Big Black Good Man Study Guide

Big Black Good Man by Richard Wright

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Introduction

"Big Black Good Man" was published in French in 1958, three years before Richard Wright's death. It appears in the story collection *Eight Men*, one of the author's last works. Its themes of suspense, fear, and alienation mark it as typical of Wright's fiction. The story, although not one of the author's better-known works, is included in *The Art of the Tale: An International Anthology of Short Stories*, edited by Daniel Halpern and published in 1987.

Author Biography

Richard Wright was born September 4, 1908, on a plantation near Natchez, Mississippi. His father, Nathaniel, was a sharecropper who left the family when Richard was a young boy. His mother, Ella Wilson, was an educated woman who worked as a schoolteacher and a cook. Throughout his childhood, Richard moved often, living at various times with his mother, his maternal grandmother, and other relatives in Mississippi, Tennessee, and Arkansas. He attended school sporadically but was an avid reader.

Wright's first short story was published in 1924 in an African American newspaper, the *Southern Register*. For a few years, Wright worked at odd jobs and continued to write. In 1927, Wright moved to Chicago. There he wrote articles for Communist Party newspapers as well as short stories, and when Wright moved to New York in 1937, he became editor of the Communist *Daily Worker*.

Four of Wright's short stories were published in 1938 as a collection entitled *Uncle Tom's Children*. The following year Wright married Dhimah Rose Meadman. With financial support from a Guggenheim Fellowship, Wright wrote his first novel, *Native Son*, which was published in 1940. Wright's first marriage was brief, and in 1941 he married Ellen Poplar, with whom he had two daughters. His autobiography, *Black Boy*, was published in 1945 and became, along with *Native Son*, his best-known work.

Wright moved his family to Paris, France, in 1946. He became a French citizen and befriended existentialist authors Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, whose work influenced his own, especially the novel *The Outsiders* (1953). In the ensuing years, Wright traveled widely and continued to write fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. As the years went by, he suffered increasingly from ill health and financial problems. The story collection *Eight Men*, in which "Big Black Good Man" first appeared, was among Wright's last works and was published in 1961, after his death.

Wright died in Paris on November 28, 1960. The official cause of death was a heart attack, though rumors that Wright was murdered have persisted through the years.

Plot Summary

"Big Black Good Man" opens on an August night in Copenhagen, Denmark. The year is not specified, but the setting seems to be contemporary with the time of the story's writing, the late 1950s. Olaf Jenson sits in the office in a cheap hotel that caters to sailors and students. Jenson, the night porter, will be sixty years old the next day. He finishes a beer, smokes a cigar, and reflects on his comfortable, unremarkable life.

It is late, and Jenson is about to take a nap when a very large black man opens the office door and asks for a room. Jenson is so taken aback by the man's size that he does not answer until the man repeats his request. Jenson asks if the man is an American (yes) and a sailor (yes). The porter thinks that, although he is not a bigot, "this particular black man . . . Well, he didn't seem human. [. . .] There was something about the man's intense blackness and ungamely bigness that frightened and insulted Olaf."

Jenson wants to refuse the man lodging but is afraid to do so. As soon as he agrees to give the man a room, the sailor hands Jenson a roll of fifty- and one-hundred-dollar bills to keep in the safe. Wracking his brain for a way to get the man out of the hotel, Jenson plans to tell him that the hotel does not let rooms for one night only. The man, however, says that he is staying five or six nights.

The man refuses to let the elderly porter carry his suitcase, but Jenson shows him to his room. The man asks Jenson to get him whiskey and a woman, which are common requests in this hotel. Still revolted by the man, Jenson returns to the office and reluctantly calls Lena, a prostitute who regularly visits men at the hotel. He warns Lena about the man's size, but she is unconcerned and soon arrives. Jenson worries about her while she is with the man, but she later leaves, first giving Jenson his percentage of her fee.

The next night, the man comes in late and asks for Lena by name. This pattern continues for six nights. Then the man comes to the office to pay his bill and get his money from the safe. The man gives Jenson a tip. Then, instead of leaving, he simply stares at Jenson, who becomes increasingly terrified. Finally, the man commands Jenson to stand up. He then approaches and places his hands around Jenson's neck, grinning. Convinced that he is about to be strangled, Jenson urinates on himself. The man moves his fingers on Jenson's neck gently and then withdraws them. Jenson pleads with the man not to hurt him, and the man replies, "I wouldn't hurt you, boy. So long."

When the man is gone, Jenson weeps out of humiliation, fear, and anger. He wishes that he had killed the man with the gun he keeps in the desk drawer. He calls the hotel owner to say that he is ill, and she comes to take over so that Jenson can go home and change out of his soiled clothes. He lies to his wife also, again saying that he is sick.

For the next year, Jenson fears the man's return and harbors detailed fantasies of revenge. He imagines that the man's ship sinks in a storm and that the man drowns "gasping and choking like a trapped rat." His rotting corpse is eaten by a white shark.

Then, on an August night one year after his first appearance, the man returns. Jenson tells him that there are no rooms available. The man says that he does not want a room. When Jenson asks what he wants, the man grins, opens his suitcase, and takes something out of it. Then he approaches Jenson and again puts his hands around Jenson's neck. Jenson tries to reach the drawer where the gun is, but the man pushes him away from the desk. The man then proclaims, "A perfect fit!" and takes from his suitcase six new white shirts□gifts for Jenson, one for each night that Jenson sent Lena to him.

Jenson becomes hysterical, laughing and crying. The man asks him what is wrong and then tells him to try on a shirt, which Jenson does. Jenson asks the man if it is Lena he wants, adding that she has not returned to the hotel since the man left a year ago. The man answers that he and Lena have been writing and that he is going to her house.

Jenson admits that he thought the man was going to kill him. Incredulous, the man laughs and tells Jenson that he would not hurt him because he, Jenson, is a good man. Jenson tells the man that he is a good man, too, adding, "a big black good man." The man replies, "Daddy-O, you're crazy." As he leaves, Jenson thanks him. The man turns back, grins, and says, "Daddy-O, drop dead."

Characters

Karen Jenson

Karen is Olaf's wife. She appears in the story only in Olaf's thoughts, as conveyed by the narrator. Olaf never talks to her about what happens at the seedy hotel, implying that she is a proper woman.

Olaf Jenson

Olaf is the night porter in the hotel where Jim arrives asking for a room. The story begins on the night before his sixtieth birthday. He is an ordinary man, who is married, owns a home, and likes to garden. As he sits at his desk in the hotel office, he reflects that it would have been nice if he and his wife had had children and if he had saved more money. But, all in all, he is content.

From the moment when Jim first arrives at the hotel, Olaf is overwhelmed by revulsion and terror. It seems to be neither Jim's race nor his size alone that so profoundly affects Olaf but the combination of the two. His reaction to Jim shows his inability to rightly judge people, as he continues to be convinced that Jim is a cruel, threatening man capable of unprovoked violence even though Jim's behavior contradicts this.

Jim

Jim is a black American sailor (on a passenger ship) who arrives at a cheap hotel on the Copenhagen waterfront on the night when the story begins. His clothes and a large roll of cash mark him as well off, but the most remarkable thing about him is his size. He is about six and one-half feet tall and huge in every aspect. The story refers to his "gorillalike arms" and "mammoth hands." As well, Jim's skin is not brown but so black that it has a bluish cast.

Upon his arrival, Jim entrusts Olaf, the night porter, with twenty-six hundred dollars in cash. He also refuses to let the older, much smaller porter carry his suitcase to his room. When he returns a year later, Jim brings Olaf six custom-tailored white shirts□one for each night that Olaf sent the prostitute Lena to him the year before. In contrast to his generous actions, Jim's verbal communication is somewhat ambiguous, giving little clue to his feelings and intentions.

Lena

Lena is a prostitute who regularly visits the sailors who stay at the hotel. It is Lena whom Olaf calls when Jim asks for a woman on the night of his arrival. Lena is a big,

strong, blonde, and Olaf thinks that if any woman can handle Jim, it is Lena. He also appreciates that she gives him a larger share of her earnings than the other women do.

Lena has four young children to support and is quite willing to visit Jim. In fact, she visits him on all six nights of his stay, and when Jim returns a year later, he stays at her home. The narrator reveals that Lena never went to the hotel again after the end of Jim's stay there, implying that Jim began supporting her.

Themes

Ambiguity

"Big Black Good Man" is shot through with ambiguity. Wright gives clues to the attitudes and intentions of Olaf and Jim, but some of these clues are contradictory so that, all in all, they lead to question marks in readers' minds. The narrator reports that Olaf is not racially prejudiced and provides some evidence to support this statement: Olaf regularly provides rooms at the hotel for men of all races. Yet Olaf's negative reaction to Jim is extreme and unrelenting, and the terms that the narrator, speaking from Olaf's point of view, uses to describe Jim are clearly racist. Throughout the story Jim is referred to as a "black beast" with animal qualities□"gorillalike arms" and "mammoth hands." Further, Olaf feels that if Jim's skin were brown rather than black, Jim would not convey the same horror.

Jim is equally ambiguous. Most of his actions toward Olaf speak of a trusting and courteous man. He gives Olaf a large sum of money for safekeeping and does not ask for a receipt. He refuses to let the elderly porter carry his suitcase. Yet, as he checks out of the hotel, he places his hands around Olaf's neck without asking permission or explaining his purpose. Most people would feel threatened by such an action, especially given Jim's size, regardless of his race.

The result of this layered ambiguity is that readers' own attitudes and experiences come into play as they attempt to interpret the two characters. At the end of the story, when both characters are finally revealed more clearly, readers also see clearly how their own interpretations colored the men□accurately or not. The term "interactive" probably had not been coined at the time this story was written, but the author's carefully crafted ambiguity makes it an authentically interactive story.

Racially Based Fear and Alienation

This story shares with much of Wright's fiction the theme of fear and alienation growing out of racial differences. The alienation is one-sided; Jim seems completely comfortable with Olaf. Olaf, on the other hand, has a horror of Jim that seems to stem mostly from his blackness. The old porter may well have been intimidated by any man as large as Jim, but it is hard to imagine that his revulsion and fear could have been as lasting and as extreme if Jim had not been black. Again, this impression is supported by the words the narrator uses to describe Jim as Olaf sees him. These words convey that Olaf sees Jim as something less than human and as someone who therefore cannot be counted on to have human thought processes and responses. To Olaf, Jim is a beast who may kill him in a fit of unprovoked rage.

Olaf's baseless, relentless fear of Jim is echoed in late twentieth century and early twenty-first century studies that find that many white people are afraid of, or at least

suspicious of, black men in situations where they are not afraid of white men. It is a long-known fact of human nature that human beings generally react negatively to people who are different from themselves. Further, race has been shown to be a difference that many people find particularly threatening. These facts are the central realities of Wright's story.

BOOKRAGS

Style

Point of View

"Big Black Good Man" has a third-person narrator who tells the story from Olaf Jenson's point of view. The narrator is privy to Olaf's thoughts but not to Jim's. Through this device, Jim's thoughts and intentions remain as much a mystery to readers as they are to Olaf. This means that readers see Jim through Olaf's eyes and at the same time through the lens of their own experiences and attitudes. The result is a heightening of tension and suspense. On one level, the reader gets caught up in Olaf's blind fear of Jim. At the same time, the reader stands outside the story and so has a different, more detached perspective. Depending upon his or her own race, age, and attitudes, the reader may have responses that closely match Olaf's or that conflict with them. Readers, therefore, struggle to resolve not only the tension between Olaf and Jim but also the tension between Olaf's attitudes and their own. The question of who is right about Jim□Olaf, or the reader, or both, or neither□looms larger and larger as the story progresses, and Jim remains (until the very end) a towering uncertainty.

If the narrator revealed Jim's thoughts throughout the story, the suspense would be greatly reduced. Readers would never be required to confront their own responses to Jim or to wrestle with the question of whether or not Olaf's responses were warranted.

Figurative Language

The story is rich in figurative language, particularly in similes and metaphors that emphasize Olaf's view of Jim as something inhuman. When Jim first appears, the narrator describes him as Olaf sees him: "His chest bulged like a barrel; his rocklike and humped shoulders hinted of mountain ridges; the stomach ballooned like a threatening stone; and the legs were like telephone poles." In these phrases, Jim is a force of nature or an inanimate object. In many other descriptions, he is an animal, with a "buffalolike head," a neck "like a bull's," "gorillalike arms," "mammoth hands," and so on. Jim is repeatedly described as anything and everything except a human being.

One especially interesting use of figurative language occurs when Lena's first visit to Jim's room is described as an "errand of mercy." The phrase stands out, since the narrator does not generally use euphemistic language to describe the tawdry goings-on at the hotel. Lena is called a whore, not a call girl, and the woman who owns the hotel is a "hard-bitten [b□□]." The lone euphemism "errand of mercy" is unexpected and humorous in such gritty company.

Historical Context

Harlem Renaissance

Scholars are divided as to whether Wright should be considered part of the Harlem Renaissance, but all agree that his work was powerfully influenced by the cultural movement that was ending just as Wright's career was beginning. After World War I, the Harlem neighborhood of New York City was home to more African Americans than any other urban area in the United States. It soon became a cultural epicenter where musicians, artists, and writers thrived. The impact of what became known as the Harlem Renaissance was magnified by the fact that white audiences embraced its artists and their works. For the first time, large numbers of white Americans supported African American artists by listening to their music in nightclubs and by reading their literary works. It was a time when a broad spectrum of Americans learned about and came to appreciate African American culture.

Wright moved to Harlem from Chicago in 1937 and was part of the area's literary community by virtue of his position as the editor of the Communist newspaper, the *Daily Worker*. He met and was influenced by some of the leading writers of the Harlem Renaissance, such as Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, Nella Larsen, and Zora Neale Hurston.

American Artists in Europe

Another phenomenon that began after World War I and continued through much of the twentieth century was the popularity of Europe—particularly France—among American artists and writers. Artists of all races were attracted to France by its rich cultural history and by its high regard for artists and the arts. In addition, African Americans found that they faced much less racial prejudice in France and other parts of Europe than they did at home. Many jazz musicians and singers, artists, and writers, Wright among them, became expatriates, remaining in France for the rest of their lives. Some returned to the United States, temporarily or permanently, when Europe was ravaged by World War II. Harlem Renaissance painter William H. Johnson, for example, spent about fifteen years living in France and traveling throughout Europe before returning to New York in 1939.

Critical Overview

Eight Men, the collection in which "Big Black Good Man" first appeared, was published after Wright's death and contains some of his last writing. The volume is not considered to be among Wright's most important work, and within the volume, "Big Black Good Man" is not considered to be among the strongest stories.

Most critics were disappointed with *Eight Men* when it first appeared, judging the stories inferior to Wright's earlier fiction. One exception was Irving Howe, according to an article by Yoshinobu Hakutani in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol. 102, *American Short-Story Writers, 1910—1945*. Hakutani quotes Howe as writing that "Big Black Good Man" shows "a strong feeling for the compactness of the story as a form. . . . When the language is scraggly or leaden there is a sharply articulated pattern or event."

Considering the story collection in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol. 76, *Afro-American Writers, 1940—1955*, Edward D. Clark writes, "The works in *Eight Men* display the variety and development in Wright's literary and thematic skills. Clark calls "Big Black Good Man" "one of Wright's few humorous stories" and notes that it "develops the theme of black pride through the adventures of a black sailor."

Clark concludes his overview of Wright's work by declaring that Wright is "undeniably one of the most important American writers of the twentieth century," noting that Wright's writing has been translated and read around the world. According to Clark, "no black writer between Frederick Douglass and James Baldwin has offered so moving a testimony and delivered so scathing an indictment of America's racial dilemmas to so large an audience as has Richard Wright."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Norvell is an independent educational writer who specializes in English and literature. In this essay, Norvell discusses three types of conflict in Richard Wright's story "Big Black Good Man."

Much of Richard Wright's fiction can correctly be said to be about race. His early stories and novels deal with the experiences of African Americans both in the North and in the South, within their own communities as well as in their relationships with white individuals and white institutions. It is easy, then, to categorize "Big Black Good Man" as a story about race, particularly since it is the story of a relationship between a black man and a white man. It is not wrong to say that "Big Black Good Man" is about race, but it is not the whole story either. In a mere ten pages, Wright has managed to tell a story about race, a story about maleness, and a story about the nature of goodness.

Clearly, race is a central concern of the story. It is perhaps not coincidental that "Big Black Good Man" is set in the far northern reaches of Europe, in a land of blue-eyed blonds that in every way is about as far from Africa as it is possible to get. The narrator of "Big Black Good Man" comments repeatedly that Jim is the blackest of black men. That he is blue-black, and not brown, is one thing about Jim that disturbs Olaf. The narrator never mentions, however, that Olaf is surely the whitest of the white, just as Jim is the blackest of the black. The two men are not just members of different races, they are the extremes of different races.

Although Olaf repeatedly protests that he is not a racist, it is clear that he is. One place where this becomes evident is in Olaf's gory fantasy of Jim's being drowned and eaten by a shark. The only guilt Olaf feels about the fantasy comes when he thinks about the fact that "many innocent people, women and children, all white and blonde" would die along with Jim when his ship went down. Not only does Olaf value the lives of white people above those of black people, he views Jim as something less than human because of his extreme blackness. The narrator, describing Jim through Olaf's eyes, never refers to Jim by name. Readers only know Jim's name because he tells Olaf to write "Jim" on the roll of cash that he asks Olaf to keep for him. Although Olaf knows Jim's name from that point on, he never uses it. Instead, he consistently likens Jim to an animal or an inanimate object. Jim is a "black beast." Various parts of Jim's body are described as being like rocks, mountain ridges, telephone poles; like parts of bulls, gorillas, mammoths, and more.

Olaf's horror of Jim—his complete misreading of Jim—stems largely from his racist assumption that since Jim is absolutely black, he cannot possibly be human. He must be a brute beast who does not know or care that it would be wrong to murder a defenseless old man. Olaf believes that Jim does not need a reason to kill; violence for the sheer thrill of it must be his nature.

The white man, therefore, is superstitious about race, equating black skin with all that is primitive and dangerous. The black man, on the other hand, is portrayed as being color

blind. Olaf's whiteness seems to have no significance to Jim. What the black man notices about Olaf is his age (he refuses to let the old porter carry his suitcase), not his race. One clear message of the story is that the white man is a racist but the black man is not.

But race is only one point of conflict between the two men. Their maleness, and the competitiveness that is a part of maleness, is another. Olaf sees Jim as an adversary and a threat not only because he is black but also because he is bigger, stronger, and more successful. As the story opens, Olaf, on the eve of his sixtieth birthday, is reviewing and evaluating his life. Readers learn that he was a sailor, that he has a wife but no children, and that he owns a home but has little money to see him through the last years of his life. The reason for Olaf's childlessness is not explained. He may or may not be impotent in the sexual sense, but he is portrayed, generally, as a man who, while not a failure, has not amounted to much.

As soon as readers have been given this information about Olaf, Jim appears. While Olaf is a physically small man who is well past his physical prime, Jim is much younger, much larger, and also obviously quite strong. As Olaf once was, Jim is a sailor. Unlike Olaf, though, Jim has done well financially. Olaf is confronted with Jim's affluence, first in the form of his expensive clothing and shoes and next in the form of a large roll of cash. The roll contains twenty-six hundred dollars in fifty- and one-hundred-dollar bills. This amount was worth much more in the 1950s, when the story was written, than it would be in the early 2000s, of course. It is quite possible that Olaf had never before seen that much money at one time. It is even possible that Jim's roll of ready cash represented more money than Olaf had saved after a lifetime of work.

Wright therefore reveals much about the two main characters and leaves it up to readers to reflect on how the facts influence the men's attitudes toward each other. Jim does not know all that readers know about Olaf, but much is easily inferred. The old man is working as a night porter in a cheap hotel instead of being comfortably retired. Jim shows Olaf a modicum of courtesy and trust, but not respect. In deference to Olaf's age and size, Jim carries his own suitcase when Olaf leads him to his room. He trusts Olaf to label and keep a large amount of money. But Jim calls Olaf "boy" and, later, "Daddy-O." The narrator more than once describes Olaf's chafing at Jim's confident manner. Jim has every expectation that Olaf will do as Jim tells him to. To put it another way, Jim is secure in the knowledge that he is the more successful and powerful man, and this security shows in his classist actions toward Olaf. Conversely, Olaf is aware of his own relative smallness and powerlessness□an awareness that greatly inflames Olaf's hatred of Jim. On this level, the conflict in the story is a conflict between two males and one that would exist regardless of the men's races. Even if Jim were white, his far greater strength and success would have been an affront to Olaf. It is understandable for a man to compare himself to other men, especially in terms of physical prowess and financial success. And it makes sense that the man who grasps his own inferiority would despise the man who is his better.

As was true of the racial conflict, this conflict between males is one-sided. Because of Olaf's age and low social position, Jim does not have any interest in Olaf beyond

acknowledging that he deserves, as a human being and as an elderly person, to be treated with decency. Olaf, on the other hand, is obsessed with Jim and feels slighted by his every word and gesture.

The third level of conflict in "Big Black Good Man" is the most basic and universal: the conflict between good and evil. On this level, too, Wright provides readers with certain facts about each man. Olaf lives a quiet, settled life with his wife. Out of respect for her, he never tells her about the unsavory events that routinely occur at the hotel. Even in his old age, he works to support himself and his wife. He limits his drinking, deciding on the first night of the story to take a nap rather than have another beer. He worries about Lena's safety on the night of her first visit to Jim. All of these are hallmarks of a "good" man.

Jim, by contrast, does not seem to be married or to live a settled life. He spends every night with a prostitute, and every night he drinks an entire bottle of whiskey. Many people, even those who are completely free of racial prejudice, would be inclined to judge Olaf as a "good" man and Jim as a "bad" one. But the story asks readers to consider whether traditional gauges of morality, such as sexual behavior, are really accurate measures of a man's goodness. It demonstrates that a man may live a conventionally moral life and still walk around seething with hate toward another man who has done him no harm.

At the end of the story, Jim tells Olaf that Olaf is a good man because he has helped Jim by sending him Lena. Jim says this, even though at the time he has at least some understanding of the dark thoughts Olaf has harbored about him. This makes Jim seem generous in his definition of a "good" man. He is willing to overlook the bad in Olaf and appreciate the good, even though the good that Olaf did for Jim was done under duress.

Similarly, Olaf finally calls Jim a good man. He finally sees Jim more accurately□finally recognizes that he is a human being□and tells him that he is a "big black good man." It is telling that Olaf still puts "big" and "black" in front of "good" and "man" in his description of Jim. The things that Olaf finds threatening about Jim still loom larger in his mind than Jim's goodness and his humanity.

The story ends with all conflicts between the characters resolved in a mutual declaration of goodness. Whether each man is correct in his evaluation of the other is an issue that Wright leaves up to readers.

Source: Candyce Norvell, Critical Essay on "Big Black Good Man," in *Short Stories for Students*, Gale, 2005.

Topics for Further Study

Jim, who is a sailor on a passenger ship, is well dressed and carries a large amount of cash. Do some research to find out what passenger ships were like in the days before air travel. Is Jim's affluence realistic? What might have been his job on the ship?

Jim's final words at the end of the story—"Daddy-O, drop dead"—are ambiguous, especially since he "flashed a grin" as he said them. What do you think Jim was thinking and feeling at that moment?

Discuss the three women who appear or are mentioned in the story. What character types do they represent? What do they have in common with one another, and how are they different?

What possible reasons might Wright have had for setting the story in Copenhagen? What role does the setting play in the story's mood and effectiveness? Do you think another location would have been more effective?

Wright implies more about Jim and Lena's relationship than he explains. What can you infer about their relationship, and what clues allow you to make these inferences? What do you think will happen between them in the future?

Compare and Contrast

1950s: A man like Olaf, who is sixty years old, is considered quite elderly, since the life expectancy for men who were born at or before the beginning of the twentieth century is less than fifty years.

Today: In developed nations, the average life expectancy for men is about seventy-five, and a man of sixty has not yet reached retirement age.

1950s: Europe is still recovering from the economic effects of World War II, while the United States is experiencing unprecedented prosperity. Americans are rich compared to Europeans, as evidenced by Jim's clothing, his roll of cash, and his generous gift to Olaf.

Today: Americans continue to be among the wealthiest people on earth and to have a higher standard of living than Europeans. Although the economic slowdown in the first years of the new millennium has been a global event, the American economy has proved more resilient than those of European nations. Low interest rates and high productivity have minimized the impact of the slowdown on Americans' standard of living.

1950s: Jazz musicians are the source of popular slang terms such as "Daddy-O," which is what Jim calls Olaf.

Today: Hip-hop musicians are the source of popular slang terms. An African American man might use the slang term "Money" to refer to a man whose name he does not know.

What Do I Read Next?

Wright's first and best-known novel, *Native Son* (1940), is the story of Bigger Thomas, an African American teenager who accidentally kills someone and is sentenced to death.

White Man, Listen! (1957) is a collection of Wright's better-known essays.

James Baldwin's novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) is the story of an African American family in Harlem during the depression. Baldwin, like Wright, was an expatriate living in France, and in fact the two knew each other and had a stormy friendship.

Invisible Man (1952), by Ralph Ellison, became an immediate classic for its portrait of racial intolerance in the United States in the 1950s□an ugly picture painted by the narrator, a young, unnamed black man.

Further Study

Coles, Robert, *Black Writers Abroad: A Study of Black American Writers in Europe and Africa*, Garland Publishing, 1999.

Coles catalogues the African American writers who left the United States over the course of two centuries, examining their reasons for moving abroad and the impact of the decision on their work.

Crossman, R. H. S., ed., *The God That Failed*, Columbia University Press, 2001.

Wright is one of six contributors to this collection of essays by respected writers, all of whom had first embraced and later renounced communism. The authors relate their personal experiences with communism and their reasons for rejecting it. André Gide of France and Arthur Koestler of Germany are among the other contributors to what is widely considered an important record of cold war issues.

Lewis, David L., ed., *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader*, Penguin USA, 1995.

This volume of short fiction, essays, memoirs, drama, and poetry provides a snapshot of the literature produced during the Harlem Renaissance. More than forty writers are represented.

Wright, Richard, *American Hunger*, HarperCollins, 1982.

This volume, first published seventeen years after Wright's death, is a continuation of the autobiography begun in *Black Boy*.

□□□, *Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth*, 1945, reprint, Everbind Anthologies, 2003.

Black Boy is the first part of Wright's autobiography, covering his early life in Mississippi and Tennessee.

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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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