The Centaur Study Guide

The Centaur by José Saramago

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

José Saramago's □The Centaur□ was first published in English in the collection *Telling Tales*, edited by Nadine Gordimer and published by Picador in 2004. Giovanni Pontiero translated the story from Portuguese into English. The short story was published earlier in Portuguese in Saramago's short story collection *Objecto Quase* (Almost an Object) published by Editorial Caminho of Lisbon in 1978 and 1984.

Like other stories by the author, □The Centaur□ involves a blending of the fantastical with the everyday or mundane. In the story, a centaur, who is the lone survivor of the mythical species, roams the Earth evading capture and persecution by human beings. As he travels toward his home country, which he has avoided returning to for millennia, he struggles to reconcile the opposite needs of his two halves: he possesses the mind and upper body of a man and the lower body of a horse. In this tale, Saramago explores the universal themes of alienation, loneliness, dualism, and the human fear and hatred of the unknown.

Author Biography

Nationality 1: Portuguese

Birthdate: 1922

José Saramago was born on November 16, 1922, in Azinhaga, Ribatejo, Portugal. He is best known as a novelist, and in 1998 he became the first Portuguese writer to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature. Born into a family of rural workers, he grew up in the city of Lisbon, often visiting relatives in the countryside, and attended a technical school to learn a trade. Before becoming a full-time professional writer, Saramago worked as a mechanic, a civil servant, a translator, a literary critic, a political commentator, and a journalist. In 1944, he married Ilda Reis, and they had a child named Violante in 1947.

Saramago published his first novel *Terra do pecado* in 1947. Almost thirty years later in 1976, Saramago published his next novel entitled *Manual de pintura e caligrafia* (Manual of Painting and Calligraphy). His third novel *Levantado do chao* (Raised from the Ground) was published in Portuguese in 1980. Following this novel, Saramago published several novels that were translated into English and which established his worldwide reputation as a novelist, including *Baltasar and Blimunda*, published in Portuguese in 1982 and in English in 1987, and *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis* published in Portuguese in 1984 and in English in 1991. In 1994, Saramago published two novels in English *The Stone Raft* and *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*.

Saramago's other novels include *The History of the Siege of Lisbon* (published in English in 1996), *Blindness* (1997), *All the Names* (2000), *The Cave* (2002), and *The Double* (2004). Although primarily known as a novelist, Saramago has also written and published several collections of poetry, plays, non-fiction works, an opera libretto, and short stories. The short story □The Centaur□ appears in the anthology *Telling Tales* (2004), a collection of stories by writers around the world, edited by Nadine Gordimer. The short story was translated into English by Giovanni Pontiero.

In addition to the Nobel Prize in Literature, Saramago has earned many awards, including Grinzane Cavour Prize, the Flaliano Prize, Premio Cidade de Lisboa (1980), Premio Vida Literaria (1993), and Premio Camoes (1995). In 1991, he received honorary doctorates from the University of Turin in Italy and the University of Seville in Spain.

Plot Summary

□The Centaur□ opens with descriptions of a man and a horse moving over a riverbed and looking for a hiding place to sleep in as the day breaks. As the description continues, it quickly becomes obvious that the horse and the man are one mythical creature, the centaur, whose body consists of the head and chest of a man and the body and legs of a horse. After pausing to drink from a stream, the centaur finds a good spot to rest and sleep among some trees. As the centaur lies down to sleep, it struggles, since sustaining a comfortable position for both the man and the horse throughout the night is not possible.

Although the horse half falls asleep right away, the man lies awake for a while before falling asleep and beginning to dream. At this point in the story, the narrative shifts to the past tense: the narrator describes how the centaur became the lone survivor of his species. The narrator explains that after fighting in several battles, the centaurs were defeated by Heracles in an epic fight. The surviving centaur managed to escape somehow, after witnessing Heracles crush Nessos, the centaur leader, to death and drag his corpse along the ground. Since that battle, the surviving centaur□who remains unnamed throughout the story□has dreamed every day of fighting and killing Heracles as the gods watch and then recede into the heavens.

The narrator goes on to say how the centaur also roamed the Earth for thousands of years. At first, he was able to travel without fear during the day □as long as the world itself remained mysterious.□ During this age, people welcomed the centaur as a magical creature, giving him garlands of flowers and entrusting their children to him. People at this time embraced him as a promoter of fertility, occasionally bringing him a mare with which to copulate.

The narrator explains, however, that at some point the world changed, and the centaur and other mythological creatures were persecuted and forced to hide from human beings. For several generations, the creatures, including unicorns, chimeras, werewolves, and other beings, lived together in the wilderness, but eventually they found they could not live there. They either disappeared from the world or found other ways to adapt to humans. The centaur alone remained, an obvious throwback to ancient times, roaming the Earth on his own. Although he traveled widely, he avoided going back to his native country, which is presumably Greece. He learned to sleep by day to avoid detection and to travel at night, sleeping only to dream.

At one point, during the millennia in which he travels alone, the centaur witnesses a man with a lance riding a scruffy horse fighting some windmills. After seeing the man tossed into the air, the centaur decides to avenge the thrown man. After leaving the windmills with broken blades, the centaur escapes pursuit by fleeing to the frontier of another country.

Following the recounting of this episode, the story returns to the present, with the centaur sleeping and waking to the smell of the sea. As night approaches, the centaur

rises and starts to head south, because in his dream, Zeus had headed southward, after the centaur defeated Heracles as usual. Although he has not dared to travel during the daylight for many years, the man part of the centaur feels emboldened and excited and decides to take the risk.

After walking along a ditch and over a plain, the centaur hears a dog barking and starts galloping between two hills, still heading south. As he runs, the barking comes closer, and the centaur hears bells and a human voice. Next, the centaur finds himself among goats and a large dog. A shepherd screams and runs away. As the man part of the centaur grabs a branch to fight off the dog, the horse part kicks the dog and kills it, much to the shame of the human side of the centaur.

The sun goes down, and the centaur continues south. After encountering a wall and some houses, the centaur hears a shot, which hits the horse's flank. The people pursue and shoot at the centaur, but the centaur leaps over the wall and runs through the countryside. As the chase goes on, with dogs and people coming after the centaur, it begins to rain. The centaur manages to outrun the mob and reaches a place he recognizes as the frontier of his native country. The people and dogs stop pursuing the centaur at the border. As the rain becomes a torrential downpour, he crosses into the land.

The rain suddenly stops, and the sun comes out. The centaur proceeds down a mountainside and looks at a valley with three villages in it. He wonders if he can pass by the villages safely. Exhausted, he looks for a place to rest until dusk, so that he can recover some strength before continuing his journey to the sea. He finds the entrance to a cave and goes inside it to sleep. Although he sleeps, the man part of the centaur wakes up anguishing, because he has not dreamed for the first time in millennia. He wonders why he hasn't dreamed and gets up and goes out into the night.

He travels under a bright moon and reaches the valley. He sees a river and the largest of three villages across the way. After walking across the river to the other side, the centaur pauses and thinks about his route. He realizes that he cannot travel in daylight, since news of his existence has probably reached the land, and so he decides to walk along the riverbank underneath the trees. He continues south toward the sea.

The centaur suddenly hears the sound of lapping water, and as he pushes back branches to look at the river, he sees a naked woman emerging from the river after bathing. Having rarely seen women, the man part of the centaur impulsively picks up the woman in his arms as she screams in terror. As he runs with the woman in his arms, the centaur comes to a curve in the river. The woman stops screaming and cries instead. They hear other voices, and as the centaur rounds a bend, they encounter some houses and people. The centaur pulls the woman to his chest, as some people flee, while others retrieve rifles from their homes. The horse part of the centaur rears up, and the woman screams again.

A shot is fired into the air, and the centaur flees, successfully outrunning the villagers. Finding himself way ahead of the persecutors, the man part of the centaur pauses,

holds the woman up in front of him, and tells her in his native tongue not to hate him. When he puts her gently on the ground, the woman does not run away, but instead recognizes him without fear, lies on the ground, and asks him to cover her. In frustration, the man part of the centaur looks at the woman longingly and then runs away bemoaning his fate. The villagers reach the woman and carry her away crying and wrapped in a blanket.

The whole country becomes aware of the centaur's existence, and people set out to capture him. The centaur travels south all night, and at daybreak he finds himself on top of a mountain with a view of the sea. After enjoying a moment of peace, the centaur hears a shot, and as men advance toward him with nets and other gear, the centaur rears up and slips on the edge of the slope, falling to his death. The centaur lands on a jutting edge of rock, which cuts through him exactly at the conjunction of his human and horse parts. As he lies dying, the man looks at the sky as if it were a sea and feels himself finally as a man and only a man. He sees the gods approaching and knows it is time to die.

Characters

The Centaur

An unnamed centaur is the protagonist of the story. Half-man and half-horse, he is the lone survivor of the mythical species, which according to the story existed in numbers, until Heracles defeated the centaurs in an epic battle thousands of years ago. This centaur managed to escape Heracles and has roamed the Earth ever since, evading capture or being killed by human beings. The centaur is a divided creature, with both human and horse parts, which are essentially at odds with one another. In the story, the narrator sometimes refers to just the man or the horse, as each part of the centaur has its own desires, needs, and wills. The horse embodies the animal part of the centaur, with bodily needs such as thirst and raw emotions such as fear. The man expresses more complex emotions and does all the thinking for the centaur. Lonely, exhausted from persecution, and perpetually frustrated, the centaur is the last of the mythical creatures to survive in the modern world.

The Mob

Two mobs of humans or villagers appear in the story, each time trying to kill the centaur out of hatred and fear.

The Woman

An unnamed woman appears toward the end of the story. The centaur happens upon her as she emerges from bathing in a river and grabs her much to her dismay. Although she screams and weeps at first, the woman seems to lose her fear of the centaur after he talks to her. She recognizes what he is and that he exists.

Themes

Dualism

One of the major themes of the story is the tension between the physical and the mental parts of the self. Throughout the story, Saramago underscores how these two sides of the character compete with one another for control, as the animal half expresses simple needs such as thirst, while the human half expresses more complex desires and thoughts. The author sometimes even refers to each part of the centaur separately as □the horse□ and □the man,□ emphasizing how distinct they are. The human part of the centaur experiences great frustration as he is unable to fully realize his humanity until the very end of the story, after competing impulses in the centaur result in his falling to his death. A symbolic character, the centaur represents the human condition, as human beings continually struggle for reconciliation between the physical and mental parts of the self.

Loneliness and Isolation

The story's protagonist, the centaur, is an essentially lonely creature. The only survivor of his kind, he has been wandering the world alone for millennia, ever since Heracles killed the rest of his race. Although at one time the centaur had the company of other mythological creatures, he has persisted alone for thousands of years, evading persecution by human beings who fear and hate him. He experiences this state of exile or extreme isolation, because of his difference and is doomed to travel in the dark alone until he dies. Thus, the story dramatizes how someone who is fundamentally different from the majority is excluded and isolated.

Wilderness

The wilderness is a safe haven for the centaur and other mythological beings. When they first experience persecution by humans, these creatures lived together in the wilderness. However, the narrator states that after a while, even the wilderness was encroached upon and the creatures had to disperse with some of them becoming extinct and the others adapting in order to live among people. The centaur alone managed to persist for millennia as a remnant from a more mysterious age. At the end of the story, as he stands on top of a mountain looking out toward the sea, the centaur imagines that he is once again in a world that appears □to be a wilderness waiting to be populated.□ He is wrong. The world has changed, and soon afterward, the centaur falls to his death. As a motif, the wilderness represents an earlier, less civilized world, in which the fantastical could exist peacefully.

Modern Times

Another theme of the story is how modern times exclude or disregard the fantastical. The narrator of the story points out that for ages, people welcomed the centaur as a special creature, promoting fertility and virility. Then the world changed, becoming less mysterious or rather intolerant and uninterested in the fantastical. When this happened, the centaur and other mythological creatures such as the unicorn and the chimera were banished and forced to flee from people. The events of the story take place in some time in the twentieth century, as the narrator mentions army helicopters preparing to hunt down the centaur at the end of the story. In modern times, the centaur experiences violence and hatred at the hands of human beings who do not understand him.

Style

Setting

The short story takes place in an unspecified land sometime in the twentieth century, after the invention of helicopters. The reader can guess that the native country the centaur returns to at the end of the story may be Greece, as the centaur's species was wiped out by Heracles, a hero in ancient Greek mythology. The mountainous land is close to the sea.

Point of View and Conflict

The story is told from the third-person point of view, with an unnamed narrator relating the events. The primary conflict in the story is internal, with the protagonist of the story, the centaur, struggling to reconcile his animal and human impulses. The human part of the centaur, in particular, strives to realize his humanity. The story's central conflict becomes resolved when the centaur falls to his death, landing on a rock and splitting into his distinct animal and human halves. As he lies dying, the half-man experiences relief, as he is finally separated from his animal side.

Allusion

Saramago alludes to the novel *Don Quixote*, when the narrator describes the centaur's greatest adventure as witnessing the fictional character of the same name fighting windmills. The reference is to the seventeenth-century work by Spanish author Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, a forerunner of the modern novel which explores the tension between illusion and reality.

Motifs

Saramago uses the motifs of the sea and the sky to represent the centaur's goal or final destiny. (A motif is a recurring image or object that unifies a work.) After waking from a dream, the centaur hears the sound of the sea, which is a □vision of beating waves which his eyes have transformed into those sonorous waves which travel over the waters and climb up rocky gorges all the way to the sun and the blue sky which is also water.□ Here and elsewhere, Saramago conflates the images of sky and sea, so that they become one in the centaur's experience. The centaur's vision of sky and sea foreshadows his ultimate vision. Right before falling, he stands on a mountain from which he can see the sea. As he lies dying at the end of the story, the man-half looks up at the sky, which appears to be an □ever deepening sea overhead, a sea with tiny, motionless clouds that were islands, and immortal life.□ The sea toward which he had been moving suggests immortality.

Another type of body of water, the river, signals change in the story. The centaur walks along a riverbed several times in the story, and upon entering a river to cross it, he appears to be merely a man, as his horse-half is hidden underwater. The river moves the centaur toward humanity, and not too long after fording the river, the centaur sees a naked woman emerging from the same river. He notes that it is the first time he had seen a naked woman in his home country, and seeing her awakens human desires. Here again, the river serves to change the centaur momentarily, emboldening his human half.

Symbolism

The centaur can be considered a symbol, representing the dilemma of the human condition in which people struggle to reconcile their physical and mental or spiritual sides.

Historical Context

Saramago wrote and first published □The Centaur□ in Portuguese in his short story collection *Objecto Quase* (Almost an Object) in 1978. At that time, Portugal had just emerged from nearly fifty years of fascist rule. On April 25, 1974, a triumphant revolution ended the dictatorships of António de Oliveira Salazar and his successor Marcelo Caetano. During the fascist rule of these dictators, Portuguese writers experienced repression and censorship and witnessed the effects of Portugal's colonial wars in Africa during the 1960s and early 1970s. The ill effects of those wars on Portuguese citizens led to the military coup of 1974 known as the Revolution of the Carnations, which resulted in democratic rule in Portugal and independence for Portugal's former African colonies.

Saramago wrote this story and most of his other works during this post-revolutionary period in Portugal, which was initially marked by zealous revolutionary ideals and later characterized by more moderate Western European parliamentary methods. In his other writings, Saramago has often turned to Portuguese history as a source of inspiration, partly in order to reclaim and re-envision a history, which had become distorted by the official rhetoric of the ruling dictatorships. A committed Communist Party member and social activist, Saramago is the leading writer of Portugal's post-revolutionary generation.

□The Centaur□ takes place in an indeterminate time, although one can conclude that the temporal setting is the twentieth century due to the references to army helicopters. Saramago may have chosen to make the time ambiguous to emphasize the setting as the modern age, as opposed to ancient times when the world appeared full of mystery. One of the themes of the story is how modern times exclude the possibility of the fantastical, with people misunderstanding and fearing the centaur. The author may have left the exact time of the story unspecified in order to highlight how people lost a sense of wonder long ago, much to the detriment of humankind. Although the story is not linked specifically to the time in which Saramago wrote it, the theme of an individual being persecuted for his difference resonates with the conditions Saramago worked under prior to the 1974 revolution.

Critical Overview

Because Saramago is mostly known as a novelist, the bulk of the criticism about his writings focuses on his many novels, which have been translated into over thirty languages and have been praised worldwide. Although the overtly political nature of some of his works has provoked censure from conservative critics who have denounced his writings as Communistic and anti-religious, many reviews of Saramago's work have been positive. According to the official Nobel Prize website, in awarding the author the Nobel Prize in 1998, the Swedish Academy lauded the author, □who with parables sustained by imagination, compassion and irony continually enables us once again to apprehend an elusory reality.□

Many critics have noted Saramago's use of universal themes and his drive to portray common human experiences. Writing in *Portuguese Studies* Luis Rebelo de Sousa states, □Next to the innovatory character of Saramago's style□a style that keeps changing□lies the universal appeal of his work. He chooses for his fiction themes of universal appeal, dealing with questions of deep human resonance.□ Similarly, Saramago's translator Giovanni Pontiero, in his introduction to a section devoted to Saramago in a 1994 issue of the *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies*, emphasizes the author's ability to convey the full spectrum of human experience: □Convinced that the writer's task is to look behind the scenes, Saramago uncovers every facet of human experience. His novels instill a keen awareness of human aspirations and failures, for human destiny is the ultimate concern in each and every one of his books. Man, for Saramago, is a remarkable creature but he can only achieve his true potential in a climate of truth and freedom.□

In his review of *Almost an Object* in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, José N. Ornelas also highlights Saramago's humanism: □The volume, which comprises six short stories mixing the fantastic and science fiction, focuses on themes that are valuable to the writer, such as the struggle against consumer society and totalitarian systems that have stripped individuals of their humanity and/or subjectivity and are the direct cause of their alienation.□ In a rare review of the short story *The Centaur* published in *Hispania*, Haydn Tiago Jones notes how Saramago begins to explore themes and devices in this story that later appear in his novels: □In the genre of short stories, José Saramago introduced the fantastical devices prevalent in his longer works. These devices include the introduction of figures usually associated with fairy tales, and the endowment of characters with quasi magical powers.□

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Anna Maria Hong is a published poet and an editor of the fiction and memoir anthology Growing Up Asian American*. In the following essay, Hong discusses how Saramago uses the mythical figure of the centaur to explore the themes of isolation and the tension between the physical and spiritual sides of humanity.*

Like much of Saramago's fiction, □The Centaur□ blends the fantastical with the actual to explore themes common to all humanity. One of the central themes of the story concerns how people struggle to reconcile their physical and spiritual needs, even as they grapple with external forces that threaten their survival. Saramago illustrates the internal conflict between parts of the self through the story's protagonist, an unnamed centaur, who literally embodies the split, as he possesses the mind and upper body of a man and the lower body of a horse.

Throughout the story, the two halves of the centaur vie for dominance or control, and the centaur experiences his conflicting needs in a moment-to-moment kind of way. Saramago emphasizes how distinct the human and the horse parts of the centaur are by frequently referring to each part separately as □the man□ and □the horse.□ Conflicts arise between the two halves, as they possess different kinds of desires. The animal half expresses physical needs such as wanting to quench thirst, while the human half experiences more complex longings such as the desire for revenge and love.

Sometimes, the needs of one half of the centaur are easily accommodated by the other half, as when the man half drinks from a stream to quench the horse half's thirst. Although the man does not feel thirsty, he can help the animal part without too much trouble. However, at other times, easy solutions evade the centaur. For example, the man finds himself perpetually fatigued, because finding a comfortable sleeping position for both the horse and the man is so difficult. The narrator states, □It was not a comfortable body. The man could never stretch out on the ground, rest his head on folded arms and remain there studying the ants or grains of earth, or contemplate the whiteness of a tender stalk sprouting from the dark soil.□ In descriptions such as this one, Saramago makes it clear that it is usually the human side of the centaur which suffers. The man half exists in a body that precludes comfort, but more than that, he is denied the pleasures of a full human, which would include being able to contemplate his surroundings in a leisurely way.

Perhaps the most frustrating thing for the human part of the centaur is his inability to connect with other creatures. The lone survivor of the once mighty race of centaurs, the centaur has been roaming the world alone for millennia, traveling by night to avoid detection by people. Saramago emphasizes that this state of extreme solitude was not always the centaur's lot, as he was once accepted and even embraced by human beings who regarded the centaur as a magical being with the power to promote fertility and virility. The centaur and other mythological creatures such as the unicorn and giant ants were free to travel openly and lived in harmony with people □so long as the world itself remained mysterious.□ The centaur's situation of perpetual exile occurred as a

result of the world's losing its sense of mystery. The narrator notes that following this abrupt change, the centaur and other fantastical creatures of yore were persecuted and banished from the human world. Although they at first banded together, eventually only one centaur remained of his kind.

Saramago thus portrays the centaur's state of alienation as a direct result of humanity's transition into the modern age. The narrator stresses that at some point in the past few millennia, the centaur discovered that there was nowhere he could travel safely anymore. In his encounters with people, the centaur is consistently hunted by angry mobs with firearms and dogs. Rather than being recognized as a magical being, he is denigrated and loathed for his difference, and as he thinks about his situation, the centaur ruminates on □that incomprehensible hatred.□ In the modern age, people are intolerant of the fantastical, and in his depiction of the centaur's existence, Saramago underscores how violently people shun difference.

Ultimately, the centaur is unable to find fulfillment due to a combination of internal and external reasons. He is limited by his extraordinary body, which denies him full access to his own humanity. However, his state of internal conflict is severely complicated by the human world in which he lives. Long ago, people decimated his kind, leaving him to fend for himself for thousands of years. Over the millennia, as the expansion of human society encroached upon the wilderness where he could live safely, the centaur became increasingly marginalized, lonely, and exhausted.

The human part of the centaur's loneliness and longing for solace are depicted clearly when the centaur encounters a woman. Having never seen a woman before in his native land, to which he has just returned, the centaur grabs her and runs with her in his arms, inciting a chase by a mob of villagers. The woman is initially terrified, but after the centaur speaks to her and asks her not to hate him, the woman speaks kindly to him. Seeming to recognize him as he is, the woman lies on the ground and asks him to cover her, but the centaur recognizes that connecting with her physically is impossible. After looking at her for a moment, he continues to run away from the mob, with the man part of the centaur lamenting his state of perpetual frustration and isolation.

Soon after his encounter with the woman, the centaur dies, falling to his death from a precipice and landing on a sharp rock, which cuts him in two exactly at the spot where the man and the horse are joined. Once again, in this final instance, Saramago makes it clear that the centaur's death results from both his internal and external struggles. Outwardly, he is being hunted by people who want to capture him with nets, ropes, nooses, and staffs. Having found love impossible for a final time, he falls to his death because he cannot resolve the battle for control between his two halves. As the narrator notes, □The horse reared into the air, shook its front hooves and swung round in a frenzy to face his enemies. The man tried to retreat. Both of them struggled, behind and in front.□ The struggle ends with the centaur falling into the abyss.

With this conclusion, Saramago emphasizes how the competing impulses of physical and mental or spiritual cannot be sustained. The conflict ends with a definite separation of the two sides, and with the man finally freed into his full humanity. As he lies dying,

the severed man seems to have a transcendent moment, as he watches the sky, which appears to be the sea that he had been moving toward all along. The story ends with the man examining himself for the last time: □The man turned his head from one side to the other: nothing but endless sea, an interminable sky. Then he looked at his body. It was bleeding. Half a man. A man. And he saw the gods approaching. It was time to die.□

As he leaves the body that has burdened him for so long, the man experiences relief as well as the contemplative peace that has previously eluded him. He is finally able to lie on his back and view his surroundings in a leisurely way, without having to run anymore. For the centaur, death is the only solution, as the modern world will not accommodate his particular struggle. He is reviled, not only as a strange remnant of a former time, but also perhaps as a thinking being that wants more than it can have.

As a symbolic character, the centaur dramatizes the human condition, as Saramago seems to indicate that the spiritual side of human beings is constantly under siege from both the demands of the physical body and the miscomprehension of others who leave little room for recognizing extraordinary phenomena such as the movement of clouds or the travails of a centaur. The centaur remains thoughtful, perceptive, and utterly alone to the very end.

Source: Anna Maria Hong, Critical Essay on □The Centaur,□ in *Short Stories for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Adaptations

The Nobel Prize Internet Archive maintains an official Saramago page at http://www.nobelprizes.com/ which includes Saramago's Nobel lecture and features comprehensive information about the author, his books, and other media resources pertaining to him.

The José Saramago page of the Nobel Prize website can be found at: http://nobelprize.org/literature/laureates/1998/index.html

Topics for Further Study

Choose another culture and read about creatures that are half-person and half-beast in that culture's mythology. Create an illustration or watercolor portraying that creature and describe it in a short paragraph. You may also invent a mythological creature that is half-human and half-animal. If you choose the latter option, tell what special powers the creature possesses.

Research the history of the relations between human beings and horses. Find out how people learned to use horses to help with work and what roles horses play in the twenty-first century. Present your findings to the class.

Read a psychology textbook or a similar source to research different theories of the divided self, such as Sigmund Freud's theory of the ego, id, and superego. With other students, write a scene in which different parts of the self interact. Perform the scene.

Consult science magazines and the science section of the newspaper to find out about genetically modified food. Research how scientists have spliced animal genes with plant genes to create some of these genetically modified food-products. Present your findings using diagrams, charts, and other visual props.

Find out which species are currently on the verge of extinction and research what people are doing that endangers the species and what others are doing to keep the species from dying out. Create a pamphlet describing the species and what factors threaten its existence, explaining what steps are being taken to preserve it.

Read about ancient Greece in a history textbook or an encyclopedia. Then, imagine you are a citizen of one of the ancient Greek city-states and write a journal entry describing your day incorporating information you acquired in your research.

Compare and Contrast

Portugal in the late 1970s: Following the revolution to overthrow dictatorship, Portugal begins to make the transition to civilian rule. In April 1976, the nation approves a new constitution. The first free elections in fifty years soon follow.

Portugal in the 1990s and early 2000s: A member of the European Union since 1986, the Portuguese economy enjoys a boom during the 1990s. In the early 2000s, Portugal faces complex socioeconomic challenges as one of the smaller members of the EU, even as the Portuguese population enjoys unprecedented expansion of civil liberties.

Portugal in the late 1970s: Upon assuming control of the nation, President General António de Spínola promises decolonization. Portugal relinquishes control of former colonies, including Angola and East Timor, during the mid- to late-1970s.

Portugal in the 1990s and early 2000s: In 1999, Portuguese citizens protest Indonesia's resistance to granting the power of self-determination in East Timor. Portuguese efforts to broker peace in Angola continue, as violent conflict persists in many of Portugal's former colonies.

What Do I Read Next?

Saramago's novel *Baltasar and Blimunda* (1982) is considered one of his great achievements. Set during the Inquisition in eighteenth-century Portugal, the book focuses on the attempts by two young characters, the disabled war veteran Baltasar and the visionary Blimunda, to transport themselves to the heavens. Like many of Saramago's works, this novel is praised as an innovative blending on the fantastical and the historical.

Another highly lauded Saramago novel is *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis* (1984). The novel tells the story of Ricardo Reis, a poet-physician who returns to Portugal from Rio de Janeiro, his love interests, and the ghost of Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa.

Saramago's controversial novel *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* (1991) imaginatively and idiosyncratically tells the story of Jesus' life, emphasizing the figure's humanity and portraying God as a bureaucratic character with questionable motives.

Poems of Fernando Pessoa (1998), translated and edited by Edwin Honig and Susan M. Brown, collects the heteronymous poems of the great Portuguese modernist poet who wrote under the personas of Alberto Caeiro, Álvaro do Campos, and Ricardo Reis.

A blend of non-fiction travelogue and novel, Saramago's book *Journey to Portugal: In Pursuit of Portugal's History and Culture*, published in English in 2001, recounts the author's travels across his country, as well as his reflections on Portuguese history and culture.

The Portuguese Empire, 1415-1808: A World on the Move (1998), by A. J. R. Russell-Wood, traces the history of Portugal as the world's first colonial empire.

Further Study

Bloom, Harold, ed., *José Saramago*, Chelsea House Publishers, 2005.

This collection contains an introduction by literary critic Harold Bloom and several scholarly essays by various critics on the author's works, focusing mostly on the major novels.

Bulfinch, Thomas, *Bulfinch's Mythology*, Modern Library, 1998.

During the nineteenth century, Bulfinch studied and retold the myths of Greek, Roman, and other cultures in several volumes, three of which have been collected in this useful book, which provides a handy reference to ancient myths, including those of the centaurs.

Cervantes, Miguel de, *Don Quixote*, Ecco, 2003.

Translated from the Spanish by Edith Grossman, this classic novel tells the adventures of Don Quixote, a romantic and idealistic knight, and his loyal squire Sancho Panza.

Gordimer, Nadine, ed., *Telling Tales*, Picador, 2004.

Edited by South African Nobel laureate Gordimer, this anthology comprises short stories by a diverse array of writers from around the world, including Salman Rushdie, Margaret Atwood, Chinua Achebe, Susan Sontag, and Kenzaburo Oe. The book's publishers donate the proceeds to HIV/AIDS preventive education and medical treatment for people suffering from the disease. *The Centaur* appears in this collection.

Hamilton, Edith, *Mythology*, Little, Brown, 1942.

Hamilton retells Greek, Roman, and Norse myths in this lively and comprehensive book, which includes sections on centaurs and the battle of Lapithae mentioned in Saramago's story.

Tamen, Miguel, and Helena Carvalhao Buescu, eds., *A Revisionary History of Portuguese Literature*, Garland Publishing, 1998.

This collection of essays explores the history of Portuguese literature from medieval times through the present, providing insight into the development of this literature.

Bibliography

De Sousa, Luis Rebelo, “A Tribute to José Saramago,” in *Portuguese Studies*, Vol. 15, 1999, pp. 178-81.

Jones, Haydn Tiago, Review of “Centauro,” in *Objecto Quase*, in *Hispania*, Vol. 82, No. 1, March 1999, pp. 5-6.

Ornelas, José N., “José Saramago,” in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol. 287: *Portuguese Writers*, edited by Monica Rector and Fred M. Clark, Thomson Gale, 2004, pp. 280-97.

Pontiero, Giovanni, “José Saramago: An Introduction,” in *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies*, Vol. LXXI, No. 1, January 1994, pp. 115-17.

Saramago, José, “The Centaur,” in *Telling Tales*, edited by Nadine Gordimer, Picador, 2004, pp. 15-34.

Tesser, Carmen Chaves, ed., “Introduction” to “A Tribute to José Saramago, 1998 Nobel Literature Laureate,” in *Hispania*, Vol. 82, No. 1, March 1999, p. 1.

Copyright Information

This Premium Study Guide is an offprint from *Short Stories for Students*.

Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

Research
Michelle Campbell, Nicodemus Ford, Sarah Genik, Tamara C. Nott, Tracie Richardson

Data Capture
Beverly Jendrowski

Permissions
Mary Ann Bahr, Margaret Chamberlain, Kim Davis, Debra Freitas, Lori Hines, Jackie Jones, Jacqueline Key, Shalice Shah-Caldwell

Imaging and Multimedia
Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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

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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Short Stories for Students

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

“Night.” Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234–35.

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

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

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

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

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

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

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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

Editor, Short Stories for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331–3535