Big Blonde Study Guide

Big Blonde by Dorothy Parker

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

Author, critic, and celebrated wit Dorothy Parker first published "Big Blonde" in a popular magazine in 1929, at the end of the decade with which she is closely associated. The story presents a sad and biting view of a woman's life in the 1920s, an era often considered both fun and liberating for women. "Big Blonde" received a warm critical and popular reception and was honored as the best short story of the year in the prestigious O. Henry competition for 1929. A year later it appeared in a collection of stories by Parker entitled *Laments for the Living,* and has since been reprinted in many anthologies and readers. "Big Blonde" is considered Parker's most significant literary accomplishment and also her most autobiographical piece of writing. For this reason, it has continued to command the fascination and respect of readers. The story is admired for its unconventional narrative structure and its controlled tone.

In Mrs. Morse, the passive, aging "big blonde" to whom the title refers, Parker offers readers a protagonist who is both tragic and pathetic. There are several interesting links between the events in the story and those of Parker's life. Both Parker and her fictional counterpart had brief, disillusioning marriages and a string of unsatisfying love affairs, and both attempted suicide. Parker does not depict Mrs. Morse sentimentally or even completely sympathetically, however; rather, she uses her character to make a cutting critique of gender dynamics and the subtle psychological forms that oppression can take in a supposedly modern and liberated environment. Mrs. Morse's lack of insight and general ineffectuality may also reflect Parker's famous self-deprecation.

Author Biography

Parker was born Dorothy Rothschild on August 22, 1893, in West End, New Jersey, to a Jewish garment manufacturer and his Baptist wife. Though she was privileged with material comforts, she was shown little affection as a child. Her mother died when she was an infant and her father was strict and remote. She received an excellent high school education at a prestigious "finishing school," but at the time it was not considered proper for a girl to go to college. Her father died shortly after her graduation and she moved to a boarding house in Manhattan - a decidedly improper decision. Here she made her first friendships in literary circles. Within five years she had published her first poem and was writing fashion items for *Vogue* magazine. Soon afterward she moved up to the post of theater critic at *Vanity Fair.*

In the 1920s Parker was closely associated with a clique of New York writers and journalists, famous for their biting wits, known as the Algonquin Round Table for the fashionable Manhattan hotel where they regularly ate lunch. Parker was the only woman in the inner circle of the Round Table, which she shared with Robert Benchley, Franklin P. Adams, Robert Sherwood, Harold Ross, and others. She was reportedly quiet and demure in demeanor, but with a rapier-like wit that was second to none. She is famous for quips such as "You can lead a horticulture but you can't make her think" and "Men seldom make passes at girls who wear glasses," but she also often made jokes at her own expense.

She was married briefly during this period to a bland if charming alcoholic named Eddie Parker and was referred to as Mrs. Parker from her early twenties. They married shortly before Eddie went off to fight in World War I, and the marriage ended for practical purposes in 1922, though they did not divorce legally until 1928. Parker had a string of affairs, most notable that with Charles McArthur. He was a philanderer who broke her heart and left her pregnant. Parker had an illegal abortion and, not long after, made her first attempt at suicide; she was to make two more attempts, both unsuccessful. Despite her emotional vulnerability, Parker maintained a facade of toughness through verbal cleverness and black humor.

Parker struggled with alcoholism for much of her life. She dressed stylishly and spent lavishly, despite a meager income. In the late 1920s she enjoyed literary success with *Enough Rope,* a book of poetry, and "Big Blonde." Much of Parker's writing concerns unhappy relationships between modern men and women. By the end of the decade the Algonquin group was falling apart, and Parker left for Europe. She went on to a successful career as a Hollywood screenwriter, and also continued to write stories, poetry, and reviews. Parker married two more times, both to the same man, Alan Campbell, and expended much energy supporting the Civil Rights Movement before dying in 1967.

Plot Summary

The story opens with a description of the main character, Hazel Morse. She is defined in terms of her appearance, men's desire for her, and her vanity. A brief and vague description of her early adulthood follows: Her mother had died when she was in her twenties and she had taken a job as a model. During this period she worked to be popular, especially with men. This entailed going out, being fun, and being a "good sport."

She meets Herbie Morse when she is nearly thirty and marries him six weeks later. Herbie is a dapper man and a heavy drinker. During the first months of the marriage she is happy. She begins to realize how tired she had grown of being the sort of woman who was popular with men. She is relieved that she no longer has to be so much fun, and she takes to crying frequently. At first her husband is solicitous of her when she is in her frequent melancholy moods, but before long he objects to her "crabbing" and begins to go out without her.

Mrs. Morse decides to start going out again, and soon she begins to drink, something she had never done in her single days. While sometimes this helps temporarily, the couple fights more and more. Herbie often threatens to leave her and on one occasion resorts to abuse, giving her a black eye. Mrs. Morse continues to hope that things will work out in their marriage and starts to drink alone at home. In Herbie's frequent absence, Mrs. Morse takes up a friendship with a woman across the hall, Mrs. Martin, who drinks with her during the day. At night Mrs. Martin entertains an admirer, Joe, and several of his friends. Mrs. Morse enjoys the attention of these men. One of them, a married man named Ed, pays Mrs. Morse particular attention. Ed starts to assert his "proprietorship," kissing her on the mouth in greeting.

One day after a long drinking bout, Herbie comes home and tells his wife that he is leaving her. They have a drink together and he makes a toast—"Here's mud in your eye"—before he leaves. Mrs. Morse drinks heavily at Mrs. Martin's that night and tells Ed that Herbie has left her. That night Ed takes Mrs. Morse back to her apartment and stays the night. She becomes Ed's mistress, and he gives her an allowance. Ed soon suggests that she move near the train station, to make it more convenient for him to see her when he is in town. Mrs. Morse drinks steadily. When she doesn't drink enough, she feels melancholy.

Ed takes Mrs. Morse to a bar called Jimmy's and she becomes friendly with a group of women there. These women are married but either do not live with their spouses, or are divorced. When they run out of money, "a new donor" appears among the men who frequent the bar. Mrs. Morse doesn't worry about money because Ed is doing well financially. She still feels melancholy, however. Ed and her new acquaintances encourage her to drink in order to act happy.

After three years together, Ed moves to Florida, leaving Mrs. Morse with some money for living expenses. She becomes the mistress of a series of men, all about whom she

feels fairly neutral. Mrs. Morse is tired and depressed much of the time. She drinks heavily, but drinking no longer offers the solace it once had. She begins to think about killing herself. One night, at Jimmy's, Mrs. Morse has a conversation with a woman there, who tells her about a sleeping pill called veronal. Mrs. Morse finds out that veronal is powerful and easy to buy in New Jersey. The next morning she goes to two different drug stores there, buying a vial of sleeping pills at each. She puts them in her drawer and they make her feel happy.

At this time Mrs. Morse is seeing a man named Art. She makes an effort to be gay around him and he considers her "the best sport in the world." But one night she becomes very depressed on her way to meet him. She drinks heavily to try to get in a better mood, but cannot. Art is angry with her and tells her to cheer up by their next date. She returns home and takes both vials of veronal, washing them down with the toast, "Here's mud in your eye."

The next day Mrs. Morse's maid, Nettie, comes to clean the house and discovers her unconscious body. She is frightened and elicits the help of the elevator attendant. Together they find a doctor who lives in the building. He is drinking with a "dark girl" and is unhappy to be disturbed. He comes to examine Mrs. Morse and asks Nettie what she had been drinking. Nettie discovers the veronal vials in the bathroom and the doctor declares that Mrs. Morse is cowardly and that they will have to pump her stomach, but that she will not die.

Two days later Mrs. Morse awakens and starts to cry. Nettie, who has been caring for her, asks her why she had taken the pills and tells her how much trouble she has been. Mrs. Morse asks Nettie if she has ever felt like committing suicide. Nettie declares that she never has and tells Mrs. Morse to cheer up. She gives Mrs. Morse a postcard from Art, which also says to cheer up. Mrs. Morse feels miserable and asks Nettie for a drink. Nettie hesitates until Mrs. Morse tells her that she can have one too. Mrs. Morse toasts, "Here's mud in your eye," and Nettie encourages her for acting cheerful. "Sure," Mrs. Morse responds.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

This short story's protagonist, Hazel Morse, is the stereotypical head-turning big blonde of her day. A former model that gravitates towards others like her, Hazel is vain. She dresses well and wears small, tight, high heels. She flirts with men; they like her, and they take her out. She considers herself a good sport and never stops to think that she might spend her time on something more serious. While working in the fashion industry, she meets Herbie Morse, an attractive man who drinks heavily and has an obsessive habit of biting his cuticles.

They marry quickly, and just as quickly, Hazel changes. She gives up the pretense of who she was. While she loves her new life, she is more real than she has ever been. She complains when she has reason to. She cries when she is sad. When she does not feel like talking, she does not. At first, Herbie assumes the role of comforter, playing to her melancholies, reassuring her and loving her. However, the responsibility soon overwhelms him. He complains about her moods, and then he begins to go out by himself at night, failing to come home for hours after work. Hazel is frantic at first, fearing that he has had an accident or that he is cheating on her. She begins to dress and go out with Herbie, but she does not find his drinking amusing any more. Herbie accuses her of nagging him about it and begins to fight with her.

In a desperate attempt to become "the sport" she once was, Hazel begins to drink, too. Initially, there are periods of levity between them, but the fights always follow. They no longer make up after these fights, and the fights become more violent. Herbie begins to slap and punch Hazel. He leaves now for days at a time, threatening to never come back.

Hazel learns to hate being alone. So, when Mrs. Martin, another big blonde, moves in across the hall, she begins to join her for drinks throughout the day and to entertain a number of male friends over poker games in the evenings. She is popular with "the boys" and begins to think that perhaps Herbie is the only one who does not believe she is still a sport. One of the men, Ed, takes a particular interest in her.

Herbie comes home after several days away, packs his suitcases and tells her that he is moving to Detroit. Hazel, partly drunk, partly indifferent, accepts the news readily. Ed sleeps with her that very night. Ed takes her picture home with him to Utica. Later, he helps find a new apartment for her near Grand Central Station and gives her an allowance. They frequent a club called Jimmy's where all the women look alike and have similar arrangements with the men in their lives. Ed insists she be happy, and is, although she wishes she could be allowed a little sadness. After a few years, Ed moves to Florida after giving Hazel a large check and some stock. After he is gone, she does not miss him.

A succession of men follows, one always materializing just as the last moves on. As the years pass, Hazel finds herself depressed and thinking of suicide. While she continues to drink into the night and sleep late into the day, she likes to think of never laughing and admiring or being a good sport again. She hears about a sleep aid, Veronal, and she visits several pharmacies until she thinks she has enough with which to kill herself. On an evening when she cannot shake the blues, she takes the pills and goes to bed. Her maid, Nettie, finds her and summons a doctor. Under his care, Hazel survives. She wakes to Nettie's remonstrations and apologizes profusely.

In an effort to cheer her, Nettie gives her a card from a current boyfriend, Art, who writes that he hopes she has cheered up. Hazel is miserable again and asks Nettie to pour her a drink. Nettie balks after all they have been through the past two days, but she gets the drink when Hazel suggests she pour one for herself as well. Nettie brings her drink and encourages her to cheer up. Hazel says "sure" as she begins to drink, praying she will always be drunk.

Analysis

"Big Blonde" is one of author Dorothy Parker's numerous short stories that deal with the fables of love and marriage. Parker, herself, had come from an unhappy childhood only to be twice divorced. No doubt, she draws heavily from personal experience when writing about the sufferings and emotional torture of unsuccessful personal relationships. Hazel Morse, the protagonist in this story, is typical of the women Parker wrote about. She suffers because she is vulnerable and knows nothing of the real world. Conversely, because she knows nothing of the real world, she remains vulnerable.

When she meets Herbie Morse, the man she later marries, Hazel can see that he is a heavy drinker with the self-destructive habit of biting his cuticles. Yet, she ignores this and convinces herself that his drunken behavior is amusing. She marries him within a short six weeks of meeting him. Yet, this has a profoundly heartening effect on Hazel. She becomes far more genuine and comfortable in her skin, expressing for the first time, her true feelings as she has them. She begins to see her former life as superficial and her former self as a fraud. Unfortunately, as if to confirm her worst fears, Herbie preferred the fraud. He married a good-time gal, and he cannot accept her true nature.

To keep him, Hazel tries to return to her former self. She goes out with Herbie, even begins drinking again, but it does not work. They begin to fight, and the fighting escalates to physical violence. As is the norm in these cases, Hazel goes from being confused to being assuming all responsibility for her failing marriage. She never questions Herbie's motivation in preventing her from expressing any real emotion.

When Herbie leaves her at first for extended periods of time, then permanently, Hazel fights the feelings of abandonment by seeking out the company of Mrs. Martin, another big blonde, and all of her gentlemen friends. She takes up with one, then another and resumes the single, party-going lifestyle she had abandoned when she got married. Even so, she hopes that this time it will be different, that those she keeps company with

are older and wiser and will allow her to be herself. They will not insist that she pretend to be happy when she is not, will not insist that she ignore any heartbreak and sadness that comes her way. When this proves not to be the case, Hazel's sense of despair deepens, and she attempts suicide.

Poignantly, the store ends with Nettie, her maid, saving her life by summoning medical help. Nettie scolds Hazel and the one phrase that she could probably live without hearing for the rest of her life, "cheer up." Nettie then hands her a card from her current beau, who writes that he hopes she has cheered up since the last time he saw her. Hazel sees only one escape, to anesthetize her pain with alcohol.

Characters

Art

Art is the last in the string of boyfriends that Mrs. Morse has over the course of the story. He is "short and fat and exacting and hard on her patience when he was drunk." Other than this, there is little to distinguish him from Charley, Sydney, Billy, and Fred—other men Mrs. Morse has had sexual relationships with and accepts money from but cares for little. She becomes involved with Art about the time she starts to think about suicide. Like all of the others, Art enjoys Mrs. Morse's company only when she is cheerful. She finds it restful when he is out of town on business. After her suicide attempt, Nettie, her maid, gives her a "pretty postcard" from Art that again implores her to "cheer up." This has the opposite effect of filling Mrs. Morse with crushing despair. He represents the repressive and monotonous future of trying to act happy in order to please her interchangeable male companions.

Doctor

The young doctor who lives in Mrs. Morse's apartment building is summoned when Nettie finds Mrs. Morse unconscious in her room. He is angry at being interrupted because he is in the midst of a vaguely sexual encounter with a "dark girl," trying to unwind after a "hard day." Like the other men in the story, he uses women for pleasure and entertainment while remaining oblivious to their pain. He examines Mrs. Morse impatiently and roughly. When he finds out that Mrs. Morse has taken sedatives to attempt suicide he is unsympathetic, regarding it as a nuisance. "Rotten yellow trick, that's what a thing like that is. Now we'll have to pump her out, and all that stuff," he says.

Ed

Mrs. Morse meets Ed playing poker at her neighbor Mrs. Martin's apartment during the period when her marriage to Herbie is dissolving. He is one of "The Boys" with whom Mrs. Martin socializes. He is a married man with a business in Utica, but he comes to New York frequently on business. He soon adopts a proprietary attitude toward Mrs. Morse, sitting next to her and lending her money during poker games, and eventually squeezing her knee and kissing her on the mouth. When Herbie leaves her, Ed immediately steps in, supporting her financially in exchange for her sexual compliance. As Ed's mistress, Mrs. Morse gives up the facade of domestic married life and moves into a flat near the train station for his convenience. Like all of the other men in her life, Ed gets angry with her when she is not cheerful and lighthearted. However, Ed stands out from Mrs. Morse's other boyfriends because he appears to be genuinely attached to her, despite the fact that she feels little for him.

Elevator attendant

The elevator attendant comes to Nettie's aid when she discovers Mrs. Morse's unconscious body after her suicide attempt. He pokes at her "so lustily that he left marks in the soft flesh," and initiates in Nettie a feeling of excitement about the drama of the event. Like other men in the story he approaches Mrs. Morse as an object, but in this case there is a different power dynamic.

Joe

Joe is one of "The Boys" who Mrs. Martin entertains at her poker games. He is euphemistically referred to as Mrs. Martin's "admirer," but the clear implication is that he is her lover. Ed is one of his friends and Joe's relationship with Mrs. Martin foreshadows that between Ed and Mrs. Morse.

Mrs. Martin

Mrs. Martin moves into the apartment across the hall from Mrs. Morse during the time when Mrs. Morse's marriage is suffering and she is beginning to drink a great deal. Mrs. Martin and Mrs. Morse drink together during the day, and at night she holds poker games, which Mrs. Morse attends. Mrs. Martin initiates Mrs. Morse into the way of life she will take up after Herbie leaves her and serves as a model for the type of woman Mrs. Morse is becoming. Mrs. Martin is "a great blonde woman of forty, a promise in looks of what Mrs. Morse was to be." She is apparently married, but the only visible man in her life is her lover Joe. "Husbands, as such, played but shadowy parts in Mrs. Martin's circle."

Mrs. Florence Miller

Mrs. Florence Miller is one of the women who Mrs. Morse meets at Jimmy's, the speakeasy that she and Ed frequent. Like all of the people Mrs. Morse associates with there, she is not characterized as an individual, but a type. She, like Mrs. Vera Riley and Mrs. Lilian Block, and like Mrs. Morse herself, is a middle-aged woman who survives by taking long-term lovers, yet maintains the facade of respectability through using her married name. Mrs. Florence Miller is distinguished from the others because she tells Mrs. Morse about veronal, the sleeping pill she later uses to try to commit suicide. Another parallel between Mrs. Morse and Mrs. Florence Miller exists because Mrs. Morse notices that when Mrs. Florence Miller cries, men try to comfort her. Both women live a similar lifestyle and find that it brings then despair, but they are only able to form the most superficial social connection with one another.

Hazel Morse

Hazel Morse is the protagonist of the story, which narrates several decades of her life. Though she is not married at the story's opening and divorces before its halfway point, she is referred to throughout as Mrs. Morse. This suggests not so much that she is defined by her husband, who exerts no more particular influence on her than any other man, but that she is defined by the social roles available to her as a woman. She relies on the status of a married woman to superficially mask her position as a "kept woman" or mistress, and this role occupies all of her energy and imagination.

The events of Mrs. Morse's life are described with little sense of forward momentum, even as she experiences tumultuous events such as marriage, divorce, and a suicide attempt. Most of the events that take place are described in vague and general terms, suggesting that this is how Mrs. Morse experiences them and reinforcing her characterization as passive. There is a deep rift between Mrs. Morse's external appearance and her internal experience. She is relentlessly defined and rewarded by men for being fun, easygoing, and cheerful, but she finds life deeply sad. She struggles throughout the story to contain her despair until the point when she attempts to commit suicide. Mrs. Morse is pathetic in her ineffectuality. Even the gesture of suicide is not enough to allow her to escape from the oppressive expectations of others. When she recovers from the attempt she is barraged with still more demands that she cheer up, ending the story on a bleak and tragic note.

Herbie Morse

Herbie Morse is Hazel Morse's husband. He is a hard drinker and a charmer. Mrs. Morse had had "a couple thousand evenings of being a good sport" when she met him and she was nearly thirty, so she was eager to get married and make a change. For Mrs. Morse marriage is a welcomed alternative to the life she had known. But Herbie's expectations of married life are different. He apparently was attracted to her for the same reasons other men were—because she was fun and indulgent of his drinking and passive in the face of his desires. When Mrs. Morse—at last "wedded and relaxed"—begins to cry and wants to stay home, Herbie soon becomes impatient with her. In an attempt to save their relationship she begins to drink with him, but to no avail. Despite the fact that the institution of marriage appears superficially to have little in common with the more informal social, sexual, and financial relationships Mrs. Morse has later, Herbie sees her and treats her in a way that is strikingly similar to the way her later lovers do.

Nettie

Nettie is the black maid whom Ed hires to clean for Mrs. Morse when she gives up her former domestic life and moves to an apartment near the train station. She is not named until the final section of the story when she becomes pivotal to the plot. Nettie comes in to clean and discovers Mrs. Morse's unconscious body. It is Nettie who summons help and she who tends to Mrs. Morse in her recovery. While Nettie saves Mrs. Morse on a

literal level, her role is more ambiguous when considered symbolically. Mrs. Morse looks to Nettie as someone who might understand her suffering, and reaches out to her by asking if she ever thinks of committing suicide. Nettie declines and echoes the words of so many of Mrs. Morse's male companions, telling her to cheer up. The story ends with Mrs. Morse toasting Nettie, whom she has bribed with a drink in order to get her to pour her one, with the false cheer of the refrain "Here's mud in your eye."

Themes

Beauty

The title of the story identifies Mrs. Morse in terms of her physical appearance and highlights the significance of this issue. The narrator in no place describes her as beautiful. To the contrary, many descriptions of her body, such as her "flabby white arms splattered with pale tan spots," are negative. However, she does meet a certain standard of attractiveness. When she was in her twenties she worked as a model. "It was still the day of the big woman, and she was then prettily colored and erect and high-breasted." This suggests that she once conformed to a certain ideal of feminine beauty, an ideal that changed as she grew older.

Mrs. Morse's physical attractiveness defines her as a type as opposed to an individual. People, especially men, see her and form expectations of her personality based on her appearance, especially her blonde hair. In the first paragraph she is described as "a large, fair woman of the type that incites some men when they use the word 'blonde' to click their tongues and wag their heads roguishly." Later in the story it is mentioned that she uses peroxide (in "inexpert dabbings") to lighten her hair. Though men view her as attractive, and thus valuable, because she is a "blonde," and though she is emotionally and financially dependent on being seen this way, it does not accurately reflect her true identity.

Sex and Sex Roles

Mrs. Morse's blondeness represents a specific idea of femininity and also has an implication of sexuality. She seems to understand implicitly that her worth as a person and her economic well-being are dependent on fulfilling men's ideas of what a woman is or should be. While she seems to do very little with her time, her life is occupied with the attempt to meet expectations about the female sex role and, relatedly, of feminine sexuality. She exhausts herself trying to live out men's unrealistic ideas of her as a blonde, a popular girl, and a "good sport."

When she works as a model she is relatively independent, though she still reflects social ideals of womanly beauty through her job and behaves in ways that make her popular with men. Being a "good sport" has sexual connotations, suggesting that she will go along with what men want to do, sexually and otherwise. After she marries, she becomes absorbed in living out a preconceived notion of domestic life, but her husband still wants her to go out, something that she finds harder and harder to do. When he leaves her, she is not only emotionally but also financially vulnerable. Ed steps in to assume the masculine role and protect her in exchange for her cheerful company and her sexual compliance. After Ed, she fulfills the same role for a series of different men, all of whom enjoy her company only when she acts the part of a woman who exists only for their pleasure and recreation.

Passivity

One of the most significant aspects of the feminine sex role that destroys Mrs. Morse is her passivity. The repeated term "good sport" implies giving in to the wishes of others and effacing her own will. She is driven to drink because it helps her feel numb, allowing her to more easily live out the role expected of her. She is financially dependent on a string of men but, after Herbie, she feels very little affection for any of them. She has no desire for any of the men she sees, despite the fact that she survives by means of their desire for her. As she gets older, her only desires are passive ones—sleep, drunken oblivion and, eventually, death. Nevertheless, she attempts to the end to comply with the demands of those around her that she act happy and cheerful, despite her deep sadness. Her suicide attempt is her only active effort to assert who she is over and against the wishes of those around her.

Identity and Alienation

Mrs. Morse is a woman whose identity is determined almost completely by the expectations of those around her and, more significantly, by the cultural codes of femininity that shape such expectations. It is through her sadness that her alienation is most apparent. The role that she is expected and attempts to fulfill is incompatible with the feelings of exhaustion and despair she persistently experiences. She cannot act or assert her identity in any way other than acting blue, which inevitably evokes negative and even punitive responses from those who want to see her as a fun, easygoing, passive "blonde." No one seems able to recognize the division between her public persona, created in order to secure approval and economic security from men, and her inner self.

Style

Setting

"Big Blonde" is set in New York City during the 1920s. The story reflects certain conflicts in this moment in cultural history, particularly those concerning sex roles and sexual mores. The 1920s were an era of growing legal rights for women and loosening strictures against sexuality. The story examines, however, how these changes may not benefit a woman who thinks of her identity and her self-worth in terms of fulfilling men's desires. Relaxed social strictures against divorce, drinking, socializing, and sex lead to Mrs. Morse's entrapment and despair rather than her liberation. The story does not include very much concrete or detailed description of physical settings, contributing to an atmosphere of haziness, malaise, and passivity that stands in contrast to the idea of 1920s New York as vital and stimulating. Though the world in which she lives is the dynamic one of the "roaring twenties," composed of poker games and nights out on the town, Mrs. Morse remains inert.

Narration

The story is told through omniscient third person narration. This means that a narrator who is not a character in the story describes Mrs. Morse's life, and that this narrator has access to her inner thoughts and feelings. This form of narration is critical to the story, since how Mrs. Morse appears to those around her is so very different from how the omniscient narrator shows her to be internally. Through this gap or difference, the third person omniscient narration creates the effect of alienation, which is a crucial part of Mrs. Morse's characterization.

While a view of Mrs. Morse's inner thoughts helps to create empathy for the character, the narration also allows for some distance from her through the use of irony. Irony is created through the difference between what readers know and what characters know. In this case, the narration reveals Mrs. Morse's associates to lack insight about her troubles and despair, while readers see them clearly. But the narration also allows readers more knowledge about Mrs. Morse's predicament than she has herself. The narrator characterizes Mrs. Morse as limited and blind: "She never pondered if she might not be better occupied doing something else. Her ideas, or better, her acceptances, ran right along with those of the other substantially built blondes in whom she had found her friends." While she is completely absorbed in her role, and sees it as inevitable that she live out the fate of a "big blonde," the narration allows readers to see Mrs. Morse as a socially constructed type who is entrapped in the way of thinking that defines her. Thus the reader sympathizes with Mrs. Morse, but pities her more than identifying with her.

Symbolism

Several subtle kinds of symbolism are at work in "Big Blonde." Naming is one form of symbolism. Hazel Morse is entrapped in social codes of gender and sexuality, and her last name, Morse, suggests codes. It is significant that she gets her name from her husband, because it is men in the story who enforce the codes that define what a "big blonde" is. Her maiden name is never mentioned, and she is referred to throughout as Mrs. Morse, despite the fact that her marriage is brief. Mrs. Morse's first name, Hazel, is also symbolic: her actions, impressions, and memories are all "hazy." Alcohol makes her life bearable and also imposes a kind of blurring associated with her given name. The two parts of her name suggest a divide in Hazel Morse between roles and codes, which are definite, and experiences and feelings, which are hazy.

The use of slang and colloquial language also creates a form of symbolism. Several slang terms and phrases are repeated throughout the story. Mrs. Morse tries continually to be a "good sport"; she is caught up in a game, with certain rules of behavior. Much of her despair is brought on by the unspoken rules of this game. The term "good sport," used casually in Mrs. Morse's milieu, has several implications, including loose morality, sexual permissiveness, and compliance to the wishes of others. Whenever she doesn't fulfill her role of cheerful feminine passivity, she is afraid of being a bad sport. The fact that the term is casual and playful suggests just how subtle Mrs. Morse's entrapment is. More poignant still is the repetition of the toast, "Here's mud in your eye." The toast is ironic on several levels. A toast by nature implies celebration and good cheer, while wishing mud in one's eye is, on a literal level, suggestive of humiliation and blindness. Mrs. Morse makes this toast three times, each in a situation of despair covered over with the facade of good cheer.

Historical Context

Women's Rights

In 1920 the 19th Amendment to the Constitution passed, giving women the right to vote for the first time. This legal change for the most part ended the first wave of American feminism, which was based on the long, politically organized struggle for Suffrage. It ushered in a decade that brought about many more subtle changes in cultural attitudes relating to sex and gender. Having gained the legal landmark of the right to vote, women became less politically oriented and made more changes in the social arena. They demanded that the Victorian strictures of dress and behavior of their mothers' generation be loosened. Men and women mixed freely socially, and sexual banter and premarital sex became far more tolerated. Women drank, smoked, and drove. They entered the workforce in greater numbers than ever before, with a smaller proportion of these working in traditional domestic jobs. The 1920s are sometimes considered an era dominated by women, as men returned from World War I bitter and disillusioned, while the image of women was young, flamboyant, energetic, and hopeful.

Beauty and Femininity in the 1920s

An indication of these changes in women's status was the new standard of beauty and fashion of the 1920s. In the 1910s the "Gibson Girl" represented the feminine ideal. She had long hair and a voluptuous hourglass figure. She wore floor length skirts and had the demure, wholesome, modest manner appropriate to a wife and mother. In the 1920s, the model of style and beauty was the "flapper." She bobbed her hair to her chin, bound her breasts, and wore straight dresses to conceal her waistline for a childish or boyish effect. But she also wore make-up, flaunting her feminine artifice. In the 1920s women everywhere started wearing much simpler, scantier underwear and skirts to the knee, a length that would have been considered outrageous or even obscene only a decade earlier. Along with these changes in fashion came changes in conduct. The looser, simpler clothes allowed women to participate in athletic activities and to be more comfortable and at ease when out in public. The young American woman of the 1920s was celebrated for her youthful flamboyance, her daring, and her knowing demeanor. These idealized qualities represented a precipitous change in standards of femininity.

Prohibition

The "roaring twenties" were famous for after-hours jazz clubs and indiscriminate drinking. This was also a period, however, when the sale of alcohol was legally prohibited nationwide. Prohibition began in 1920 after ratification of the 18th Amendment. Some of the same women's political organizations that were behind the 19th Amendment helped pass Prohibition. Prohibition was controversial and difficult to enforce. Despite the fact that alcohol consumption was reduced nationwide, the

permissive social climate of the decade made it easy and fashionable for many to keep on drinking. Bootlegging, or the illegal trade of alcohol, was common all over the country, and speakeasies, where one could buy hard liquor illegally, replaced neighborhood bars and saloons. Women, who had been a political force behind Prohibition a decade earlier, began to go out and drink alongside their husbands. Because hard alcohol was more profitable, it became much more popular than before, in most cases replacing wine and beer. Prohibition was not repealed until 1933.

Critical Overview

From the time she was a struggling young writer and a member of the high-profile Algonquin literary clique, Dorothy Parker's reputation as a serious author has been overshadowed by her fame as a public figure and a wit. "Big Blonde" is the achievement that earned Parker her greatest literary respect and it remains a staple of anthologies and readers. Even this most famous of Parker's stories, however, is less well-known than some of her frequently cited witticisms, such as "Men seldom make passes at women in glasses." Since "Big Blonde" is the most autobiographical of Parker's stories, criticism has tended to focus on parallels to Parker's life, rather than the story's craft.

Parker has been credited with breaking the boundaries that circumscribed earlier generations of women writers in terms of both style and subject matter. Biographer Marion Meade, in *Dorothy Parker: What Fresh Hell is This?,* identified the beginning of Parker's literary reputation with the *Vanity Fair* drama criticism column Parker began to write at age 24. "What makes that particular column so interesting is its rejection of the prevailing standards for female writing and thinking," wrote Meade. "She had chosen to present herself not so much as a bad girl but as a bad boy, a firecracker who was aggressively proud of being tough." Parker used a similar approach in her first book of poetry, *Enough Rope* (1927), which flouted the conventions of the gentle lady poet and faced modern love head on, or, in the words of a *New York Herald Tribune* critic quoted by Meade, "whiskey-straight." The collection was a bestseller and a critical success.

Despite her success as a poet, Parker saw fiction as the true benchmark of literary credibility. She wrote "Big Blonde" in 1928 and published it in *The Bookman* in 1929. Since Parker was friends with many of the arbiters of literary opinion, the story's unanimous praise must be taken with a grain of salt. For example, Meade reported that Parker's good friend Franklin P. Adams described "Big Blonde" as "the best story I have read in so long a time that I cannot say," in *The Conning Tower.* The story cemented Parker's literary reputation, garnering her even more respect when the prestigious O. Henry competition named it the best short story of 1929. In 1930, having failed to fulfill a contract for a novel, Parker published a collection of short stories called *Laments for the Living* in which "Big Blonde" served as the centerpiece. According to Meade, the collection was a popular success, but the stories other than "Big Blonde" were assessed by some critics as "slight." Parker herself considered her literary career a failure, in part due to her inability to complete a novel.

In the following decades, critics often described Parker's writing, including "Big Blonde," as summing up the ethos of the 1920s. "Mrs. Parker strips our society down to its festering bones, rips aside the sheltering curtains of the cruel and respectable.... [She] has purity and indignation and a terrible, almost painful warmth, so that tragedy underlies the acid," wrote Ruth McKenny in *The Saturday Review of Literature* in 1939. While some critics used this same line of argument to suggest that Parker's writing did not meet the criteria of timelessness that makes great literature, W. Somerset Maugham came to her defense in his 1944 introduction to her writings, using "Big Blonde" as an example. He complimented the story's formal unity, writing that it "has all the earmarks

of a masterpiece." Maugham continued: "Perhaps what gives her writing its particular tang is her gift for seeing something to laugh at in the bitterest tragedies of the human animal. It is a devastating truth that she has discovered, and a salutary one...."

There has been relatively little critical attention paid to Parker's writings more recently, though she continues to hold fascination for biographers as a symbol of the 1920s. Her status as a major writer remains up for grabs. A 1995 *Publisher's Weekly* review of Parker's *Complete Stories* criticizes her work for being too homogeneous and describes her stories as "tend[ing] to float to the shallow end of the literary pool." "Big Blonde," however, is often singled out as surpassing her other achievements.

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Madsen Hardy has a doctorate in English literature and is a freelance writer and editor. In the following essay, she discusses the meanings of work, recreation, and freedom in "Big Blonde."

For much of the span of the story's narration, Mrs. Morse is a "kept woman"—the mistress to a series of married men. Her role in the men's lives is to entertain them and to comply with their sexual desires, in exchange for which they offer her financial support. According to this arrangement, she doesn't need to hold a job or even to clean her own apartment. Her only obligation is to have fun and be fun. She goes out at night to drink and socialize with various male companions and appears to do very little else. Yet one of Mrs. Morse's complaints—one serious enough to drive her to attempt suicide—is that she is exhausted. In this essay I would like to consider the causes for Mrs. Morse's exhausted despair by exploring the meanings of work and leisure that Parker creates through her narrative and imagery. Thinking about Mrs. Morse's womanly role as a kind of work brings into focus Parker's critique of gender dynamics in the story.

Mrs. Morse's "job" as a pleasing woman and a good sport reflects the cultural and historical contexts of "Big Blonde." The possibilities for both recreation and labor expanded dramatically for women during the 1920s. In a decade ushered in by women's victory in their struggle to gain the vote, both work and pleasure were associated with female liberation. Social and sexual expectations of the earlier Victorian era were overthrown, changing most women's everyday lives. It became generally acceptable for women to wear much shorter skirts and to socialize much more freely with men. They drank and smoked, and drove if they pleased. Women enjoyed themselves in new ways and they also earned money in new ways. Many women joined the workforce for the first time, and it became more acceptable for even a married woman to hold a job. Women worked in traditional feminine professions like nursing and teaching, in the mills and factories of an increasingly industrialized society, and they also made inroads into the professions such as law and, in the case of Parker, journalism.

Perched between World War I and the Great Depression, the 1920s are mythologized as a time when Americans—especially American women— were independent and carefree. However, there is, of course, another side to women's experience during this decade. Parker was certainly among the most socially adventurous and professionally successful women of her era, and she is remembered as spirited and self-possessed—the quintessential woman of the roaring twenties. Thus it is interesting to note that Parker chose to reflect some of her most intimate and traumatic personal experiences through the character of Mrs. Morse, a sad and ineffectual woman whose fading, out-dated style of beauty marks her as a creature of a bygone era. George H. Douglas, in his book *Women of the Twenties,* refers to "the cost, the difficulty and, above all, the *vulnerability* of leaving oneself open to experience" from which women of the 1920s suffered. He identifies psychological exhaustion, alcoholism, and illness as the fate of many. In "Big Blonde" Parker deflates a romanticized idea of the 1920s according to which women enjoyed a new freedom to both enjoy and assert themselves without

negative consequences. Mrs. Morse reflects the fact that many women were left behind and consigned to more traditional female roles even as standards for gender-related behavior changed radically. And, furthermore, while Mrs. Morse might be seen as enjoying the freedoms of a less socially and sexually restricted culture, Parker makes it clear that she must also pay a heavy price.

As the story opens, Mrs. Morse's life has the superficial appearance of liberation. Unbeholden to parents or to earlier social customs, she lives on her own, works as a model, goes out frequently, and is popular with men—all of which seems to fit the image of glamorous 1920s youth culture. However, the stresses of this lifestyle are apparent in the fact that when Mrs. Morse marries—and thus gives up these freedoms for a conventional and respectable feminine role—she feels relieved. And, curiously, she is relieved that she does not have to have fun and that she can finally be sad. "Wedded and relaxed," Parker writes, "she poured her tears freely." Thus Parker makes a striking new definition of a woman's liberation as freedom *from* recreation—freedom *to* be sad. Unfortunately, Mrs. Morse's respite from fun is a very brief one. While liberalized standards for socializing and sexuality are often understood as empowering women, Parker shows that it is the *men* in Mrs. Morse's life who benefit from such "liberation" and, indeed, enforce it. One way of understanding Herbie's abandonment is to say that he left her when she stopped performing her role as a popular girl and a good sport. Another is to say that he stopped supporting her when she stopped doing her job.

This social and economic dynamic becomes clearer in Mrs. Morse's relationships with Ed and the other men who "keep" her. The transactions become simpler and clearer. First Ed gives her poker money and in return she offers her attention and lets him squeeze her knee. After Herbie leaves her, Ed offers her a new status as his mistress, which has greater benefits and also greater demands. When Mrs. Morse is married she cooks and cleans, but once she becomes Ed's mistress she gives up anything that one might normally describe as work, in the interest of fulfilling the role that Ed desires of her—that she be his source of recreation when he visits the city. A maid came in every day to clean and make coffee for her—she was "through with that housekeeping stuff," she said, and Ed, twenty years married to a passionately domestic woman, admired this romantic uselessness and felt doubly a man of the world for abetting it. Parker is again offering a new definition, this time critiquing gender relations by inverting a commonly held concept of work. In order to do her job as Ed's mistress, Mrs. Morse recognizes that she must give up things she had formerly done—modeling and domestic work. While both of these earlier jobs inscribe extremely conventional femininity, neither was quite as restrictive as the imperative to do *nothing* other than provide a carefree source for Ed's enjoyment.

This restriction is most clear in the repeated demands from Mrs. Morse's lovers that she be cheerful. When Ed has a good year, he treats her to an expensive sealskin coat. "But she had to be careful of her moods with him. He insisted upon gaiety." She understands that "she was instantly undesirable when she was in low spirits." Mrs. Morse's sadness is her only form of freedom from her role—or job—as the amusing and attractive companion of men. But because it jeopardizes her desirability, it jeopardizes her basic material security. So she has no choice but to live out the modern female "liberties" of

drinking and sex that are appealing to her male companions at the cost of any real freedom to express herself.

When Mrs. Morse first realizes that she is sad, her sympathy encompasses everything. "All sorrows become her sorrows," Parker writes, and lists things that would make Mrs. Morse cry: "newspaper accounts of kidnapped babies, deserted wives, unemployed men, strayed cats, heroic dogs." But as the story nears its climax, Parker gives particular emphasis to one image—that of a tired workhorse—as a trigger for Mrs. Morse's despair.

Almost everything could give her the blues. Those old horses she saw on Sixth Avenue—struggling and slipping along the car-tracks, or standing at the curb, their heads dropped level with their worn knees. The tightly stored tears would squeeze from her eyes as she teetered past on her aching feet in the stubby, champagne-colored slippers.

The image of a tired workhorse pulling a heavy load may seem incongruous with that of a woman headed out for a night of drinking, which is nominally a night of leisure and fun. Parker reflects this incongruity through the deliberate contrast of the horse's clunky, bestial hooves, with Mrs. Morse's small and delicately shod feet. However, the description of feet suggests a stronger, underlying parallel between Mrs. Morse and the horse. The fact that Mrs. Morse feels like a workhorse is suggested through the connection between the horse's exertion to pull its load through the streets, "struggling and slipping," and Mrs. Morse's effort as she teeters toward Jimmy's on "aching feet." The horse's exhaustion is physical and literal, while Mrs. Morse's is caused by carrying a load that is less tangible but just as heavy. One of the very first things that readers learn about Mrs. Morse is that she "prided herself upon her small feet and suffered for her vanity, boxing them in snub-toes, high-heeled slippers of the shortest bearable size." By this point in the story readers may understand Mrs. Morse's vanity as a part of the constant demand that she act as an object of desire, a luxury, and a form of amusement—or risk her very livelihood.

The metaphorical connection between Mrs. Morse and a beast of burden is extended in the second description Parker offers of a workhorse. Mrs. Morse again encounters a horse on the way out to Jimmy's, and in this scene it is a direct catalyst to the black mood that leads by the end of the night to Mrs. Morse's suicide attempt. Again, there is a parallel established between Mrs. Morse's struggle to walk and the horse's.

As she slowly crossed Sixth Avenue, consciously dragging one foot past the other, a big, scarred horse pulling a rickety express-wagon crashed to its knees before her. The driver swore and screamed and lashed the beast insanely, bringing the whip back over his shoulder for every blow, while the horse struggled to get a footing on the slippery asphalt.

On the modern streets of Manhattan, recently overtaken by the new invention of the automobile, the workhorse is a symbol of a bygone era that nevertheless plods on. Mrs. Morse identifies with the horse because, unlike a car, it feels and suffers and yet it is not

treated like a sentient being. With her outdated figure and fading beauty, Mrs. Morse does not conform to the image of the modern woman, yet she struggles within the conflicted social codes of liberated modern womanhood to survive in a world that denies her feeling.

Source: Sarah Madsen Hardy, "Working Woman," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 1999.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Simpson explores how Parker renders race in "Big Blonde," and shows it to be an integral part of the story.

The story "Big Blonde" (1929) articulates some of the ambivalence with which Dorothy Parker's work approaches feminist inquiry. There is a vicious style to Parker's compassionate portrait of a woman hopelessly trapped in social codes of femininity. Just as intriguing, however, is the way race is inscribed in a text so overtly marked as a reflection on gender. Foregrounding the Africanist presence in the text discloses the real source of the story's power to disturb. Blackness surfaces in Parker's story in a way that provides an unusually clear example of the use of racial difference in white America's contemplation of itself. In concert with the critical project Toni Morrison pursues in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992), the present observations represent an effort to "avert the critical gaze from the racial object to the racial subject; from the described and imagined to the describers and imaginers; from the serving to the served." By shifting our sights to consider the function of three seemingly minor black characters in Parker's "Big Blonde," we are given a penetrating view of the divides of American identity, and of one white author's attempt to write that identity. Parker's story compellingly exposes the way gender and race are mutually constitutive, and how blackness constructs and contests the privilege of whiteness.

"Big Blonde" won Parker the national O'Henry Prize for the best short story published that year. Arguably her strongest work, it is generally viewed as an unusually affecting tale about feminine vulnerability. The story is frequently read as a kind of "autobiographical fiction," and it contains many echoes of the author's own failed relationships with men, her drinking problems, and her loneliness and suicide attempts. But the connection is probably more subtle. Parker's writing and her life reveal a drama of negotiation with the urge to challenge on the one hand, and to surrender on the other. As Nina Miller points out [in *American Literature*], Parker's public persona was "desirable to the extent that she was . . . modern and reassuring to the extent that she left certain basic femininities intact." Parker's biographers suggest she was both liberated and constrained, exploited and self-exploiting. The nasty tongue she cultivated earned her a name as one of the founders of the male-dominated Algonquin Round Table, yet the record shows little room at that table for moods not witty or cynical. Parker's trademark mouth gave her entry to a masculine domain she evidently aspired to join, but much of her work is devoted to complaining relentlessly about the terms by which women are forced to operate in a male-dominated world. Her telephone stories, for example, find women always on the short end of the conversation. Parker invented herself as a bad girl, and she was original in her badness, but often sorry in her girlness. She successfully wisecracked her way to a seat at the table with the boys, but she is frequently remembered more for that status than for her writing.

The 1994 film *Mrs. Parker and the Vicious Circle* does little to disturb the conventional view of Dorothy Parker as a clever but self-aggrandizing and troubled personality. The "vicious circle" seems to refer as much to Parker's drinking habits and penchant for

sleeping around as to the sharp-tongued crowd she joined regularly for banter at the Algonquin. Not much is made of her literary talent. The film is sprinkled with poems, but they are delivered in a slurred and mumbled undertone that is difficult to decipher and hints at manic depression and drunkenness more than the idea of serious literary endeavor. An editor of Parker's once complained that her work didn't amount to much more than a series of "asides." But Parker was a gifted writer who struggled seriously alongside others engaged in mapping the social and moral contours of American culture. She is more than a camp follower, as John Updike implies when he writes [in *New Yorker*]: "[Her] life brushed against most of the strands of American literary life from 1920 to 1950."

Parker survives in the push and shove of contradiction that gives a story like "Big Blonde" a hold on us still. In that text, the author produces a narrative about the subjugation of white women in America, using the scaffolding of blacks in America. Three Africanist figures who at first glance appear to serve only the interests of narrative expediency, are in fact the key to Parker's architectural paradox. Their presence problematizes the text beyond its interrogation of the cultural construction of the "big blonde" as an ideal of femininity. The question of gender resonates in another, more suggestive way in the presence of Africanist figures who reveal that such a construction is also informed by views of race. The proximity of the historically bought black body to the kept white one contaminates and opens the narrative to a wider contemplation of the institutions and practices of slavery.

I

"Big Blonde" is the tale of Hazel Morse. The story's title gives a familiar formula for femininity, a code tapped out by the appropriately named Morse. Her surname reminds us that the dumb blonde, like any stereotype, is human identity reduced to uninflected code. Her given name records the haziness of the view from inside such a construction. The author uses blondeness to eroticize the character and give her a badge of shallowness. Morse is the blonde built for amusement and display, a woman "of the type that incites their heads roguishly." Morse and her women friends, "other substantially built blondes," are supported by such men who call up when they are in town on business.

Morse is a woman whose identity is something others bestow on her. When the story begins, she is a dress model in her twenties. By the end, she is a tired party girl in her mid-thirties, surviving an alcoholic haze, self-destructing before ever building a self. She is dumb blondeness reduced to a blur, to "flab-by white" flesh made low by age and alcohol. Morse's body is Parker's subject. The author details its decline in increments of degradation, from the "inexpert dabblings with peroxide," to the feet squeezed each night into undersized "champagne-colored slippers." Morse, like the other blondes in the story, is passed around from man to man, yet "in her haze, she never recalled how men entered her life and left it."

Parker's protagonist is distinguished from the others by a more radical emptiness. The author has her materialize out of nowhere. Her only relative, a "hazy widowed mother,"

dies when the story begins. Morse surfaces intact, a big blonde in her mid-twenties, in New York City, in the 1920s, a woman with no history, no future, and only a vague sense of the present. She is no different a decade later: "At her middle thirties, her old days were a blurred and flickering sequence, an imperfect film, dealing with the actions of strangers." Morse is a permanent stranger with a familiar face.

Parker insistently presses her protagonist into the corsetted role of the party girl. A brief marriage is an experiment with emotional liberty: "To her who had laughed so much, crying was delicious." But the experiment fails, Morse is unreadable except as the party girl, the "good sport." She is permitted only one mood, that of gaiety, and her role is rigidly enforced:

She was instantly undesirable when she was low in spirits. Once, at Jimmy's, when she could not make herself lively, Ed had walked out and left her. "Why the hell don't you stay home and not go spoiling everybody's evening?" he had roared.

Morse is quickly and brutally punished for the least deviation. Apart from her role as party girl, she hardly exists, and indeed tries not to: "She slept, aided by whisky, till deep into the afternoons, then lay abed, a bottle and glass at her hand, until it was time to dress and go out for dinner." Eventually Morse longs for escape: "She dreamed by day of never again putting on tight shoes, of never having to laugh and listen and admire, of never more being a good sport. Never." She buys a quantity of sleeping pills and sinks into unconsciousness.

At this juncture, Parker introduces a set of three new characters. It is no coincidence that they are black. These figures bear the heavy body of the sleeping Morse across the narrative bridge back to speech. They rescue her, and they do more. They illuminate Morse's condition, and they complicate the narrative. They engage the story of the blonde in a deeper dialogue with her keepers. Morse's "colored maid" Nettie, the "Negro" elevator attendant George, and a "dark girl," constitute the Africanist presence in "Big Blonde" Nettie keeps house and, after Morse's suicide attempt, carries out the "ugly, incessant tasks in the nursing of the unconscious." It is Nettie, too, who discovers Morse in a coma and goes to George for help. Together, they find a doctor in the building, interrupting him while he is entertaining a "dark girl," evidently a prostitute, in his apartment. Although the "dark girl" is not explicitly identified as black, the adjective and her working status contrast conspicuously with the blondeness and nonprofessional status of Morse and her women friends.

The white figures (Morse, the doctor) and the black figures (Nettie, George, the prostitute) emerge in sharp contrast to each other. Morse herself has become a blank, drooling slab of a body:

Mrs. Morse lay on her back, one flabby white arm flung up, the wrist against her forehead. Her stiff hair hung untenderly along her face. The bed covers were pushed down, exposing a deep square of soft neck and a pink nightgown, its fabric worn uneven by many launderings; her great breasts freed from their tight container, sagged

beneath her arm-pits. Now and then she made knotted, snoring sounds, and from the corner of her opened mouth to the blurred turn of her jaw ran a lane of crusted spittle.

The doctor's approach to the medical emergency is professional, impersonal, and remote. He barely speaks, and regards Morse as nothing but a "nuisance." The black figures, on the other hand, negotiate a range of emotions, from fear, wonder, and excitement, to compassion, irritation, and scorn. Their manner is impulsive, intimate, and indiscreet. The black figures are set apart by their expressiveness, and by other markers as well. They are portrayed as childlike, their speech is different, and they have no names or first names only. Although they are adults, the black characters are referred to as "boy" and "girl," where the whites are "men" and "women." The black figures are even shunted off to the end of the narrative, positioned away from the body of the text.

From the start, then, the text formally establishes a disjuncture between black and white. That structural and figurative separation exposes white as central commanding, and controlled, while black is shown as peripheral, subordinate, and undisciplined. Parker is clearly implicated in the conventions of representations that place blackness in a sphere inhabited by primitive or childlike others. From that position, the black figures serve to highlight white stature and authority. The segregating structure, however, also allows blackness to inform whiteness in other, unintended ways. As Morrison observes in another context, "there are unmanageable slips." If blackness shows white in control, it is also seen as detached and lifeless. The inhumanity blackness ascribes to whiteness shapes and sharpens the author's vision of femininity, while yielding unanticipated significance as well. Nettie is the most important of the three black figures in "Big Blonde." One wonders why the other two are there at all. The answer lies in their function as surrogates, stand-ins for missing registers of experience. In this case, and in keeping with the well-documented history of blackness as a sexualizing trope in Western discourse, the two characters foreground the theme that is implicit throughout the story, starting with the title itself—that of illicit sexuality. The conspicuous fashion in which two minor black figures raise the subject of sexual commerce and desire contrasts to its muted treatment elsewhere. Morse and her crowd represent a marketplace where men pay and women are kept, but the commercial nature of the transaction is masked by a logic of social alliances. Racial difference undercuts that logic to expose a politics behind Morse's abandonment of her own body. She is depicted as sexually indifferent, neutral to the advances, for example, of boyfriend Ed:

It became his custom to kiss her on the mouth when he came in, as well as for farewell, and he gave her little quick kisses of approval all through the evening. She liked this rather more than she disliked it. She never thought of his kisses when she was not with him.

The expression of sexual awareness, desire and agency is displaced onto the Africanist figures of the elevator attendant and the prostitute. Called to the bedside of the comatose Morse, George prods her "so lustily that he left marks in the soft flesh [of] the unconscious woman." The prostitute, in turn, cries after the doctor as he reluctantly departs to tend to the emergency: "Snap it up there, big boy . . . Don't be all night."

Along with their usefulness to the narrative design, these two, apparently marginal, black characters function discursively to underline the theme of illicit sexuality. The dark girl makes transparent the nature of the transaction that commodifies the big blonde in America. She articulates and links the codes of commerce and sex. By introducing race to the gendered field of sexual commerce, her meaning also spills over into another trade in bodies to connect Morse to the historical text of the black body. George, too, functions through his blackness. The contact between his blackness and Morse's whiteness makes his poking at an unconscious body more than just sexual taboo.

Only a page after the episode in which Parker has George prod Morse's soft flesh, the author describes the doctor's treatment of the same body:

With one quick movement [the doctor] swept the covers down to the foot of the bed. With another he flung her nightgown back and lifted the thick, white

legs, cross-hatched with blocks of tiny, iris-colored veins. He pinched them repeatedly, with long, cruel nips, back of the knees.

The infliction of a series of pinches, which Parker pointedly labels as "long" and "cruel," indicates an impulse to punish. Since the doctor's duty is to police the border Morse has attempted to cross, his reaction to her is necessarily punitive as well—one that is challenged by the sexualized contact between the black male (George) and the white female (Morse), and between the black female (the "dark girl") and the white male (the doctor). It is worth noting, in this regard, that the author calls attention in the passages depicting these episodes to the whiteness of Morse's body. The intervention of the Africanist figures, whose presence serves but also threatens to disrupt racial hierarchy, elaborates on the meaning of Morse's "punishment" by placing her in the context of a disintegrating self that is explicitly white.

Although their roles are brief, George and the prostitute draw attention to the function of the racial Other to serve and also to complicate and disturb. The third of Parker's Africanist figures—Nettie, the "colored maid" has a larger role in "Big Blonde." Nettie is central to the narrative play of accommodation and disruption that the Africanist presence represents. On the one hand she is a serviceable figure. She cooks, cleans, and runs errands for Morse. Yet for all her serviceability and subaltern status, Nettie is pivotal. She is particularly important to the narrative denouement. Nettie foregrounds and inflates the white woman's unfolding drama of isolation, and she can do so because her blackness guarantees her separateness. Parker reminds us explicitly each time Nettie appears that she is the "colored maid," as if to give special emphasis to her difference. Nettie becomes the final enforcer of the social code that imprisons the big blonde. It is Nettie who delivers that last blow. Parker makes the black figure the embodiment of the bonds of slavery.

The maid makes three appearances in "Big Blonde," each linked to a stage of Morse's descent into increasingly bewildering confinement and dependence. Nettie first surfaces when Morse's short-lived marriage fizzles and Ed, the first boyfriend, takes possession.

He persuades Morse to move to an apartment more convenient to him, near the train station:

She took a little flat in the Forties. A colored maid came in every day to clean and to make coffee for her—she was "through with that housekeeping stuff," she said, and Ed, twenty years married to a passionately domestic woman, admired this romantic uselessness and felt doubly a man of the world in abetting it.

The maid facilitates an arrangement that deepens Morse's isolation and renders increasingly conditional her apparent freedom. Nettie gives coherence to a domain explicitly framed to serve male interests. The maid's function is to keep the narrative house in order. Yet, while Nettie allows the author at this point in the text to foreground a paradigm of gender oppression, the regular reminders of racial difference introduce another element to the developing theme of freedom and enslavement.

When Nettie next appears, she is buying liquor for the suicidal alcoholic. Morse has managed to purchase a quantity of veronal tablets, and she addresses the tablets with religious fervor. Nettie hovers helpfully nearby, an "angel" of deliverance:

She put the little vials in the drawer of her dressing-table and stood looking at them with a dreamy tenderness.

"There they are, God bless them," she said, and she kissed her finger-tip and touched each bottle.

The colored maid was busy in the living room.

"Hey, Nettie," Mrs. Morse called. "Be an angel, will you? Run around to Jimmy's and get me a quart of Scotch."

She hummed while she awaited the girl's return.

When Morse takes the final step and swallows her pills, the maid will be the net that catches her in her fall. She is Parker's solution to the problem of how to end the story. Without Nettie, Morse dies in a haze, pleasantly knocked out, herself cheated, and cheating us, of the full spectacle of her misery. A rescued Morse, on the other hand, is a woman without the blinds, finally and fully alive and aware. The character who saves Morse assumes the ungenerous, dismissive, inhuman qualities of all of the blonde's keepers. Nettie becomes, in effect, the punishing voice of the social body that creates and destroys Morse. Rather than embrace across the racial divide, the two women mark it. Nettie is the net that catches, but also traps. Although she nurses Morse back to life, no understanding grows between them. The gender identity that Parker explores through the figure of Morse is inscribed in a hegemonic discourse of racial difference.

Nettie's role after Morse regains consciousness is an example of the ironic reversal that Michele A. Birnbaum notes in her analysis of the literary function of the racialized Other in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening.* In "Big Blonde," as in Chopin's text, the racialized

Other can serve as a marker of the status quo of social hierarchy. In this context, "the oppressed become the oppressors." When Morse finally comes out of a coma, able to do little more then weep at the "saturating wretchedness" that slowly returns with consciousness, Nettie only looks "coldly at the big, blown woman in the bed." "You can thank you' stars you heah at all," the maid scolds. Nettie irritably prompts Morse to express gratitude for the care: "Here I ain' had no sleep at all for two nights, an' had to give up goin' out to my other ladies!" Parker brings Nettie to witness but not treat, to rescue but not save. When Morse asks "Didn't you ever feel like doing it? When everything looks just lousy to you," Nettie's response is a cool rebuke: "I wouldn't think o' no such thing."

Immediately following this exchange is another which Nettie initiates and which effects a fundamental transformation in Morse. Her voice will split open for the first time and become knowing. She will shed her speechlessness, the vacuum of cliche, and speak for the first time with irony. The shift occurs after Nettie's scolding when she continues, using the same words Morse has heard many times before from her various escorts: "You got to cheer up. That's what you got to do. Everybody's got their troubles." Lying in what she had hoped would be her deathbed, Morse's response, "Yeah, I know," is her first declaration of self, of knowledge of her place in the world. This is the first ironic Morse we have seen.

Parker ends her story by repeating the epiphany. Morse has persuaded Nettie to pour them both a drink and she proposes a toast:

"Thanks, Nettie," she said. "Here's mud in your eye."

The maid giggled. "Tha's the way, Mis' Morse," she said. "You cheer up, now."

"Yeah," said Mrs. Morse. "Sure."

Morse's "Yeah . . . sure" is, again, a signal of recognition. She has emerged finally from a verbal world of formula—where small talk is all the talk there is—into the grip of powerful, disabused utterance. Enforcement of the code of the party girl has fallen to Nettie, its brutal tyranny displaced onto the black figure, whose giggle marks her difference and her indifference.

It is Nettie who is assigned the racial identity that erects a barrier between the two women. When the maid does not stay to share a drink with Morse, but instead, "deferentially [leaves] hers in the bathroom to be taken in solitude," the social code that is played out is structured by a racialized paradigm. The mistress/servant dichotomy casts the relationship as one of domination and subordination. The white woman's status, gradually eroded in the course of a narrative of gendered subjugation, is nevertheless still marked as a position of privilege in relation to the black servant. Thus if the rhetoric of racial oppression emerges suggestively in relation to Park-er's theme of gender oppression, the text continues to operate on another level to reinforce, not interrogate, racial difference. When Morse hits bottom, for example, and survives to feel

misery "crush her as if she were between great smooth stones," she compares herself to "weary horses and shivering beggars and all beaten, driven, stumbling things"—but not to Nettie.

The doctor is the one white figure who participates in Morse's "rescue." He saves her, but without piercing her isolation. Parker's ambivalence about assigning that role to a white character is reflected in the way she taints him making him not quite white. Through his contact with the "dark" prostitute, the doctor is distinguished from other white men in the story who prefer blondes. He is linked to blackness through George as well. There is a similar element of violence in the way the two men pinch and poke as they handle Morse's unconscious body. The two men meet across her body, as well as across the racial boundary where each seeks sexual contact. Blackness releases the doctor from the exacting codes of whiteness. His grayness makes possible his indifference to Morse's fate, an attitude that American slang tells us is not "white."

II

Parker's black figures divulge a departure from personal to social pathology, from the solitary, pitiable drift Morse embodies to the menacing current in which she is caught. At the heart of "Big Blonde" is the commerce of human bodies. The Africanist presence alludes to that commerce, but also conceals it. Parker uses the subordinate, othered, inconsequential Nettie to outline the dilemma of captivity. She and other Africanist figures in "Big Blonde" both serve and shield the author. They make it possible for her [as Toni Morrison says in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*] "to say and not say, to inscribe and erase." Parker's narrative is thus rhetorically implicated in the perpetuation of racial difference and inequality.

It may be useful to imagine the consequences if Africanism were not available as a discursive device for Parker to employ, if there were no black figures in "Big Blonde," if the maid, the elevator attendant, and the prostitute were white. Certainly, the distance between that group of characters and Morse would be reduced. She would be familiarized, rather than estranged, by the surrounding figures. She would be more like them, one among them. In the absence of blackness, Morse would be less white, less innocent, less alone. She would be less effective in dramatizing her story of estrangement and alienation, and less able to contain and isolate the germ of another idea: That all American freedom is broadly and historically conditional.

Parker's narrative burrows into the vagueness of Morse's flesh in order to express a hard bone of truth about femininity. The racial implications of the big blonde are remarked only indirectly. She is regarded above all as an icon of male desire. But blondeness is liminal, not democratic. Blonde hair on non-white skin is a marker of difference, appropriation, or deviation. Gender displaces race in the consumption of the image of the blonde, yet the ideology that fuels that elision still binds the two together. In the context of Parker's story, blonde is connected to black through the vulnerability of the body. The leaks that allow race to surface in "Big Blonde" are a consequence of the author's willingness to expose fully the vulnerability of the female body.

Parker's work suggests she regarded women as crucially expressive of the American identity. Her fiction and poetry are all about them. Most of Parker's women are closely attached to the American landscape. They evoke the stylish abandon and "modern love" of the twenties, the slippery pleasure and curse of American money, the rise and fall of one's place on the social ladder. Parker's women are caught up in the space and movement of loosening times. They are not introspective, not grounded or protected. They are placed in a gendered narrative with the view that ease of circulation is attached to a condition that menaces, entraps, and often dooms. Parker's women are not free. The authority they wield is contingent, and so they are rendered vulnerable, easily disabled, replaced. To the degree that Parker compares the status of women like Morse to that of slaves, "Big Blonde" represents a radical confrontation with American identity.

But if Parker places women in the same arena of vulnerability and oppression as blacks, at the same time she makes use of the codes of racial separation to create her narrative. That apparent contradiction, or sympathetic break, introduces to Parker's tale a breach that exposes the convergence of race and gender. Through that gap we see that the privilege of the big blonde is granted by racially-constituted desire. Concerning the intersections of the oppressions of gender and race expressed in antebellum feminist-abolitionist texts, Karen Sanchez-Eppler observes [in *Touching Liberty: Abolition, Feminism, and the Politics of the Body*] that "although the identifications of woman and slave . . . occasionally prove mutually empowering, such pairings generally tend toward asymmetry and exploitation." Many decades later, Parker's story reflects the same struggle. The association of the condition of women with that of slaves in "Big Blonde" unfolds virtually exclusively through the story of a white woman.

Parker's use of racial difference is not the same as racism. The author was sensitive to racial prejudice, and denounced it explicitly in two stories from her major collections —"Arrangement in Black and White" (1927) and "Clothe the Naked" (1938). Unlike in those tales, however, the Africanism in "Big Blonde" is not studied. Indeed, it is likely inadvertent. As such, it is revealing of a different register, of blackness not as a theme but as a mechanism of and for the imagination. The blackness in "Big Blonde" brings race into the story of gender oppression, but the oblique approach leaves unexamined their interdependence and the consequent possibilities for negotiating of otherness.

Morrison shows how black characters in American literature by white authors do not have to be mere background detail, simple props for setting up action, but rather that they "ignite critical moments of discovery or change or emphasis." She explores Africanism in literary expression as a device that develops from the need to write a social identity that rests in a fundamental sense on a shudder of recognition. American literature tells again and again the compelling story of "a nation of people who decided that their world view would combine agendas for individual freedom and mechanisms for devastating racial oppression." Literature is one site where the unfree body is put to work to guarantee the free one. Reading the Africanist presence in Parker's story not only illustrates how crucial blackness is to American literary expression, but also helps to explain an elusive author. To ignore the way American Africanism shapes the visions and structure of works by writers like Dorothy Parker depletes us. Morrison warns that

"all of us, readers and writers, are bereft when criticism remains too polite or too fearful to notice a disrupting darkness before its eyes." If Hazel Morse is more than a forgettable floozy, it is because Parker's story charts a passage of cultural conception and deception through the channels of gender and race in America.

Source: Amelia Simpson, "Black on Blonde: The Africanist Presence in Dorothy Parker's 'Big Blonde'," in *College Literature,* October, 1996, pp. 105-116.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Kinney covers Parker's background and influences as a writer, before examining her autobiographical character in "Big Blonde," Hazel Morse.

Dorothy Parker first attracted attention as a flippant and bittersweet poet and irreverent and acerbic satirist whose aim at the shallow and superficial social customs and social climbers often turned on a *bon mot,* a turn of phrase or perspective or a pun that was both striking and memorable. Closer attention to her work, however, shows a talented and dedicated artist whose persistent concern with spare, economical, pure language - even when cliched and colloquial, which she often used for effect - drew both on her classical education at Dana's School in Morristown, New Jersey, a private secondary school where she took several years of Latin, and her less formal teachers, especially Ernest Hemingway. Like him, she learned to foreshorten time and place in her short stories, so that the central characters and events were always prominently in focus. She learned to rely more on monologue or dialogue than on description. She sought the typical that was also archetypal. Thus however a "slice-of-life" her fiction might seem, the real emphasis often resembles that of James Joyce, whom she also admired. Whether acts and the people who perceive them are substantial or trivial, her stories deal with epiphanic moments of self-awareness or self-exposure (leading to the reader's new judgment and awareness). She frequently spoke of Hemingway as a model and convinced *The New Yorker* to pay her sea voyage to Paris so that she could interview him there, producing the first pro-file in that magazine ("The Artist's Reward," November 30, 1929). But she also praised F. Scott Fitzgerald, from whom she learned the value of particular, selected objects as symbols of broader social significance, and Ring Lardner, who taught her how to use colloquial dialogue.

The strategy for her fiction - both the early, obvious satires and the later, more sophisticated ones - is often the same: the energy and significance reside in irony, where one shallow person condemns another or is in turn exposed. Nearly all her short stories chart the same course: they affect sophistication while nevertheless displaying the manners of an ignorant "bambosie." But if some of their customs and behavior seems obvious or transparent now, such revealing stories in the 1920s and 1930s had significant power. The bohemian style following World War I, affected and derivative, fit awkwardly with the Puritan values that were still prevalent among Parker's readers, and a considerable part of her strength and importance as a writer lies in her awareness that both strains that together constituted American culture had their serious weaknesses. Her fiction thus constantly turns to the disjunction between intention and performance, pretended knowledge and real ignorance, feigned concern and real pride and greed. In her short stories, the barbed and acid criticism of her satirical verse is still central, but it is both more incisive and more subtle. Gilbert Seldes's praise of Lardner fits her equally well: "the swift, destructive, and tremendously funny turn of phrase, the hard and resistant mind, the gaiety of spirit," but compounded, in Parker's case, with great labor and care. "It takes me six months to do a story. I think it out and then write it sentence by sentence," she once told Marion Capron an interview; "I can't write five words but that I change seven." This caution, purchased at such cost, was also necessary to keep

guard over Parker's more sentimental, sympathetic side, the kind of emotion she could show in public but ruthlessly exempted from her writing.

The best example of all her qualities is seen in her most successful, most anthologized, and most enduring story, "Big Blonde" (first published in 1929, and collected in 1930 in *Laments for the Living*). It is also her most daring story, for it recounts unflinchingly her own alcoholic depressions and attempts at suicide in the years immediately preceding its composition. Like Parker, the story's protagonist, Hazel Morse, is terrified of loneliness and despair, even when she is thought by her friends to be a party girl, a barrel of laughs, always ready for a carefree time. While the stark and unrelieved tragedy of Hazel was new for Park-er, a risk that seriously challenged her popular reputation as a wit, on which her career had relied so completely, the story of "Big Blonde" is masterfully rendered, told with astonishing power and technique. Parker reduces the long and despairing years of a woman's life into short panels and compresses an entire autobiography into the strictly limited range of the short story. It is both startlingly panoramic and severely concentrated. In its portrait of the birth and growth of alcoholism and suicidal despair and in its clinical analysis, painfully detailed and piercingly accurate, it is an unrelenting study of the possibility of the brutality of life - the brutality of an uncaring society and of an uncaring self, without self-esteem. The close and steady focus on Hazel Morse's decline and fall is Parker's searing attempt to record society's victimization of its more vulnerable members, and the self-victimization of those who cannot earn even self-respect.

From the start, Hazel Morse finds no advantage in living. She never knew the pleasure of family; her later popularity is artificial. But she has no distorted sense of herself; she is willing to settle for the nearly worthless Herbie Morse to gain some security and stability. Herbie leads Hazel to alcohol, which in turn produces tenderness, self-pity, "misty melancholies." Herbie finally leaves her, despising himself, despising him in her, and she becomes a party girl, seeking favors from anyone willing to give them to her, however temporarily.

Hazel Morse is mirrored in her husband, the speakeasies, her lovers, and finally, the maid, yet all these painful doublings are not nearly so pathetic as the comparison Parker makes between Hazel and a wretched horse nor as tragic as Hazel Morse looking at herself in an actual mirror when taking Veronal. Here, at the moment of suicide, the best she can manage is a bad joke: "Gee, I'm nearly dead, . . . That's a hot one!"

But that is not the end of Hazel Morse. As she survived desertion by her husband and by a string of anonymous lovers, so she survives the deadly poison: her punishment is to remain alive amid the squalor of the poor and unfortunate yearning to breathe free. Yet what survives is at best what we see when Hazel Morse, drugged, is at greatest peace with herself: "Mrs. Morse lay on her back, one flabby, white arm flung up, the wrist against her forehead. Her stiff hair hung tenderly along her face. The bed covers were pushed down, exposing a deep square of soft neck and a pink nightgown, its fabric worn uneven by many launderings; her great breast, freed from their tight confiner, sagged beneath her arm-pits. Now and then she made knotted, snorting

sounds, and from the corner of her opened mouth to the blurred turn of her jaw ran a lane of crusted spittle." The spittle doubtless descends from that of her literary prototype, the suicide Emma Bovary of Flaubert, from whose mouth at death trickles black bile. But Emma leaves a respectable husband, a doctor, and their daughter. Hazel lives rather than dies, and she still has no one. She remains, at the close of the story, symbolically limp and weakened in bed, a bottle close to her hand - but no more pills.

From more than 2,000 entries in 1929, the unrelenting story of the "Big Blonde," the good-time girl, was awarded the eleventh annual first prize of $500 in the O. Henry Memorial Prizes for the best short story appearing in an American magazine for that year. It was instantly a classic. From as far away as Cannes, Fitzgerald himself was elated. He urged his agent to take up Parker as a client: "Just now she's at a high point as a producer and as to reputation," he wrote Max Perkins, "I wouldn't lose any time about this if it interests you." For him as for many later critics, this was masterful storytelling. However closely it scraped along the bones of Parker's own life, they were bones with the beauty of artifice stripped bare and a detail clean with truth. But like Hazel Morse, alone at the end, feeling unwanted and unsuccessful, there is no record that Parker ever knew what her model Fitzgerald thought of the story or what he said of it.

Source: Arthur F. Kinney, "Big Blonde," in *Reference Guide to Short Fiction,* Detroit: St. James Press, 1994, pp. 645-6.

Adaptations

In 1995 "Big Blonde" was performed by Elaine Stritch on a Penguin audio cassette entitled *Dorothy Parker: Selected Stories.*

Topics for Further Study

None of the characters in the story seems to understand why Mrs. Morse is so sad. Contemporary psychology and medicine might explain her sadness as related to the diseases of alcoholism and depression. Learn as much as you can about the causes and symptoms of alcoholism or depression and then try to apply this knowledge to the story. Does thinking of her as having an illness help you to understand Mrs. Morse better?

Another approach to the question of why Mrs. Morse is so sad is to consider the relationships between men and women in the story. List some ways that Mrs. Morse is powerful and some ways that the different men in the story are powerful. What can you conclude about the power dynamic between the sexes as Parker describes it? Does this help you better understand Mrs. Morse's despair?

As the story's title makes clear, Mrs. Morse is defined in terms of her physical appearance. What are some of the personal and social qualities attributed to a "big blonde" in the story? Does this role or type still exist today? If not, what are some other labels used to define people in terms of their appearance? Can you draw some general conclusions about how ideas of physical attractiveness are used to categorize people?

Research the social roles of women in the 1920s. How are they similar to those for today's women? How are they different? Do you think that women like Mrs. Morse still exist today? How much of Mrs. Morse's plight do you think should be attributed to her personal weaknesses and how much should be attributed to social conditions?

Compare and Contrast

1920s: Forty-seven percent of American college students are female, signaling gender parity in higher education for the first time. Eight million American women are employed, a far higher number than ever before. Of these, 1.9 million are married. Architects design middle-class houses for families who use modern appliances instead of servants. Thirty percent of bread is baked at home, down from 70 at the turn of the century.

1990s: Most working- and middle-class families need two incomes to meet their costs, and the majority of women are employed. Women are prominent in most professions. In 1990, however, women make only 67 cents for every dollar earned by a man in an equivalent position, up from 59 cents in the 1970s. Studies show that even women who work full-time spend significantly more time on housework and childcare than do their husbands.

1920s: Sigmund Freud's psychological theories—drawing heavily upon early childhood sex roles and sexual desire—are in vogue among sophisticated urbanites, and his method of therapy, called psychoanalysis or the "talking cure," is the preferred treatment for depression. Depression is far more common among women than men.

1990s: Freud's theories have been largely discredited. Psycho-pharmaceuticals, based on brain chemistry, are the new wave in the treatment of depression and other psychological disorders. Far more people than ever before are diagnosed and treated. Approximately twice as many women as men suffer from clinical depression.

1920s: Silent film stars Clara Bow, a saucy flapper, and Theda Bara, a femme fatale, are icons of female desirability. In 1927 hemlines rise to just below the knee.

1990s: Rail thin supermodel Kate Moss ushers in the "waif" look, ending an era of athletic, muscularly sculpted female ideals. Women wear skirts anywhere from ankle-length to mid-thigh mini.

1920s: Reproductive rights activist Margaret Sanger organizes the first conference on birth control in the United States. Contraceptive diaphragms are manufactured in the United States for the first time. Abortion is illegal.

1990s: Forty-nine percent of all American women between 18 and 24 use the birth control pill, and almost as high a proportion of women in the 25-29 and 30-34 age brackets take the pill as well. Surgical abortion is legal but hotly debated. The manufacture of RU-486, an abortifacient medication, is blocked in the United States.

Further Study

Gaines, James R. *Wit's End: Days and Nights of the Algonquin Round Table,* New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977.

An approachable glimpse into Parker's immediate social milieu, this well-illustrated history covers biographical information about the various colorful figures in Parker's set, as well as offering some basic cultural and historical context.

Horn, Pamela. *Women in the 1920s,* Stroud, Gloucestershire, England: A. Sutton, 1995.

A social history of women in the rapidly changing cultural climate of the "roaring twenties," this study fleshes out what life was like for women of different classes, races, and regions during the era with which Parker is most closely associated.

Nolan-Hoeksema, Susan. *Sex Differences in Depression,* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990.

A psychological study presenting evidence that women are twice as likely as men to experience clinical depression, and offering theories to explain this gender-linked phenomenon.

Bibliography

Douglas, George H. *Women of the Twenties.* Dallas, TX: Saybrook, 1986.

Maugham, W. Somerset. "Variations on a Theme," in *Dorothy Parker,* Viking Press, 1944, pp. 11-18.

McKenney, Ruth. "Satire and Tragedy," in *The Saturday Review of Books,* Vol. 20, No. 1, April 29, 1939, p. 7.

Meade, Marion. *Dorothy Parker: What Fresh Hell is This?,* New York: Villard Books, 1988.

Copyright Information

This Premium Study Guide is an offprint from *Short Stories for Students*.

Project Editor
David Galens

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

Research
Michelle Campbell, Nicodemus Ford, Sarah Genik, Tamara C. Nott, Tracie Richardson

Data Capture
Beverly Jendrowski

Permissions
Mary Ann Bahr, Margaret Chamberlain, Kim Davis, Debra Freitas, Lori Hines, Jackie Jones, Jacqueline Key, Shalice Shah-Caldwell

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

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

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

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:

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