Christmas Not Just Once a Year Study Guide

Christmas Not Just Once a Year by Heinrich Böll

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BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

"Christmas Not Just Once a Year" ("*Nicht nur zur Wiehnachtszeit*") was written in 1951 and was first "published" in a German radio broadcast that year. Considered to be one of Heinrich Böll's finest satires, the story was included in German in his 1952 book, *Nicht nur zur Weihnachtszeit*, a collection that was expanded in 1966 and renamed *Nicht nur zur Wiehnachtszeit: Satiren*. In the United States, the story appeared most recently in Böll's collected stories, *The Stories of Heinrich Böll*, published by Knopf in 1986. In addition, "Christmas Not Just Once a Year" is one of Böll's most widely anthologized stories. By 1975, according to Robert C. Conard, writing in *Understanding Heinrich Böll*, the story had appeared in at least twenty-three German and foreign anthologies.

"Christmas Not Just Once a Year" tells the simple story of Aunt Milla's hysterical reaction to the taking down of the family Christmas tree in 1946 and her family's subsequent reaction to her hysteria. Told through the eyes of one of the family's first cousins, the story describes the complete moral and psychological disintegration of a family that refuses to acknowledge Milla's profound psychological problems. Instead of addressing the issue of Milla's breakdown clinically or directly, the family decides to continue with the ruse that every day is Christmas. For two years they go to great lengths and expense to host a nightly ritual of Christmas tree decorations and carol singing in order to keep Aunt Milla from screaming hysterically.

Böll's narrative becomes increasingly absurd as the story develops. Written while Germany was in the early stages of its postwar reconstruction, and during a time when it had yet to fully acknowledge its role in World War II or in the Holocaust (according to J. H. Reid, writing in *Heinrich Böll: A German for His Time*, in a 1954 essay Böll laments the fact that in one particular class of forty German students, not one had heard of the Holocaust), "Christmas Not Just Once a Year" addresses the theme of historical amnesia. Just as the family refuses to accept the fact that things are no longer "like the good old days" of prewar Germany and that Aunt Milla could not become healthy until the family acknowledges this basic fact, Böll believed that Germany would remain stunted if it did not directly address its Nazi past and come to terms with its role in the war.

However, to say that the story is simply about Germany would be to underestimate its strength; critics have pointed out that the characters and symbols Böll uses in the story are universal enough that "Christmas Not Just Once a Year" can be applied to any country, including the United States, with a historical past that it would rather ignore.

Author Biography

Heinrich Böll was born December 21, 1917, in Cologne, Germany. The sixth child of Maria and Viktor Böll, Böll's earliest memories were of Germany's defeated troops returning from the war and the economic instability that Germany experienced following the war. His father, a self-employed furniture maker, lost his business in 1923 when Germany's astronomical rates of inflation rendered its currency virtually worthless, and following the stock market crash of 1929, he was unable to keep up with his loan repayments and lost the family house. Böll would cite these events, along with the rise of Adolph Hitler's Nazi movement during this same time period, as having a profound impact on his writing throughout his career.

Böll was never more than an average student in school. However, his decision to resist joining Hitler's youth movement gave him ample time to read on his own outside of classes. Following high school, he took on a brief stint as a bookseller's apprentice in 1938, and shortly thereafter he was inducted into the army. In 1942, while on furlough, he married Annemarie Cech, a woman he had known through the Catholic youth group meetings his mother hosted at their house, and over the next three years he wrote his wife nearly one thousand letters, many of them openly critical of the war and of Hitler. Böll was wounded several times in the course of the war, and for a brief spell late in the war, he went underground as a deserter. In 1945, after returning to the front, he was captured by American troops and remained a prisoner of war until the war's end.

Böll and his wife returned to Cologne after the war, and by 1950 his wife had given birth to three children. Böll wrote full time upon his return from the army while his wife worked, and in 1951 he received his first award for his writing□1,000 marks for his short story "Black Sheep." His first novel, *Adam, Where Art Thou*, was published in 1951, and his second novel, *And Never Said a Word*, which appeared in 1953, sold well enough to allow Böll to continue as a full-time writer. The short story "Christmas Not Just Once a Year," considered to be one of Böll's best satires, was written in 1951 and was translated into several languages and anthologized widely.

In addition to his prose fiction, Böll became well known for political work and views, which he expressed widely in his essays and speeches. His work on behalf of imprisoned and politically repressed writers around the world led to his election as president of the German PEN Club in 1970 and his election the following year as president of the International PEN. He was instrumental in bringing Soviet dissident Alexandr Solzhenitsyn's book *The Gulag Archipelago* to the West, and he was the first Westerner to offer the Russian writer refuge after his expulsion from the Soviet Union in 1974. In 1972, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature. In the 1980s, shortly before his death, a poll was conducted in Germany, and Böll was considered to be the second most popular figure in Germany, second only to the country's chancellor Helmut Schmidt. Heinrich Böll died at his home in Langenbroich in 1985, from complications of arteriosclerosis.

Plot Summary

Section 1

"Christmas Not Just Once a Year" tells the story of how a German family, shortly following World War II, is affected by an aunt who suffers a severe psychological breakdown and reacts hysterically to the taking down of the family Christmas tree. Told through the eyes of an unnamed narrator, the nephew of Aunt Milla, the story is a satire, and the events the narrator describes over the course of two years grow increasingly more absurd as his narrative develops.

In section 1 the narrator introduces the members of the family who play important roles in the story and among whom "symptoms of disintegration" are beginning to show: Uncle Franz, "the kindest of men," who is said to have recently become "tired of life"; his sons Franz, a famous boxer who now rejects all praise with utter indifference, and Johannes, whom the narrator fears has become a communist; Lucie, the sister who had always been a "normal woman" but who now frequents "disreputable places"; and Aunt Milla, the "originator" of the family's ills but who "is as well and cheerful as she has almost always been."

Although section 1 offers no details, the narrator makes it clear that it is because of Aunt Milla the family has suffered tremendously and that cousin Franz has warned the family much earlier of the "terrible consequences" of what was, at the time, deemed a "harmless event." Now, as a result of not listening to Franz, things have gotten "so out of hand" that the family is at a "total loss" of what to do.

Section 2

Section 2 provides the background and first details of the source of the family's ills. The setting of the story is an unnamed German city, shortly following the end of World War II. Aunt Milla has always had a "particular fondness" for decorating the Christmas tree and singing Christmas carols, activities that her son Franz always resisted with "vehement indignation." During the war, however, aerial bombardments and the general war-torn state of the country prevented the aunt from having a tree. In fact, her desire for the ritual was so great that she saw the war mainly as a "force" that "jeopardize[d] her Christmas tree."

The family itself was left virtually unscathed by the war. Uncle Franz, a successful importer of fruits and vegetables, had built a strong bunker that protected them from the raids, and his business and political connections kept the family relatively well endowed during most of the war. However, as the war continued, it became difficult even for Franz to find supplies, so it was not until Christmas 1946, more than a year after the war ended, that Aunt Milla could once again bring her family around the decorated Christmas tree.

There was nothing peculiar about Christmas that year; however, three months later, in March of 1947, as the narrator was nearing his uncle and aunt's house, he could hear the singing of Christmas carols. Later, Uncle Franz explained the situation to him: On the eve of Candlemas, or the "Festival of Lights" that occurs at the beginning of February, Johannes began to strip the tree of its decorations, as was the custom of the region. However, as he was detaching the dwarves that decorated the tree, the tree crashed to the floor, and Aunt Milla began to scream hysterically. For almost a week she continued to scream despite the best efforts of neurologists and psychologists. She refused to eat or sleep, and it was not until Uncle Franz suggested getting a new tree that the aunt finally stopped.

Sections 3—6

The reality of Uncle Franz's "solution" to Aunt Milla's hysteria begins to settle in as the family discovers how difficult it actually is to procure a Christmas tree outside the Christmas season. But somehow arrangements are made, a new tree is erected, complete with its decorations, and the family continues to meet on a nightly basis, as if each night were Christmas Eve, to sing carols around the tree and eat holiday sweets.

Spring approaches and with it the region's carnival season. As an indication of how deeply disturbed Aunt Milla has become, she complains about the thousands of carnival-goers for not respecting the sanctity of Christmas. Nevertheless, the family and the family priest continue to celebrate Christmas each night. By June, the doctor the family has hired to cure Aunt Milla gives up his efforts, and one night the family priest does not show up, citing other obligations in his parish. A fellow curate is sent to replace him, but in the course of the singing, he laughs hysterically at the absurdity of the situation and refuses to return. Uncle Franz files a complaint with the church, ultimately to no avail, and the family must replace him with a retired priest in the area who agrees to participate in the nightly ritual.

By now, the family has become quite efficient in organizing the ceremonies: The family arrives at the uncle's home and assembles around the tree, the candles are lit, the angels on the tree begin singing "Peace, peace," a few carols are sung, and all end the evening with a "Merry Christmas!" and retire to their regular lives. One item the narrator notes is that the financial cost of keeping up this facade is beginning to add up.

Sections 7—11

Although the actual Christmas of 1947 goes off without a hitch, in January Lucie suddenly begins to scream when she sees fallen Christmas trees littering the streets. Soon thereafter Karl, Lucie's husband, secretly begins to research emigration possibilities to countries where carol singing is not allowed and where Christmas trees do not grow and are not imported; Johannes suddenly resigns from the choral society; and Uncle Franz is rumored to be in an adulterous relationship. Most significantly, Uncle Franz has hired a stage actor to replace him in the nightly ceremonies, a precedent-

setting act that ultimately leads to the hiring of a complete ensemble to replace each of the adult members.

Eighteen months following Aunt Milla's initial scream, rumors circulate that Uncle Franz has entered into business practices "that virtually no longer permit the description 'Christian businessman.'" Lucie has come to wear gaudy clothes and has otherwise thrown "all restraint to the wind"□acts she considers to be "existential." Johannes has, indeed, become a communist and has severed all relations with his family. Karl has discovered a country along the equator where he and Lucie will move, and Franz has retired from boxing.

Nearly two years following the start of these extraordinary events, the narrator, on one of his evening strolls, stops by the uncle's house to observe the ceremony. The room is filled with actors who are treating themselves to good food, cigars, and wine. The narrator points out the possible negative effects this constant partying will have on the family children, who continue to participate, and he convinces the uncle to replace the children with wax dummies.

Section 12

The final section mirrors section 1 in that all of the characters and their respective situations are mentioned. Lucie and Karl have emigrated; Johannes has moved out of the city; Uncle Franz has become "tired of life" and complains that the servants are no longer dusting the wax dummies; the aunt and the retired prelate continue to "chat about the good old days" at the nightly ceremonies; and cousin Franz has traded the boxing ring for the monastery, where, according to the narrator, he looks more like a "convict" than a monk. "Our life is our punishment," Franz says to the narrator before quickly departing for his chapel prayers.

Characters

The Actors

After nearly eighteen months of having to participate in the nightly family rituals, Uncle Franz hires an ensemble of local actors to take the places of the adults. As artists who can barely make ends meet, they are quick to take on this assignment, and over time they come to take advantage of the situation by eating expensive asparagus every night, drinking the family's good wine, and smoking its good cigars. Eventually, the children are replaced by wax figures, so in the end the only "true" participants in the ritual are Aunt Milla and the retired priest.

Dr. Bless

Dr. Bless is mentioned briefly as one of the psychologists who is hired, at no insignificant cost, by Uncle Franz to cure Aunt Milla of her condition. However, neither Dr. Bless nor any of the other specialists hired by Uncle Franz is successful in curing Aunt Milla.

Uncle Franz

The narrator describes Uncle Franz on more than one occasion as "the kindest of men." Franz, the patriarch of the family, made his fortune by importing and selling tropical fruits. During the war he expanded his business to include other fruits and vegetables. It is Franz's decision not to commit his wife for her hysteria, choosing instead to organize and finance the daily ritual of decorating the Christmas tree and singing the carols. The narrator suspects early on that Uncle Franz is having an extramarital affair, a suspicion he eventually confirms. A further indication of Franz's moral decay is that rumors begin to circulate that he has begun business practices that can in no way be described as "Christian." Franz eventually gets the idea of hiring an actor to replace him during the evening rituals, a practice that is quickly adopted by all of the family's adult members. Eventually, he is convinced by the narrator to replace the children with wax figures, and at the story's conclusion he is said to be "tired of life" and complains that the servants at the house do not dust the wax children regularly and are taking advantage of him. It can be said that Uncle Franz represents Germany's rush into economic activity as a way to avoid dealing with its past. Instead of addressing the root causes of his wife's hysteria, Franz decides it is best to keep his wife believing that these are still the "good old days," even if he must dive headlong into his business activities and become "un-Christian" as a result.

Cousin Johannes

Uncle Franz's favorite son, Johannes is a highly successful lawyer as the story opens. However, as Aunt Milla's condition worsens, rumors begin to circulate that Johannes has become a communist□a rumor that the narrator confirms by the story's conclusion. Johannes uses his extensive connections and finds a company that can deliver Christmas trees throughout the year. An indication of the effect his mother's hysteria has had on Johannes comes when he resigns from the choral society and declares in writing that he can no longer "devote himself to the cultivation of German songs"□a sure sign that the family's nightly carol singing had deeply affected him.

Karl

Karl is Lucie's "helpless spouse" who frequents "disreputable" places with Lucie. As Aunt Milla's condition worsens, Karl begins to research countries where no Christmas trees are allowed and where the singing of carols is prohibited. By the story's conclusion, he has found such a country located near the equator, and he and Lucie leave Germany for good.

Cousin Lucie

Up until the moment her mother's hysteria begins, Lucie is generally thought of by the narrator as a "normal woman." Unmarried during the war, she volunteered in a local factory that embroidered swastikas. Following the onset of Aunt Milla's condition, Lucie, along with Karl, her "helpless spouse," is said to frequent "disreputable" places in the evening. Her own condition worsens to such a degree that following Christmas 1947, a year after her mother first became hysterical, Lucie begins to scream uncontrollably herself at the sight of discarded Christmas trees. Karl and she eventually move to an equatorial country that does not have Christmas trees and has a prohibition on the singing of carols. Prior to her departure, the narrator notes that she had essentially taken on an "existential" life; she had started wearing her hair in "bangs," instead of the more acceptable fashion of the day, and sandals instead of shoes, and she had begun dressing herself in corduroys and "gaudy sweaters."

Aunt Milla

Aunt Milla, the narrator's aunt, is the source of the family's "disintegration." She is described by the narrator in several places with warm regard. Generally speaking, she is described as a kindly woman; however, her one peculiarity is "her particular fondness for decorating the Christmas tree"□an attribute the narrator describes as a "harmless if particular weakness that is fairly widespread in our Fatherland." In fact, though, her fondness for the ritual is so strong that she views World War II "merely as a force that . . . jeopardize[d] her Christmas tree." For a six-year period starting in 1940, Aunt Milla's tree falls victim to the war and the country's subsequent shortages of goods and

supplies. She is finally able to decorate a tree at Christmas 1946, but when the tree is taken down on the eve of Candlemas, she begins to scream hysterically. The only "cure" for her screaming is for the family to continue the ritual of singing around the tree every evening thereafter, as if every day were Christmas. Symbolically, Aunt Milla, along with her family, comes to represent Germany's unwillingness to recognize its Nazi past and its responsibility in the war.

The Narrator

The narrator is an unnamed nephew of Uncle Franz and Aunt Milla. He does not participate directly in the rituals, though it is as a result of his insistence that Uncle Franz replaces the children with wax figures. The success of the satire depends on the narrator being a member of the family but not one of the members who directly participates in the rituals. As a family member, the narrator is able to view the events with an empathy that would otherwise not be possible, and as a family member who is removed from the daily rituals, he is also able to be objective enough not to become too drawn in or detrimentally affected by Aunt Milla's hysteria. It is Böll's choice of this narrator that gives "Christmas Not Just Once a Year" the conviction it needs to succeed as a satire.

The Priest

The family priest who originally participates in the family's Christmas celebration decides by late spring that enough is enough, and he refuses to participate any longer. He is replaced by a curate who, during the course of the carol singing, laughs uncontrollably and also refuses to return. Eventually, the family finds a retired priest to participate. The priest represents, on one level, the close relationship and favored status Uncle Franz has, by virtue of his wealth and standing, with the church.

Themes

Catholicism

Böll's family was devoutly Catholic, and until 1969 when they were forced to leave the church because of their refusal to pay church taxes, he and his wife remained practicing Catholics. In "Christmas Not Just Once a Year," Uncle Franz uses his connections and his economic standing to build a favored relationship with his parish. When the family priest finally decides, after several months, no longer to participate in the family's evening rituals, a prelate is quickly sent to take his place. However, the replacement laughs throughout the family's ritual and does not return, and Franz files a formal complaint with the church. The complaint is eventually dismissed, but Böll seems to be commenting on the favored relationship that Franz has with the church by virtue of his economic status.

Family

During the 1920s and 1930s, when Böll's father lost his business and the family house because of the economy, and while Hitler was rising to power, Böll's family remained close and provided Böll with a shelter from all the social and economic unrest of the time. Much of his work portrays the family structure in a positive light. In "Christmas Not Just Once a Year" the family structure once again plays a positive role, to a large degree, in the characters' lives. Uncle Franz's bomb shelter keeps the family from harm during the war, and his connections keep the family fed during difficult times. However, while Aunt Milla is devoted at all costs to keeping her family together through the tradition of tree decorating, her inability to accept the changed reality of her circumstances leads to the family's ultimate disintegration. The family structure, in this case, comes to symbolize the greater "family" of Germany. Just as Aunt Milla's family is unable to understand how destructive their refusal to face reality is, Germany's refusal to acknowledge its own reality vis-à-vis the war and the Holocaust was just as destructive.

German Reconstruction

Germany's economic, industrial, and social infrastructures were decimated by the war. Whole sections of cities were left abandoned, and families wanting to start a new life could often move into a house and call it their own by agreeing to its renovations. Cologne itself lost more than seven hundred thousand of its inhabitants in the war. There are some hints of this situation in "Christmas Not Just Once a Year." On his way to visit his uncle and aunt, the narrator must walk by "overgrown piles of rubble and neglected parks." One of Böll's arguments is that in the aftermath of World War II, Germany's headlong rush into rebuilding its economy prevented it from adequately

addressing its role in the war. Uncle Franz, a highly successful business man, symbolizes this aspect of German reconstruction for Böll.

Historical Amnesia and the Holocaust

In the early 1950s, when Böll wrote "Christmas Not Just Once a Year," a minority of Germans believed that they were responsible for the war, and very few claimed knowledge about the Holocaust. The Jewish population in Germany had been annihilated, and there were no national moves to discuss reparations or acknowledge the great loss of human lives due to Nazi policies. Böll believed that if Germany was unwilling to address its past and directly confront its own role in the Holocaust, it would "disintegrate" much like Aunt Milla's family disintegrates around her while she lives as if every day were Christmas. Böll's satire is a direct response to the historical amnesia he perceived his country was experiencing.

Tradition

The tradition of Christmas and its rituals is obviously a vital part of Aunt Milla's life. In "Christmas Not Just Once a Year," Christmas comes to symbolize the tradition of Christian Germany's way of life as it existed before the war: Each year families decorate tress, sing carols, and on the eve of Candlemas, they take down their trees to signify the end of the season. World War II interrupted that tradition, and it is Aunt Milla's steadfast and absurd desire to keep the tradition alive year round, as if she can make up for the lost time caused by the war. Böll seems to be saying that while traditions are important, Germany is hiding behind its own traditions as a means of escaping reality. Like Aunt Milla, Germany is not able to set aside its obsession with returning to the "good old days" long enough to recognize the horrors it inflicted during the war. Another, more subtle comment Böll's use of the Christmas tradition seems to reveal is that although Aunt Milla's experience clearly shows the steep price the family must pay to keep their tradition alive day in and day out, at least they are able to continue with that tradition. Because of German war policies, the entire German Jewish population was annihilated, and with it the many traditions Jews practiced on a daily and yearly basis.

War

World War II was a pivotal event in Germany's history. Prior to the war the country had built the strongest military in Europe, but its defeat at the hands of the Allied forces virtually destroyed every aspect of its society. The role of its citizens in the Holocaust would eventually become an important topic of discussion and debate throughout Germany, but for many years the country refused to acknowledge that as an issue. In "Christmas Not Just Once a Year," the narrator essentially apologizes to the reader for bringing up the war. Although none of the family members was killed during the war, it nevertheless had a profound effect on them, as evidenced by Aunt Milla's hysteria.

Style

Narrative Point of View

It is significant that the narrator of "Christmas Not Just Once a Year" is a cousin of the family that is directly affected by the aunt's hysteria. This point of view allows him just enough distance to view events somewhat objectively, although he admits that throughout much of the time in which the story takes place even he did not notice the extent to which the events had gotten out of control. A daughter or son of the aunt could not remove her or himself enough from the story to narrate it dispassionately, and an outsider to the family would not have the compassion that the narrator portrays for the family's situation. To succeed as a satire about Germany, the story must be told by a family member; thus, although the narrator is literally describing his family, he could also be seen as talking about Germany, his greater family.

Satire

A satire is a literary work, made with irony or wit, which doubles as a kind of protest or criticism of society or of humanity in general. Satirical works usually use absurd situations or elements to make their points. Famous examples of satire in the twentieth century include Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and George Orwell's *1984* and *Animal Farm*. "Christmas Not Just Once a Year" is one of Böll's most famous satirical stories. Although its literal subject is what appears to be a fairly normal, well-to-do family that is suddenly faced with an extreme situation concerning one of its members, its real subject is Germany in general and the way the country refused to acknowledge its Nazi past and the role it played in World War II. By injecting a few absurd, but plausible, elements into the beginning of the narrative, Böll is able to draw the reader into the story□so much so that it makes perfect "sense," for instance, that the children are replaced by wax dummies at the end. Successful satires use comedic elements to address what the writer perceives to be a tragic situation or set of circumstances.

Setting

The setting for "Christmas Not Just Once a Year" is postwar Germany. World War II was started largely because of German aggression, and as a result of the war, Germany itself, as well as the whole of Europe, was now digging itself out of the literal and figurative rubble caused by the war. The war was devastating to both Germany and its enemies. The country's population, due to war casualties, was decimated, and nearly every facet of Germany's infrastructure was in ruins. On a psychological level, the country's citizens had yet to deal with their individual or collective responsibility for the horrors inflicted by their country during war. Germany, through the Nazi policies of Adolph Hitler, was responsible for the annihilation of millions of Jews and other ethnic groups in the Holocaust, and for years thereafter historians, politicians, and

psychologists argued publicly about how to best deal with the country's guilt. In 1951, at the time of the story's publication, there was a significant desire among the German population and its leaders to forget about the country's past and to think only of the future. Many writers and other intellectuals, like Böll, insisted that Germany would not be fully healed on a psychic level until it stopped ignoring reality and addressed the role it played in the war. "Christmas Not Just Once a Year" is written to show what can happen when a family's, or a country's, reality or difficult past is ignored and people try to live as if every day was like one of the "good old days."

Historical Context

Heinrich Böll was first and foremost known as a political writer. In speeches and essays, Böll continually described the purpose of his writing as political, asserting that he did not believe there was a separation between his literary life and his political one. In 1951, he was invited to join "Group 47," writers who were committed to democratic ideals; eighteen years later, in 1969, he was elected president of the West German PEN, an organization devoted to the politics of literature, and in 1971 he was elected as president of the international PEN.

"Christmas Not Just Once a Year" takes place in the years immediately following World War II. Böll himself had participated in the war as a Nazi soldier. In the course of the war, he wrote hundreds of letters home to his wife, many of which explicitly criticized Germany's role in the war, and Böll also spent some time as a deserter before being captured by the Americans, which he celebrated as an act of liberation.

Germany, once considered to be the economic and military powerhouse of Europe, had been reduced to rubble by the war. In Böll's hometown of Cologne, for instance, the population was reduced from over eight hundred thousand before the war to less than thirty thousand. Entire city blocks throughout the country were abandoned, and families trying to rebuild their lives were given opportunities to move into abandoned houses and start anew. The narrator alludes to some of this devastation when he describes walking "past overgrown piles of rubble and neglected parks" as he makes his way to his uncle's house.

More important for the story, however, is the emotional and psychological rubble the war left behind. Germany was the clear aggressor of World War II. Without Hitler's aggressive military actions prior to the war and without his policy of eliminating European Jewry along with other "undesirables," there probably would not have been a European war. And in the years immediately following its defeat, as the full horrors of those policies were made known to the world, German citizens were forced to deal with their role in those horrors.

Most major politicians, and most of the population, chose not to address the war directly. Instead, they argued, it was best for Germany to look "forward," and not "backward," and the country should let the past be the past. For Böll, however, it was necessary to understand the past in order to move into the future. "Christmas Not Just Once a Year" can be read as his statement to that effect: that by pretending that life is like it was before the war, that by pretending that every day can be like "Christmas," Germany was in danger, like Aunt Milla and her family, of complete "disintegration" and "collapse."

Indeed, one of the strengths of "Christmas Not Just Once a Year" is its timelessness. The issue of Germany's "collective guilt" would continue to be played out in public spheres for the next two decades; it was not until the 1980s and 1990s that German society as a whole□at least West German society□began to discuss the Holocaust

publicly in any depth. And by the time the Berlin Wall was finally torn down in 1989 and East and West Germany were once again united, a whole new issue of German guilt, which "Christmas Not Just Once a Year" could also work to address, suddenly arose□namely, the East German's collective guilt over its communist past.

Critical Overview

Several critics, including Erhard Friedrichsmeyer, believe that Böll's greatest work is to be found in his short stories and, more particularly, in his satires. Friedrichsmeyer, writing in his *University of Dayton Review* article, "Böll's Satires," considers his satirical stories his best work, and he calls "Christmas Not Just Once a Year" one of his "masterpieces." Robert C. Conard, writing in *Understanding Heinrich Böll*, concurs: "Böll's work in the satiric mode has no equal in postwar German literature." He adds, "In *"Nicht nur zur Weihnachtszeit"* Böll created not only a national classic but a satire for all ages." Conard also quotes Friedrichsmeyer as saying that the story is a "satiric gem." Rienhard K. Zachau, in his book *Heinrich Böll: Forty Years of Criticism* discusses the views of German critic Marcel Reich-Ranicki, who had a strong influence on the reception of Böll's work in Germany in the early 1960s. Reich-Ranicki, according to Zachau, believed Böll's short story style was his trademark and that Böll had not written anything perfect "except for a few short stories."

In general, Böll was highly regarded around the world for his writing and his commitment to literature. Because his subjects were most often political and, more specifically, dealt with the less advantaged members of German society, Böll often suffered from the political vicissitudes of reviewers and critics. This was especially true of his reception by critics in former communist countries. Zachau, for instance, points out that Böll was warmly received early in his career in the former Soviet Union and became one of that country's major Western writers, "second only to . . . Ernest Hemingway." Critics pointed to his commitment to working class ideals and his antimilitarist and antifascist stances. However, starting with the publication of his novel *The Clowns* in 1965, Böll began falling out of favor with communist orthodoxy, and following the 1974 publication of *The Lost Honor of Katharina Blum*, Böll was officially banned by Soviet censors, although his books could continue to be sold in the country in foreign languages.

In the United States, Zachau writes that the reception of Böll's works reflected that of German literature in general. Until 1954, with the translation of *And Never Said a Word*, no German author, according to Zachau, had become widely known in academic or critical circles in the United States. For several years, then, at least until the publication of Günter Grass's breakthrough novel *The Tin Drum* in 1959, Böll was considered "the" German writer in the eyes of American critics and academics. However, Böll would continue throughout his career to receive praise in America for his work. Reviewing the posthumously published *The Stories of Heinrich Böll* in the *Chicago Tribune* on March 23, 1986, critic Miriam Berkley concludes her review by writing, "Readers of this volume should have no doubt that Heinrich Boll well deserved his Nobel Prize." Michael Heskit, reviewing the collection on January 12, 1986, for the *Houston Chronicle*, writes that the "collection provides a powerful entrance to Böll's tragic view of the world, tempered always by wit and compassion: the sordidness and inhumanity of war, the hollowness of Germany's postwar economic recovery, and the moral rot pervading the new Germany." While most of the reviews of Böll's stories were positive, there were some notable exceptions. In the *Los Angeles Times*, for instance, Michael Scammell concludes that

"Böll's talent was largely unsuited to the genre of the short story, and that he needed more space to succeed." And although it fell short of being negative, the *New York Times* published a less than enthusiastic review, calling the collection "a memorial to the far more subtle-minded author" that Böll was.

In Germany, Böll became an enormously popular cultural icon. Known for his political work as well as his writing, Böll was, according to a poll conducted shortly before his death in 1985, considered by Germans to be the second most popular figure behind the country's chancellor at the time, Helmut Schmidt. Zachau points out that in 1977 alone, more than fifteen books, twenty dissertations, and twelve hundred newspaper and magazine articles were written about Böll, and by 1993, more than sixty books had been written about him.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

White is the publisher of the Seattle-based press, Scala House Press. In this essay, White argues that Böll's choice of narrator is a crucial element in the tremendous success of the story as a satire on the German postwar situation.

Heinrich Böll's "Christmas Not Just Once a Year" is a satire on Germany's refusal to address the moral implications of its Nazi past. Written in 1951 as Germany was working feverishly to recover from the devastating effects of the war, the story was one of Böll's many warnings that Germany faced an uncertain future of "disintegration" and possible "collapse" if it did not adequately treat the root causes of its historical and moral amnesia.

To convey this warning, Böll chose as the narrative voice a calm and slightly detached nephew of Aunt Milla□the main character whose hysteria is the immediate cause of her family's ills. This choice of narrator was crucial to the resounding success of "Christmas Not Just Once a Year" as a satire. By virtue of his close relationship to his aunt's immediate family, the narrator is privy to enough family history and gossip to offer a comprehensive account of their troubles. However, as a once-removed relation, he is sufficiently protected from the immediate effects of Aunt Milla's hysteria and is therefore able to comprehend the depths to which the family is sinking. And yet□and this is a crucial element to Böll's underlying message□despite his knowledge, the narrator□just like his fellow countrymen who remained silent to the effects of Germany's amnesia□is still unable or unwilling to intervene on behalf of the family's welfare.

There is little disagreement among critics that "Christmas Not Just Once a Year" is not only one of Böll's most successful satires but perhaps one of the Nobel laureate's finest works. Erhad Friedrichsmeyer, writing in his *University of Dayton Review* article, "Böll's Satires," calls "Christmas Not Just Once a Year" one of Böll's masterpieces. Böll scholar Robert C. Conard writes in *Understanding Heinrich Böll* that "Böll's work in the satiric mode has no equal in postwar German literature," and he adds that "Christmas Not Just Once a Year" is "not only a national classic but a satire for all ages."

Set in the years immediately following World War II, "Christmas Not Just Once a Year" tells the story of Aunt Milla and the devastating effects her obsession with the family Christmas tree has upon her family. From 1940 to 1945, the war made it impossible for Aunt Milla and her family to have a Christmas tree. In 1946, the situation in Germany had improved enough to allow the family to renew the celebration, much to Aunt Milla's delight, but when the tree is finally taken down, Aunt Milla begins to scream hysterically, and nothing can stop her. It is only when the family sets up another, fully decorated tree and repeats the celebration that her screaming stops. The narrator of "Christmas Not Just Once a Year," an unnamed nephew of Aunt Milla, describes how the family, rather than addressing the source of Aunt Milla's psychosis, celebrates "Christmas" in the family living room every night thereafter. This profound denial of reality gradually takes its toll on the family members, and by the story's conclusion, a full two years has passed

since Aunt Milla's screaming had begun, and the narrator has detailed what can only be described as the complete "disintegration," if not utter "collapse," of Aunt Milla's family.

One of the effects Böll's story had was to highlight his country's refusal to acknowledge its Nazi past and the devastation it was responsible for in the war. In 1951, Germany was in the early stages of its headlong rush into postwar reconstruction. Although the rest of the world considered Germany to be the prime instigator of the war and although the horrible truths of the Holocaust were becoming public, the country itself seemed either to be in great denial or in great ignorance of these basic truths. The vast majority of German citizens at the time did not believe their country was responsible for the war, and four decades later German society would still be debating its role in the Holocaust.

Whereas some critics, such as John Klapper, writing in his essay "The Art of Aggression and Its Limitations: The Early Satires," point to the idea of "traditions" in general being the main theme of "Christmas Not Just Once a Year," the satire works best when it is read as an indictment of Germany's refusal to confront its history. Aunt Milla, in this context, represents Germany's desire to return to its past. However, her "perseverance with which she insisted that everything was to be 'like in the old days'" does not reflect her, or Germany's, desire to return to the country's *pre-Nazi* past; rather it is her desire to return to the days just prior to the war when Adolph Hitler's Nazi movement had peaked and Germany was viewed by the world as a mighty nation. The Christmas tree, in this context, represents the bridge between the prewar Germany of 1939□the last year before the war that the family was last able to celebrate their annual rituals□and the postwar society in which the story is set.

Böll also seems to be using Aunt Milla to comment on Germany's narcissistic view of the war. In Aunt Milla's eyes, the war is "merely . . . a force that began as early as Christmas 1939 to jeopardize her Christmas tree." The war was not a "force" that annihilated millions of Jews and tens of millions of Russians; rather, it was an inconvenience□admittedly a serious one□that disrupted the German way of life.

Böll uses the rituals around the Christmas tree to remind his readers that Germany's problems started long before the war and that simply returning to the ways things were in 1939 would be disastrous. Just as Aunt Milla will never be healed of her psychosis by celebrating Christmas every day as if it were still 1939, Germany itself would not be able to cure its own psychosis without first acknowledging that it was responsible for the war, the Holocaust, and for Hitler's ascendancy in the first place. Returning to 1939 Germany would not be enough, and hiding behind long-standing traditions was little more than a ruse. Both Aunt Milla and Germany must face the fact that their respective situations have undergone irreversible changes that necessitate radical measures. While literally and figuratively decorating the Christmas tree every night might alleviate the screaming, over the long run the psychosis will only deepen.

That Aunt Milla's family represents the greater German "family" is made evident by the narrator's choice of words as the story opens: "*Among our relatives*, symptoms of disintegration are beginning to show" (emphasis added). He adds that a "mildew of

decay" has begun to take hold that could bring on "the end of the integrity of the entire clan."

For the story to succeed on this level, it is necessary that the narrator embody several characteristics. First, and most obviously, he must be a respectable member of the family he is describing. Criticism of any organization by one of the organization's accepted "insiders" is more likely to find a sympathetic audience than would the same criticism from an outsider. It is essential for Böll's narrator to be a family member with no bias or agenda that could render his account unreliable.

Franz, for instance, is a family insider who has been warning the family about his mother's obsession with the Christmas tree for years, but because "he lacked prestige in the family," his words have gone unheeded. In a cultured, upper-middle-class family with strong business and political connections, Franz, a boxer, is a black sheep due to his profession and his proclivity to fistfight "regularly with shady characters in remote parks and dense undergrowth on the outskirts of town."

The narrator, on the other hand, seems to have the ear of Uncle Franz, Aunt Milla's husband, who fills him in with accounts of the early events as they unfold. And nearly two years into the family's ordeal, when stage actors have long since replaced the adults in the nightly rituals, the narrator worries of the "possible effects" of the "unusual daily stimulation on childish minds" and recommends to Uncle Franz that he consider replacing the children with wax dummies, a recommendation the uncle accepts despite the steep costs.

It is also important to Böll's satire that the narrator be removed enough from the problems he describes so as not to be immersed in them. As a nephew, the narrator of "Christmas Not Just Once a Year" has not suffered the way Aunt Milla's husband or children have suffered, and he can therefore offer a more reasonable and detached view of the situation than could one of those immediate family members. Aunt Milla's daughter, Lucie, for instance, becomes so affected by her mother's psychosis that she eventually begins her own bouts of hysterical screaming at the sight of downed Christmas trees, and any account that she could possibly offer would be severely limited by that psychosis. Similarly, the other children and their spouses become deeply affected, if not disturbed: Johannes becomes a communist, moves out of the city, and ends all communication with the family; Franz falls into a deep melancholy, retires from the ring, and joins a monastery, where he looks more like a "convict" than a monk; and Lucie's husband, Karl, has been driven to emigrate with Lucie to an equatorial country where Christmas trees and Christmas carols are not allowed. Even Uncle Franz, considered at the start of these events to be the "kindest of men," has taken a mistress at the age of seventy and has resorted to business practices that can in no way be described as "Christian."

What the narrator has described is the complete "moral disintegration" of the family, and he seems to have successfully kept himself at a safe distance from its disturbing effects. Or has he?

For the sake of the narration—that is, for the sake of the narrator's perceived objectivity in his retelling of the family tragedy—it is true that he has steered clear of the most obvious psychotic elements that plague the immediate family members. By his account, the reader is given no reason to distrust his story. However, he nevertheless suffers from an "ailment" that strikes at the heart of Böll's satire. The narrator, despite his respectable position in the family and despite his ongoing awareness of the family's disintegration, does nothing, aside from recommending that wax dummies replace the children, to intervene in the situation. In effect, his inaction helps contribute to the family's collapse.

In 1996, Harvard professor Daniel J. Goldhagen wrote a controversial book entitled *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*, in which he argues that the extent to which everyday Germans, and not simply members of the Nazi party, knew about the genocide of Jews was much greater than had previously been acknowledged. Although the book was eventually criticized widely in academic circles for lax scholarship, it became a bestseller in Germany and provoked intense reaction and debates throughout the country. More than fifty years after the last trains had transported Jews to concentration camps, Germans were still debating their individual and collective roles in the Holocaust.

Böll's "Christmas Not Just Once a Year" addressed this same issue less than five years after the war had ended. Is Böll suggesting that the narrator, by virtue of his knowledge and apathy, is "guilty" of the family's demise? Is he accusing his fellow countrymen of being responsible for the Holocaust? One of the great strengths of "Christmas Not Just Once a Year" is that it allows for these possible interpretations without bludgeoning the readers with direct accusations. Although Böll did not hesitate to "bludgeon" or "accuse" in his political writings and activism, as an artist he understood life's complexities, and by creating a morally ambiguous and seemingly unaffected and objective narrator, he was able to portray those complexities in a brilliant satire of the German situation.

Source: Mark White, Critical Essay on "Christmas Not Just Once a Year," in *Short Stories for Students*, Gale, 2005.

Topics for Further Study

One of the main themes of "Christmas Not Just Once a Year" is "historical amnesia." What is meant by the term "historical amnesia?" In particular, how does it relate to Germany immediately following the war? Explain the steps Germany has taken since the 1950s, if any, to address this issue.

Research the Nuremberg Trials of 1945—1949. What was the purpose of the trials? What effect did they have on German society? Did the trials ultimately achieve their goals?

Some of the most popular shows ever broadcast on German television have been about the Holocaust. In 1984, for instance, a rebroadcast of the American television serial *Holocaust* was viewed by over 10 million Germans, or one-sixth of the population. What accounts for the huge popularity of that series nearly two decades after the historical events had transpired? Is this phenomenon related to the concept of "historical amnesia"? If so, how?

For much of his career, Heinrich Böll devoted himself to the "writers of conscience"□writers who, for political reasons, were either imprisoned by their governments or whose writing suffered from severe governmental censorship. Many of the writers whom Böll worked for lived in the eastern bloc or other communist countries. Now that most of the former communist countries have become democratic, is there a primary region of the world where most "writers of conscience"in the early 2000s live? Using Amnesty International and the International PEN Club as the basis of your research, find the names of several writers who would fall in this category and describe their situations. Are there political issues that these writers share?

Compare and Contrast

1950s: There are very few public exhibits or museums devoted to Germany's role in World War II or its role in the Holocaust.

Today: Several significant museums in Germany are devoted to World War II and the Holocaust, and throughout Germany there are public displays related to various aspects of the war and its victims.

1950s: With the German population decimated by the war and facing severe shortages of trained personnel, laws have been passed to encourage couples to have children. Germany is in the early stages of its economic and social reconstruction. With the assistance of the Marshall Plan, it is attempting to rebuild its once mighty industrial and economic infrastructure.

Today: The German population has long since recovered, and Germany is one of the economic powerhouses of the European Union and is a major producer of many of the world's most popular brands of cars and electronic devices.

1950s: Many German Nazi leaders have fled the country, relocating free from prosecution in South American countries and other countries around the world.

Today: So-called "Nazi Hunters" have successfully tracked down most of the high-ranking Nazis and brought them back to trial for their war crimes.

1950s: There is not a central economic or political entity in Europe. The continent consists of many individual nation states, each with its own currency, laws, and political structures.

Today: Following the fall of the eastern bloc, many European countries have voted to join the European Union. Union members share a currency and agree to abide by many laws and policies that govern various aspects of governmental, economic, and social policies.

What Do I Read Next?

W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*, widely acclaimed at its publication in 2001, tells the story of Jacques Austerlitz who, as a small child, was sent to England on a kindertransport in 1939, and who, as an adult fifty years after the war is over, is haunted by images and fleeting memories of his past. He follows a dim trail that ultimately leads to the truth of his parents' death in the Holocaust.

The Tin Drum (1959) is Günter Grass's first and most famous novel. A huge commercial success, *The Tin Drum* tells the story of thirty-year-old Oskar Matzerath, who, in protest of the Nazi regime, stopped growing at the age of three. The novel is a moving and hilarious view of German history and immediately cast Grass as German's most popular writer.

Missing Persons (1997), a collection of essays by Heinrich Böll, includes selections from Böll's non-fiction prose work, including his political essays, book reviews, and literary work, and provides a good overview of Böll's political convictions and social views.

Heinrich Böll's first novel, *Silent Angel*, remained unpublished until 1995, a decade after his death. Like "Christmas Not Just Once a Year," its themes are postwar German decay and reconstruction.

The Stories of Heinrich Böll was first published in the United States in 1986 to widespread and strong reviews. The collection includes most of Böll's previously published stories, as well as stories previously uncollected in English editions, including "Christmas Not Just Once a Year."

What's to Become of the Boy? or Something to Do with Books (1985) is Heinrich Böll's memoir of his teenage years in Germany. Böll describes Hitler's rise to power, the importance of books in his life, and his strong family ties that helped him to eventually become a writer.

Further Study

Burleigh, Michael, *The Third Reich: A New History*, Hill & Wang, 2001.

Burleigh focuses on the systematic breakdown of German society that ultimately led to Hitler's rise to power. The book paints a picture of a people so desperate for prosperity and identity that they gradually and consistently ignored their conscience while their country pursued those goals at a great human cost.

Conard, Robert C., *Understanding Heinrich Böll*, University of South Carolina Press, 1992.

Conard is considered one of the foremost experts on Böll's writing, and he provides a comprehensive overview of Böll war stories, satires, and major novels.

Goldhagen, Daniel J., *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*, Knopf, 1996.

Goldhagen caused a huge stir in the United States and in Germany with the publication of this book. He argues that the extent to which ordinary Germans knew of the genocidal acts of the Nazi government was far greater than had previously been acknowledged and that hundreds of thousands of Germans were directly aware of the death camps and other aspects of the Holocaust.

Reid, J. H., *Heinrich Böll: A German for His Time*, Oswald Wolff Books, 1988.

Reid was one of Böll's earliest biographers. This biography, published a few years after Böll's death, is perhaps the most comprehensive study of Böll's life yet published in English. Of particular note is the chapter "Years of Hope (1949—1955)," which covers the years of Böll's early literary life when "Christmas Not Just Once a Year" was written and first published.

Sebald, W. G., *On the Natural History of Destruction*, Random House, 2003.

The four essays in this collection address the themes of memory and survival in the context of the violent era of postwar Germany. The essay "Air War and Literature," in which Sebald criticizes the silence of German writers on the starvation, mutilations, and killings caused by Allied bombings, provoked great controversy in Germany when it was first published in 1999, an indication that the country had not yet fully healed itself of the war's aftereffects.

Zachau, Reinhard K., *Heinrich Böll: Forty Years of Criticism*, Camden House, 1994.

Böll's fame as a writer extended beyond Germany to England and the former eastern bloc countries, as well as to the United States. Zachau provides an overview of how Böll's work was received by critics in those countries. The book also includes an extensive bibliography of critical articles on Böll's work.

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Scammell, Michael, Review of *The Stories of Heinrich Böll*, in *Los Angeles Times*, March 30, 1986, p. 3 (in The Book Review).

Stewart, Keith, "The American Reviews of Heinrich Böll: A Note on the Problems of the Compassionate Novelist," in *University of Dayton Review*. Vol. 11, No. 2, Winter 1974, pp. 5—10.

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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

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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Short Stories for Students

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