The Blues I'm Playing Study Guide

The Blues I'm Playing by Langston Hughes

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

In many ways, "The Blues I'm Playing" exemplifies the qualities that dominate the prose and poetry of Langston Hughes. The author is a major figure on the landscape of American poetry and may be the best-known on the landscape of African-American poetry. First published in *Scribner's Magazine* in May, 1934, and in the collection *The Ways of White Folks* that same year, "The Blues I'm Playing" combines Hughes's irony, his directness, and his use of dialect. It also conveys powerful messages about race relations, the beauty of blues and jazz, and the black artist's experiences in the white-dominated world of modern art. The story of a young black pianist, Oceola Jones, and her conflict with her self-appointed white patron, Dora Ellsworth, "The Blues I'm Playing" embodies Hughes's belief in the fortitude and dignity of black Americans.

Author Biography

James Langston Hughes was born on February 1, 1902, in Joplin, Missouri. Hughes was the only child of James Nathaniel Hughes and Carrie Mercer Hughes nee Langston. The elder Hughes left soon after his son's birth, eventually settling in Mexico, where he prospered in a variety of business ventures. Young James and his mother, however, struggled to make ends meet. He spent many years living with various relatives and family friends as his mother traveled in search of work. When his mother was remarried and settled in 1914, he joined her in Cleveland, Ohio. At Central High School, he proved himself as a student and as an athlete, and began writing poetry and short fiction for the school's literary magazine.

After graduating from high school, Hughes taught English in Mexico for a year. He also became a regular contributor to the *Crisis*, a magazine published by the NAACP and one of the cornerstones of the early fight for civil rights. In 1921, Hughes spent a year at Columbia University in New York City. There he studied English literature and explored the city's rich social and intellectual life. He also became a regular at events sponsored by the American Socialist Society. After leaving Columbia University, Hughes supported himself and his mother - who now lived in Harlem - with a variety of menial jobs. In 1923, he signed on as a cabin boy with a freighter bound for West Africa. He traveled across Europe for the next two years, living hand-to-mouth at different times in Holland, France, and Italy. When he returned to the United States in 1925, he and his mother and a half-brother settled in Washington, D.C.

During this time of education and travel, Hughes had continued to send poetry regularly to the *Crisis* and other journals. He was already experimenting with sound and rhythm, looking for a way to incorporate jazz and other aspects of black culture into the genre. In 1925, his efforts were recognized with prizes from both the *Crisis* and *Opportunity* magazines. At the end of that year Hughes had his first taste of real celebrity when the poet Vachel Lindsay read some of Hughes's poems to his own audience. The morning after the reading, when Hughes came to the hotel where he worked, he was greeted by a number of photographers and reporters curious about the "Negro busboy poet." Hughes's first book, *The Weary Blues,* followed in 1926, aided by the first of his white patrons, critic Carl Van Vechten. The collection showcased both his experiments with style and his determination to focus on African-American life and race relations. Although the book met with considerable praise, some critics-including prominent black artists-responded harshly to Hughes's form and content. That response set a pattern for the rest of his career.

Throughout this period, Hughes published frequently in a variety of publications, both black and mainstream. He had also returned to college at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania just before the publication of *The Weary Blues,*. In 1927, Hughes published his second book - *Fine Clothes to the Jew* - and co-founded a literary journal, Fire, specifically for African-American writers. In 1929, Hughes earned his Bachelors degree from Lincoln University. At the end of the decade, Hughes began a significant patron-protegee relationship with the wealthy Charlotte (Mrs. Rufus Osgood) Mason, an

elderly widow who often sponsored black artists. Mason supported Hughes through the composition of his first novel, *Not Without Laughter,* published in 1930. However, a rift developed between Mason and Hughes soon after. The relationship ultimately provided Hughes with the material for "The Blues I'm Playing."

While traveling in the Soviet Union in 1932, Hughes happened onto the book that would inspire his development as a short fiction writer - *The Lovely Lady,* a collection of short stories by English author D. H. Lawrence. Lawrence's directness, his irony, and his willingness to make fiction carry a social message prompted Hughes to rethink the potential of short fiction. He began composing stories right away, publishing several in magazines. More importantly, he built up the collection that would become *The Ways of White Folks* in 1934. The power of these stories set a standard that Hughes would continue to uphold in many subsequent volumes. One of his most popular pieces, the first of what became known as his "Simple" stories, appeared in the 1940s. This piece was significant not only for its artistic strength but also because the story was printed in the *Chicago-Defender,* a black-owned newspaper with a black audience. Whereas Hughes had written his earlier works primarily for a white audience, from the late 1930s onward he became known as one of the first authors to write for and enjoy a wide popularity among black readers.

As Hughes's career matured, he became more and more explicitly political both as an artist and as an individual. As a correspondent for the *Baltimore Afro-American* in 1937, he lived in Madrid during the Spanish Civil War. During the rise of the Civil Rights struggle, his publications in the 1950s and 1960s addressed the political upheaval and the conditions of black life. Probably one of his most significant works, the verse collection *Montage of a Dream Deferred,* published in 1951, articulated the hardship and disillusionment that called for social and political change. Hughes continued to be active and prolific until his death from congestive heart failure on May 22, 1967. In the year of his death, Hughes published *The Panther and the Lash: Poems of Our Times.*

Plot Summary

I: Introduction

"The Blues I'm Playing" opens in the middle of the story that will follow. Oceola Jones, the young black pianist, is in Paris studying music at the expense of her white Manhattan patron, Dora Ellsworth. An exposition of Mrs. Ellsworth's character and background ensues: her deceased husband's wealth and their childlessness allow her to pursue life as a patron of the arts, supporting young artists. The narrator also informs us that some confusion underlines Mrs. Ellsworth's motivation as a patron: her choices in protegees seem to be as much driven by the beauty of the protegee as by the extent of his or her talent. By implication, then, we know that Oceola possesses beauty as well as talent, since about her "there had been no doubt." The young pianist supports herself before meeting Mrs. Ellsworth by teaching piano, directing a church choir, and playing at house parties in Harlem. She comes to the attention of Mrs. Ellsworth via Ormand Hunter, a white music critic. He persuades the reluctant Oceola to play for Mrs. Ellsworth at her home. Even before Oceola has played, Mrs. Ellsworth begins "treating her as a protegee: that is, she began asking her a great many questions she would not dare ask anyone else at first meeting." When Oceola plays for Mrs. Ellsworth, she includes, among classical selections, a rendition of *St. Louis Blues*. Through these two actions, the inquisitiveness and the musical selection, the author prepares the ground for the conflict that follows.

II: "The Period of Oceola"

Mrs. Ellsworth devotes herself to her new protegee, beginning what the narrator calls "the period of Oceola." Oceola, however, keeps a certain emotional distance from the older woman, suspicious of Mrs. Ellsworth's desire to give her things *"for art's sake."* Her mistrust is exacerbated when Mrs. Ellsworth pries for information not just about Oceola's musical background, but about her personal life as well. Most significantly, Mrs. Ellsworth learns that Oceola lives with Pete Williams, a man who works as a train porter but plans to go to medical school. Pete will become central to the conflict between the women. Mrs. Ellsworth finishes the interview by overcoming Oceola's reluctance: she will give up her present work to devote herself to developing her talent, all at Mrs. Ellsworth's expense.

True to her word, Mrs. Ellsworth sends Oceola a check that same evening. Mrs. Ellsworth also begins occupying herself with the details of the young woman's private life. Concerned about Pete's presence, Mrs. Ellsworth asks Ormand Hunter to ask his maid, who attends church with Oceola, to glean information from the rumor mill. Deciding that she does not know enough about Oceola's environment, Mrs. Ellsworth orders a book by Carl Van Vechten, *Nigger Heaven*, generally considered the white curiosity seeker's tour of Harlem. Finally, after she has gone to bed, Mrs. Ellsworth's

entertains herself by imagining Oceola in different dresses, with Hughes revealing the first hint of a repressed sexual fascination.

III: The Conflict Begins

Determined to remove Pete from Oceola's life and to remove Oceola from Harlem, Mrs. Ellsworth sets about a plan to take charge of her protegee. After another meeting at her home, Mrs. Ellsworth offers to drive Oceola to her apartment in order "to see the inside of this girl's life." She invites herself up to Oceola's apartment, which she deems unacceptable, announcing that Oceola must move out of Harlem altogether and relocate to Greenwich Village - the current locus of the arts in New York City. Oceola, however, resists, stalling the move until that fall, when Pete will go away to a medical school for African-American students. Mrs. Ellsworth accepts the compromise and leaves for her summer season in Bar Harbor, Maine, a resort town favored by New England's elite.

IV: Training in Paris

After several years, Oceola's life has changed considerably under Mrs. Ellsworth's sponsorship. She lives in Greenwich Village and devotes her days to practice and study. The only element Oceola retains from her old life is Harlem house parties, at which she now plays for free. Mrs. Ellsworth begins taking Oceola away from the city on weekends to her resort home in upstate New York. On occasion the two women find it necessary, because of limited space, to share a bed, revealing Mrs. Ellsworth's repressed desire: "Then she would read aloud Tennyson or Browning before turning out the light, aware all the time of the electric strength of that brown-black body beside her." In close conjunction to this feeling is Mrs. Ellsworth's persistent worry that Oceola lives too much in the concrete world, especially in her relationship with Pete, now at medical school in Atlanta. Determined that Oceola will learn to "sublimate" all physical desires to her art, Mrs. Ellsworth arranges for her to study in Paris.

There, as in Greenwich Village, Oceola lives in the city's artistic ghetto, the Left Bank, and spends her days studying with a teacher, Philippe. She also explores the world of Paris' African-French population, mostly immigrants from Algeria and the French West Indies. Oceola listens in on their aesthetic and political debates, most of which strike her as too removed from the practicalities of real life. We also learn that Oceola has little faith in the belief that art could heal relations between blacks and whites. Oceola does, however, discover one aspect of Paris that she loves-dance halls:

In Paris, Oceola especially loved the West Indian ball rooms where the black colonials danced the beguine. And she liked the entertainers at Bricktop's. Sometimes late at night there, Oceola would take the piano and beat out blues for Brick and the assembled guests. In her playing of Negro folk music, Oceola never doctored it up, or filled it full of classical runs, or fancy falsities. In the blues she made the bass notes throb like tom-toms, the trebles cry like little flutes, so deep in the earth and so high in

the sky that they understood everything. And when the night club crowd would get up and dance to her blues, and Bricktop would yell, "Hey! Hey!" Oceola felt as happy as if she were performing a Chopin etude for the nicely gloved Oh's and Ah-ers in a Crillon salon. (Excerpt from "The Blues I'm Playing")

At times, Mrs. Ellsworth visits her protegee in Paris. They attend classical music recitals, at which Mrs. Ellsworth persists in her belief that Oceola experiences music in the same disembodied trance that she does. In her wishful thinking, she fails to recognize Oceola's love for music that is sensual and dynamic. Oceola does, however, enjoy aspects of Mrs. Ellsworth's company, especially when the two travel outside of the city. For example, at Versailles, the palace of eighteenth-century Queen Marie Antoinette, Mrs. Ellsworth reveals her girlhood love for France's culture and "romantic history." We discover that she once had her own musical facility-a talent for singing French songs-that apparently died when her husband failed to appreciate it. Around this, the two women almost approach an emotional connection.

The period of Oceola's formal training closes as her "development at the piano blossomed into perfection." She gives several performances in Europe, all meeting with rave reviews and considerable publicity. She returns to New York in 1930, planning a concert for the coming fall. Her return is also timed so that she can attend Pete's spring graduation. After the visit with Pete, Oceola writes to Mrs. Ellsworth-again in Bar Harbor for the summer-that they have decided to be married at Christmas. The tension that has been building beneath the surface of the relationship between the women emerges in Mrs. Ellsworth's reply: she reprimands Oceola for sacrificing her career to marriage and a family. Oceola insists that she need not choose between the two things that she loves. But a concert at Town Hall in the fall convinces Mrs. Ellsworth otherwise: since the critics don't "go wild," it must be the fault of Pete, a "monster" who has-or so she thinks-destroyed Oceola's genius.

Disappointed at Oceola's determination to marry, and perhaps at her own inability to gain control over Oceola's life, Mrs. Ellsworth distances herself from the young woman. The conflict comes to a head in another meeting in Mrs. Ellsworth's drawing room. When Mrs. Ellsworth criticizes Oceola's choices, Oceola responds with an assertion of personal and cultural pride, insisting that she has been away from the black community for too long and that she needs to immerse herself in it again. The argument finally turns to Pete and his impending visit on Thanksgiving, for which Oceola makes no apology or defense, leaving Mrs. Ellsworth powerless to influence her.

V: Conclusion

Oceola's final performance for Mrs. Ellsworth takes place in the drawing room that has been the setting for many of their encounters. Their conflicts, wholly undiminished, come to the surface as Oceola ends her musical program with a powerful blues variation. Mrs. Ellsworth protests that this music is not worthy of the money she has spent on Oceola; Oceola responds by asserting her freedom, saying "This is mine."

Mrs. Ellsworth, in the end, is unchanged, still rejecting Oceola's life-affirming jazz in order to "stand looking at the stars."

Section 1

Section 1 Summary

The story begins by introducing pianist Oceola Jones and Mrs. Dora Ellsworth, who pays for Oceola's small apartment on the Left Bank in Paris and for a grand piano. Mrs. Ellsworth lives in New York City but spends her time visiting the disciples who study their art under her patronage. She is a widow with no children. In addition, she is quite rich, but has lost interest in her own life. Instead, she enjoys sharing her money with artists who create beauty. The line between the art and the artist is very unclear for Mrs. Ellsworth, and she relies on her intuition to guide her selection of protegees. This intuition is not blind to aesthetics, as she had taken no interest in a soprano who, despite her talent, reeked of garlic and had a sallow complexion. Her discrimination was not without regret when the soprano won the hearts of the New York critics.

Mrs. Ellsworth's decision to take Oceola under her wing was unfettered by doubt. The young black woman was recommended by Ormond Hunter, a music critic who had heard Oceola play at a church concert in Harlem. Oceola was a busy young woman, teaching piano, playing for the church choir, and frequently playing for late-night dances and house parties in her Harlem neighborhood. She made enough money on her own and was very reluctant to play for an elderly white lady she didn't know; though eventually she gave in and met with Mr. Hunter and Mrs. Ellsworth in the lady's music room.

Mrs. Ellsworth immediately approached Oceola with numerous personal questions about her background and her family. They had tea while Mrs. Ellsworth conducted the interview, and then Oceola had a chance to play for them. Both the patron and the critic were enormously impressed. Mrs. Ellsworth insisted on providing the young woman with a teacher to further refine her playing and with enough money to provide her time to devote to her music.

Section 1 Analysis

The text is written in the third person point-of-view with a casual tone. Oceola Jones and Mrs. Dora Ellsworth are introduced immediately and their relationship of artist/patron is made clear. This dynamic may be somewhat foreign to younger readers as it no longer really exists in the modern world. Changes in society and the economy have made the relationship between philanthropist and artist virtually obsolete. Life has become more complex and art has taken a backseat to other more commercial interests. However, when the story takes place (roughly mid 1920s) this relationship is quite familiar among the economically and socially elite.

Mrs. Ellsworth's interest in her protegees was not simply business. She loved her artists; her interest lay in beauty and the line between creator and creation blurred in her

mind. She was a lonely old woman with no husband or children, and so sought out the artists as companions, dependants, and a means to furnish the aesthetics she admired.

The characters first meet during an appointment was set up by Ormond Hunter, a music critic. Though impressed by Hunter's reputation, Oceola was hesitant to give in to this woman's enthusiasm. When she walked through the door, she was immediately met with personal questions. Mrs. Ellsworth was seemingly oblivious to the inappropriateness of her actions, ignoring the fact that the young girl was her own person and not a 'thing' to be handed around.

After hearing Oceola play, both Mr. Hunter and Mrs. Ellsworth were enthralled. The lady was astonished to discover that Oceola no longer had a teacher and insisted on providing one for her and buying time for her to study. Oceola had little chance to respond, but despite her suspicion of the woman's enthusiasm, she accepted her offer. Rarely does one capture the interest of another so far out of one's own social sphere.

Section 2

Section 2 Summary

Mrs. Ellsworth focused a great deal of her time and money on meeting Oceola's needs. However, her generosity was met with some resistance from the young musician. Oceola regarded Mrs. Ellsworth's gifts with suspicion. Art for art's sake didn't survive in her world. She had never before come across someone who took such a peculiar interest in her and wanted to help her pursue her own musical interests.

Oceola shared her personal background at Mrs. Ellsworth's request. Oceola was born in 1903 to a musical family. Her stepfather had had a band and her mother played the organ and piano for church choirs. Oceola began learning piano by ear before her mother began giving her lessons. The family traveled with a group of minstrels before settling in Houston. Both of her parents worked when they could, and though food was sometimes scarce, Oceola attended school and received piano lessons from an elderly German woman. After her stepfather died, she and her mother moved to St. Louis where her mother worked playing for a movie house. Oceola worked playing for the church choir and managed to save enough money to attend Wilberforce College, where she continued to study and play.

Later, Oceola and her mother moved to Harlem. After her mother died, Oceola lived alone in the flat except for a boarder: Pete Williams, a medical student. Mrs. Ellsworth was startled to hear that Oceola lived with a man and was disgruntled to discover that he did not pay rent, but was instead saving for medical school.

Motivated by a desire to instill in Oceola a belief in her art, Mrs. Ellsworth announced that she had hired a teacher for Oceola and would cover all of her living expenses while she studied. She also set out to determine whether this Pete Williams was a romantic distraction. She acquired a book in order to educate herself about Harlem and the Negro life, and had her dressmaker come up with some dresses that would look good on a dark complexion.

Section 2 Analysis

This section of Mrs. Ellsworth's life is "the period of Oceola" and is the most interesting time of her life. The beginning of the artist/patron relationship was awkward because Mrs. Ellsworth badly wanted to be needed, but Oceola's needs were so few. The lady remedied this by continually inventing new needs to meet. For Oceola, the decadence was wasteful. The idea of "art for art's sake" simply didn't exist in her world. That frivolous kind of beauty only exists in a world of luxury. Oceola's world involved work and sacrifice; art was an intricate part of this life, not something that could be separated, polished, and placed on a shelf.

In answer to Mrs. Ellsworth's questions, Oceola narrated her personal history in her own voice, painting a very candid image of her life. She shrugged off Mrs. Ellsworth's reaction to her a male boarder, recognizing it as none of her business.

However, Mrs. Ellsworth did think it was her business, and she began to inquire through the gossip line of maids whether there was a romantic element to Oceola's relationship with Pete Williams. She also decided to make it her business to educate herself about Harlem and Negro life" She found the "otherness" completely fascinating. At the dressmaker's where she purchased new clothes for Oceola, she spoke about her protegee like a hobby or a project, not a woman.

Section 3

Section 3 Summary

Mrs. Ellsworth had asked Ormond Hunter to inquire through his maid (who attended Oceola's church) about any private details about Oceola's relationship with her boarder. Thus, she discovered that Oceola had been supporting Pete Williams while he saved up to attend medical school. She decided that Oceola was being taken advantage of and she became determined to get the girl out of Harlem. The following day, the benefactor offered to drive Oceola home because she herself had never been to Harlem. When they arrived, Mrs. Ellsworth invited herself in and insisted on investigating the apartment, which she found to be small, cluttered, and dark. Oceola did not share Mrs. Ellsworth's enthusiasm about moving into the village. She insisted on remaining in Harlem, upholding a promise to Pete Williams that he could stay on until fall when he would be attending a black medical college in Nashville. Mrs. Ellsworth gave in and headed to Bar Harbor for the summer.

Section 3 Analysis

Section 3 begins with the gossip revealed from Ormond Hunter's maid. Mr. Hunter and Mrs. Ellsworth immediately jump to the conclusion that Pete Williams is taking advantage of Oceola's good nature and generosity, using her to put himself through medical school. This conclusion evidences several presumptions: first, because Oceola is a woman, she is automatically believed to be the victim in the situation; second, the patron and the critic have also placed a value judgement on Harlem itself as being partly to blame for Oceola's situation. The biggest flaw in Mrs. Ellsworth's judgement is the assumption that art will replace the need for romance in Oceola's life. She believes that one passion can be substituted for another and she places an elevated value on art as being more pure and sacred than romantic love. Perhaps she draws from her own experiences in life, love having failed her when her husband died and left her to fend for herself. However, projecting these values onto Oceola irrevocably damages their relationship. Mrs. Ellsworth fails to realize that Oceola has her own dreams apart from her benefactor's plan for her life. Oceola holds fast to her decision to remain in Harlem until Pete leaves to attend medical school. Mrs. Ellsworth has no choice but to acquiesce.

Section 4

Section 4 Summary

This section begins by placing the preceding events into the timeline of the past and declaring Mrs. Ellsworth triumphant in her struggle to remove Oceola from Harlem. She moved the girl into the Village, where she met several of Mrs. Ellsworth's other protegee. With her cleared schedule, Oceola spent her days practicing the piano, playing small concerts for her patron's guest audiences, attending concerts, and reading about her art. Oceola did not, however, stop playing for house parties in her old Harlem neighborhood.

Oceola's love for jazz won out over Mrs. Ellsworth's disapproval. The benefactor was not able to appreciate jazz; she found it undignified and inappropriate. She removed Oceola from the city entirely in an attempt to cleanse her of her improvisational tendencies. She brought Oceola to the Berkshires, where they shared a bed in a very popular resort. Mrs. Ellsworth enjoyed this time that she spent so close to her little protegee. She was intrigued by Oceola's vitality and the exoticness of her dark skin. She felt that her pupil had the strength for a tremendously successful career as a pianist, but Mrs. Ellsworth was also convinced that she needed to let go of all other passion (especially Pete Williams) in order to supply her art with her complete, pure soul.

To this end, Mrs. Ellsworth arranged for Oceola to spend the next two years abroad. While Oceola enjoyed her studies in Europe, she was frustrated by the superficiality of the other artists. They were convinced that art had the power to change the world and break down social inequities, but Oceola had known art her whole life, music married to struggle and suffering, or in fact born from it. She found the privileged discourse of those artists to be naive and contemptuous.

In Paris, Oceola found a vivid appreciation for her spirituals and jazz music. She played the blues as it came to her and the entire nightclub would get up and dance. "Music, to Oceola, demanded movement and expression, dancing and living to go with it." (Quote from page 59.) Mrs. Ellsworth visited Oceola in Paris, and while the young musician did not share her patron's experience of the classical pieces, she did enjoy listening to Mrs. Ellsworth's stories about the history of France.

Oceola continued to play throughout Europe until the depression hit and most people could no longer afford the luxury of concerts. She then returned home to New York in time to travel south for Pete William's graduation from medical college. She was thrilled when Pete asked for her hand in marriage and wrote to Mrs. Ellsworth to share the good news. It was a while before she received a reply, and when she did, rather than congratulating her, Mrs. Ellsworth told her how sorry she was that Oceola had chosen marriage and children over music. She was convinced that Oceola's talent would be destroyed by her love for a husband and family.

From that point on, Mrs. Ellsworth grew cold toward her protegee. She condemned her desire to live in Harlem, criticized her improvisation during a church recital, and belittled her for sending Pete the money to travel back from Atlanta, where he was doing his internship, for Thanksgiving. While he was visiting, the two young lovers talked about their wedding. Oceola asked that they be married in Atlanta, surrounded by people who were "like them." She wanted an inexpensive dress. Thinking about how her mother had been buried in a plain cotton dress, in comparison to Mrs. Ellsworth's wealth and abundance, turned Oceola sour toward moneyed things.

Oceola and Pete discussed whether Mrs. Ellsworth would travel south for their wedding, and the repercussions of having a white lady visitor. In the end, however, Mrs. Ellsworth decided not to attend. "When she saw how love had triumphed over art, she decided she could no longer influence Oceola's life." (Quote from page 63.) She explained to her protegee that she would be spending the winter in Europe with several of her other artists. She talked about her plans to bring in a young boy who lived for his art and asked Oceola to play for her once more before she left for abroad. Oceola marveled at how it seemed that folks believed a person could survive by art alone.

Section 4 Analysis

Mrs. Ellsworth triumphed when Oceola fell into her routine of practicing, studying, and attending concerts with her patron. Mrs. Ellsworth fought against Oceola's tendency toward jazz and soulful syncopation. She developed an almost motherly closeness to Oceola, enchanted by the young girl's dark skin, energy, and strength. She sent Oceola to Europe for two years, where she met other artists. There Oceola grew frustrated with the frivolity of the artists' concerns. She experienced jazz and blues as a way to express herself, a way for her soul to speak directly to the outside world. She created a sound that didn't reflect Mrs. Ellsworth's staunch whiteness or the poverty of her Harlem existence. Her music was full of life and passion. In France, she found an appreciative audience for her music, which is not surprising when the reader considers France's proximity to Africa and the effect that had on the issues of race and class in society.

Mrs. Ellsworth did not congratulate Oceola on her engagement. Mrs. Ellsworth had outlived her husband, and whether their marriage was one of true love or merely practicality, love had died. Mrs. Ellsworth survived, but the only passion she had left when her husband was gone was art. She wanted to direct her young protegee down a road that would not be filled with loss as her own had been. Married to her music, Oceola would not experience the sorrow that is inherent in familial relationships and romantic entanglements. Music would be there for Oceola forever, and that is what Mrs. Ellsworth wanted to provide for her, some eternal beauty. However, Oceola chose love and all of the difficulties that go with it. For her, music was a language to describe the experience of life, but not a life in and of itself.

Section 5

Section 5 Summary

The last time Oceola traveled down from Harlem to play for Mrs. Ellsworth, she was treated like an ignorant child. As Oceola played, her benefactor reprimanded her decision to pursue love and marriage and accused her of giving up on art and music. She told Oceola that Pete would drain the music right out of her soul. "Art is bigger than love," she cried. Oceola agreed, but said that they could be enjoyed together.

As Oceola let her fingers slip into Negro blues and then heartfelt jazz, she played straight from her soul and sang of love and desire and loss.

She sang, "Oh, if I could holler/Like a mountain jack,/ I'd go up on de mountain/And call my baby back." Mrs. Ellsworth rose and replied, "And I would stand looking at the stars." (page 65.)

Section 5 Analysis

The last chapter of the story marks the close of the two women's relationship. Mrs. Ellsworth viewed their divergence as irreconcilable, for as long as Oceola had a husband and children, she would not need her benefactor. Oceola had made her choice. She chose to view art as a lens through which to view the world, a language to speak about experience and shape its impression. She chose to love a man and start a family and embrace all those things that would one day come to an end.

Mrs. Ellsworth also made her choice. She clung to the immortality of beauty, the larger picture, because she felt the impermanence of everything else as impending loss.

Characters

Antonio Bas

Another artist in Mrs. Ellsworth's patronage, Antonio Bas never actually appears in the story; his name appears at the beginning and toward the end. Mrs. Ellsworth mentions him at the conclusion, possibly in an effort to chide Oceola for rejecting the conditions of her money.

Dora Ellsworth

The narrator introduces Mrs. Ellsworth as a wealthy, middle-aged, white widow with no children. These qualities become central to the progress of the story as they influence Mrs. Ellsworth's artistic patronage. Mrs. Ellsworth's motivation for artistic patronage-helping a constant retinue of young artists-is not a pure love of art, but rather is mixed with a desire both for intimacy and for power. As Oceola Jones's patron, Mrs. Ellsworth attempts to shape the young woman's sensibility and, ultimately, her life. Hughes depicts Mrs. Ellsworth as the embodiment of a traditional demand that art be "transcendental." Accordingly, art should be above life, and, for Mrs. Ellsworth, above sensuality. She attempts to live her life in a wholly "sublimated" state. This means that she directs all of her passions toward non-sensual endeavors and admirations, especially toward the arts. However, traces of a physical passion in her do betray themselves. For example, Mrs. Ellsworth's sexuality reveals itself in the description of those weekends that she and Oceola share a bed in the mountains. Similar feelings are suggested in a glimpse of Mrs. Ellsworth's past, before and during her marriage, when she was actively involved in the romantic aspects of French history and culture. The narrator implies that her husband's failure to appreciate her love for "simple French songs" may have squelched her passion. But now Mrs. Ellsworth is the one who fails to appreciate someone else's passion. As much as Mrs. Ellsworth admires Oceola's talent, she never understands Oceola's love of jazz, and she does not respect Oceola's love for the black community in Harlem. Consequently, Mrs. Ellsworth becomes Oceola's nemesis, her opposite in all values, and the obstacle that Oceola must overcome on her way to her own fulfillment.

Mrs. Ellsworth

See Dora Ellsworth

Mr. Hunter

See Ormand Hunter

Ormand Hunter

Ormand Hunter's character is the critic who first brings Oceola Jones to Mrs. Ellsworth's attention. This character may have been based on Carl Van Vechten, a white critic who made a special project of championing black artists. Hunter's own lack of sensitivity is suggested by his willingness to collude in Mrs. Ellsworth's attempts to pry into Oceola's private life.

Oceola Jones

A talented young pianist who works hard to earn a living, Oceola Jones becomes the protegee of a wealthy white woman, Mrs. Dora Ellsworth. A very practical woman, Oceola mistrusts Mrs. Ellsworth, and she maintains a determined degree of independence from Mrs. Ellsworth throughout their relationship. This independence proves vital to Oceola as it becomes evident that she and Mrs. Ellsworth have different, even hostile, views of art and music. Mrs. Ellsworth demands that Oceola's music be detached, bodiless, and restricted to the classical tradition. Oceola, however, is drawn to music that expresses life and sensuality, and she embraces a repertoire ranging from classical selections to traditional black spirituals and contemporary innovations in blues and jazz. This approach to art reflects Oceola's approach to life in general- she refuses to give up her physical and emotional life, represented by Pete Williams, despite Mrs. Ellsworth's urging. Similarly, even as Oceola appears to be headed for a brilliant musical career and financial security otherwise unavailable to a black woman, she remains dedicated to the black community in Harlem. In the final confrontation between Mrs. Ellsworth and Oceola, Oceola appears to dismiss her growing career-though not her love of music-for the sake of racial pride and a better life. Oceola's experiences with her patron largely derive from Hughes's experiences with his own patron; consequently, the reader can, to some degree, see Oceola as a mouthpiece for the author's own opinions.

Pete Williams

Pete Williams is a train porter who lives with Oceola Jones in Harlem and who later attends a medical school in Atlanta. Pete Williams gradually becomes the focus of all of Mrs. Ellsworth's hostilities. When her plan for Oceola to become properly "sublimated" to a bodiless art fails, Mrs. Ellsworth blames that failure on Pete and, by suggestion, on Oceola's love and desire for him. Although Pete appears only briefly in the story, the moment is striking because it also provides the one mention of segregation.

Themes

Race and Racism

"The Blues I'm Playing," like all of the stories in *The Ways of White Folks*, reveals to the reader, through form and content, one of the many ways in which racism can operate. While some stories portray the most obvious acts of racism, "The Blues I'm Playing" makes explicit a subtle, racist paternalism. Mrs. Ellsworth embodies the way that paternalism can hide racism, both from herself and others, because it is apparently so well-intentioned: Mrs. Ellsworth wants to help Oceola, so how could she be racist? Hughes's narrative illustrates how.

Mrs. Ellsworth's racism begins, in a sense, with her ignorance: she believes that she has never known a black person before. This belief betrays her narrowness of vision, since we can assume that she has certainly interacted with many black people, mostly as servants of some sort or another; at the very least, we know that Ormand Hunter's maid is black. Implicitly, then, her thought suggests that she has never quite seen any African American as a person-as an individual one might get to know.

The paternalism with which Mrs. Ellsworth approaches all of her protegees, although it has something to do with an admiration for raw talent, also assumes a certain inferiority on the part of these young artists, Hughes suggests. She believes that they require not just money, but also refinement and her insight and guidance. In this association between the lack of money and the supposed lack of refinement and insight, Mrs. Ellsworth's patronage tends to be classicist. This classicism enters into her relationship with Oceola, but it is secondary to the function of racism. The financial and social limitations on Oceola's life, because they are embodied in her Harlem apartment, become in Mrs. Ellsworth's mind a function of black life. Mrs. Ellsworth is determined to remove Oceola from Harlem and ultimately from New York. Perceiving Oceola as held back by her connection with her black community, Mrs. Ellsworth fails to notice that Oceola does not ask for or even particularly want her help.

In finding so much of black culture distasteful, Mrs. Ellsworth assumes that the values and traditions of European and white American culture are inherently superior. While Oceola is capable of finding power in many different musical traditions - she is not a racial chauvinist about music - Mrs. Ellsworth rejects jazz and blues out of hand because they are not classical. Finally, Mrs. Ellsworth also makes the logical error of "universality": she sees the products of European culture as "universal," transcending their cultural and economic origins; conversely, she sees the products of African-American culture as necessarily tied to that culture and, therefore, not universal. Coupled with Mrs. Ellsworth's distaste for black culture is, paradoxically, a fascination and desire that some critics refer to as "exoticism." That is, she tends to look at Oceola as an intriguing, exotic object. She finds Oceola "the blackest-and most interesting of all" her protegees. Wondering about why, she speculates that "it was that Oceola really

was talented, terribly alive, and that she looked like nothing Mrs. Ellsworth had ever been near before. Such a rich velvet black, and such a hard young body!"

The presence of this kind of subtle, often "well-intentioned" racism becomes especially clear when one looks at "The Blues I'm Playing" in context: many other stories in *The Ways of White Folks* treat these same dynamics even more directly. Articulating his insights, Hughes confronts his readers with subject matter that had rarely, if ever, appeared in fiction before. Furthermore, he used narrative strategy to challenge racism. For example, Hughes incorporates dialect and blues rhythms for their beauty, rather than for caricature; the narrator frequently identifies Mrs. Ellsworth as " white," making her race as immediate and marked as Oceola's, if not more so.

Sex

At the conclusion of "The Blues I'm Playing" Oceola gives one last private recital for her patron. As Oceola incorporates a powerful blues variation into her program, the two women's attitudes about music come to the fore. Explicitly at this moment, as elsewhere in the story, the music represents their contrasting views of passion and sexuality. A fully sensual life is fundamental to Oceola's character: she ultimately cannot accept success without it. By making Oceola his protagonist and presenting her relationship with Pete in a sympathetic light, Hughes chooses to portray sexual intimacy in positive terms. Mrs. Ellsworth, on the other hand, represents the most repressive aspects of nineteenth-century Western culture. In her demand that the artist become disembodied-a pure soul gazing up at the stars and denying its body on earth-Mrs. Ellsworth denies the presence of passion in her own life. She believes that she has "sublimated" her sexual desires-that she has directed all sexual energy into non-physical admirations. Her responses to Oceola, however, betray the sexuality that still resides, repressed, beneath her veneer of artistic purity: "Oceola really was talented, terribly alive, and . . . she looked like nothing Mrs. Ellsworth had ever been near before. Such a rich velvet black, and such a hard young body!" In this way, Hughes suggests that desire cannot be overcome or removed from one's life; it will make itself evident, one way or another. Through his description of Oceola, he questions why one would even try to remove this part of human life.

Art

The conflict that Oceola and Mrs. Ellsworth have over music is, more broadly, a debate about art and beauty. According to Mrs. Ellsworth, true art must follow certain very traditional conventions: she "still believed in art of the old school, portraits that really and truly looked like people, poems about nature, music that had soul in it, not syncopation." She believes, furthermore, that these conventions are not simply conventions, but in and of themselves constitute artistic quality. It is this assumption that limits her ability to find most unfamiliar forms beautiful, as we see in her response to the jazz that Oceola loves. For her part, Oceola remains open to the possibility of finding beauty anywhere. Open to all kinds of music, she is not limited by the conventions of her own background.

She can, for example, be "crazy" about the music of Rachmaninoff. Nor does she glorify, as did some black artists of the period, the conventions valued by white patrons like Mrs. Ellsworth. When Oceola encounters this kind of fellow artist in Paris, her experiences reflect Hughes's own struggle in the Harlem Renaissance, which promoted the idea of "the New Negro." According to Hughes, the aspiration to produce works of art that satisfied only European tradition denied the beauty and value of African tradition, African-American culture, and people of African descent.

Style

Narrator

In many ways, the narrative voice of "The Blues I'm Playing" is not likely to strike the contemporary reader as radical. This third-person voice uses simple and clear prose, providing very direct exposition - explanation about the characters' backgrounds and feelings. Nonetheless, when Hughes was writing in the 1920s and 1930s, both his short fiction and his poetry challenged many readers' expectations. First, the language was too direct, in explicit opposition to the prevailing standards of the era. These had been greatly influenced by turn-of-the-century writers like Henry James, who held to the practice of "show, don't tell." Hughes, however, often tells. Second, this voice borrows from black dialect, more at some times than at others. This use of colloquialism is not exaggerated to the point of caricature; Hughes presents the phonic beauty of oral language, rather than making a joke of it. Third, as the narrative voice allies itself with Oceola and black characters in general, it places the reader in a position that was quite novel for the time: looking at the white world from a black perspective. This would have been a new experience to both black and white readers, in different ways.

Irony

The gaze that Hughes's narrator directs at the white world is marked by a powerful irony. It is in this sense that Hughes achieves a "deceptive and *profound* simplicity," in the words of Hoyt W. Fuller. The simplicity or seeming naivete of the voice veils what are actually harsh and sometimes painful realizations. So, for example, when the narrator informs us in all sincerity that Oceola's "apartment was just as [Mrs. Ellsworth] thought it would be. After all, she had read Thomas Burke on Limehouse," we are expected to see the sharp criticism beneath the surface. Limehouse and Harlem are not interchangeable, and a white writer characterizing an ethnic ghetto usually resorted to stereotypes.

Setting

Because of the subject matter and the largely unprecedented viewpoint that Hughes uses, settings in "The Blues I'm Playing" carry a great deal of meaning. The narrative primarily moves between Mrs. Ellsworth's house and the apartments that Oceola lives in, with a particular stress on her life in Harlem. Each of these places is presented from an unusual perspective. A Madison Avenue house belonging to someone of Mrs. Ellsworth's resources would have been stately and impressive, but we see it only as "grey stone" with "a butler who actually wore brass buttons." We first see Oceola's apartment in Mrs. Ellsworth's negative assessment, framed by her ignorant reliance on inappropriate sources ("The apartment was just as she thought it would be. After all, she had read Thomas Burke on Limehouse.") Consequently, the ensuing description, which

tells us simply how small the apartment is, points to Mrs. Ellsworth's privileged narrow-mindedness. Oceola's insistence that she is happy in Harlem suggests her ability to see value Mrs. Ellsworth cannot. By contrast, Mrs. Ellsworth's drawing room - full of monetarily valuable objects - becomes a sterile and hateful place. By presenting the mansion in a negative light and the small apartment in a positive light, Hughes challenges readers' assumptions.

Historical Context

Harlem

At the beginning of the twentieth century, African-Americans were still fighting an uphill battle against the prejudices and social forces that had kept slavery alive until the 1860s. Most African Americans still lived in the rural south, trying to earn a living from agricultural labor. Now technically free to go where they wished, however, they began moving to the cities of the northeast, where black neighborhoods like Harlem took root. Although discrimination and hardship still limited their opportunities and economic well-being, the 1920s brought with it a spirit of optimism that blossomed with the Harlem Renaissance. The black intellectuals and artists who comprised this movement believed that their works, which displayed traditional erudition and talent, would compel white Americans to see African Americans in a new - and equal - light. For a time, it seemed to work: white critics and patrons directed their attention and money to black artists, making possible once unimaginable exhibits and integrated social gatherings. Furthermore, Harlem itself was in vogue among white New Yorkers: a Saturday night on the town might consist of bar-hopping from one Harlem nightclub to another, taking in shows that featured jazz musicians and black dancers. The vogue was not, however, necessarily anti-racist: many of the clubs that catered to white patrons and featured black entertainers refused to allow entrance to black patrons.

There was, however, a Harlem that was by and for black New Yorkers, a Harlem glimpsed in the house parties at which Oceola loves to play and in the church that is also central to her social life; both institutions were vital to the black community in Harlem, although at times for separate social groups. While Harlem provided relative safety and a strong sense of community for black New Yorkers, it also reflected the poverty that plagued African Americans in general. With few exceptions, the people of Harlem struggled to make ends meet. Hughes stresses this when he describes Oceola waiting in Mrs. Ellsworth's drawing room, "afraid to move for fear she might knock something over - that would take ten years of a Harlemite's wages to replace, if broken." When the stock market crashed in 1929, the U.S. economy went with it, devastating the job market for all people. Only a few, as Oceola notes about Mrs. Ellsworth, were wealthy enough to coast through the Great Depression.

Segregation

When Harlem was celebrating the hope of the new century in the northeast, segregation still ruled the daily lives of African Americans in the south. Although Hughes makes it clear to his readers that racism dominated race relations in New York, its presence is much more pronounced in the Atlanta that Pete speaks of. There, Oceola could not enter a hotel through the front door; if Mrs. Ellsworth stayed in their home, they would run the risk of "a lynching." Although not mentioned in Hughes's story, we know that segregation also meant separate bathrooms and water fountains, as well as exclusion

from many business establishments. On a broader scale, although African Americans had the nominal right to vote, to own property, to receive an education, and to hold a job, many of these rights were undermined by racist practices, some of which were even carried out within town and state governments. Not until the advent of Civil Rights in the 1950s would these conditions begin to change.

Critical Overview

The Ways of White Folks and "The Blues I'm Playing" established Hughes's reputation as a short story writer on its publication. He was already known as a poet, having gained celebrity with several publications in the 1920s, during the height of the Harlem Renaissance, a movement fostered by black artists and intellectuals. His short fiction, like the poems that preceded it, were-in context- daring and controversial. While many readers acclaimed his work for its beauty and directness, others-many of them leading black intellectuals of the day-complained that he put on display the "lowest" and most stereotypical aspects of black life. Some of these readers, like Mrs. Ellsworth in "The Blues I'm Playing", considered art something that should rise above race and everyday life-a view that Hughes attacks in his story. But Hughes saw himself as presenting the beauty inherent in the lives of black Americans.

When Langston Hughes published *The Ways of White Folks* in 1934, he was already known for the poetry he had published in the 1920s. While most readers had praised his verse, many leaders of the black community criticized the young author, drawing him into a heated debate about art and race relations. Hughes's poetry, because it drew its language from black dialect and drew its rhythms from jazz and blues, failed to adhere to the conventions of Western art. To many black intellectuals, proving their facility with these conventions was central to the project of the Harlem Renaissance; dialect was a caricature, an insult to the black community. Despite many positive reviews, the 1934 volume of short stories revived this criticism because most of the stories explicitly took as their subject matter the ordinary people who lived in neighborhoods like Harlem. Rather than setting up a new black hero for white Americans to see, these critics charged, Hughes was putting the community's worst and most stereotypical elements on display. "The Blues I'm Playing" captures Hughes's response to these critics. In the face of Mrs. Ellsworth's distaste, Oceola embraces her community in its everyday life. Like Hughes, she insists on its value and beauty, and she will not cooperate with the effort to erase African- American history and culture.

As these concerns about Hughes's work in general drew less attention, critics began to focus interpretation on particular elements in "The Blues I'm Playing": the function of music, the function of sexuality, and the function of racism and racial identity. For the most part, critics have agreed in their assessments. Studies of the presence of jazz and blues in the story note not just its centrality, but also the meaning that music takes on-its evocation of the earth and the body and, consequently, of life. It is, through these same associations, also fundamental to the element of sexuality in the story. Critics agree that "The Blues I'm Playing" charts a conflict between sexual repression and affirmation. While Oceola and Pete obviously stand for the latter, Mrs. Ellsworth sometimes appears to champion the former and at other times to be its victim. Most critics take for granted Mrs. Ellsworth's repressed sexual desire for Oceola, but some disagreement appears in analyses of her character. While Peter Bruck and Hans Ostrum, for example, portray her as essentially fearful and almost pathetic, Robert Bone and Steven Tracey stress her desire for power over Oceola, comparing her to a slave owner. All in all, however, most critics today concur in Peter Bruck's determination that this story "marks one of

Hughes's outstanding achievements in this genre and established him as a serious writer of satirical short fiction."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
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- Critical Essay #5
- Critical Essay #6
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- Critical Essay #8

Critical Essay #1

Brent has a Ph.D. in American Culture, specializing in cinema studies, from the University of Michigan. She is a freelance writer and editor and teaches courses in American cinema. In the following essay, she discusses the conflicting perspectives on "art" represented by the two main characters in the story.

Langston Hughes's short story "The Blues I'm Playing" portrays the relationship between a young, working class African American pianist, Oceola Jones, and her elderly, wealthy, white patron, Mrs. Dora Ellsworth. Hughes juxtaposes Oceola's and Mrs. Ellsworth's perspectives on their relationship through contrasting the meaning and significance of music to each woman. For Mrs. Ellsworth, music or "art" is an abstraction which, if "pure," rises above the banalities of everyday life. For Oceola, on the other hand, music is a living, breathing practice which is fully integrated with her personal, everyday experiences. These two different perspectives on music, or "art," are portrayed as an issue of both race and class which ultimately divides the two women. Through this juxtaposition, Hughes's story is a social commentary on Black/White relations in the U.S., and a critique of the high/low distinction between "pure" art and "folk" art.

Critical Essay #2

The central conflict which develops between the African American musician and her white patron in this story revolves around how each conceptualizes the role of "art," in this case music, in the artist's life. The rich, white Mrs. Ellsworth can, quite literally, "afford" to conceptualize "art" as separate from everyday necessities, such as earning a living. To Oceola, on the other hand, Mrs. Ellsworth's concern with "pure art" as an end in itself, separate from everyday life, is absurd, at best, "for she had never met anybody interested in pure art before. Just to be given thing's for art's sake seemed suspicious to Oceola."

The nature of this difference in perception is based in broader assumptions throughout White Western culture about the distinction between "pure" art and "folk" art, or "high" art and "low" art. "Pure" or "high" art has generally been considered distinct from any particular use-value, and set apart from the activities of daily life. "Folk" or "low" art has been used to designate art which grows out of non-white, non-Western or impoverished cultures, and which often serves a practical function within that culture. For instance, a patchwork quilt made by someone's grandmother in her home for the purpose of staying warm would generally be considered a "folk" art, while an abstract fabric sculpture hanging in an art museum would be considered "pure" art. Art which serves no other purpose than to be art is referred to as "art for art's sake." In Hughes's story, the differences between the white woman's and the black woman's understanding of the role of art in the life and culture of the artist hinges on this distinction. More specifically, white Western classical music is pitted against the African-American musical traditions of jazz and blues.

For Mrs. Ellsworth, "art" becomes a substitute for life, as she lives only vicariously through the young artists whom she supports: "she had no interest in life now save art, and the young people who created art." Her "generosity" toward the struggling young artists she patronizes comes in the form of taking care of their financial needs so that they may devote themselves fully to "art" without the distractions and corruption of daily struggle. Among her "protegees," Oceola, for Mrs. Ellsworth, is merely a means of diversion, as the older woman has no genuine interest in music itself. Her interest in "aiding the arts" is really an excuse for treating other human beings as hobbies, rather than as individuals. Oceola is described as if she were merely a phase in the old woman's life, rather than as a real individual with whom she develops a personal relationship. "Then began one of the most interesting periods in Mrs. Ellsworth's whole experience in aiding the art. The period of Oceola."

Furthermore, Mrs. Ellsworth perceives Oceola almost as an object of art in herself, similar to one of the expensive Persian vases which adorn her home. Oceola's blackness, for Mrs. Ellsworth, is not an ethnic or community identity, with personal relationships and real economic and social struggles, but a characteristic that makes her "interesting," as if she were an artifact from a foreign country. Her interest in "art" and "beauty" is actually an expression of her view of the artists themselves as objects of beauty, rather than as real individual people, for "she was sometimes confused as to

where beauty lay in the youngsters or in what they made, in the creators or the creation." Mrs. Ellsworth regards Oceola herself as a novelty object, to be added to her collection of protegee's, "She was tremendously intrigued at meeting Oceola, never having had before amongst all her artists a black one." At one point, she thinks of Oceola almost as a toy doll for her to play at dressing up, for "Mrs. Ellsworth began to think in bed about what gowns would look best on Oceola. Her protegee would have to be well-dressed." And, when she goes to a dressmaker to have an outfit custom made for Oceola, she refers to the young woman as if she were merely a piece of fabric which needed a matching color. When she asks the dressmaker, "what kind of colors looked well with black," the dressmaker does not realize she is talking about a person, and she must clarify, "not black fabrics, but black skin."

The darkness of Oceola's skin becomes almost a fetish for Mrs. Ellsworth, for whom she is a curiosity, because of their racial differences and her lack of familiarity with black people. "Mrs. Ellsworth couldn't recall ever having known a single Negro before in her whole life, so she found Oceola fascinating. And just as black as she herself was white." Mrs. Ellsworth's obsessive "interest" in Oceola focuses on the novelty of her blackness. Of all her protegees, Oceola is described as "the blackest and most interesting of all." Mrs. Ellsworth even becomes fascinated with the very body of the young musician, for "she looked like nothing Mrs. Ellsworth had ever been near before. Such a rich velvet black, and such a hard young body!"

Mrs. Ellsworth further regards Oceola as an object of study, as if she were a specimen from a foreign culture.

Before going to bed, Mrs. Ellsworth told her housekeeper to order a book called Nigger Heaven on the morrow, and also anything else Brentano's had about Harlem. She made a mental note that she must go up there sometime, for she had never yet seen that dark section of New York; and now that she had a Negro protegee, she really ought to know something about it.

Even Oceola's modest living conditions are a point of interest for Mrs. Ellsworth, who is unable to see poverty or financial struggle as a real problem experienced by real people, but as simply a backdrop for this "interesting" musician, whom she coddles like a prized possession. Mrs. Ellsworth's knowledge of how poorer people live is derived solely from books, and her assessment of Oceola's apartment is almost clinical, as if she were reading a page out of a book, rather than visiting a friend in her home.

The apartment was just as she thought it would be. After all, she had read Thomas Burke on Limehouse. And here was just one more of those holes in the wall, even if it was five stories high. The windows looked down on slums. There were only four rooms, small as maid's rooms, all of them.

Mrs. Ellsworth regards Oceola as a valuable object, an artifact from a foreign culture, to add to her collection of "protegees," just as she displays a collection of "jade vases and amber cups worth thousands of dollars" in her music room.

Critical Essay #3

In taking her on as a protegee, Mrs. Ellsworth wishes to remove Oceola from her African American community in order to give her the opportunity to devote herself to the purity of "art for art's sake." For Oceola, by contrast, music is not a pure abstraction called "art," which rises above everyday life, but both grows out of and expresses her life as a whole, and is an integral part of her relationships, financial concerns and community. When Mrs. Ellsworth first meets Oceola, the young woman's music is part of her role in her community as a teacher and member of the church, is central to her social life, and is her sole means of livelihood. Her life is socially, culturally and spiritually rich, and financially stable. When Mrs. Ellsworth wishes to meet her, "She had said she was busy every day. It seemed that she had pupils, rehearsed a church choir, and played almost nightly for colored house parties or dances. She made quite a good deal of money."

For Mrs. Ellsworth, classical music is a form of "pure art," distinct from what she regards as lower art forms emanating from African-American culture. To Oceola, however, classical music in the white European tradition, and jazz or blues in the African-American tradition, are all part of her repertoire, between which she makes no hierarchical distinctions. When she first plays for Mrs. Ellsworth at her home, Oceola unceremoniously plays a blues tune, mixed in with several classical pieces. "She played the Rachmaninoff Prelude in C-sharp Minor. She played from the Liszt Etudes. She played the 'St. Louis Blues.' She played Ravel's 'Pavanne pour une Engante Defunte.'" But for Oceola, playing in the drawing room of a rich white woman she hardly knows is second to playing at an event within her own community which is both a social occasion and a benefit concert to support the cause of African Americans. Her time playing for Mrs. Ellsworth is limited because "she was playing that night for a dance in Brooklyn for the benefit of the Urban League."

The role of music in Oceola's life is also integral to her personal relationships with her parents, as well as her family history, their role in their church and community, and their financial circumstances. As she explains to Mrs. Ellsworth:

Papa had a band, that is, her stepfather. Used to play for all the lodge turnouts, picnics, dances, barbecues. You could get the best roast pig in the world in Mobile. Her mother used to play the organ in church, and when the deacons bought a piano after the big revival, her mama played that, too. Oceola played an organ, also, and a cornet.

In Oceola's description of her upbringing, playing music remains integral to her family and community life, throughout their changing circumstances.

Mama got a job playing for the movies in a Market Street theater, and I played for a church choir, and saved some money and went to Wilberforce. Studied piano there, too. Played for all the college dances. Graduated. Came to New York and heard Rachmaninoff and was crazy about him.

Nevertheless, Mrs. Ellsworth insistently attempts to remove Oceola from her African-American community, relationships and cultural influences, as well as from economic necessity, in order to make it possible for her to pursue "pure" art, in the form of classical music performance for white, European audiences. For Mrs. Ellsworth, getting and keeping Oceola out of Harlem is a central priority to her project to "increase the rapprochement between art and Oceola." Mrs. Ellsworth regards art as an abstract beauty from which life is only a distraction. When Oceola decides to wait until Pete leaves for medical school before moving out of Harlem, Mrs. Ellsworth reproaches her with a high-minded aphorism about making "art" a priority over personal relationships: "'Art is long,' reminded Mrs. Ellsworth, 'and time is fleeting, my dear.'",/p>

In distinguishing "pure" art from everyday life, Mrs. Ellsworth repeatedly pits "art" against "love." She thus attempts to separate Oceola from love by keeping her from her boyfriend, Pete Williams, who later becomes her fiance. Mrs. Ellsworth hopes that, once out of Harlem and on the road to a successful career as a piano performer, "'She won't need him,'" because "'She will have her art.'" When Oceola informs Mrs. Ellsworth of her engagement to Pete, the white woman feels that "love had triumphed over art." On their last meeting, she criticizes Oceola for choosing love over art, as "she began to reproach the girl aloud for running away from art and music, for burying herself in Atlanta and love " Mrs. Ellsworth's high-minded, abstract ideas about art as transcendent are expressed through imagery of the stars in the sky, which rise above the earth. "You could shake the stars with your music," she tells the young woman. The elderly woman goes on to describe Oceola's marriage through imagery which descends to the level of dirt and death. She describes Oceola's decision to marry Pete as "digging a grave for yourself."

While Oceola makes her relationship with her boyfriend and her participation in her community a priority, Mrs. Ellsworth values Oceola only in isolation from her community and relationships. The story suggests that Mrs. Ellsworth's attempts to make Oceola a "successful" pianist only serve to distance the young woman from her full, emotionally and culturally rich life within her African-American community. Mrs. Ellsworth "wondered why anyone insisted on living in Harlem." But to Oceola, Harlem is her lifeblood. "'I've been away from my people for so long. I want to live right in the middle of them again.'" And, in talking with her fiancee, Oceola again expresses her wish to live among fellow African Americans, rather than in the upper class white world in which Mrs. Ellsworth wishes to place her. "'Let's live in Atlanta, where there are lots of colored people, like us.'"

Hughes further implies that for Oceola, a young black woman in the 1930s, Mrs. Ellsworth's dreams for her success as a classic pianist are unrealistic. Unlike Mrs. Ellsworth, Oceola is fully aware of her social and financial status, reasoning that "Anyway, during the present depression, it was pretty hard for a beginning artist like herself to book a concert tour so she might just as well be married awhile." Mrs. Ellsworth, on the other hand, is rich enough to float above the concerns of everyday people as indicated by the fact that not even the Great Depression affects her financial status. "And [Oceola] came home to New York a year after the stock market crash and nobody had any money except folks like Mrs. Ellsworth who had so much it would be hard to ever lose it all."

Critical Essay #4

Mrs. Ellsworth's desire to groom Oceola for the pursuit of the "pure art" of classical music is met with conflict most specifically by Oceola's "sheer love of jazz." As Oceola continues to play at Harlem house parties, for free, Mrs. Ellsworth objects to the mixture of dance and alcohol with a musical form which she regards as primitive, describing it as "the most tom-tom music she had ever heard." She prefers music which she associates with abstract concepts, such as the "soul" and the "eternal," which, both literally and figuratively, rise above human concerns.

So in the spring, Mrs. Ellsworth organized weekends in the up-state mountains where she had a little lodge and where Oceola could look from the high places at the stars, and fill her soul with the vastness of the eternal, and forget about jazz. Mrs. Ellsworth began to hate jazz especially on grand piano.

Oceola, on the other hand, makes no such distinctions between art and life. She "merely lived and loved it." She even finds the high-minded conversation among her fellow black artists in France to be absurd. "Why did they or anybody argue so much about life or art?" she wonders. Oceola, in fact, never forgets the most basic human concerns, such as the need for food, in relation to her art. "Only the Marxian students seemed sound to her, for they, at least, wanted people to have enough to eat. That was important, Oceola thought, remembering, as she did, her own sometimes hungry years. But the rest of the controversies, as far as she could fathom, were based on air." Oceola is particularly baffled by Mrs. Ellsworth's obliviousness to the basic economic necessities of people such as herself. "Why did white folks think you could live on nothing but art? Strange! Too strange! Too strange!"

While Mrs. Ellsworth continually pits art and music against life and love, Oceola sees her music as fully enmeshed with life and love. "Music, to Oceola, demanded movement and expression, dancing and living to go with it." In contrast to Mrs. Ellsworth's lofty ideas about "pure art," Oceola is happiest playing blues and jazz for free at a club. Hughes describes her music in terms rich with imagery and feeling and rooted in African culture. "In the blues she made the bass notes throb like tom-toms, the trebles cry like little flutes, so deep in the earth and so high in the sky that they understood everything." To Oceola, her music belongs as much in the church as it does in the dance club, as much in the realm of the body as in the realm of the spirit. "She liked to teach, when she had the choir, the singing of those rhythmical Negro spirituals that possessed the power to pull colored folks out of their seats in the amen corner and make them prance and shout in the aisles for Jesus."

In the final meeting between Oceola and Mrs. Ellsworth, the ongoing conflict between each woman's perception of the role of art in the life of the artist comes to a head. While Mrs. Ellsworth had tried her best to make "art" triumph over "love," Oceola demonstrates through playing that blues and jazz music encompasses love and the spirit, the earth and the sky, within the realm of music and art. She plays "a Negro blues, a blues that deepened and grew into rollicking jazz " In this final confrontation, Oceola

makes the blues triumph over the very idea of "pure art." Her playing flows into "an earth-throbbing rhythm that shook the lilies in the Persian vases of Mrs. Ellsworth's music room." The lilies in the expensive imported vases symbolize the white woman's efforts to remove the black woman from her community and display her like an object of art in the cold atmosphere of her music room.

The final exchange between Oceola and Mrs. Ellsworth sums up the nature of their different views on art and different social statuses. Oceola expresses herself through singing a blues song while playing piano. The words to the blues song begin, "Oh if I could holler / like a mountain jack," and continue, "I'd go up on de mountain / And call my baby back." The desire to "call my baby back" suggests a strong impulse to use the "hollering" of music for expressing feelings of love. Mrs. Ellsworth's response to this sentiment, which she coldly states, rather than singing, underscore's her continued desire to hold "art" high above human emotion and experience. Picking up from the song lyrics, the elderly white woman asserts that, were she to "go up on de mountain," she would abandon "love" in favor of an abstract notion of art as something which remains above the world of human emotion. Rather than "call my baby back," she would choose to "stand looking at the stars."

Critical Essay #5

"The Blues I'm Playing" is a celebration of the role of Blues and Jazz music in African American life and culture. The story is an argument against assimilationism suggesting that making it in the white world comes at the expense of the richness and beauty of black culture and community. It is simultaneously a critique of the high/low distinction between "pure" art and "folk" art, a distinction based on racist and classist social hierarchies.

In his own writing career, Hughes seems to exemplify these ideals in choosing to write about ordinary, everyday, working class black folks. And while he was criticized by black writers and intellectuals for perpetuating negative images of blacks, this was the very category of people among whom he gained enormous popularity, and he became the first black writer ever to earn his living solely from his writing. In writing for and about his fellow African Americans, Hughes succeeded in achieving his own black American Dream, suited to his own aesthetic and social values. Years before the Black Power Movement which arose in the 1960s, Hughes's message in this story could be summed up, as critic Linda Patterson has pointed out, by the slogan, "Black is beautiful."

Source: Liz Brent, for Short Stories for Students, The Gale Group, 2000.

Critical Essay #6

Le Blanc has taught at the University of Michigan and is currently an editor and freelance writer. In the following essay, she discusses the subtle ways in which Hughes conveys his social message in the story.

When in 1932 Langston Hughes first found himself interested in writing short fiction again, he was visiting the Soviet Union on a film-making project with some other artists. Like many other Americans at the time, Hughes believed that socialism could help in the search for social justice. He personally had been involved with left-wing organizations at least since his first year of college. However, the trend in fiction of the period was not to convey a social message but rather to emphasize aesthetic technique and experimentation, a concentration on the art itself or on psychological detail. Critics generally agree that it wasn't until Hughes read in the Soviet Union a book of short stories by English writer D. H. Lawrence, whose sharp irony and unabashed critiques filled *The Lovely Lady,* that Hughes decided he could express his political concerns about race relations through fiction. So began the stories, including "The Blues I'm Playing," that would constitute *The Ways of White Folks.*

While other prominent fiction writers of the period - James Joyce, for example - focused on challenging readers' expectations with a disruption of the prose itself, Hughes subtly inverted the world with the techniques he used in "The Blues I'm Playing." That is, he showed his readers the world from a black woman's perspective, an experience that most likely would have been entirely new to both black and white readers. Many of the elements that are fundamental to any work of fiction-characterization, setting, narrative voice - take on an extra function in "The Blues I'm Playing" since they show us the white world from a critical distance.

"The Blues I'm Playing" is, like all of the other stories in *The Ways of White Folks,* a study in race relations. Consequently, every aspect of how Mrs. Ellsworth treats Oceola is not simply the portrayal of a personal dynamic, of two psychologies interacting, but rather the portrayal of how white treats black. Mrs. Ellsworth's paternalism, her ignorance, her rejection of Pete, and her desire for Oceola, all appear in relation to that type of interaction. The ignorance that Hughes depicts would have been typical of such a segregated world, although segregated more subtly in New York than in a southern city like Atlanta, as Pete points out. Mrs. Ellsworth firmly believes that she has never known an African American before only because it has never been necessary for her to interact with an African American before. Economic and social inequality not only kept blacks and whites apart, but relegated blacks to service roles; Mrs. Ellsworth would never have encountered an African American as her equal before. In her effort to educate herself, she turns to Carl Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven*, a shallow study full of stereotypes. It was considered progressive by many white readers but insulting by black readers.

Of course, in her paternalism, Mrs. Ellsworth does not quite view Oceola as her equal. Despite the young woman's superior talent, Mrs. Ellsworth persistently believes that

Oceola lacks not just money, but certain cultural and emotional advantages. The older woman looks down upon her protegee's attachment to the physical and sensual world. This sensual world is manifested in jazz, Harlem, and Pete, and all these represent her connection to her black community and culture. In her determination to remove Oceola from all these things for the sake of "pure art," Mrs. Ellsworth fails to see them as beautiful or at all valuable. Throughout the story, she remains disdainful of black culture.

While Hughes makes Mrs. Ellsworth an embodiment of this kind of racism, he also makes her guilty of "exoticism." The desires that Mrs. Ellsworth so doggedly represses are directed toward Oceola because of, not in spite of, Oceala's race. Mrs. Ellsworth is specifically intrigued by Oceola's blackness: "Oceola really was talented, terribly alive, and . . . she looked like nothing Mrs. Ellsworth had ever been near before. Such a rich velvet black, and such a hard young body!" Mrs. Ellsworth resolves the contradiction by rejecting Oceola's culture but embracing her "essence"-some essential "blackness" supposedly not rooted in Harlem but in some fundamental racial quality. This myth, not uncommon even today, casts African Americans as innately-for example-more sensual and more rhythmic than European Americans. But this idea, although often meant to be complimentary, is still steeped in prejudice.

The subject matter, given emphasis by Hughes in spite of the unfashionableness of conveying an overt message, demanded that the reader acknowledge certain forms of racism perhaps not visible before to many readers. The subject matter had less to do with the impact of the story than did Hughes's use of perspective: he put his reader at Oceola's side. Most European and American writers of the time and their predecessors were white, wrote about white characters, and wrote for white readers. While non-white readers developed double vision, becoming familiar with a white point of view, as well as their own point of view, white readers could remain comfortable with their single view of life. In "The Blues I'm Playing," the narrator, through perspective and irony offers the reader a seat that shows not just Oceola's point of view, but specifically Oceola's view of white and black cultures. For the white reader, then, to be reading about a white character - Mrs. Ellsworth - as a person marked by her race would, most likely, have been an unprecedented experience. And Hughes has very explicitly marked Mrs. Ellsworth with her race. References to Mrs. Ellsworth as "white" are more frequent than references to Oceola as "black." Mrs. Ellsworth's actions are identified specifically as the actions of a white person. Her assumptions, thrown onto unfamiliar ground when contrasted with Oceola's, become "white" assumptions. Mrs. Ellsworth assumes that Oceola must be uncomfortable in her small Harlem apartment. But, in fact, Oceola is most uncomfortable in Mrs. Ellsworth's drawing room, where the expensive objects strike her not as inherently beautiful but as oppressive and dead - even the lilies are symbolic of death.

In the 1920s and 1930s, the first two decades of Hughes's prolific career, many black artists and intellectuals sought equality for African Americans. Many of these same people, however, criticized Hughes' work, believing that his bold depictions of everyday black life would only reinforce for white readers their negative stereotypes of blacks. Only more recently have critics seen the subtler techniques with which Hughes approached his readers. Now, however, it is recognized that the critique of race

relations in "The Blues I'm Playing" also embraces black community and culture. When we see the richest of white American culture through Oceola's eyes, we see its supposedly inherent beauty undermined. Hughes does not suggest that black Americans achieve equality with whites by adopting white values alone, but rather suggests that everyone love beauty wherever it is found, as Oceola loves classical music without sacrificing jazz.

Source: Ondine Le Blanc,"Overview of 'The Blues I'm Playing,'" for *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 2000.

Critical Essay #7

Tracy leads a blues band and has published books on the blues and on Langston Hughes. In the following essay, he offers his interpretation of the conflict between Dora Ellsworth and Oceola Jones, focusing on the significance of the blues in the story and on the meaning of Oceola's name.

In his short story "The Blues I'm Playing," from *The Ways of White Folks* (1934), Langston Hughes presents us with a compelling portrait of two women whose approaches to life and art cause them to sever a relationship that could have continued to be advantageous to each of them. In elderly white patron Mrs. Dora Ellsworth, who was based partially on Hughes's ex-patron Charlotte Mason, Hughes portrays a widow whose lack of fecundity, both physiologically and creatively, abetted by beliefs in Platonic and Manichaean dualism, leads her to exercise a Nietzschean "master morality" and to adopt an artistic aesthetic, art for art's sake, that divorces art from the living of life. In Oceola Jones, Hughes shows a quietly rebellious woman who subverts a number of sexual and racial stereotypes and in the process succeeds in defining herself and challenging Mrs. Ellsworth's aesthetic. Through Oceola, Hughes demonstrates how a positive self and racial image brings about self-confidence, success, and a unified vision of life. Oceola declares her independence from the strictures of Mrs. Ellsworth, but just as surely declares her dependence on Pete and her community for the support she needs to help make her what she can be; and the community recognizes the need it has for Oceola - a need she sets about fulfilling. She has, then, not only the freedom but the courage to choose her direction. And it is in the blues that Oceola finds the artistic freedom, range of emotion, and intellectual and spiritual energy equal to expressing her feelings about the nature of existence.

Hughes makes it clear that Mrs. Ellsworth is, in a sense, trying to be a mother to her young charges, Oceola and Antonio Bas, because of her own emotional aridity and loneliness. Because her wealthy husband is dead and she has no children of her own, Mrs. Ellsworth, feeling deserted, unfulfilled, and bitter, allows her own personal barrenness to direct her young charges away from personal relationships and life-directed thoughts that would interfere with her domination and away from their movement toward their own art, so that they can give birth to things out of their minds and not their bodies. She has adopted, clearly, the Platonic mind/body dualism and, perhaps, a Manichaean dualism as well, given the regular contrast and opposition between black and white in the story.

In Mrs. Ellsworth's view, the mind is associated with right, whiteness, and goodness, the body with wrong, blackness, and evil. Ellsworth views the "intrusion" of Pete, Oceola's African-American boyfriend, as the intrusion equivalent to that of a psychic and economic vampire whom she hopes to drive away by exposure to the "sunlight" of her ideas. James Emanuel [in *Langston Hughes*, 1967] speculates that "unappreciated sensitivity" has led Mrs. Ellsworth to her mindset, and indeed she does seem to fear male domination in a way that suggests that she had been in some way limited personally, perhaps artistically, by her relationship with her husband. However, Mrs.

Ellsworth seems to have absorbed the power relationships established by society enough to be unaware of the fact that her attitudes and actions do the same thing to her charges that (we assume) her husband did to her. She assumes, in other words, that her money, her power, gives her the right to place limits on "her" artists, as her husband's maleness, and thus dominance, had given him the right to do to her. Her "unappreciated sensitivity," if indeed she had it, did not teach her to appreciate sensitivity that she did not understand, or care to understand, in others.

Mrs. Ellsworth obviously feels it is her right and duty - indeed her place - to exercise control over artistic concerns and endeavors, not only because she has the money to do so, but because the money offers her the status of authority and intellectual superior[ity] as well. Mrs. Ellsworth is someone whose knowledge of the inherited values of Western culture in the world of art is sufficiently developed to value the accomplishments of the past masters recognized by the guardians of her culture, but insufficiently sympathetic to "foreign" developments that would represent real advances in art. She guards the Western past and tradition because that is where she is master, where she is in control. Actually, the control she has is economic, bequeathed to her by a male, her late husband; and it is this economic independence granted to her that she wishes to pass on to Oceola - but with artistic and aesthetic strings attached, a strong sexual attraction, and a desire to run Oceola's life that indicates that Mrs. Ellsworth has learned from her husband, and male authority, well. Plato asserts in *The Republic* that because art is an imitation of an imitation and thus removed from reality and eternal beauty, the person most capable of appreciating true beauty is the intellectual, not the artist. Therefore art should be subject to the control of the intellectual. And this is, in fact, what Mrs. Ellsworth wants for herself - in direct contrast to Oceola's desire to please herself, her audience, and her "people" with the variety of music they all want. To one who doesn't worry about paying the rent, playing for rent parties is uncommonly vulgar; but to one who has those worries, it is commonly voluntary.

Friedrich Nietzsche describes, in Beyond Good and Evil, what he believed to be the root of the problem that Hughes has torture Mrs. Ellsworth (or does she use it to torture Oceola?) and makes her what she is. She possesses what Nietzsche terms a perverted "master morality." Because she is unable to actuate her own will creatively - perhaps as a result of her husband's inability or lack of desire to understand her own forays into singing-she seeks to substitute power over others, in Oceola's case someone she views as both an exotic and a child, for her own inability to create. This is her "sublimation" (Nietzsche's term), and it explains her "master morality," her desire to direct or control the lives of others, in terms of her own weaknesses. When she encourages Oceola to sublimate her soul, Mrs. Ellsworth does so with the weight of Plato and Nietzsche behind her, and with the desire to control Oceola's life, to have her own "period," the period of Oceola, as she calls it. Ironically, her ability to control Oceola represents for her a fecundity she lacks, and it is not difficult to see her controlling of Oceola's life as being analogous to Mrs. Ellsworth's getting her menstrual period, proving herself still capable of giving birth and thus creating something of her own. The joke here, of course, is that if she has her period she is most likely not with child, so her imagined state is an illusory one at best. When Mrs. Ellsworth first meets Oceola, she is intrigued at the thought of having a Black among her artists. She is an owner, or at least deludes

herself that she can own people like Oceola. However, at the very point at which she deludes herself into believing that she is freeing Oceola, she is making a subtle and insidious attempt to enslave her.

Part of that attempt at enslavement draws philosophically on the ideas of Walter Pater and the Aesthetic Movement in championing the phrase and concept of art for art's sake. Separating art from some kind of useful purpose places art in a realm where the wealthy Mrs. Ellsworth, retreating from the mundane reality of life with the help of her money, can deal with it as the exclusive property of someone of her class and background who has the time to cloister herself in delicate parlors and lose herself in some imaginary artistic realm. "But you must have time," Mrs. Ellsworth tells Oceola when Oceola says that she is too busy with work to study formally. Later, when Hughes introduces the carpe diem theme as Mrs. Ellsworth cautions Oceola that "Art is long. . . and time is fleeting. . . ," Oceola replies, "Yes, ma'am . . . but I get nervous if I start worrying about time." Whereas Mrs. Ellsworth worries about time - in this case Oceola's - as if it were her own, Oceola prefers not to do so, electing to concentrate on doing things as they can be done, on living more immediately, and on flowing with her life rather than flooding it nervously or frantically toward some destination that would be destroyed by the deluge. Art, then, takes its place in a continuum rather than existing outside of or over it, and takes its character from a continuum as well. The concept of pure art is totally alien to Oceola's aesthetic system. Like the idea of a "pure" race, which is very likely at least partially behind Mrs. Ellsworth's retreat from contemporary life, pure art in Mrs. Ellsworth's case is the creation of a master mentality that is in many ways afraid of both Oceola's reality and itself.

And pure art has nothing to do, Mrs. Ellsworth believes, with syncopation, blues, jazz, or spirituals. She is decidedly not a modernist where music is concerned. For her, art must have a certain dignity and propriety of her own definition, and clearly African-American music didn't have them. The selections that Oceola played for Mrs. Ellsworth at their first audience reflected Oceola's interests: the Rakhmaninov *Prelude in C Sharp Minor*, with its melancholy and nostalgia, possesses at times a blues-like sadness; the Liszt *Etudes*, from the pen of the greatest piano virtuoso of his time, reflect his imaginative and technical advances; Ravel's *Pavanne Pour Une Enfante Defunte* demonstrates one of Ravel's lifelong sympathies with the ancient, exotic worlds and experiences of children and animals; and Handy's "St. Louis Blues," which Ellsworth would have grudgingly granted as a concession to Oceola's background and inexperience, demonstrates the popular possibilities for folk material of African Americans. Oceola demonstrates through her selections not only her virtuosity but also her respect for imagination and innovation. Ravel himself, in fact, produced a jazz-like syncopation in *Concerto for the Left Hand*, and a G-Major piano concerto that was touched by jazz as well. It is certainly ironic that Mrs. Ellsworth is impressed by the works of classical composers like Ravel, who flirted with jazz, and with their innovations and independence, but is herself unable to break through and accept the achievements and possibilities of jazz the way Milhaud, Gershwin, Ives, and Stravinsky could. But then, she needs the cloak of respectability wrapped around what she likes, and that cloak is for her necessarily made of a heavy European fiber.

Of course, it is significant that Oceola is a pianist, since the piano is one of the few instruments that women were encouraged or allowed to play at the time. Linda Dahl [in *Stormy Weather: The Music and Lives of a Century of Jazz Women*, 1984] discussed its importance as an artistic, but not an economic, outlet for women:

The piano is one of the few instruments that seem more or less free of sex stereotypes to the extent that it does carry unconscious gender associations. Those associations deliver an ambiguous message. On the one hand, for example, Jelly Roll Morton recalled hesitating to take up piano for fear of being thought a "sissy"; on the other hand, though playing the piano has been approved as a desirable feminine refinement, making a professional career of it was considered decidedly unladylike and was an option reserved largely for men.

Rosetta Reitz points out [in *Piano Singer's Blues: Women Accompany Themselves*, 1982] that women "profoundly influenced many of our most distinguished male jazz pianists," citing the influence of Mamie Desdoumes on Jelly Roll Morton, the mothers of James P. Johnson and Willie "the Lion" Smith on their sons, Mazie Mullins on Fats Waller, a grade school teacher on Fletcher Henderson, and two Washington, D.C., pianists on Duke Ellington (*Piano Singer's Blues*). Indeed, during the pre-World War II period, such outstanding women pianists as Bernice Edwards, Victoria Spivey, Myrtle Jenkins, Louise Johnson, Georgia White, Gladys Bentley, and Hociel Thomas recorded as featured artists or accompanists, demonstrating that there were women who plied their talents as pianists either as a career or an avocation; and a pianist in the sacred field, the great Arizona Dranes of the Church of God in Christ, was just one of many women whose pianistic skill graced the church services and recordings of multitudes of African-American churches. Hughes's choice, then, of the piano as an instrument for Oceola is entirely within the reality of the acceptability of the piano as an option available to women in both non-professional and sometimes professional areas. Playing the piano allowed Oceola to express a part of her personality that might otherwise have been repressed or gone unexplored.

From the very first words of the story, Hughes emphasizes the importance of possessing an identity, opening with the name of the woman who is the primary force of the story. Her name is important in that through it Hughes is able to provide some subtle characterization. Linda Dahl reports in *Stormy Weather* that Mary Lou Williams remembered a pianist named Oceola playing in Kansas City, and Hughes may have been familiar with that performer, though he mentions her nowhere else in his autobiographical writings. It is likely that the use of that name stems from Hughes's familiarity with the historical figure for whom nineteen towns, plus various counties, streets, a Navy destroyer, and a mountain have been named: Osceola, the famous chief of the Seminole tribe in the Second Seminole War. [According to John K. Mahon in *Dictionary of Afro- American Slavery*, 1988], the Seminoles counted among their tribe, friends, and allies a rather large element of African American ex-slaves who had fled largely from the abuses of the South Carolinians and felt a kinship with the Seminoles, who also not only had suffered similar abuses, but also possessed "religious, ceremonial, governmental, and mythical similarities" that had parallels to the African heritage of the slaves. Those African Americans who were slaves to the Native

Americans were in fact more like feudal vassals than chattel slaves, and the combination of the runaway slave problem and the relatively better treatment at the hands of the Native American masters was enough to provoke the U.S. government into declaring war on the Seminoles twice, once in 1817-18 and again in 1835-42. It was during the second war that Osceola rose to prominence because of his success in battle.

Osceola's name lends a number of associations to Hughes's character in the story. It strengthens, on one hand, the autobiographical elements of the story, given that in real life the first love of Hughes's patron Charlotte Mason was Indians, suggesting that in her interest in Oceola Mrs. Ellsworth has a parallel to the lover of primitives in Hughes's life. More important are a number of pertinent facts related to the historical figure. Although most sources report that the name "Asi-Yahola" means "black drink singer," referring to a ceremonial drink, Charles B. Cory reported in 1896 that the name signified "rising sun," and Oceola is certainly that. Not only is she, for Mrs. Ellsworth, at the beginning of a great career, ready to be polished and finished, as Ormond Hunter notes, like new furniture, she is also a youthful choir director and rent party pianist who loves her neighbors and neighborhood and seeks to warm her community with the heart of its own technique and passion. The Seminole chief, though, was noted for his fighting, his bravery in battle, and his war whoop - especially remarked [upon] by several commentators - which is in stark contrast to the much more subtle, calm rebellion of the female Oceola Jones.

Oceola Jones wonders at Mrs. Ellsworth's generosity; merely sidesteps Mrs. Ellsworth's question about the location of her biological father (on the heels of a discussion of how big Billy Kersands's mouth was, it is hard not to think about how big Ellsworth's mouth is here); politely refuses Ellsworth's first attempt to extricate her from Harlem, though she ultimately does move; puzzles over the arguments that fellow students have at the Left Bank concerning art; and patiently resists Mrs. Ellsworth's attempts to separate her and Pete. Oceola is, indeed, constantly under siege, captured for a time under the white flag of truce, like the chief was, but ultimately escaping by simply walking away- unlike the chief, who died in captivity. What is admirable about Oceola in this story is that she has the strength not to whoop, not to insult, not to say "none of your nasty business, white woman," not to strike out; but to state calmly her objectives and desires, to try various opportunities, to resist gently those directives with which she disagrees, and to walk away richer and with dignity without having compromised her integrity. She is self-assured, comfortable and happy with her culture and her abilities, and is thus not defensive about Ellsworth's intrusions into her private life or attitudes about her people. Her war, then, has been won in her own mind, and her confrontation with the enemy, Ellsworth (who had been informed of Oceola's presence by the great white hunter, Ormond), is a victory without bloodshed, but a victory nonetheless. The Seminole chief's victory was only a partial and posthumous one; later much romanticized and mythologized, buried with military honors, the subject of poems, plays and novels, he took on an heroic stature in American popular culture that living Native Americans might not enjoy. Most of Osceola's people were removed from their land, and Osceola died in captivity, though not without taking 1500 of the enemy and twenty million dollars in U.S. war expenses with him. Oceola Jones winds up on the verge of being married, and to

return to live among "her people," with two years of professional training to her credit, and a feeling of calm with herself.

Oceola Jones's victory comes about because she refuses to let Mrs. Ellsworth define her. The opening lines of the story, with their clipped cadence and bloodless tones, reflect Ellsworth's aesthetic:

Oceola Jones, pianist, studied under Philippe in Paris. Mrs. Dora Ellsworth paid her bills. The bills included a little apartment on the Left Bank and a grand piano.

The sentences are very neat, economical, and passionless. Oceola is a pianist, nothing more - that is enough. She studies in the "correct" location with the "correct" person, and is significantly described as being "under" him, subjugated to his aesthetic values; she has an economic arrangement that removes her from the mundane worries of daily life; and she is allowed for that life only a "little" apartment, while for her art she is supplied with something "grand." At this time Oceola is not the sole beneficiary of Mrs. Ellsworth's attention. Mrs. Ellsworth is also seeking to be the patron of the significantly - named Antonio Bas, whose surname evokes associations with bas - relief, sculpture carved in a flat surface so that the figures are only slightly three dimensional. As in Shaw's *Pygmalion*, Ellsworth seeks to take the rough base and mold it in her image of what it could or ought to be; and Ellsworth wants the figure to be only slightly three dimensional, always compliant with her wishes. Bas, in fact, ends up with Mrs. Ellsworth at the conclusion of the story when the Oceola-Ellsworth relationship deteriorates, most likely because of his acquiescence rather than any special genius he might have. Mrs. Ellsworth had, after all, once dismissed a soprano because she smelled like garlic, living "to regret bitterly her lack of musical acumen in the face of garlic" when the soprano later became a great success.

But Oceola avoids the Ellsworth ambush and maintains her own identity independent of Ellsworth's vision of what Oceola is or ought to be. Oceola tells Mrs. Ellsworth what she needs to know about her past and family-no more-calmly reports her devotion and aid to Pete, sacrifices at one point her technical progress for Pete's benefit, and laments at one point "I've been away from my people so long . . . I want to live right in the middle of them again." She prefers, we might say, being in bed with Pete to being in bed with Mrs. Ellsworth. Mrs. Ellsworth would characterize the preference as being for the pleasures of the body over the pleasures of the mind, an avoidance, perhaps, of her own sublimated sexual attraction to "the electric strength of that brown-black body beside her."

Oceola would not employ that characterization. At their parting audience, just as Mrs. Ellsworth begins to express her fears about men, Oceola plays the blues, described by Hughes in blatantly sexual terms. It starts as a sensuous slow blues of seductively wandering fingers and "soft and lazy syncopation," building to a more rollicking and driving passion, climaxing with an "earth-throbbing rhythm that shook the lilies in the Persian vases of Mrs. Ellsworth's music room," returning to the slow and sensuous denouement of the blues with which she began. In Oceola's microcosmic and artistic drama, which drowns out the voice, the imperatives, of Mrs. Ellsworth and her aesthetic,

we see the playing out of Oceola's own aesthetic. While Mrs. Ellsworth continues to try to define Oceola's artistry in economic terms-"Is this what I spent thousands of dollars to teach you?" - Oceola emphasizes the blues as a marriage of intellectual, technical, and personal emotional impulses, a unified approach that does not compartmentalize or deny anything about her life, but builds from it, moves to its feel, swells to its height, and always returns to what is most elemental and honest about it. It is a protean force, not fixed or static in Persian vases removed from Nature to adorn in an artificial environment, but emotionally complex and broad-ranging. "These are the blues . . . I'm playing," Oceola announces, and she means that statement two ways: she is playing the blues, and now *she* is playing, from herself.

Interestingly, Hughes makes it clear that the music has a voice of its own, a message it delivers. After the first and before the last line of the message, Hughes includes the words "sang the blues" to indicate that indeed it communicates by virtue of what it is, from what tradition it comes. Rather than letting the blues act as a means of separation and unproductivity, as Mrs. Ellsworth does, Oceola fuses her sadness and hope into a work of art that affirms humanity and self pride. After all, the bass notes are said to throb like "tom-toms," suggesting that the blues recall what Hughes saw as the ancient and earthy power of her African ancestors. Thus, historically, geographically, intellectually, emotionally, sexually, and artistically, the blues is represented as being both unifying and useful. Mrs. Ellsworth's response to the song doesn't make much sense practically. "If I could holler," the song begins; Mrs. Ellsworth responds that she would stand looking. In her hands (or rather mouth), the lyric's emotional construction is undercut by an unfulfilling delivery: if one can holler, why does one merely look? Why mention the ability to holler if in fact one has no intention of doing so? It is because she is an observer, not a creator, and someone unused to being enough in touch with herself and the meaning of her life to consider it worthy of individual, personal artistic expression. Quite appropriately, the line she supplies, "And I . . . would stand looking at the stars," violates the true words lyric not only in spirit, but in form. Mrs. Ellsworth's line doesn't rhyme, as do the lines of the song, probably taken from Leroy Carr's version of "How Long How Long Blues" as performed by Carr or someone like Jimmy Rushing. Her line is clearly decontextualized, underscoring how foreign the tradition and the spirit are to Mrs. Ellsworth.

Mrs. Ellsworth has the last word in Hughes's story, but one has to wonder, as the song asks: how long she'll have it, or how long blacks will have to suffer it.

Her speech seems little more than broken wind as she delivers her final words. The "stars in her eyes" prevent her from realizing that she is doomed to remoteness from the object of her admiration: her sense of what she and others ought to be. "How long has that evening train been gone?" the song asks. Mrs. Ellsworth didn't even know that darkness had fallen long before Oceola, having bought a railroad of her own, rode off on her own track.

Source: Steven C. Tracy, "Blues to Live by: Langston Hughes's 'The Blues I'm Playing,'" in *The Langston Hughes Review*, Vol. XII, No. 1, 1993, pp. 12-18.

Critical Essay #8

In the following excerpt, Bone discusses the conflict between Oceola Jones and Dora Ellsworth and the significance of the blues to the story.

[T]he complex vision of the blues, even as it balances the claims of hope and disillusionment, absorbs both attitudes in a higher synthesis. The blues, as Richard Kostelanetz has remarked, is a "tightly organized lyric form in which the singer narrates the reasons for his sadness, usually attributed to his failure to attain the ideal role he conceives for himself." The blues are born, in short, out of the inexorable tension of dream and actuality. By mediating poetically between the two, the form itself makes possible a bittersweet and retrospective triumph over pain.

The centerpiece of *The Ways of White Folk* is "The Blues I'm Playing." This story is a fictional account of Hughes's relationship with [his former patron], Mrs. Mason. The black heroine, Oceola Jones, is a gifted young pianist equally at home in the jazz or classical tradition. Her white antagonist, Mrs. Dora Ellsworth, is a rich and aging patron of the arts. The plot traces the successive stages of their relationship: discovery and sponsorship; increasing efforts to dominate not only the musical career, but the private life of her protegee; a crisis following the girl's announcement of her impending marriage; and eventual estrangement, after a painful, parting interview.

The dramatic conflict centers on the girl's stubborn effort to preserve her black identity in the face of her patron's determined onslaught. Mrs. Ellsworth looks on Oceola as a kind of refractory material that resists cultivation or refinement. She is in short a missionary. Mrs. Ellsworth embodies that Faustian urge toward total possession of another human being which informs so much of the short fiction of Edgar Allan Poe. This is the urge responsible for slavery and other forms of European empire. Oceola fights with all her strength to fend it off, and to establish her life on an independent footing.

"The Blues I'm Playing" is at once an arraignment of Western culture and an affirmation of Negro folk forms. The classical and jazz idioms, which compete for Oceola's loyalty, give dramatic substance to the theme of cultural dualism which is basic to the Harlem Renaissance. In the sexual sphere, conflicting codes divide the two women. Oceola has a lover she is helping through medical school, and whom she ultimately marries. Mrs. Ellsworth hopes that she will learn to sublimate her sexual desires through art. An irreconcilable conflict thus unfolds between the Platonist and transcendental values of the patron (symbolized by her aspiration toward the stars) and the earthy, down-home folk morality of her protegee.

A sublimated sexuality implies a disembodied art. Through Mrs. Ellsworth, Hughes is satirizing the otherworldly strain in Western art. He decries the separation of art from life, and the transcendental impulse to resolve all human contradictions in the vastness of eternity. Through Oceola's music, on the other hand, Hughes defines his own esthetic. Hers is an art grounded in folk sources, steeped in sensuality, and based on the life-affirming rhythms of the blues. It is a music close to dance, full of movement and

expression, vibrant with the joy and pain of living. The blues is an art of paradox and ambiguity, and it is through this form that Langston Hughes has chosen to express his complex sense of life.

In the end, Hughes resorts to a satiric image. The final scene takes place in Mrs. Ellsworth's music room, whose decor is dominated by a row of Persian vases filled with white lilies. As Oceola entertains her patron for the last time, she breaks into a jazz rhythm that shakes the long-stemmed flowers in their rootlessness and artificial isolation: "Mrs. Ellsworth sat very still in her chair looking at the lilies trembling delicately in the priceless Persian vases, while Oceola made the bass notes throb like tomtoms deep in the earth."

Source: Robert Bone,"The Ways of White Folks," in his *Down Home: A History of Afro-American Short Fiction from Its Beginnings to the End of the Harlem Renaissance*, G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1975, pp. 254-60.

Topics for Further Study

House parties initially provide Oceola with income and later with an important link to Harlem. Using books and other sources about the history of black life in New York City, write a description of a Harlem house party or rent party.

Oceola takes a rather unconventional approach to planning her wedding. Find the description and speculate about the significance of this in relation to her character and the story's meanings.

Did you find that your feelings about any of the characters changed significantly as you read the story? If yes, try to locate and explain the passages that influenced you.

Oceola's stepfather played in a minstrel show, which was a very popular form of entertainment at the turn of the century. Do a short research paper on minstrel shows, looking especially at the images of African Americans they presented.

If Oceola has triumphed at the end of the story- as most critics agree-why does Mrs. Ellsworth have the last line?

Compare and Contrast

1933: Lynch mobs kill forty-two blacks as lynchings increase in the southern U.S. states. **1991 and 1992:** Los Angeles police officers beat unarmed Rodney King, and the following year the officers charged in connection with the beating are acquitted. The worst riot for violence and looting in U.S. history follows the verdict.

1948: Nationalist Afrikaner bloc wins the election in South Africa on an apartheid platform that favors the separation of the white and black races with the whites in power.

1992: South African whites vote 2 to 1 to give a mandate to the president of the country to end white-minority rule.

1939: The Daughters of the American Revolution refuse to rent Constitution Hall to Marian Anderson because of her race, although Anderson had been proclaimed as the world's greatest contralto by European critics. An audience of 75,000 gathered at the Lincoln Memorial to hear Anderson on Easter Sunday.

1987: Popular black soul and Rhythm and Blues singer Anita Baker makes a music video of her performance "One Night of Rapture" at Constitution Hall.

What Do I Read Next?

An early and central argument for racial equality in the United States, W. E. B. DuBois's *The Souls of Black Folk* was also fundamental to the Harlem Renaissance and its vision of African- Americans raised up through intellectual and artistic achievements.

An influential book of short stories by British author D. H. Lawrence, *The Lovely Lady* confronts the reader with undisguised social critiques. The volume had a considerable impact on Hughes, convincing him that short fiction could be a valuable genre.

Hughes's autobiography, *The Big Sea,* describes in detail his relationship with his patron, Charlotte Mason; that dynamic was, he acknowledged, the model for "The Blues I'm Playing."

Further Study

Emanuel, James A. *Langston Hughes*, New York: Twayne Publishers, 1967.

An authoritative, early study of "The Blues I'm Playing" that analyzes the story in terms of thematics.

Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. *The Signifying Monkey,* Oxford University Press, 1988.

A landmark study of African-American fiction that demonstrates the influence of African tradition and folklore on "The Blues I'm Playing."

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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