

The Best American Short Stories of the Century Study Guide

**The Best American Short Stories of the Century by
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Page 1-104

Page 1-104 Summary

"The Other Woman" tells the story of a man, possibly the author, and his visit to see a friend. The friend explains that he is in love with his wife, although the author hadn't asked if the man loved his wife or not. The companion tells the author a story of the events that happened following the companion's appointment to a government position. The companion was at his fiancée's house and was listening to praise from all the people there. No matter where he went on the nights that followed, it seemed that people recognized him and praised him, which made him feel almost dizzy. The companion goes on to explain that at the cigar store there was a short man who was married to a woman that caught the companion's attention. The companion begins to think of the woman at night while he is alone waiting to go to sleep. The woman becomes something that invades all his thoughts. Finally the companion goes to see the woman and asks her to come to his house at eleven. In the day, before the woman is to arrive at his house, the man has trouble composing himself but everyone attributes it to his upcoming marriage. It is the day before his marriage and his fiancée sends him a note explaining her love to him and asks that he be patient with her and that she will repay him with all the love that she has. The man decides that he must not meet with the married woman but that night when the woman arrives he cannot send her away. The next day the man goes to see his fiancée and begins to weep in front of all the guests. They all laugh at the man not realizing the reason for his tears and his fiancée hugs him and says she is glad he understands her feelings. The man says that he doesn't think of the other woman at all now except at night but when morning comes she will be completely gone.

"The Killers" begins at an eatery called Henry's where two men enter the shop. After a short period of time the two men explain to the man running the store, George, and a patron, Nick Adams, that they are there to kill Ole Anderson but don't say why. Ole is supposed to come into the shop to eat as he does most every night. Nick and the cook are tied up in the back and the two men warn that if anyone says anything when other patrons come in then they will be in danger. George sends everyone away quickly that comes in and soon it is obvious that Ole isn't coming that night. The two men leave without hurting anyone and Nick quickly goes to warn Ole that the men are looking for them. Nick finds that Ole is just laying in bed and refuses to get up saying that he isn't going to run anymore. Nick isn't told what the reason is that someone would want Ole dead but Nick and George suspect that it has something to do with the fact that Ole used to be a boxer. Nick goes back to Henry's and Nick says that he can't stand to think of Ole just laying there waiting to die so George tells him not to think of it.

"Wild Plums" tells the story of a young girl who is recalling the events that lead up to the first time she tasted wild plums. Her mother and father refused to go with the Slump family and the others that would go pluming. The girl knows that it is not nice to go pluming although no one has ever told her why and the girl wants to go. The Slumps ask the girl to go with them whenever they go but her father and mother continually



refuse. One day the girl's father goes to the Slump residence to take back his plow that they have borrowed. It is known that Mr. Slump often leaves tools laying out in the weather rather than putting them away. Mr. Slump refuses to let the plow go explaining that since they borrowed it it is the Slump's responsibility to take it back and that they will bring it back the next day when they go pluming. The next day the Slumps come by and ask the girl and her family to go pluming with them and it is clear that they have forgotten the plow. The girl's parents refuse to let her go. The girl's mother warns her not to take any of the plums when the Slumps come back by but when the Slumps pass one of the children throws several out to the girl. The girl takes them to her mother who is upset by this but tells the girl to wash them carefully and warns her that they will taste bitter and nasty. The girl goes out to wash them but doesn't tell her mother that she has already eaten one while standing in the road and that it tasted wonderful to her.

Page 1-104 Analysis

The story of "The Other Woman" is told in first person and the author is recalling the story that his companion tells to him. There are never any names given to any of the characters and it seems that the author is the narrator, although this is never actually confirmed. The gentleman in the story says that the other woman is never thought of anymore. Later he revises that and explains that she is only thought of at night and that in the morning she is gone again. Since the author never asked and the companions offers the statement that he loves his wife it seems that there may be some guilt behind this statement. The statement that he loves his wife appears to have come out of nowhere and the author seems to make it sound as if it were very unexpected to have said it.

"The Killers" could arguably be about more than one person. Ole Anderson is the one that the two killers are looking for and so much of the plot is aimed toward what is known of Ole but Ole himself is only seen one time in the story. Nick is followed much more in the story and it appears that his reaction to what he knows is going to happen to Ole is very important. Most of what could be called the plots in this short story are unanswered. There is no indication of when, if ever, the men find Ole and Nick appears to have made up his mind to leave the town because of the things that have happened. It is unclear why none of the men in Henry's decide to go to the police with what they know.

"Wild Plums" is a story that seems to focus heavily on the fact that the girl's parents are seemingly better off in many respects than the Slump family. The mother seems rather indignant to think that her daughter would actually want to go "with those persons" (page 103). The girl is never told why it is wrong to go pluming but it seems that her parents desire to have their daughter not go is due in great part to who it is that she would be going with.

The stories in the book are written in chronological order and there are changes that will slowly begin to take place in the writing in regards to phrases and slang terms. In the story "The Killers" the cook is referred to as "nigger" and answers the men by calling

them "sir" after they use this term. This is just one of the indications of the time in which the story takes place.



Page 105-210

Page 105-210 Summary

In the story "Theft" a young woman has a very nice purse that was given to her as a gift. In the story the woman goes out with different friends who has nice things, such as hats, that they try to keep looking nice. The woman thinks this is rather silly of them but she continually shields her own purse. When the woman goes home after being out with her friends she lays her purse down on the table. The next morning the woman is in the tub when the lady janitor comes in to check the radiators with the explanation that winter will be coming on soon. When the woman gets out of the tub she sees that her purse is gone. The woman goes to confront the janitor who denies that she took the purse but then hands it back saying that her niece is graduating and that young girls need nice things. The janitor says that the woman could have had whoever gave her the purse give her another. The woman hands the janitor back the purse and says that she doesn't want the purse after all. The janitor now refuses to take it saying that the woman has stolen the purse from her niece. The woman is angry but takes her purse back upstairs. The woman realizes that the only thief she needs to be afraid of is herself because she will leave herself with nothing.

"My Dead Brother Comes to America" begins with a family arriving in America by boat from the Ukraine. The author, a young boy, is looking with his mother and two sisters for his father in the faces that are looking at the boat. The young boy is recalling what he knows of his father and isn't as excited about seeing his father again as his two sisters are. The boy's moth is nervous about seeing her husband again because she never wrote her husband to tell him that their oldest son died in the war. When it is their turn to get off the boat the officials won't let them off for a while because of the discrepancy in the description of his family that the father gives about his family. The father explains that he has four children but the woman only has two. The mother begins to weep and explain the situation until finally they are let off the boat. The weather is cold and the father gives each of his children a hat to wear and holds the last hat that was intended for his oldest son. When they arrive at what will be their new home they each are given a new set of clothing but their is one set of clothing left over. The family grieves together realizing that the dead brother came to America with them as well.

In the story "Christmas Gift" a young boy enters a town after having gotten a ride with a man into town. It is night and snow is falling. The boy enters a store and is allowed to warm himself by the stove. Several men are in the store and one of the recognizes the boy as Milt Lancaster's son. One of the men refers to the boy as "Milt's little bastards" (page 171). One of the men in the store is kind to the boy, however, and even gives him candy after telling the boy where to find the doctor since the boy's half sister is about to have a baby. After the boy is gone one of the men in the store asks what is wrong with the store owner that he gave away candy to the boy but the man simply tells the others to go to hell. Outside the boy finally reaches the doctor's house and explains that his sister is having a baby. The doctor and the boy begin the journey back to the boy's



house. The boy, Sill, smokes a cigarette that the doctor gives him. The doctor says that the boy is too young to smoke but the boy says that he is ten and his father started smoking when he was only eight. Sill soon begins to tell about how the person his father works for has wronged him but the doctor corrects the boy and says that there is likely to be two sides to the story. Sill sits quietly while they edge their way toward Sill's house. Sill explains that he had never seen his sister until recently when she showed up. They have the same mother but different fathers. Sill's father didn't want the girl there for a time but eventually grew quiet about it and now the girl is going to have a baby.

Page 105-210 Analysis

In the story "Theft" the young woman who owns the purse is never named although several of the men that she goes to parties with are given names. Despite the fact that they are talked about it seems clear that it was none of these men that gave her the purse that she enjoys so much. The purse is described in detail but only once in the story does the woman say that it was a birthday present. It seems that whoever gave the woman the purse isn't in her life any longer. The lady janitor that tries to steal the purse is never given a name either. The janitor explains that she wants the purse to give to her niece. The reason that the janitor says that the woman has stolen the purse from her niece seems far fetched but at this point the purse has grown to represent more than just a pretty trinket that a girl would take with her. The janitor seems certain that this purse would mean something much more for her niece and help the young girl as she begins life although this is never explained.

"My Dead Brother Comes to America" focuses greatly on a young boy's interpretation of how things are rather than facts. The boy seems to be under the impression that his father all but abandoned his family although no one else in the family takes this view. The young boy describes his older brother and how the boy died. Although the boy never says so, it is plausible that the young boy believes his brother would still be alive if his father hadn't gone away. Despite the boy's adverse feelings toward his father and the fact that his father left, the father was there waiting on them and seemed to take great strides to ensure that the children had new clothes and warm hats when they arrived. The grief that they go through together is an important factor in the story. In some ways it seems to separate them more as the young boy states that he feels as if he has the right to grieve for his brother. The fact that they are all still grieving is enough to make them pull together in other ways although this is more inferred rather than stated.

The name of the last story is "Christmas Gift" and there is never a clear answer as to what the Christmas gift actually is. The Lancaster family seems to be one of ill repute as is seen when Sill enters the shop to warm himself. The shop owner acted in a curious manner to the boy and it could be that Sill is the man's illegitimate child or that he has some connection to the family. It seems that it must be more than compassion that makes him give Sill the candy because after the boy is gone he tells the other patrons in the store to go to hell. This strong indication of feeling alludes to something that is never



fully explained. Sill is very polite when he is in the town and almost seems leery of talking to anyone unnecessarily. Later in the story when it is just Sill and the doctor, Sill begins to use very foul language and it is seen that Sill smokes cigarettes. Sill says that his sister showed up and that for a time his father wasn't happy to have her around. The reason that the father suddenly became understanding about the girl's situation is unclear. There may have been more to the situation than Sill, a ten year old boy, knew. The gift itself could have been viewed as the candy that was given to Sill, the baby that the girl was going to have, or something in the interaction.



211-294

211-294 Summary

"The Hitch-Hikers" begins with a man named Tom Harris driving down the road. Harris sees two men hitch-hiking, one of whom is carrying a yellow guitar. Harris decides to stop and give the men a lift. Before long they stop and get something to eat and when they leave one of the men has taken a bottle with him from the eatery. The bottles were supposed to be left at the eatery but they do not go back to return it. Before long Harris comes to a town and stops to talk to the owner of a motel that Harris knows and asks if the two men can stay the night there. While Harris talking there is a commotion outside. The hitch-hiker with the bottle, Sobby, had hit the man with the guitar and was trying to steal Harris' car. Sobby is quickly arrested and the man with the guitar, laying unconscious, is rushed to the hospital. Word spreads around town of the attack and Harris waits in town while his car is cleaned up from all the blood. Soon the man in the hospital dies and Sobby agrees to tell what happened. Sobby tells them that the other man was named Sanford and that Sanford and Sobby had only met each other two weeks ago and that Sanford didn't have any family. Sobby describes Sanford as uppity and a braggart that carried around that guitar. Harris gets ready to leave the town after his car has been cleaned up and a little colored boy asks for the dead man's guitar. Harris hands it over.

"That in Aleppo Once..." has the author writing a letter about a woman that he met, and although he has documented proof that he was married, he believes that his wife never actually existed. The man retells the story of how he came to love the girl and that they were married. Soon after they were married they embarked on their honeymoon and the woman would begin to sob for the poor dog that they left. The man was confused because they had never had a dog. The woman explained that she knows but that if they had a dog then it would be locked up at home and crying for them.

On the train in route to their destination, the man got off to get something to eat and when he returned the train had left early. It took the man some time to track his wife down again and when he did she told him a long story of how she thought she might meet up with her husband different ways and took different trains but never could find him. Later she changes her story to say that she was living with a man having an affair. This crushes her husband but later she tells him again that she made that up and that she never had an affair. They were happy for some time until the husband came home one day to find his wife gone. The husband visited several of their mutual friends who all refused to speak to the man of his wife.

Finally, an elderly woman tells the man that she will tell him what she knows if he promises not to go after the young woman. The old woman says that his wife told them all how she had fallen in love with a man who would treat her well and had begged for a divorce but had been denied. The wife also said that her husband had threatened suicide rather than let her leave. The husband listens until the old woman is done and



she seems sympathetic to him but gets firm when she tells him she will never be able to forgive him for strangling the wife's poor dog. The husband doesn't know if his wife left for another man or simply left him but soon boards a boat to head to America. On the boat he sees a doctor that both him and his wife knew. The doctor asks about the wife and the husband explains that he is sailing alone. The doctor finds this odd since he had seen the woman just a couple of days earlier and said that her husband was joining her with bags and tickets soon. Once in America the husband tries to look up family the wife had claimed to have but they were not where they should have been and the wife's former address proves to be a vacant lot between two buildings. The husband admits that he is terribly unhappy.

"The Second Tree from the Corner" is a story about Mr. Trexler who visits a psychiatrist and is asked if he has any bizarre thoughts. Trexler can't think of any of his bizarre thoughts that he would be willing to share and so he lies and says that no he doesn't. Over the next few sessions Trexler begins to feel that he is the doctor in many ways. One day Trexler is asked what he would like out of life, what would make him happy. Trexler asks the doctor the same question. The doctor explains about wanting a wing and several other material things. After hearing this Trexler leaves and thinks about the question and becomes happy in the knowledge that he doesn't want the same things that the doctor wants. Trexler wants things that can't be explained and are unobtainable. Trexler is suddenly happy with who he is. Trexler takes the bus home and makes it several streets before he has a bizarre thought.

211-294 Analysis

Harris admits that the reason that he picked up the two men hitch-hiking was because of the guitar. The guitar was a symbol of something for each man in the story. The guitar was the reason that Harris was willing to pick the men up in the first place. It was the guitar that seemed to add to Sobby's hatred of Sanders. When Sobby is explaining the reason that he knocked Sanders in the head he says that Sanders carried the guitar around with him, as if this was enough to be an insult. The guitar was something to Sanders, who kept the guitar close but didn't play it for anyone but himself. The only child that is willing to stay and talk to Harris when all the other boys run away is the one that wants the guitar.

There is never any proof for the husband what his wife has actually been up to or what her real name even was. The wife did a great many things that would have hurt her husband but she seemed to care nothing about his emotional state and none of this was enough to make it appear that he could stop loving her. All this information was written by the author in letter form to someone that is only known as V. It isn't explained if it is a male or a female that the husband is writing to or if it is a friend or a relative. Regardless, it appears clear that the husband considers V. a confidant and is willing to tell things that otherwise might have been embarrassing for him to recall.

Mr. Trexler never states what any of his bizarre thoughts actually are. It appears that none of these thoughts are about harming himself or others and there are brief

summaries about some of his thoughts but no indication as to what makes them bizarre. It appears at the end of the story for a short period of time that Mr. Trexler is happy for the first time in a long time until he again has another bizarre thought.



295-368

295-368 Summary

"The Resemblance Between a Violin Case and a Coffin" begins with a young boy watching his sister begin her transformation from a girl into a young woman. The boy is very unhappy about this because his sister had been his only friend. The boy doesn't get along with other kids who all make fun of him and want to fight him. The boy watches as his sister is slowly being treated differently, acts differently and is taken to town to have her childish copper curls cut off of her hair. It was at this time that the young boy began writing as an escape with his only friend and confidant being taken away. The sister began practicing music and was considered a great prodigy by her teacher, Miss Aehele. Miss Aehele had two prodigies. One was the young boy's sister playing the piano and the other was a seventeen year old boy named Richard Miles on the violin. Neither one of these students were as talented as Miss Aehele professed, in the opinion of the boy, but all her other students were tone deaf. Miss Aehele plans a concert in which her two prodigies are to do a duet together.

As they begin to practice together it becomes clear to the boy that his sister has fallen in love with Richard, and the boy has developed a fascination with him as well. The girl can practice all her pieces quite well by herself but finds that whenever Richard is around nothing is played correctly. Richard tries to calm her down but nothing soothes her or improves her ability to play the pieces correctly. Whenever Richard comes over to practice the young boy begins to watch them through the crack of his bedroom door. The boy, on some level, realizes there is something wrong with the way he feels by seeing Richard but decides he is monster and there is nothing that can be done about it. The girl tries to get out of her recital but is made to go regardless. Once there the girl makes several mistakes and Richard tries to cover them up by playing louder at that point in the program since he has practiced enough with her to know where her mistakes will come. At the end of the recital she tries to run off stage but Richard holds her hand and has her bow with him. The girl is allowed to quit the piano after that. The boy remember Richard and how he had thought the violin case looked much like a child's coffin. They moved away shortly after the recital and learned that about a year later that Richard died of pneumonia.

"The Country Husband" begins with Francis Weed on an airplane that crashes down. No one is hurt and Francis goes home where the news of the crash hasn't even been heard of. Francis tries to tell her children about it but each of his children are busy doing something and have no interest in listening to their father. Julia, Francis' wife, has been making dinner and when Francis asks her if she couldn't have fed the children earlier Julia explains about her day and how impossible it would be to set two tables. They get into a small fight and soon dinner is over and the children are put to bed while Julia and Francis get ready to go to a neighbor's dinner party. Julia loves going to parties because she felt that her life was boring and lonely.



When they arrive at the dinner party Francis recognizes the woman that is the maid. He remembered her from when he was in the army and there was a woman in a village that was convicted of a crime. As her punishment she was forced to strip down naked and walk out of the town wearing nothing but her shoes and her stockings. Francis says nothing to anyone about the woman knowing that it would not be kept a secret with the way that their community was. When the Weeds arrive home Francis is to take the baby sitter home. She is a young girl named Anne Murchison. Her father is an alcoholic and she doesn't want to go home. When Francis drives her home she kisses him as she gets out of the car. When Francis gets home he can't help but think of Anne and dream of her that night.

The next day Francis, while on his way to work, sees a neighbor who begins talking to Francis about her curtains. Francis is extremely rude to her and looks her in the face so she will know he intended to be rude. That afternoon Francis decides to buy a bracelet for Anne. Over the next few days Francis can't stop thinking of Anne and writes her a love poem which he is certain no one will find. A young boy named Clayton Thomas comes to their house and talks to the Weeds about the fact that he isn't going back to college because of lack of funds. He also eventually says that he is engaged to be married to Anne Murchison.

When Clayton is gone Francis talks very badly of the young man. Julia then asks Francis about the fact that their neighbor has invited everyone to their anniversary party but the Weeds and Francis has to admit to his rude comments to the woman but says that he has never liked the woman. Julia tells Francis to hide his dislikes in order to keep everyone's happiness but Francis disagrees. While Julia is yelling about the effect that it will have on their children Francis slaps his wife. Julia goes upstairs to pack but Francis stops her saying that she can't possibly make it in life without him. Julia grows indignant and says that it is her that makes sure his life is running properly. Francis says he can't let her go and Julia agrees to stay for a while.

The next day at work someone calls Francis to ask about getting a job for Clayton where Francis works. Francis calls the boy several names and refuses to give him a job. Moments later Francis' secretary comes in to resign. Francis quickly calls up a therapist and makes a rush appointment to be seen. When Francis arrives he falls into tears explaining that he is in love. After the appointment Francis is happy and everything is back to the way it should be in Francis' life. In the night Francis dreams of kings in gold suits riding elephants.

295-368 Analysis

There is no explanation as to what is said that makes Francis suddenly happy with his life. It is clear that he couldn't honestly have been in love with Anne since they had only spoken one time. Julia knew that Francis wasn't happy with her but apparently had been trying to make the marriage work and had found other ways of making herself happy. It seems that the fantastic dreams that Francis was having may have had a part in his recovery from Anne.

Tennessee Williams is the writer of "The Resemblance Between a Violin Case and a Coffin" and from what is known of his life it appears that the young boy that the point of view in the story comes from is most likely him. The boy calls himself Tom one time in the story when talking about what a monster he is. Other than that there are no names given to the family that the story focuses the most on.

There is a change that has occurred in the writing already as the stories have gone from 1915 through the 1950s. There will continue to be a great many changes. Despite these changes the theme of love and lust will continue to be heavily used in several of the stories.



369-492

369-492 Summary

"Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" is about a fifteen-year-old girl named Connie. Connie and her family don't get along very well. Connie goes with her friends to the movies on a regular basis and are dropped off by one of the girl's fathers. Sometimes the girls do go to the movies but often they leave the movie theater and go to where older kids hang out at a restaurant. While they are there Connie sees a guy who tells her that he is going to get her. She ignores the boy and thinks nothing more of him. On Sunday Connie's family gets up and gets ready to go to a family barbecue and Connie refuses to go because it won't be any fun. Connie is allowed to stay home.

Connie has the radio on when someone drives up outside her house. Connie knows that it is too early for her family to be home and goes outside to see who it is and finds that it is the same boy that she had seen that said he was going to get her. The boy is smiling at her and tells her that Connie needs to come and go for a ride with him. The man knows Connie's name and that her family has gone to a barbecue. Connie becomes nervous and after a short period of time she realizes that the man, Arnold Friend, is much older than her. He claims to be only eighteen but Connie believes him to be much closer to his thirties. Arnold tells her that he is going to be her lover. Connie threatens to call the cops but Arnold says that if she calls the cops then he will just break down the door and come in and get her. Arnold tells her that she needs to come and get in his car so that they can go for a drive and then everything will be fine, but that if she doesn't then Arnold will wait for her family to get home and will hurt all of them in retribution. Connie scared and tries to shut the door but is to frightened. After talking to her and telling her everything he can do if she doesn't cooperate Connie finally walks outside to Arnold with Arnold telling her that she is better than any of her family because none of them would have done this for her.

"The Rotifer" begins with a woman that is looking at rotifer through a microscope. The rotifer is microscopic and is trapped in a web of algae. The woman tries to help the rotifer by slightly touching the slide with her finger but when she does everything simply slides out of view and she can no longer see the single rotifer and knows that it is gone forever now. Later the woman got a job looking up old family records for a prominent family called the Benton family. After going through many letters the woman finds that the father had a son that he sent off to private boarding school at a very young age. The letters come steadily to the father thanking him for this opportunity and he will try not to let his father down. Before long the boy becomes sick and the letters stop. A nephew of the man goes to visit the boy and finds that he looks very ill and writes his uncle to inform him of his son's declining health. The uncle will take no advice from his young upstart of a nephew and is seemingly insulted to be advised by him.

Later, the letters from the boy simply stop altogether and there is no more mention of the child in all of the family's history. After reading the letters the girl realizes that there is



nothing that can be done for the boy since all these people have been dead an gone for years but she badly wishes someone could have helped the boy. The woman has a cousin named Leah whom she is fairly close to. Leah is the youngest child of a very wealthy and prominent man. Leah calls her cousin to tell her that she is engaged and invites her cousin to the engagement party. This is a very sudden engagement and her cousin agrees to come that Saturday. Before Saturday arrives the woman is in a cab and the man driving is holding onto a blond woman and they are kissing. When the party comes on Saturday Leah introduces her fiance and the woman recognizes him as the man that drove her cab. The woman is torn and doesn't know what to do but ultimately decides she can't say anything without making the situation worse since it is Saturday and they plan to be married that Sunday. The couple seems happy for a time but divorce a year later. Leah's father had died and tied all her money up for a set amount of time before she could claim it. Leah's husband had left her and immediately married what is described as a fuzzy headed blond.

369-492 Analysis

"The Rotifer" has several stories that all mirror each other. The woman telling the story, presumably the author, Mary Ladd Gavell, first sees a rotifer trying to escape it's snare in her microscope. The second is the Benton family story in which the young boy presumably dies because of his ill health and the boarding school he is at. In both of these stories there is someone on the outside looking in who seemingly makes the situation worse by trying to help. When the woman is faced with the dilemma of telling Leah what she knows about Leah's fiance or letting it go, she ultimately decides that it would be better to let it go since she is an outsider and couldn't do much other than make the situation worse. There is no indication that Leah ever knew that her cousin had any information or that Leah would have responded well to it regardless.

"Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" is a very suspenseful story in many ways. Arnold may have been able to break into the house if he had wanted to but it seems that much of what he depended on was the fact that Connie was fifteen years old and easily scared. There is no indication as to what happened to Connie after she left the house. The year that this was written was 1967 and reporting a rape would have been a much different event than it is today. It appears to be clear that Arnold was a predator and that Connie was quickly marked as his prey.



493-564

493-564 Summary

"The Key" begins with Bessie Popkin thinking about the things that torment her in life. Bessie is an older woman and widowed with no children. She often lays things down and then finds them somewhere completely different when she goes to look for them. Bessie blames all of this on her neighbors that hate her. Bessie has changed the locks on her door and lays little traps so that she will know if anyone breaks in but she is still tormented. Bessie knows that her landlord has put rats and roaches in her house to get her to move out but it hasn't worked yet. Bessie has written letters to the police, the mayor, the FBI, and the president in order to have some of her problems fixed but no one has helped her. Bessie gets ready to leave for the supermarket and puts putty in the keyhole before she leaves so that she will know if anyone tries to break in.

Once in the supermarket, Bessie finds that someone moved her money from one side of her purse pocket into her coin purse to make her look foolish. Bessie is finally able to go home past all the thieves and gang members. When she finally gets home she removes the putty from the lock but her key breaks in the door. Bessie begins to panic realizing she has no one to call for help since everyone is against her. Bessie is too tired to carry her groceries to the lock smith and so she leaves her bag by the front door because they would be stolen by someone regardless of what she does. Bessie wanders down the street and sits on the steps of the church to rest where she falls asleep. Bessie wakes up and looks at the stars and realizes she has locked herself away for so long that she has forgotten what they look like. Bessie suddenly realizes that she has paid so much attention to the little things that she has forgotten the bigger things, such as church, and remembering to light a candle on her husband's anniversary. Bessie feels as if the broken key has opened a door that was shut when her husband, Sam, died. Bessie waits until day light and heads home.

On the way home Bessie sees many people getting out bright and early heading to work and Bessie realizes that not everyone is a thief and a gangster in the neighborhood. Bessie almost can't smile when someone tells her good morning and she is ashamed that she has forgotten how to do this. Bessie goes home and finds her landlord who is very kind and helps her in her apartment. Bessie's next door neighbor opens up and says that she took Bessie's groceries and put them in her fridge so that they would be good when Bessie returned. Bessie is overcome with their kindness and realizes how wrong she has been all these years. Bessie enters her house and sits down and her husband Sam comes to her. Sam takes Bessie and they go to a place where Sam tells her that she will never need a key.

In "A City of Churches" there is a woman named Cecelia that comes to the city to start an office for a car rental company. The man showing her around, Mr. Phillips, explains that every single building in town is a church and that everyone lives and works in one of the churches. Cecelia says she isn't religious but the man says she will be. Cecelia is



shown several different places to sleep but tells her that no one has a room to themselves. Cecelia refuses to share a room and is given the choice of a basement or a belfry. When Cecelia and Mr. Phillips walk out of one of the churches there is a group of people that have gathered and tell Cecelia that they all own cars already and no one will rent one from her. Mr. Phillips admits that this is true and so Cecelia says she won't stay there. Mr. Phillips say that she can't go because they need a girl to sit behind the car rental counter they have set up in one of the churches in order to make their town perfect. Cecelia she won't stay and that if she has to stay then she will dream and they won't like her dreams. Cecelia tells them she will dream of the life they are most afraid of. They take her by the arm and say that she is theirs and there is nothing she can do about it. Cecelia tells them to wait and see.

493-564 Analysis

Bessie spends most of her life hoarding for some event that she eventually comes to realize is not ever going to happen. She is old and has no children to leave her money to and, apparently, no one to call in an emergency. She is obviously delusional and perhaps in the early stages of some type of dementia or Alzheimer since she lays things down and then forgets where they are. Some of the objects wind up in very odd and unique places. Bessie had become so eager to look for the evil that was going on around her that she shut herself off from all the good as well. It takes, what Bessie views as a catastrophe, for her to realize that she has been wrong.

In the story "A City of Churches," the churches could symbolize many different things. They can represent religion and the way that it has been forced on some people in cultures. The churches could also be a symbol of the conformity that people find they are asked to fit into. At the end of the story the girl says that she will dream of a life that is what they fear the most. This is never explained to the reader and depending on what the churches and the people in the city represent the dream that Cecelia will dream seemingly will be the opposite of that. The dreams are also important symbols in this story.



565-651

565-651 Summary

"Gesturing" begins with Richard and his wife, Joan, discussing the fact that their marriage has grown stale. Richard tells Joan that he won't give up his lover, Ruth, and he doesn't believe that Joan will give up her lover either. Joan says she would give him up if Richard asked. Richard tells her not to give her lover up. Richard and Joan had spent their summer vacation in separate places. They would have dinner together at the house once in a while but it always ended in fights. Richard finds a new apartment in the city and calls Ruth to tell her. Ruth tells him that she loves him and after her telling him to do what he feels like doing Richard decides to keep the apartment. Richard has Joan and Ruth over at different times and neither woman tries to clean up the house. Ruth smokes but her cigarettes are long and greatly unused when she finishes. When Joan visits the cigarettes are smoked down till there is nothing left. In his new apartment after a time Richard sees that etched into the glass are the words "With this ring I thee wed" (page 569). Richard tells Ruth that Joan had visited and that they had slept together for fun. This infuriates Ruth. Ruth has removed her own wedding ring although she is still with her husband. Whenever she comes to visit Richard she uses a fake name anywhere they go. Richard and Joan continue to go out. Joan still wearing her wedding ring. Richard tells Joan that she should keep the man that she is having an affair with because the man loves her. Joan argues that all the man does is shield Richard from her. Through everything that Joan says and does Richard catches little gestures that Joan gives. Richard knows that these gestures are the same as the words "With this ring I thee wed" that are cut into the glass.

"The Shawl" begins with Stella being cold as her mother Rosa carries the baby Magda. Stella is jealous of the baby and wishes it were her hidden by the shawl. Rosa has stopped giving milk but the baby continues to try to nurse. When the breasts are not something that Magda wants the shawl is sucked for comfort as if it is giving nutrition. Rosa wants to try and give the baby to someone in the streets watching them but knows that if she hands the shawl over that whoever she gives the baby to might drop it not realizing what it was or might not want to keep it. Magda was too weak to cry out and no one tried to take the shawl from Rosa and so Magda stayed hidden. When Magda began to walk Rosa knew she would die and very soon. Magda would let no one touch the shawl. One day Stella took the shawl and this made Magda die. Stella said later she was cold. After this Stella was always cold because the events chilled her to her heart. Magda tries to cry for her momma and the soldiers hear her. Rosa is unable to save her daughter who is thrown against an electric fence. Rosa shoves Magda's shawl in her own mouth to keep her from screaming out and being killed.

"Janus" is the story of a woman, Andrea, who is a real estate agent. Andrea has vast success and at each house she takes a particular bowl that she owns and sets it in the room. It doesn't always get comments but everyone always seems drawn to it and once Andrea got a call asking where the people bought the bowl because they wanted some



like it. When it wasn't at a house she was showing it was at Andrea's house but was always to be empty. Her husband didn't say much about the bowl but Andrea became more and more focused on the bowl. After a time she even began to dream of the bowl. More than once Andrea thought of telling her husband that her success was due in some way to the bowl but knew that he would not have understood what she was saying. Despite her enjoyment of the small bowl it was a mystery to her as well as a comfort. She beloved she loved the bowl. The first time she saw the bowl she had been at a craft fair with a man she was having an affair with. Her lover bought her the bowl and at first it was simply pretty but soon she loved it more than any other gift he gave her. Her lover told her that she was two faced and didn't understand that she couldn't leave her husband. After a time her lover broke off their affair.

565-651 Analysis

The gesturing begins early on in the story. At the end of the story it seems that Joan is willing to hold on to Richard despite the fact that he has someone else he is seeing. It isn't clear if these gestures are absolutely there or if they are only perceived by Richard but they seem to be enforced by the fact that Joan has dinner and continues to sleep with Richard and still wears her wedding ring. Ruth is never actually seen in the story which adds to Richard's view that Ruth isn't real as Joan is. Despite what seems to be her desire to hold onto Richard Joan assures him that in time Ruth will become real.

The Shawl is a very harsh stories about the brutalities that took place by the Nazi's in concentration camps. A story about a concentration camp seems almost far removed but there is the view of the girl, Stella, who is jealous of the tiny baby who is allowed to be hidden by the shawl. This jealousy adds to the already harsh world that the prisoners live in. The shawl in the story serves as a symbol for many different things. The shawl first protects the baby and keeps it hidden from the Nazis. The shawl then begins to act like a pacifier for the child. Finally it is the shawl that prevents Rosa from crying out when Magda is killed.

"Janus" is the story of a woman who has two faces as her lover tells her. Janus is the name of the Roman god that was depicted having two faces. This title is symbolic of the life that Andrea has to live. She continues to keep the bowl, a remembrance of the one that she truly loves, but she can never put anything in the bowl, or have the life that she wants. It is possible that Andrea could be happier with her husband if she was willing to let go of the bowl or to allow something to be put into it. The fact that she holds onto it as it is keeps her with two faces.



652-768

652-768 Summary

"You're Ugly, Too" begins with the introduction of Zoe Hendricks, a teacher at a liberal arts college called Hilldale-Versailles. Zoe isn't well liked or understood by the faculty or by her students. Despite this she can't be fired because there recently was a sex-discrimination suit. Zoe calls her little sister, Evan, and Zoe says that she is going to come and see Evan and Evan's boyfriend Charlie for Halloween. Eventually the subject comes to marriage and Zoe tells Evan that she is too young to get married. Evan claims that Zoe only says this because Evan is five years younger and Zoe isn't married yet. Zoe has dated some guys in town but none of them understand her humor or can relate to her. Evan says that Charlie has a friend who is coming over for the Halloween party that she wants to introduce Zoe to. Zoe has recently bought a house and while looking in a mirror that a friend gave her Zoe realizes that she looks different to herself.

Zoe is going for an ultrasound test because she has a growth in her abdomen. Zoe had kept the ultrasound a secret and once told her sister that she felt like she was dying but Evan told her that Zoe was just bored. At the ultrasound there is suddenly something that catches the technicians attention and the machine begins to click loudly but Zoe is told nothing other than the doctor will call her. When Zoe arrives at her sister's house Evan eventually tells Zoe that Evan and Charlie have decided to get married. Zoe tries to act happy for her sister. Zoe starts to tell Evan a story of a woman who fell in love and then killed herself but stops before the gruesome part and changes the story. At the party Zoe is introduced to Charlie's friend, Earl, who is dressed as a naked woman. Earl and Zoe talk for a while but it is clear that they have very little in common and Earl doesn't understand Zoe's sense of humor. Zoe soon begins to hurt in the abdomen and goes to the bathroom until the pain subsides. When she returns Earl asks her opinion on love and Zoe tells him the story of the woman that fell in love and then killed herself. Earl says that Zoe is jaded and he should know better than to try and see career women. When he turns around Zoe pushes him at the edge of the balcony making him spill his beer over the edge. Zoe claims it was a joke.

"Birthmates" is the story of Art Woo, a business man, who finds himself in a broken down welfare motel room at a business convention after trying to save a few dollars. Art tries not to think of evil lurking in the dark but doesn't sleep well. The following day Art thinks of his wife Lisa and the reason that she left him after they tried repeatedly to have children but were unsuccessful. Art then thinks of Billy Shore, a competitor in the insurance market. Billy is always making jokes at Art's expense. As Art goes through his day he discovers that Billy has left for a different job. Art is rather relieved to know that he won't have to face Billy any longer but somehow the news still depresses him. Art held onto this job but most people felt it was smart to leave if there was anywhere else to go to. Art knows that he is luckier than the people that live in the hotel he is staying at. Art thinks of his wife and the baby boy that had been on the ultrasound. The child



had looked perfect but it was known that when the child was born he would have broken every bone in his body coming into the world.

652-768 Analysis

"Birthmates" is given its title because of the similarities between Art and Billy. There is not much similar between Art and Billy except the kind of work that they happen to be in and when their birthdays are. The title seems to stem from the fact that Art believes that he and Billy have a lot in common and there is no reason that Art couldn't succeed in the same areas that Billy does. There is a lot of talk about Billy and it is clear that they dislike each other in most respects but Billy is never actually introduced during the story, only recalled by Art. Art seems to try and think the best of everything that happens, no matter how bad but despite this tendency he doesn't expect good things to happen to him. Art seems to be overly timid and this creates him a large amount of trouble in his own life.

"You're Ugly, Too" doesn't have a definitive plot or ending. The point of view is third person although it focuses solely on Zoe. The point of view makes it hard to understand Zoe's feelings and thoughts. It seems that her constant jokes at death and lack of emotional attachment with the opposite sex may be causing her some form of depression. Even those that she works with and her students don't understand Zoe. The only people in the story that Zoe seems to have any kind of relationship with are her sister and the cab driver. Later it will be the cab driver that Zoe uses as a central theme for one of her lies to Earl about a non-existent relationship.



Characters

Tennessee Williams appears in *The Resemblance Between a Violin Case and a Coffin*

Tennessee Williams is a young boy in this story. The relationship between him and his sister, Rose, is described in great detail. This is given to explain the emotions that the boy goes through watching his sister begin to mature. Some of the feelings seem almost to be anger or jealousy. In truth the young boy knows that he is watching the end of his close relationship with his closest friend, Rose, and it appears to frighten him more than the young boy can understand.

The story also focuses on the young boy realizing that he is beginning to take notice of people in what could be described as a sexual way. The young boy knows that it is wrong to have these feelings since they are aimed at a young man. While Tennessee is watching the boy, he calls himself a monster but says that there is nothing he can do about it. The story focuses on the what could be viewed as a very pivotal point in Tennessee's life. It is at this point that he loses what he views as his only friend explaining that the other kids frightened him. It is also at this point that Tennessee begins to realize that he is attracted to the same sex.

Bessie Popkin appears in *The Key*

Bessie Popkin is an elderly widow who stays in her home believing that she lives in a horrid neighborhood. Much of the beginning of the story deals with the way Bessie views the changes she sees around her since her husband died. Bessie believes that there is no one in the neighborhood she lives in except gang members and thieves. Bessie is older and forgets where she puts things. When she finds them somewhere she doesn't remember putting it she blames people that are breaking into her apartment.

Bessie goes out to the grocery store after taking great strides in order to ensure that no one is able to get into her apartment without her knowing it. When Bessie returns home she breaks her key off in the door. While most people would have asked for help Bessie continues with her accusing behavior stating that her neighbors are responsible. It is also seen that Bessie refuses to say thank you or give common courtesies to those around her because she has convinced herself that they are out to get her.

It isn't until Bessie happens to rest on the steps of a church that Bessie sees the stars and realizes that she has wasted her life in hate. Bessie decides she was wrong about her beliefs of evil being everywhere. When Bessie returns home she sees her long dead husband who takes her home.



Bessie does explain that she has no children. She seems very harsh and the police believe her to be a joke. In truth Bessie was left alone when her husband died and it appears that this has given her a lot of fear.

Nick Adams appears in The Killers

Nick Adams is in Henry's when the killers arrive and explain that they are there to kill Ole Anderson. Nick is tied up in the kitchen for a time. Nick is the one that goes to warn Ole Anderson about the men looking for him although Ole says that he isn't going to run any longer. Nick is confused by this and disturbed and ultimately says he thinks he is going to move out of the town.

Sill Lancaster appears in Christmas Gift

Sill is only ten years old but makes his way to town to find a doctor for his sister who is going to have a baby. Sill seems very polite when he is first introduced into the story and is very respectful to the adults that he speaks to. Later when the doctor begins talking with Sill in a much more relaxed conversation Sill begins to repeat things that he has heard his father say and use foul language and even smokes a cigarette.

Tom Harris appears in The Hitch-Hikers

Tom Harris happens to be the man that picks up two hitch-hikers. They stop in a town and Tom gets out to talk to someone. One of the hitch-hikers is hit over the head with a bottle by the other hitch-hiker and this covers much of Tom's car in blood. Tom admits to himself that the guitar that one of the hitch-hikers carries is a lot of the reason that he picked the two men up.

Richard Miles appears in The Resemblance Between a Violin Case and a Coffin

Richard Miles is the young man, the age of 17, that performs a musical duet. It is also this person that the young Tennessee Williams first watches and realizes he is attracted to the same sex. Richard Miles dies a short time after the duet from pneumonia.

Francis Weed appears in The Country Husband

Francis Weed is married with several children but jeopardizes his marriage after the very young baby-sitter kisses him. Francis doesn't have an affair with the girl but becomes obsessed with her to the point that his wife almost leaves him. Francis makes an appointment with a psychiatrist and confesses his love and after that is able to return to his life and seemingly not think of the girl again.



Connie appears in Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?

Connie is a young pretty girl of fifteen who attracts the attention of a much older man. The man, Arnold Friend, tells Connie that they are going to be lovers and forces Connie to go with him explaining that if she doesn't then he will hurt her family. Connie believes that Arnold is close to being in his thirties although he tells her he is only eighteen.

Richard appears in Gesturing

Richard is married to a woman named Joan but is having an affair with a woman named Ruth. Richard's wife tells him that she is ready for a divorce. After they split up Richard realizes with every gesture that Joan does that she doesn't mean for their relationship to be over and that she still wants to be his wife.

Andrea appears in Janus

Andrea is a real estate agent and makes sure that a bowl she owns is in each of the houses that she shows. The bowl was a gift to her from the man she was having an affair with. Andrea attributes the success she has in selling houses to the fact that the bowl is in each house.

Zoe Hendricks appears in You're Ugly, Too

Zoe is a college professor who is told by the doctors that she has a mass in her stomach. After having tests done Zoe goes to visit her sister and finds that she is looking haggard and having stomach pains. Zoe seems unable to find a man to spend time with and even makes up relationships when asked about her opinions about love.



Objects/Places

Yellow Guitar appears in The Hitch-Hikers

It is this yellow guitar that the hitch-hiker is holding that makes Harris decide to offer them a ride. The owner of the guitar is killed by a guy he is traveling with. The guitar is given by Harris to a little colored boy who asked for it after the owner had died of his wounds.

Henry's appears in The Killers

Henry's is where the two men show up to kill Ole Anderson. Those working and others are held captive here until it becomes obvious that Ole Anderson isn't going to show up. This establishment is called "Henry's lunch-room" (page 68) but later is called "Henry's eating-house" (page 76). The story begins and ends at Henry's.

Bowl appears in Janus

This bowl is a piece of pottery that was bought for a woman by the man she was having an affair with. The woman put the bowl in the houses she was selling and attributed her vast success to the bowl's presence in each house she would show. The bowl was always left empty and the woman refused to let anything, including her husband's keys, to be put in the bowl.

Shawl appears in The Shawl

The shawl is said to be magical and is used to keep a baby, Magda, hidden while in a concentration camp. The infant's older sister, Stella, takes the shawl and the baby is discovered. Stella shoves the shawl in her own mouth to keep her quiet while both her mother and the baby are killed.

Key appears in The Key

Bessie Popkin breaks her key off in her door. Bessie has convinced herself that everyone is out to get her and it isn't until she is dependent upon the kindness of her neighbors that she realizes that she was wrong.



Purse appears in Theft

This purse was a gift to the woman in the story "Theft." The purse is stolen by the janitress who came to check the radiator. The janitress gives the purse back but claims that the woman in essence is stealing the purse from her niece.

Car Rental Office appears in A City of Churches

Cecelia goes to a town that is made up completely of churches to open an office for a car rental office. The people there say that they don't have any need for this office. Despite the fact that her services aren't wanted they refuse to let Cecelia leave saying that since they have the office already for her she must stay.

Boat appears in My Dead Brother Comes to America

It is in New York Bay that a family arrives from Ukraine on a boat. It is here that a young boy, his two sisters and his mother come to meet his father who is already in America. When the woman tries to get off the boat she is stopped for a moment before being allowed off the boat because the father is explaining he has four children not realizing that his older son has died.

Microscope appears in The Rotifer

It is through the telescope that a woman watches a rotifer struggling for life. The woman tries to help the microscopic rotifer but only whisks it out of view and is unable to find it again. The woman likens this situation to the one she is faced with later in the story when her cousin, Leah, is engaged to a man who the woman suspects to be unscrupulous.

Taxi Cab appears in The Rotifer

It is while riding in the taxi cab that the woman sees a man and remembers his face. The man is seen later as the fiance of the woman's cousin, Leah. Unknown to Leah, her cousin is sure that she saw the man with another woman in a romantic embrace. Despite her thoughts the woman can find no way to tell Leah of what she believes to be true.



Themes

The Strength of Emotions

The short stories found in this book range from the year 1915 through 1998. These stories will have different point of views and subjects that they focus on but many of the stories show the importance of emotions and the strength that they have. Love, and sometimes lust, is seen as a driving force in stories such as "The Other Woman," "The Resemblance Between a Violin Case and a Coffin," and "Janus." "The Other Woman" was written in 1920 and "Janus" was written in 1986. Despite the difference in the years that these stories are written in they have a great many things in common.

Another emotion that is looked at is fear. Fear is a strong driving force for several characters in stories such as "The Second Tree from the Corner" and "The Key." In both of these stories the characters are so concerned with safety in one extreme or another that they seemingly forget how to live and enjoy life. There are other emotions that are looked at as well over the course of the book such as jealousy, hate and many others. Sometimes these emotions are from the perspective of a child and sometimes it is from an adult and even those that are elderly. The theme of emotions is used in each story in one capacity or another.

The Importance of Choices

In many of the stories there is a main character that is looked at and these short stories will focus on one character's choice or choices. It will be this choice that either influences all other happenings in the story or it will be this choice that ends the story. Sometimes these choices will seemingly be minor choices but will reflect a deeper meaning for the character and the story, such as that of the choice made in "Wild Plums." In "Wild Plums" the little girl decides to eat a plum even though she knew it was wrong and it tasted wonderful to her. The choice of eating the plum, although she knew it to be against her mother's wishes, was seemingly what the entire story lead up to.

Other stories will have choices made by the main characters that effect everyone around them or have the potential to end someone's life, such as "The Shawl." In the story of "The Shawl" the young girl takes the shawl that had kept her sister hidden in the concentration camp. This leads to the death of her mother and her baby sister while the sister chooses to keep herself safe with the shawl that had protected the baby. In "The Killers," a man chooses simply to wait for the men who are coming to kill him. It is never explained why the men are coming for him but his choice to sit and wait for the men rather than run from them is very important to the ending of the story.

In each story there will be a very different group of people, setting and plot. Despite these differences it is clear that the choices that these characters make are ones that

leave the reader wondering about the decisions that they would make if left in the same position.

The Impact of Relationships

There are many different types of relationships that are looked over the course of the books. Some of the relationships are seemingly typical and involve interaction that an average person can relate to in terms of family, marriage, and so on. Often these prove to be much more complex than they first appear when they are looked at more closely. Many times in the stories there will be an adulterous relationship going on in the marriage, and in some cases such as "Gesturing" even the adulterous affairs become more complex when the husband and wives continue to see each other despite the fact that they are no longer together. There are some family relationships that are looked at more closely from the point of view of children such as that of "Verona: A Young Woman Speaks." In this story the view of the young girl is compared to that of what she knows when she is older. The family seems very happy at a distance but it is seen that even within this very close and seemingly loving family there is jealousy and spite.

Other relationships are looked at such as those between friends and even patients and doctors. Arguably the most important relationship that is looked at in the story is the relationship that a person has with themselves. Many of these stories are told from the point of view of the person that is looking at the battle that is going on within themselves. There are times when the characters either highly approve or highly disapprove of themselves and their own actions.

Style

Point of View

The point of view in the stories will change. Some of the stories will be told by one person and will have little or no dialogue. In the story of "The Other Woman" the story contains dialogue from only one person although the point of view is from the person that is being spoken to and not the man speaking. Other stories will contain large amounts of dialogue. There are stories that will have the point of view that will be told from only one point of view but there are other stories that are told from different point of view of the various characters. At times it will be hard to distinguish which character, if any, the point of view is being told from. Some of the stories will be told in the first person, such as the story "The Resemblance Between a Violin Case and a Coffin." Other stories, such as "Greenleaf," will be told in third person. The story "That in Aleppo Once..." is written in the form of a letter explaining past events and asking about the other person's family and life.

There are some of the stories that will have an omniscient point of view while others are limited. There are some of the stories that will be told as if they are being remembered or are in the past but others seem to be told in present tense.

Setting

The stories' settings will change throughout the book. This may be due in part to the fact that the stories come from different eras in time beginning with the date 1915 and ending with the year 1998. Some of the stories won't give any type of concrete place or time but will appear to be the general time that the piece was written. Others will give more exact places, such as the story "My Dead Brother Comes to America". In "My Dead Brother Comes to America" there are several different places mentioned in which the characters came from and where in America they ended up. For each story the date that the story was written will be needed knowledge for better understanding the setting since often the setting isn't given a great amount of detail. In stories such as "Wild Plums" there is talk about the tools and objects that people will use that will give the reader a better understanding of the time.

Often the time of year has more detail given to it than the actual year itself, such as the story "Christmas Gift." In "Christmas Gift" the snow and the bitterness of the year is explained to give the reader a better understanding of what the characters in the book are going through but there is no indication of the actual year itself.

Language and Meaning

The language in the story will change as the era in times change. There is a clear period of time that is shown in some of the story because of the different phrases and



slang terms that are used. In the story "The Killers," Sam the cook is a black man who is called "nigger" (page 70). Sam answers the men when they call him by this term and even goes so far as to call the men "sir" (page 70). This dialogue clearly indicates a period in time although the date is never told in the story itself.

Often times in the story there are obvious grammatical errors as well as language that is misspelled in order to relate to the reader the education level or perhaps the culture that the characters in the story claim. This language tool is seen clearly in the story "Christmas Gift" and in the story "Greenleaf." There may be times in which the language is harder to understand because of these misspellings but when taken into context the meaning becomes clear. The stories that are written earlier in the book come from as early as 1915 and the language in these earlier stories will appear much more stiff and formal than those that are written later. The reader will need to take into consideration the date in which the story was written and whether the writer was male or female for many of the stories in order to understand better the language used.

Structure

The book contains a forward and an introduction at the front of the book that contain twenty-four pages which are numbered with roman numerals. After the forward there are an additional 776 pages consisting of 55 different short stories as well as biographical notes at the end of the book. The short stories in the book come from a vast array of different authors and they are put into order by the date in which they were written. There are some years that will have more than one story that comes from that year but there are many years that are skipped entirely. The years range from 1915 through 1998.

In the introduction and forward in the book the explanation as to why these few stories were chosen from those that were written throughout the last century is given as well as information about the people that chose them. The forward was written by Katrina Kenison and the Introduction was written by John Updike. Katrina Kenison was the co-editor for the book and John Updike was the editor. The biographical notes found in the back of the book takes a look at the individual life of each author that contributed one of the stories. This information includes what is known of their birth, death and any significant information about their life in regards to their writing and in some cases information about awards that were given to these writers for their works. There are some authors, such as Alexander Godin, who were known to write only one work and very little information about the persons life is known and there is no knowledge of when they died.

There are more than fifty short stories in the book, only a few of which were chosen to summarize and analyze. The stories, in the order the book provides are as follows: Zelig; Little Selves; A Jury of Her Peers; The Other Woman; The Golden Honeymoon; Blood-Burning Moon; The Killers; Double Birthday; Wild Plums; Theft; That Evening Sun Go Down; Here We Are; Crazy Sunday; My Dead Brother Comes to America; Resurrection of a Life; Christmas Gift; Bright and Morning Star; The Hitch-Hikers; The



Peach Stone; That in Aleppo Once...; The Interior Castle; Miami-New York; The Second Tree from the Corner; The Farmer's Children; Death of a Favorite; The Resemblance Between a Violin Case and a Coffin; The Country Husband; Greenleaf; The Ledge; Defender of the Faith; Criers and Kibitzers, Kibitzers and Criers; The German Refugee; Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?; The Rotifer; Gold Coast; The Key; A City of Churches; How to Win; Roses, Rhododendron; Verona; A Young Woman Speaks; A Silver Dish; Gesturing; The Shawl; Where I'm Calling From; Janus; The Way We Live Now; They Things They Carried; Meneseteung; You're Ugly, Too; I want to Live!; In the Gloaming; Proper Library; Birthmates; Soon; The Half-Skinned Steer.



Quotes

"I went out quietly, knowing I would never tell her that they were strange on my tongue as wild honey, holding the warmth of sand that sun had fingered, and the mystery of water under leaning boughs." Wild Plums, Page: 104

"She remembered how she had never locked a door in her life, on some principle of rejection in her that made her uncomfortable in the ownership of things, and her paradoxical boast before the warnings of her friends, that she had never lost a penny by theft; and she had been pleased with the bleak humility of this concrete example designed to illustrate and justify a certain fixed, otherwise baseless and general faith which ordered the movements of her life without regard to her will in the matter." Theft, Page: 109

"The New World breathed a chill upon us and this chill, we felt, was not due entirely to the season."

My Dead Brother Comes to America, Page: 153

"Both of them were- but when he touched it he knew obscurely that it was the yellow guitar, that bold and gay burden in the tramp's arms, that had caused him to stop his car and pick them up."

The Hitch-Hikers, Page: 213

"Although I can produce documentary proofs of matrimony, I am positive now that my wife never existed."

That in Aleppo Once..., Page: 241

"Trexler knew what he wanted, and what , in general, all men wanted; and he was glad, in a way, that it was both inexpressible and unattainable, and that it wasn't a wing."

The Second Tree from the Corner, Page: 285

"How on earth did I explain to myself, at that time, the fascination of his physical being without, at the same time, confessing to myself that I was a little monster: Or was that actually before I had begun to associate the sensual with the impure, an error that tortured me during and after pubescence, or did I, and this seems most likely now, say to myself, 'Yes, Tom, you're a monster! But that's how it is and there's nothing to be done about it.'"

The Resemblance Between a Violin Case and a Coffin, Page: 319

"Everything about her had two sides to it, one for home and one for anywhere that was not home: her walk that could be childlike and bobbing, or languid enough to make anyone think she was hearing music in her head, her mouth which was pale and smirking most of the time, but bright and pink on these evenings out, her laugh which was cynical and drawling at home- 'Ha, ha, very funny'- but high-pitched and nervous anywhere else, like the jingling of the charms on her bracelet."

Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been? Page: 451



"We want you standing behind the counter of the car-rental agency, during regular business hours. It will make our town complete."

A City of Churches, Page: 506

"We were silent, and in silence we spoke of how we loved men and how dangerous men were and how they stole everything from you no matter how much you gave- but we didn't say it aloud."

Verona: A Young Woman Speaks, Page: 538

"He saw through her words to what she was saying- that these lovers, however we love them, are not use, are not sacred as reality is sacred."

Gesturing, Page: 575

"It was a magic shawl, it would nourish an infant for three days and three nights."

The Shawl, Page: 577

"But now in her second job, in her fourth year of teaching in the Midwest, Zoe was discovering something she never suspected she had: a crusty edge, brittle and pointed."

You're Ugly, Too, Page: 654



Topics for Discussion

Pick a character from one of the stories that you felt you could identify the most with. Explain what it is about this character, or the story, that made it easy for you to have a connection or an understanding with this character.

In the story "The Country Husband" Mr. Weeds goes to the psychiatrist and in the next passage seems to be happy. Explain why the author doesn't relate what is said in the doctor's office. Speculate on what was said or what conclusion that Mr. Weeds came to that restored his happiness. Explain your answers.

In the story "The Hitch-Hikers" Harrison admits that the guitar is the reason that he picked the two men up. Explain what the guitar possibly represents. Why is it significant that it was given to the small colored boy? Explain your answers.

Narcissism and low self esteem often fuel inner turmoil in literature. Pick two characters from the book. One should be an example of narcissism and the other should be indicative of someone with low self esteem. Explain your choices.

In the story "The Shawl" Stella chooses not to rush to aid her sister or her mother. Explain the motivations of Stella for the taking of the shawl and why she put the shawl in her mouth.

In the story "Janus" the bowl is kept empty. Explain the significance of the bowl being left empty. What does the bowl represent?

Compare the stories written in the early-1900s (1915-1930 or so) to the ones that were written after 1970. What differences does the literature show that is an indicator of the time they were written? What do they have in common despite the year written?

How important is the Biographical Notes found in the back of the book containing information about the lives of the writers? Why did the editors choose to include this information?