Blackberry Winter Study Guide

Blackberry Winter by Robert Penn Warren

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".

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".

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

The novelette *Blackberry Winter* was originally published separately in 1946 and subsequently collected in Robert Penn Warren's first and only volume of short stories, *The Circus in the Attic,* initially published in 1947. *Blackberry Winter* is widely believed to be Penn's finest work of short fiction. It has been included in many anthologies and has garnered the interest of critics and readers. Since its first publication, critics have noted Warren's deft evocation of the textures and rhythms of rural Tennessee and his ear for dialogue. One of the reasons for the story's popularity is the universal appeal of the narrator, whose boyhood innocence is as convincing as his adult ambivalence and restlessness.

Author Biography

A Southerner by birth and by nature, Robert Penn Warren was born in 1905 in Guthrie, Kentucky and died of cancer at his Vermont vacation home in September, 1989. His legacy includes major contributions to fiction, poetry, drama, and criticism. In a tribute to Warren in the *Kenyon Review,* a journal he helped establish, editor David Lynn commemorated "the end of a miraculous career of an American laureate." Other than, perhaps, [Ralph Waldo] Emerson," Lynn continues, "no other American has ever stood among the first rank in so many genres."

Not only did Warren write literature (he published nearly three dozen books), but he changed the way literature was taught and studied. His books (written with Cleanth Brooks), *Understanding Poetry and Understanding Fiction,* "influenced, in Lynn's words, "a generation (and more) of students and teachers," and his essays on other writers "remain models of level- headed judgment, insight, and passion, and are bedrock for other critics."

After completing his early education in Guthrie, the young Warren was sent across the state line to Clarksville High School in Tennessee. A tall redheaded boy with aspirations for a career as a military officer, he suffered an eye injury that forced him to resign his appointment to the United States Naval Academy after graduating from high school at sixteen. Instead, he entered Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee. At Vanderbilt he soon fell in with an extraordinarily bright and ambitious group of students and faculty who cultivated his talent and honed his critical skills. Soon he was committed to a career in literary studies. He graduated with highest honors from Vanderbilt and began graduate study at the University of California at Berkeley. After receiving his master's degree he was awarded a prestigious Rhodes Scholarship and studied at Oxford University in England until eye trouble brought him back to the States in 1929.

Newly married and armed with an advanced degree from Oxford, Warren then embarked on the teaching career that would support and complement his writing until his retirement in the mid-1970s. After holding posts at Vanderbilt, Louisiana State University and the University of Minnesota, in 1949 Warren accepted a position at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut, and settled in a New York City apartment. A year later he divorced his wife and married fellow writer Eleanor Clark, who soon gave birth to Warren's first child, Rosanna and three years later to a son, Gabriel. Fatherhood and marriage to Eleanor helped spark a creative rebirth for Warren as he entered into the second half of his life and career.

Despite all his travels, however, Warren never lost touch with his Kentucky roots. He participated in the literary and social movements known as the Agrarians and the Fugitives, who aimed to preserve and nurture the cultural heritage of the south, and with Cleanth Books at Louisiana State University he founded the distinguished literary journal, the *Southern Review.* "Blackberry Winter," the finest piece in the only collection of short fiction Warren ever published, was written in 1946 while Warren was living in the north. Its detailed and evocative rendering of a boy's life on a farm in the first

decades of the century is testimony not only to Warren's skill as a writer, but also to his attachment to the memories of summers on his grandfather's farm in the hills of southern Kentucky.

Plot Summary

This novelette is a recollection of one memorable day in the childhood of Seth, the narrator, then nine years old. It is told as a first-person narrative, more than thirty-five years later. The title refers to the weather phenomenon of a period of cool temperatures in June. The story takes place in middle Tennessee.

On this unseasonably cold day Seth's mother forbids him to go outside barefoot, but he disobeys her, wanting to "rub [his] feet over the wet shivery grass and make the perfect mark of [his] foot in the smooth, creamy, red mud." But before he can get out the door, Seth notices something unusual: "Out of the window on the north side of the fireplace I could see the man...still far off, come along by the path of the woods." The boy watches the man follow a path where the family's fence meet the woods. From a distance he can tell that the man is a stranger and that he is approaching the house. After Seth's mother calls off the dogs the man is near enough for closer inspection, and the boy sees that he is carrying a paper parcel in one hand and a switch-blade knife in the other. According to the narrator's assessment of the stranger, "Everything was wrong about what he wore." His worn khaki pants and dark wool coat and hat, his tie stuffed in a pocket and his city shoes mark him as both strange and menacing. Despite premonitions of danger, however, the boy is fascinated and drawn to the man who has come looking for a handout or work.

Seth watches the man work, disdainfully picking up the dead chicks and pitching them into a basket, "with a nasty, snapping motion." Then the boy watches while the tramp washed his dirty but uncalloused hands before eating. Finally the man makes the boy feel so uncomfortable that he leaves, suddenly remembering that "the creek was in flood over the bridge, and that people were down there watching it."

When he arrives at the bridge the first person he sees is his father, "sitting on his mare over the heads of the other men who were standing around admiring the flood." Seth's father scoops him "up to the pommel of his McClellan saddle" so he can see better. Seth and the men watch as the swollen creek carries debris along its course, and they are fascinated by the sight of a dead cow. Uncomprehending, Seth listens as the men discuss whose cow it likely was and whether a man could get hungry enough to eat a drowned cow.

Although his father takes him to the gate of their farm, Seth does not go home immediately. Instead he decides to stop off at a sharecropper family's cabin, where his playmate Jebb lives with his parents Dellie and Old Jebb. He expects to be welcomed by the usual cheer at the cabin, but instead encounters Dellie sick in bed and Old Jebb forecasting that the cold weather is a sign of the end of the world as we've known it, evidence that the earth is tired of "sinful folks." The most disturbing incident in the cabin, however, is that Dellie suddenly reaches out from her sick bed and slaps her son across the face. Although Seth tells Old Jebb about the man at the house with a knife, the news barely penetrates the gloom of the cabin and the preoccupation of the family.

The story reaches a climax when the stranger comes head to head with the father. Seth's father tells the tramp that he won't be hiring him for another day's work and pays him a half dollar for a half day's work (the going rate). Then the man curses the farm, mocks Seth's father, and spits on the ground just "six inches from the toe of [the] father's right boot." Seth's father stares the man down and he retreats. Seth, however, still cannot resist the man's horrible appeal and follows him "the way a kid would, about seven or eight feet behind." Seth asks where he came from and the man rebuffs him, but the young boy keeps following. Finally, the tramp threatens: "Stop following me. You don't stop following me and I cut yore throat, you little son-of-a-bitch."

The story ends with the older Seth explaining that both his parents are now dead, Jebb is in the penitentiary, Dellie's dead, but Old Jebb is still alive and well over a hundred years of age. The narrator also confesses that although the tramp had threatened to kill him for following him, that he "did follow him, all the years."

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

Blackberry Winter, written by Robert Penn Warren, tells the story of a young boy who grows up on a Tobacco farm in Tennessee. Seth, the story's narrator, describes the summer of 1910, when he was nine years old. The story is written in first person narration, as Seth recalls his own history. As the story begins, young Seth is warming his feet by the fire. Even though it is June, the temperature is chilly. There county is experiencing what Seth's mother calls blackberry winter, a brief cold spell amidst otherwise warm weather. In spite of the cold, Seth has ventured outside without shoes or socks. Seth's mother had warned him that he needed to wear shoes but he tried to sneak by her. While Seth warms his feet, after being caught by his mother, the young boy insists that he doesn't need shoes because it's June.

As Seth attempts to argue this notion with his mother he notices that a strange man is walking on the path near the edge of the woods next to his family's property. The boy finds this odd because the path extends through the forest and meets up with the river. No one travels along the path unless they are going to fish or hunt. In addition, people always got the permission of Seth's father before they passed through their farm to enter the woods. Seth also recognizes that the man is not a sportsman because of his appearance. Stranger still, the mysterious man is walking from the opposite direction. He is walking toward the farm which makes Seth wonder where the man is coming from. As the man comes closer Seth sees that he moves steadily but not quickly. The narrator notes that the man has hunched shoulders and that his head is thrust forward, "like a man who has come along way and has a long way to go."

Seth tells his mother that a man is walking toward the house. She goes to the window to see him for her self. Seth's mother guesses that the man has come from the Dunbar place and cut through the woods covered section of the path. The family's two dogs bark at the approaching stranger. The man doesn't stop walking but he moves the parcel he is carrying into his other hand and takes a switch knife out of his pocket. He waves the blade of the knife at the dogs as he continues to walk down the path. Seth's mother calls out to the dogs and they stop barking.

Seth and his mother are alone in the house on this particular day but she isn't afraid of the stranger. The narrator describes his mother as small but steady and self-reliant. With hands that are more like boy's hands than women's hands. He explains that when she was young she was the first woman in the county to ride a horse in stride. Seth's mother waits on the back porch for the man to arrive. Seth sees that the man's clothes are old and dirty like a tramp's clothing. He wears old khaki pants, a grey felt hat, a striped jacket and striped shirt without a tie. He isn't dressed as the people from the area dress. Seth finds the man's clothing very peculiar. He notes that the man's face is unmemorable. He has stubble on his face, bloodshot eyes, a newly formed scar on his lower lip, and his front teeth have been knocked out.

Seth's mother asks the man if he is looking for work and he affirms that he is in fact seeking work. Seth's mother offers the stranger some small jobs to do around the farm. There has been a bad storm which caused flooding throughout the county. Although the storm did not damage their crops it has drowned the family's baby chickens, blown over the chicken coops, and damaged the flowerbeds. The narrator's mother offers the man some food before he begins his work and she tells Seth to take the stranger to where he can wash up. The man sets down the parcel he is carrying and follows the boy.

After he eats the man follows Seth into the chicken yard to collect the corpses of the drowned chicks so that they can be buried in the woods. The sight of the dead chicks disturbs the young boy. Seth describes their eyes as having bluish membranes like a sick old man who is about to die. The stranger picks the chicks up by one foot and flings them into a basket. Seth decides to leave the chicken yard because the man's silence makes him uncomfortable.

Seth walks through the woods to see the flooded bridge at the creek. He spots is father there along with a number of other neighbors who have come to marvel at the flood. The narrator notes that whenever an unexpected flood arrived, the county gathered to observe the aftermath. Seth's father is sitting on his mare, Nellie Gray. Seth says that it has always filled him with pride to see his father on a horse, when he can witness his father's quiet and straight nature. Seth tries to make remain unseen by his father because once again he has gone out without his shoes on and he is sure that his father will be angry with him. His father spots him and calls him over. Instead of reprimanding him he helps the boy onto the horse to give him a better view of the flooded bridge.

The crowd sees a dead cow tumbling down the creek. They deduce that the cow must belong to Milt Alley, a squatter that lives in a cabin in the hills. Milt Alley and his many children are what the narrator describes as white trash. The squatter is known to have a cow that jumps fences. A fifteen-year-old boy in the crowd asks if anyone has ever eaten a dead cow. When everyone turns around to view him, he is embarrassed because he had not intended to speak so loudly. An old man amongst the onlookers comforts the young boy by saying that people will eat all kinds of things when the need is great enough. Another man in the crowd comments that hardship will probably occur this year. The adolescent leaves and the others comment that he is Cy Dundee's son, part of a family who is starving.

Seth's father takes him home. He drops the boy off at the gate and leave to check on his cornfields. Seth goes next door to Dellie's cabin to see his friend, Little Jebb. Dellie, Jebb and Little Jebb are an African American family who are well respected by their neighbors. Dellie and Jebb have lived together for twenty-five years but they were never married. Jebb is around seventy years old and he is thirty years older than Dellie. Unlike the other African American tenants near by, Dellie and Jebb always keep a clean house and they grow their own vegetable patch. When Seth isn't around the other kids are mean to Little Jebb because they are jealous of him. The storm has washed a mess into Dellie's yard. Garbage and dirt that had been washed under her house during other storms has now resurfaced in her front yard.

Seth knocks on the door and Dellie calls out to invite him in. Dellie is sick in bed and Little Jebb is playing near the hearth. The two young boys play with trains and when they begin making a lot of noise Dellie calls her son over to her bedside. She yells that she warned him to be quiet and she slaps him firmly. This surprises both of the children. Little Jebb cries and Seth runs out of the house.

Seth decides not to go home. He still isn't wearing shoes and he doesn't want his mother to catch him. Instead, he runs to the stables and goes inside. He finds Big Jebb inside the stable shelling corn. Even at the age of seventy, Jebb is a strong man. Alongside his visible strength, Seth describes Jebb's face as kind and wise. Seth asks Jebb what Dellie is sick with. He tells the boy that its "woman-mizry," meaning menopause. Seth doesn't understand what this is but Jebb does not explain it to him.

Jebb asks Seth why he is shivering and Seth says it because it's Blackberry Winter. Jebb disagrees with him. Jebb says that it's too late in the year for it to be Blackberry Winter. Besides which a Blackberry Winter is a short cold spell and Jebb says that no one knows how long this cold will last. He comments that perhaps it will stay cold from now on. According to Jebb the earth is tired and it won't produce anymore. Jebb explains that once the lord caused rain to fall for forty days and forty nights because he was tired of man's sinfulness, so maybe god told the earth it could take a rest. Seth asks Jebb what will happen and Jebb explains that people will eat the rest of the crops and burn up all the trees for fire. Seth tells Jebb about the tramp that showed up on their farm. Jebb notices that the boy is still shivering and he tells him to go inside the house.

When Seth arrives home his father is standing on the back porch and the tramp is walking toward him. He hears his father apologize to the tramp, saying that he has no more work for him until wheat thrashing begins. He pays the tramp a fifty-cent piece for a half day of work. The man takes the money and curses and screams that he doesn't want to work on that farm. Seth's father yells back at the tramp, telling him to get off his property. The tramp grins and spits on the ground next to Seth's father's shoe. His father stares at the man. The tramp reaches over to pick up his parcel and disappears around the corner. Seth's father goes inside. Seth follows behind the tramp to the path near the woods. As he gains the courage to move closer to him Seth asks the man where he came from. The tramp tells the boy that it's none of his business. Seth asks him where he is going. The tramp looks at the boy and says, "Stops following me. You don't stop following me and I'll cut your throat, you little son-of-a-bitch."

During the wind down of the story the narrator speaks to the reader in present tense to update the reader on what has happened since that day. His father dies of lockjaw after being cut by a mowing machine. His mother sells the farm and moves in with her sister in the city but she dies three years after, his aunt says, "from a broken heart." Dellie dies and Little Jebb ends up in the penitentiary for murder, which Seth credits to the other kids mistreating him when he was a child. Seth guesses that Big Jebb is still alive because he saw him ten years ago where he was living in the city, surviving on relief during the depression. At the age of a hundred Jebb is still as strong as ever. He tells Seth that in his youth he prayed for the strength that god has given him. But now he is alone with his strength and he is too strong to die. Finally, Seth comments on the tramp

that told the narrator to stop following him. In a surprise twist, the narrator reveals that he has been following him ever since.

Analysis

Robert Penn Warren's work is considered to be one of the cornerstones of Southern writing in the United States. *Blackberry Winter* is the most widely read and anthologized of Warren's short stories. In this story the narrator shares recollections of his childhood in Tennessee, just before the depression. This revealing, if not solemn, tale uses rich and vivid nature imagery to describe his perceptions of the world as a child. In the opening pages the author writes, "everything is important and stands big and full and fills up Time and is so solid that you can walk around it like a tree and look at it. You are aware that time passes, that there is a movement in time, but that's not what Time is. Time is not a movement, a flowing, a wind then, but is, rather, a kind of climate in which things are, and when a thing happens it begins to live and keeps on living and stands solid in Time like the tree that you can walk around. And if there is movement, the movement is not Time itself, any more than a breeze is climate, and all the breeze does is to shake a little the leaves on the tree which is alive and solid."

The stranger's arrival foreshadows approaching evil. When the stranger comes to the farm, the family's dogs bark at him. Bully, the white Bull dog, gets covered in red mud during the storm. The narrator describes this as looking like blood covers the white dog, a symbol of violence and death. The tramp's aggression towards the dogs when he pulls a knife on them mirrors his aggression toward the young boy later on in the story. Perhaps these occurrences are in place to represent the fact that the tramp sees everyone as a threat.

Meeting the stranger is juxtaposed with the destruction of the farm community. The dead cow floating past the flooded bridge, the drowned chicks, and Dellie's messy yard are all aftermaths of the storm that surprises and disturbs young Seth. These acts of destruction coupled with the arrival of the stranger from nowhere throw the boy's world into chaos.

When Seth goes to the bridge to see the flood he describes the water as hissing and steaming like water from a fire hose. Here the mention of fire, which is a force that is opposite to the destructive nature than a flood, is likely evoked to symbolize more frightening disaster.

The story's setting is close to the depression years. The author foreshadows this with symbols of famine. At the bridge a young adolescent comments on eating a drowned cow and his comment sparks conversation among the onlookers about the hard times to come. Jebb also makes references to biblical times to suggest that the earth will stop producing crops soon. Here Seth notes that next to his parents he favors Jebb the most. Jebb is like a father figure to Seth, which causes his prophecies to carry more weight.

At the heart of this tale, this story is about the loss of innocence. The idealisms of childhood give way to harsh reality. What was easily defined to the narrator in his youth has become broken down. The shock of the flood and cold weather in June both symbolize the narrator's transition from childhood to the first hints of adult life because these symbols are indications of unexpected change. Seth's pride in his father symbolizes his idealism. It represents a black and white view of his environment. Seth's perceives his father as a larger than life hero. The standoff between Seth's father and the tramp tears Seth's father down from his pedestal. Not surprisingly, Seth follows the tramp down the path near the woods instead of following his father into the house. In a way this action is Seth's first step toward manhood. He has lost his fascination for his father because he is more curious about the tramp. The narrator admits that he has followed the tramp ever since the day that the stranger warned him to go away. This implies that it is too late for Seth to return to the simplicity of childhood. He has already crossed over into the more complicated future.

Characters

Dellie

Dellie is the wife of the sharecropper Old Jebb and mother of Seth's sometime playmate Jebb. She works as a cook for Seth's family. They are an African-American family who live in a cabin on the narrator's family's farm. On the day the story takes place, Dellie is sick in bed with an unspecified "female" illness. Young Seth is shocked by her ravaged appearance and stunned when she lashes out and slaps her son so hard that he cries.

Father

The father's first or last name never appears in the story, but he plays a prominent role both in the events of the day and in the elder Seth's recollections. From the information provided, however, he seems to be a leader in the community, an affectionate father, and a fearless protector of his family. He embodies the virtues of his rural southern roots: chivalry, loyalty, resourcefulness, and restraint. In the boy's eyes, he is everything the tramp is not, and despite the boy's attraction to the malevolent stranger, it's clear that he loves and respects his father. The elder narrator remembers that his father "was a tall, limber man and carried himself well. I was always proud to see him sit a horse, he was so quiet and straight, and when I stepped through the gap of the hedge that morning, the first thing that happened was, I remember, the warm feeling I always had when I saw him up there on a horse, just sitting." He dies just a few years after the events of the story.

Jebb

Sometimes called Little Jebb, the son of Dellie and Old Jebb, Jebb is about two years older than Seth. He lives with his sharecropper parents in a cabin provided by Seth's father. On the day the story takes place, his mother viciously slaps him for making too much noise playing with Seth. In the epilogue to the story Seth explains that Jebb "grew up to be a mean and fiery Negro. [He] killed another Negro in a fight and got sent to the penitentiary."

Mother

Seth's mother, whose name is Sallie, is tough and brave. She is the one who puts limits on the young boy and tries to keep him from going outside in the cold air barefoot. The older Seth remembers his mother for her other, non-maternal qualities. When his mother confronts the strange man with the knife in his pocket, the narrator acknowledges, many women would have been afraid, "But my mother wasn't afraid. She wasn't a big woman, but she was clear and brisk about everything she did and looked everybody and everything right in the eye from her own blue eyes in her tanned

face." It is later revealed that she died within three years of Seth's father's death, "right in the middle of life."

Old Jebb

Old Jebb is Jebb's father and the live-in partner of Dellie. The narrator remembers that he was an old man, "up in his seventies," back then, "but he was strong as a bull." Young Seth is drawn to him because he had "the kindest and wisest face in the world, the blunt, sad, wise face of an old animal peering tolerantly out on the goings-on of the merely human before him."

Seth

Seth is the narrator and the main character in the actions of the story. The first and only time his name is used in the story is when his father calls out to him from the crowd looking at the flooding creek. The nine-year-old Seth is completely at home in his world and lives a child's innocent existence, free from the constraints of time and unthreatened by death and evil. As events unfold, however, he experiences and witnesses events that begin to change the way he sees himself and his world. The older Seth understands much better what happens that day, but the fact that he needs to go back and tell the story indicates that he still has unresolved feelings and unanswered questions. The biggest mystery about the Seth is what happens to him in the thirty- five years between the events and the telling of the story.

The Tramp

The tramp— or simply, the man, or the man with a knife— is the malevolent stranger with the inappropriate city clothes who walks up the path from the woods to the back door of Seth's family's farmhouse. Seth notices at first glance that "Everything was wrong about what he wore," and his menacing appearance proves to be an accurate predictor of his behavior. First, he's a surly and poor worker. Next, he swears and spits at Seth's father, and finally he snarls at and threatens Seth himself. Nevertheless, his exotic and singular rebelliousness is a powerful attraction for the young Seth, and apparently has remained so throughout his life, according to the narrator's cryptic comments in the epilogue.

Themes

Fathers and Sons

Throughout his career, Warren was interested in exploring and writing about the relationship between fathers (and grandfathers) and sons, and in *Blackberry Winter* the theme takes center stage. In an interview, Warren agrees with his critics who say that the search for the father is a recurrent theme in his work: "I've been told, and I think it's true, that the 'true' father and the 'false' father are in practically every story I've written." Though Warren goes on to say (rather disingenuously) that he has "no idea" what that means, but readers of *Blackberry Winter* can hardly fail to notice that the young boy is drawn to two strong and contrasting figures in the father and the tramp.

Surely the tramp embodies the opposite of his father: the tramp is cowardly, weak and squeamish, and perhaps worst of all, ungentlemanly. His choice of the switchblade as a weapon demonstrates his untrustworthiness and cowardice, but the blade itself naturally appeals to the boy. When the tramp is repulsed by the dead chicks, the boy "who did not mind hog-killing or frog-gigging," suddenly sees them anew and feels "hollow in the stomach." But it's the tramp's swearing and spitting at the boy's father that makes him at once repulsive and irresistible. The boy follows him because he's the only one he's ever seen who has not deferred to his father, and because like all boys he will eventually have to do the same in order to become a man, and he wants to know how.

Seth's father, on the other hand, is a model of strength, affection, and manly southern virtues. At the creek his father displays both civic leadership among the other men and paternal affection by lifting his son up to his horse and placing a hand on his thigh to steady him. When the father finally encounters the tramp on his property, he knows exactly what to do and exercises restraint when the man accosts him. Nevertheless, the portrayal of the father is undercut somewhat by the older Seth's epilogue when the narrator reveals that the tramp is the man whose image walked before him "all these years."

Innocence

Warren's depiction of the farm in *Blackberry Winter* is most likely drawn from his own boyhood experiences on his grandfather's farm in Cerulean, Kentucky. In the narrator's memory, it is a place of unspoiled innocence—until that cold day in June when the stranger walked up to the house from the path by the woods.

Seth's boyhood world on the morning of that day is June is a kind of garden of Eden, a "first paradise," in the language of critic Winston Weathers. The narrator describes how the boy's understanding of time differs from the adult view: ". . . and when you are nine years old, what you remember seems forever; for you remember everything and

everything is important and stands big and full and fills up Time and is so solid that you can walk around and around it like a tree and look at it."

Of course, innocence is a state of being only understood from the perspective of its opposite- experience. In Judeo-Christian terms, the opposite of innocence is sin, and the consequences of the fall include being expelled from the garden of Eden. The older narrator of *Blackberry Winter* is recalling the day when his paradise was lost, when death (the baby chicks, the dead cow in the creek), the destructive force of nature (the flood), and evil (the snarling, malevolent tramp) entered his world and changed him forever. In the words of critic Charles Bohner, "In the span of a single morning, the child has experienced his own blackberry winter. He has been thrust suddenly and violently from the warmth of his childish innocence to the chill knowledge of the 'jags and injustices' of an adult world."

Style

Narration

The story is told by a first-person narrator who is recalling events that happened to him sometime in the past. Not until the epilogue does he reveal that thirty-five years separate the events of that June day from the narration. This distance sets up a contrast between the nine-year-old Seth's point of view and the forty-four-year-old narrator's. This structure not only invites comparison between the boy's perception of events and the man's, it also asks readers to consider how the mechanism of memory works. In other words, is it the events of that June day that are important, or the recollection of those events over the intervening time period?

Because the adult narrator is capable of understanding and interpreting the events of the day better than the child is, the narrative structure of the story anticipates an explanation. Readers expect that by the end, the elder Seth will provide the missing pieces and a narrative overlay to connect the fragments and explain the significance of the events of the day. Warren never gives his narrator a chance to offer a full resolution, however. Though it is clear throughout the narrator's story that he understands events much better now than he did then, he still cannot account for the bigger mysteries. "The man is looking backward on the boy he once was," Bohner explains, "recalling objectively his childhood bewilderment. The events of the day had puzzled the child, but the man, remembering the experience, is not puzzled. Rather he now sees the experience as a paradigm of a problem he has carried into adulthood. He has come to terms with the problem - it is one mark of his maturity - but it is a problem that is never finally resolved."

Setting

The southern rural setting of *Blackberry Winter* is significant in several ways. Warren considered himself a Southerner and a southern writer his entire career, despite the years he spent living in Minnesota, New York, and abroad. He, like Flannery O'Connor wrote years later, believed that the south would produce a richer literature because the experience of the Civil War and its repercussions meant that the region had "already had its fall," had already acquired a deeper and more tragic vision of the human condition. For Warren the rural life in Kentucky and Tennessee (where the story is set) conjures images of an agrarian way life in the south that he believed was being threatened by the intrusion of homogeneous northern industrialism (see below).

On a more personal level, though, the farm in *Blackberry Winter* evokes his grandfather's place in Cerlulean, Kentucky, where Warren spent summers as a boy. Living in Minneapolis in 1946, where snow in May was not uncommon, Warren was apparently nostalgic for the warmer spring of his youth and found himself with a string of memories that became the story that many consider his best piece of short fiction.

Historical Context

The New Criticism

Warren's legacy to literary studies goes far beyond the novels, stories, poems and plays he created. He was one of the founders of a school of criticism called the New Criticism, which dominated the field of English studies for more than a generation. He accomplished this through his role as teacher to countless undergraduate and graduate students who would go on to be teachers and professors, through his influence as founder and editor of two highly influential literary journals (*Southern Review and Kenyon Review*), and perhaps most important, through the defining textbooks he wrote with fellow Louisiana State University professor and critic Cleanth Brooks.

The theory and methods of the New Criticism will seem to today's students both obvious and outdated. Simply put, they argued that poems (and other genres, but poems especially) could be read and interpreted on the merits of their own internal and formal qualities. The methods grew out of the practices of a loose group of students and professors (called the Fugitives) at Vanderbilt University who met regularly to talk about poetry and to read and discuss each other's work. Though one of the youngest members of the group when he first began attending, Warren was quickly recognized as one of its brightest lights, contributing as both a poet and as an adept reader of other members' work. The critical methods that members of the group employed, careful word by word scrutiny of the text as separate from its author, became part of the classroom practices of the professors and professors to be. When Warren took up a teaching post at Louisiana State University in 1934 he collaborated with his colleague Cleanth Brooks to write the textbook that formalized these methods, *Understanding Poetry*, which was published in 1938 and still in use in some college classrooms forty years later.

Today, most critics find New Criticism limited in its ability to account for the cultural context of a work of literature, and believe that its insistence on discounting the personal life of the author erases important differences in gender, ethnicity, and other features of authorial identity. Nonetheless, many— if not most—professors and critics in literary studies today were taught by professors who were trained in these methods. Though the New Criticism is no longer an end in itself, its methods for close reading of a text are often the first step in any teacher's or critic's approach to a work of literature.

The New South and the Old South

The cultural context of the literary circle at Vanderbilt is important. Vanderbilt was at the time the site of vigorous intellectual activity, and a great deal of the discussion, quite naturally, had to do with the state of the American South. Members of the Fugitive group who met to discuss literature and culture were interested in preserving the cultural uniqueness of the southeast, but were also "intent of repudiating the magnolia-and-julip tradition of southern letters," as Bohner puts it. The Fugitives' positions were complex

and contradictory, but in general, they were concerned that the northern industrial culture would eclipse what was left of the southern way of life. In particular they "were distressed by what they considered to be the results of a culture based on the machine: the accelerating tempo of life, the chaotic individualism, the blatant materialism, the debasement of human effort and human dignity," as Bohner defines it. By 1930, four of the regular attendees of Fugitive meetings, Warren, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and Donald Davidson joined eight other southern writers to publish a collection of essays called *I'll Take my Stand*.

Critical Overview

Blackberry Winter first appeared in November of 1946 at a time when Warren's novel *All the King's Men* was on the *New York Times* best-seller list. Because of the success of the novel, Warren's agent was able to get him an unusually large amount of money for the publication of his novelette. When Warren collected his short fiction into the volume called *The Circus in the Attic and Other Stories* in 1948, he received what was for him an exceptionally large advance against royalties.

Early reviews praised the title story and *Blackberry Winter* (the second story in the book), but the critical consensus then and now is that the short story is not Warren's finest genre. Within a year of the book's publication, Warren told a colleague, "I know that the collection is, at the best, uneven, but if I was ever to publish them I reckoned I might as well go ahead and hope for the best." In his recent critical biography of Warren, Joseph Blotner sums up the reaction of critics: "It was indeed uneven, achieving distinction only in the first two and the last story. His range of characters and inventive imagination would be praised along with the atmosphere and continuity of the stories, but there would also be numerous cavils and rather general agreement that in prose fiction he was a novelist rather than a short-story writer. It was to be his first and last collection of stories."

Blackberry Winter, however, has been frequently anthologized and has received considerable critical attention. Commentators in the first decades after the story's publication tended to focus on Warren's use of poetic imagery and universal themes, using critical methods from the New Criticism that Warren himself had helped to define. Writing in the *New York Times* Granville Hicks noted that Warren had "developed a colloquial style that is just about as good as anything one can find in contemporary literature," and that he has "also acquired greater and greater subtlety in his explorations of personality."

Another reviewer in *U. S. Quarterly Booklist* praises Warren's ability to capture "the characteristic rhythms and homely idioms of Southern rural speech," as well as the stories' "strong sense of the uses and beauties of tangible things." A reviewer in *Time*, however, concluded that although "each story has a rural or small-town setting and is marked by a notebook quality of careful, detailed observation . . . there is not one story that rises from notebook level to finished fiction."

H. N. Smith, writing in *The Saturday Review of Literature* concludes that "Despite the occasional triumphs of the earlier pieces, none of them is an entirely satisfactory thing-in-itself. They suggest, in fact, that Mr. Warren is a novelist rather than a short-story writer." As it turns out, recent critical attention has focused less on Warren's novels and more on the long narrative poems that occupied the late phase of his career. Joseph Blotner's 1997 critical biography of Warren devotes little space to Warren's short fiction, but does single out *Blackberry Winter* as the best and most enduring of the collection.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4
- Critical Essay #5

Critical Essay #1

Elisabeth Piedmont-Marton teaches American literature and directs the writing center at Southwestern University in Texas. She writes frequently about the modern short story. In this essay she discusses how the tramp's appearance rearranges Seth's conception of himself and the protected world he lives in.

Critics of Warren's finest story, "Blackberry Winter," have focused on his presentation of universal themes and his deft use of imagery and atmosphere. While it certainly is true that the story invokes age-old and timeless human narratives, like the expulsion from the garden of Eden and the rebellion against the father, it can also be understood in its own particular historical and cultural context. Because the events that happen to young Seth that day in June, and which continue to haunt him thirty-five years later, is about how human beings create and carve out identity from their surroundings, it seems especially important to attend to where these events transpire in time and space, to the here and now-ness of the story. "Blackberry Winter," for all its symbolic resonance, is very much the story of a thoughtful young (white) boy's experiences in and around his parents' farm in middle Tennessee at the beginning of the second decade of the twentieth century.

The first indication that this day will be significant, and possibly transformative, appears in the story's opening paragraphs when the child assesses how this moment seems unique, different from each that has come before. Seth's understanding of time and the passing of the seasons is childlike: if it is June, you can go barefoot. It never crosses his mind, he says, "that they would try to stop you from going barefoot in June, no matter if there had been a gullywasher and a cold spell." For Seth, time and nature are familiar and knowable things, not the troubling abstractions they become for adults. At that age, "you remember everything and everything is important and stands big and full and fills up Time and is so solid that you can walk around and around it like a tree and look at it." His connection to nature is similarly seamless: "When you are a boy and stand in the stillness of woods, which can be so still that your heart almost stops beating and makes you want to stand there in the green twilight until you feel your very breathing slow through its pores like the leaves." Poets and theologians would define Seth's state of mind at the beginning of the story as "innocence." He has no understanding of his self as separate or different from the world around him. Psychologists would call Seth's identity "undifferentiated."

During the course of the day, Seth begins the wrenching process of differentiation, of exploring the boundaries where self ends and other begins, of understanding that his particular reality cannot be mistaken for universal truth, and of recognizing that he only knows who he is by defining others as "not him." What makes Warren's story so poignant and effective is that Seth's self-knowledge comes incrementally and tangibly. The landscape which he traverses is not some vague, mythical place, not are the other characters he interacts with merely empty symbols themselves. Instead, Seth's experiences that day have everything to do with rural Tennessee, with the south, with who his father is, with the arrestingly cool weather of blackberry winter. The arrival of

the stranger sets in motion a series of events that cause Seth to redefine himself and his place in the world, and, as he will come to understand more deeply in the thirty-five years before he narrates the story, he will lose forever the innocent certainty of being perfectly at home in the world.

That morning, when Seth first sees the man out the window, he is struck by the incongruity, the strangeness, of the sight. In fact, the hallmark of the man is his strangeness: he does not know anything about dogs, his clothes are all wrong, and he carries a mysterious package. To Seth, the man is more than strange, however, his entrance into the world defies explanation and challenges the laws of Seth's universe. Even Seth's mother cannot account for his presence. She says that she does not "recognize him," and when Seth asks her where he could be coming from, all she can say is "I don't know." Shutting his eyes and hoping the figure of the man will disappear, Seth thinks, "There was no place for him to have come from, and there was no reason for him to come where he was coming, toward the house." But he is there, and his presence does not just challenge Seth's world view, it forever changes it. Now Seth must include new phenomena in his comprehension of what is possible, and furthermore, he will no longer enjoy the feeling of certainty with which he began the day. Even thirty-five years later, the narrator still cannot make sense of the encounter with the stranger. The man's voice, he remembers "seemed to have a wealth of meaning, but a meaning which I could not fathom." In retrospect, he can still only hazard a guess that "it probably was not pure contempt."

The tramp's intrusion into Seth's world changes everything. The strange man's emergence from the woods, "like a man who has come a long way and has a long way to go," is trespassing in several senses of the word. He is a trespasser in the legal sense in that he walks across the family's property (and surely the property of others as well) without permission or regard for their rights. But trespass also means to sin or transgress. The tramp's entrance into Seth's world is literally a transgression, a crossing of boundaries (the fence), and figuratively (stepping over the line between the possible and the impossible). His sin does not take the form of any specific act, however. Rather, he is sin embodied and his very presence forces Seth to acknowledge the existence of sin and evil in the world. That knowledge, in turn, alters the way he perceives himself and everything else in his now fallen world.

The familiar sights of his world suddenly look strange to Seth. When he arrives at the bridge, for example, a ritual repeated every spring flood, the faces of the men look "foreign" and "not friendly." When he comes up along side his father "within touching distance of his heel," Seth is unable to "read" his father's "impassive" face. The spectacle of the dead cow also takes on new dimensions for Seth, who understands for the first time that the cow is not just "dead as a chunk." It represents a devastating loss to Milt Alley and his "pore white trash family." Seth's concern and empathy for Mr. Alley and his "thin-faced" children is genuine, but part of his interest in their circumstances is triggered by his dawning awareness that the brutal forces of the rural economy make the Alleys poor and his family comfortable. He seems to recognize that his relative wealth depends on their poverty, that the idyllic comfort of his family's farm is built on the hard work of others. After Seth listens, only half understanding, to the men and boys

discuss what hunger will do to a man, he gets another glimpse of life outside of the garden of innocence. And once he has that knowledge in his possession, he cannot return to his former state of consciousness. This inability to return to innocence is symbolized by Seth's choice not to go home after his father drops him off at the gate to the farmhouse.

Shivering, both from the cold and from uncertainty, Seth goes instead to Dellie and Jebb's cabin where he hopes to be able to play with Little Jebb, the boy close to his own age. Expecting warmth and reassurance in the family's humble cabin, Seth finds instead disarray, sickness, and violence. The first thing that Seth notices is "that the drainage water had washed a lot of trash and filth out from under Dellie's house." Like the appearance of the tramp coming across the yard, and revelations of poverty at the bridge, the trash in Dellie's yard is jarring because it defies the laws of the universe as Seth has understood them up to this point. Although the cabin looks "just as bad as the yards of the other cabins." To Seth's eye's "it was worse . . . because it was a surprise." The interior of the cabin is no less familiar. Dellie herself is sick, and looks so strange that Seth "scarcely recognized" her face. When she calls Jebb over to her bedside and then slaps him so hard that he cries silently, the last of Seth's illusions are shattered. He is forced to acknowledge the psychological consequences of poverty and to accept his role in the social and economic mechanisms that keep Jebb and his family in a dirt-floored cabin. It is as if Seth realizes for the first time that his friend and his family are black, that he his white, and that in the time and place where they live, that signifies an unerasable and fundamental difference.

Everything changes after the tramp arrives on Seth's family's property. He does not do anything menacing or sinful, or destroy or change anything, but when he walks in to Seth's garden from the outside world, he represents the intrusion of the outside world into the fading agrarian ideal of the south. He represents the city, industrialism, materialism and the ruthless cult of success. The stranger's presence destroys their shared illusions about race, class and identity in the south. Now, Seth sees, black and white are not just unequals, they are adversaries. In short, the tramp represents everything that threatens the middle Tennessee rural way of life and once Seth sees the world through the tramp's eyes, he is destined to follow him "all the years" because he knows he cannot stay where he is.

Source: Elisabeth Piedmont-Marton, for *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Dietrich interprets "Blackberry Winter" in terms of its religious context, casting the tramp as an antichrist who negates Christian belief in the face of the disillusionment of life.

For four and half decades readers, professors, and critics seem to have stumbled, at least the first time through, over the last line of Robert Penn Warren's short story, "Blackberry Winter." If we know the basic story line, the adult narrator's final, backward-looking observation, "But I did follow him, all the years," is plain enough on the surface. It simply refers to the tramp of the story and to an experience the narrator is remembering in the context of 35 interim years. But as readers, we know there is a deeper level, and it is the deeper level that throws us. Seth, the narrator, has not literally spent the years since he was nine years old following that one tramp. But if we believe a metaphor is at work here and that that metaphor succeeds, then we must be seeing evidence, clues, or keys to its interpretation, in the larger body of the story.

Floyd C. Watkins argues that such a key to adequate understanding of the last line (and ultimately, I suppose, the whole tale) is lacking. Watkins acknowledges that the "concluding sentence is as dramatic as the threat of the tramp," but also suggests,

the older narrator did *not* specify how he followed him. There are many possibilities: following him into the urban world; growing old; adopting a life of rootlessness and violence; or simply growing up into knowledge.

In other words, Watkins continues,

The tramp moves into the experiences of the world, but the story does not provide one glimpse of his understanding or of the events of the narrator's later life. . . . the author lets the last sentence of the story, mysterious as it is, fall flat on its face into a puddle of meaning.

If we believe Watkins, then, Warren has neglected to provide a solid context in which to see the ending, and it is only natural that the reader should trip over the last line.

Most other critics, however, seem to disagree. Thomas W. Ford, in a charming essay that compares "Blackberry Winter" to Emily Dickinson's poem, "These are the days when Birds come back," sees

the recognition of hunger and starvation as a possible human condition . . . the trash washed up by the flood that spoiled Dellie's always clean yard; the awful and uncharacteristic slap administered by Dellie to her small son during the misery of her menopause; and, most important of all, the conversation with Old Jebb . . . [as] the metaphorical center of the story.

I think Ford would agree with Warren himself, who wrote of his story, and of the meaning of the last line in particular,

the tramp had said to the boy: "You don't stop following me and I cut yore throat, you little son-of-a-bitch."Had the boy then stopped or not? Yes, of course, literally, in the muddy lane. But at another level - no. In so far as later he had grown up, had really learned something of the meaning of life, he had been bound to follow the tramp all his life, in the imaginative recognition, with all the responsibility which such a recognition entails, of this lost, mean, defeated, cowardly, worthless, bitter being as somehow a man. (Warren, "Recollection")

And for Warren himself, then, the ending is one of hope, an ending that indicates no matter what or how much we realize about the inadequacies of men, no matter how awful those realizations may be (especially for a nine-year-old), we tend to find that we can overcome self-pity when we accept a kind of basic humanity in even the most inhumane of men.

If such a hopeful outlook is the interpretation we are to arrive at, Ford's assertion of the central metaphor will do nicely. All the images of human frailty that he notes - images that illustrate the basic, underlying contradictions of human nature - provide sufficient context with which to read the last eight words as positive. Ford goes on to say,

So a nineteenth-century Amherst spinster in a poem about a New England Indian summer and a twentieth-century southern agrarian in a short story about a Tennessee blackberry winter stretch out long arms across space and time, clasp hands, and become metaphorical twins in creative response to and recognition of the uncertainty of the human condition.

But the above interpretation is not the only interpretation. Ford himself suggests that there is a strong "rite of passage" element at work in Warren's story, and this particular rite can be seen in a more negative context, despite Warren's own assertion: "no tramp ever leaned down at me and said for me to stop following him or he would cut my throat. But if one had, I hope that I might have been able to follow him anyway, in the way the boy in the story does" (Warren, "Recollection").

Kenneth Tucker sees the underlying contextual metaphor as related to the German legend of the Pied Piper. Such a parallel is a fairly simple one to make if we break the action of both the story and the legend down into general terms:

In both stories appear the coming of a catastrophe, the hiring of a stranger to undo the harm, the employer's reneging on the wage, the stranger's impulse to seek vengeance, and children or a child irresistibly following the departing stranger.

Tucker, however, takes the analogy even further, deftly describing the tramp's accouterments, not necessarily as "pied," but certainly as "motley." He then elaborates, defining the Tramp/piper character as a symbol of evil, specifically as "an embodiment of the Trickster archetype" and later explains, "The Trickster's basic significance resides in his delight in disorder."

Tucker argues that Seth understands the basic "evil" inherent in the tramp, but

like the Pied Piper, the tramp gains a victory over the employer who has not paid the promised wage. As the Piper leads the children from the town, the tramp lures Seth psychologically from the orderly but restrictive world of his parents.

This particular interpretation makes fairly clear how Tucker sees that "the provocative [last] line also implies that in trailing after the tramp, Seth has followed and faced villainy in himself."

In his essay, "'Blackberry Winter' and the Use of Archetypes," Winston Weathers anticipates Tucker's argument, but suggests an even more sinister view of the tramp. For Weathers, "Warren's handling of the 'Mysterious Stranger' is traditional" yet he believes Warren creates a "Mephistophelian form of the archetype." Weathers, continuing, writes, "Of the Mephistophelian possibilities - the harlequinesque rogue or the black punchinello - Warren leans somewhat toward the latter." In other words, for Weathers, the tramp is more than a simple Trickster or Pied Piper who leads Seth into (presumably) redeemable villainy; the tramp is cut from a decidedly darker pattern of Luciferan cloth. Thus, Seth's admission to having followed the tramp all his days becomes less an admission of guilt, and more an admission of damnation.

Few if any of these interpretations take the middle way into consideration. Yes, the metaphoric context is there; yes, the last line is justified by that metaphor; yes, the ending is hopeful; but yes, also, the tramp figure is a harbinger of "evil." These statements are not mutually exclusive if the tramp is seen as a dual figure himself. We will return to the dual nature of the tramp later, but first we must look at the metaphoric context: In what light should we see the tramp? Much of that light, the light that shines from behind the words of the text, can be viewed as religious, at least as pseudo-religious.

Prime examples of such a "religious" reading can be found early in the story, in the awed descriptions of time and the woods that rattle through Seth's head. There is little doubt that the depth of caring, the breathlessness, and the nod to universal significance that appear in these internal descriptions approach a kind of mystic revelation. These are short textual examples, but both descriptions hold positions of prominence in the overall thrust of the story. These descriptions, in fact, set the tone for the entire piece. Other scenes follow in the same religious context, some specifically Christian, some, like the awed responses to nature, not. Moreover, the religion, the belief that these undertones allude to, can also be seen as a fading belief.

The religious context, the atmosphere of faith that is set up early in the story, is gradually undermined. Belief becomes disillusionment. We see this undermining in several places throughout "Blackberry Winter," most notably in Jebb's speeches, in Seth's brief historical summary at the end, and in a handful of specific Christian (or New Testament) allusions. In both of Jebb's extended speeches, his disillusionment is clear. In the first, he describes the blackberry winter as a sign of the end. Here, by "end," he means the apocalypse in the Judeo-Christian tradition. If we are to take him literally, he

and Seth and all the characters have been left behind by God, left to walk the Earth as it becomes a living hell. Jebb, 35 years later, again echoes this kind of disillusionment when he says that God answered his prayers, gave him strength, and left him. This strength has allowed him to live too long in a world that has lost its significance, in a world God himself has forsaken.

Other images of fading belief, of the undermining of faith, appear in the scenes outlined by Ford earlier, but what about Seth's adult description of what has happened to his family? His father, a man who believed in the way of farming, died on his own blade. Seth's mother, a woman who believed in loving her husband, died of a broken heart. Those very beliefs, the faith in what they were that *made* them what they were - farmer or mother, man of the land or wife - killed them.

The final images of disillusionment can be found in what appear to be direct allusions to the New Testament. The time frame and setting of "Blackberry Winter" are, after all, rooted in "downhome" Christian tradition. If we are to see the metaphoric context of this story as a descent into disillusionment, it only makes sense that the basic faith of the given place and time, Christianity, is also challenged, at least symbolically. When the county people come to see the results of the flood, the narrator informs us, "Everybody always knew what it would be like when he got down to the bridge, but people always came. It was like church or a funeral". Here we have people gathering in a church-like atmosphere to witness something for reasons they do not really understand. We have a boy, small of stature, who comes to this "religious" gathering and who sees his father mounted on a horse. His father, seeing Seth on the ground, commands him up onto the horse where the boy can see better.

We see a similar set of events and actions in the Gospel of Luke, 19:1-6, when Jesus enters Jericho. The people have gathered to see Jesus, to witness the coming of something they do not fully understand. Zacchaeus, a rich man, but a man small of stature, climbs a sycamore tree to see better. Jesus, passing by, commands Zacchaeus to come down. Of course the parallels are not exact; Seth mounts his father's horse to see better, he does not climb a tree. But all of the same elements are here, as well as tantalizing similarities: Seth's smallness of stature, his climbing up to see better, the people gathered and unsure about *what* they have gathered to witness. Even more important, arguably, are the differences. Seth's father commands him up onto the horse. Jesus commands Zacchaeus to "come down." There is at one and the same time a kind of familiarity with the scene and a kind of reversal. After all, what the masses witness in "Blackberry Winter" is not a coming (or even a second coming) of Christ; rather, they witness the coming of a cow. This cow - if we see it as a symbol, as reminiscent of roughly parallel pagan symbols - is yet another indication that faith has fallen degenerate. Not only is it potentially pagan, and thus the antithesis to Christ, it is also quite dead. Another, possibly even more oblique, parallel to the New Testament is the relationship between Christ's parable of the vineyard, in which a laborer contests unequal pay (Matthew 20:1-16) and the hostility that arises between Seth's father and the tramp over what the tramp sees as a "breach of contract."

What about the tramp himself? Seth mentions, when he first sees the vagabond on the road, "Nobody ever went back there except people who wanted to gig frogs in the swamp or to fish in the river . . ." This simple statement is far more intriguing when we view it in light of what Christ says to Simon and Andrew by the Sea of Galilee in Mark 1:17: "Come ye after me, and I will make you to become fishers of men." Is the tramp then, himself, a kind of "fisher of men"? He "reels in" Seth quite handily; in fact he does so by reversing what Christ says in Matthew 8: 22. While Christ asks his disciples to "Follow me," the tramp eventually says to Seth, "Stop following me," the exact opposite.

One can easily read a Pied Piper legend into this work, or see a Lucifer figure in the person of the tramp; but if we take the incidentals of the story as symbolic and religious references rather than simple metaphors, the tramp becomes an antichrist figure. The tone of near-cathedral-like reverence toward time and nature early in the story; the church-like atmosphere of the gathering on the river bank; the increasing tempo of disillusionment with any belief, but specifically with belief in Christian ideas; the loose parallels to Christ and Christian mythos throughout; and, specifically, the command of the tramp, a command that echoes an exact negation of Christ's words - all these elements lead to the conclusion that the last eight words are an admission that Seth did not (necessarily) follow the path of hope, villainy, or damnation alone. Rather, he followed all the paths by following the path of an antichrist.

This is not to say that Seth fell under the spell of that antichrist - merely that he followed in the footsteps of disillusionment. Disillusionment holds within it all paths, the temptation toward despair, for example (as Jebb would solidly testify). But it also presupposes the possibility of enlightenment, the possibility of recognizing the face of the deceiver and changing course. And who better than a deceiver, an antichrist, to bring us the message of a dual- or even multi-faced coin? To a society whose preeminent belief system is Judeo-Christian, whose system is now faltering, an antichrist comes, and he flips that coin. He shakes things up, because if one does not question one's beliefs, one prays to a sedentary God.

Whether the deceiver arrives in the form of Pied Piper, Lucifer, tramp, antichrist or Christ himself, the revealed deception is always a seed of hope. And Seth, the narrator of "Blackberry Winter," intimates the possibility of such hope by the very knowledge that he *did* follow that deceiver, that tramp, all the years.

Source: Bryan Dietrich, "Christ or Antichrist: Understanding Eight Words in 'Blackberry Winter,'" in *Studies in Short Fiction,* Vol. 29, No. 2, Spring, 1992, pp. 215-20.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Watkins suggests that the puzzling ending to "Blackberry Winter" (that the boy followed the tramp) is incomplete and lacks clues from the story necessary for an adequate understanding of how the boy did follow the tramp.

Robert Penn Warren wrote his short stories in the late 1930s and the first half of the 1940s. He did not publish any poems from his *Selected Poems* (1943) until *Brother to Dragons* (1953) and then the poems collected into the Pulitzer Prize winning *Promises* (1957). Brevity and compactness (and perhaps the intensity of writing short fiction) interfered with Warren's composition of poetry. On the other hand, he has said that the emotional turbulence of the last stages of his marriage to Cinina Brescia also ran counter to the mood which produces poetry.

Preciseness of imagery, distinctness of characterization, and revelation of meaning give Warren's "Blackberry Winter" many traits of his poems. The story begins with childhood in the country recalled by a forty-four-year-old man. The progression is toward increasing conflict on a day on the farm and an abrupt shift in time at the end of the story when the narrator takes a hard look at the meaning of his following a tramp after that day. An interpretation by Warren written twelve years after the story was published serves as the author's criticism of his own story. This afterword on "Blackberry Winter" increases the complexity and puzzlements, the variety of possible meanings, and perhaps the questions.

The remembered day in Tennessee is cold and uncomfortable, and mother and son argue about whether the boy may go outdoors barefooted. Putting on his shoes, he lifts his head and sees a man out the window. "What was strange was that there should be a man there at all," but what is even stranger is the kind of man he is - a complete foreigner to the farm. He prepares to defend himself against the farm dogs with "the kind of mean knife just made for devilment and nothing else"; "everything was wrong about what he wore"; when the boy's mother speaks to him, he "stopped and looked her over" - suggesting hostility and perhaps even an appraisal of her sexually. He wants work, but told to bury some drowned young turkeys, he says, "What are them things - poults?" Working in a flower bed, he feels "a kind of impersonal and distant marveling that he should be on the verge of grubbing in a flower bed." The series of images which reveal how this tramp is from a different world end in a scene of conflict between the tramp and the boy's father. Learning that the tramp has a "mean knife," the father fires him. In contempt, the man spits close to the father's foot, and the son notices the contrast between the father's "strong cowhide boots" and the tramp's "bright blob" of spit and his "pointed-toe, broken, black shoes. . . ."

The stranger brings to the farm the disorder of a mechanized, violent, urban world. Disorder also comes from nature. It is blackberry winter, a day of cold rain, storms, and floods. A dead cow floats down the flooding creek, and hunger in the lives of the poor is revealed. A big gangly boy asks, "Reckin anybody ever et drownt cow?" The storm

mangles the flowers around Dellie's cabin, and trash washes from under the house of her and Jebb - admirable blacks who live on the farm.

These destructive forces enter the nine-year-old's stable world from a foreign culture and the storms of nature. It is for him a time of definition. His childhood until that time had not been "a movement, a flowing, a wind," but a world in which living things and people stood "solid in Time like the tree that you can walk around." Before, the wind had not shaken the tree but only the leaves "a little . . . on the tree which is alive and solid." Decades later the boy remembered the stable environment: the strength of his mother, the courage of his father, and the suffering of poor countrymen like Milt Alley, who silently watched the cow and the crops being washed away.

The entire story is a description of this cold day, except for five final short paragraphs. They are told when the boy is forty-four years old, thirty-five years later. The ending summarizes a variety of disasters since that time: the natural, the accidental, and the violent and the evil. The father died of lockjaw after a cut; the mother, of a broken heart; Little Jebb grew up to be "mean and ficey" and killed a man. But the most extraordinary future awaited the boy. At the end of his long recollection, he comes back to the tramp and tells how he followed him as he left the farm. The man showed his teeth and said: "'Stop following me. You don't stop following me and I cut yore throat, you little son-of-a-bitch.' That was what he said, for me not to follow him. But I did follow him, all the years." The concluding sentence is as dramatic as the threat of the tramp, but the older narrator did *not* specify how he followed him. There are many possibilities: following him into the urban world; growing old; adopting a life of rootlessness and violence; or simply growing up into knowledge.

In the last five paragraphs the characters also seem to have followed the tramp - the good people lived on into a sadder world; they died of accident and lockjaw, of grief, the Negroes Jebb and Dellie lived on for many years; their son, Little Jebb, went out into the violent world. All, then, apparently moved into a greater knowledge of complexities and depravities. The way the boy followed the tramp is not at all enacted in the story. Warren indicates only that he lived at least forty-four years, arrived at some state of knowledge, and indulged in a long reverie about that ancient day. The man ponders the meanings rather than the actions of the later time. The story ends without the causes being embodied in the world's body and the events of the boy's life. The actions and decisions of several characters were not like those of the tramp. The narrator's life was like the tramp's, or perhaps not. Not everyone must follow the tramp into the same kind of knowledge.

Warren's "Recollection" of his writing the story begins with the admission that the writing was "complicated" and that "I shall never know the truth, even in the limited, provisional way the knowing of truth is possible in such matters." In unfavorable terms he remembered the tramp who came into the story and left it: "city bum turned country tramp, suspicious, resentful, contemptuous of hick dumbness, bringing his own brand of violence, . . . a creature altogether lost and pitiful, a dim image of what, in one perspective, our human condition is." In contrast, he remembers the "mother's self-sufficency," and there is never an indication that she too followed a route like the

tramp's. Warren remembered later that he "wanted the story to give some notion that out of change and loss a human recognition may be redeemed, more precious for being no longer innocent." At the ending, I believe, there is a decline from embodied incident to general statement. Either when Warren wrote the ending of the story or when he wrote his interpretation of it, he considered only one way of following the tramp. Warren now believed that if the narrator "had really learned something of the meaning of life, he had been bound to follow the tramp all his life, in the imaginative recognition . . . of this lost, mean, defeated, cowardly, worthless bitter being as somehow a man." The boy followed the tramp at least in his meditations. If following is mere recognition, the last sentence is "an impersonal generalization about experience" - as Warren calls it in his own recollection. But that is not the best method of enactment in fiction. That ending makes a heavy demand on a reader who is told of the murderous life of Little Jebb and of other terrible matters. In his recollection, Warren says that no tramp ever threatened him as the one in the story did the boy, "but if one had, I *hope* that I might have been able to follow him anyway, in the way the boy in the story does" [italics mine].

But what way is that? The story has not specified, and the recollection has given almost no additional clue. The tramp moves into the experiences of the world, but the story does not provide one glimpse of his understanding or of the events of the narrator's later life. Certainly this ending has not ruined one of Warren's best short stories and one of the most accomplished American short stories. But neither has it entirely fulfilled the fiction. By switching altogether to the narrator's meditation and by making a *statement* of a view of life, the author lets the last sentence of the story, mysterious as it is, fall flat on its face into a puddle of meaning. At the end of Warren's explanation, one can only wonder if he has left his interpretation incomplete, if the recollection is wrong, or if the story itself has a misleading last sentence.

Source: Floyd C. Watkins, "Following the Tramp in Warren's 'Blackberry Winter,'" in *Studies in Short Fiction,* Vol. 22, No. 3, Summer, 1985, pp. 343.

Critical Essay #4

In the following essay, Rocks argues that the tramp in "Blackberry Winter" represents the idea of the original corruption of the will in Adam.

Robert Penn Warren wrote "Blackberry Winter" shortly after he completed *All the King's Men* and "A Poem of Pure Imagination: an Experiment in Reading," the long essay on *The Ancient Mariner;* these three works, written during 1945 and 1946, are notable examples of their respective genres and reveal Warren's varied literary talents. That "Blackberry Winter" was written soon after the novel and essay suggests that it might be read critically in the light of the two earlier works. It is unlikely that they influenced the short story in any definite way, but the essay on Coleridge and *All the King's Men* do foreshadow some of the themes, symbols and techniques of the story and indicate that Warren was thinking about similar problems as he wrote each work. *All the King's Men* and "Blackberry Winter" share the same mood of impending disorder and express a similar view of the idea of change, a major theme in Warren's work.

In "Writer at Work: How a Story was Born and How, Bit by Bit, It Grew," Warren describes the origin of "Blackberry Winter" in World War II, when he felt civilization might never again be the same. A line in Melville's poem "The Conflict of Convictions" carried for him the frightening reminder that wars threaten to uncover the "slimed foundations" of the world, an image that is reminiscent in tone of the decay, corruption and death in the novel and the story. His tale grew, he says, from the association of various experiences in his own life and was an attempt to treat the "adult's grim orientation" toward the fact of time and the fall of man into moral awareness. As Warren writes, "I wanted the story to give some notion that out of change and loss a human recognition may be redeemed, more precious for being no longer innocent." This condition of growth into maturity, with its concomitant gains and losses, is shared by Jack Burden in *All the King's Men* and Seth in "Blackberry Winter."

Warren's essay on "Blackberry Winter" gives us some clues in reading both the story and *All the King's Men,* but it is like Poe's "The Philosophy of Composition" or Allen Tate's "Narcissus as Narcissus" in that it leaves most of the important pieces of the puzzle for the reader to assemble. Warren expects the reader, like the writer in the act of composing, to be a creative and discerning individual. The quest for knowledge that fictional characters undergo is interpreted by a sympathetic and imaginative reader, who must discover in the work the symbols, myths and archetypes that the writer has used to dramatize the universal human condition. As a New Critic, Warren affirms the significance of a symbolic reading of literature and states that a "poem is the light by which the reader may view and review all the areas of experience with which he is acquainted." A story, like a poem, uses symbol and has rich texture. Warren stresses the varied and suggestive meaning of any symbol, particularly one "rooted in our universal natural experience." The sun, moon, stars and wind that he identifies in Coleridge are examples of such fundamental symbols, which like the archetypes of rebirth and the journey in Coleridge are to be found in Warren's own work, including, of course, "Blackberry Winter" and *All the King's Men*.

Warren's discussion of Coleridge's sacramental conception of the universe, violated by the Mariner's crime against the sanctity of nature, is relevant to a reading of "Blackberry Winter." The short story examines how the prideful individual can isolate himself from what Warren calls the sense of the "One Life" in which a creation participates. In "Blackberry Winter" the older Seth arrives at a similar knowledge as he looks back at his day's journey: like the Mariner, he learns about the beauty and terror of the universe and the natural process of change that both renews and destroys. Seth, like all men, must reenact the fall of the first father, Adam, whose third son we are told in Genesis was named Seth. Although the story, in its series of episodes and recurring symbols, seems to emphasize decay and death (the "slimed foundations"), it asserts finally the triumph of human perception over the natural forces that age and destroy. Seth, whose fall is fortunate, has moved, like Jack Burden and Ann Stanton in *All the King's Men*, "into history and the awful responsibility of Time." The adult Seth, like Jack and Anne, has learned the meanings of sin and guilt, isolation and community.

The tramp, or the Mysterious Stranger, represents, as Warren finds them in Coleridge's poem, the ideas of sin and guilt and the isolation that attends them. Warren maintains that Coleridge was interested in the mystery of original sin - not hereditary sin, however, but sin that is original with the sinner and is a manifestation of his own will. In the Mariner, Warren says, we witness the corruption of the will, which is the beginning of the moral history of man. The Mariner's killing of the albatross reenacts the fall and is a condition of the will and results from no single human motive. Although a comparison between the Mariner and Willie Stark certainly cannot be carried too far, one may see in Stark an example of the corruption of the will that Warren finds in the Mariner. Like the Mariner, Willie makes his own convenience the measure of an act and therefore isolates himself from the "One Life." One might argue, then, that Willie Stark and the tramp in "Blackberry Winter" represent in Warren's fiction the corruption of the will and the isolation of sin he finds in Coleridge. Both men are agents in the narrators' initiations and can be viewed as primarily beneficial in their influence on them. Stark may be corrupt in the means of his politics but he is often motivated by altruistic ends; goodness, as Jack Burden learns, can be accomplished by the morally bad agent. Like Stark, the tramp is also a human being, however sinful and violent he may appear. In "Blackberry Winter," as Warren states in "Writer at Work," Seth remembers "this lost, mean, defeated, cowardly, worthless, bitter being as somehow a man" who had come "out of the darkening grown-up world of time." The Ancient Mariner, Willie Stark and the tramp are alike in that they serve to elicit the emotions of pity and terror from the reader and suggest the knowledge that man must apprehend if he is to avoid a similar fate. Each of these men enters a "darkening grown-up world of time"; so, also, do their observers, the wedding guest, Jack Burden and Seth. An awareness of time is a central concern of Warren's characters, and in his story he depicts the truth that Jack Burden and Seth must suffer to learn; life is motion toward knowledge.

The title "Blackberry Winter" foreshadows the principal knowledge that Seth will gain: what man thinks has been permanent and will always remain permanent is subject to unexpected and devastating change. As a boy Seth believes that what he has done before will remain possible forever - that in June, for example, one need never wear shoes:

. . . when you are nine years old, what you remember seems forever; for you remember everything and everything is important and stands big and full and fills up Time and is so solid that you can walk around and around it like a tree and look at it. You are aware that time passes, that there is a movement in time, but that is not what Time is. Time is not a movement, a flowing, a wind then, but is, rather, a kind of climate in which things are, and when a thing happens it begins to live and keeps on living and stands solid in Time like a tree that you can walk around. And if there is a movement, the movement is not Time itself, any more than a breeze is climate, and all the breeze does is to shake a little the leaves on the tree which is alive and solid. When you are nine, you know that there are things that you don't know, but you know that when you know something you know it. You know how a thing has been and you know that you can go barefoot in June.

At the time the story opens, however, an unseasonable cold spell, blackberry winter, and a gully washer have just interrupted the anticipated plan of boyhood activity. From the beginning of the story, we are aware that the apparent security of the boy's world will be upset by a series of episodes revealing the mystery of change. The four scenes of the story - the first at his house, the second at the bridge, the third at the Negro cabin and the fourth at his house - are structured to suggest the idea of cycle or return, a going forth and a coming back. This pattern, like the notion that the gain of knowledge is worth the loss of innocence, argues for an interpretation of the story that stresses rebirth and renewal - if not the regeneration of life, at least the enlightenment of the mind. In the epilogue that concludes the story, the older Seth looks back from the year 1945 - when Warren felt that the "slimed foundations" of the world might be exposed - and considers the profound ironies of change: that the father who seemed invincible to him as a boy has died early, a victim of the machine, not of nature; and that the mother who seemed strong has died of a broken heart; and that Old Jebb, who most wanted the release of death to end his fatigue and who had prophesied the end of the world, lives on like an aging Samson. Most important of all, Seth realizes the value of his memory, which has kept alive the image of the tramp for thirty-five years.

This tramp and not the cold spell first disturbs the harmony of Seth's world, his "One Life." Seeing the tramp emerge from the woods, he is struck by "the strangeness of the sight" and he tries to "walk around" in his mind the idea of such unpredictable behavior. The tramp is completely out of place; his appearance and his manner suggest the origin of the city, a complex world unknown to the country boy. In the figure of the tramp Warren creates the archetype of the outsider, a character who threatens the security of a closed world; a vagabond or maverick, he is the type of the failure of the American dream of success. The tramp's nondescript eyes and "perfectly unmemorable face" are like a confusing mask to the boy, making him all the more inquisitive of the reality underneath. The boy's "steady and self-reliant" mother, in whom he can feel confidence, offers the tramp the work of burying the dead chicks and cleaning up the trash in the flower beds. This description of the littered setting, suggesting the destruction and death of the animate world, foreshadows the vivid descriptions in succeeding scenes of the trash that runs in the creek and of the trash under Dellie's cabin. The boy begins to see the capacity of nature to ravage what it creates (chickens) and what man creates (flower

beds). Seth will grow to realize that man does not control his environment and that he cannot be certain either of his expectations or of the satisfaction of his desires.

Seth does not perceive the full devastation of nature until he arrives at the strange sight of the bridge over the swollen creek, which is described as "boiling," "frothing," "hissing," "steaming" and "tumbling" - words that suggest natural cataclysm and foreshadow the Biblical tone of Old Jebb's later description of the next great and annihilating flood. On the bank the boy's tall, proud father sits on his horse, above the heads of the other men, who are mostly poor white tenant farmers and in Seth's mind of a lower social class. In this episode Seth begins to learn about poverty, a condition largely unknown to him. The dead cow that floats past reminds the onlookers of their probable hunger in the future. The cow, which suggests the idea of maternity, foreshadows Dellie's condition of menopause, Old Jebb's remark that mother earth might stop producing and his own mother's death some years later. Each of these images gives unity to the story and affirms the idea of death to man and nature, a death out of which there will seem to be no renewal.

When the young spectator at the bridge asks whether anyone has ever eaten a drowned cow, the response is stunned silence; but the question becomes ironic in the light of Old Jebb's statement later that if the earth stops producing man will eat up everything. Jebb's wisdom is anticipated in an old Civil War veteran's response to the boy: "you live long enough and you'll find a man will eat anything when the time comes." This man speaks, it might be said, rather like a character out of Southwestern humor; his words demonstrate knowledge of the comic and the tragic. He is, like Old Jebb, the sage and seer, to whom time and experience have brought wisdom.

The third episode of the story, at the Negro cabin, falls into two parts - in the first, Seth talks with the family cook Dellie and, in the second, with her common-law husband Old Jebb. Both of them have always been proud of their clean, orderly house and yard; but, much to Seth's surprise, the yard has also become littered by the storm. Contrary to what he had come to expect, the yard is full of the trash and filth that had always remained hidden under the house. Seth learns that appearances or order, cleanliness and health can be deceptive, that dirt, ugliness and decay lie beneath the surface of things. This new awareness is reaffirmed when he sees Dellie, normally healthy and active, lying sick under her quilt, which, like the house hiding the litter, covers the reality of the decay underneath. Dellie is suffering menopause, what Old Jebb later calls "the change of life and Time." This change signals the end of her ability to reproduce and thus the approach of a kind of death. When Seth says he is sorry to hear that she is ill, he realizes that the word is an empty one. Language fails to express the emotions of loss or sorrow, and, like the men watching the creek, Seth stands a mute and powerless witness to this example of natural change and human suffering.

The culmination of the boy's journey is reached in his dialogue with Jebb, who unlike the tramp has a wise, sad, kind face and represents the security of love and fatherly wisdom. A prophet figure, Jebb speaks like Noah, who foretells a flood but who has not heard God's word of a possible salvation for man; he is also like the preacher of Ecclesiastes, but his message is that the sun will never rise again, that the earth will not

abide forever. Old Jebb will not tell Seth why Dellie is ill, and his response, "Time come and you find out everything," reveals the Negro's understanding that all things change and that time is needed for man to be aware of the nature of change and of his part in it. Time, Jebb knows, is maturity.

Seth argues with Jebb that because it is June the cold spell will pass. Jebb contradicts the boy's belief that what has been will always be when he says that the cold may have come to stay:

Cause this-here old yearth is tahrd. Hit is tahrd and ain't gonna perduce. Lawd let hit come rain one time forty days and forty nights, 'cause he was tahrd of sinful folks. Maybe this-here old yearth say to the Lawd, Lawd, I done plum tahrd, Lawd, lemme rest.

Like Dellie, mother earth will lose her fecundity and man will be faced with extinction. The irony of Old Jebb's speech is that man feels no awe for the earth's seemingly infinite bounty or no concern to preserve it; the Lord rested on the seventh day and so does man, but the earth can never rest. As Seth leaves, the cold penetrating his spirit as well as his bare feet, Jebb tells him to hurry home before "you ketch yore death." Young Seth will also have to endure the process of change and decay; like all men, he has caught his death. Back at his home, in the concluding episode that brings the action full circle, Seth follows the tramp up the drive toward the pike and into the memory of the future.

In the epilogue, the adult Seth provides a perspective on his youthful experiences and reveals that he is not unlike the Ancient Mariner in his need to articulate the meaning of what happened to him on that day. The story provides for him and for the reader an epiphany that gains value in the narrator's dual vantage point of youth, which feels, and age, which interprets. The fullest insight belongs to the reader, however, for it is he who perceives the entire significance of Seth's experience. The epiphany we participate in is a discovery of the self in relation to one's environment and to other individuals, not unlike Robinson Crusoe's discovery of the footprint, a mark that signaled a change in his life. (Seth thinks early in the story about this moment of self-awareness in Defoe's work.) The image of a footprint is particularly meaningful in the light of its importance as a symbol of man's relation to nature, which is both his sustainer and his destroyer. Seth's bare feet grip the earth but they are unprotected from the cold and dirt; they let him know nature as she is. As the foot is an important symbol in the story, so is the hand, which can grasp hold of reality. Each of the adult characters has strong hands, which presumably can control and shape destiny - or at least that seems so to young Seth. But the painful truth is that these people cannot alter their lives, that they will become victims of their mortality. Their condition is almost like that of the character in *All The King's Men* who has what Jack Burden calls the Great Twitch, which determines that man is a victim of uncontrollable forces. The characters in "Blackberry Winter" have the freedom to choose and to act but no certainty that their choices and acts won't be overwhelmed by nature.

"Blackberry Winter," like *The Ancient Mariner* and *All the King's Men,* creates in literary form, as Warren writes in "Knowledge and the Image of Man," "a vision of experience . . . fulfilled and redeemed in knowledge, the ugly with the beautiful, the slayer with the slain, what was known as shape now known as time, what was known in time now known as shape, a new knowledge." This definition of the ordering of experience into a literary image comments on the theme of his own fiction, particularly "Blackberry Winter." Man has a right, states Warren, to define himself and to achieve his own identity, or an image of himself. He says that this notion of personality is part of the heritage of Christianity, in which every soul is valuable to God and in which the story of every soul is the story of its choice of salvation or damnation. In the quest for knowledge, Warren declares, man discovers his separateness and the pain of self-criticism and of isolation; but he also learns that his condition is shared by all men alike:

In the pain of isolation he may achieve the courage and clarity of mind to envisage the tragic pathos of life, and once he realizes that the tragic experience is universal and a corollary of man's place in nature, he may return to a communion with man and nature.

Man's knowledge makes him aware that he is a fallen creature, Warren is saying, but that he has gained more than he has lost:

Man can return to his lost unity, and if that return is fitful and precarious, if the foliage and flower of the innocent garden are now somewhat browned by a late season, all is the more precious for the fact, for what is now achieved has been achieved by a growth of moral awareness.

These two passages provide a perfect gloss of Warren's story and novel written a decade earlier.

The essay on *The Ancient Mariner* and *All the King's Men* share with "Blackberry Winter" similar themes of sin, isolation, change and growth, similar characters who lose their innocence because of others who embody evil and guilt or because of forces over which they have no apparent control and similar techniques of rich texture, narrative point-of-view and the treatment of time. Reading "A Poem of Pure Imagination," *All the King's Men* and "Blackberry Winter" together enhances the reader's appreciation of each of the works.

Source: James E. Rocks, "Warren's 'Blackberry Winter': A Reading," in *The University of Mississippi Studies in English,* Vol. 1, 1980, pp. 97-105.

Critical Essay #5

In the following essay, Warren informs the reader that he wanted the story to tell about the effect of time in bringing harsh change and loss to human relationships but also to show that one can still recognize human qualities in the struggle.

I once wrote a story called "Blackberry Winter." It has the form of a recollection, many years after the events narrated, by a fictional first person. On a June morning, a young boy on a farm in Tennessee is being prevented by his mother from going barefoot because a gullywasher the night before makes the morning unseasonably cold. As they argue, they see a tramp, a citified tramp, coming up the lane, and wonder how he ever got back there in the river woods. The mother gives the tramp some work. The boy goes off to explore the damage and excitement of the storm, and then to play with the son of Dellie, the cook, who is sick in one of the tenant cabins. In a moment of annoyance Dellie, ordinarily a loving mother, savagely cuffs her son. The boy, disturbed, goes to hunt Old Jebb (Dellie's common-law husband) who says this isn't merely blackberry winter - that the earth maybe is tired the way Dellie is, and won't produce any more. The boy goes back to the house and sees his father firing the tramp. The tramp is about to resent the firing, but the father overawes him, and the tramp goes off, the boy following until the tramp turns and snarls at him. Then there is a little summary of what had happened to the boy's family and Dellie's family in later years. Then:

That is what has happened since the morning when the tramp leaned his face down at me and showed his teeth and said: "Stop following me. You don't stop following me and I cut yore throat, you little son-of-a-bitch." That was what he said, for me not to follow him. But I did follow him, all the years.

I remember with peculiar distinctness the writing of the story, especially the tension between a sense of being trapped in a compulsive process, and the flashes of self-consciousness and self-criticism. I suppose that most attempts at writing have some such tension, but here the distinction between the two poles of the process was peculiarly marked, between the ease and the difficulty, the elation and, I am tempted to say, the pain.

The vividness with which I remember this may come from the time and situation in which the story was written. It was the winter of 1945-46, just after the war, and even if one had had no hand in the blood-letting, there was the sense that one's personal world would never be the same. I was then reading Melville's poetry, and remember being profoundly impressed by "The Conflict of Convictions," a poem about the American Civil War. Whatever the rights and wrongs, the war, Melville said, would show the "slimed foundations" of the world. There was the sense in 1945 that we had seen the slimed foundations, and now as I write this, the image that comes to mind is the homely one from my story - the trash washed out from under Dellie's cabin to foul her pridefully clean yard. So Melville, it seems, belongs in the package.

For less remote background, I had just finished two long pieces of work, a novel called *All the King's Men* and a study of Coleridge's *The Ancient Mariner.* Both of these things were impersonal, that is, about as impersonal as the work of a man's hand may be. At the same time I was living in a cramped apartment over a garage in a big, modern, blizzard bit Northern city. So the circumstances of my life and the work that had held me for so long were far from the rural world of my childhood. As for my state of mind, I suppose I was living in some anxiety about my forthcoming pieces of work, and in the unspoken, even denied conviction that, with my fortieth birthday lately passed, I was approaching some watershed of experience.

Out of this situation the story began, but by a kind of accident. Some years earlier I had written a story about a Tennessee sharecropper, a bad story that had never been published; now I thought I saw a way to improve it. So with that story I began to turn my feelings back into an earlier time. I can't say whether I began writing "Blackberry Winter" before I rewrote the other story. It doesn't really matter much. What mattered was that I was going back. I was fleeing, if you wish. Hunting old bearings and bench-marks, if you wish. Trying to make a fresh start, if you wish. Whatever people do in their doubleness of living in a present and a past.

I recollect the particular thread that led me back into the past: the feeling you have when, after vacation begins, you are allowed to go barefoot. Not that I ever particularly liked to go barefoot. But the privilege was important, an escape from the tyranny of winter, school, and, even, family. It was like what the anthropologists call rite of passage. But it had another significance; it carried you over into a dream of nature, the woods, not the house, was now your natural habitat, the stream not the street. Looking out into the snow-banked alley of that iron latitude, I had a vague nostalgic feeling and wondered if spring would ever come. It finally came - and then on May 5 there was again snow, and the heavy-headed blooms of lilac were beautiful with their hoods of snow and beards of ice.

With the recollection of going barefoot came another, which had been recurrent over the years: the childhood feeling of betrayal when early summer gets turned upside down and all its promises are revoked by the cold spell, the gully-washer. So by putting those two recollections together, I got the story started. I had no idea where it was going, if anywhere. Sitting at the typewriter was merely a way of indulging nostalgia. But something has to happen in a story, if there is to be more than a dreary lyric poem posing as a story to promote the cause of universal boredom and deliquescent prose. Something had to happen, and the simplest thing ever to have happen is to say: "*Enter, mysterious stranger.*" And so he did.

The tramp who thus walked into the story to cut short the argument between mother and son had been waiting a long time in the wings of my imagination - an image based, no doubt, on a dozen unremembered episodes from childhood, the city bum turned country tramp, suspicious, resentful, contemptuous of hick dumbness, bringing his own brand of violence into a world where he half expected to find another kind, enough unlike his own to make him look over his shoulder down the empty lane as dusk came on, a creature altogether lost and pitiful, a dim image of what, in one perspective, our

human condition is. But then, at that moment, I was thinking merely of the impingement of his loose-footedness and lostness on a stable and love-defined world of childhood.

Before the tramp actually appeared, however, I had known he was coming, and without planning I began to write the fourth paragraph of the story, about the difference between what time is when we grow up and what it was when we stood on what, in my fancy phrase in the story, I called the glistening auroral beach of the world - a phrase which belonged to a boy who had never seen a beach but whose dreams were of the sea. Now the tramp came up, not merely out of the woods, but out of the darkening grown-up world of time.

The boy, seeing the tramp, tries to think of him coming up through the woods. He sees the image of the tramp blundering along, not like a boy who might stand in absolute quiet, almost taking root and growing moss on himself, trying to feel himself into that deep vegetative life. This passage, too, was written on impulse, but as soon as it began I knew its import; I was following my nose, trusting, for better or worse, my powers of association in relation to an emerging pattern of contrasts. It was natural, therefore, after a little about the tramp's out-of-waterness, to set over against him the brisk self-sufficiency of the mother at the time of the incident, and then over against that portrait a thought of the time later when she would be dead and only a memory - though back then in the changeless world of childhood, as the narrator says, it had never crossed the boy's mind that "she would ever be dead."

In the instant I wrote that clause I knew, not how the story would end, for I was still writing by guess and by God, but on what perspective of feeling it would end. I knew that it would end with a kind of detached summary of the work of time, some hint of the adult's grim orientation toward that fact. From now on, the items that came on the natural wash of recollection came not only with their, to me, nostalgic quality, but also with the freighting of the grimmer possibilities of change - the flood, which to the boy is only an exciting spectacle but which will mean hunger to some, the boy's unconscious contempt for poor white trash like Milt Alley (the squatter who lived up the hill), the recollection of hunger by the old man who had ridden with Nathan Bedford Forrest, Dellie suffering her "woman mizry." But before I had got to Dellie, I already had Old Jebb firmly in mind with some faint sense of the irony of having his name remind one - or at least, me - of the dashing Confederate cavalryman killed at Yellow Tavern.

Perhaps what I did with Dellie had, in fact, stemmed from the name I gave Old Jebb. Even if the boy would see no irony in that echo of J. E. B. Stuart's fame, he would get a shock when Dellie slapped her beloved son, and would sense that that blow was, in some deep way, a blow at him. I knew this, for I knew the inside of that prideful cabin, and the shock of early realization that beneath mutual kindliness and regard a dark, tragic, unresolved thing lurked. And with that scene with Dellie I felt I was forecasting the role of the tramp in the story. The story, to put it another way, was now shifting emphasis from the lyricism of nostalgia to a concern with the jags and injustices of human relationships. What had earlier come in unconsciously, reportorially, in regard to Milt Alley, now got a conscious formulation.

I have said the end was by now envisaged as a kind of summary of the work of time on the human relationships. But it could not be a mere summary: I wanted some feeling for the boy's family and Jebb's family to shine through the flat surface. Now it struck me that I might build the summary with Jebb as a kind of pilot for the feeling I wanted to get; that is, by accepting, in implication at least something of Jebb's feeling about his own life, we might become aware of our human communion. I wanted the story to give some notion that out of change and loss a human recognition may be redeemed, more precious for being no longer innocent. So I wrote the summary.

When I had finished the next to the last paragraph I still did not know what to do with my tramp. He had already snarled at the boy, and gone, but I sensed in the pattern of things that his meaning would have to coalesce now with the meaning I hoped to convey in the summary about the characters. Then, for better or worse, there it was. In his last anger and frustration, the tramp had said to the boy: "You don't stop following me, and I cut yore throat, you little son-of-a-bitch."

Had the boy stopped or not? Yes, of course, literally, in the muddy lane. But at another level - no. In so far as later he had grown up, had really learned something of the meaning of life, he had followed the tramp all his years, in the imaginative recognition, with all the responsibility which such a recognition entails, of this lost, mean, defeated, cowardly, worthless, bitter being as somehow a man.

So what had started out as an escape into the simplicities of childhood from the complications of the present, had turned, as it always must if we accept the logic of our lives, into an attempt, however bumbling, to bring something meaningfully out of that simple past into the complication of the present. And now, much later, I see that this story, and the novel then lately finished, and my reading of Coleridge's poem all bore on the same end.

I should give a false impression if I imply that this story is autobiographical. It is not. I never knew these particular people. And no tramp ever leaned down at me and said for me to stop following him or he would cut my throat. But if one had, I hope that I would have been able to follow him anyway, in the way the boy in the story does.

Source: Robert Penn Warren, "Writer at Work: How a Story Was Born, and How, Bit by Bit, It Grew," in *New York Times Book Review,* Vol. CVIII, No. 36,926, March 1, 1959, pp. 4-5, 36.

Topics for Further Study

What were the lives of tobacco farmers like early in the century? What is likely to happen to the families whose crops are washed away in the flood?

There are many interpretations of what the narrator means when he says he did follow the tramp "all the years." What do you think he means? Write a brief narrative describing what happens to Seth during those thirty-five years.

The story provides no motivation for the tramp's behavior. What do you think he wants when he walks up to the farmhouse? Does Seth's mother's fearlessness make him change his plans?

The whole town seems to be represented at the bridge over the flooding creek. Describe the social and economic structure of the area where Seth's family lives.

Compare and Contrast

1940s: Workers during the Great Depression are faced with unemployment rates as high as 25% and relief comes through socialistic government programs. The United States also increases defense spending as the nation enters World War II.

1990s: Unemployment stands around 6%, but corporate downsizing has many workers concerned about their future. The government must reduce a multi-billion dollar deficit, yet the stock market continues its strong performance.

1940s: Blacks are excluded from the suburban housing boom of the era. The Federal Housing Authority practices "redlining": on city maps it draws red lines around predominantly black inner- city areas and refuses to insure loans for houses in those areas. This practice contributes to the demise of the inner city.

1990s: Though many upper- and middle-class blacks live and work in the suburbs, poor blacks are often confined to substandard housing in decaying urban areas, or ghettos.

1940s: Race relations are tense as blacks grow frustrated with segregation and discrimination. In southern states, poll taxes and literacy tests are used to prevent blacks from voting. Tempers explode during race riots in Detroit and Harlem in the summer of 1943.

1990s: Though civil rights legislation enacted during the 1960s has improved the conditions of minorities, particularly African Americans, the nation was polarized along racial lines in the debates over the Rodney King and O. J. Simpson trials.

What Do I Read Next?

All the King's Men (1946) is Warren's famous novel about an ambitious political leader. It is funny, exciting, and every bit as relevant to politics today as it was the day it was published.

"A Good Man is Hard to Find," by Flannery O'Connor is also a short story in which the ordinary events in the life of a family are disrupted by the arrival of a menacing stranger.

Ellen Foster(1989) is the coming-of-age story of a young girl struggling to grow up amidst poverty and sorrow in rural North Carolina.

Further Study

Conkin, Paul. *The Southern Agrarians,* Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1988.

With the benefit of historical perspective and newer critical methods, Conkin offers a fresh perspective on the literary and scholarly contributions of the group of writers who called themselves The Agrarians. Contains a careful explanation of Warren's sometimes strained relationship with the group.

Runyon, Paul Randolph. *The Taciturn Text: The Fiction of Robert Penn Warren,* Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1990.

In this comprehensive study of Warren's fiction, Runyon organizes his analysis historically. Chapter Four is a careful reading of the volume of stories of which "Blackberry Winter" is a part, and contains useful discussion of common themes and stylistic features.

Bibliography

Blotner, Joseph. *Robert Penn Warren: A Biography,* New York: Random House, 1997.

Bohner, Charles. *Robert Penn Warren,* Twayne United States Author Series, Boston: G. K. Hall, 1981.

Hicks, Granville. Review of *Circus in the Attic,* in the *New York Times,* January 25, 1948, p.5.

Lynn, David H. [In Memoriam], in *Kenyon Review,* N.s., Vol. 11, No. 4, Fall, 1989.

Review of *Circus in the Attic,* in *Time,* January 26, 1948.

Review of *Circus in the Attic,* in *U.S. Quarterly Booklist,* June, 1948.

Smith, H. N. Review, in *Saturday Review of Literature,* January 1, 1948.

Watkins, Floyd C. and John T. Heirs, eds. *Robert Penn Warren Talking: Interviews 1950-1978,* New York: Random House, 1980.

Weathers, Winston. *"Blackberry Winter* and the Use of its Archetypes," in *Studies in Short Fiction,* Vol. 1, pp. 45-51.

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