A Christmas Memory Study Guide

A Christmas Memory by Truman Capote

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers".

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

"A Christmas Memory" was issued by Random House in 1966 during the holiday season in order to capitalize on Truman Capote's growing popularity following the release of his true-crime novel, *In Cold Blood*. Though "A Christmas Memory" had initially appeared in *Mademoiselle* magazine in December, 1956, and was reprinted in *The Selected Writings of Truman Capote* in 1963, it was the 1966 edition that established the story's enduring popularity. The story of a seven-year-old boy and his aging cousin's holiday traditions was made into an Emmy Award-winning television movie starring Geraldine Page in 1968 and continues to be produced by high-school and regional theaters throughout the United States.

The story is a prime example of what William L. Nance in *The Worlds of Truman Capote* calls Capote's "fiction of nostalgia," in which the author looks back fondly upon his Southern childhood. These nostalgic stones evoke a gentle, simple, and secure childhood uncorrupted by the complications of adulthood. Autobiographical elements in "A Christmas Memory" are apparent: Capote lived with relatives in the South as a child, and during this time his older female cousin, the childlike Sook Faulk, was his closest companion. The nostalgic mood has prompted some critics to dismiss the story as "saccharine." However, the story also contains darker elements such as loneliness, poverty, social isolation, and death, which demonstrate that the innocence of childhood may protect young people from the elements of the human condition, but not remove them from it. The story is also an example of a common theme in Capote's writings: the friendship forged among social outcasts, many of which are eccentric women.

Author Biography

Truman Capote drew on his own youthful experience in rural Alabama to write "A Christmas Memory." This story, which he called his personal favorite, is an idealized recollection of one of the few relatively secure periods of his unstable early childhood.

Capote was born Truman Streckfus Persons on September 30, 1924, in New Orleans, Louisiana. Although his parents did not formally divorce until he was seven years old, they never created a stable home for young Truman, and some of his earliest memories are of accompanying his mother, Lillie Mae, on job-hunting excursions to St. Louis, Missouri, and Louisville, Kentucky. At other times he was shuttled between the homes of various relatives in Alabama. One of these households of his mother's relatives provided the settings for much of his early fiction, including "A Christmas Memory."

In 1930, Capote was sent to live in Monroeville, Alabama, while his mother went to New York City to seek work. His new "family" consisted of the three middle-aged Faulk sisters and their older brother. One of the sisters, Sook, is the model for Buddy's friend in "A Christmas Memory." While in Monroeville, Truman became friends with Harper Lee, a young girl who lived next door and later gained recognition for writing the critically acclaimed novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Lee allegedly based the character of Dill, a wildly imaginative young boy, on Capote. The two writers remained lifelong friends, and she later traveled to Kansas to help research his most famous work*, In Cold Blood*, the true story of the murder of a wealthy farm family. His mother remarried in 1932, and later that year he joined her and his new stepfather, Joseph Capote, in New York; in 1934 Truman became Truman Garcia Capote when Joseph formally adopted him.

In New York, Lillie Mae (who now called herself Nina) became alarmed by her son's effeminate tendencies and sent him to St. John's Military Academy. The other cadets made his life miserable by mocking his Southern accent and ridiculing his mannerisms. Eventually his mother withdrew him from St. John's, and he returned to New York, where he developed his flair for storytelling and became quite popular as a *raconteur*—a teller of stories—at parties. Around 1943 he landed a job as a copyboy at the prestigious magazine *The New Yorker*, where he saw firsthand the ins and outs of the New York publishing world. His first story, "Miriam," was published in *Mademoiselle* in June, 1945, and at the tender age of 21, Capote became the, darling of the New York literary establishment.

Other Voices, Other Rooms appeared in 1948 and another novel, *The Grass Harp*, in 1951. In 1958 he wrote the short novel *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, which was made into a movie starring Audrey Hepburn, and he also wrote two screenplays. But it is *In Cold Blood*, in which he claimed to have invented a new genre, the nonfiction novel, which ensured his reputation and made him a social celebrity. Toward the end of his life, problems with alcohol and drugs sapped his creativity, and he never completed his final project, Answered Prayers, which was published posthumously in 1987. In his later years, Capote was known more as a social gadfly, one who hosted celebrated parties,

like the infamous Black and White Ball held at the Plaza Hotel in New York in 1966. During the 1970s, he could frequently be found at the notorious Manhattan discotheque Studio 54. Capote died in Los Angeles, California, on August 25,1984.

Plot Summary

The narrator of the story tells the reader to "imagine a morning in late November" more than twenty years ago. The scene is a kitchen of a rambling house in a small rural town in the 1930s. An elderly woman stands at the kitchen window and proclaims that "it's fruitcake weather!" This is delightful news to her seven-year-old cousin and best friend, Buddy. "Fruitcake weather" signals the beginning of the holiday season for the unconventional cousins, who bake the loaves for the people in their lives who have been kind to them through the year. The two proceed with their tradition more or less oblivious to the other relatives who live in the house: "they have power over us, and frequently make us cry, [but] we are not, on the whole, too much aware of them."

They begin the routine by gathering pecans for the fruitcakes. The unnamed woman and the little boy, accompanied by their dog Queenie, spend three hours filling an old baby carriage with the nuts that have fallen on the ground in the neighbor's orchard. Then they return to the kitchen to shell the nuts by firelight and plan the next day's work — buying the other ingredients for the fruitcakes. Later, they go up to the woman's bedroom, where she keeps a change purse hidden under her bed. The purse is filled with the money they have accumulated all year from their various enterprises: selling fruit and flowers, and once even charging neighbors to see a deformed chicken. At this time the narrator, grown now and relating the story in flashback, reveals more facts about his cousin. She has never seen a movie or eaten in a restaurant, but she knows how to tame hummingbirds, tell chilling ghost stories, and create elixirs to cure a variety of ills.

The next day, they go on their shopping trip. During their most unusual errand they visit a man named Haha Jones, the local whiskey bootlegger. Jones is large and frightening-looking, but he is kind to the cousins, giving them a bottle of whiskey in exchange for the promise of a fruitcake. Over the next four days they bake thirty-one cakes, most of which they send to people they know only slightly or not at all; people who have passed through their town once, or famous people such as President Franklin D. Roosevelt. The woman, the narrator points out, * 'is shy with everyone *except* strangers." After the cakes are baked and sent, they split the leftover whiskey and give a spoonful to the dog. A little drunk, they sing and dance around the kitchen, but soon two relatives come in and scold the woman for giving whiskey to the boy. Sobbing, she retreats to her room. Buddy comforts her by reminding her that they will cut down a Christmas tree the next day.

In the morning, they find the perfect Christmas tree, twice as tall as Buddy. They drag it home themselves along with other holiday greenery. They make decorations from colored paper and tinfoil to supplement the few store-bought ornaments they own and sprinkle the tree with shredded cotton. They finish their decorating tasks by creating holly wreaths for the house's front windows. Gifts are created for the rest of the family; Buddy makes his cousin a kite, and he suspects she is making him one as well. His suspicions are confirmed on Christmas Eve when they are too excited to sleep and they reveal their presents to one another. After they open their presents on Christmas Day,

they go out to fly the kites. They have such a good time that the old woman feels as if she has seen God.

The narrator reveals that this is the last Christmas he shared with his cousin. Buddy is sent to military school, and spends his summers at camp. For a while, his cousin writes him and continues her holiday fruitcake tradition, sending him "the best of the batch." Eventually, though, she becomes mentally and physically frail, unable to keep up her routine. When she dies, Buddy knows before he is told: "A message saying so merely confirms a piece of news some secret vein had already received." The story closes with him walking over the grounds of his school and looking at the sky: "As if I expected to see, rather like hearts, a lost pair of kites hurrying toward heaven."

Section 1

Section 1 Summary

Truman Capote learns the true meaning of the Christmas season through his older cousin. He remembers times full of happiness, simple pleasures, and giving - despite how poor he was. His story takes the reader down Memory Lane to show how his cousin touched his life.

Truman remembers the friendship he had with his older distant cousin. The 60-year-old homely dressed old woman considers 7-year-old Truman her best friend. They spend time with each other because relatives ignore them and they have no other friends. The woman had a childhood best friend named Buddy, but he died long ago. She does not call Truman by his real name but by the name Buddy. The old woman doesn't get out much, cares nothing for her appearance, and lives by the bible she reads. She has the courage to kill snakes and also dips snuff secretly. Winter is an exciting time for both of them. At the beginning of the season the woman declares it is "fruitcake weather."

They take great care in gathering the ingredients to make the 30 fruitcakes they bake every year. First they pick pecans from trees in another person's yard with their rat terrier, Queenie. Next they must count how much money they have saved in their Fruitcake Fund to buy cake ingredients. Truman reflects on all of the ways they have raised money in past years. The pair enters every contest they hear about. They have won $5 in a contest, sold jellies and jams, picked flowers for funerals, and produced their own show called Fun and Freak. The show featured pictures of various cities and a three-legged chicken. They even killed flies for money from relatives. Relatives paid them a penny for every 25 flies they killed. In the woman's room they carefully count how much money they have in the fund. Truman thinks they have $13 saved, so they throw a penny out. The woman is superstitious, stays in bed on the 13th of every month, and thinks it bad luck if they have exactly $13.

Section 1 Analysis

It is odd that a 60-year-old and a 7-year-old share a friendship. They build a friendship based on the rejection they experience in life. Both are considered outsiders by family and other people. In a season that should be about spending time with family, they have no relationship with their family. Both are poor and don't have much. Although they live poor lives, they seem to be content. When they need money, they come up with creative ways to earn it, rather than complain about their situation. Since they make fruitcakes every year, their creative ideas work.

The description of the woman and her habits symbolizes her character. The woman is not materialistic. She is very religious and, although it may not look like it, she has strength. She is courageous enough to kill snakes, which is an animal many people

fear. The woman may even still wish to be young. She has not gotten over the death of her friend because she continues to call Truman by the name of her friend, Buddy.

Section 2

Section 2 Summary

The next morning the woman and Truman go to buy the cherries, pineapples, raisins, walnuts, and other ingredients. They also pay a visit to Mr. Haha Jones to buy the whiskey necessary for the fruitcakes. Buying alcohol is illegal where they live. The woman says the fruitcakes must have whiskey, so she buys some anyway. She takes Truman to the fish fry and dancing cafy that Mr. Haha owns. It is public knowledge that people have been murdered and cut up in Mr. Haha's cafy. Neither of them has met Mr. Haha. In the past they bought their whiskey from his wife. Truman and the woman are taken back when they see Mr. Haha's tall figure, scarred face, and cold demeanor. When the woman tells him she needs whiskey for her fruitcakes, he gives her the bottle for free and asks for only a fruitcake in return.

Truman and the woman make 31 cakes in four days. They send the cakes out to many people they don't know or have met one time and only a few neighbor friends. Every year they send a fruit cake to the president of the United States, which is Roosevelt at the time, and Baptist missionaries. They also sends fruitcakes to random people, like the truck driver that waves at them when he passes through and the couple that talked to them after their car broke down in front of the house. Truman comments that the woman is "shy around everyone but strangers." After mailing off the last cakes, Truman is exhausted and sad because they are broke again. The woman does not share his sadness. She wants to celebrate that they sent out all the cakes by drinking leftover whiskey.

Truman, the woman and Queenie drink the leftover whiskey. The pair sing and dance. Truman feels better after drinking the whiskey and dancing. He wants to be a tap dancer when he is older. Two relatives walk in on their celebration and yell at the woman. How could she let 7-year-old Truman drink whiskey? They bring up cousins and uncles who were involved in scandals and humiliated the family. The woman runs to her room and cries.

The woman continues to cry all night. Truman cheers her up when he reminds her that they have to go pick a Christmas tree the next day. The woman stops crying and says she know the perfect place to find a tree. Her father use to take her there when she was young. The next day they drive, wade through water and brush, and pick a very tall tree. On the way home the mill owner's wife offers to pay the woman a small price for the tree. The woman is usually soft spoken but manages to firmly tell the lady that her tree is worth more. The mill owner's wife laughs at her, but the woman tells her there is not another tree like hers. She is not willing to sell it.

Section 2 Analysis

The woman's phrase "fruitcake weather" could mean that winter is the season for giving. After taking much care and putting in many hours to make the fruitcakes, the two give the fruitcakes away to strangers. Those who have been kind to them in even the smallest gesture of a wave get a fruitcake. Some of the people they send cakes to are often the people overlooked in society, like the bus driver and the knife grinder. Meeting with Mr. Haha shows that people cannot be judged on their appearance. Although Mr. Haha looked scary and owned a scary cafy in a dangerous part of town, he was still nice enough to give the woman good whiskey she needed for free.

The woman views Truman too highly. They are friends, but she finds it okay to take him with her when she buys whiskey and give him whiskey to drink. Giving a 7-year-old illegal alcohol is very irresponsible. Truman may be right when he says in the first part of the story that the woman is still a child. The two relatives who yell at her treat her like a child and compare her to other humiliating relatives. The woman's character is strong with morals and purity. She gives freely. She even celebrates giving when it has left her broke. The woman is happy with the rituals that come around Christmas time. Because Christmas time is usually thought of as a period of giving, the woman is genuine in her efforts. The woman's quiet strength also comes through. Although she is shy, she is strong when she needs to be.

Section 3

Section 3 Summary

By Christmas Eve the woman and Truman are broke. Truman draws paper ornaments. The woman cuts them out and hangs them on the tree. Once they finish decorating, the woman declares it is the most beautiful tree. They make presents for everyone. Women relatives get color scarves. Male relatives get syrup that can be used to clear a cough or heal ailments after hunting. Although they would love to get each other elaborate gifts, Truman and the woman secretly make kites to give each other for Christmas. For the past two years they have given each other kites, so it isn't a huge surprise. The woman is a little hurt at only being able to get Truman a kite.

Christmas morning the pair suffers through a huge breakfast with relatives. Both the woman and Truman are more excited about opening presents. Truman is angry when he sees his gifts from his family. He gets hand-me-downs, a church shirt, and a subscription to a religious magazine. The woman gets a few gifts. Truman and the woman go out to fly their kites. Truman forgets about how much he hates his other presents when he flies his kite. The woman has a revelation when she flies hers. She tells Truman that all her life she thought she would see the Lord when she was sick and dying. Flying the kite has made her realize that she already sees the Lord and his handiwork in the simple things.

Relatives send Truman off to military school. Truman and the woman miss each other. The woman sends him money for picture shows and asks him to write. She even sends him fruitcakes. Truman is never able to visit. One day the woman tells Truman that Queenie died. She was kicked hard by a horse. Eventually the woman begins to sleep more days than the 13th away. When Truman does not hear the woman's annual declaration at wintertime that it is "fruitcake weather," he knows something is terribly wrong. Now, 20 years later, Truman walks along the streets on his college campus during wintertime. He looks to the sky and remembers their two kites flying in the wind.

Section 3 Analysis

Truman and the woman show that people don't need money to have a good Christmas. The gifts they give each other and family are heartfelt because they spent time making them. The gifts they receive from their relatives imply that the relatives don't care about them. Although Truman and the woman would like other things, they are happy with the kites they get from each other. The woman's excitement to open gifts shows how childlike she really acts. The woman realizes that simple pleasures can be a blessing. With not having much, she is able to see the Lord in her life more than she would have if she had money.

Queenie's death symbolizes the weak bond between the woman and Truman when he goes to school. Queenie was with them through everything. Her death symbolizes the fact that one day Truman and the woman will do nothing together again. The fact that the woman got to the point where she did not celebrate "fruitcake weather" reveals that she has died. Her excitement about winter coming had to do with spending the holidays with Truman. Truman's not being able to come home and Queenie's death was too much for her. Truman's memory of the woman, who has no name in the story, shows that he cared deeply for her. He thinks of the kites almost as their two souls flying freely in the wind. The kites could symbolize the freedom Truman and the woman have experienced all their lives. They are not confined to society or its rules. They pleased themselves, gave freely, and experienced more happiness with themselves.

Characters

Buddy

Throughout "A Christmas Memory" the narrator refers to himself only in the first person (I, me, myself), but his friend calls him Buddy "in memory of a boy who was formerly her best friend" and who had died when she was a child. Truman Capote said that Buddy is based on himself; as a boy, Capote indeed lived with an elderly, somewhat eccentric cousin in a country house full of relatives. At the time the story takes place Buddy is seven years old, and his age influences the way he perceives the events going on around him. Despite his youth, he proves perceptive. Buddy understands that even though his friend is in her sixties, "She is still a child." He lives with relatives in "a spreading old house in a country town," but he and his cousin manage to remain somewhat separate from them, "We are not, on the whole, too much aware of them. We are each other's best Mend," he says. By recognizing this, Buddy reveals his compassion for society's outsiders, as his cousin is considered. Every Saturday she gives him a dime and he goes to the movies, which influences his decision to be a tap dancer when he grows up. Because his friend never goes to movies, Buddy tells her about them, thus honing his storytelling skills. Later, when he recounts mat he has been sent to military school, the sensitive narrator breaks the nostalgic mood of the story and provides its bittersweet resolution: "home is where my friend is, and there I never go."

Mr. Haha Jones

Described as a "giant with razor scars across his cheeks," Haha Jones is proprietor of a "sinful" fish-fry and dancing cafe. The name "Haha" is ironic, because he is purportedly a gloomy man who never smiles. Buddy and his friend purchase whiskey for their fruitcakes from Haha, and when he gives them their money back he demonstrates that there is good in all people.

My friend

Although she remains unnamed throughout the story, this "sixty-something" distant cousin is the narrator's best friend. Capote said in interviews that he based this character on Miss Sook Faulk, an elderly cousin with whom he spent much of his childhood. Buddy's friend is described as "still a child," and it is her innocence which allows their friendship to occur. The narrator reveals her to be a very idiosyncratic person—one who possesses unusual characteristics—by stating the things she has never done: "eaten in a restaurant, traveled more than five miles from home, received or sent a telegram, read anything except the funny papers and the Bible." She is also very wise, however, and it is she who teaches Buddy to value each individual object because "there are never two of anything." She also helps Buddy to appreciate nature as the place where God reveals Himself every day.

Queenie

Queenie is a dog, described as a "tough little orange and white rat terrier who has survived distemper and two rattlesnake bites." Her resilience symbolizes the mam characters' friendship, for though each is small and physically insignificant, their spirits are united by a strong bond. Queenie's death symbolizes the friends' forced separation and foreshadows the eventual death of the narrator's friend.

Those Who Know Best

See Two Relatives

Two Relatives

Buddy never refers to the other people who live with him and his friend by name, and by doing so he demonstrates his emotional distance from them. The irony in the term "Those Who Know Best" signifies that he believes they really do not know what is best for him. The relatives are shown to be harsh and scolding. He admits that "they have power over us, and frequently make us cry." Buddy also does not think much of their pious religious attitudes. When he receives a subscription to a religious magazine for children as a Christmas present, he says, "It makes me boil. It really does."

Themes

Memory and Reminiscence

From the beginning of the story, the narrator's memory is linked to the act of storytelling and creativity. "Imagine a morning in late November. A coming of winter morning more than twenty years ago." Though the narrator sets the scene, he depends on the reader's own experiences to bring it into focus so he can tell the story. This technique plays upon the questionable nature of memory, in which personal experience is combined with images from other stones, books, and pictures to form a mind's-eye view. Thus, the veracity, or truthfulness, of memory is cast into doubt.

The story also illustrates the power of specific objects to evoke a particular memory. Just as in the beginning of the story "a great black stove" is the object around which the remembered kitchen is constructed, so at the end does the image of kites help the narrator to remember his cousin and their friendship. Likewise, the "hateful heap of bitter-odored pennies" which comprises the bulk of the two friends' fortune recalls "the carnage of August" when they were paid one penny for every twenty-five flies they killed. This image exemplifies the nature of memory in which one sense (in this case the smell of the pennies) leads to the remembrance of another sensory experience (the sight of the dead flies).

Another trait of personal reminiscence is the listing of objects, such as what the narrator eats for dinner ("cold biscuits, bacon, blackberry jam"), the fruitcake ingredients ("Cherries and citron, ginger and vanilla and canned Hawaiian pineapple," etc.) and the Christmas tree decoration ("a shoe box of ermine tails..., coils of frazzled tinsel ..., one silver star," etc.). These lists not only aid the reader in conjuring an image of the scene being described, they also establish the authority of the narrator, as though he were saying, "I can prove that I was there because this is what I saw."

Memory also acts as a retreat from reality, as evidenced by the narrator's elderly friend calling him Buddy "in memory of a boy who was formerly her best friend" and who died. Her later inability to distinguish him from "the other Buddy" signals the increasing confusion of her mind and also her death, when she herself becomes a memory of the narrator.

Friendship

Friendship among social outcasts is a common theme in Capote's work, and in "A Christmas Memory" the friendship between Buddy and his friend provide strength for the narrator. Buddy and his friend are outsiders within their household; the other members of the family "have power over [them], and frequently make [them] cry," but on the whole they "are not too much aware of them" because the friendship is then- refuge. This friendship is made possible because even though his cousin is "sixty-something,"

she is "still a child" and shares his innocent view of the world. The strength of their friendship is further underscored by the statement that the narrator's real name is not Buddy; it is the name his friend has given him, and it is the only name the reader learns. From his cousin, Buddy learns how the beauty of nature signifies God's presence and that money is not the only measure of value. When the "rich mill owner's lazy wife" tries to buy their Christmas tree, his friend exclaims "We wouldn't take a dollar," underscoring the intrinsic value of nature by stating: "There's never two of anything." The friendship helps the narrator survive once he is separated from her, though he recognizes the irreversible loss of his childhood innocence: "Home is where my friend is, and there I never go." Even twenty years later, he likens their friendship to a "lost pair of kites hurrying toward heaven."

Coming of Age

"A Christmas Memory" shows how children pass into adulthood not only by growing older, but also by learning the ways of the world. Two conflicting worldviews confront Buddy in the story, and it is his ability to synthesize the two that leads to his increased wisdom. His friend's childlike qualities exemplify her refusal to leave childhood and assume an adult role. The narrator states: "She is still a child." Though seven-year-old Buddy respects this quality, it is the basis for her ostracism from the rest of the family, who treat her as a subordinate. Her inability or refusal to properly distinguish between what is socially acceptable behavior and what is not is demonstrated in her allowing Buddy to become drunk on the leftover whiskey. She does understand that society might have good reason for refusing to allow children to drink alcohol. Told in flashback, the narrator relates the bittersweet nature of coming of age. Once removed from his best friend and sent to military school, he states that "Home is where my friend is, and there I never go." He recognizes the symbolic innocence of his younger days when he "[expects] to see, rather like hearts, a lost pair of kites hurrying toward heaven."

Style

Point of View

The story employs a first-person narrator who is called Buddy, though we are also told that this is not his real name, but a name given to him by his friend. By telling us this, the narrator suggests that the story is not his alone, but also belongs to his friend, the other major character in the story. The advantage of the first-person point of view lies in its allowing us to experience the story as Buddy himself did. The description of Mr. Haha is not an objective view; rather it is the view of a seven-year-old boy: "he is a giant; he does have scars; he doesn't smile." The italicized words demonstrate the amazement and fear felt by seven-year-old Buddy. Likewise, what the narrator thinks of the others in the household comes through in his references to them. "Other people inhabit the house," and his emotional distance is underscored by his using the generic term "people" and his refusal to give them personalities. His later reference to "those who Know Best" suggests his belief that they really do not know best. The fact that the narrator is an adult while he is telling the story is also significant, because it allows him to put his earlier memories into perspective and to understand events in ways which a seven-year-old boy could not: The adult narrator recognizes that his friend was "still a child." The main disadvantage of first-person narration is its limited ability to portray others. The reader must rely on Buddy's description of the woman, since her thoughts are never shown. Likewise, the reader cannot form valid judgments about the other family members because the point of view does not allow their perspective to be heard.

Setting

"A Christmas Memory" is set in the rural South during the early 1930s. This can be deduced from the fact that the story first appeared in 1956, and the narrator tells us it took place during the winter "more than twenty years ago." This places the story during the Great Depression, a time of great poverty, which may explain why so many relatives are living in a house together, including a young boy without his parents. In reality, Capote spent several years with relatives while his mother sought work in other parts of the country. Furthermore, placing a nostalgic, "coming-of-age" story during the Christmas season, a time many people remember fondly, further emphasizes the story's goal of evoking a warm, bittersweet reminiscence.

Structure

Partly because "A Christmas Memory" is a reminiscence, time is its dominant structural element. There are two time periods in the story: the present, in which the narrator relates the story, and the distant past, when the narrator was a boy. The narrator quickly moves the reader into the distant past by issuing a series of commands: "Imagine a morning in late November... .Consider the kitchen of a spreading old house." At the

climax of the story, as Buddy and his cousin fly kites on Christmas day, die narrator brings the reader back to the present: "This is our last Christmas together." This sudden shift in time abruptly ends the story's nostalgic mood, and in the several subsequent paragraphs that recount events leading up to the narrator's present life, Capote quickly establishes a tone of bittersweet melancholy. By placing the main action of the story nearly twenty years before, that time is made to seem distant and remote. That Buddy's cousin is no longer living by the end of the story further serves to emphasize the passing of time and the inability for people to return to the past.

Historical Context

Growing up in the Depression

Capote's "A Christmas Memory" takes place in the South during the Depression. Though a larger historical framework is not apparent in the story, the traditions of the era are well represented by Buddy's adventures with his cousin. Living in a house with many relatives was common in times of great poverty, and Buddy was most likely there because his parents' economic situation prevented them from providing him with a stable life. In addition, the activities he pursues with his cousin—baking fruitcakes, cutting down a tree in the woods, making homemade decorations and Christmas presents together—not only evoke a nostalgia for a simpler time but also represent common amusements in a rural community when money was scarce. One of Buddy's favorite pastimes is going to the movies, which costs only a dime. During the Depression, millions attended the country's elaborate movie palaces every week; it was the cheapest, most common form of entertainment in a world not yet captivated by radio and television. That Buddy's cousin has never been to a movie herself may not seem so strange when one considers that she grew up in an era before the film industry had captured the public's attention.

An Intolerant Era

Less apparent in the writing of "A Christmas Memory" are the cultural attitudes that fostered what Thomas Dukes has called "the quintessential homosexual writing style1' of the 1950s. In an era of considerable sexual repression, addressing homosexual themes overtly in literature was uncommon. Instead, authors, especially Capote, created situations in a type of "code" that were often interpreted in a homosexual context. One aspect of this "code" in Capote's story is the sensitivity of the central male character, particularly his preference for emphasizing his feelings and emotions over action. Another aspect of this "code" is the emphasis on female characters and domestic concerns. Note also the joke that Mr. Haha Jones makes when he asks Buddy and his cousin, "Which of you is a drinking man?" That Haha finds this funny suggests that he equates Buddy's gender identity more with his female friend rather than with his status as a young male. Outside of his writing, Capote defined himself as homosexual in the often homophobic culture of the 1950s and 1960s through the way in which he chose to be photographed and the effeminate manner he assumed during television interviews.

Critical Overview

"A Christmas Memory" was first published in *Mademoiselle* in 1956 and then reprinted in *Selected Writings of Truman Capote* in 1963, but it received little attention until it was reprinted as a gift-boxed set for Christmas in 1966. Reviews at the time were generally favorable, with a writer for *Harper's* calling it "an enchanting little book destined ... to become a classic." Nancy McKenzie noted in *The New York Times* that the story "seesaws slowly and nostalgically in time." However, other critics, including playwright Tennessee Williams, characterized the story as saccharine, overly sentimental, or even repulsive. Capote himself described the story as a catharsis which helped him to deal with his experiences as a child in the South: "The moment I wrote that short story I knew I would never write another word about the South. I am not going to be haunted by it any more, so I see no reason to deal with those people or those settings," he said in an interview with Roy Newquist in Counterpoint in 1964.

William Nance sees the story in *The Worlds of Truman Capote* as important for understanding Capote's work because of the character of Buddy's elderly friend. "Asexual admiration of a childlike dreamer heroine is the usual attitude of the Capote narrator," Nance explains, linking Buddy's friend to Dolly Talbo in *The Grass Harp* and Holly Golightly in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. Nance further notes that in "A Christmas Memory" Capote displays his typical "hostility toward those outside the magic circle," the magic circle being the closed environment manufactured by those who are alienated in some way from society.

Many critics have noted the similarity between Buddy himself and Capote's other male characters. Often lonely, thirsting for love, and in search of an identity, these characters represent Capote himself. In "A Christmas Memory," these emotional quests end on a sad note when the narrator says "Home is where my friend is, and there I never go." Other critics comment on Capote's presentation of male characters as forcing the reader to rethink gender roles. Buddy revises the traditional coming-of-age narrative, in which the male protagonist demonstrates his masculinity and self-worth by moving ever westward and exploring new frontiers. Instead, Buddy remembers with fondness baking fruitcakes on a cast-iron stove, thereby romanticizing the traditionally female sphere of domesticity. During the years in which he is supposed to "come of age," he rejects the traditionally masculinizing influence of military schools, which he characterizes as "a miserable succession of bugle-blowing prisons."

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Trudy Ring is a frequent writer, editor, and reporter on literary subjects. In the following essay, she gives an overview of Capote's "A Christmas Memory," concentrating on the portrayal of the character of Buddy's cousin.

Truman Capote often drew on his Southern childhood in finding material for his fiction. He also frequently focused his stories on unconventional, strangely appealing women. "A Christmas Memory" is possibly the best example of a Capote story that exhibits both of these features. Capote described it as his favorite among his stories, and it showed his writing shifting from a preoccupation with the darker aspects of life to warmer and more sentimental subject matter. (He would return to darker subjects later, with *In Cold Blood*, his account of the murder of a family in rural Kansas.) Capote said he liked "A Christmas Memory" because of the truth in it, but the story is actually an idealized and embellished portrait of his childhood and of his elderly cousin, Sook, who provided much of the warmth and companionship he knew as a youngster.

Capote's parents were divorced when he was four years old, and his mother placed him with relatives in Monroeville, Alabama, while she went to New York City to look for a job. Young Truman lived most of the time with four cousins, all much older than he. The one with whom he formed the closest relationship was Nanny Rumbley Faulk, nicknamed Sook. She was reclusive and many people considered her peculiar. Relatives later pointed out after characterizations of her began showing up in Capote's work, however, that she was more intelligent and less naive than she appeared. At any rate, she was able to relate to Truman almost as if they were both children. Later, like Buddy in "A Christmas Memory," Truman was sent away to boarding school. Unlike his fictional counterpart, he went through an emotional break with his cousin. Capote's family members, including Sook, were unable to accept his homosexuality or deal with his alcoholism and drug abuse.

Capote modeled several of his characters on Sook. In addition to the kindly and eccentric woman of "A Christmas Memory," she is represented in Dolly Talbo in his novel *The Grass Harp*. Some other Capote heroines are based less directly on Sook, but are closely related to her. One of them is the character who is perhaps Capote's most famous creation, Holly Golightly of *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. William L. Nance, a literary scholar who has written extensively about Capote, referred to Holly as "a dreamer-heroine whose prototype is the elderly friend of 'A Christmas Memory.'" Nance also noted that these characters are evidence of Capote's nonsexual yet strong attachment to women, especially women who do not quite fit into mainstream society.

The elderly woman of "A Christmas Memory" certainly is out of the mainstream. Buddy says that his cousin, although in her sixties, "is still a child." She is not stupid, but she does not live her life according to an adult idea of what is sensible or practical. She has a sense of fun that appeals to the boy. Buddy is tolerant of his cousin's eccentricities, which Capote describes in detail and with affection. Her appearance, described in the story's second paragraph, marks her as an unorthodox person. She wears tennis shoes

and a baggy sweater with a lightweight calico dress; her "remarkable" face is craggy yet delicate. Later, the narrator, the boy grown up, relates more facts about her. "She has never: eaten in a restaurant, traveled more than five miles from home, received or sent a telegram, read anything except funny papers and the Bible, worn cosmetics, cursed, wished someone harm, told a lie on purpose, let a hungry dog go hungry," Capote writes. Then he tells us the things she does: "tame hummingbirds ,.. tell ghost stories ... so tingling they chill you in My, talk to herself, take walks in the rain, grow the prettiest japonicas [a flowering shrub] in town, know the recipe for every sort of old-time Indian cure." The story provides fewer details about the little boy, but it is obvious he is a precocious child, something that inspires admiration in his cousin. She loves to have Buddy tell her the stories of the movies he sees; she will never go to a movie because she wants to save her vision for when she sees God.

Buddy and his cousin create a happy world of their own. They "are not, on the whole, too much aware" of the other relatives who live with them; instead, they find joy in each other's company. Incidents throughout the story underline their attachment to each other and their distance from the rest of their family. Because Buddy and his cousin have little money, most of their pleasures are improvised, from gathering pecans left on the ground after the harvest to making their own Christmas gifts and ornaments. They are enthusiastic about their various moneymaking schemes, from entering contests advertised on the radio to setting up their homemade museum, even though these schemes are more often failures than successes. They enjoy interacting with people outside of the world of their conventional relatives and neighbors—such as the bootlegger Haha Jones or the strangers and near-strangers to whom they send their Christmas fruitcakes. The old woman lets Buddy drink whiskey, which gets her in trouble with the rest of the family. And while the other family members give him disappointingly practical Christmas gifts, she gives him a kite. That's what he gives her, too, in an exchange of gifts that, as critic Stanley Edgar Hyman once pointed out, is as corny and as emotionally effective as the exchange in O. Henry's "The Gift of the Magi."

Over the years, some critics have pronounced "A Christmas Memory" overly sentimental, but most of them, along with the reading public, have found it genuinely moving. It is particularly heartrending when Capote moves from the idyllic Christmas Day that Buddy and his cousin spend flying their kites to Buddy's separation from his friend—a separation created first by distance when Buddy goes away to school, then by the old woman's death. It is indicative of their bond that Buddy feels her death before he is told of it. In life, Capote's bond with Sook was so strong, and so painful to break off, that he was driven to recreate it along with similar relationships in his fiction for many years afterward. "A Christmas Memory," according to Nance, "has a unique importance" among Capote's works because it is so much a model for his later stories, often centering on unusual women who live in a world of their own and who inspire love that has little to do with sex. "The pastness of the experience is also essential; Capote's is a fiction of nostalgia," Nance observed. " 'A Christmas Memory' is one of his best and most satisfying works because it places the feelings he can dramatize most powerfully in the setting which is best suited to them."

Source: Trudy Ring, for *Short Stories for Students*, Gale Research, 1997.

Critical Essay #2

Garson is a professor of English and a frequent contributor to literary journals. In the following excerpt from a longer chapter in a book, she discusses "A Christmas Memory" in terms of its autobiographical elements and its similarities to Capote's novel A Grass Harp, which also fictionalizes the author's youth.

Capote's ability to combine comedy, nostalgia, and a child's sense of tragedy is nowhere more evident than in the story "A Christmas Memory." Declared by Capote to be his most cherished piece, it is more overtly autobiographical than anything else he has written. The author has said that the child in the story is himself and the elderly relative, his cousin, Miss Sook Faulk. He further emphasized the reality behind the fiction in "A Christmas Memory" by having a childhood picture of himself and Miss Faulk reproduced for a reprinting of the story in 1966, ten years after its original publication.

In addition to seeing the autobiographical connection between the story and the author, the reader can discern immediately similarities to Capote's novel, *The Grass Harp*. In both works, the major figures are a young boy and his older female relative; the scenes take place primarily in the kitchen and in the woods; the story is set in the past and the tone is nostalgic; and an event of great significance takes place in both the story and the novel, that is, the parting of the child and his cousin. In *The Grass Harp* the woman dies and the young man goes north to school, whereas in "A Christmas Memory" the boy is sent away to a military school, never to see his cousin again; her death occurs after his leaving.

"A Christmas Memory" opens as the narrator evokes memories of late November mornings spent in a warm country kitchen. Looking backwards the speaker becomes a seven-year-old who has lived for a long time with his distant cousin Although it is not her house, in his child's world the other inhabitants don't matter unless they cause difficulties. The old woman and the boy, whom she has named Buddy, after a childhood friend of hers who died in the 1880s, are best friends. It is possible because the white-haired, small, sprightly, craggy yet delicate-faced woman with sherry-colored, timid eyes has never outgrown the sunny world of childhood. Buddy stresses the great difference between her and others, saying, "She is still a child"

On a particular morning every November, a special ritual is repeated. His cousin looks out the window, notes the chill of the season, thinks of Christmas, and makes the pronouncement: "It's fruitcake weather." The two of them find her hat— worn more for propriety than for warmth, a straw cartwheel decorated with roses of velvet—and get Buddy's old baby carriage, which serves as a cart for carrying the load of pecans that will go into the fruitcake. Along with their dog, Queeme, they walk to a pecan grove, where, on their hands and knees, for hours they will search out nuts.

Their expeditions are like those in *The Grass Harp*. Dolly, Catherine, and Collin go to the woods to gather ingredients for Dolly's dropsy medicine or to picnic. Buddy and his cousin collect flowers, herbs, and ferns in the spring, firewood in the winter, and fish the

creek in the summer. The lives of the two families resemble each other in their patterns. And another similarity exists in their attitudes toward money. It is intended to bring pleasure. However, where Dolly, Catherine, and Collin have Dolly's earnings to purchase magazines and games, Buddy and his cousin enter contests to try to win money to support their activities; they also sell jars of jams, jellies, and preserves they've made, berries they've gathered, and flowers they've picked for important occasions.

They need money for the buying of the items that go into the fruitcake, the candied fruits, the spices, the whiskey, the flour, the butter, the eggs. All year long they save in their "Fruitcake Fund;" most of it is in pennies, which they count out for the thirty or more cakes they send to people they like, such as President Roosevelt, a bus driver who waves at them every day, and a couple who once took a picture of them. And afterwards there are the thank-you letters for their scrapbooks.

The fun and excitement of shopping is followed by the pleasure of preparing the cakes: the glowing of the stove, the sounds of the mixing, the smells of the spices delight Buddy. However, in four days it is all over and he feels let down afterwards. His cousin has a remedy though for depression, the whiskey left from the baking. After Queenie gets a spoonful mixed in coffee, the two of them drink the remainder. Then the sour taste of the liquor is soon replaced by happy feelings. They begin to giggle, to sing, and to dance. Queenie rolls in drunken joy as the cousin waltzes around in her squeaky tennis shoes.

The delightful comedy of the drinking scene is produced by the deft touch of the writer, not only here but elsewhere in the work as well. The description of the meeting with Haha Jones—so named for his somber disposition—proprietor of the shop where they buy the whiskey for the cakes, is another episode enlivened by the lightness of the humor.

Looking at the odd pair, Haha asks, "Which one of you is a drinking man?" The appearance of Haha and the tongue-in-cheek designation of the "sinful" cafe he runs all add to the comic note.

There are also other kinds of humor in the story. A line here and there suggests the eighteenth-century satirist Alexander Pope. When the narrator tells of earning pennies by killing house flies, he says in mockheroic style, "Oh the carnage of August: the flies that flew to heaven!" Superstition further provides the opportunity for comedy; the number thirteen has several possibilities. Fear of having thirteen dollars causes Buddy and his cousin to throw a penny out of the window to avoid the multiple catastrophes that could occur from the unlucky sum. Twelve ninety-nine is safer. The importance of hoarding the money of the "Fund" provides another chance for verbal and visual humor. Buddy makes the following statement, creating an expanding comic effect by the use of detail and the repetition of the word "under": "These moneys we keep hidden in an ancient purse under a loose board under the floor under a chamber pot under my friend's bed."

The only money ever withdrawn from their savings is the ten cents Buddy is given each week for the movies, to which he goes alone. Although his elderly cousin enjoys hearing him tell the film story, she has never been to a movie. Her life, like that of Dolly Talbo, is that of a recluse. One thinks of Dolly's nunlike, pink room when Buddy describes his cousin's bedroom containing an iron bed painted in her favorite rose pink. Further, his cousin has never been far from home, has had very limited experiences, and is ignorant of the world outside the little town in which she lives. Yet she knows all kinds of wonderful things a small boy admires: how to tame hummingbirds, how to tell terrifying ghost stories, and how to treat ailments by using old Indian cures.

Buddy's cousin, who reads only the funny papers and the Bible, is a religious Christian who fully expects to come face to face with God at the end of her life. However, she also understands the natural world, loves and respects it. Once someone chides her for refusing to sell a beautiful fragrant pine she has cut for a Christmas tree and she is told she can get another one. But she responds like a nineteenth-century Romantic philosopher in tune with nature: "There's never two of anything."

Decorating the Christmas tree they have dragged home from the woods and making presents consumes much of their time. As early as August they pick cotton to sprinkle on the tree in December. Later, old treasures are brought down from the attic; cutouts of fruits and animals are made from colored paper and tinfoil angels from candy wrappers. They make holly wreaths and family gifts together. But then they separate to make the most important items, the things they will exchange with each other. Both want to give something special, but they have no money for bought presents. Because of that, every year they design colorful handmade kites.

When the holidays are over and the wind is right, they go out of doors to the nearby pastures to fly their kites. Thus the seasons pass, from fruitcake time to tree cutting and decorating, to kite-flying weather. And during the last kite-flying days they have together, Buddy's cousin speaks of a sudden vision she has. She tells him that God shows Himself in many guises, but only at the end of life do we realize that He "has already shown Himself." And as she says that to Buddy, she moves her hand in an encompassing gesture "that gathers clouds and kites and grass and Queenie pawing earth over her bone."

It is not long after his cousin has described to him her sense of a godlike indwelling that Buddy is parted from her. He is forced to take up a new life in military schools, camps, and another home. However, because of his love for his cousin and his great sense of loss in the separation, he never feels that he belongs anywhere. He always identifies home with his cousin.

Remaining alone, his cousin writes him of her activities and sorrows, of the death of Queenie. Each November she sends him the best of the fruitcakes. But she lives only a few years more. Soon her memory fails and she can no longer distinguish the narrator from the Buddy who was her childhood friend.

In the winter season when she dies, Buddy intuits her death before he is told of it. He describes his feeling of loss as an "irreplaceable part" of himself, "loose like a kite on a broken string." He looks up to the December sky as if to see that lost self of his joining with his other self, the spirit of his cousin, "rather like hearts, a lost pair of kites hurrying toward heaven...."

Source: Helen S Garson, "Surprised by Joy: Stories of the Fifties and Sixties," in *Truman Capote*, Frederick Ungar, 1980,pp. 97-102

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay about Truman Capote's short stories, Nance analyzes "A Christinas Memory" as a "fiction of nostalgia."

"A Christmas Memory" is Truman Capote's non-fiction short story. In 1956, the year it was published, Capote was in the midst of a major change in literary direction. Five years had passed since his short fiction had drifted into the shallows of "House of Flowers," and his vital fictional development had shifted to the short novel. During the next three years he made disappointing experiments with drama (*The Grass Harp*) and musical comedy (*House of Flowers*), and went on a cinematic lark (*Beat the Devil*) in Italy. Then, deciding that he had been wasting his time, he began preparing seriously for the nonfiction novel with some "finger exercises," the most important of which was The Muses Are Heard (1956), his report on the Russian tour of an all-Negro production of *Porgy and Bess*.

In the same year he returned to the very roots of his own experience in "A Christmas Memory," a frank memoir which, while generally accepted as one of his finest and most charming short stories, has become his own avowed favorite among his shorter works because it is "true." In 1966, riding the tidal wave of popularity whipped up by *In Cold Blood*, Capote arranged for a pre-Christmas publication of the story in a slim, boxed volume bearing a reproduction of an actual snapshot of himself, a smiling little boy, with the elderly cousin with whom he spent much of his childhood.

The story is his idealized recollection of his relationship with this woman. As such it has a unique importance among his works, for it embodies the archetype of an emotional pattern which underlies all his later fiction and even exerts a subtle influence on *In Cold Blood*. Asexual admiration of a childlike dreamer-heroine is the usual attitude of the Capote narrator. The pastness of the experience is also essential; Capote's is a fiction of nostalgia. 1 'A Christmas Memory" is one of his best and most satisfying works because it places the feelings he can dramatize most powerfully in the setting which is best suited to them—which, as Henry James would say, artistically does most for them.

Capote begins by asking the reader to remember a November morning more than twenty years ago and the kitchen of a country house. A little old woman with a craggy but delicate face and eyes "sherry-colored and timid" is standing at the window. Suddenly she exclaims, "Oh my, it's fruitcake weather!" The narrator explains:

The person to whom she is speaking is myself I am seven; she is sixty-something. We are cousins, very distant ones, and we have lived together—well, as long as I can remember. Other people inhabit the house, relatives, and though they have power over us, and frequently make us cry, we are not, on the whole, too much aware of them. We are each other's best friend She calls me Buddy, in memory of a boy who was formerly her best friend The other Buddy died in the 1880's when she was still a child. She is still a child

Their annual ritual, the baking of thirty fruitcakes, begins with a trip to gather pecans, followed by an evening spent cracking them: "Caarackle! A cheery crunch, scraps of miniature thunder sound as the shells collapse and the golden mound of sweet oily ivory meat mounts in the milk-glass bowl." The second day is to be spent buying the many ingredients, but first there is the problem of money. During the year, they have supplemented the "skinflint sums" given them by the family by selling handpicked fruit and preserves, holding rummage sales and backyard entertainments—once by winning seventy-ninth prize in a national football contest. The slowly accumulated Fruitcake Fund is tapped only for a weekly dime to permit Buddy to go to the picture show. His friend has never seen one and doesn't intend to. Her life has, in fact, been extremely circumscribed; yet she has numerous accomplishments, among them the ability to tame hummingbirds, tell ghost stories, and concoct old time Indian cures. She is superstitious and always spends the thirteenth of the month in her bed, which is painted rose pink, her favorite color.

To get whiskey, the most expensive of the fruitcake ingredients, the two friends pay an apprehensive visit to Mr. Haha Jones, proprietor of "a 'sinful' (to quote public opinion) fish-fry and dancing cafe down by the nver." Mr. Jones, a sort of benevolent bogeyman with razor scars across his face, decides to charge them one fruitcake rather than the usual two dollars. Buddy's friend later remarks, "Well, there's a lovely man. We'll put an extra cup of raisins in his cake."

Then comes the baking. "The black stove, stoked with coal and firewood, glows like a lighted pumpkin. Eggbeaters whirl, spoons spin round in bowls of butter and sugar, vanilla sweetens the air, ginger spices it; melting, nose-tingling odors saturate the kitchen, suffuse the house, drift out to the world on puffs of chimney smoke."

In four days the cakes are finished. They are intended for "friends," most of them met only once or not at all—people who have struck their fancy. Among them are President Roosevelt, a Baptist missionary couple, a knife grinder, the driver of the six-o'clock bus from Mobile (perhaps the same who unwittingly ended the life of Miss Bobbit), and a young couple who chatted with them one day and took the only snapshot they ever had taken. Buddy decides it is because his friend is shy with everyone except strangers that these acquaintances seem their truest friends. Besides, the thank-you notes make them feel "connected to eventful worlds beyond the kitchen with its view of a sky that stops."

Mailing the cakes takes the last of their money, and they return home to celebrate by drinking up the last two inches of whiskey in Mr. Jones's bottle-After a while they begin singing two songs at once and dancing, she with "the hem of her poor calico skirt pinched between her fingers as though it were a party dress: *Show me the way to go home*, she sings, her tennis shoes squeaking on the floor."

Suddenly two relatives enter, very angry. They tell Buddy's friend she "must be a loony" to give whiskey to a child of seven, and exhort her to "kneel, pray, beg the Lord! " She runs to her room and cries into her pillow because she is "old and funny," but Buddy insists that she is fun—"More fun than anybody."

The next day they go to the woods for a Christmas tree. Decorations, made from colored paper and Hershey-bar tin foil, are attached to the tree with safety pins. The two friends make gifts for the family, then separate to prepare each other's. Unable to buy the bicycle and the chocolate-covered cherries which each knows to be the other's true heart's desire, they make each other kites, as they did last year and the year before.

On Christmas morning they are awake long before dawn and rouse the rest of the family by dropping a kettle and tap-dancing in the hall. The others finally appear, "looking as though they'd like to kill us both," and after breakfast the presents are opened. Except for the kite, Buddy is disappointed. "Who wouldn't be? With socks, a Sunday school shirt, some handkerchiefs, a hand-me-down sweater and a year's subscription to a religious magazine for children. *The Little Shepherd*. It makes me boil. It really does."

This hostility toward those outside the magic circle is another reminder of the social alienation of Capote's dream world. Always inclined toward this kind of exclusiveness, he has tried to counteract it in various ways, especially in the non-fiction novel. Here, at a distance of over twenty years, he allows it free rein.

Buddy and his friend spend Christmas day not with their relatives but out in the fields flying their kites. She, growing meditative, tells Buddy she has always believed that the Lord's coming would be "like looking at the Baptist window: pretty as colored glass with the sun pouring through, such a shine you don't know it's getting dark. And it's been a comfort: to think of that shine taking away all the spooky feeling." Now, however, she decides that probably the Lord shows himself even in this world: "'That things as they are'—her hand circles in a gesture that gathers clouds and kites and grass and Queenie pawing earth over her bone—'just what they've always been, was seeing Him. As for me, I could leave the world with today in my eyes'." This dreamer, because she is a Bible-reading Christian, thinks not of children on their birthdays but of a more conventional heaven. In this Christmas meditation she almost succeeds in grasping it immediately, transcending death.

And here Capote, through memory, comes closer to sharing it than anywhere else in his fiction. Buddy's own particular dream of starring in the movies links him to Miss Bobbit and Appleseed, reminding us that they and he and his elderly friend are all essentially the same dreamer.

Death intrudes, however: Buddy is sent to military school and moves to a new home. "But it doesn't count. Home is where my friend is, and there I never go." For several years she writes, but gradually she begins to confuse him with the Buddy who died in the 188O's. One November morning she cannot rouse herself to welcome fruitcake weather.

And when that happens, I know it A message saying so merely confirms a piece of news some secret vein had already received, severing from me an irreplaceable part of myself, letting it loose like a kite on a broken string. That is why, walking across a school

campus on this particular December morning, I keep searching the sky As if I expected to see, rather like hearts, a lost pair of kites hurrying toward heaven.

The part of himself that Capote identifies with his childhood friend did not escape him at her death. Or, if something was cut away, it has continued to pulse like a severed arm. Repeatedly he has felt a need to project the emotional pattern of this early friendship into other relationships, in most respects very unlike that first one, and to build stones around them. "A Christmas Memory" is in a sense continued in *The Grass Harp*, which was published five years earlier. There the boy is about ten years older, and it is the death of his friend, there named Dolly Talbo, and his own entry into the adult world that bring the story to a close. *Breakfast at Tiffany's* picks up his career in New York a few years later and presents, in Holly Golightly, another version of his childhood friend. In "Among the Paths to Eden," Capote's last short story to date, he portrays another of her counterparts.

Source: William L Nance, in *The Worlds of Truman Capote*, Stein and Day, 1970, pp. 78-83.

Adaptations

"A Christmas Memory" was adapted for television in 1967 with Geraldine Page and Donnie Melvin; Truman Capote was the narrator. It is available on video under such titles as *ABC Playhouse 67*; *A Christmas Memory* or *Truman Capote's "A Christmas Memory"*; the latter version was also released by Allied Artists in 1969 as part of *Truman Capote's Trilogy*.

The story has been adapted as part of *Short Story Anthology*, a sixteen-part series available from Children's Television International; "A Christmas Memory" comprises episodes 11 and 12 of the series.

An audio adaptation of the story read by Capote is available from Knopf Book & Cassette Classics; a version read by Celeste Holm which includes "The Thanksgiving Visitor" is available from Random House Audiobooks.

Holiday Memories is a musical stageplay adaptation by Malcolm Ruhl and Russell Vandenbroucke combining both "A Christmas Memory" and "The Thanksgiving Visitor"; it was published by Berwyn Press in 1991.

Topics for Further Study

What role does money play in "A Christmas Memory"? In what ways does the story suggest the economic hardship of the Great Depression, and how do the characters compensate for their lack of money?

Write a brief story about a memory of your own. Now rewrite it from the viewpoint of someone who is not a central character in the story. How has your story changed? How would "A Christmas Memory" have been different if it had been told from the perspective of one of the other relatives in the household? How might the "rich mill owner's lazy wife" have recounted the story of trying to buy the Christmas tree to her husband that night over dinner?

Does the Southern setting of "A Christmas Memory " enhance or detract from the nostalgic quality of the story? What images come to mind when you think of the South, and how do these images compare to your experience of reading the story?

Compare and Contrast

1930s: Schools and most other public facilities across the South are segregated by race.

1956: The University of Alabama expels its first black student in defiance of a federal court order; Southern congressmen issue a manifesto pledging to use "all lawful means" to defy desegregation.

Today: Schools and public facilities are open to all regardless of race, but economic inequality is still seen by some as a barrier to full integration.

1930s: The first "talkie" was produced in 1928; a few years later all films have sound. Elaborately staged musicals become one of the movie industry's most popular genres.

1956: As a result of the country's rising prosperity following World War II, television is introduced to many homes, providing cheap, nearly endless entertainment. Movie attendance falls by millions, and many theaters close. The industry fights back by developing thousands of drive-in movie theaters.

Today: New forms of mass media include cable television and the Internet.

1930s: At the height of the Depression unemployment is nearly 25%. President Franklin Roosevelt attempts to stimulate economic growth through his New Deal programs.

1956: Post-war prosperity makes the United States a dominant world power. President Eisenhower warns of the "military-industrial complex " at the heart of the country's economy, but government continues to expand.

1990s: Both Democrats and Republicans proclaim an end to the era of big government, but true economic and social reforms are slow to impact people's lives.

1930s: Fascist dictatorships and militant nationalists gain power in Europe as the Great Depression throws countries into economic and social turmoil.

1956: The fear of communism fuels the Cold War. The arms race escalates, and Soviet Premier Nikita Khruschev tells the U.S. government, "History is on our side. We will bury you!"

1990s: Communist regimes in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union have been replaced by democratic-style governments. China, the last significant communist power, enacts many capitalist reforms.

What Do I Read Next?

"The Thanksgiving Visitor," a 1968 story also by Capote, is a companion piece to "A Christmas Memory" and recounts further adventures of Buddy and his friend Sook, as well as Buddy's run-in with Odd Henderson, the town bully.

Capote's novel *The Grass Harp* (1951) tells the story of a band of social outcasts, including a young boy and his older female relative, who disrupt their complacent community when they retreat to the woods and begin living in a treehouse.

Carson McCullers's *Ballad of the Sad Cafe* (1936) is the story of Cousin Lyman, a traveling hunchback dwarf who brings excitement to a lonely Southern town when Miss Amelia falls in love with him and follows his suggestion to open a cafe.

Black Boy is Richard Wright's 1941 autobiographical novel, which vividly describes his harsh, hardscrabble boyhood and youth in rural Mississippi and Memphis, Tennessee. The book is a coming-of-age story that details how Wright worked to realize his dream of being a writer despite the constraints placed upon him by a racist society.

Let Us Now Praise Famous Men (1941) is a nonfiction chronicle of the daily lives of Depression-era tenant farmers in rural Alabama with black-and-white photographs by Walker Evans and accompanying text by James Agee.

Paper Moon, is a novel by Joe David Brown about a Depression-era traveling Bible salesman and the hassles he experiences when he is saddled with caring for his precocious daughter. Also filmed in 1973 under the same title; directed by Peter Bogdanovich and starring Ryan and Tatum O'Neal.

John Dufresne's 1994 novel *Louisiana Power and Light* is a comical send-up of the Southern Gothic tradition and revolves around the adventures of Moon Pie Fontana, a physically disabled child-star radio evangelist, and his family down in the Delta.

Further Study

Clarke, Gerald *Capote: A Biography, Simon & Schuster*, 1988. A very readable and thorough biography of Capote While It is not an authorized biography, Capote cooperated with Clarke up until his death

Inge, in Thomas *Truman Capote: Conversations*, University Press of Mississippi, 1987.

A compilation of interviews with Truman Capote spanning 1948 to 1980 Provides insight into what Capote thought about the craft of writing and his childhood in the South

Moates, Marianne in "Truman Capote's Southern Years," in her *4 Bridge of Childhood*, Holt, 1989, 240 p.

Moates provides background on Capote's childhood and family, including the cousin he fictionalized in "A Christmas Memory."

Bibliography

Hyman, Stanley Edgar "Fruitcake at Tiffany's," in his *Standards A Chronicle of Books for Our Time*, Horizon Press, 1966.

McKenzie, Nancy. A review of "A Christmas Memory," in *The New York Times*, November 17,1966

Newquist, Roy. An interview with Truman Capote in Counterpoint, RandMcNally, 1964.

A review of "A Christmas Memory," in *Harper's Magazine*, Vol 233, December, 1966, p 132.

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