Black Boy Study Guide

Black Boy by Kay Boyle

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Contents

Introduction

Kay Boyle drew a great deal of attention from literary stalwarts from her earliest publications in European journals and magazines. Later reprinted in the essay, "The Somnambulists," in 1929, William Carlos Williams wrote in *transition* that Boyle's stories were "of a high degree of excellence." He also noted that people with a "comprehensive" but "disturbing view of what takes place in the human understanding at moment of intense living," will not succeed with the American readership.

Boyle's uniqueness was reflected not only in her style, but also in her subject matter. In the 1920s, Boyle's cause—aptly reflected by her avant-garde style—was the liberation of art from literary traditions. By the following decade, Boyle was turning away from the text and to the world in which it was perceived. Her best-known works of the 1930s and 1940s concern serious issues, such as racial oppression and Nazism.

The story "Black Boy," first published in 1932 in the *New Yorker,* contains a very real social message. At the time of its creation, Boyle says, "stories were written in protest, and also in faith, and they were not unlike fervent prayers offered up for the salvation of man." Through works such as "Black Boy," Boyle addresses the issue of racial discrimination in the United States. Yet Boyle makes it succeed on levels that extend beyond that of social fiction.

Author Biography

Kay Boyle was born to a wealthy family in St. Paul, Minnesota, on February 19, 1902. While a child, she traveled with her parents throughout the United States and Europe. Boyle developed an early appreciation for art, literature, and social values. In her adolescence, Boyle began writing short stories and poems. While still a teenager, Boyle moved to New York City. There she got a job as an assistant to the editor of *Broom* magazine. Within a short period of time, Boyle's own work began appearing in that publication as well as in *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse.*

Boyle married a French engineer, a man who shared her dislike for societal conventions and injustice. The couple moved to France, partly because Boyle believed that country was kinder to its leftwing political thinkers and its writers. The couple settled in Paris, where Boyle's literary contacts led to her acquaintance with many other expatriate writers, including Gertrude Stein, James Joyce, and Ernest Hemingway. Soon, her literary associates were asking her to contribute to new publications. She also edited a journal called *This Quarter.* In 1927, she began publishing short stories in an avant-garde magazine called *transition,* and she published regularly in that journal for the next several years.

By the 1930s, Boyle's work was appearing frequently in numerous American magazines, including the *New Yorker.* The stories from this period were collected in her first American book, *Short Stories.* She continued to work on novels and poetry, and many of her best-known novels were published in that decade. She also worked on translations, a children's book, and edited a short story anthology.

Her personal life was less steady. By 1943, she was married to her third husband and had lived in many locations throughout Europe. Her experiences in Europe in the pre-World War II years influenced many of the short stories she wrote during this period. After the end of World War II, Boyle lived in the former West Germany, where she served as a foreign correspondent for the *New Yorker.* Her short stories from this period were informed by her experiences in the then-occupied, war torn nation.

In the 1950s, Boyle fell victim to the American communist scare and McCarthyism. She lost her job with the *New Yorker* and returned to the United States. For a time, the *Nation* was one of the few magazines that would print her work. In 1961, she received her second Guggenheim Fellowship (the first was in 1933, the year after "Black Boy" was published). In the decades following, she taught at various colleges and continued her social involvement through her work for feminist and pacifist causes. Boyle died in ill Valley, California, on December 27, 1992.

Plot Summary

"Black Boy" begins with an unnamed narrator remembering an accident she had when she was about 10 or 12 years old and living with her grandfather in a seaside city. The girl likes to ride her horse along the beach while her Grandfather Puss likes to ride in the chairs along the wooden boardwalk, which are pushed by young black boys. Puss would fetch his granddaughter from the beach and then choose one of the many boys to push him in one of the chairs. He asks the boys their names but isn't really interested in knowing them.

The girl has developed a friendship with one of the black boys. She often comes down to the beach— where the boy sleeps—early in the morning, and the two of them eat dog biscuits and talk. The boy talks about magical things—kings and camels and the Northern Lights. If he were king, the boy says, he wouldn't stay around here.

One day, Puss comes to find his granddaughter so they can take a chair to look at an electric sign. He sees her sitting with the black boy. Once Puss and the narrator are up on the boardwalk, he says that he doesn't think it is a good idea for her to be friends with the boy because the boy might harm her. When she asks how, Puss suggests the boy might steal her money. The girl protests, saying that all they do is sit and talk. When Puss asks what they talk about, she claims that she doesn't know.

The next morning when the girl wakes up, she remembers her grandfather's words. She decides to go for a horseback ride and not visit the black boy for a few days. She thinks that when Puss sees her riding on the beach, he will stop feeling ill at ease. On the beach, however, the narrator sees her friend sitting in their accustomed place under the boardwalk. The boy stands up to pat the horse, then takes it for a short ride, sitting easily. The boy says he has thought about being a jockey but doesn't care for their lifestyle as they have to watch what they eat.

The girl gets on her horse again. She plans to jump over the dock. She tells her friend to watch. The girl and the horse race under the boardwalk to get a good start on the jump, but suddenly the girl's dogs rush down the beach, barking wildly and chasing a cat. They get under the horse's legs, and the horse gets frightened and jumps sidewise into an iron arch. The girl is thrown from the horse and loses consciousness. In a dreamlike state, she imagines that she hears someone crying. The black boy has come to the girl and holds her in his arms, murmuring soothing words. He carries the narrator back to her house and she nestles against the boy, seeking comfort. At the narrator's house, Puss comes out to meet them; without saying a word, he hits the black boy in the mouth.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

An unnamed white girl narrates this short story of an incident that occurred when she was 10 or 12 years old. In the early spring, she is living with her grandfather, Puss, in a house on an unnamed beach. She loves to ride her horse in the foam when the tide is out, but when the tide is in, the horse is too timid to brave the waves.

Puss doesn't care to dirty his feet by walking on the sand. He prefers to rent a chair and ride along the boardwalk, with a view of the water on one side, and the shops on the other. Puss is interested in the shops and people on the promenade, and he enjoys picking out a black boy to push his chair, as if the boys were horses for his consideration. The little girl notices that the boy he chooses to push their chair never smiles, and he never reveals his own name. Whatever her grandfather calls him, the boy answers to that name.

Otherwise, he is silent and sorrowful as he pushes the chair up and down the boardwalk.

The girl can come and go as she pleases, she says, because she has her dogs with her. She often visits the boy on the beach and finds him to be a talkative, imaginative companion. The boy ruminates about other choices he'd make if he were a king; he'd not push chairs, and he might even give up sleeping out on the sand under the boardwalk. He tells her marvelous stories of seeing images of zebras and other animals, reflected from the other side of the world by the Northern lights.

On the day this particular visit takes place, Puss comes from the house to fetch his granddaughter for a ride up on the boardwalk. He stiffens when he sees that she is visiting with the black boy. As they walk away, Puss tries to make his granddaughter afraid by suggesting the boy might harm her somehow. He says the boy might push her down and take her money.

The girl responds in honest confusion to this suggestion, which angers Puss, and she wakes the next morning feeling burdened. She intends to wait a couple of days before going to visit the black boy again, hoping that it will put her grandfather's mind at ease to see her spend the next couple of days riding "high and mighty" on her horse. When she rides her horse out of the stable, though, she sees the boy and feels drawn to take the horse down and let him ride. Although he still doesn't smile, she can see that he is delighted and is a natural rider.

When he finishes his turn, the girl wants to let him see the horse jump. She mounts and rides the horse under the boardwalk, intending to give the horse a good start. However, just when she is under the boardwalk, her dogs come darting underfoot as they chase a cat from the house. The startled horse sidesteps and slams the girl into an iron arch.

The girl, lying on the sand, is either unconscious or delirious with pain for a moment. She imagines her dead mother is with her, because she feels herself surrounded by love and sorrow. The boy gathers her up, and the girl wraps her arms around his neck and rests her head on his chest. He carries her up to the house, where Puss meets them and abruptly ends the story by punching the boy in the mouth.

Analysis

In just six pages, Kay Boyles presents the theme of love/nature versus racism/society in a story rich with symbolism and characterization. Even the setting, a beach along the forsaken part of an unnamed city, is symbolic of division. A wooden promenade divides higher from lower classes of people and divides commerce from nature. A lighthouse that used to be at the sea's edge is now just a torch in the middle of town, because nature, in the form of the sea, has retreated from this forsaken city.

Though this story was published in *The New Yorker* in May 1932, the story is not limited in time, except that it takes place when the narrator was 10 or 12 years old. The plot of the story is very simple and doesn't begin to unfold until the fourth of six pages. What moves the story along, and illustrates the theme, is Boyles' rich characterization.

The first character introduced is the narrator's horse. The mention of the horse is so brief at the beginning, that one must read to the end to realize the consequences of her timid character. When the horse sidesteps the dogs, it is not a total surprise, because the reader already has seen that she steps gingerly through the waves, even at low tide.

The next character we meet is Puss, who the narrator refers to as "my little grandfather." He is a fastidious man of leisure, who prefers the boardwalk to the sand below. He is the opposite of the natural man. He doesn't like to dirty his boots and habitually lures his granddaughter, away from the beach. He prefers to see and be seen riding past the shop windows. Puss clearly considers the black boys, who push the rolling chairs on the boardwalk, as not quite human. In the beginning of the story, the narrator sees her grandfather as eccentric perhaps, but harmless. His character is more fully revealed, however, when he tries to poison her mind against her friend, and of course, when he responds to the boy's help by hitting him just for touching Puss's white granddaughter.

The character of the black boy, as seen through the eyes of the young narrator, directly challenges the assumptions of racism. She sees in him all the intelligence, compassion, and humanity that Puss obviously lacks. Though his clothes are too small for him, his nobility is not diminished. He has what in Standard English would be considered poor grammar, but he has a brilliant mind.

The black boy has some ingenious survival skills that allow him to function in a world of limited choice. For one thing, he chooses how much to reveal of himself. He has the discernment not to waste himself by giving so much as his name to Puss, but he recognizes in the girl a kindred spirit and is generous in talking with her. His other

choices are limited, sometimes even imaginary, but through the power of his daydreams, the boy keeps alive his humanity. One also suspects that living outdoors, though certainly a harsh existence at times, gives the boy a primal sense of being and worth as a natural creature. Though society, symbolized by Puss, may consider nature to be less than anything man-made, the boy's natural wisdom is fed by living outdoors. He may live in sorrow, but he does not despair.

The white girl who befriends the black boy is a child who loses her illusions in the course of this story. At the beginning, she thought she came and went as she pleased. What she learned was that she only went where her white grandfather allowed. Though hers is a life of greater physical comfort, she is as limited by racism as the black boy. This aspect of her character illustrates that, often, those in society who appear to live in luxury are actually in prison. When the girl ignores society's separation between herself and her friend, she literally runs into iron. Metaphorically, the iron arch she slams against is the man-made force that supports the separation between two worlds, white and black.

The girl's skittish horse can be thought of as a symbol of the narrator before her fall. She is a mixture of timidity, strength, love and courage. When Puss places the burden of racism on her shoulders, she has the courage to question it, but not to resist it openly. This shows that she has begun to realize she is not as free to choose as she at first believed. She does not have the power, or the daring, to demand that she be allowed to visit her friend. She at first intends to humor her grandfather by staying away from the black boy for just a couple of days, but when she sees the boy sitting on the beach, she feels pulled by her friendship, and friendship wins.

Even at this point, she still thinks Puss is concerned for her safety and wants to put his mind at ease. She thinks, naively, that if Puss could learn how nice the boy is, he wouldn't mind her visiting him. It is not until Puss hits the boy for helping her that the girl realizes her grandfather's concern is not for her welfare. His agenda is to enforce the societal structures that give him a sense of superiority.

In fact, she may not clearly understand that even at the moment Puss strikes the black boy. She may have had to grow into that realization. The adult white female narrator is, in a sense, the last character revealed by the story. As the narrator tells the story, the reader learns that while the girl was disillusioned, the grown woman's sense of fairness and friendship was not destroyed. She is honest in telling of the stupidity and cruelty of her grandfather, her cowardice or powerlessness, and the black boy's compassion. The narrator is now a grown white woman who has not given in to the racism of her culture.

The abrupt ending leaves the reader with the sorrow of the narrator's disillusionment. Boyle doesn't give the reader the relief of a false resolution; there is no information to suggest that either the boy or the girl's lives became better later. Yet, there is hope in the telling of the story. By telling the story honestly, without denigrating her noble friend or excusing her grandfather, the narrator seeks to conquer the racism that poisoned them all.

Characters

Black Boy

The black boy and the narrator are friends. The black boy has a job pushing people in chairs to see the sights along the boardwalk. He lives on the beach and is quite poor. Despite his poverty, he has an active fantasy life. With his imagination, he can create a beautiful world in which he can be anything he wants to be. He is a bright and self-confident boy, whose caring nature and optimism belies the racist beliefs held by 1930s American society.

Grandfather

See Puss

Narrator

The narrator of the story is a girl about 10 or 12 years old. Her mother is dead, and the narrator lives with her grandfather, Puss, in an oceanside town. She spends a lot of time on the beach, sometimes riding her horse and other times talking to her friend, the black boy. The narrator is very observant and perceptive. She notices details about people and things that surround her, and she also clearly sees her grandfather's distasteful treatment of minorities. She is open-minded, going along with the black boy's fantasies and seeing the beauty in what his words describe.

Puss

Puss is the narrator's grandfather. He has fussy and particular tastes. One of his favorite activities is hiring a boy to push him and his granddaughter in a chair along the boardwalk. He likes to look at the shops along the way. He is more at home in the world of civilization rather than the natural world. He holds racist beliefs and does not trust the black boy whom his granddaughter befriends, even though he makes no effort to get to know the boy.

Themes

Prejudice and Racism

The prejudice that Puss has for African Americans is one of the major components of the story. Even before Puss speaks of his dislike for the black boy whom his granddaughter has befriended, his racism is apparent. He sees all the boys who make a living pushing chairs along the boardwalk as interchangeable. At this point in the story, Puss's racism evidences itself in his complete disregard for these black boys who nevertheless perform a service he finds valuable.

When Puss realizes that his granddaughter has become friends with one of these boys, he lets her know in no uncertain terms that he does not want her to be friends with the boy because he "might do you some kind of harm." He is hard-pressed, however, to explain what kind of harm that might be. He proposes that the black boy might "knock you down and take your money away." Puss's fears, however, are clearly unfounded. Earlier, the narrator had attested to her safety when she noted that wherever she went, her dogs always followed behind her.

Ironically, it is the dogs that cause the narrator' s accident when they scare the horse, which then throws the girl. Puss refuses to acknowledge the boy's helpfulness and compassion. Instead, his racist attitude causes him to physically attack the black boy.

Boyle also comments on the social injustice of racism through the black boys themselves. All of the people who push the chairs are black boys. They have a hard, thankless job that is more suited to animals than humans. Through details like these that surround the black boy, Boyle shows the boys' poverty.

Childhood

Although the story is written from the point of view of an older narrator looking back on a childhood incident, it presents the child's perception. The narrator beholds the world with a childlike fascination and credulity. For instance, the waves of the ocean became lazy women tiptoeing across the sand. The narration also reflects the purity of childhood. Instead of looking down at her friend because of his race, she compares his neck favorably to that of a white man. She embraces her friendship with the black boy, sensing that he can provide love and comfort. This would be unimaginable to the adult as typified by Puss, who could not look beyond the boy's race and social circumstances.

The narrator, who maintains the more mature voice of the adult throughout, nevertheless remains true to the childlike persona. At the end of the story, as she recalls lying on the grass after her accident, her perceptions are those of a lonely child. She imagines her dead mother holding her and the wind crying over her pain. She feels "rocked in a cradle of love, cradled and rocked in sorrow." When the black boy refers to

her as his "little lamb," he subtly emphasizes her youth and her need for a guiding adult figure.

Imaginary World

The idea of an imaginary world figures prominently in the story. The black boy invents an entire world in which he has lived. In this world, he "could be almost anything I made up my mind to be." For instance, he could have been a jockey, only he chose not to because they have to watch their diet so carefully. He also dreams up prettier surroundings. Instead of the boardwalk creaking above, he creates a time when all sorts of wild and exotic animals came down to the ocean edge. Although he acknowledges that this is a "mirage," he also claims, "I seen camels, I seen zebras, . . . I might have caught any of one of them if I'd been inclined."

Although the boy's claims cannot be proven, there is truth to some of them. He may not have been a jockey, but he does ride the girl's horse with surprising ease. The boy is extremely effective in his creation of the imaginary world, his escape from the impoverished, gritty world in which he really lives. Even the narrator is swayed, finding that every one of his words "seemed to fall into a cavern of beauty."

Style

Point of View

The story is told from the first-person point of view. The narrator is a grown woman looking back on an incident that took place when she was about 10 or 12 years old. The reader is only privy to what goes on in the mind of the narrator. Yet, because the narrator has a keen perception of the world around her, the story clearly indicates the mores and values of the time period. Though the story is brief, the narrator fills it with vivid detail. The narrator's account of her grandfather's attitudes toward the black boys who push the chairs is particularly illuminating. While it shows the prevailing racist attitude of the time, the girl juxtaposes herself against her grandfather, showing her own open-mindedness.

Symbolism and Imagery

Boyle makes use of a great deal of symbolism and imagery in the story. The slow movement of the waves of the Atlantic Ocean is evoked through her comparison of them to "indolent" ladies who "gathered up their skirts in their hands and, . . . came tiptoeing in across the velvet sand." The dogs "wheeled like gulls." The narrator's horse is likened to a shy bird.

The black boy is also described in comparison to other key elements of the story. His neck is long and shapely, more so even than a white man's. His fingers "ran in and out of the sand like the blue feet of a bird." This phrase is perhaps most important because it has both a positive and a negative slant. On the positive side, Boyle compares the boy to an animal, and she infuses animals with worthy attributes throughout the story. On the negative side, Boyle also implicitly equates the boy with the narrator's horse, since both of them are likened to birds. This comparison reinforces the idea that on the boardwalk above, the boy, doing the work of a horse, is regarded as little more than an animal that provides a physical service.

Boyle also uses intense imagery to refer to the character's blackness. The boy was "as thin as a shadow but darker" and his face was "black as a bat's wing, nodding and nodding like a dark heavy flower." Another black boy who pushes the carts has a face "dripping down like tar in the sun." All of these descriptions emphasize the extreme darkness of the skin color of these boys who work on the boardwalk.

Language

Boyle uses rich language in writing the story, and her characters mimic this language. The narrator uses vivid metaphors and well-crafted descriptions, and the black boy's speech reflects a desire for true beauty. He describes a magical scene in which there

used to be all kinds of animals come down here to drink in the dark. . . . They was a kind of a mirage came along and gave that impression. I seen tigers, lions, lambs, deer; I seen ostriches drinking down there side by side with each other.

The narrator responds to the boy's language: "every word the black boy spoke seemed to fall into a cavern of beauty."

When the narrator's grandfather wants to know what the two children converse about, however, she only replies, "I don't know. It doesn't sound like much to tell it." She understands that she and her friend are creating a better world but a made-up world just the same.

Historical Context

The Great Depression

The Great Depression, the period between the stock market crash of October 1929 and the bombing of Pearl Harbor in December 1941, was the worst economic crisis in American history. During that time, millions of Americans lost their jobs and sank into poverty. By 1932, the United States was solidly in the midst of the Great Depression. Industrial output fell to about half that of 1929, resulting in massive layoffs. About 12-15 million Americans were unemployed at the peak of the crisis. Wages had fallen by almost one third. More than 5,000 banks closed their doors.

Urban Living Conditions

The depression hit many cities very hard. City governments, religious groups, and charitable organizations tried to provide direct relief to the needy, and neighbors relied on each other for help. Men and women waited in breadlines for bowls of soup and pieces of bread. Hunger was so widespread that one out of every five children in New York City suffered from malnutrition. Homelessness was also a serious problem in the cities. Some people lived in shantytowns, which were collections of makeshift shelters built out of packing boxes, scrap lumber, and other pieces of junk. They used newspapers as blankets.

Popular Culture in the 1930s

Despite the hard times, Americans still sought entertainment. Many people played at home, listened to the radio, and attended movies. Radio shows that featured heroes who triumphed over evil, and gangster films, zany comedies, musicals, and cartoons all allowed people to forget their troubles, if only briefly. New forms of popular literature also arose during the decade, such as comic books featuring superheroes. Popular books of the period also offered a chance to escape. Many Americans managed to hold onto their automobiles, and millions of Americans took to the road for vacations.

The New Deal

In the presidential elections of 1932, voters overwhelming supported Democratic candidate Franklin Roosevelt. He received 23 million popular votes in comparison to incumbent Herbert Hoover's 16 million popular votes. The Democrats also won decisive victories in both houses of Congress. Roosevelt was thus poised to initiate his New Deal program, which involved a series of relief and recovery measures aimed at helping the American people and stimulating the economy.

Roosevelt's administration increased confidence in the banking system, provided direct relief for the poor and hungry and employed jobless men and women, among other significant actions. The New Deal attempted to correct those inequalities that had such adverse affects on minorities. For instance, the Public Works Administration instituted the first nondiscrimination and quota clauses for hiring. Thus, Roosevelt became very popular with minority and African-American voters, who felt that at last someone in government cared about their special needs.

African Americans and the Depression

African Americans faced especially difficult times as economic troubles added to the problems they already experienced with racial discrimination. African-American workers were often the first to be laid off. In northern cities, as much as 25 to 40 percent of African Americans were out of work by 1933, and in southern cities, unemployment rates rose as high as 75 percent. When African Americans were employed through federal job programs, many received lower wages than did their white counterparts. African Americans also were excluded from certain New Deal programs. Only one in four African Americans received any public aid during the Depression. If they did, they often received significantly lower payments than white families did. Because of a lack of political organization and strength, African Americans had little means to influence and improve this state of public affairs. Throughout the depression, the majority of African Americans remained poor and uneducated.

Critical Overview

"Black Boy," which was originally published in the *New Yorker* in 1932, was collected along with 13 other stories in 1933's *First Lover and Other Stories.* Sandra Whipple Spanier wrote in *Kay Boyle, Artist and Activist* that nearly all of the stories in the volume "evidence the author's long-standing concerns with fresh language, the individual quest for identity, and the need for—and failures of—love." Spanier added that "a few chart new territory, moving away from the personal expression of personal experience toward communication of broader social concerns." This shift is particularly relevant as Boyle's work from the mid-1930s onward increasingly reflected the author's interest in and understanding of the events that shaped the international community as the world went to war. Toward the end of her career, Boyle stated that she had come to believe that it was the duty of a writer to chronicle the world as she knew it and particularly its key issues. "Black Boy," as much as Boyle's more well-known fictions focusing on Nazism in Europe, concerns itself with pressing social inequities, ones that needed to be addressed.

At the time of its publication, many reviewers held a favorable opinion of *First Lover and Other Stories.* In the 1920s, Boyle had been concentrating on avant-garde fictions, and Karl Schriftgiesser of the *Boston Transcript* found these new stories to be "the matured work of an avowed experimentalist who has standards and subjects that are worth experimenting with." Reviewers tended to comment on Boyle's careful attention to words and expression.

Boyle had already established a reputation for herself as a wordsmith, which led some critics to expect a great deal from any new work from her. As Gladys Graham wrote in the *Saturday Review of Literature,* "Miss Boyle has set herself too high a standard for continuous realization." Louis Kronenberger of the *New York Times,* however, believed the stories to show that Boyle had "not yet quite mastered her art." Still, Kronenberger recognized Boyle's uniqueness as a writer, stating:

If without losing any of her lightness and grace and sensibility, Miss Boyle can bring into play more of the toughness that already seems latent in her work, and can use words a little more gravely, she should become as significant as she already is individual.

In 1946, *Thirty Stories*—a work that included stories produced during a period of 20 years—was published, and again, Boyle's use of language was a major focus. Rosemary Paris, reviewing this collection for *Furioso,* believed that Boyle did not manage to deepen and broaden her "initial very real ability" despite the fact that her subject matter was "the resounding materials of the contemporary world." Paris did find that "there are stories in this volume which come near the crystallization of substance and style which makes a good work of art" and specifically commended "Black Boy" as "very delicate and moving." However, Paris also used this story as an example of Boyle's sometimes overwhelmingly strong voice and manipulation of words. She writes that Boyle at times is an "undisciplined" writer, pointing out her inability to "resist the uncontrolled and unrelated imagery on which she relies for effect." Struther Burt, in

contrast, who reviewed the collection for the *Saturday Review of Literature,* believed that Boyle's work showed "a unique gift for striking metaphor, granted as a rule only to poets." Although he recommended Boyle's European stories over her American stories, he still found these earlier stories to be "interesting as a study in the emergence of an artist; an artist with a beautiful command of language . . . and a passionate, impelling drive."

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Korb has a master's degree in English literature and creative writing and has written for a wide variety of educational publishers. In the following essay, Korb discusses how the personalities of the main characters are reflected through Boyle's choice of descriptive language.

In the early 1930s, Kay Boyle was producing short stories at an astonishing rate. Over the course of that decade she published three short story collections in addition to numerous other works. Despite her prodigious writing, she rarely talked about her work. "Black Boy," first published in 1932 and collected in *First Lover and Other Stories* the following year, was one of the few stories that she spoke about to friends, chronicling the difficulties she had getting it published. Several magazines rejected it, including *Harper's,* which nonetheless told her that some of its passages were "magical." Boyle finally succeeded in selling the story to the *New Yorker.* Later on, she also expressed satisfaction with the story because "it is completely simple, and moral without moralizing."

Indeed, "Black Boy" is a brief tale about a pre-adolescent girl who becomes friends with a black boy who makes his living pushing people in chairs along the oceanside boardwalk. Despite her grandfather's warning that the black boy might want to do her harm, she continues to visit the black boy on the beach. One day, she is thrown from her horse and knocked unconscious. The boy picks her up and holds her comfortingly, but when he returns her home, the grandfather strikes him in the mouth.

To maintain the simplicity of the story and its overarching message, Boyle relies on effective language. Through her words, she draws clear portrayals of her characters and her setting. All of the characters - even the nonhuman ones - are evocatively described through careful metaphor. The waves of the sea are "indolent as ladies," the boys who push the chairs on the boardwalk have faces that drip "down like tar in the sun," even the narrator's horse is "as shy as a bird." Such language focuses attention on the fundamental characteristics of the story's elements while bringing them sharply to life. The details that surround the narrator, the black boy, and Grandfather Puss further identify the milieu in which these people are comfortable and shed light on their manner of regarding the world.

Of the three characters, the black boy - who lives the most circumscribed life due to harsh economic realities - has the widest worldview. He is at home in the natural world, sleeping on the beach and spending hours with his eyes on the sea. He is identified with animals; the narrator notes that "his fingers ran in and out of the sand like the blue feet of a bird." Yet, his vision is not limited to the world in which he lives. He vividly imagines an Atlantic City that is not a hotbed of tourism but populated by exotic animals allowed to roam wild. His vision of these animals represents the boy himself and his longing for change. He says, "If I was a king, I wouldn't put much stock in hanging around here." It also demonstrates his self-sufficiency in his ability to create a better world for himself when none is forthcoming.

Though he speaks with incorrect grammar, the boy is knowledgeable about myriad topics such as biblical kings, mirages, and the Northern Lights. He knows how to ride a horse "easily and straight." His preference for riding a horse bareback again shows his comfort in the natural world, and his rejection of the trappings of civilization befits him, for civilization has already rejected him. Despite his bleak circumstances, the boy still has the capacity for awe and respect. He regards the narrator's horse with eyes filled with a "spark of wonder" and when he rides the horse he was "quick with delight" but still had "no thought of smiling." He takes his task of riding the horse seriously.

Grandfather Puss's focus in life is exceedingly narrower. For instance, despite living in close proximity to the ocean, he chooses to remain on the boardwalk or in his house, only visiting the beach when the tide has gone down. Even then, he does not venture far. "For a minute, he put one foot in the sand, but he was not at ease there," relates his granddaughter. His perception is bounded by the world above, on the boardwalk "over our heads" where "some other kind of life was in progress." That world contains the trappings of modernity, such as transportation in the form of rolling chairs and women in high-heeled shoes. Puss enjoys the chair ride because he likes to look at the store windows and the electric signs. His granddaughter comments to herself, "there was no hesitation about whether he would look at the shops on one side, or out on the vacant side where there was nothing shining but the sea." He also enjoys the dominance he has over the black boys who push the chairs. He might look for a "nice skinny boy" who would "put some action into it."

Puss's reaction to the black boys who work on the boardwalk demonstrates a prevailing racist attitude of American society - which is further subtly alluded to in the fact that only black boys work pushing chairs. Puss regards the boys as little more than animals pulling a load. Though he asks the boys their names, he only does so "without turning his head" to actually look at them. His prejudice also extends beyond the African-American race. In casual conversation he remarks to his granddaughter, "I saw another little oak not three inches high in the Jap's window yesterday."

As befits her superior socioeconomic position, the girl can straddle both the world of her grandfather and the world of her friend, but she is not fully part of either. While she enjoys taking her horse to ride in the ocean waves, unlike her friend, she uses a saddle. She also spurs the horse on "with the end of my crop," which is in stark contrast to the boy, who would "never raise a hand to one [a horse], unless he was to bite me or do something I didn't care for." On the beach one morning, the girl notes that the ocean wind was "filled with alien smells." She enjoys sitting on the sand, but she makes the choice about when to descend to this world. At other times, she ascends as if from hell to heaven, where she is served by the black boys who pull her and Puss along in a chair with red velvet cushions - cushions fit for the king that the black boy will never be.

The important difference between the narrator and her grandfather is that she does not share his racist opinions. Her observations show that she sees the people around her as just that - as people and not as people of a certain color. She describes the neck of the black boy as "longer and more shapely than a white man's neck." However, she is still unable to ignore the prevailing attitude of black and white in the world. Her prose is

full of references to color: Her grandfather wears a white mustache, she can see her friend sitting on the beach at night in the "clear white darkness," even the dangerous beams of the boardwalk into which the horse smashes are "tough" and "black." The message in the language is clear: racism is a pervasive and destructive element of society, affecting even those members who are open-minded. Indeed, even the narrator's neglect to name her friend, instead choosing always to refer to him as the "black boy" underscores this basic truth of her world.

The inherent racism of society is also manifest in her desire to be superior to the black boy at horseback riding. Never before had she indicated an interest in jumping over the dock; previously she had only spoken of riding the horse in the waves and on the beach. Once she sees the skill with which her friend handles the horse, however, she feels a stir of jealousy. For the first time, she points out the fallacy of her friend's words. When he claims that he was going to be a jockey but changed his mind, she draws attention to the inconsistency of his story with the simple phrase, "Jockeys make a pile of money."

Despite this momentary flash of jealousy, the narrator is openhearted toward the black boy. When her grandfather declares that he does not want her to continue the friendship, she feels the "burden of his words." She decides her best course of action is to stay away from her friend for a few days. She wants to make sure that Puss sees her "riding high" down the beach. Then she will be able to pick up her friendship with the black boy.

Ironically, it is the effects of racism that lead her to the one place where she feels truly at peace. After she is thrown from her horse and loses consciousness, she feels "rocked in a cradle of love, cradled and rocked in sorrow." It is her friend, the black boy, who gathers her in "long swift fingers of love untying the terrible knot of pain that bound my head." She puts her "arms around him and lay close to his heart in comfort." The black boy is equated with other symbols of comfort: her dead mother and a soft wind. His compassion is shown through his words: "Oh, my little lamb." The girl's peacefulness is extremely short-lived because when the black boy returns her from the beach, to the real world, the two children again come face to face with racism. Instead of thanking the black boy for helping his granddaughter, or even finding out what happened, Puss "struck him squarely in the mouth."

Source: Rena Korb, Critical Essay on "Black Boy," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

Hart has degrees in literature and creative writing and focuses her published writing on literary themes. In this essay, Hart discusses the various methods the author uses to portray the overall themes of division and separation.

From the title of "Black Boy" to the final scene in Kay Boyle's short story, the reader is conscious that this is a story about prejudice. But Boyle creates this tale of prejudice not by harping on the evils of racism but by building images of separation and division in every scene in her story. With her careful creation of metaphor and allusion, she subtly weaves her theme into her descriptions of nature and the mannerisms and thoughts of her characters. She sets both her characters and her readers on a collision course with that invisible dividing wall between white people and African Americans that exists in the narrator's world. Through a closer reading of Boyle's story, readers can appreciate not only the impact of that collision but also the artistic ability of the author in creating the setting around the conflict.

Beginning with the first sentence of "Black Boy," Boyle places in the mind of the reader the concept that this is the story of divisions: "At that time, it was the forsaken part, it was the other end of the city." It is to this forsaken part of the city that the narrator heads, taking the reader with her as she rises early in the morning before most of her neighbors crowd the sidewalks and the beach. The forsaken beach becomes a sanctuary for the narrator, separating her from the noise and busyness of city life. But it is only the first of many separations. The beach itself is divided. There is the hard-packed sand close to the water where the narrator can enjoy a fast ride on her horse. There is also the softer "drifts of dry sand" where the narrator must retreat when the tide and the wind are high. The softer sand makes the narrator slow her pace, and even when she does this, the dry sand, driven by the wind, blows into her face and stings her. The distinction between the two types of beach environment is clearly marked not only with their various characteristics but also with the narrator's preference.

Further division of the beach is apparent when the narrator describes the wooden promenade, or boardwalk, that runs the length of the beach. It is to this promenade that most of the city people head, including the narrator's grandfather. The grandfather has no patience with the sandy nature of the beach. This difference in character separates him from his granddaughter who loves the more natural setting. The grandfather prefers the man-made, wooden structure overhead, where, in the narrator's words, "some other kind of life [was] in progress." Here it is clear that the typical city person - women wearing high heels and the narrator's grandfather in his "pearl fedora," - come out only in fair weather with their minds and heads turned toward the shops on the promenade rather than toward the ocean and the open horizon. The boardwalk separates them from nature to the point that there is very little awareness that the beach even exists.

The next division is very obvious. The white people are on one side of the transparent socioeconomic wall, wearing their hats and dresses and eyeing the most suitable drivers of the boardwalk's wheeled chairs. The black boys, of course, are on the other

side. The wall of division is so thick at this encounter between the two groups of people that the grandfather looks at the young African-American men as if they were horses: "There's a nice skinny boy . . . . He looks as though he might put some action into it." Boyle's depiction of this scene is reminiscent of slave owners eyeing new arrivals at an auction, belittling the human aspects of the slaves to justify their own inflated sense of self-worth. Further examples of this attitude are seen when the grandfather addresses the young man who is pushing the chair by making up names for him.

It can also be deduced from the reading that the division between the world of his granddaughter and the young man, in the grandfather's mind, is so wide that he has no consciousness that his granddaughter might know the young man, which she does, although she does not admit it. The fact that she does not admit it signifies that there is also a division within her. Not only does she not tell her grandfather that she prefers the world that exists under the boardwalk on the beach, she also does not convey her attraction to the young man. She is aware of the wall that separates her world from the world of the young man, but she does not attempt to plow through it, at least not in the presence of her grandfather.

Although the narrator is aware of the divisions that separate her life from that of the young African-American man, she is not totally aware of how deeply those divisions cut into her. She describes the young man in terms of a "shadow" and "a dark heavy flower"; and in another passage, he becomes "black as a bat's wing" with "his face dripping down like tar," while his fingers are "like the blue feet of a bird." Readers might question if these non-human features are descriptive phrases that the narrator would use in depicting someone from her white world. Or is the narrator seeing the young man as the so-called other, the exotic one, the one removed to the outer limits of the prescribed definition of members of the dominant culture, the one who is considered "not normal?"

The young man also appears to be affected by these internalized, psychological divisions as he dreams of being a king, dreams of being anything but the young man who must tolerate people like the narrator's grandfather. Later, he confesses to the narrator of seeing mirages of wild animals coming down to the ocean to drink. Boyle has the young man make references here to animals from both the African continent (lions, tigers, and ostriches) as well as from the North American continent (lambs and deer). In addition, the animals also represent a mixture of predator and prey. In the fantasies of the young man, these animals from mixed continents and crossed purposes are able to drink the water "side by side with each other." These imagined scenes are very much separated from the daily scenes that fill the young man's normal life.

It is also interesting to note that the young man and the narrator meet under the boardwalk, right under the dividing line between the ocean and the structures of the city. In this space, neither in nature nor in sight of the eyes of black or white people, there exists a sense of suspension of all the definitions, a deterioration of all the divisions. The place under the boardwalk becomes a sort of mythological netherworld for the two main characters, the only place in this story where the divisions temporarily fade away.

Another fascinating passage that shows the degree of separation between the lives of the two youths is Boyle's mention of dogs. The narrator states that she is free to go wherever she wants to go because she has her family dogs to protect her. In contrast, the young boy is not protected by a set of dogs, and it could be argued that he is less free than the dogs to wander through the obviously segregated society in which he lives. The reference to the narrator's dogs who shake "the taste of the house out of their coats" before running across the beach comes in stark contrast to the young man who has no house to go to or come from and who eats dog biscuits with worms in them, a food that, more than likely, would never be given to the narrator's dogs.

It is at this point in the story that the grandfather discovers that the narrator has befriended the black boy. Boyle has the grandfather not only verbally express his dislike of this situation, she subtly alludes to the degree of separation between the grandfather's life and that of the young boy by first having the grandfather touch his white mustache, then "put his kid gloves carefully on his fingers." The mentioning of the word white emphasizes the color of the grandfather's skin as being different from the young man's, whereas the putting on of the gloves symbolizes a variety of possibilities. Kid gloves are expensive, for one thing, too expensive for a young man who lives on the beach to own. So there is the economic distancing. There is also a sense of separation in that the grandfather layers himself, protects himself from having to touch or feel the presence of the young man.

The narrator is slightly disturbed by her grandfather' s having pointed out the chasm that exists between the world of white people and black people. But like all Romeo-and-Juliet-type stories, when authority figures create artificial barriers between two people, the two people, in retaliation, attempt to build bridges.

Not persuaded by her grandfather's argument that she must stay away from the young man, the narrator rides her horse over to where the young man is sitting on the beach. She rides on a leather saddle. In response to being offered the chance to ride the horse, the young man states that he's not used to riding in a saddle: "I ride them with their bare skin," he says. With this statement, Boyle once again shows the separation that exists between the narrator and the young man. The narrator is more comfortable riding on an expensive saddle, while the young man, whom Boyle keeps in the realm of the exotic, is the nature boy, the wild man. His life is filled with no frills, no extra comforts. He rides the horse with ease, sharing some second nature, intuitive understanding with the animal. When he returns from his ride, he tells the narrator, in an ironic foreshadowing: "Some folks licks hell out of their horses. . . . I'd never raise a hand to one."

There is then the final scene in which the bridge that the young woman and young man have tried to build across the chasm comes crashing down. It is at this point of the story that the young girl wants to demonstrate how she can overcome obstacles. She wants to ride her horse over the jetty, much as she wants to ride her own sense of justice over the prejudiced beliefs of her grandfather. She tells the young man that she is going to take her horse under the boardwalk to get "a good start." Remember that it is under the boardwalk where the two young people have met, where they have talked, where they have hidden themselves in that netherworld. It is from this point that the narrator

believes that she can gain enough energy and power to rise above the obstacles that lay in her way. But dogs suddenly appear out of nowhere, little creatures much smaller than the horse. Little like the narrator's references to her Grandfather Puss. And it is the little creatures that upset the horse that throws the narrator into an iron arch. The laws of society hit very hard when one is thrown against them. The consequences of that collision is that the narrator passes out.

Only in a state of unconsciousness does the narrator allow herself to be loved by a black man. It is possible that at the time this story was written, it was unthinkable that a white woman could love a black man. Or maybe this is another of Boyle's statements. Maybe it is only through unconsciousness that the barriers between the narrator and the young man could be totally disintegrated. No matter which statement is true, the narrator, while unconscious, releases her true feelings toward the young man: "I put my arms around him and lay close to his heart in comfort."

Just as powerful as the iron arch and at least as damaging, the young man is thrown into the fist of the narrator's grandfather. There was no need to add any more information. The reader's imagination could fill in the blanks. For a young black man to be found holding the body of a young white woman, at the time of this story, was unfathomable. There were no excuses. All language would fail, like the narrator on her horse, to clear its way over the barriers.

Source: Joyce Hart, Critical Essay on "Black Boy," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #3

Semansky's stories, poems, and essays appear regularly in literary journals. In the following essay, Semansky analyzes the contradictions at the heart of Boyle's short story.

Boyle's concern in *"Black Boy"* is with social justice and the contradictions inherent in American society. She addresses these contradictions not only in the story's setting, characters, and plot, but also in its style. However, she offers no resolution to the problem of bigotry or economic inequality. Rather, the acts of remembering and expressing themselves serve as symbolic markers for the necessity of social change.

Boyle presents these contradictions through her use of juxtaposition. By placing the world above the boardwalk, populated by "rolling chairs, and women in high heels," alongside the world under the boardwalk and on the beach, where the narrator and the black boy play, Boyle highlights the differences between them. Symbolically, the boardwalk, home of the "Million Dollar Pier," represents the world of commerce and social conventions where Puss is most comfortable. By naming the pier generically rather than putting it in, say, Atlantic City, Boyle emphasizes the setting's symbolic and universal nature. What's morally important in the story are the ideas the characters and setting evoke. Literally a surface structure, the boardwalk teems with human-made things: chairs, shops, electric signs, the empirically verifiable world of commodities. This is where adults go to see and be seen, to conduct business and pursue pleasure.

The world underneath the boardwalk, on the other hand, is the world of children and their innocence. The narrator and the black boy sit here among the "Great crystal jelly beasts" and "the wastes of sand," talking. Symbolically marked by its physical relation to the boardwalk, the world underneath the pier also represents instinct and nature, the organic and wild, as opposed to the artificial. The galloping horse and baying dogs run here. Literally, the beams the two sit near hold the pier up. Symbolically, this place represents the world of exploited labor, where the black boy fantasizes about what he would do if he were not working on the boardwalk. The boy's dreaming, his belief that his life could be otherwise, is what enables the world above to continue as it does. Seen in this light, the boardwalk - the world of the white man - could not exist without what lies underneath it.

Boyle's characters come close to embodying racial and class stereotypes. In his pearl fedora and "belly pouting in his dove-gray clothes," the grandfather "was not at ease" on the beach, preferring the boardwalk's world of shops and monetary transactions. Puss's attitude towards people is stereotypical of a capitalist. He treats the black boy as if he were one more thing to be bought and controlled. His exchange with the boy regarding the boy's name illustrates the power of money to abuse and degrade others. By responding to whatever name Puss calls him, the boy literally becomes whoever Puss wants him to be. Even the grandfather's attitude towards his granddaughter is centered on money. He cautions her against spending time with the black boy, saying, "He might knock you down and take your money away." Puss's bigotry extends to other people as

well, as he uses the epithet "Jap" to describe a Japanese person. In her study of Kay Boyle and her fiction, *Kay Boyle: Author of Herself,* Joan Mellen notes that *Black Boy* is one of Boyle's largely autobiographical stories of the 1930s and that Puss is modeled on her paternal grandfather, Peyton "Puss" Boyle, the family patriarch, a proud capitalist, and an overbearing man. The story is based on an actual incident that took place in Atlantic City, New Jersey, where the family lived for a time. Boyle's relationship with her grandfather was mixed: she reviled his politics and the way he treated others but was dependent on him financially. Mellen sums up Boyle's attitude toward Puss (and her father) by quoting her: "I knew from my father and my grandfather what I didn't want to be, and the kind of person I really didn't have any respect for at all."

Although the narrator describes the black boy in more positive terms, he is still marked by the kind of racial stereotyping common in the early 1930s, when the story was written. Alternately, the black boy symbolizes the oppressed and victimized working class, the force of nature, and idealized love. The boy works joylessly, pushing paying customers up and down the boardwalk in a rickshaw-like chair. The girl describes him:

He never wore a smile on his face, the black boy. He was thin as a shadow but darker, and he was pushing and sweating, getting the chair down to the Million Dollar Pier and back again, in and out through the people. If you turned toward the sea for a minute, you could see his face out of the corner of your eye, hanging black as a bat's wing, nodding and nodding like a dark heavy flower.

Describing the boy's physical features in animal and plant terms foregrounds the girl's view of him as a *black* boy, someone closer to the natural world than the whites, someone mysterious, raw, instinctual, fully "other." The girl says: "His hair grew all over the top of his head in tight dry rosettes. His neck was longer and more shapely than a white man's neck, and his fingers ran in and out of the sand like the blue feet of a bird." His exotic appearance is matched by his fantastical story of seeing camels, zebras, and tigers down by the water, but when he tells the girl that he "could be almost anything I made up my mind to be" and that he once wanted to be a jockey but gave up the idea because " [t]hey have to watch their diet so careful," readers see him as the child he is, with a child's innocence and hope for the future. The boy gradually becomes more humanized to the girl as well, after riding her horse barebacked with skill and grace and tenderly stroking its mane. Her love for the boy is obvious in the way she describes his response to her accident.

As the story's narrator, the girl seeks to make sense of her past and her experience with the black boy and her grandfather, now dead. The actual setting of the story, then, is the girl's mind. Boyle pulls off her technique of juxtaposing the symbolic and the real in her characters and setting because the lens through which the story is told is memory itself. Imagery of light and darkness pervades the story, underlining the way in which remembered details emerge and subside in the process of remembering. A typical Boyle image, which juxtaposes opposites, comes when the girl describes seeing the black boy on the beach, "sitting there in the clear white darkness." Boyle similarly packs symbolic imagery into the girl's memory of the beach:

It may be that the coast has changed there, for even then it was changing. The lighthouse that had once stood far out on the white rocks near the outlet was standing then like a lighted torch in the heart of the town. And the deep currents of the sea may have altered so that the clearest water runs in another direction, and houses may have been built down as far as where the brink used to be. But the brink was so perilous that every word the black boy spoke seemed to fall into a cavern of beauty.

Boyle symbolically evokes the uncertainty of the girl's memory, of any memory, in these images. Her impressionistic rendering of the girl's recounting of her experience with the black boy emphasizes the point that details are largely interchangeable and, in any case, not reliable. What are important are the girl's emotional response to the boy's words, and her moral response to the injustice of racial prejudice. By transforming the details of her own history into a work of art, Boyle transcends mere autobiography and creates an enduring portrait of a young girl's passage from innocence to experience.

Source: Chris Semansky, Critical Essay on "Black Boy," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2002.

Topics for Further Study

Conduct research to find out more about the harsh economic circumstances under which many African Americans lived in the 1930s. Write up your findings in a paragraph or two.

Boyle's prose and descriptions are very evocative. Imagine that you are an artist invited to illustrate an important scene from this story. Which scene would you pick and why? What stylistic choice would you make in rendering the scene?

Analyze the black boy's commentary. How honest are his comments? What do his statements reveal about him? Why do you think this?

Critics do not always agree on Boyle's use of metaphor; some think her metaphors are overdone while others think they are evocative. Explain your opinion of Boyle's metaphors in "Black Boy."

Many critics have commented upon Boyle's vivid descriptions. Reread "Black Boy," taking careful note of how she describes the setting and characters. Write a fictional paragraph and try to use a descriptive style that imitates Boyle's.

Compare and Contrast

1930s: Sixty percent of African Americans between the ages of 5 and 20 attend school.

1990s: In 1997, 13.4 percent of African-American students drop out of high school.

1930s: The annual median income for whites is $1,325, while the median income for African Americans and other minorities is $489.

1990s: In 1998, the annual median household income for whites is $42,000 and for African Americans it is $25,500. In 1995, 9.9 million African Americans—29.3 percent of the African-American population—live in poverty.

1930s: In 1930, the population of Atlantic City, New Jersey, is 66,198. Atlantic City is a popular vacation resort.

1990s: In 1998, the population of Atlantic City, New Jersey, is 38,063. Voters legalized gambling in 1976, and today Atlantic City is best known for its casinos.

What Do I Read Next?

Boyle's short story "White as Snow" (1933) is another story of a child's introduction to racial prejudice. Like "Black Boy," it is told from the point of view of a white child who does not understand discrimination, in this case against her African-American governess.

Hugh Ford's *Four Lives in Paris* (1987) explores four American expatriates who lived and created in Paris in the 1920s. Along with his discussion of Boyle, Ford presents the composer George Antheil, social and political critic Harold Stearns, and New York editor Margaret Anderson.

Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* (1884) chronicles the voyage of Huck Finn, a poor white boy, and his companion Jim, a runaway slave, down the Mississippi River. Huck learns to overcome racial prejudices during his journey.

The Color of Water (1996) is a memoir by James McBride of growing up in a large, poor family with an African-American father and a white mother. He also recounts his efforts to find out more about his mother's path in his own quest for self-understanding.

Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) addresses the issue of white America's responsibility for racial oppression. It tells the story of an African-American man imprisoned for the accidental killing of his white employer's daughter.

Further Study

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

Bell's book discusses Boyle's short stories. She also collects interviews with the author and critics' opinions of her work.

Holt, Patricia, *Publishers Weekly,* Vol. 218, No. 16, October 17, 1980, pp. 8-9.

Holt's essay, based on an interview with Boyle, provides an overview of the author's life.

"Kay Boyle," in *Current Biography: Who's News and Why, 1942,* edited by Maxine Block, H. W. Wilson Company, 1942, pp. 101-04.

This work provides a contemporary viewpoint of Boyle.

McAlmon, Robert. *Being Geniuses Together,* Garden City, 1968.

Boyle's friend, the writer Robert McAlmon, recalls the expatriate scene in Europe during the 1920s. The book includes supplementary chapters by Boyle.

Mellen, Joan, *Kay Boyle: Author of Herself,* Farrar, Strass and Giroux, 1994.

Mellen provides an in-depth portrait of Boyle as well as her literary endeavors.

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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

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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