A Boy and His Dog Study Guide

A Boy and His Dog by Harlan Ellison

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Introduction

Published in Harlan Ellison's 1969 short-story collection, *The Beast That Shouted Love at the Heart of the World,* "A Boy and His Dog" is one of the author's favorite works. Critics also appreciated the story, and it won the 1969 Nebula Award (awarded by Science Fiction Writers of America) for Best Novella. Six years later, it was adapted as a Hugo Award-winning film, with Don Johnson starring as Vic. "A Boy and His Dog" is considered one of Ellison's most compelling stories, and the author expanded it into a novel in 1989.

The story takes place in post-apocalyptic America, where Vic and Blood (his telepathic dog) must fight to survive. The story's violence, explicit sexuality, and coarse language shock many readers, although these elements support Ellison's harsh presentation of the future world. Set in a bleak environment and carrying dark themes, it is often read as a cautionary tale about what the future may hold.

Author Biography

Harlan Ellison is a prolific editor and writer of novels, short stories, essays, and screenplays. His fiction includes crime stories, mysteries, mainstream fiction, and science fiction. Although he is most strongly identified with science fiction, he balks at being categorized. Ellison maintains that his influences—Mark Twain, Ambrose Bierce, Henry David Thoreau, and Edgar Allan Poe—also defy neat categorization.

Ellison was born on May 27, 1934, in Cleveland, Ohio, to Louis Laverne (a dentist and jeweler) and Serita. As a child, Ellison performed at a local children's playhouse, but his creative interests soon turned to writing. At the age of thirteen, he saw his first story published in the *Cleveland News.* Three years later, he formed the Cleveland Science Fiction Society.

Ellison left Ohio State University in 1954 after only a year and pursued a career as a professional writer in New York. Within two years, he had sold 150 short stories to various magazines. The science fiction readership was most responsive to his writing, and critics soon aligned Ellison with the New Wave of science fiction writers, whose writing is characterized by previously taboo subjects and fictional experimentation. He was drafted to serve in the United States Army from 1957 to 1959, but then resumed writing and editing. According to Ellison, his reputation was secured when the esteemed critic Dorothy Parker wrote a favorable review of one of his mainstream stories in 1961. With success as a fiction writer came opportunities to write for television in the early 1960s. Ellison wrote episodes for *The Outer Limits, The Twilight Zone,* and *The Alfred Hitchcock Hour,* and he won a Hugo Award for a *Star Trek* script.

Ellison's personal life has been tumultuous. He married his first wife in 1956 and has since divorced and remarried several times. He is currently married to his fifth wife, whom he married in 1986.

Ellison's numerous awards include Writers Guild of America Awards and Hugo Awards. He also won the Nebula Award from the Science Fiction Writers of America for Best Short Story in 1965 for "'Repent, Harlequin!' Said the Ticktockman" and for Best Novella in 1969 for "A Boy and His Dog." Ellison's recent work (including the 1993 novel *Mefisto in Onyx* and the 1994 screenplay for I, *Robot,* co-written with Isaac Asimov) continues to draw critical praise.

Plot Summary

"A Boy and His Dog" is narrated by Vic, a teenaged boy who has a telepathic dog named Blood. The story is set in 2024 post-apocalypse America. Rubble, craters, and molten metal mark the landscape. There are two civilizations of survivors - those above ground and those below. Those who live below are called "downunders," and their cities resemble those of pre-World War I America. Vic lives in the wreckage above ground and is a "solo," which is someone who is not a member of one of the gangs (called "roverpaks") that wander the streets.

As the story opens, Vic tells Blood to find him a woman, but Blood is unsuccessful because most women are downunders. Blood, like most dogs who stay with solos, was bred for intellect, telepathy, and an acute sense of smell. He relies on Vic for food because he lacks the ability to hunt, and Vic relies on Blood to help him find women and to warn him of danger.

Vic and Blood go to the movies, where Blood senses a woman. When she leaves, they follow her into a shelled YMCA building, where Vic prepares to rape her. A roverpak arrives, and they all hide. After Vic and Blood kill several of the rovers, Vic sets the building on fire. He, Blood, and the girl, Quilla June, hide in the boiler room, hoping the roverpak will think they are dead. Vic and Quilla June have sex repeatedly before Vic and Blood check to see if the roverpak is gone after the fire.

When Vic returns to the boiler room, Quilla June knocks him unconscious and escapes. When Vic awakens, he is enraged and heads for the dropshaft that will take him to her underground hometown of Topeka. When he reaches the bottom, an automated green tram (called a "sentry") shackles him and takes him to an office. There, a group of people led by a man named Lew tell him that he was lured to Topeka because too few of their men are able to father children. Vic agrees to help them repopulate the city, but he wants Quilla June first.

Vic is told to walk around the city for the next week, so that the residents can get accustomed to him. Topeka is a picturesque city where older people rock on front porches, kids play hopscotch or throw sticks for their dogs, men tip their hats at ladies, and families visit the community swimming pool. The lawns are manicured, the streets are quaint, and people enjoy being social. Vic feels confined by the politeness and picture-perfect lifestyle. Determined to escape, he finds out where his guns are being kept and where there is another way out of Topeka besides the dropshaft.

At the end of the week, Lew and two other men - one of whom is Quilla June's father - take Vic to Quilla June. When they get to the house, Vic and Quilla June go to the bedroom, where she starts crying and apologizing. Vic's vindictive streak fades, and he asks if she wants to escape with him. She says yes, and Vic kills her father and the other man, and they run out of the house past Lew and Quilla June's mother. After retrieving Vic's guns, they run for the escape route, but Quilla June stops to shoot some

of the people chasing them. She even tries to kill her mother. Above ground, they find Blood waiting.

Blood is famished because there is no food for miles around, and his wounds from the fight with the roverpak at the YMCA need attention. He warns them that the roverpak knows they are alive. Vic is concerned about how to take care of and feed Blood, but Quilla June wants to find safety. She thinks that because she and Vic have said they love each other, Vic will make her his first priority. At the end of the story, however, she is gone, and Blood has just eaten a huge meal. Although it is not stated explicitly, it is clear that Vic has killed Quilla June to feed Blood.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

Vic (teen-age boy) and Blood (telepathic shaggy brown dog) are hanging out together. Blood continues to annoy Vic by calling him Albert. Vic has fed Blood mutated water rats and a poodle that escaped from "down under." Vic is horny and wants a piece of ass. Blood enters a trance state but finds no woman nearby. They go meet their roverpak foraging Gang at the Metropole Theater. Vic checks his .45 and Browning .22 at the door, but keeps his spike and knife in his neck sheath. The theater is jammed with other rovers and their dogs, but Blood finds 2 seats together. Keeping theaters going is part of the post-war barter economy. They watch a triple feature: a 1948 movie titled "Raw Deal;" Third War epic called "Smell of a Chink" with a scene of skirmisher greyhounds napalming a Chinese town; and a 1970 "beaver flick" called "Big Black Leather Splits." As some of the boys in the theater masturbate, Blood whispers to Vic, "there's a chick in here, in the third row in front of them, aisle seat.

Chapter 1 Analysis

In this fantasy, World War IV broke out on July 4, 1995 and lasted 5 days until all the world's nuclear missiles had been spent. The survivors divided. The now sterile adults now occupied previously built underground cities. The aboveground was abandoned to "roverpaks" of parentless young boys and their telepathic dogs. Vic and his telepathic shaggy dog "Blood" met in 2021. This story redefines "love" and often equates it with sex. The graphic story itself won a Nebula award. The movie, starring Don Johnson and Jason Robards, also won a Hugo.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

Vic remembers what Blood told him about his (Blood's) ancestors. In Los Angeles, over 50 years ago, dogs, including a German shepherd bitch named Ginger, were bred to smell out hidden marijuana. In Santa Barbara, another scientist was genetically altering dolphin spinal fluid and injecting it into baboons and dogs. After surgery and grafting, a prototype dog, a 2-year-old male Puli named Ahbnu, communicated sense impressions telepathically. Telepathic skirmisher dogs from several breeds were used in World War III (June 25, 1950, beginning with the Korean war, to January 1993). Ginger and Ahbnu were Blood's ancestors.

Vic then tries to check out the chick Blood sensed but can tell nothing from where he is sitting. Other solos and their dogs leave. Vic and Blood sit through "Raw Deal" again, and Blood goes to sleep. When the movie ends, the chick leaves and they follow her out of the theater but lose sight of her. Blood senses her and they run towards the edge of the city, where the access dropshaft to the "downunder" city is located.

Vic recalls the last time he had sex, a month ago with a filthy woman in the basement of the Market Basket. He got the crabs from her. He tied her down, clubbed her a couple of times and left her. Blood relates how the War killed off the girls and the things getting born were mutants killed at birth. The few chicks that remain aboveground are hard, tough and stringy. Now he has found a middle-class chick from a downunder city who had hot pants to see a "beaver flick" and Vic was going to get laid. He could not wait.

Chapter 2 Analysis

The author fails to explain where all these teen-age sex crazed boys came from since the adults are both sterile and living underground or apparently dead. The apocalyptic world is lopsidedly populated to fit the story. We have no true explanation of the depopulation of the world.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

Vic and Blood, now in an area of blasted and flattened buildings, spot the chick in the YMCA, or "Young Men's Christian Association" (Blood taught Vic to read). Vic does not want the chick to get away, so he puts Blood on guard in front of the building. He finds the girl in the gym changing out of her disguise. He admires her body as she brushes out her long hair and begins to change clothes. She put on her panties and bra and pulls her dress over her head before Vic attacks her. He pulls her dress off and trips her to the floor. Then he levels his .45 at her and says he is going to get a wrestling mat. He flips it so the cleaner side is up and uses his gun to get her on it. She sits on the mat, hands behind her, stares at Vic, and asks him his name. He gets his pants down and makes her remove her bra and panties. Then he asks her name. She replies, "Quilla June Holmes," very common in former Oklahoma. Blood dashes in from outside with news that 15-20 boys in a roverpak have surrounded the building, and Vic should pull up his pants. Quilla June is surprised that Vic and Blood talk. She apparently dresses, but this is not discussed.

Chapter 3 Analysis

It is obvious that Vic, who does not think about anything except sex and food, also does not plan or consider about why a presentable "downunder" girl would be changing clothes in an abandoned, aboveground gym. He also does not realize that other telepathic dogs might find her too. At this point, Vic is only interested in sex, sex and more sex. Blood's only interest is in protecting Vic.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

Vic makes Quilla June a shelter out of a dozen wrestling mats. He does not think that bullets will penetrate that many of them. He climbs a rope onto a girder and waits to shoot the invaders. Blood is lying in the shadows near the door. Vic hears the roverpak in the poolroom next to the room where they are. Blood and Vic kill several boy "rovers" from the pack and wait. Vic kills the next "rover" and Blood takes his rifle to Quilla June. Vic decides to feed Blood something special for his bravery. Two rovers and their dogs attack. Vic shoots one dog but drops his gun. The other attacks Blood. Quilla June shoots a rover with her rifle. Vic swings down to the floor and kills the other rover and the dog. Blood, heavily injured, says, "thanks" to Vic and goes over to the corner to lick his wounds. Vic gets Quilla June out from behind the mats and slaps her in the face to stop her crying. Blood comes over and suggests they burn down the building and fake their deaths.

Chapter 4 Analysis

The battle scene does not lend to much analysis. The telepathic dog Blood is actually the most intelligent of the group. It is interesting that the boys have degraded to gang warfare with guns and trained dogs. A comparison could loosely be made with the boys in Lord of the Flies.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

Vic, Quilla June and Blood gather wood and kerosene and set fire to it so the building will burn. Blood has found them all a "safe place" in a boiler room way down under the building. They take mats, ammo, and the dead rovers' extra firearms and rifles. Blood senses that the building is burning well. They all go to sleep. Vic awakens to find Quilla June snuggled under his armpit. They have sex many times and Blood sleeps through it all.

Vic asks Quilla June about where she lives, a "downunder" city called "Topeka." It is a city with dropshaft access to it about a half mile from where they are. She initiates sex and they continue until Blood interrupts and says, "I am not going to keep pretending I'm asleep. I am hungry. And I'm hurt." Vic throws Quilla June off him so he can examine Blood. The three discuss leaving, since the boiler has cooled. Vic gets Blood to go outside and check. Blood is now angry, since while he puts himself in danger again to check outside, Vic and Quilla June will be inside the boiler having more sex. Vic shoves the boiler room door open and all appears clear. Vic asks Blood why the dog does not like the chick. Blood senses Quilla June will make trouble for Vic. Vic asks Quilla June more about the "downunder" cities. According to her, middle class squares and Fundamentalist Christians started the cities in abandoned caves, mines and other deep holes after the First World War. They had all returned to life as it was 150 years ago, and it was quiet and well planned.

She asks Vic if he has ever been in love with a girl. He says that he has not, and if it means living in a "downunder" city, he will never be in love with a girl. They have sex again until Blood scratches at the boiler door. Blood says it is all clear and repeats that the girl will be trouble for Vic. They should have left her for the other rovers to rape. Blood wants something to eat, help with the pain in his side, and to be somewhere else. Vic explains that the three of them will be traveling together now. Blood reminds Vic that he is responsible for Blood, especially since he saved Vic's life from the fungus green stone pit burner. They argue, and Blood leaves. Vic returns to the boiler for more sex, and Quilla June knocks him out with the butt of a pistol. Then she disappears.

Chapter 5 Analysis

The reader learns more about life on the surface and in a "downunder" city, if Quilla June is to be believed. Blood instinctively knows she is not telling the whole truth. It is again obvious that Blood is more intelligent than Vic because he sees beyond the "do you love me, Vic?" and the female-initiated sex to realize that this Quilla June has additional motives.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

Blood returns to doctor the now wounded Vic and repeats, "I told you she was no good." Vic rummages through the boiler and finds the spare ammo and guns and something that must have slipped out of Quilla June's clothing – a 3-½ inch high metal plate with a string of numbers and a pattern on it. Blood sniffs it and decides it an identity card she used to get out of the "downunder" city.

Vic picks it up and heads for the access dropshaft. Blood demands that he does not go there but find him food, but Vic is determined to find Quilla June and bring her back. Blood follows him to the access dropshaft leading to Quilla June's "downunder" city of Topeka. It is a tall, straight, featureless pillar of shining black metal 20 feet in diameter, flat on top, disappearing into the ground. Vic decides it is a cap to something. He reaches for the metal card. Blood tugs at his right pants leg and tells him yet again not to go down there because he will be killed. Blood says they have been together almost three years and he is scared to be by himself, hurt and hungry. Blood is not that young any more and it will be hard for him to find another boy.

All Vic can think about is how Quilla June whacked him on the head. He remembers the softness of her body and decides he has to go after her to get even. Blood did not say anything else because it would be useless. Vic says he will be back quickly. Blood said maybe he will wait for Vic and maybe he will not. Vic goes to the pillar and inserts the metal card. A circle door opens and he goes through. Blood is there watching him as the pillar hummed. Blood says, "So long, Vic."

Chapter 6 Analysis

Obviously Blood loves Vic and since he comes back to check on him. Quilla June has other motivations than have been revealed since she leaves a metal plate behind when she needs one herself to enter the dropshaft to her home. Blood repeatedly tells Vic not to follow her any more, but Vic is determined to go hit her in the head and have more sex. This is an immature motive and makes no sense. Blood and Vic find the "dropshaft" into what is supposed to be Topeka. Blood now pleads with Vic not to go. Vic is not thinking logically. The injured Blood is still there with Vic as he leaves.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

The access iris swirls closed behind Vic. The humming grows louder; the walls are lit; the floor dilates and he drops steadily down the tube past ominous signs, including one that reads "BREEDER-CON." At the bottom is a sign on the wall, "Topeka City Limits Pop. 22,860). As he uses the metal plate again, the iris opens on the "downunder" town of Topeka, which stretched to the horizon. Vic sees neat little houses, curvy little streets, trimmed lawns and a business section. He did not see the sun, moon or stars; rain, mountains, oceans, fields of grain, or forests; or animals, birds, or insects. He feels as if he is in a tin can and he wants out. A green box-like cart on tracks grabs him with cables with mittens on the end and takes him towards Topeka. He watches people in rockers on their front porches, raking their lawns, hanging around the gas station and doing other mundane activities common to small towns. In his mind, he remembered all of Blood's warnings and expects to be killed.

Chapter 7 Analysis

Although super modern technology is used to transport Vic to Topeka "downunder," it is not quite what he expects. He is trapped in the past and in a city where ordinary and unexciting events happen and he has no friends. He has left the faithful Blood behind to find Quilla June.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

The green box takes Vic to a storefront "Better Business Bureau" where old men and women greet him. One takes his metal plate and removes his weapons. The old people begin to argue and then explain to Vic that he has been brought "downunder" as an experiment. They have a nice life going but they have no baby boys. They need certain kinds of men. Vic sits down on the floor and laughs until he has tears in his eyes. They need him to "service" the women. He unzipped his pants and offers to get started, but the old people hustle him to a boarding house so he can get to know Topeka. Vic becomes very claustrophobic and bored in a week. All the food is artificial and tastes like chalk. Since they have given him the run of the town, he finds the way out and where they put his weapons.

Chapter 8 Analysis

Vic is slow but he gets the idea.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

A week after his arrival, when Vic is extremely bored, he is sitting on the back porch of the boarding house smoking an un-lit corn cob pipe with his shirt off, the old men come for him so he can meet his first lady, Quilla June. She is sitting on a settee with her mother, an older, dried up version of her. Quilla June has a blue ribbon in her hair that matched her eyes. The old people discuss getting this disgusting thing over with so they could go to church and repent. It becomes apparent that it is a fundamentalist religious settlement that views the sex act as "evil." Vic and Quilla June go to the bedroom. Now Vic decides he does not want to kill her. She explains that she was sent to get someone like him to impregnate women. Vic asks her if she wants to leave with him. Vic improvises a weapon with brass balls from the bed in a sock. Quilla June lies exposed on the bed and calls for her dad. When dad enters, Vic kicks the door shut and whacks him. Quilla June sees the blood and gunk and throws up. Vic calls for another old man to come in and Vic whacks him too.

Vic pulls Quilla June out of the house. They retrieve Vic's weapons and a crowbar and he shoots the green box sentry now coming after him. Quilla June shoots the women in a gathering mob until Vic takes the .45 away from her. He grabs her and they head to the south end of Topeka, where the exit, a big air-intake duct, is located. Vic removes the clamps to the duct, and both of them begin climbing the ladder inside it back to the surface. Quilla June asks Vic, from below him, "Vic, do you love me?" He keeps saying "yes" because he thinks he means it and it helps her keep climbing.

Chapter 9 Analysis

Quilla June explains why she went to the surface. She is trapped in a boring, sterile world where there is little fun. There is no mention of other girls or boys her age being in the town. Quilla June, having violated her religious upbringing and having had fun having sex with Vic, now wants reassurance that he loves her. Vic sincerely believes he does, although he does not understand what "love" means.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

The airshaft opens a mile from the dropshaft. Vic shoots off the hatch bolts, and he and Quilla June climb out. Rather than sleep there, in potential danger, they walk back to the dropshaft where Vic left the surface. Blood is there waiting for Vic to return. He has not eaten, and his wounds are untended. Quilla June tries to hurry Vic away from the dropshaft, and Blood closes his eyes. Vic picks up the weak, hungry, Blood. He offers to go to the city for food, but Blood has already been. Blood tells Vic that they cannot return to the city because the rovers found out they did not die in the fire. Blood shivers. Vic realizes he cannot go back, nor can he make it without Blood. He has to get Blood food and medical care. Quilla June demands that he abandon Blood and head out. She begins to pout.

Vic kills Quilla June and cooks her. He and Blood eat her. After Blood is full of food, Vic carries him to the air duct a mile away, and they spend the night safely on a ledge inside. In the morning, Vic tends to his wounds. They return to the fire site and eat more of Quilla June. Then they head off slowly across the wasteland for another city. Blood is limping.

Vic hears Quilla June calling his name and asking him, "do you know what love is?" Vic believes he now knows the answer. "A boy loves his dog."

Chapter 10 Analysis

This cult classic, Nebula-winning novella (short novel), presents a futuristic society with some population and plot gaps, where a dog educates a boy in the true meaning of love. This last quote from Vic shows that he is beginning to understand love and that it is not just sex. However, the true love in the story is that of Blood, the dog, who never deserts Vic and waits patiently for his return. Blood's love for Vic is unconditional and depends on nothing but Vic's presence. Vic's love for Blood is conditional on Blood's obeying his commands and using his telepathic powers to benefit Vic.

Characters

Blood

Blood is Vic's telepathic dog. Vic and Blood have been together for three years, each helping the other survive in post-apocalypse America. Blood is a "skirmisher," which is a dog that is bred for intelligence, telepathic ability, and an acute sense of smell. He is descended from a German shepherd named Ginger, who detected drugs for the Los Angeles Police Department, and a puli named Ahbhu, who was the product of an experiment to develop telepathy in dogs. Crossbreeding such dogs resulted in skirmishers, who were used in the last world war for their telepathy and their ability to smell trace amounts of fuel, poison gas, and radiation. Although Blood can sense the presence of certain kinds of people (especially women and dangerous gang members), he is a typical skirmisher in that he has lost his ability to hunt. As a result, he must rely on Vic to find food for him.

Blood is highly intelligent and well-educated. He teaches Vic reading, history, math, and culture. He and Vic often tease each other, as old friends do. At the same time, he is a product of his harsh environment, and thus can be fierce and violent. His relationship with Vic is important, and he is threatened by and suspicious of outsiders like Quilla June.

Quilla June Holmes

Quilla June is the girl sent to the surface to lure a young man back to Topeka. She is a teenager who is described as having a pretty face, thin build, medium height, long reddish hair, blue eyes, and a soft voice. Her family originally came from Oklahoma before the war, but now they live underground in Topeka. She is brave because she agrees to go to the surface alone, knowing that "downunders" like herself are routinely raped and killed.

Quilla June seems timid and gentle at first, but her true nature soon becomes clear. Once she and Vic have sex, she is insatiable. Her capacity for violence is first revealed when she knocks Vic unconscious with a gun. When Vic kills her father and another man in front of her, she cries and vomits, but then she recovers and laughs as she shoots at and kills her fellow townspeople. Before she and Vic make their final escape to the surface, she even tries to kill her mother.

Despite her violent streak, Quilla June desperately wants to be loved. When she escapes Topeka with Vic, she tells him she loves him and repeatedly asks him if he loves her. She seems satisfied when he says yes and then assumes that she will be Vic's top priority. Her naïveté about devotion leads to her demise. She insists that Vic leave Blood behind while they seek safety, but Vic kills her in order to feed Blood.

Lew

Lew is the head of the group of aging men who use Quilla June to lure Vic underground to Topeka. He is set in his ways but also sees the necessity of getting someone to help repopulate the city. Lew is not intimidated by Vic's rough ways and profane language, but he insists that Vic behave properly while he is in Topeka. His fundamental inability to understand Vic, however, is evident when he is surprised by Vic's violent escape from Topeka to return to the surface of the Earth.

Vic

Vic is the narrator of the story, a teenage survivor of the apocalypse, who bands together with Blood to survive the violent world in which he lives. He is a "solo," a person who is not a member of a roverpak. Because of the realities of his environment, Vic is violent, unfeeling, and impulsive.

Vic knows that Blood is more intelligent than he is, and he accepts Blood's role as a teacher. Although he claims that their relationship is fair and balanced, he maintains his role as the leader of their twosome and insists on being obeyed. He dismisses Blood's sound advice, such as when Blood warns him not to follow Quilla June underground. Instead, Vic allows his rage to dictate his actions. This decision is not surprising, because Vic is guided by his base needs and feelings; when he feels the desire for sex, he follows that impulse, and when he is threatened, he follows his violent impulse.

In the end, the only human emotion Vic seems capable of feeling is loyalty, and he feels this toward Blood. Despite his violent tendencies, he tells the reader that he has never hit Blood. He has no context for understanding (and thus for giving or receiving) human love, and he feels little tenderness toward Quilla June. When faced with a situation in which Blood needs to be fed, Vic makes a practical decision and kills Quilla June to feed him.

Themes

Division

The societies described in "A Boy and His Dog" are marked by strong divisions. Above ground, there are solos, who do not belong to any roverpaks, but instead fend for themselves, often with the aid of a dog. The numerous roverpaks are similar to gangs. They are violent, unforgiving, and intolerant of being challenged. The cinema is referred to as "neutral ground," indicating the territorial nature of the rest of the surroundings.

Vic puts himself in danger with a roverpak by preventing them from getting Quilla June and then by killing several of them. This episode demonstrates the violent nature of the divisive world, and it is clear from Vic's narration that this type of clash is common. In fact, one of Blood's functions is to help warn Vic of approaching roverpaks so that he can stay out of their way.

The downunders represent another division of society. Although they are not internally divided, they live in tight-knit communities that avoid interaction with others. When Vic is in Topeka, he must spend a week wandering the city to allow the residents to become accustomed to him. The downunders are also important in the story because their existence (which is so different from that of the people living on the surface of the Earth) shows the reader that the Earth itself is divided into different realms.

Violence

Violence is a major feature of "A Boy and His Dog." In describing the dwindling and mutating population on Earth, Vic relates a horrifying reality:

The War had killed off most of the girls.... The things getting born were seldom male *or* female, and had to be smashed against a wall as soon as they were pulled out of their mother.

The story contains many violent scenes, such as when Vic prepares to rape Quilla June, when Vic and Blood fight the roverpak, and when Vic and Quilla June shoot their way out of Topeka. Describing the scene with the roverpak at the YMCA, Vic relates,

Blood leaped, right over the crossbar of the guy's rifle held at ready, and sank his fangs into the rover's throat. The guy screamed, and Blood dropped, carrying a piece of the guy with him. The guy was making awful bubbling sounds and went down on one knee. I put a slug into his head, and he fell forward.

In addition to the violent scenes, the characters' attitudes clearly reflect the violent world in which they live. Vic always carries at least two guns, a knife, and a spike. He casually discusses sexual encounters, but the reader soon realizes that he is talking about rape. Quilla June allows Vic to kill her father before she herself tries to kill her mother.

When Vic and Blood seek entertainment, they go to the cinema, where they enjoy violent and pornographic films. They both enjoy films that are bloody and extreme. Vic describes the film *Raw Deal* by remarking, "Gangsters, mobs, a lot of punching and fighting. Real good."

Style

Almost every element of "A Boy and His Dog" brings the dystopic setting to life. Dystopia is the opposite of utopia; it is a depiction of a world (usually in the future) that is bleak, emotionless, and harsh. Ellison utilizes descriptions of the physical world in addition to language, attitudes, and culture to fully relate the story's dystopic setting.

Ellison's descriptions of the physical landscape create a gloomy picture of post-World War III Earth. Vic mentions the "crumbled remains of the curb," the "melted stub of a lamppost," the "weed-overgrown craters," and the "empty corpses of blasted buildings." Inside the YMCA, Vic notices a stench coming from a pile of dead bodies that were never buried after the war.

Almost immediately, Ellison demonstrates Vic and Blood's severe language and attitudes. These characteristics are consistent throughout the story, reflecting their reaction to the hopeless world in which they live. They are products of their environment, so they speak with profanity and relate to each other harshly. Distrust is central to their world, which is evident in the way the characters interact with one another. Vic and Quilla June have no chance of ever achieving true intimacy, and it is hardly surprising that they betray each other. Vic and Blood are loyal friends, yet they often treat each other with disrespect and meanness.

The culture of Ellison's dystopic world is cruel, violent, and divisive. In the absence of law, everyone knows that there are no consequences for violence, so they continue to victimize one another. Quilla June knows that she is being followed by someone who will rape her, and Vic knows that the roverpak searching the YMCA building will kill him if they find him. Vic is so accustomed to his violent world that when he stays in Topeka, he is bored and disgusted. He comments, "Inside a week I was ready to scream.... The clean, sweet, neat, lovely way they lived was enough to kill a guy."

Historical Context

American Involvement in the Vietnam War

The Vietnam War began with a gradual escalation of U.S. forces in Southeast Asia during the 1950s and early 1960s and lasted until 1975, with the North Vietnamese and the National Liberation Front fighting the South Vietnamese and the United States military. America became involved out of fear that if Vietnam became communist-controlled, communism would spread throughout Southeast Asia. At home, the war was unpopular. Demonstrations, sit-ins, and anti-war songs became common in 1960s America.

In 1968, Richard Nixon defeated Lyndon B. Johnson in the presidential election, promising "peace with honor." As he failed to make progress in peace negotiations, Americans at home became increasingly cynical. This attitude was reflected directly and indirectly; while protestors continued to voice their disapproval, others wrote songs, fiction, and drama reflecting America's deepening concern and cynicism.

Despite the difficulties surrounding the war, Nixon won reelection in 1972. In January 1973, all participants in the Vietnam War signed the Treaty of Paris. Among the terms of the Treaty of Paris were the withdrawal of American troops from South Vietnam (which occurred by the end of March) and a cease-fire.

The war's casualties were immense; three to four million Vietnamese lost their lives, close to two million Laotians and Cambodians were killed after being drawn into the conflict, and more than fifty-eight thousand Americans died. The war cost the United States well over $130 billion. Despite the terms of the treaty, conflict persisted in Vietnam and, in 1975, North and South Vietnam were unified under communism.

Science Fiction

Science fiction is a genre in which the author uses scientific facts to create fictional premises and worlds in far-off places or in the distant future. This type of fiction is generally adventuresome, fast-paced and highly imaginative, and contains obvious villains and heroes. Science fiction often incorporates elements of mythology, folklore, and medieval life.

Science fiction is a relatively new genre, having begun toward the end of the nineteenth century and gained widespread popularity in the 1950s. Today, it has a sizeable readership and has become popular in television and film. As science advances, so do the possibilities of science fiction. While early science fiction often considered alien life forms, space travel, and human evolution, today's science fiction delves into issues of artificial intelligence, genetics, and computer technology.

Critical Overview

Critics consider Ellison an important contributor to science fiction, despite his stance that he is not a science fiction writer. A prolific author and editor, Ellison is praised for his contributions to the genre and for his work in elevating it in the eyes of the reading public. Thomas Dillingham of *Dictionary of Literary Biography,* Volume Eight: *Twentieth-Century American Science Fiction Writers* comments,

There can be little doubt... that Ellison has been an important force in the field, publicizing good writing, insisting on the dignity of his own and his colleagues' work, and writing some very fine stories himself.

In *St. James Guide to Science Fiction Writers,* a contributor observes that Ellison's body of work "is more multifaceted than that of perhaps any other science-fiction author, and because of the variety of things he does ... he continues to be an important force in science fiction."

"A Boy and His Dog" is ranked as one of Ellison's strongest and most memorable stories. In *Extrapolation,* John Crow and Richard Erlich describe it as a "cautionary fable employing satire and mythic patterns to define a future world that in some respects may already be with us." Commentators often address the story's violence, characterization, and setting. George Edgar Slusser of *Science Fiction Writers* notes that in this and other stories, "man, as the victim both of oppression and of his own violent instincts, is condemned to hopeless struggle." Commenting on Vic and Blood's role-reversal and dependence on each other, he adds, "Fascinating here is the chain of bloody dependencies established, a chain based on reversals of station." Commenting further on the relationships between the characters, Joseph Francavilla, in *Phoenix from the Ashes: The Literature of the Remade World,* emphasizes the loyalty between Vic and Blood. He explains:

Part erotic witch and part earth mother, Quilla June is by the end of the story the sole representative of downunder and Vic's only hope for permanent, heterosexual love. Yet he rejects this possibility, a sacrifice on his part since women are rare and precious commodities above, and kills Quilla June for food to save the starving Blood.

Francavilla is also struck by the dramatic setting of post-apocalypse Earth. He writes, "Ellison's post-holocaust landscapes are unique, not only because they are symbolic hells .. . but also because there is no indication, promise, or hint that the world will be rebuilt." He further observes that in these settings, time seems to have stopped. In "A Boy and His Dog," this element of frozen time is especially pronounced because the landscape above is timeless in its own way, while the downunder setting of Topeka is timeless in a completely different way. While one is destroyed and hopeless, the other is a seemingly perfectly preserved version of pre-World War I America.

Responding to the shocking sex, violence, and language in the story, many critics argue that these disturbing elements are appropriate in context. A *St. James Guide to Science*

Fiction Writers contributor, for example, notes that the story is set in the aftermath of a nuclear war, adding:

Roving gangs and roving independents, called "solos," occupy the surface of the planet; these young toughs, mostly male, are the same sort as those who roam inner-city streets today. Their language must be realistic and accurate to carry the story.... And without the obscenities and the violence, the reader would be less able to contrast the destructive aggressiveness of the surface group to the equally destructive non-participation of the below-grounders.

"A Boy and His Dog" is in many ways typical of the author's work. Ellison's writing is often dark, disturbing, and controversial. In *Bloomsbury Review,* Tom Auer remarks,

Ellison's prose is powerful and ingenious but often angry, sometimes sinister, occasionally gloomy, and often with an edge that can cut quickly to and through the heart of his subject, and that of his reader for that matter.

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Bussey holds a master's degree in interdisciplinary studies and a bachelor's degree in English Literature. She is an independent writer specializing in literature. In the following essay, Bussey explores the significance of the role reversal that characterizes the relationship between Vic and Blood in Ellison's story.

As indicated by the title, "A Boy and His Dog" is about the relationship between the two main characters in the story, a teenager named Vic and his telepathic dog named Blood. Among the many unusual qualities of this story is the role-reversal that characterizes this human-canine relationship. Ellison inverts what the reader understands as the dynamic between a person and a dog, making the human the more impulsive character and the dog the more thoughtful one. The author's use of inversion in the story reflects the dramatic changes that have taken place on Earth since the War demolished it physically, socially, and culturally. Ellison's presentation of inversions also suggests that perhaps the present is not as stable as the reader might think. The relationship between Vic and Blood shows how something that is taken for granted in the present— the dynamics between people and their pets—might be inverted in the future.

Because Vic is human, the reader expects him to be levelheaded, dominant, caring, and intelligent. He should be Blood's guide, providing for his needs and taking charge of navigating them through the human world. Instead, Vic is impulsive, instinctual, uneducated, and weakened by his base drives. Ellison relates Vic's animal nature on the first page when Vic tells Blood to find him a woman because he needs sex. When Blood teases him, Vic is too blinded by his sexual drive to respond good-naturedly; he is mad at Blood for not immediately responding to his needs. For Vic, sex is not a mutual, loving act; it is rape, and his only concern is fulfilling his need, without regard for the woman he finds.

Vic is also violent, sometimes in reaction to being physically threatened, and sometimes in reaction to having his lifestyle threatened. He, Blood, and Quilla June are threatened by the presence of the roverpak in the YMCA, so Vic reacts by hiding and killing as many of them as he can. This is an example of the basic "fight or flight" instinct, and Vic never chooses flight. In his environment, there is no way to run away from a situation safely, so he has learned to respond to danger with violence. Later, when his carefree, roaming, crude lifestyle is threatened by the leaders of Topeka, he responds like a caged animal. In essence, he wants to return to his native habitat.

Blood, as a dog, could be expected to be an instinct-driven, submissive, and obedient creature who constantly seeks his master's approval. Instead, Blood is the intelligent one in the relationship. He is educated, clever, clear-thinking, and wise. While Vic is impulsive and short-sighted, Blood is levelheaded and strategic, thinking through his plans and choices. He is Vic's instructor, teaching him reading, math, history, and culture. Blood is more intuitive than Vic is, and he has a better understanding of their society.

Blood tries to act as Vic's advisor. When Vic is irrational, Blood attempts to reason with him and guide him to make better decisions. He warns Vic that he does not trust Quilla June and that Vic should not pursue her underground. Although he is rational, Blood is also able to be fierce when necessary. His complex nature is best revealed in the scene in which he and Vic fight the roverpak at the YMCA. Blood attacks by going for the throat, but he also devises a plan to try to fool the roverpak into thinking they (Vic, Blood, and Quilla June) are all dead.

In considering the role-reversal in the relationship between Vic and Blood, an important distinction must be made. Vic has reverted to an animal-like state as a result of his environment, while Blood has evolved to a more rational state as a result of genetic engineering. Vic is genetically the same as present-day readers, but his extreme environment makes him very different. On the other hand, Blood is nothing like present-day dogs. He is evolved by design. Ellison supports the dynamics of the role-reversal in his characterization of Quilla June. Although she lives in a seemingly pleasant city underground, she has a very violent nature. Ellison makes the point that the artificiality of the picket fences and gumball machines of the recreated pre-World War I city can mask, but not erase, the horrors of the war that sent them all underground in the first place. The environment, then, is not restricted to the immediate and visible world, but includes the realities of the history that created it.

Through Vic's reversion to an animal state as a result of his environment and Blood's acceleration to a highly evolved state as a result of genetic manipulation, Ellison makes a strong statement about the power of external and internal influences. The story becomes a twist on the long-standing psychological debate about the dominance of "nature" or "nurture." The debate most often centers on the question of whether nature (genetics) or nurture (environment) affects creatures more powerfully. Ellison's story focuses more on the fact that neither alone is enough to yield a self-sufficient creature. These two characters are brought together because each needs the other. Neither is fully capable of functioning alone. In spite of his animal-like survival skills, Vic needs Blood to help warn him of danger and to provide intelligent counsel. And for all his intellect and keen sense of smell, Blood still needs Vic to find food for him and to care for his wounds.

Beyond the practical aspects of their relationship, Ellison demonstrates that the bond between Vic and Blood is forged in part by the same force that brings people and animals together today—loyalty. Even in the extreme environment and bizarre circumstances of the story's dystopic setting, there is something vaguely familiar in the inverted relationship between Vic and Blood.

Source: Jennifer Bussey, Critical Essay on "A Boy and His Dog," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

Walker teaches writing and literature courses at the University of Washington. In the following essay, Walker tracks the ways in which Ellison's story suffers from misogynistic and adolescent posturing.

When Marlon Brando, in the 1953 film *The Wild One,* is asked what he's rebelling against, he answers, "Whaddaya got?" It's an iconic moment in twentieth-century art: a young man casting off societal constraints. In Harlan Ellison's "A Boy and His Dog," Vic adopts this spirit of amorphous protest. He rails against "squares" with "nice whitewashed fences"; he turns manicured poodles into dog chow. What he doesn't do is demonstrate the advantages to be found in the rebellious stance. Vic gains freedom of a sort, but he remains frozen in his own misogynistic and adolescent postures. It's a trade-off with which Ellison appears comfortable.

Ellison's work has long trumpeted the outsider, the dissenter, the man neither caste- nor clock-conscious. By calling his 1988 short story collection *Angry Candy,* Ellison allied himself with another self-proclaimed rebel, the poet e. e. cummings. The allusion is to cummings's "the Cambridge ladies who live in furnished souls," a satiric poem in which upper-class ladies exercise their "comfortable minds" by bandying "scandal of Mrs. N and Professor D." The ladies' social consciences are eased by knitting sweaters. The moon, meanwhile, offers protest, rattling in the sky "like a fragment of angry candy." Ellison's characters confront orthodox thought just as angrily as cummings's moon does. In "'Repent, Harlequin!' Said the Ticktockman," Ellison's hero is accused of being a non-conformist. "That didn't used to be a felony," he replies. "It is now," the totalitarian figure shoots back. "Live in the world around you." But Ellison's characters are rarely able to live in the worlds around them.

"A Boy and His Dog" illustrates the problem neatly. Vic devotes much of his time "above-ground" searching for sex - a search that, more times than not, is unsuccessful. Lured "downunder," he learns that the townspeople of Topeka plan to employ him as a stud service. For someone whose taste in movies runs to "Big Black Leather Splits," this development is, as Vic says, "too good to be true." But rather than continue to revel in his good fortune, he finds that within a week he's "ready to scream."

For Ellison's Topeka is full of cummings's Cambridge ladies - conservatives too self-content to notice a wider world around them. Vic sees them as "squares of the worst kind," "lawanorder goofs," Better Business Bureau bumblers who rake lawns, collect milk bottles, and listen to oompah bands in the park. Existence for the Topekans is a collective experience; Vic is, by definition, a solo. He's also, by Ellison's reckoning, a natural man, a figure who acts on instinct and who feels kinship with the mountains and forests and moon. He balks at the Topekans" 'artificial peas and fake meat and make-believe chicken and ersatz corn"; he denounces the "lying, hypocritical crap they called civility." Vic imagines himself on the side of the truth-teller, the outlaw, the man who can't be bullied or bought. Trapped in the tin can of Topeka, among people with comfortable minds, he sets forth to free himself, brass balls and rattle in hand.

In the introduction to his story "The Crackpots," Ellison writes disparagingly of the "faceless gray hordes of sidewalk sliders who go from there to here without so much as a hop, skip or a jump." That hopping and skipping sound like child's play is no accident; Ellison's prescription for society's ills usually involves a return to adolescence. The "above-ground" scenes of "A Boy and His Dog" resemble a teenage boy's fantasy, complete with movies and gymnasiums and naked girls. (The fantasy is even educational, as Vic notes the manner in which Quilla June puts on her bra. "I never knew the way chicks did it," he confesses.) Gestures toward youthfulness abound: Vic and Quilla June have sex on a wrestling mat; goods are exchanged by the barter system; the Metropole Theater is run by a rascally roverpak named Our Gang. And, of course, there's the story's conclusion. Boys *do* love their dogs.

The conclusion demands attention. A young woman who has been objectified throughout the story (as "that girl" or "that Quilla June") is killed and cooked and made into dog food. (L. Q. Jones, who wrote and directed the screen version of Ellison's fantasy, turns Quilla June's predicament into a terrible joke. "She said she loved me," Vic tells Blood. The dog replies, "Well, I'd say she certainly had marvelous judgment, Albert - if not particularly good taste." Boy and dog laugh; credits roll.) Ursula K. Le Guin, in her introduction to *The Norton Book of Science Fiction,* writes that patterns of misogyny in science fiction are "often so brainlessly repetitive as to debase stories otherwise inventive and imaginative." In "A Boy and His Dog," Vic imagines women to be sub-human and disposable ("All the ones I'd ever seen had been scumbags that Blood had smelled out for me, and I'd snatchn'grabbed them"). Some of Ellison's best-known stories - "The Prowler in the City"and "I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream" - feature women in appalling situations. Even a relatively mild work, "The City on the Edge of Forever" (Ellison's Hugo Award-winning *Star Trek* script), turns on the need for a female sacrifice.

On the DVD version of A *Boy and His Dog,* the director talks about reactions to the film after its 1975 release. "The first time out," Jones says,"women's groups went bonkers." While it would be folly to suggest that the movie shouldn't be seen or the story shouldn't be read (Ellison has long spoken forcefully against censorship), it's fair to consider the strategies of either work in terms of artistic effect. The problem with the level of misogyny in the story is that it's not in service of anything greater than itself. There's no interesting irony or cathartic terror or unsettling surrealism - what remains is Ellison, very much present, saying "look what I can get away with." And "look what I can get away with" is an adolescent posture.

"Look what I can get away with" also contains a dash of self-congratulation, and that's a deadly ingredient for protest art. The most effective works of social protest are often the quietest: Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* or Bruce Springsteen's *Nebraska* to name a few. Too much hullabaloo and muscle flexing turn the focus away from the target and toward the one doing the targeting. (Ellison's novella *All the Lies That Are My Life* was published with six afterwords by six different writers; the narcissism of the venture is almost comic.) "Strange Wine," the 1976 Ellison story that Le Guin selected for *The Norton Book of Science Fiction,* shows Ellison in a more restrained, less smug, mode. Willis Kaw lives on Earth but believes himself to be an alien. Plagued by earthly troubles

and longing to return home, Willis commits suicide - only to find that he is indeed an alien and that his home planet is a place of true torment. (Earth, it turns out, is known throughout the galaxy as "the pleasure planet.") An interesting study of relativism, "Strange Wine" shows Ellison working with familiar themes, but without the self-congratulatory tone that can be so crippling to his art.

In the introduction to his *Collected Poems,* cummings writes that "it's no use trying to pretend that most people and ourselves are alike. Most people have less in common with ourselves that the square-root of minus one. You and I are human beings; most people are snobs." Along with a love for compound-word coinages, cummings and Ellison share a presumption about their readerships that is dangerously exclusionary. Cummings expects support as he knocks down old ladies; Ellison wants cheering as he battles the "squares." To react otherwise would be to incite the moon's wrath or be labeled a Topekan. But life is more complicated than either of these positions allows for, and art has a responsibility to address those complications. Ask a Cambridge lady the right question and you may find a passion for zoology, or printmaking, or higher mathematics. Explore a place like Topeka (either the current city, or Ellison's "downunder" version) and you're likely to encounter some free spirits in the mix. (Quilla June is certainly a free spirit, but Ellison so exaggerates her lust for sex and blood that she becomes cartoonish rather than complex.) Yes, the world needs more harlequins, more rattlers, more hoppers and jumpers, but it also needs more people who can ask questions, who don't presume to have everything and everyone figured out. There's nothing squarer than thinking inside of a box.

Introducing the second edition of *Paingod and Other Delusions,* his 1965 story collection, Ellison writes, "I'm the same as you: the deaths of a hundred thousand flood victims in some banana republic doesn't touch me one one-millionth as much as the death of my dog did." Ellison, in fact, is not the same as any of his readers, and much of his fiction - "A Boy and His Dog" included - celebrates those who recognize and claim their own uniqueness. Unfortunately, the celebration often turns smug. Vic knows himself to be an individual, but he puts this knowledge to a boastful and uninteresting end. Stuck in his adolescent fantasy, he murders Quilla June and expects thanks from readers and dog alike. A mature reader is likely to ask, "What else do you got?" But Vic's pockets are as empty as his posturing.

Source: Cody Walker, Critical Essay on "A Boy and His Dog," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Crow and Erlich explore mythic elements in Ellison's novella and the subsequent film adaptation.

Harlan Ellison's *A Boy and His Dog,* as novella and film, is a cautionary fable employing satire and mythic patterns to define a future world that in some respects may already be with us. The "boy" is Vic (Don Johnson) and the "dog" is Blood (voice by Tim McIntire); their world is the American Southwest in 2024, shortly after World War IV and the near-total destruction of the human race. Vic is a "solo" operating with his dog, Blood, competing for survival and sex with other solos and their dogs and, also, with "roverpaks," small tribes formed in the wake of the destruction of all other social order. Blood, however, is not the ordinary *Canis familiaris* of our world. By means of biological engineering, carried out to produce "skirmisher dogs" for the military, dogs have become more intelligent and, also, capable of telepathic communication with humans. Their sense of smell has been modified to be ultra-sensitive to humans so that they can locate enemies. Consequently, many of them, including Blood, have lost the ability to find their own food.

But these dogs find men to forage for them. The men cooperate partly because dogs are useful in the fight for survival, but primarily because the new-model dogs are as competent at tracking down females as they are at locating enemies - a highly valuable skill in a world with a diminishing female population. Even among dogs of this new type, though, Blood seems extraordinary. Not only is he the sharpest "tail-scent" around, he is also intellectually more sophisticated than Vic and emotionally more mature than any of the humans we see in the world of 2024.

In Blood, we have one of the variations in mythic patterns and folk motifs that make both Ellison's novella and Jones's film so fascinating and disturbing. At first glance, Blood seems much like the wise magic animal of folk and fairy tales who comes to the aid of the hero when the hero is at an impasse. But Blood goes beyond this role to become Vic's link to the lost pre-war civilization, teaching him reading, arithmetic, recent history, and "Edited English" grammar. He becomes the culture-bearer of the bombed-out wasteland, superior to Vic in everything but the necessary skills of animal survival. The normal relationship of human and animal is inverted.

This inversion and others that follow acquire significance when we see them against the structural pattern of the story. The pattern is the basic descent-containment-reascent pattern of initiation, which in primitive societies is usually a formalized ritual designed to bring a boy into manhood. It is also appears in myths of the hero, where the hero undertakes the task of renewing the wasteland. Through the many variations of the pattern, the task confronting the protagonist remains the same: to maintain conscious "human" control over the unconscious "animal" instincts and responses, thereby overcoming fear, fatigue, inattention or disobedience, or the temptation to indulge appetites such as hunger or the sex drive. Since the sexual appetite presents such a powerful and persistent temptation to the hero, the feminine becomes a symbol of the

danger of losing consciousness and regressing to instinctual, unconscious motivation. On the other hand, the feminine can function as mediatrix of the life force that brings renewal to the wasteland. In myth, the feminine has either positive or negative value according to whether she overwhelms the hero and renders him ineffectual by depriving him of human consciousness or joins him in the task of rejuvenating the wasteland.

All the elements of this mythic situation are present in both the film and the novella: the bombed-out wasteland incapable of the renewal of life; the feminine sexual lure into the descent, represented by Quilla June Holmes (Suzanne Ben ton); a hero divided between using good sense and pursuing his sexual desires; and the necessity for rebirth (the goal of initiation).

The need for rebirth is implicit in the first part of the narrative in the images of the wasteland - the radiation-scorched plain - and, symbolically, in the preoccupation of all males with tracking down the few females who remain above ground. The impossibility of rebirth is implicit in the brutality and violence of the sexual relationship in Vic's world. With a few exceptions, the women in this world hide from men, and, if found, are brutally raped and sometimes killed. As the film opens, Blood and Vic have tracked down a female only to find her already the captive of a roverpak. A long-distance shot gives us Vic and Blood's view of the departing rovers, and we hear in the distance a young boy's voice exclaim excitedly, "Did you see how she jerked when I cut her?" Vic finds the woman stabbed to death and expresses his view of the pity of it all: "Ah, why'd they have to do that? She was good for three or four more times yet." Masculine and feminine are alien and hostile to one another; rebirth in such a world is impossible.

Cheated by the roverpak out of his own chance for rape, Vic takes Blood to a "beaver flick," where Blood picks up the scent of a woman, disguised as a solo. Vic and Blood track her to a bombed-out YMCA, stand off a roverpak whose dogs have also picked up a female scent, and discover a woman from the downunder who is not only desirable but willing - very willing.

Quilla June Holmes is an escapee (apparently) from the State of Topeka, one of the subterranean retreats of American middle-class civilization, and she has never had such a good time. From Vic's point of view she has only one flaw: she is concerned about love, offending Vic's sense of propriety and wounding his ego by suggesting that he does not know a thing about it. Their discussion of love introduces into the film the concept of relatedness between masculine and feminine that could promise a renewal of the wasteland. Unfortunately, at this point Quilla June bashes Vic over the head with a flashlight and disappears back into the downunder, leaving behind the key card that opens the access shaft to the underground. This sets up the descent of the hero into the underworld, for Vic, much to Blood's disgust, loses whatever good sense he once possessed: lured on by his desire to get even and his desire for Quilla June, Vic decides to follow her downunder. The pattern seems true to the usual psychological significance of mythic descents. The loss of "human" intellect reduces the hero to the animal level, and he descends into the womb of the Earth Mother to struggle with the unconscious forces of instinct, passion, and, quite possibly, death. As Blood remarks sarcastically, Vic is acting like a *putz,* phallic man, ruled by his lower rather than his higher human

nature. The argument between Vic and Blood makes clear the baseness of Vic's *macho* motivation. To pursue Quilla June, Vic leaves Blood, hungry and badly wounded from the fight with the roverpak, to fend for himself. The inversion between man and animal is starkest at this point.

The next inversion follows closely. The underground that Vic discovers is anything but a region of the spontaneity, disorder, and passion of the Earth Mother. Vic descends through a hell not of chaos, but of machinery, pipes, cables, and wires. Cryptic labels, valves, color-coded gadgets of various types add to the clutter of an extensive life-support system for the underground city, all of which disappear as Vic leaves the shaft and enters the city itself. The downunder is innocent of any sign of highly developed scientific technology. It is America circa 1915 - River City in parody, complete with marching bands, community picnics, overalls, straw hats, and gingham dresses. The only anomalies are a public address system with a Big Brother voice, giving recipes, homespun advice, notices to the public - and Michael.

Michael is a big, husky hayseed who enforces rigid order for the ruling Committee; and as we discover later, he is a humanoid robot, backed up by several immediately available replacements. The Committee is comprised of a female secretary (Helen Winston) and two mean-minded, dessicated old men (Jason Robards and Charles McGraw). They recognize only one crime: "Lack of respect, wrong attitude, failure to obey authority"; and they assign only one punishment: death by "natural" causes - which means summary execution by Michael.

This underground world is, in short, the antithesis of the underground of myth and fairy tale. It is a sterile, rigidly structured, time-denying society, as mechanistic as the life-support machinery concealed in the shafts surrounding it. But there is a sense in which locating this ossified society in the underground world of unconsciousness conforms with the usual significance of mythic undergrounds. For we become most unconscious in our habitual acceptance of cultural forms, in the sacrifice of human intellect by failing to question these forms - until, little by little, our social behavior becomes as automatic as breathing. A character of Ellison's describes the process in mechanistic terms: "Men often become too much like their machines ... Then they blame the machines for dehumanizing them." And "machinery," is not only technological gadgets but also social forms. Civilized society produces traditional forms as constraining as the taboos of the most primitive culture; and it can produce its own rigid orthodoxies, and orthodoxy, in George Orwell's words, "means . .. not needing to think. Orthodoxy is unconscious."

Orthodoxy is the highest value in Topeka. Consequently, the underground world is even more of a wasteland than the world above ground. In the downunder consciousness is repressed; and any attempt to become conscious, to examine the system, becomes "Lack of respect, wrong attitude, failure to obey authority" and a prelude to absolute unconsciousness at Michael's hands. Accordingly, rebirth is as impossible in the downunder as it is in the wasteland above, a situation that becomes apparent when the captured Vic discovers that he has been lured down below by Quilla June to perform stud service on the young female population, the males having lost their fertility in the sterile mechanistic world.

Vic is delighted to oblige, but his "service" is a good deal less pleasant than he expects. The film, in an improvement on the novella, shows Vic, mouth taped shut, strapped to a table and connected to an aseptic machine of gleaming chrome and glass. Down the hall stretches a seemingly endless line of conventionally gowned, sad-faced "brides." Each "bride" is brought to a flowery arch at the entrance to the room where Vic is captive, a clergyman in full vestments intones a marriage ceremony, the machine hums and clicks - and Vic ejaculates, his semen neatly transported into a test tube. Quilla June rescues Vic, not so much because she likes what he does, but mostly because she has planned a coup to take over the downunder and intends to manipulate Vic into using his fighting ability to help her succeed.

The Committee aborts the coup; and Michael brutally executes Quilla June's co-conspirators, a small band of ineffectual boy friends. After Vic finally destroys *this* Michael, he and Quilla June escape up to the surface, where they find the deserted and starving Blood near death from hunger and from the wounds he sustained helping Vic defend Quilla June. Quilla June, fearing pursuit, demands that Vic leave Blood and continue their escape. But Blood needs food immediately; and Vic, who has recovered a human consciousness during the struggle below, decides to provide it from the most obvious source in the barren landscape. The film closes with Vic and Blood setting off into the sunrise to look for Over the hill - a place where "food grows right out of the ground!" The final image implies what Ellison makes explicit at the end of his novella: "It took a long time before I stopped hearing her ... asking me: *do you know what love is?*

Sure I know.

A boy loves his dog.

The film, like Ellison's novella, demands consideration of just how consciously our own society is proceeding into its technological future. It also has in its political implications a strong condemnation of any complacent "silent majority" who would deny time and change by a mechanistic application of outworn values. Both Ellison's story and Jones' s film present a two-level world: on the surface we have "man in a state of nature," a la Thomas Hobbes, a life of "perpetual war of every man against his neighbor"; in the downunder we have a mechanized incarnation of Hobbes' Leviathan - a totalitarian society where people have renounced freedom, individuality, and, most of all, consciousness, for stability and order. This Hobbesian dichotomy presented in a mythic structure suggests the horror of a world not future, but present, a world where our surface struggles move in patterns dictated by our unconscious subservience to traditional forms.

Jones's film, like Ellison's novella, cautions us that the blighted wasteland of 2024 may become reality, the result, not so much of man's unrestrained animal nature as of his social, political, and technological machinery. As Susan Sontag observed in "The Imagination of Disaster": "The dark secret behind human nature used to be the animal - as in King Kong. The threat to man, his availability for dehumanization, lay in his own animality. Now the danger is understood as residing in man's ability to be turned into a machine." Vic's discovery at the end of the film that "a boy loves his dog" places the

center of value in Blood, the intelligent animal with a capacity for love. Blood waits for Vic even in the face of starvation: the dog loves his boy. Blood's love surpasses merely unconscious, "phallic," love; it far surpasses the power-hungry manipulation of passion represented by Quilla June. And in the end, Vic's love matches Blood's.

The end of the film is appropriately grotesque, but in the world of 2024 it is the best resolution we can hope for: Blood's breakfast fire glowing dimly in the foreground, he and Vic walk off together into the sunrise, joined by consciousness and love.

Source: John Crow and Richard Erlich, "Mythic Patterns in Ellison's *A Boy and His Dog,*" in *Extrapolation,* Vol. 18, No. 2, May 1977, pp. 162-66.

Adaptations

"A Boy and His Dog" was adapted to film in 1975 by LQ/JAF Production Company. The adaptation was written and directed by L. Q. Jones, and the film starred Don Johnson as Vic. This film won the 1975 Hugo Award for best dramatic presentation.

Topics for Further Study

Read about dystopian literature. Other dystopic works include George Orwell's *1984,* Aldous Huxley's *A Brave New World,* and Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange.* Why do you suppose some authors consider the future such a dark and frightening place? Can you relate to the human fear of the unknown future? Why or why not?

Imagine how the story would be different if Blood were not a dog but a different animal. Choose an animal and give it a history, a way of relating to Vic, and a name. Write a synopsis of the story in which you replace Blood with your new animal character.

Science fiction involves taking a scientific principle or a set of scientific facts and extending them to create a work of imaginative fiction. In "A Boy and His Dog," the story springs from the reality of the widespread destruction that would come from a nuclear war. Take a scientific fact (or facts) and create a premise for a science fiction story or film. Write it in the form of a proposal letter to a publishing house or a movie producer.

Vic is a product of his violent environment. Choose a group of people who live in a harsh environment (such as prison), and research how these environments negatively shape the people who live in them. Prepare a presentation for your class in which you describe your findings. If possible, include information about programs to help bring positive influences into these people's lives.

Compare and Contrast

1960s: The Vietnam War is the first war that is brought into American homes via television. Instead of reading about battles and fallen soldiers in the newspaper, Americans tune into the news to see actual footage. This is shocking and disturbing, and it helps fuel the anti-war movement.

Today: American television audiences routinely view violence around the world. Wars, uprisings, riots, police chases, and stand-offs are common, and Americans expect to see footage of such events.

1960s: In 1968, Stanley Kubrick produces the classic science fiction film *2001: A Space Odyssey,* based on the novel by Arthur C. Clark. The film centers on space travel, extraterrestrial life, and a computer named HAL.

Today: Steven Spielberg teams up with Stanley Kubrick Productions to produce the film *A. I.* This film centers on artificial intelligence and concerns an android boy who is programmed to love. He finds himself caught between the human world and the android world.

1960s: Because the Cold War still threatens world peace, the specter of World War III generates fear. Tension between the United States and the Soviet Union continues to fuel the arms race, and much emphasis is placed on which "superpower" has greater nuclear capability.

Today: The break-up of the Soviet Union during the early 1990s signaled the end of the Cold War. As a result, the threat of World War III seems more distant and unlikely to most Americans as they anticipate world events of the twenty-first century.

What Do I Read Next?

Ellison's 1993 *Mefisto in Onyx* is a novel combining crime novel characters with supernatural elements. When a district attorney suspects that a convicted man is innocent, she persuades a man who can read minds to uncover the truth. Critics praise the book for its pace, originality, and characterization.

Robert A. Heinlein's classic science fiction novel, *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961), is the story of Valentine Michael Smith, a man brought up by Martians who arrives on earth as a foreigner. This Hugo Award-winning novel continues to intrigue readers with its plot, characters, and controversial topics.

George Orwell's *1984* (1949) is a classic novel describing a dystopic future in a new region called Oceania. The main character, Winston, is in danger because he questions the all-powerful, all-seeing Big Brother.

Further Study

Dowling, Terry, ed., *The Essential Ellison: A Fifty-Year Retrospective,* Morpheus International, 2000.

This comprehensive volume provides an overview of Ellison's prolific writing career, beginning in 1949. Because it contains both fiction and nonfiction in its twelve hundred pages, it is an excellent resource for students of Ellison's work.

Friedman, Norman, *The Fifty-Year War: Conflict and Strategy in the Cold War,* United Sates Naval Institute, 1999.

In this historical overview, Friedman reviews the events leading up to, during, and ending the Cold War in a way that demonstrates how they are interrelated. The bulk of his analysis is spent on the 1950s and 1960s, although significant occurrences in the 1980s and early 1990s are also discussed.

Roberts, Garyn G., ed., *The Prentice Hall Anthology of Science Fiction and Fantasy,* Prentice Hall, 2000.

This anthology combines the works of many of the foremost authors of science fiction, such as Jules Verne, Ray Bradbury, and H. G. Wells, with those of some unexpected authors, such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Mary Shelley, and Charles Dickens. By presenting a wide array of authors and styles, the editor seeks to demonstrate the universality and long-standing appeal of science fiction and fantasy.

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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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