The Beginning of Homewood Study Guide

The Beginning of Homewood by John Edgar Wideman

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

John Edgar Wideman is the author of dozens of books and stories and has in the last two decades claimed his rightful place among the most important contemporary American authors. Central to his legacy, the Homewood books, originally published as separate volumes, *Damballah, Hiding Place, and Sent For You Yesterday*, were collected under the title *The Homewood Trilogy* and published in 1985. "The Beginning of Homewood" has emerged as the most anthologized of all the stories in the volume.

"The Beginning of Homewood" employs Wideman's call and response narrative technique to blend the stories of his ancestor Sybela Owens, his elderly aunt May, and his own incarcerated brother, Robby. In the story, which he confesses has "something wrong with it," he poses the question whether Sybela's crime (of escaping slavery) can be weighed against Robby's. Though Wideman never offers a resolution for this thorny problem, by juxtaposing these two images of freedom and bondage, he encourages readers to explore the complex and deeply ambiguous moral landscape that all of the characters inhabit.

Author Biography

Born in Washington, D.C., in 1941, John Edgar Wideman has led a life filled with remarkable achievement and terrible tragedy. He is the author of seven novels, three collections of short stories, and two books of nonfiction. He has taught at the University of Pennsylvania, the University of Wyoming, and the University of Massachusetts, where he is currently a member of the faculty.

When Wideman was still a baby, his family moved from Washington to Pittsburgh and settled in Homewood, a black neighborhood with a rich history that would later inspire several books. Within a decade, however, Wideman's family moved from Homewood to the predominantly white, upper-class neighborhood of Shadyside. John flourished in school, becoming captain of the basketball team and the class valedictorian. In 1959, he entered the University of Pennsylvania on a scholarship, intending to be a psychology major. After switching to English as a major, he continued to excel as both a student and an athlete, winning election to Phi Beta Kappa and all Ivy-league in basketball. By his senior year Wideman had decided to become a writer.

After graduation in 1963, Wideman became the first African American to win a Rhodes Scholarship since Alain Locke in 1905. At Oxford he continued to study literature and began his teaching career in the summer term at Howard University in Washington, D.C. In 1965, he married Judith Ann Goldman and the next year received his degree from Oxford. After attending the famous University of Iowa's Writer's Workshop and publishing his first novel, *A Glance Away*, Wideman returned to the University of Pennsylvania to teach. After students asked him to teach a course in African-American literature, Wideman began his own personal exploration of black literature and reconsidered his own voice as an African-American writer. After publishing two more novels, Widmean entered an eight-year fallow period.

In the mid-1970s two things happened that changed the course of Wideman's life. He accepted an offer from the University of Wyoming and moved away from his roots and history to the virtually all-white world of Laramie. Within a year, his brother Robby, who had remained in the Pittsburgh area, was sentenced to life imprisonment for armed robbery and murder. After an exceptionally productive ten-year period, Wideman and his family moved back east and he began teaching at the University of Massachusetts in Amorist, a position he continues to hold. The same year in which they moved east, 1986, the Wideman family experienced yet another tragedy when his middle child, Jacob, confessed to killing a roommate at summer camp and, at eighteen years old, was sentenced to life in prison.

Plot Summary

The story opens as the narrator tries to explain how the story came into being. It began, he says, as a letter to his brother, which he "began writing on a Greek island two years ago, but never finished, never sent." Addressing his absent brother, he then proceeds to tell "the story that came before the letter," the story about his great-great-great-grandmother Sybela Owens and how she escaped slavery and settled in Pittsburgh in what is now known as Homewood.

At his grandfather's funeral, the narrator had heard the elderly aunts talk of Sybela and the beginnings of Homewood. Through the intervening voices of his aunt May and Bess, the narrator relates the story of Sybela's "escape, her five-hundred-mile flight through hostile, dangerous territory."

Having been a slave on a plantation near Cumberland, Maryland, Sybela escaped one night with her two small children and Charlie Bell, the white man and son of the owner, who "stole" her when he learned that his father planned to sell her. The year was 1859; Sybela was around eighteen years old, and Charlie was the father of the children. Charlie and Sybela went on to have eighteen more children. Eventually, as Aunt May relates, "the other white men let Charlie know they didn't want one of their kind living with no black woman so Charlie up and moved." And the neighborhood where he moved, "way up on Bruston Hill where nobody 'round trying to mind his business," marked the beginning of Homewood.

Sybela was remarkable, not only because of her courageous escape from slavery but also because of her legendary ability to refuse to internalize her status as slave. She was known throughout the plantation as a woman of exceptional pride and reminded old-timers of another woman who maintained the autonomy of her body against the all common sexual advantages of white owners by wearing a cage around her torso.

After Aunt May and Mother Bess finish telling their story about Sybela and the old days, the narrator's voice returns in the final paragraphs. Again, he addresses his brother, whom he last saw "in chains . . . old-time leg irons and wrist shackles and twenty pounds of iron dragged through the marble corridors in Fort Collins." He wonders if there is a larger scale of justice at work, if the "Court could set your crime against Sybela's, the price of our freedom against yours."

Summary

The Beginning of Homewood is addressed as a letter to the narrator's brother. A trip to Greece, two years earlier, began the narrator's meditation on the story of Sybela Owens, who is their great-great-great-grandmother, and the matriarch of a place known as Homewood. The narrator feels that the story is connected to the brother's plight. He is imprisoned, awaiting trial for murder and prison break. Sybela was also imprisoned as a slave. The story itself is an oral tradition, passed down to the narrator through several voices, among them, Aunt May and Aunt Bess, whose voices seem to combine with the narrator's account.

Sybela Owens' story begins in 1859. Sybela lives as a slave on a farm near Cumberland, Maryland. Every day, she wakes to the blast of a conch shell trumpet to do slave labor. She lives with her two young children there, until one day she hears an urgent knock at her door. It's Charlie Bell, the white slave master's son. Since his father has plans to sell her, Charlie has decided to rescue Sybela and her family. Immediately, they run through the woods. Sybela and Charlie carry the children, running at night and camping by day for five hundred dangerous miles. Eventually, they arrive in a place that becomes Homewood, which was then merely a settlement. Charlie abandons Sybela and returns home, but Sybela makes a home for herself there, and she has eighteen children. Her children have children, who have children in turn, and Sybela becomes a matriarchal figure in Homewood. In her old age, Sybela is eventually coaxed out of her home on Bruston Hill and dies shortly afterwards. Generations later, the descendants of Sybela boisterously share their stories of Sybela in church. The narrator's aunts are the prominent storytellers. There are stories of some sort of curse upon her old home. Nothing thrives there. There are stories that Sybela Owens had a power over people, "a freeing kind of power." There are memories of all her descendants, especially as children.

The old aunts ask the narrator about his brother. The narrator recalls the last time he saw his brother, shackled, in a courthouse in Fort Collins, Colorado. In order to share some of that freeing power with his imprisoned brother, the narrator draws a comparison between his brother and his great-great-grandmother, "You looked as if you had been hiding for days in the bush, bringing some of its wildness with you into the clean halls of justice. She too, if they had caught her, would have returned part wild thing."

Aunt May is saddened to see Sybela's descendants grow into conditions like this. She laments that the babies had been so beautiful and had grown into such interesting youths, only to run off or go to jail as adults.

On the first night of her freedom, Great-great-grandmother Sybela has a vision. Staring through the eyes of her child and through the night sky to the stars, it is as though she can see through the generations to Aunt May, and, through her, to even younger generations, people like so many stars from the sky. It seems as though those stars are falling stars.

The narrator concludes by mentioning that there has been a recent case upon the Supreme Court, where a group of prisoners argue that they had the right to escape from prison, because the punishment was cruel and unusual, just as Sybela had the right to escape and perhaps the narrator's brother as well.

Analysis

The Beginning of Homewood is a complex story that spans a variety of times and places. John Edgar Wideman employs a variety of literary devices to tell the story. The epistolary or letter-writing form of the text allows for a conversational tone. One idea flows into the next idea because the ideas are related, but the story is not necessarily told in a cause-and-effect order. This is a frame story, or a story within a story, because the story of the past is sandwiched inside a story about the present time. Arranging the story this way allows Wideman to draw a variety of comparisons between the past and the present, and to tell two stories at the same time, and in an interesting way.

Imprisonment, the theme of this story, applies just as much to the slaves of generations past as it does to their descendants. A central image throughout the story is an allusion to the Greek myth of the Sybyl, whose name resembles Sybela's. Sybyl is a prophetess in the myth. Like her namesake in the story, Sybyl can see into the future. Sybyl is transformed into a bird by an evil magician and, like Sybela, was caged. There are many myths of many Sybyls, in ancient literature, and Wideman has added to this list with his account of the story of Sybela Owens. Sybela has her own myth, an oral tradition, passed down among her generations, as a source of hope and inspiration.

Characters

Charlie Bell

Charlie Bell is the white man whose family owns Sybela Owens. As was the cruel custom among slave-holding men, he has forced Sybela to be his concubine. One night he comes to her cabin and "steals" her and her two children, of whom he is the father, and together they run north toward Pittsburgh where the neighborhood in which they settle becomes known as Homewood.

Bess

Called Mother Bess, she's May's sister and fellow caretaker of Sybela's spirit and the family's history.

Maggie

Maggie is the oldest of Sybela's two children who accompany her in her flight from slavery (with Charlie Bell). The story does not specify, but it is reasonable to suppose that they are Bell's children as well.

May

Called Aunt May most of the time by the narrator, she, like Mother Bess, belongs to an intermediate generation of women. She is old enough to remember Sybela as an old woman and takes it as her responsibility to tell the old stories to the younger generations. The narrator hears her tell these stories at his grandfather's funeral, and it plants the idea of this story in his head. May also has a certain way of talking that the narrator finds fascinating, and he attempts to imitate it in his prose.

Narrator

The narrator is the great-great-great-grandson of Sybela Owens. This story is a letter he's writing from a Greek island to his brother who is in prison and is his self-conscious attempt to connect her story to his.

Sybela Owens

Sybela is the narrator's (and the un-named "you" to whom the story is told, the narrator's brother's) great-great-great-grandmother. A "black woman who in 1859 was approximately eighteen years old," she's the ancestor that helped establish the African-

American community of Homewood when she settled there with Charlie Bell. Sybela went on to have eighteen more children in addition to the two she brought with her when she escaped from slavery. She's a kind of spiritual leader of the family, and the older women, Aunt May and Mother Bess, tell stories about her courage and strength in order to keep her memory alive and the family history known to the younger generations. Wideman uses the story of her captivity and flight as a contrast to his brother's flight and captivity in the criminal justice system.

Thomas

Thomas is Maggie's younger brother.

Themes

Afrocentricity

"The Beginning of Homewood" and the volume of short stories of which it is a part, *Damballah*, belongs to the stage of Wideman's career when he began to write from an Afrocentric perspective. After the eight year hiatus following the publication of the novel *The Lynchers*, Wideman moved his family back East and shifted his literary interest to stories more connected to his own life and to African-American culture and history.

Critic Doreatha Drummond Mbalia explains that this process is necessarily incremental. Wideman's literary education, Mbalia explains, was Eurocentric. That is, he was taught to view the world from a European, or white, point of view and came to internalized European standards and values for art and literature. Thus, when he began his career as a writer, he emulated white writers like William Faulkner and James Joyce. According to Mbalia, Wideman, like so many African-American authors, needed to "reclaim his African personality." This process "occurred in developmental stages, she continues, "caused by a quantitative buildup of a number of factors, largely negative, involving family members, race concerns, and the writing process itself." For Wideman, the most influential of these factors was his brother Robby's arrest for murder, which brought him back into the fold of his family for the first time in years. He writes about this experience in the memoir *Brothers and Keepers*: "The distance I'd put between my brother's world and mine suddenly collapsed. The two thousand miles between Laramie, Wyoming, and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, my years of willed ignorance, of flight and hiding, has not changed a simple truth: I could not run fast enough or far enough. Robby was inside me. Wherever he was, running for his life, he carried part of me with him." "The Beginning of Homewood," then, is a story about his own ancestor, Sybela Owens, who came to Homewood in 1859 but is addressed to a fictionalized version of his incarcerated brother. The story is about both Sybela's and Tommy's (Robby's) flights from bondage— hers from slavery, his as a fugitive—but it is also about Wideman's narrator's struggle to reconcile these two stories and to locate his own voice in them.

Freedom and Bondage

Images of freedom and bondage animate the narrative of "The Beginning of Homewood." Wideman juxtaposes the story of his great-great-great grandmother Sybela Owens with the story of his brother, to whom the story is addressed as a letter, in order to challenge readers' assumptions about what freedom and bondage signify in the African-American experience. Moreover, the narrator explores the ways in which he is *bound* to his family's history and, conversely, how *free* he is to tell the story. In this sense, Wideman's relationship with the material for his story is problematic. Critic Barbara Seidman explains that "by embedding Sybela's story of physical and spiritual redemption within a meditation on his brother's grim circumstances, the narrator conveys the continued urgency of such issues for African Americans; he also engages

the metafictional self-reflexiveness that characterizes his generation of American writers as he muses over the act of writing and its problematic relationship to living events."

Sybela's narrative moves nominally from bondage to freedom as she escapes from slavery in the South to the free black communities of Pittsburgh in the North. But crossing over from slavery to freedom, Wideman suggests, is never as simple and absolute as it appears. Sybela's freedom is compromised by her dependence on Charlie Bell, the white man who "stole" her and her children. She may have escaped slavery, but her status as his property is fundamentally unchanged. Sybela's story is one of gradual self-emancipation from the psychological bonds of slavery, and her presence in May's and Bess's narratives testifies that she has finally found freedom: she belongs to them.

Tommy's (Robby's) trajectory, on the other hand, is the opposite of Sybela's. He moves from freedom to captivity in the criminal justice system. In a gesture analogous to the portrayal of the ambiguity of Sybela's freedom, Wideman's story suggests that Tommy's prior freedom was already constrained, as it is for most African-American males, and that his captivity is merely superficial because his defiance keeps him free to some extent.

The narrator, as well, is caught up in the shifting valences of freedom and bondage. While he presumes to write to his brother from the safe and remote location of Greece, he is ineluctably drawn into the stories of both his ancestors and his brother. It's as if he isn't free to tell other stories; he must tell these. Furthermore, as he explains in the opening paragraph of "The Beginning of Homewood," one story is held captive by another: "The letter [to his brother] remains inside the story, buried, bleeding through when I read."

Style

Narration: Oral Tradition

Wideman's narrative technique in "The Beginning of Homewood" is related to the development of his Afrocentric point of view. By the time in his career when he was writing the stories that make up *Damballah*, Wideman had shaken off the single narrator perspective of his earlier fiction and had merged his interest in the modernist prose of Faulkner and James Joyce with his concern to write about the African-American experience. The resulting narrative technique attempts to render in prose aspects of the African-American oral traditions of storytelling and call and response. In an interview with James Coleman, Wideman explains how he came to adopt these new techniques: "In the later books also I began to understand how in using Afro-American folklore and language I didn't have to give up any of the goals that I was after when I was using more Europeanized and more traditional—literary traditional— devices and techniques."

"The Beginning of Homewood," as the final story in *Damballah*, makes particularly good use of these Afrocentric literary techniques. In the words of critic Seidmann, Wideman's narrator "creates a wall of sound from the voices he has unloosed in the preceding stories; writing to his brother in prison, he acknowledges that his real task as a writer has been to hear and synthesize those women's testimonials to the community's history of defeat and transcendence." In other words, he allows Sybela and May and Bess to speak through him, to use him as an instrument to tell their stories across barriers of time, culture, and geography. To choose this technique is also to comment on the role of the storyteller, or writer, in the African-American culture. To some extent, this kind of self-consciousness about the role of the writer is a feature of all modern literature, as Seidmann explains. Like many of his contemporaries, Wideman "engages in the metafictional self-reflexiveness that characterizes his generation of American writers as he muses over the act of writing and its problematic relationship to lived events." But as Wideman himself explains in the interview with James Coleman, there is something more at stake for African-American writers. "Storytellers are always inside and outside the story by definition. Sometimes in Afro-American culture there are these little doors, there are these wonderful windows by which the storyteller gets pulled back, so he doesn't feel too lonely, doesn't feel left out . . ."

Setting: Mythical Spaces

Just as Wideman's use of many narrative voices, or poly-vocality, allows him to tell the story from several perspectives, his use of diffuse and multiple settings for the story adds to its power and range. It's difficult to say where the story takes place. Is it the place from which the narrator is writing the letter to his brother? Is it the plantation in Maryland? Is it Homewood of the mid-nineteenth century, or Homewood of the 1970s and 1980s? Is it the Fort Collins courtroom where the narrator last sees his brother? Or even the Greek island where the narrator first begins thinking about these stories?

Wideman's point is that the story is set in all these places and times, but its true force does not emerge until they come together, layered upon and woven around each other.

As a result of this layered or woven construction, Wideman's narrative settings take on more mythic dimensions than they otherwise would. The character of Sybela, for example, resonates with the legend of a slave woman, named Belle, from an earlier era, as well as with the Greek legend of the Sybil, who, when asked what she wanted, replied "I want to die." The intermingling of these identities and stories helps to imbue Homewood with a history and significance that would have been lost without the intervention of the storytellers.

Historical Context

Life under Slavery

The institution of slavery placed enormous physical and psychological burdens on the body of the slave population in the American South. In addition to the hideous cruelties of forced labor, slaves faced a constant threat of being sold. This meant that slaves lived with a gnawing instability, as families could be broken up against their will.

Female slaves endured yet another hardship as they frequently became the objects of unwanted and often violent sexual advances from white owners and overseers. In fact, many white owners who viewed their slaves as property, considered sexual appropriation of black women to be their right. As a result, there were many white men who had two families: one in the big house and another down in the slave quarters. To make matters even worse, the children of these unions, mulattos, were treated even worse. Linda Brent, a slave whose autobiography, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, was originally published in 1861, wrote that "slavery was terrible for me, but it is far more terrible for women." Walter Teller explains in his introduction to a new edition to Brent's book in 1973 that "while all female slaves were subject to sexual abuse, mulattos in particular were exploited sexually." The subject was rarely discussed, even among antislavery activists. In fact, when a white woman, L. Marie Child, helped to bring Brent's narrative into print, she felt compelled to warn her readers in a preface about the "indelicate" subject matter contained in the book: "This peculiar phase of slavery has generally been kept veiled; but the public ought to be made acquainted with its monstrous features, and I willingly take responsibility of presenting them with the veil withdrawn. I do this for the sake of my sisters in bondage, who are suffering wrongs so foul, that our ears are too delicate to listen to them."

Homewood and African-American Enclaves

An enclave is a section or an area of a city or town in which members of an ethnic group settle. As opposed to a ghetto, where members of ethnic or religious groups are forced to live, enclaves are created by members of these groups and tend to cultivate community support networks and other economic structures. Of course, runaway slaves and free Blacks would not necessarily have their pick of prime real estate in cities like Pittsburgh in the mid-nineteenth century. Nor would the residents of Homewood, or enclaves like it in other cities, have much economic power to wield. The value of enclaves like Homewood, Wideman explains, is in their power to preserve and reproduce culture and tradition. In an interview with Jessica Lusting in 1992, he explains that the appeal of Homewood is "not so much with bricks and boards," but in the people's "sense of values and the way they treated one another and the way they treated the place." Wideman elaborates on how African-American enclaves like Homewood are so important: "Africans couldn't bring African buildings, ecology,

languages wholesale, in the material sense, to the New World. But they brought the invisible dimensions of their society, of our culture, to this land."

Critical Overview

As many of his critics have pointed out, the novel *Damballah*, of which "The Beginning of Homewood" is a part, marks the end of a fallow period for Wideman and signals the beginning of a new phase for him as a writer. Not surprisingly, then, some critics, expecting more of the same from the accomplished college professor and Rhodes scholar, were somewhat put off by his new thematic interests and stylistic innovations. On the other hand, some reviewers and critics saw the book as the culmination of Wideman's career up to that point.

Writing in the *New York Times*, reviewer Mel Watkins says that Wideman's latest work contains "the high regard for language and craft demonstrated in [his] previous books." He goes on to praise Damballah for its formal daring and departure from the rules of the novel. The book, he says, "is something of a departure for him, and in freeing his voice from the confines of the novel form, he has written what is possibly his most impressive work." Watkins concludes that "Wideman is one of America's premier writers of fiction." Finally, he sounds a note that other reviewers and critics have also echoed: "That they [*Damballah* and *Hiding Place*] were published originally in paperback perhaps suggests that he is also one of our most underrated writers."

Also writing in the *New York Times*, reviewer John Leonard praises both *Damballah* and *Hiding Place*, but decries their paperback status. Suggesting that the publishing world does not acknowledge the literary permanence of many black writers, Leonard wonders if publishers aren't guilty of "a new 'aesthetic' of bad faith." He concludes: "That his two new books will fall apart after a second reading is a scandal." But in an interview in the New York Times with Edwin McDowell, Wideman explains that it was his decision to bring the books out in paperback. Citing the modest hardcover sales of his earlier work, Wideman explained: "I spend an enormous amount of time and energy writing and I want to write good books, but I also want people to read them."

Among the stories in *Damballah*, "The Beginning of Homewood" is often singled out by critics and reviewers as a particularly successful example of the kinds of stories Wideman was writing during this period. "The Beginning of Homewood," because it links the stories set in Africa with those set in Pittsburgh that will follow in the next volume, seems to best embody the features that reviewer Randall Kenan identified as Wideman's strength during the Homewood period: "It is as if he wrote his stories and then compressed them to a third of their original size. Eschewing quotation marks, Wideman has his speakers shift and shift and at times meld—as if into one mind, one voice."

Literary critics recognized in these collage-like techniques, despite the African-American setting and allusions to an oral literature, the hallmarks of literary modernism as practiced by the likes of James Joyce and William Faulkner. Despite the praise he received for the Homewood stories, Wideman continued to develop his experimental

techniques and Afrocentric perspectives. This trend, as Mbalia points out, has caused some members of the literary establishment to dismiss his more recent work as not quite up to the standards of the Homewood stories. In her estimation, reviewers "emphasized the beauty of the Homewood stories," and implied that they "were more lyrical and thus more powerful works of art than the more recent ones."

Criticism

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Critical Essay #1

Piedmont-Marton teaches literature and writing classes at Southwestern University in Texas. She writes frequently about the modern short story. In this essay she explores the moral ambiguity at work in "The Beginning of Homewood."

Like William Faulkner does in his novels and stories set in the fictional world of Yoknapatawpha, Wideman creates a complex landscape in "The Beginning of Homewood" that allows him to enmesh his characters in webs of moral ambiguities. The community of Homewood founded by runaway slave Sybela Owens, the narrator's great-great-great grandmother, is certainly not an unqualified safe haven. Though life in Homewood is preferable to life as a slave in Maryland, Sybela's escape from freedom, Wideman's story suggests, is compromised by her alliance with Charlie Bell, the white man and father of her children who stole her from his own father and brought her to Pittsburgh. The story's theme of moral ambiguity is dramatized by the narrator's comparison between Sybela's escape from slavery and his own brother's captivity. By asking himself and readers to weigh her crime against his, he suggests that her emancipation is incomplete and the crimes committed against her are not yet fully redressed. Thus the story leads readers into extremely ambiguous moral territory - intimating that the narrator's brother's crime is caused or balanced by the legacy of slavery. But the narrator's own reticence and ambivalence about asking these questions, about even telling the story, encourages readers to contemplate the troubling issues that the story raises rather than just turn away from them.

The opening paragraph of the story sets the tone of moral ambiguity and introduces the narrator as a troubled mediator, as someone stuck in the middle. He describes the story to follow as unfinished, as having something wrong with it. He identifies himself as reader as well as author of the text: "I have just finished reading a story which began as a letter to you." The letter, which was never finished and never sent, was written from a Greek island two years earlier. The narrator's distance - and alienation - from home is significant and will figure into the complex moral equations he explores regarding ethics of escape. But readers don't know now to whom the narrator is writing, nor why "there is something wrong about the story nothing can fix."

Soon, however, the narrator begins to explain how one story overtook another, how the letter he never finished became the story he's telling now. He also maps out some of the moral territory across which his narrative and intellectual journey will take place. First, he says, he wanted to tell Aunt May's story, let her voice come through him to tell the tale of great-great-great-grandmother Sybela Owens' flight to freedom. But as clearly as he hears May's voice working through him, he is also nagged by the question why he "was on a Greek island and why you were six thousand miles away in prison and what all that meant and what I could say to you about it." At first, telling May's and Sybela's story seemed as simple as it was important: "the theme was to be the urge for freedom, the resolve of the runaway to live free or die." But the narrator soon discovers the disquieting fact that when he tries to connect Sybela's story to his brother's, he's unable to maintain the safety of his objective storytelling stance: "I couldn't tell either story

without implicating myself." What he runs up against is "the matter of guilt, of responsibility," and he finds he must include himself in the reckoning. Then movement of his narrative from the cafe in the Greek islands back to Homewood, back, in fact, to Sybela Owens and the beginning of Homewood, is a return to the place from which he believed he had escaped. But in returning he finds that he must face matters of guilt and responsibility; he must, as the storyteller, set his brother's crime against "the crime of this female runaway."

The narrator's reckoning process requires that he reconsider Sybela's story in light of both his own and his brother's life. When he revisits her "dash for freedom," he finds that he wants to dwell on her first day of freedom, but cannot. The reason his imagination won't stay fixed on how Sybela felt and what she thought that first day when she isn't awakened by the sound of the conch shell is that her freedom is compromised and mediated, not simple, as he had always thought it was. Sybela's freedom is incomplete, and her autonomy limited. She trades absolute freedom - and the risk of death and capture - for the protection she gets from remaining with Charlie Bell. On her first day of freedom, Sybela "misses the moaning horn and hates the white man, her lover, her liberator, her children's father sleeping beside her." In other words, the line between slavery and freedom is not absolute, nor is the boundary between evil and good, and hate and love. Sybela's freedom, upon which the narrator's entire family's existence depends, is not the result of a singular, heroic act. Rather, she's free because of an infinite number of calculations and compromises, all of which have consequences. She may have escaped the plantation and some of the strictures of slavery, but she remains bound to Charlie, at first because he knows where they're going and later because he can offer her and her children protection. He knows his way in the world and she does not: "All white men seemed to know that magic that connected the plantation to the rest of the world, a world which for her was no more than a handful of words she had heard others use."

When the narrator imagines what would happen to Sybela if she had been caught, "a funky, dirty, black woman, caught and humbled, marched through like the prize of war she is," he is compelled to ask himself "why not me." And then he addresses his questions to his brother's situation, also "paraded . . . costumed, fettered through the halls," and wonders if he "could have run away without committing a crime." Will running away always be a crime for descendants of Sybela Owens, the woman who never managed to quite run far enough? The narrator wonders if his own distance from, or escape from, Homewood constitutes a crime, or if it is compensated by his brother's crime.,/p>

The narrator suggests that his brother's incarceration is a consequence of Homewood's history. According to May's account, the land on which Sybela and Charlie originally settled is "fixed," or cursed. She explains: "That spiteful piece of property been the downfall of so many I done forgot half the troubles come to people try to live there." She describes how the beautiful babies she remembers later become men about whom there always seems to be some terrible story to tell: "I remembers the babies. How beautiful they were. Then somebody tells me this one's dead, or that one's dying or Rashad going to court today or they gave Tommy life."

Though it stops short of drawing conclusions, Wideman's story suggests that even today in Homewood, a community founded by a runaway slave and her white lover, determining guilt and innocence is no simple matter. By setting up the comparison between Sybela's incarceration under the institution of slavery and her moral but illegal escape on the one hand, and Robby's flight from the law and subsequent imprisonment on the other hand, Wideman asks some troubling questions about justice and accountability. Is Robby's criminalization inevitable? Is his flight from justice preordained and his imprisonment an instance of the historical desire of white America to subdue rebellious black Americans like Sybela? By examining his own role in the family and his safe, privileged distance from the kind of life his brother has led, the narrator wonders if his freedom had been purchased by his brother's. The story implies that the curse of the piece of land on which Sybela and Charlie settled insists that the family has not yet paid for Sybela's crime of resistance, and that it demands that every generation must offer up one of its own to white authority to compensate for Sybela's refusal to give herself and her children up.

Just as the narrative landscape of Wideman's story proves to be more complex than meets the eye, so does it's moral terrain. Wideman challenges readers to sort out one voice from the next and leaves readers to wrestle with gaps and unanswered questions. On a moral level, however, his story has an even more profoundly destabilizing effect by linking Sybela's "crime" of escaping slavery, to Robby's crime and capture, to the narrator's "escape" from the life his brother and so many others have been consigned to live.

Source: Elisabeth Piedmont-Marton, Critical Essay on "The Beginning of Homewood," in *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

Frazier is an instructor of high school and college English literature and composition. In this essay, he analyzes the relation of Wideman's structure to his themes.

John Edgar Wideman's short story, "The Beginning of Homewood," is a complex assembly of smaller stories that the narrator attempts to meaningfully string together. The many stories he tells appear in the letter written from the narrator to his brother, imprisoned for life for a murder to which he was an accomplice. That letter is the short story "The Beginning of Homewood." His brother's fate prompts the narrator into "trying to figure out why I was on a Greek island and why you were six thousand miles away in prison and what all that meant and what I could say to you about it." Feeling he must say something to his brother ("the only person I needed to write was you"), he begins a letter, but "five or six sentences addressed to you and then the story took over." The narrator never finishes this original letter or its story. He does, however, later re-read it and is provoked to write the second letter - the present story. The first story the narrator tells, about a letter becoming a story but never getting sent, establishes one of the major themes of "The Beginning of Homewood," namely, the attempt to make sense of events through telling stories. Additionally, the structure here serves to blur the generic distinctions between letters and stories, suggesting that stories take on much of their meaning through whomever the writer is addressing, and that, conversely, letters to others may be not very different from stories we want to tell them, specifically and individually.

The second story the narrator wants to tell his brother, that of their great-great-great-grandmother Sybela Owens, he calls both a story and a meditation. Moreover, it is a meditation that he "had wanted to decorate with the trappings of a story." As the short story "The Beginning of Homewood" is both story and letter, here the story of Sybela is both story and meditation meant to look like a story. The effect is a further blurring of genre distinctions, which here suggests that stories might be characterized as meditations, instruments for thought processes that change the reader or listener. With that invitation to meditate on Sybela's story, the narrator proceeds. Sybela had been a runaway slave, and the theme of the story as the narrator wants to tell it is "the urge for freedom," presumably because his brother feels the same urge. But this application gets too complicated. His attempt "to tell Sybela's story as it connected with yours," proves difficult since she ran away from slavery, and his brother ran away from the scene of a murder he committed. It would seem obvious that a slave who runs away is certainly less a criminal than a man who commits murder and runs from the law. Therefore, there is an initial impulse to say something to his brother with this story, but the message is deferred because the narrator is uncertain how to make sense of it; the parallels between the stories of Sybela and his brother seem difficult to maintain. Still, in the face of this frustration, he persists, faithful that telling the story will yield some meaning, some understanding for his brother and him. Straining to relate his brother's story to Sybela's, he wonders whether the difference might be one of language, whether there are "names other than 'outlaw' to call you," whether "words other than 'crime'" might "define" his brother's actions. Though during slavery a slave who ran away was, legally

speaking, committing a crime, few people would today call a runaway slave a criminal. Perhaps such a change in perception could redeem his brother. But imagining such a change is a difficult and complex task. The narrator wants to tell a story that can console his brother, offer him some kind of redemption, some kind of connection, but there are parts that don't fit, that he can't make sense of. This is presumably why the original letter was deferred for so long.

Yet Aunt May's voice, which echoes throughout "The Beginning of Homewood," gets him "started on the story" of Sybela. Like Aunt May, the narrator allows himself to make "digressions within digressions." Imitating Aunt May's stories that "exist because of their parts and each part is a story worth telling, worth examining to find the stories it contains," the narrator takes two important "digressions" off the Sybela story, seeking "to recover everything." These are the stories of Sybil and Belle. Sybela's very identity - her name - preserves both of these women's stories. Sybela and Sybil the Greek priestess are both imprisoned, but Sybela overcomes the death of spirit that comes from being caged, while Sybil begs for death. Thus, Sybela's triumph of spirit is highlighted through contrast. It becomes an example the narrator wants to hold up for his brother. Sybil's story contributes meaning to Sybela's and, by extension, to the story of the narrator's brother. Sybela, Sybil, and Belle - who encloses her head in a bird cage to ward off the sexual advances of white men - all struggle with captivity and the waiting it entails. They raise the possibility of, and complicate the issue of, dignity within captivity. In the worst case scenario, captivity might finally allow no hope except the "hauntingly human expressiveness" with which one can sing Sybil's song, "I want to die." As these stories provided ways for her fellow slaves to interpret Sybela, so they all three might provide interpretations for the situation in which the narrator and his brother find themselves. The quick complications the narrator brings together with this grouping of stories - those of Sybela, Sybil, Belle, and his brother - demonstrate his readiness to concede that there are no easy answers and to deal with the difficulties directly. Striving to be the kind of storyteller Aunt May is, one whose stories take shape in the process of telling, he has faith that the stories, however disparate, can be pieced together into a unified and meaningful whole. And so he continues to tell them.

Around the middle of "The Beginning of Homewood," the narrator writes his own version of a piece of his brother's story, the scene at the courthouse in Fort Collins, Colorado. The imagery in this account provides links to the other stories, inviting comparisons. For example, details such as the hallway that "some other black prisoner mopped" and the "drag of the iron" that binds their legs suggest the slavery and bondage of the narrator's brother's ancestors. The narrator's brother and accomplice pretend no awareness of the chains that cage them at the courthouse, creating around themselves a "glass cage," in which they perform for the onlookers, and asserting their spiritual independence from the physical chains that bind them. This "glass cage" is part of a pattern of cage imagery that links many of the stories, and how these characters respond to the cages is a good point of contrast. The image of the cage recalls the self-imposed cage worn on Belle's head, which became a symbol of self-rule and dignity to protect her from the sexual advances of the white men. Sybil is caged by the magician and wants to die. Sybela flees her cage, and escapes. Yet the most important cage is the prison that holds the

narrator's brother, and the question that drives this story is: What should my reaction to this cage be? It's a question as urgent to his brother as to the narrator.

In the project of telling stories to find meaning and order, the narrator might also hypothesize variations on those stories. For example, he realizes that Sybela is a much closer parallel to himself than to his brother since he and Sybela both escaped - she the slavery, he the conditions that have landed his brother in jail. So by imagining her getting caught, he distances himself and turns Sybela's story, once more, into his brother's: "I ask myself again *why not me*, why is it the two of you skewered and displayed like she would have been if she hadn't kept running." In this comparison, his brother becomes a victim of the social forces around him, as sympathetic as a runaway slave. Tinkering with the story allows the narrator to wonder, to question the society that has jailed his brother. Yet, the tone is not argumentative. It is openly exploratory, not angrily condemnatory. He wonders "if you really had any chance, if anything had changed between her crime and yours." The tension is not relieved, but the hypothesized story creates new possibilities for the narrator to consider in trying to make sense of his brother's situation, and thus the layering of these stories continues to fulfill an important purpose.

Yet another story, that of Sybela's life at Homewood, finally shows the significance of the title, "The Beginning of Homewood." Like most of the stories the narrator tells, this one has no real conclusion; it ends in a kind of limbo. Racists in the community run Sybela and Charlie Bell off the property at Hamilton Avenue, and legend says that "Grandmother Owens cursed it." As evidence of this curse, Aunt May offers two more stories, one of a "crazy woman" that tried to live there and "strangled her babies and slit her own throat," and another of a Jehovah's Witness church there that "burned to the ground." The property is "still empty 'cept for ashes and black stones." All of these details suggest that things have not yet been set right. The land from which this family springs is still cursed and at odds with its surroundings, and no one knows how to release it. There is sterility, lack of peace, and discord. The story is called "The Beginning of Homewood," because this beginning is what still determines the lives of these family members, and the story has no end yet. Still in the beginning stages of making sense of Homewood and its people, they wait for an authentic resolution.

This theme of waiting pervades "The Beginning of Homewood." In the first paragraph, the narrator's report that he has delayed the writing of the letter - the telling of the story - establishes the mood of "The Beginning of Homewood," one of uncertain waiting and incompletion. Furthermore, the narrator's brother waits in prison. Sybil waits in a cage. The isle of Delos waits in a barren limbo with no death and no birth. The narrator has just visited Dachau, where prisoners waited and died, hopelessly. Aunt May's plea in her song for the lord to come down and touch her expresses a reverent waiting. May and Sybela Owens wait for each other in their exchange of gazes, wait to share the truth, wait to hear it, wait upon each other. The narrator wonders whether he would have tried to escape slavery, or waited in its hold. The narrator ends this letter to his brother with the words, "Hold on."

In the last story the narrator tells, people wait to hear the Supreme Court. The Court will be hearing a story to which it must offer some kind of resolution, a case involving prison conditions and inmate rights. Though it does not seem that this case would directly affect the narrator's brother, it offers hope because the Court may be able to re-conceptualize human rights; it has "a chance to author its version of the Emancipation Proclamation." The simple hearing of an unusual story might cause the Court to see things differently, the narrator hopes, to probe deeper than present ideas of "crime," to "ask why you are where you are, and why the rest of us are here." For the narrator, there is no simple conviction that everything will turn out well, but his faith in storytelling allows him to have faith in the institutions of justice that have imprisoned his brother. Given the circumstances, that is a tremendous accomplishment.

At the conclusion of "The Beginning of Homewood," none of the stories end. There is still waiting to be done, everyone must "hold on." They will all wait for some resolution, for some new version of the Emancipation Proclamation, for the Judgment Day that Sybela's neighbors saw portended in the falling of stars, stars who come to symbolize her descendants and their falls. While that waiting is uncertain in nature, the stories told can begin "to cohere" and offer hope that their lives may finally do the same.

Source: James Frazier, Critical Essay on "The Beginning of Homewood," in *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #3

In the following interview, Wideman discusses how the fictional Homewood portrayed in his stories relates to the real Homewood, his hometown.

I went to Amherst, Massachusetts, on April 23, 1992, to talk with John Edgar Wideman on the U Mass campus, where he teaches a graduate course in creative writing. Wideman's literary mapping and charting of Homewood's neighborhood streets and people indicate the complexities and paradoxes of contemporary American urban literature. In discussing his portraits of Homewood in *Damballah, Hiding Place, Sent for You Yesterday, and Reuben*, we explored the ways in which fictional, constructed landscapes can be read.

[Lustig:] You moved from Homewood when you were twelve, yet it's the place that you keep circling back to. I find it interesting that, despite all those years away, it's the primary place in your work, that you keep going back to it as defining home. Maybe you could talk a little about that.

[Wideman:] Okay, but let me start with a distinction. There is a neighborhood in Pittsburgh called Homewood. It was there before I was born, and probably when I'm dead it will still be called that. It's considered a number of streets, houses, population changes - people get old and die. It's a real place in that sense. Now, for many of the years between birth and about twelve, I lived in Homewood. Other times I've lived in Shadyside, which is a completely different neighborhood. That's the level of fact. The distinction I want to make is that, once I started to write, I was creating a place based partly on memories of the actual place I lived in, and partly on the exigencies or needs of the fiction I was creating. Once I began to write, to create, I felt no compunction to stay within the bounds of Homewood. Now how that fictional place relates to the actual Homewood is very problematic. And, depending on the questions you ask, that relationship will be important or irrelevant, superfluous.

If I were to tell the story of your life in my fiction, I might talk about your height, and keep you tall, but I also might make your hair dark, because I want a heroine who has dark hair. And I might know your parents well, or know just a tiny bit about them, but I could make one a sailor, and the other a college teacher, just because that's what I need in my fiction. People could then go back and say, well now, what did Wideman know about this young woman named Jessica, and how long did he know her, and how tall is she really, and what do her parents do? But all that might or might not have anything to do with the particular book in which you appear. So although I have lived in other places, the Homewood which I make in my books has continued to grow and be confident. It has its own laws of accretion and growth and reality.

What I think is really interesting about the way this Homewood, in your books, is figured is that the post-1970 landscape has been in a lot of ways devastated. Your characters - and you, for that matter - talk about Homewood Avenue as it is now, as opposed to what it was in the '50s, or the '40s. And yet the way in which the people relate to each

other makes it feel almost like a rural place, like a small town. I think that a neighborhood is an urban construct, so I'm very interested in the way that these people seem to interrelate as a small-town community.

I go in the other direction. I think it's the people who make the neighborhood. That's the difference between learning about Homewood through my writing and learning about Homewood from sociologists. There have been interesting books written about Homewood, but the people make the place. They literally *make* it. Yes, Homewood Avenue is devastated, but when the character in "Solitary" walks down that street, she sees the street at various times in its history. So it's populated by the fish store, by five-and-tens. She remembers places that were there when she was a little girl. Characters do that all the time. They walk through the landscape which, from the point of view of some person who's either following them with a camera or looking at them from a distance, is just vacant lots, but the person in the story sees something else. What counts most is what the person inside the story sees. That's where the life proceeds; that's where Homewood has a definition.

In other places in my writing I talk about how the old people *made*, created the town. But they created it not so much with bricks and boards; a lot of them simply moved into houses where other people had lived. They created it through their sense of values and the way they treated one another, and the way they treated the place. That's crucial to the strength of Homewood, and it's something very basic about African-American culture. Africans couldn't bring African buildings, ecology, languages wholesale, in the material sense, to the New World. But they brought the invisible dimensions of their society, of our culture, to this land. That's what you have to recognize: This world that's carried around in people's heads overlays and transcends and transforms whatever the people happen to be. So it's not anything that people in Homewood invented. To make something from nothing is almost a tradition.

Home, what could be called territory or turf, in your books, is often shaped by streets. You know, some of your characters will sort of read a litany of streets. I know that's so in Hiding Place. That seems to me like the equivalent of boundaries or property lines in rural or suburban areas, like a sense of possession, or of defining your place, your landscape.

Absolutely, and I'd take your point a step further. That litany, or *incantation*, is a way of *possessing* the turf. You name it, you claim it. There isn't that much physical description, I don't think, of Homewood. It's mostly the inner geography, and then street names as the most concrete manifestation of that geography. The street names are there, I think, because they have a magic. They have an evocative quality, and that's something that can be shared when you speak. There are streets, and when I say them to you and you walk down them, that's the opening. It's no coincidence that some of the great catalogs that occur in classical literature have to do with the names of the ships, the names of places. For sailors or voyagers or travelers, naming is a way, literally, of grounding themselves.

Talking about streets, or a neighborhood, in connection with this whole idea of memory and memory links, and evocation, and incantation . . . what I find so striking is what you do with time, and how much of your work starts or is set in the present and then goes back, and back, and back. And a lot of the time the look of the present is very different from that of the past, especially since urban renewal. You often refer to the effects of urban renewal as having devastated whole blocks or houses that you used to live in or live next to. I think that could be an interesting argument against urban renewal, because of the idea of memory, those memory links, the tangible memory links or the physical memory links, to the past.

I don't know that it's so much an argument against urban renewal, because urban renewal is a big political decision, and lots of factors go into it - and some of the reasons for doing it are very good indeed. I mean, if you take that preservationist argument to its logical conclusion, then there's a good reason for keeping the slave barracks in the South behind the big house. You don't want to lock yourself into some ghettoized existence.

There's nothing essential about things; it's how people see them, how people treat them. You could have the same attachment to a shiny new house, if you really felt it was yours, if you felt you had experience in it. For instance, the house that the Tates live in in *Sent For Your Yesterday*, that's a big house, a roomy house. And there are obviously well-put-together staircases and stuff like that. It might even be a house that had been urban-renewed, at least remodeled, et cetera. And it's a perfectly good situation, although it's kind of haunted and scary, too.

Well, I'm thinking more of urban renewal as it was conceived of in the late '50s and during the '60s, as it involved the razing of blocks and sometimes of entire neighborhoods.

The impetus behind that kind of urban renewal was a simple-minded remaking of people by changing their external circumstances.

Or slum clearance, as it was sometimes called.

What that really was about was turning black people into white people, without a critique of what was wrong with white people, what was wrong with the world that blacks were being asked to become part of. That's the whole integration-into-a-burning-building kind of thing. That's why it didn't make any sense, and why it was devastating. Nobody asked what was important, what was valuable about the black community that shouldn't go, that should resist the bulldozers. There was just a wholesale exchange. We'll give you these external circumstances because we think they're good, because our lives are prospering. We'll plunk this down on you, and it'll become your world. When you examine it that way, then the real problems behind urban renewal become clearer.

You say, I think it's in Brothers and Keepers, that your grandmother's house on Finance was your link to Homewood at the stage when that book was being written, the early '80s, and you were remembering the railroad tracks going overhead. I know this isn't a

fictional work, but that image sticks out for me because it's very evocative, because I understand the sense of this place that is yours, that you're linked into through your grandmother, because I have that with two neighborhoods in Brooklyn that were home to me. I'd like to hear more about why it's a Homewood, and not parts of Philadelphia, not parts of Laramie, that you write about. You've been in many places that you could write about as, figure as, home - many places in which you could absorb the stories. A lot of times it seems that your places are alive because of the stories that people tell about the places, continually, to keep them alive.

Well, there's something simple going on here. Those elements of Philadelphia that I came to appreciate and enjoy, and the same with Laramie, I plug into Homewood. They're in there, although they're kind of disguised. If I met somebody yesterday who had some quality that I felt was fascinating, and it either reminded me of my grandfather or suddenly opened up some mystery that I had in my mind, well, I might stick that in. It's not like there's this well of Homewood experiences that I keep drawing from; it's stuff in the future that I'm also locating there. It has to happen that way, or else the work would become static, a moldy thing, nostalgic. The neighborhood, the place, is an artistic contrivance for capturing all kinds of experience, and it works to the degree that it is permeable, that things that happen outside Homewood continue to grow up.

That makes sense. The idea of plugging in the different parts is an elegant way of putting the writing process, or the writerly process. But if we're talking about the neighborhood as sort of this artistic crucible for you, I'm interested in the environment that you create in your books; that is, Homewood. Am I correct in understanding that the environment forces some of your characters into situations? I read Tommy, in Hiding Place, as having been forced into his situation through an accumulation of circumstances.

I think it's safer, and it's always more productive and useful, to look at the individual case. That's, again, the break in the fictional from the sociological. The play of environment versus character, versus the individual, to me is pretty meaningless when translated into the statistical terms that you use for gas molecules. You know, where and how they separate, how many will end up in this corner. That's sort of silly when you only have one life and your life pushes you in the way that it does. It's also kind of dangerous to generalize from one life. I want to examine the interplay of environment and character at the level at which it's meaningful, and that is the individual life. What part does biology play, what part does nature, as opposed to nurture, play? You can only answer that, and even then in a very tentative way, by looking at the individual life. I'm not making any case, except the case of the person.

And so this play of the place, and the individual, is going to create different stories for each of the persons in that place?

Exactly. I mean, it's not because Robby gave in, because something in the shape of Robby's life was the shape it was. I had other brothers; there were lots of other kids like Robby who turned out a different way.

I understand. Let me ask you another question about Hiding Place. The last line of that book is, "They better make sure it doesn't happen so easy ever again." It's Mother Bess, you know, talking about Tommy's situation. I think that can be really interesting in conjunction with what you said about incantation, and litany. That line, for me, embodies what I see you doing with different memory links as stories passed between people, and between generations, because I think one of the most important things about this place that you create in this book is that it's generational. It's an established neighborhood that's generational, that continues to exist with links between generations. As a reader you wonder, what's going to happen in this place? What is happening with the new generation? I'm not asking you to say, here's what's happening, here's the news, you know, but that kind of line, coming from a representative of the older generation, not the younger one . . . as readers, can we infer that you are saying that, for these people, a memory link has got to be established, and strong, or else the nature of Homewood will be lost, as a place, as a home?

I think that's fair enough, if I understand what you're saying. The learning goes in both directions: Older people teach younger people, and younger people also teach their elders. I wanted Bess's last words to reverberate. I wanted almost to make hers a kind of avenging, or a threatening, voice. The community has learned something, she has learned something, and now it's in the air, it's out there, that idea *should* be out there. And if that idea is out there, an idea that has a certain amount of anger, because of what's happened to this relative of hers and, knowing something about his life circumstances, the rotten dead he got, the love she has for him . . . these are things that are very powerful. They can only be allowed to fester, or be ignored, at one's peril. She's arming the community with a knowledge of itself which will hopefully open the door to a healthier future. The singer, or the storyteller, if he or she is functioning the way he or she should, traditionally, should arm, should enlighten, should tell you what's happening, tell you what you need to do, what your choices are. That's the stage I wanted to take Bess to, in that book - and, with her, the reader and the community. Bess inhabits the same world the little fairy who helps to burn things down in *Hiding Place* inhabits. Hers is a blood knowledge, it's very palpable, but it's also a world of the spirit.

It's what you can call upon.

Yeah.

Source: Jessica Lustig, "Home: An Interview with John Edgar Wideman," in *African American Review*, Vol. 26, No. 3. Fall 1992.

Topics for Further Study

How common was it for runaway slaves to make it to freedom and establish permanent homes in the North? Do some research to see if Sybela's story is typical. Identify through research other areas in Northern cities like Homewood.

What's the significance of Greece and the Greek island in the story? How does it relate to the Sybil, which the narrator identifies with Sybela?

Compare Wideman's narrative technique of weaving together multiple voices with the narrative technique of another story you have read.

Explain your opinions on Wideman's comparison of his brother to a runaway slave? What questions about fairness and the criminal justice system are raised by this story? Try to answer this question by looking at the issues from several perspectives.

What Do I Read Next?

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (1973) by Linda Brent was originally published with the assistance of a white woman named L. Maria Child in 1861. This book has become a crucial piece in nineteenth-century American literature. Though the slave narrative constitutes its own genre, Brent's book is one of the few written by a woman.

"Everyday Use" by Alice Walker is a short story that explores many of the same themes about African-American culture that Wideman's stories do. Walker also experiments with the same techniques of integrating oral culture into the story format.

Cane (1923) by Jean Toomer uses experimental techniques drawn both from literary modernism and from traditional African-American culture. Toomer renders a richly textured and powerful portrait of the lives of African Americans in the South. This is one of the books that Wideman cites as an influence on his work.

Further Study

Coleman, James, *Blackness and Modernism: The Literary Career of John Edgar Wideman*, University Press of Mississippi, 1989.

This study takes on the complicated issues that arise when the Eurocentric models of modernism are applied to African-American writing.

Du Bois, W. E. B., *The Souls of Black Folk*, 1903.

This essay is one of the classics in the study of African-American literature. In it Du Bois explains his theories of second sight.

Hurston, Zora Neale, *Mules and Men*, Perennial Library, 1990.

This pioneering work by the anthropologist and writer remains the landmark study of African-American culture in the post-reconstruction South.

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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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