Blues Ain't No Mockingbird Study Guide

Blues Ain't No Mockingbird by Toni Cade Bambara

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

First published in 1971, "Blues Ain't No Mockin Bird" was included the following year in Toni Cade Bambara's highly acclaimed first collection of short stories, *Gorilla, My Love.* Like most of Bambara's stories, "Blues Ain't No Mockin Bird" features strong African-American female characters and reflects social and political issues of particular concern to the contemporary African-American community. In the story, the young female narrator is playing with her neighbors and cousin at her grandmother's house. Two white filmmakers, shooting a film "about food stamps" for the county, lurk near their yard. The narrator's grandmother asks them to leave: not heeding her request, they simply move farther away. When Granddaddy Cain returns from hunting a chicken hawk, he takes the camera from the men and smashes it. Cathy, the distant cousin of the narrator, displays a precocious ability to interpret other people's actions and words as well as an interest in storytelling and writing. Her intelligence and ambition echo Bambara's own accomplishments as well as the larger African-American storytelling tradition.

Author Biography

Toni Cade Bambara, writer, filmmaker, and political activist, says she has known "the power of the word" since she was a child on the streets of Harlem. Born Miltona Mirkin Cade in 1939 in New York City, she adopted the African name "Bambara" in 1970. Upon her death in 1995, the *New York Times* called her a "major contributor to the emerging of black women's literature, along with the writers Toni Morrison and Alice Walker." She grew up in Harlem, Queens, and Jersey City. In 1959, at the age of twenty, she received her B.A. in Theatre Arts and English from Queens College and won the John Golden award for short fiction. While enrolled as a graduate student of American fiction at the City College of New York, she worked in both civic and local neighborhood programs in education and drama and studied theater in Europe. After receiving her Masters degree, Bambara taught at City College from 1965 to 1969. Immersed in the social and political activism of the 1960s and early 1970s, Bambara sometimes saw her writing of fiction as "rather frivolous," yet this period of her life produced some of her most popular works.

Bambara participated in the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s and was active in the civil rights, Black Power, anti-war, and feminist movements that characterized this period. Along with other members of the black intelligentsia, Bambara sought to challenge traditional representations of blacks, recuperate significant African-American events and personages of the past, and explore black vernacular English. Bambara's writings also explore themes of women's lives and social and political activism.

In 1970 Bambara (writing as Toni Cade) was one of the first authors to bring together issues of feminism and race with her *The Black Woman.* In the anthology *Tales and Short Stories for Black Folk* (1971), Bambara collected stories by other published authors as well as fiction written by herself and her students. In 1972, Bambara's short stories were collected in *Gorilla, My Love.* Celebrated for its focus on the voice and experience of young black women and its compassionate view of African-American communities, this collection has remained her most widely read work.

Before publishing her second collection of stories, *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive* (1977), Bambara traveled to both Cuba and Vietnam, where she saw the effectiveness of women's organizations and "the power of the word" in these countries as a legitimate tool for social change. During this time, Bambara moved with her daughter to Atlanta, Georgia, where she took the post of writer-in-residence at Spelman College from 1974 to 1977 and helped found a number of black writers' and cultural associations. In 1980, Bambara published *The Salt Eaters*, which is set in Georgia and focuses on the mental and emotional crisis of a community organizer, Velma Jackson.

In the 1980s and 1990s Bambara concentrated on film, another medium for "the power of the voice," working as scriptwriter, filmmaker, critic, and teacher. She collaborated on several television documentaries, such as the award-winning *The Bombing of Osage Avenue* (1986), a documentary about the bombing of a black separatist's organization's

headquarters in Philadelphia. A selection of her writings, *Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions,* was published posthumously in 1996.

Plot Summary

Children are playing in a front yard. The twin boys from next door, Tyrone and Terry, are on the tire swing, while the narrator and her cousin, Cathy, jump and dance on a frozen puddle. The narrator's grandmother is on the back porch, ladling rum over the Christmas cakes she has baked. Near the house, in a meadow, are two men who have been there all morning shooting film with their movie camera; they claim they are from the county and are making a film that has to do with food stamps. Granny has asked them to get off the property and has protested their filming, but although they have moved father away they have continued to film.

Granddaddy Cain returns home from the woods where he has shot a chicken hawk. The two filmmakers film his approach. Granny asks him to get the men out of her flower bed.

Granddaddy Cain holds out his hand for the camera. Without arguing, the men give it to him. They explain they are filming for the county. One of the man asks for the camera back, using the word "please." Granddaddy smashes the camera. The camera man gathers up the pieces. Granddaddy tells the men that he and Granny own this place and they are standing in her flower bed. The men back away.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

One of more than a dozen short stories gathered in Toni Cade Bambara's *Gorilla, My Love*, "Blues Ain't No Mockingbird" is the tale of an impoverished black family as told through the eyes of the young granddaughter. The story opens as two children, Cathy and the title's unnamed narrator, are jumping atop a frozen puddle, waiting for their turn in the tire swing occupied by Tyrone and Terry, the neighbor's twin boys.

Cora Cain, the young narrator's grandmother, is on the porch making Christmas cakes when two white men, one holding a camera, come their way. They work for the county and are purportedly taking footage as part of the food stamp campaign. They approach Granny Cain in the hopes that she will give them a statement regarding the campaign. She says nothing and eventually they leave. When they are gone, she tells the children a story about how she had been on a bridge once, as part of the crowd that had gathered to watch a man threatening to commit suicide by jumping off. The police were there, as was a minister and the man's woman.

A man with a camera had come to take pictures of the ordeal and it is clear that Granny Cain does not approve. The twins are eager to know if the man jumped, but Granny simply ends her story there. Cathy is the narrator's third cousin, whom they had taken with them after a visit last Thanksgiving. The family has moved around a lot, mostly due to Granny Cain's intolerance of those who look down on them. Clearly, she is a proud, righteous woman. She wouldn't abide with Mr. Judson bringing them boxes of old clothes and raggedy magazines or Mrs. Cooper's condescending comments and it is for these reasons that they had left those places.

With Granny not finishing her story, Cathy tells the others about a story she had read once about a lady named Goldilocks who had simply barged into a stranger's house, messed up their groceries, broke their furniture, and slept in their beds. The twins are intrigued and the narrator thinks to herself that she had heard the story was actually about bears.

The two boys get into an argument and start a scuffle. Granny Cain however, is in such a foul mood that she does not seem to notice and instead continues pouring the rum over the cakes while mumbling and grumbling to herself.

Just then, Granddaddy Cain returns from the fields with a chicken hawk slung over his shoulder. The two men from the county are close behind. He nails the bird to the tool-shed door; it is still alive. Granny Cain tells her husband to get the men out of her flower bed, but just then the chicken hawk's mate comes swooping down across the yard, having come to claim its mate.

The children fall to the ground and the two men are running and falling about. One of the men flails helplessly at the bird with his cap. Granddaddy Cain kills the bird. Sure of themselves once again, the men walk over to him, but he simply dismisses them with a quiet, "Good day, gentlemen." Not sure of what to do, they stand in place and smile wolfishly. Granddaddy Cain then holds his hand out for the camera. They put the camera in his hand and start to explain how they are filming for the county. The cameraman even asks for it back, saying, "Please, sir."

Granddaddy Cain smashes the camera. The cameraman comes forward and gathers up the pieces in his arms, trying to preserve the film. Presently, both men leave. Granddaddy Cain makes his way into the house, while Granny Cain continues working on the cakes, now humming contentedly. Cathy says that she is going to write a story one day and Tyrone asks if he can be in it. Maybe, she replies, if he is there and ready.

Analysis

Though it is never overtly expressed, the title's theme and subtext is one of race and racial prejudice. The men from the government are clearly trespassing on the Cains' land, under the auspices of a county project relating to food stamps. Although they are polite, their motives are questionable. It seems that they wish to use the Cains as an example of how it is possible that black people can sustain themselves: the insinuation being that the food stamp program is not needed.

Essentially, the incident portrayed in the story acts as a microcosm of society, with the obvious representation of both, the white and black races. The story was first published in 1971, at a time when equality and the rights of black people were increasingly under the spotlight and is a succinct, if not overt comment on the numerous issues that faced black people in America.

The two white characters, referred to as 'Camera' and 'Smilin', in the story are not portrayed as particularly strong individuals: They are unable to offer any reasonable explanation for their actions beyond saying, repeatedly, that what they're doing is for the county. Similarly, they seem to be ashamed of what they are doing, unable, as they are, to look Granny Cain in the eye.

Granny Cain tells the men to leave on numerous occasions, but they simply loiter further away from the family, remaining on the land. This can be construed as a comment that for a long time black people in the country had no real authority or voice of their own. Their requests and pleas would simply be ignored. The arrival of Granddaddy Cain represents a shift in the balance of power, however. The men are clearly in awe of his imposing presence, as displayed by how, with a mere gesture, he is able to demand the camera from the men. The cameraman even calls him 'sir' whereas he had referred to Granny Cain as 'aunty', a considerably less formal and less respectful manner of addressing someone.

So too, it is an indictment of how the white people had perpetrated various crimes against the black people in America under the guise of official sanction; they are trespassing but reason that they can do so because they are working on a food stamp film for the county.

In spite of the contentious, potentially explosive subject matter, the tone of the narrative is mostly light and humorous, told as it is through the eyes of a child. Although the specific place is never mentioned – perhaps so as not to constrain what are essentially universal themes and problems to one specific place – the dialect used by the author is a clear indication the story takes place in the rural South.

Cathy's comment in the final lines of the story is Bambara saying that there is a place for Tyrone (that is, the black male) to play in society if he is there and ready to do so when the time comes.

Characters

Camera

"Camera" is how the narrator refers to the cameraman who is filming for a county project on food stamps. The camera on his shoulder is so much a part of him that when he hands it to Granddaddy Cain he keeps his shoulder "high like the camera was still there or needed to be." When Granddaddy deliberately damages the camera, Camera gathers up the pieces and holds them "like he's protectin a kitten from the cold."

Cameraman

See Camera

Cain

Granddaddy Cain is Granny's husband, whom she always refers to as "Mister Cain" in keeping with rural Southern protocols. Although he speaks only a few lines in the story, he performs its most dramatic action. When he returns from hunting, carrying a bloody chicken hawk over his shoulder, Granny asks him to get the cameramen to leave. First, however, he dispatches the hawk's attacking mate by throwing a hammer at the swooping bird. Although he displays no anger, greeting the filmmakers calmly with a simple, "Good day, gentlemen," Granddaddy Cain is a forceful presence. Cathy observes that he unnerves people because he is "tall and silent and like a king," and the narrator reports that when he worked as a waiter on trains he was always referred to as "The Waiter," while his colleagues were just "waiters." Granddaddy gestures for the camera, and the cameraman, flustered, gives it to him. Granddaddy's hand is huge and skilled, "a person in itself" — holding the camera in one hand, he tears the top off of it with the other. He offers no explanation beyond the statement, "'You standing in the misses' flower bed . . . This is our own place,'" and the filmmakers leave without further protest.

Cathy

Cathy is the most perceptive of the four children in the story. The narrator is impressed by her ability to understand the workings of the adult world and of the family, such as "how come we move so much," even though she is a relative newcomer. The narrator's third cousin, Cathy became a part of the family during a visit one Thanksgiving. Although no more information about her origin is offered, this suggests that Cathy may have a troubled past or a disrupted family life. Her statement that one day she will write a story situates her as the heir of the storytelling Granny and, perhaps, the predecessor of the storywriting Bambara.

Filmmaker

See Smilin

Granny

The narrator's grandmother, Granny occupies a central position in the family. Her displeasure at the intrusive behavior of the filmmakers is at the root of the story's theme and conflict, and her behavior towards the children, both in the story and in the recollections of the narrator, makes manifest her dominant role as teacher, caretaker, and guardian of the community. Granny also has an explosive temper and a low tolerance for patronizing and demeaning behavior; the family has moved many times "on account of people drivin Granny crazy till she'd get up in the night and start packin." Her anger at the presence of the filmmakers causes her to mumble menacingly in the kitchen, and the narrator fears she might "bust through that screen with somethin in her hand and murder on her mind." Granny is fiercely protective — as protective as the chicken hawk who squawks and attacks her slain mate's killer— yet caring and perceptive as well, teaching the children "steady with no let-up" and cautioning them against in-fighting.

Narrator

The narrator is a young girl through whose curious and engaged eyes the reader absorbs the events of the story. The narrator looks up to her cousin Cathy, whose perceptiveness outstrips the narrator's own. She also is in awe of her grandparents, whose strength and love provide the core of the family. Although the narrator does not fully understand everything that she observes, her youthful point of view engages the reader and allows the reader to gain the insights that she herself only partly grasps.

Smilin

"Smilin," as the narrator calls him, does most of the talking for the two filmmakers, smiling constantly as he explains that they are filming for a county project on food stamps.

Terry

With Tyrone, Terry is one of the twins who lives next door to the narrator. Terry mimics Tyrone, leading Cathy to observe that he "don't never have anything original to say." Terry and Tyrone exhibit none of the perceptiveness of Cathy and the narrator; instead, they wrestle with each other and ask eager questions.

Tyrone

Tyrone is the twin brother of Terry and lives next door to the narrator. Terry mimics his brother, but neither boy displays the insight or perceptiveness of the narrator or her cousin Cathy.

Themes

Race and Racism

The story's conflict is really a conflict over race and representation: Granny believes that the filmmakers have no right, uninvited, to shoot footage of her, her family, and her home; the filmmakers, meanwhile, are attempting to use her life to make a political and social statement, sponsored by the state government, about the black rural poor. The filmmakers, then, want to see the family as "representative" or "typical"; Granny sees herself and her family as individuals. This difference in attitude is demonstrated in the first dialogue between the filmmakers and Granny. When they first approach Granny, they fail to greet her. She interrupts them with an ironic "Good mornin." They respond sheepishly, with a guilty, hangdog expression. They continue, though, referring to Granny as "aunty," a condescending, stereotypical term used for older black women. Later in the story, when Camera repeats the appellation, Granny snaps backs: "'Your mama and I are not related.'" The filmmakers also offend Granny when they praise her place: "'Nice things here,' said the man, buzzin his camera over the yard.The pecan barrels, the sled, me and Cathy, the flowers, the painted stones along the driveway, the trees, the twins, the toolshed." The filmmakers, referring to the narrator and Cathy as "things" and regarding children as little different than driveways or flowers, objectify people. Granny is aware of this: her first line in the story is a request to "'Go tell that man we ain't a bunch of trees.'" She responds to their appraisal of her place by stating, "'I don't know about the thing, the it, and the stuff, . . . Just people here is what I tend to consider.'"

Social Class

The filmmakers from the county are filming about food stamps; specifically, they appear to be making a film arguing against the food stamp program, a federal program instituted to aid the poor. We know this from Smilin's comment to Granny: "'I see you grow your own vegetables . . . . If more folks did that, see, there'd be no need— "' Thus the issue of class is intertwined with the question of race: the filmmakers want to portray Granny as self-sufficient, not needing government assistance, and therefore "nice." While we do not know the views of Granny or the others on this issue, the crass and demeaning behavior of the filmmakers leads us to question rhetoric about poverty and entitlements that depend upon uninformed, general representations and has little to do with the actual lives of people.

Responsibility toward Others

A final, related issue of representation can be traced by considering the stories-within-the-story. Granny and Cathy are the storytellers in the family, and their stories revolve around the harmful intrusiveness of looking at and representing the plights of others.

Granny tells a story about a man who was going to jump off a bridge. A crowd gathered; the minister and the man's girlfriend tried to talk him out of it. Then a man with a camera arrived and took pictures of the man. She notes that he saved a few pictures, implying that he wanted to photograph the man as and after he jumped (and, by extension, that he wanted the man to jump). The twins want to know whether the man jumped or not: Granny stares at them, saying nothing until they realize that there is something wrong with their question, although they may not recognize the similarity between their curiosity and the callous and prurient attitude of the cameraman. Cathy then tells the story of Goldilocks and the Three Bears. While the story is usually seen as harmless and cute, Cathy retells it to emphasize Goldilocks's rude behavior: she "barged" into a stranger's house, "messed over the people's groceries and broke up the people's furniture." The twins want to know if she was forced to pay for the mess she made. Both stories are left unfinished, but both point to the same theme: the indignity of invading the lives of strangers for sensational or selfish reasons. In addition, these stories-within the story, in which third-person narrators represent others, are in contrast with the overall story, which is narrated in first person and constitutes an example of self-expression, the telling of one's own story.

Style

Dialect

Toni Cade Bambara's use of dialect has been highly praised by readers and critics. Her ability to capture the cadences and languages of rural Southern black speech has been equated with Mark Twain's ability to capture the dialects of nineteenth-century American speech.

The informal and conversational tone of "Blues Ain't No Mockin Bird" allows the narrator to "talk" to us in her own voice, and her figurative language conveys as much of the story's themes as any action of the plot. When the twins ask Granny what happened to the man who was going to jump off the bridge, the narrator reports: "And Granny just stared at the twins till their faces swallow up the eager and they don't even care any more about the man jumpin." The image of the faces of the young boys "swallow[ing] up the eager" brilliantly conveys a complex psychological process in a few words. Similarly, Bambara renders dialogue so competently that the reader can "hear" the words of her characters and, by so doing, better understand their motivations and values. When Granny responds to the filmmakers's praise of her "nice things," she says: "'I don't know about the thing, the it, and the stuff. . . . Just people here is what I tend to consider.'" The syntax of Granny's words conveys the cadences in her speech, and the narrator's comment that she "speaks with her eyebrows" helps the reader to visualize her. Bambara's adept ability to capture the language of her characters in its specificity and fullness enables the reader to gather the story's themes almost entirely through the words of the characters.

Point of View

"Blues Ain't No Mockin Bird" is told from the point of view of a young child. In the fifteen short stories which comprise the short story collection *Gorilla, My Love,* in which "Blues Ain't No Mockin Bird" appears, ten are told from the perspective of young, female narrators. Most of the narrators are imaginative and intelligent, but many also display a considerable vulnerability and insecurity. The narrator of "Blues Ain't No Mockin Bird" is aware that both her grandmother and Cathy are more perceptive than she is and have a better understanding of the world. Yet the use of the point of view of a child whose language reflects her age, race, and rural Southern background allows the reader a particular advantage. We understand the events through her consciousness, and her unsophisticated yet insightful narration allows us to consider the complex issues present in the story through her subtle, questioning, and poignantly innocent eyes.

Historical Context

The Black Power Movement

When "Blues Ain't No Mockin Bird" was published in 1971, the influence of the Black Power Movement was widely felt among African-American artists and writers. While the Black Power movement, extending through the decade from 1965 to 1975, grew out of the Civil Rights movement for the dignity and equality of black people in the United States, the Black Power movement stressed the importance of self-definition rather than integration and demanded economic and political power as well as equality. The movement was fueled by protest against such incidents as the shooting of Civil Rights leader James Meredith in 1966 while he led a protest march across Mississippi. Shortly afterward, Civil Rights leader Stokely Carmichael initiated the call for Black Power and the first National Conference on Black Power was held in Washington, D.C. in 1966. In the same year, the Black Panther Party was founded in Oakland, California by Bobby Seale and Huey P. Newton, taking a militant stand against police brutality and the appalling conditions of black urban ghettoes, which lacked adequate municipal services and suffered crime rates up to 35 times higher than white neighborhoods.

While the unemployment, crime and lack of facilities in black urban communities were denounced, black communities were also seen as the source of a vibrant culture. By the early 1970s, Black Power had become a widespread demand for black people to control their own destinies through various means: political activism, community control and development, cultural awareness and the development of black studies and "Black Arts." Pride in both African heritage and in the cultural distinctiveness of black communities in the United States, often summed up in the word "soul" was reflected in a variety of forms from "Afro" hairstyles to soul music and soul food. In the arena of sports, heavyweight champion Muhammed Ali embodied the self-confident attitudes of black pride. In the arts, black writers saw themselves as both inheritors and creators of a black aesthetic tradition. African-American writers like Toni Cade Bambara played an important part in developing awareness of a distinct African-American culture and folk tradition which emphasized the collective and maintained oral forms of expression. Bambara's sympathetic portrayal of Granny's resistance of efforts to patronize her and to exploit her family is typical of the concerns of the time, as is the emphasis Bambara places on the storytelling roles of Granny, Cathy, and the narrator.

By the mid-1970s organizations like the Black Panthers, targets for police persecution and FBI surveillance, were decimated. In 1976, the 4,000 black officials elected represented a larger number than had ever held office, but were still only 0.5 of all American elected officials. In the 1990s, African-Americans constitute less than 2 percent of all elected officials. Economic conditions for African-Americans suffered in the 1980s: the recessions in the early 1980s reduced black family income to only 56 of white family income, less than in 1952, and the gap remains the about same in the 1990s. Nevertheless, the cultural heritage of the Black Power movement - black self-

awareness and the celebration of an African-American culture and identity - has remained.

Black Women and the Women's Movement

The Women's Movement developed in the late 1960s in North America partly in response to the radicalizing processes of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements and the antiwar movement. At the same time, many women were radicalized by their realization that they were treated as second-class participants in these movements. Women analyzed their situation and advocated radical change, forming their own local organizations and national networks for women's equality and women's rights. Consciousness groups were formed and women's centers established, concerned about issues such as sexual discrimination and harassment, spousal abuse, rape, and freedom of choice concerning abortion. Bambara's portrayal of strong, capable, and independent-minded female characters in stories like "Blues Ain't No Mockin Bird" challenged conventional assumptions about female roles. In particular, her emphasis on the story-telling abilities of Cathy, Granny, and the narrator insists on the ability of women to interpret reality effectively and their right to do so.

Black women, however, did not necessarily embrace the same ideology as the mainly white, middle-class women who dominated mainstream women's groups. As Toni Cade Bambara did in her anthology, *The Black Woman,* black women tended to connect issues of sexual equality with those of race and class. The struggle for welfare rights and decent housing was also seen by women in the black community as a woman's issue. As well, many black women felt that taking on the education and socialization of the young was an important role for them to play in order to strengthen their communities and empower future generations. "Blues Ain't No Mockin Bird" emphasizes the nurturing and teaching roles of both Granny and Cathy, whose stories impart lessons about personal and community values. Moreover, while many feminist writers white and black have been accused of vilifying men, Bambara in this story portrays a strong, positive black male character.

Critical Overview

When *Gorilla, My Love,* the collection of short stories which includes "Blues Ain't No Mockin Bird," was published in 1972, it was hailed by critics as a powerful portrayal of the experience of blacks in America. A writer in the *Saturday Review* remarked that the book was "among the best portraits of black life to appear in some time."

No full-length study of "Blues Ain't No Mockin Bird" has been completed, but critical discussion of Bambara as a short story writer generally concur on one point: Bambara is exemplary for her ability to capture the dialects and speech patterns of the characters she portrays. In an essay, "Youth in Toni Cade Bambara's *Gorilla, My Love,*" Nancy D. Hargrove writes that Bambara's narrators speak "conversationally and authentically." Anne Tyler, herself a fiction writer, praises "the language of her characters, which is so startlingly beautiful without once striking a false note." In an essay in *Black Women Writers,* Ruth Elizabeth Burks comments of Bambara's range and dexterity in portraying languages. According to Burks, all of Bambara's works "uses language to particularize and individualize the voices of the people wherever they are - on a New York City street, crossing the waters of the Pacific, amid the red salt clay of the Louisiana earth. . ." One critic, Caren Dybek, claims that Bambara "possesses one of the finest ears for the nuances of black English." In her ability to capture the particular cadences and rhythms of her character's speech, Bambara has been compared to Mark Twain and Zora Neale Hurston.

Critics also consider Bambara's representations of black communities and concern with the formation of black identities. Burks argues that Bambara is less concerned with issues of race and class than many other black women writers: "Bambara appears less concerned with mirroring the black existence in American than in chronicling 'the movement' intended to improve and change that existence." Burks argues that Bambara's role is comparable to that of the griot, an African term for one who preserves history through story-telling. Bambara, Burk claims, "perpetuates the struggle of her people by literally recording it in their own voices." Burk also notes that Bambara considers the limits of language as a way to gain independence. An "innate spirituality" must accompany an awareness of the power of words if blacks are to succeed in their quest for freedom. In a study of American women writers, *American Women Writing Fiction,* Martha M. Vertreace examines Bambara's definitions of identity and community. According to Vertreace, Bambara's sense of identity, defined as "personal definition within the context of community," is one of her consuming interests. The strength of her female characters stems from the "lessons women learn from communal interaction," not from an essential "feminine" trait they are born with. Thus, Vertreace claims, identity "is achieved, not bestowed." Bambara's concern with pedagogy and teaching, the centrality of community in her stories and her portrayal of the struggle to achieve despite seemingly overwhelming situations are all evidence of this definition of identity. While other writers "paint a picture of black life in contemporary black settings," Bambara's stories "portray women who struggle with issues and learn from them."

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Korb is a writer and editor from Austin, Texas. In the following essay, she looks at ways in which language and dialect are used in "Blues Ain't No Mockin Bird" to support the theme of respect for oneself and others.

Toni Cade Bambara, the possessor of "one of the finest ears for the nuances of black English," may have revolutionized the use of contemporary African American dialect in literature, introducing it to non-African American audiences in much the same way that Mark Twain brought the dialect of middle America to people of the mid-nineteenth century through his character Huckleberry Finn. Like Zora Neale Hurston in her works of the 1920s and 1930s, Bambara uses language to capture what is unique about her characters' experiences and voices. Through Bambara's fiction, people around the world have come to better appreciate the richness of African-American language, mythology, and history and the strength of the African-American commitment to community. Bambara's work mirrors the lives of African Americans and strives to chronicle the civil rights movement which sought to improve the quality of those lives.

After earning a reputation as a worker in the civil rights movement, a college teacher, and an editor, essayist, and collector of writings by African Americans, Bambara published her first book in 1972, a collection of short stories. *Gorilla, My Love* was immediately and enthusiastically welcomed. In a review in *Washington Post Book World,* Anne Tyler remarked on "the language of her characters, which is so startlingly beautiful without once striking a false note"; the *Saturday Review* placed it "among the best portraits of black life to have appeared in some time," and the *New Yorker* noted the "inspirational angle" of the stories. Readers admired and learned from the view of African American life presented in the stories, while critics exclaimed over the "bold, political angle" of Bambara's language. Of the collection and public and critical reaction to it, Bambara once wrote, "It didn't have anything to do with a political stance. I just thought people lived and moved around in this particular language system. It is also the language system I tend to remember childhood in" (in her *Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions,* 1996). Because Bambara was so familiar with the culture she represented in the book, because she wrote in "the language many of us speak," she would need other people to teach her just "what was so different and distinct" about her work.

In an article in *Black Women Writers: A Critical Evaluation* (ed. Mari Evans, 1984), Ruth Elizabeth Burks describes Bambara as a *griot,* an African who preserves history by retelling it; she "perpetuates the struggle of her people by literally recording it in their own voices." When looked at as a unit, her three major works trace the history of the civil rights movement in America and African Americans' struggle for freedom. *Gorilla, My Love* preceded the principal flowering of the movement, but it demonstrated a need for equality and a willingness to take it when it is not offered. For Bambara, a spiritual communion, one that is based on a shared sense of community and purpose, is necessary for African Americans to achieve freedom. The type of communion found in "Blues Ain't No Mockin Bird," one of the stories that appeared in *Gorilla, My Love,,* is unique in the collection, for it portrays a harmonious, cooperative relationship between a

man and woman; the other stories in the collection all depict close ties among women. In the story, Granny is feeling threatened by outsiders, two men who claim to have been sent by the county to make a film about the food stamp program. Granddaddy Cain responds to her outrage and forces the men to leave the property. The old couple's granddaughter, grandniece, and young neighbors all witness, and learn from, the interaction.

At the time of *Gorilla, My Love*'s publication, many commentators associated its breezy style of speech with African American street dialect. But even when the stories take place in a non-urban environment, as does "Blues Ain't No Mockin Bird," Bambara's characters exhibit the same ease. The narrator tells the story using a rural Southern tone and language that unconsciously convey a distinct sense of the place and atmosphere in which she and her family live. While it twists and breaks the rules of standard English, the language of Bambara's narrator and the other African American characters is concise and expressive, from the narrator's description of a "tall man with a huge camera lassoed to his shoulder. . . buzzin our way," to the screeching hawk "reckless with crazy," to Granny about to "bust through that screen with somethin in her hand and murder on her mind." But most importantly, their speech is true to who they are, and even when they are threatened by the presumably white strangers, the characters' voices do not waver; they do not alter their speech to make it seem more dignified or formal. The two filmmakers are the only people who change their speech patterns. When they first are called upon to explain their presence, they say, " *We're* [italics mine] filmin for the county," but after they are challenged by Granddaddy Cain, they say, " *We* [italics mine] filmin for the county. . . *We* [italics mine] puttin together a movie." Commenting on their behavior, the narrator observes that they talk to each other "like they was in the jungle or somethin and come upon a native that don't speak the language." They change their way of communication to try to reach Granddaddy Cain by using what they perceive to be his own language.

It is interesting that, despite Bambara's powerful use of dialect, Granddaddy and Granny communicate primarily through "nonlanguage." Granny indicates her great displeasure with the filmmakers by the sounds she makes, such as moans and hums. Without even looking at Granny, Granddaddy and the children know, simply from her "low groanin music," that "any minute now, [she] gonna bust through that screen with somethin in her hand and murder on her mind." The filmmakers, on the other hand, are insensitive to this careful and intuitive transmission of feelings, and continue to try to smile and talk their way past the family's hostility until Granddaddy Cain's quiet dissection of their camera makes their maneuvering pointless.

The filmmakers are at least able to recognize the dignity and self-assurance of Granddaddy Cain, even asking politely for the return of the camera with the words, " Please, sir.'" The outsiders do not notice or individuate the other African Americans, however, categorizing pecan barrels, a sled, stones, trees, and a tool shed along with the children as some of the "[N]ice things here," whereas Granny sees "[J]ust people here." They call Granny "aunty," exposing their view of her as a person who fits into their stereotype of a nonthreatening, submissive black woman whom they can overlook and overrun. Far from being submissive, however, Granny stands up to the men and refuses

to give them permission to film on her property. When they continue to address her as "aunty," she retorts, "'Your mama and I are not related'." The narrator's cousin, Cathy, also emerges as a strong and capable character. Cathy understands the unspoken and has the ability to interpret events. Unlike the narrator, Cathy "knew how come we move so much and [she] ain't but a third cousin we picked up on the way last Thanksgivin visit." When Granny tells of photographers taking pictures of a man about to jump off a bridge "[b]ut savin a few [shots], of course," Cathy immediately repeats "of course," while the narrator is left "standin there wonderin how Cathy knew it was 'of course' when I didn't and it was *my* grandmother." Cathy's wisdom that extends beyond her years brings hope for the future of African Americans— she is the one who points out the nobility of Granddaddy Cain, who is "tall and silent and like a king" and she makes sure others perceive this quality as well by bringing their attention to it. She also expresses a desire to chronicle her experiences, and thus, the lives of African Americans in general. The story she's "goin to write one day" about "the proper use of the hammer" will presumably also convey the perceptions she has gleaned about the community in which she grew up and the people whom she cared for and who supported her. Like Bambara, Cathy will become a griot, and in retelling the past, she will inspire future generations.

If Cathy has the power to transform the future, the relationship between the grandfather and the grandmother in "Blues Ain't No Mockin Bird" provides the courage to impose bold changes. The grandparents provide the children with models of African Americans who demand to be treated with respect. Even though Granny, by herself, cannot induce the intruders to leave, she continues to show her displeasure at their presence and does manage to get them to move some distance away. Moreover, she has a history of educating the children in the sort of behavior that commands respect. Granny "teaches steady with no let-up," the narrator comments; and when the twins get into a tussle with each other, the narrator expects Granny to come off the porch and tell them "about how we can't afford to be fightin amongst ourselves." Granddaddy Cain functions as what Toni Morrison calls the "ancestor" of the family, a parent or other adult who is an "advisor with a strong connection to the past" [*Literature and the Urban Experience,* edited by Michael C. Jaye and Ann Chalmers Watts, 1981]. In "Blues Ain't No Mockin Bird," Granddaddy fulfills his role as the "competent protector," and in keeping with this duty, he demands and receives respect from outsiders. Unlike most of Bambara's stories, "Blues Ain't No Mockin Bird" takes place in a rural area, but the city and its lack of values still are highlighted— "'How come your grandmother calls her husband "Mister Cain" all the time?' Tyrone whispers all loud and noisy and from the city and don't know no better." These values of respect learned from the ancestor will aid African-Americans because, in showing respect for each other, they will command respect from outsiders.

The importance that Bambara places on the younger generation may be one reason why she is able to portray children with sensitivity and compassion. Like other great writers of literature about youth— Mark Twain with Huckleberry Finn or J. D. Salinger with Holden Caulfield — Bambara takes her young characters, their experiences, and their perceptions of the world seriously. She captures that time of life extraordinarily well and shows, even during the course of just one story, the maturation and growth of her characters. Her depiction of children learning to come to terms with a world that is not

always welcoming, and doing it with grace and anticipation, shows her faith in a more positive future for African Americans and in the drive to make it happen.

Source: Rena Korb, "Dialect and Story-telling in 'Blues Ain't No Mockin Bird'," for *Short Stories for Students,* Gale, 1997.

Critical Essay #2

Girard is a Ph.D candidate at Wayne State University who has taught many introduction-to-literature classes. In the essay below, she offers an introduction to "Blues Ain't No Mockin Bird," focusing on its qualities as a told story grounded in the African-American oral tradition.

The short story as a literary form is unique in that it "does what it does in a hurry," as Toni Cade Bambara said in an interview with Beverly Guy-Sheftall in 1979. Bambara also commented that "it's quick, it makes a modest appeal for attention, it can creep up on you on your blind side." Those are a few of the reasons that Bambara prefers to write short stories as well as read them. The short story "Blues Ain't No Mockin Bird" was written in 1971 and, as Bambara says, manages to take you by surprise and blindside you. Toni Cade Bambara accomplishes many things in focusing on short stories in her writing. She is able to, among other things, tell stories of experience which hold interest; teach the young and/or ill-informed about the pride of a people; and, carries on the story-telling oral tradition of blacks, while transposing it into the written form. Above all, she spins a story in "Blues Ain't No Mockin Bird" which seems to be lifted right out of someone's life.

Conventional story lines do not inhabit Bambara's writing. She fails to define her characters in comfortable, recognizable ways. Martha M. Vertreace says that she does "do more than paint a picture of black life and contemporary black settings. . . . Her stories portray women who struggle with issues and learn from them." Elliot Butler-Evans notes that Bambara primarily uses girls or women as narrators.

The story begins by depicting some children playing. The narrator and one of the other children, identified as Cathy, are jumping on a frozen puddle. The fact that the puddle is frozen and Granny is ladling rum onto tinned Christmas cakes leads to the conclusion that Christmas is near. The mention of the nearby meadow and the cameraman cutting across the neighbor's yard places the scene in a semi-rural area. The pecan barrels, as well as the pecan grove, indicate that the setting is southern because pecans are a major crop of the South.

The action centers around the grandmother of the narrator and how she interacts with a variety of people, some of whom are characters in the story and some who are only referred to as past experiences. Initial introductions to Granny, by the narrator, reveals a complex woman. She owns and likes nice things. As the children crack the ice in the puddle, the narrator (whose name is never known), lets us know that it resembles the crystal paperweight Granny has in her parlor. That the paperweight is crystal is significant, as is merely having something as frivolous as a paperweight.

The other important bits of information revealed about Granny is that she has moved a great deal: from the Judson's woods, to the Cooper place, at the dairy, to where they are now residing. Cathy, the narrator's cousin, knows that Granny's dignity and sense of privacy are the reasons they moved so often. For example, Mr. Cooper insulted Granny

by bringing her boxes of old clothes and magazines. Mrs. Cooper infuriated Granny by touching all of Granny's things and remarking "how clean it all was." The times lived at the other locations also reveals that they had not lived at any single place very long, as indicated by the use of the ladle. "The old ladle dripping rum into the Christmas tins, like it used to drip maple syrup into the pails when we lived in the Judson's woods, like it poured cider into the vats when we were on the Cooper place, like it used to scoop buttermilk and soft cheese when we lived at the dairy." The use of the ladle also indicates the passage of the seasons: spring, ladling maple syrup; summer, ladling buttermilk and soft cheese; autumn, ladling cider; winter, ladling rum.

When two men begin to film Granny's yard without her permission, Granny becomes quite upset. After filming the yard, they say that they "thought we'd get a shot or two of the house and everything and then— " and are cut off by Granny. She simply says, "Good mornin," and in those two words, she teaches the men, the children, and the readers about proper manners. After an exchange that forces the men to realize that they had made several errors in etiquette. When one man condescendingly calls her "aunty," she responds: "Your mama and I are not related."

Through Granny, Bambara also instructs young blacks in the black story-telling tradition. While the men finally back out of the yard, the children all wait "cause Granny always got somethin to say. She teaches steady with no let-up." She tells a story of a man who was going to jump off of a bridge and how an unfeeling person with a camera could be. She tells the children how awful it was that the camera person took nearly a whole roll of film of the poor man— "saving a few, of course." Cathy is the only one of the children to understand, immediately, why the person saved a few pictures. The other children waited for an answer which never came. They are left to figure it out, as is the reader.

The filmmakers make another mistake when they encounter Granny's husband, Grandaddy Cain. Granny asks him to "Get them persons out of my flower bed." Granddaddy Cain simply puts out his hand to the cameraman and says "Good day, gentlemen." The man unquestioningly hands Granddaddy his camera, and after destroying the film, returns the camera when the man asks for it, adding a polite, "Please, sir."

Bambara does not waste an opportunity to instruct her characters or her readers. She tells stories to that end and embedded in her written stories are the oral stories. She gives clues to indicate features, but encourages readers to figure it out on their own. By duplicating the story telling within the story, she reinforces the value of oral tradition and its place in the culture of the black community.

Source: Theresa M. Girard,"Overview of 'Blues Ain't No Mockin Bird'," for *Short Stories for Students,* Gale, 1998.

Critical Essay #3

An American educator, editor, nonfiction writer, and critic, Guy-Sheftall has served as director of the Women's Research and Resource Center at Spelman College. In the following excerpt from a longer interview, Bambara comments on her literary influences and her approach to writing fiction.

[*Guy-Sheftall*]: *Have women writers influenced you as much as male writers?*

[Bambara]: I have no clear ideas about literary influence. I would say that my mother was a great influence, since mother is usually the first map maker in life. She encouraged me to explore and express. And, too, the fact that people of my household were big on privacy helped. And I would say that people that I ran into helped, and I ran into a great many people because we moved a lot and I was always a nosey kid running up and down the street, getting into everything. Particular kinds of women influenced the work. For example, in every neighborhood I lived in there were always two types of women that somehow pulled me and sort of got their wagons in a circle around me. I call them Miss Naomi and Miss Gladys, although I'm sure they came under various names. The Miss Naomi types were usually barmaids or life-women, nighttime people with lots of clothes in the closet and a very particular philosophy of life, who would give me advice like, "When you meet a man, have a birthday, demand a present that's hockable, and be careful." Stuff like that. Had no idea what they were talking about. Just as well. The Miss Naomis usually gave me a great deal of advice about beautification, how to take care of your health and not get too fat. The Miss Gladyses were usually the type that hung out the window in Apartment 1-A leaning on the pillow giving single-action advice on numbers or giving you advice about how to get your homework done or telling you to stay away from those cruising cars that moved through the neighborhood patrolling little girls. I would say that those two types of women, as well as the women who hung out in the beauty parlors (and the beauty parlors in those days were perhaps the only womanhood institutes we had— it was there in the beauty parlors that young girls came of age and developed some sense of sexual standards and some sense of what it means to be a woman growing up)— it was those women who had the most influence on the writing.

I think that most of my work tends to come off the street rather than from other books. Which is not to say I haven't learned a lot as an avid reader. I devour pulp and print. And of course I'm part of the tradition. That is to say, it is quite apparent to the reader that I appreciated Langston Hughes, Zora Hurston, and am a product of the sixties spirit. But I'd be hard pressed to discuss literary influences in any kind of intelligent way. . . .

[Have] your travels revealed to you how American black and other Third World women can link up in their struggles to liberate themselves from the various kinds of oppression they face as a result of their sexual identity?

Yes, I would say that two particular places I visited yielded up a lot of lessons along those lines. I was in Cuba in 1973 and had the occasion not only to meet with the

Federation of Cuban Women but sisters in the factories, on the land, in the street, in the parks, in lines, or whatever, and the fact that they were able to resolve a great many class conflicts as well as color conflicts and organize a mass organization says a great deal about the possibilities here. I was in Vietnam in the summer of 1975 as a guest of the Women's Union and again was very much struck by the women's ability to break through traditional roles, traditional expectations, reactionary agenda for women, and come together again in a mass organization that is programmatic and takes on a great deal of responsibility for the running of the nation.

We missed a moment in the early sixties. We missed two things. One, at a time when we were beginning to lay the foundations for a national black women's union and for a national strategy for organizing, we did not have enough heart nor a solid enough analysis that would equip us to respond in a positive and constructive way to the fear in the community from black men as well as others who said that women organizing as women is divisive. We did not respond to that in a courageous and principled way. We fell back. The other moment that we missed was that we had an opportunity to hook up with Puerto Rican women and Chicano women who shared not only a common condition but also I think a common vision about the future and we missed that moment because of the language trap. When people talked about multicultural or multiethnic organizing, a lot of us translated that to mean white folks and backed off. I think that was an error. We should have known what was meant by multicultural. Namely, people of color. Afro-American, Afro-Hispanic, Indo-Hispanic, Asian-His-panic, and so forth. Not that those errors necessarily doom us. Errors may result in lessons learned. I think we have the opportunity again in this last quarter of the twentieth century to begin forging those critical ties with other communities. It will be done. That is a certainty. . . .

You are one of the few black literary artists who could be considered a short story writer primarily. Is this a deliberate choice on your part or coincidental?

It's deliberate, coincidental, accidental, and regretful! Regretful, commercially. That is to say, it is financially stupid to be a short story writer and to spend two years putting together eight or ten stories and receiving maybe half the amount of money you would had you taken one of those short stories and produced a novel. The publishing companies, reviewers, critics, are all geared to promoting and pushing the novel rather than any other form.

I prefer the short story genre because it's quick, it makes a modest appeal for attention, it can creep up on you on your blind side. The reader comes to the short story with a mind-set different than that with which he approaches the big book, and a different set of controls operating, which is why I think the short story is far more effective in term of teaching us lessons.

Temperamentally, I move toward the short story because I'm a sprinter rather than a long-distance runner. I cannot sustain characters over a long period of time. Walking around, frying eggs, being a mother, shopping— I cannot have those characters living in my house with me for more than a couple of weeks. In terms of craft, I don't have the kinds of skills *yet* that it takes to stay with a large panorama of folks and issues and

landscapes and moods. That requires a set of skills that I don't know anything about yet, but I'm learning.

I prefer the short story as a reader, as well, because it does what it does in a hurry. For the writer and the reader make instructive demands in terms of language precision. It deals with economy, gets it said, and gets out of the way. As a teacher, I also prefer the short story for all the reasons given. And yes, I consider myself primarily a short story writer. . . .

That leads me into the next question which is about the process involved in your writing a story. Do you have the whole idea of it before sitting down to write, or does it unfold as you're writing?

It depends on how much time you have. There are periods in my life when I know that I will not be able to get to the desk until summer, until months later, in which case I walk around composing while washing dishes and may jot down little definitive notes on pieces of paper which I stick under the phone, in the mirror, and all over the house. At other times, a story mobilizes itself around a single line you've heard that resonates. There's a truth there, something usable. Sometimes a story revolves around a character that I'm interested in. For example, "The Organizer's Wife" in the new collection. I've always been very curious about silent people because most people I know are like myself— very big-mouthed, verbally energetic, and generally clear as to what they're about because their *mouth* is always announcing what they're doing. That story came out of a curiosity. What do I know about people like that? Could I delve into her? The story took shape around that effort.

There are other times when a story is absolutely clear in the head. All of it may not be clear— who's going to say what and where it's taking place or what year it is— but the story frequently comes together at one moment in the head. At other times, stories, like any other kind of writing, and certainly anybody who's writing anything— freshman compositions, press releases, or whatever— has experienced this, that frequently writing is an act of discovery. Writing is very much like dreaming, in that sense. When you dream, you dialogue with aspects of yourself that normally are not with you in the daytime and you discover that you know a great deal more than you thought you did. So there are various kinds of ways that writing comes.

Then, too, there is a kind of— some people call it automatic writing— I call it inspiration. There are times when you have to put aside what you intended to write, what got you to the desk in the first place, and just go with the story that is coming out of you, which may or may not have anything to do with what you planned at all. In fact, a lot of stories (I haven't published any of these because I'm not sure they are mine) and poems have come out on the page that I know do not belong to me. They do not have my sense of vision, my sense of language, my sense of reality, but they're complete. Each of us has experienced this in various ways, in church, or fasting, or in some other kind of state, times when we are available to intelligences that we are not particularly prone to acknowledge, given our Western scientific training, which have filled us with so much fear that we cannot make ourselves available to other channels of information. I think

most of us have experienced, though we don't talk about it very much, an inspiration, that is to say, an inbreathing that then becomes "enthusiasm," a possession, a living-with, an informing spirit. So some stories come off like that.

Do you make many revisions before the story is finished and ready for publication?

Oh yes. I edit mercilessly. Generally, my editing takes the form of cutting. Very frequently, a story will try to get away from me and become a novel. I don't have the staying power for a novel, so when I find it getting to be about thirty or forty pages I immediately start cutting back to six. To my mind, the six-page short story is the gem. If it takes more than six pages to say it, something is the matter. So I'm not too pleased in that respect with the new collection, *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive.*

Most of those stories are too sprawling and hairy for my taste, although I'm very pleased, feel perfectly fine about them as pieces. But as stories, they're too damn long and dense. . . .

One of the characteristics of your fiction which is apparent in Gorilla, My Love, *an older collection of short stories, as well as in* The Sea Birds *is the extent to which— though one knows you're there—you can remove yourself from the narrative voice. You don't intrude. Is that deliberate?*

Well, I'm frequently there. You see, one of the reasons that it seems that the author is not there has to do with language. It has to do with the whole tradition of dialect. In the old days, writers might have their characters talking dialect or slang but the narrator, that is to say, the author, maintained a distance and a "superiority" by speaking a more premiumed language. I tend to speak on the same level as my characters, so it seems as though I am not there, because, possibly, you're looking for another voice.

I rarely get the impression that your fiction comes directly out of your personal experience, even though it's obvious that what you have written about has been filtered through your consciousness. I don't have the impression that these particular characters or that particular incident are very close to what you may have actually experienced. Is that correct?

Yes, that's correct. I think it's very rude to write autobiographically, unless you label it autobiography. And I think it's very rude to use friends and relatives as though they were occasions for getting your whole thing off. It's not making your mama a still life. And it's very abusive to your developing craft, to your own growth, not to convert and transform what has come to you in one way into another way. The more you convert the more you grow, it seems to me. Through conversion we recognize again the basic oneness, the connections, or as some blood coined it: "Everything is Everything." So, it's kind of *lazy* (I think that's the better word) to simply record. Also, it's terribly boring to the reader frequently, and, too, it's dodgy. You can't tell to what extent things are fascinating to you because they're yours and to what extent they're useful, unless you do some conversion.

What can we expect from you in the future?

I'm working on several things— some children's books, a new collection of short stories, a novel, some film scripts.

"Children of Struggle" is a series I've been working on that dramatizes the role children and youth have played in the struggle for liberation—children of the Underground Railroad, children of Frelimo, children of the Long March, of Granma, of El Grito de Lares, The Trail of Tears, and so forth....

Source: Toni Cade Bambara with Beverly Guy-Sheftall, "Commitment: Toni Cade Bambara Speaks," in *Sturdy Black Bridges,* Roseann P. Bell, Bettye J. Parker, Beverly Guy-Sheftall, eds., Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1978, pp. 230-49.

Topics for Further Study

The filmmakers in the story, who say they are doing a film for the county on food stamps, note favorably that Granny grows her own vegetables. Research the history of food stamps in the United States, from their institution to the present. Consider the debates on this issue, and use this information to consider why Granny has such a negative reaction to the men's intrusive filming and, perhaps, to their objective in making the film.

Bambara is known for her use of dialect. Read the story, paying close attention to how Bambara denotes the speech patterns of her characters. Consider what dialects you speak or hear spoken in daily life. Attempt, like Bambara, to transcribe these speech patterns into writing.

"Blues Ain't No Mockin Bird" examines the question of stereotyping. The filmmakers and some previous landlords or employers have stereotyped Granny, her family, and home. Discuss these stereotypes and how Bambara counters them. Consider, also, whether Bambara might herself be accused of stereotyping in her fiction.

While "Blues Ain't No Mockin Bird" is not set in any particular place or time, it does seem to take place in the rural South during the 1960s or 1970s. Research conditions of rural poverty in the South during the period, particularly for African Americans. Compare your findings with conditions today.

Compare and Contrast

1970s: The Equal Rights Amendment, a proposal to change the constitution to guarantee women's rights, particularly equal pay for equal work, becomes a central issue of political debate.

1990s: Women continue to struggle for political, social, and especially financial equality with men in the United States. Comparably educated and experienced women still earn, on average, only 75 of what men earn for performing the same work.

1970s: The broad-based civil rights movement of the early'60s gave way, in the wake of the deaths of Malcolm X (1967), and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1968) to more the radicalized racial politics of a younger generation of activists, including the Black Power movement, Angela Davis and the Black Panther Party founded by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale. The more militant Black Power organizations were targeted for investigation and infiltration by the government and quickly faded from prominence.

1990s: The Black Power tradition continues with the public prominence of Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam. Alternative strategies for social integration and minority advancement are visible in the popularity of multicultural education.

1970s: A full range of government guaranteed services to the poor, known as entitlements, are instituted to guarantee a minimum standard of living for all American citizens, continuing reforms of the 1960s.

1996: President Bill Clinton signs the Welfare Reform Bill, limiting recipients to five years of benefits and ending a federal guarantee of a sustainable income through the use of food stamps, medical assistance and cash grants.

1970s: Judges begin interpreting Civil Rights legislation as requiring full racial integration of public school systems. Many efforts to integrate schools result in violence, for instance Boston in 1974, or the abandonment of public schools and mixed-race districts by middle-class whites.

1990s: Debates over the quality and equity of education continue. Many school districts remain segregated, despite twenty years of efforts at integration. New proposals for education reform include school choice, school vouchers, home schooling, charter schools, and a federal guarantee of access to higher education.

What Do I Read Next?

"Blues Ain't No Mockin Bird" was published in Toni Cade Bambara's critically acclaimed collection of short stories, *Gorilla, My Love* (1972).

Toni Morrison's novel *Sula* (1973) recounts the struggle of Nel Wright and Sula Peace, who live in the black community of Medallion, Ohio. The novel recounts the decline of the community after World War I, the ostracism of Sula by the townspeople, and the friendship between Sula and Nel.

William Faulkner's novel *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), one of the most important and influential novels of modern American literature, recounts the decline of a wealthy Southern white family and explores issues of race relations in the South through an experimental style, shifting narration, and use of dialect.

Zora Neale Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) is an insightful portrayal of rural black life in the early twentieth century. Trained in anthropology, Hurston, in both her fictional and nonfiction works, explores the folk culture of black Southerners and contrasts its complexity with the superficial understanding generally available to outsiders.

Further Study

Bambara, Toni Cade. "How She Came by Her Name," in her *Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions,* Pantheon Books, 1996, pp. 201-45.

In this collection of Bambara's later writings is included an interview with the author, discussing her early career as a writer and essayist.

Burks, Ruth Elizabeth. "From Baptism to Resurrection; Toni Cade Bambara and the Incongruity of Language," in *Black Women Writers,* edited by Mari Evans, Doubleday, 1984, pp. 48-57.

Burks discusses what she sees as the spiritual power of Bambara's use of language.

Morrison, Toni. "City Limits, Village Values: Concepts of the Neighborhood in Black Fiction," in *Literature and the Urban Experience,* edited by Michael C. Jaye and Ann Chalmers Watts, Rutgers University Press, 1981, pp. 35-43.

Morrison discusses the role of the city in the works of many African-American writers, including Bambara.

Robinson, Lillian S., ed. *Modern Women Writers.* Continuum, 1996.

A compilation of critical writings on modern women writers, including an extensive section on Toni Cade Bambara.

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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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