Conscience of the Court Study Guide

Conscience of the Court by Zora Neale Hurston

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Introduction

Zora Neale Hurston is best remembered as the Harlem Renaissance novelist who contributed *Their Eyes Were Watching God* to the American canon. Like so many novelists, Hurston also produced a fair amount of short fiction over the course of her career. Toward the end of her life, she continued to write but was unable to support herself doing it full time. In fact, when "Conscience of the Court" was published in the March 18, 1950, issue of the *Saturday Evening Post*, she was working as a maid. It would be her last original short story published.

"Conscience of the Court" is a relatively simple story of devotion and justice. A black maid is on trial for assaulting a white man. As the details of the story come to light, the maid is exonerated and even commended for her behavior and the devotion that motivated it. The story reveals Hurston's affinity for themes of genuine love and devotion and her belief that these themes are relevant to the human experience, whether crossing racial lines or not.

Author Biography

Although census reports indicate that Zora Neale Hurston was born on January 7, 1891, she claimed to be born in 1901 or 1903. The actual date remains a mystery, as does her exact burial site. In 1973, prominent African American feminist and novelist Alice Walker was determined to find Hurston's unmarked grave and provide a suitable marker. After much effort, she found the spot she believed to be Hurston's grave and mounted a headstone that reads, "A Genius of the South" (a phrase from one of Jean Toomer's poems).

Hurston was the fifth of John and Lucy Ann (Potts) Hurston's eight children. Lucy was a former teacher and seamstress who wanted her children to reach higher, to "jump at de sun." John was a handsome and popular Baptist minister, who also served as Eatonville's mayor for three terms. Eatonville was founded by and for African Americans, and this unique all-black community provided the context for most of Hurston's early years. She recalled her childhood as happy until her mother's death in 1904, after which her father married a woman Hurston found impossible to embrace. Entering young adulthood without a mother, Hurston became independent, outspoken, and bold.

Hurston graduated from Morgan Academy in Baltimore in 1918. She enrolled immediately in Howard University in Washington, D.C., where she studied for five years while working as a waitress and a manicurist. She also tried her hand at writing and was encouraged enough to go to New York City to pursue writing. There, she met other writers such as Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, and Jean Toomer. The collective effort of these writers is known as the Harlem Renaissance.

Hurston accepted a scholarship to Barnard College, where she studied anthropology under Franz Boas. Upon graduation, she combined her love of anthropology with her love of writing by collecting folklore. Her efforts produced 1935's *Mules and Men*. This book is historically important, as it is often regarded as the first published collection of African American folklore.

Hurston went to Florida in 1935 to work for the Works Progress Administration before conducting anthropological research in Haiti. While in Africa, she wrote *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) in only seven weeks. With its regional flavor and its black female protagonist, Hurston did not expect the novel to be important in American literature. In the mid-1970s, this book was popularized by feminist writers and critics such as Walker. Unfortunately for Hurston, she never enjoyed great critical acclaim during her lifetime. In the last decade of her life, she did some freelance writing and worked variously as a maid, teacher, reporter, and librarian.

Hurston suffered a stroke in 1959 and died on January 28, 1960, in a welfare home in Fort Piece, Florida. Because she had so little when she died, a collection was taken to pay for a funeral and an unmarked grave in a segregated cemetery. Today, visitors can visit the marker where Walker believes she found the gravesite.

Plot Summary

Laura Lee Kimble is Mrs. Celestine Beaufort Clairborne's maid. She is in court for assaulting a white man named Clement Beasley. Although she has been in jail for three weeks awaiting trial, she is calm and respectful, even in the face of the scorn she feels as she enters the courtroom. The judge and the onlookers all have preconceived ideas about her, but she does not know this is all working against her.

After the jury is brought in to their box, a series of witnesses testify to the brutality of the beating she gave Beasley. Then Beasley himself is helped from his cot to the witness stand to give his version of events. He tells the court that he arrived at Mrs. Clairborne's house to collect on an overdue loan he had made to her. Although Mrs. Clairborne was not home, he found her maid packing silver and became concerned about his loan. Believing that Mrs. Clairborne had left town for good and was sending for her things, he felt he had to act. The house and its furnishing had been the collateral on the loan, so he resolved to take the furniture. He claims that even though the furniture would not cover the loan, he wanted to be kind to the widow. When he arrived for the furniture, however, the maid physically attacked him. He claims she beat him terribly, as his apparent pain indicates.

Beasley's account outrages Laura Lee, who cannot believe the lies she is hearing. The first thing that offends her is his suggestion that Mrs. Clairborne would not honor a loan and that her beautiful antiques were not worth six hundred dollars. As she reflects on her bad luck at being in this position, she thinks about Mrs. Clairborne and how she feels betrayed by her. Laura Lee sent word as soon as she was put in jail, and yet Mrs. Clairborne had neither responded nor returned to town. Her heart is so broken that she does not care what the court decides to do with her.

Laura Lee is given her chance to tell the story, and she does so without an attorney. After assuring the court that Mrs. Clairborne is an honorable woman who would never leave a loan unpaid, she proceeds with her version of the story. According to Laura Lee, she was at the house when Beasley arrived, and she told him that Mrs. Clairborne was out of town and gave him the address where she was staying. The next day, he arrived with a truck and tried to take the furniture. Laura Lee blocked him, and when he hit and kicked her, she attacked him. She beat him until he could not stand upright, so she carried him to the gate and tossed him off the property.

Laura Lee does not try to make a case for her own innocence or guilt. While she feels justified in protecting her employer's belongings, she wonders if her husband had been right about her extreme loyalty to others. She goes on to explain her loyalty to the jury. She has known Mrs. Clairborne (then Miss Beaufort) since she was an infant and loved her so much she took care of her and mothered her for years. When her father died, Laura Lee married a man who worked for the family so she could stay with the family. She saw Miss Beaufort marry and become Mrs. Clairborne, and she was there when she lost her parents and then her husband. The widowed Mrs. Clairborne needed a fresh start and a smaller house, so she asked Laura Lee to consider moving to Florida

with her. Laura Lee could not bear the thought of being separated and convinced her very reluctant husband to move. After much negotiating, they all moved to Florida. When Laura Lee's husband died, Mrs. Clairborne generously paid for his coffin to be returned to his hometown for burial, and she paid for Laura Lee and herself to go with it. As it so happens, this is why she had borrowed the money from Beasley.

When Beasley finally releases the promissory note to the court, the judge discovers that the due date is not for three more months. The judge chastises him for his attempted burglary and for trying to manipulate the court into helping him punish Laura Lee for protecting her employer's property against trespassers. The judge goes on to praise Laura Lee's loyalty to her employer.

Returning to the house, Laura Lee realizes that Mrs. Clairborne did not get her message about being in jail, and she asks God to forgive her. Inside, she polishes a silver platter to a high sheen as a symbolic act of cleansing her heart that loves Mrs. Clairborne so much.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

As the story begins, Laura Lee Kimble is sitting in a courtroom awaiting her trial. When her name is called, a policeman indicates to her that she should stand and then leads her to a rail in front of the judge. Aware that there is a great deal of animosity toward her by those in the courtroom, she looks straight ahead.

Laura Lee has spent the last three weeks in jail, and although she does not know what lies ahead for her - death by the electric chair, life in prison, or a mob lynching - she is resolved to be ready for whatever happens. She knows that this trial is merely a formality and is being held to show the community that justice will be served.

As the charges against her are read - felonious and aggravated assault, mayhem, premeditated attempted murder, obscene and abusive language - Laura Lee finds herself fascinated by the enormity of the words used to describe her actions. In fact, she is so engrossed in her own thoughts that she does not immediately answer the clerk's question regarding her plea. When the police officer prompts her to answer, Laura Lee says she isn't sure she understands the words used to describe the charges against her.

The look of bewilderment on Laura Lee's face causes the judge to take a few moments to ponder his response. He is well aware of what Laura Lee has been accused of doing, but now that he finds himself face to face with her, he cannot imagine her committing such a brutal act. Finally, he explains to Laura Lee that the clerk would like to know if she believes she is or isn't guilty of the charges against her. Laura Lee thanks the judge for his explanation and then says that although she admits to having hit Clement Beasley, it was only after he hit her, so she isn't sure if this alone makes her guilty. As she responds, she glances at Beasley, who is heavily bandaged and lying on a hospital cot. The judge instructs Laura Lee to take her seat and wait for her case to be called.

When the prosecutor indicates that he is ready to proceed, the judge notes that Laura Lee does not have legal representation. Speaking directly to Laura Lee, he tells her that the court can appoint a lawyer to represent her if she would like. Laura Lee declines the offer, telling the judge that she doesn't think having a lawyer will affect the trial's outcome. Hearing this causes the judge to become introspective for a moment; he recalls his own time as an eager, zealous law student who aspired to follow in the footsteps of his hero, John Marshall, and work to preserve and protect human rights. Meanwhile, the prosecutor is bustling about the courtroom and going through the process of selecting a jury for Laura Lee's trial.

One by one, the witnesses take the stand and give their testimony. It is all fairly consistent and describes how Laura Lee beat Beasley to within inches of death. Beasley's own appearance on the stand causes the courtroom to buzz with anger and

forces the judge to repeatedly demand quiet. Beasley begins to tell his story by explaining that he had first come in contact with Laura Lee after having loaned her employer a considerable sum of money. When the date by which the loan was to have been repaid passed, Beasley went to her employer's home to inquire as to why the promised payment had not been made. When he arrived, he found that Laura Lee's employer, a woman named Mrs. Clairborne, was not at home; in fact, according to Laura Lee, she had left Jacksonville altogether. As Beasley spoke with Laura Lee, he noticed that she was in the process of packing up the house, an observation that troubled him, since the home's contents had been used as collateral for the loan. Although he doubted that the value of the contents would be enough to cover the full amount, he nonetheless returned the next day with a moving van so that he could seize the contents and protect the loan. As he entered the house, Laura Lee attacked him, and Beasley says he feels certain he would have been left for dead if help hadn't arrived.

As Beasley recounts this story, Laura Lee finds herself becoming enraged. In addition to being angered by the untruths Beasley tells regarding her own actions, Laura Lee is incensed that he is lying about the worth of Mrs. Clairborne's possessions; certainly, her house full of antiques would more than cover the six hundred dollar loan. Laura Lee's emotions make her think of her husband, Tom, who time and again had told her "the world had not use for the love and friending that [Mrs. Clairborne] was ever trying to give." For the first time, Laura Lee begins to think that perhaps Tom had been right; even Mrs. Clairborne has deserted her now, when she needed her most.

Laura Lee's thoughts are interrupted by the sound of the judge's voice. Having concluded his testimony, Beasley is being questioned further by the judge. When Beasley confirms that he made a loan to Mrs. Clairborne, the judge asks why the note through which the loan was made was not entered into evidence. When Beasley reluctantly says that he did not think it was necessary, the judge nonetheless orders that the note be immediately presented. Resigned to do as ordered, the prosecutor rests his case.

The courtroom falls momentarily silent, which is a sign that Laura Lee believes indicates she will be found guilty. As she contemplates this, she realizes that she is not afraid; her husband and her family are all dead, and Mrs. Clairborne has deserted her; she is all alone in the world. Resigned to accept whatever her fate is, Laura Lee holds back the tears that are beginning to well in her eyes.

Before allowing her to give her testimony, the judge tells Laura Lee that despite the fact that she refused legal representation, she is still entitled to tell her side of the story. When Laura Lee does not leave her seat to take her place on the witness stand, the judge reminds her that both sides of the story need to be heard before a verdict can be given and that it would be very helpful to him if she would share her account of what happened. Anxious to oblige the judge, she takes her seat on the witness stand and after being sworn in, begins to recount the events in question. Before she begins, however, Laura Lee addresses the jury and tells them that she is not a learned woman and that she is ignorant about a great many things. She tells them that she will tell them

exactly what happened on the day in question and leave it to them to decide whether or not she is guilty.

As she begins her testimony, Laura Lee says that the first time she met Beasley had been three months earlier, the day after her husband died. Mrs. Clairborne had called the funeral home to retrieve Tom's body so that it could be prepared for burial in Georgia. After calling the funeral home, Mrs. Clairborne had left the house without telling Laura Lee where she was going, an act that Laura Lee said was unusual, since her employer always told her where she would be. Mrs. Clairborne returned a short time later with Beasley. The two walked through the house looking at Mrs. Clairborne's antiques and talking in low voices, which made it difficult for Laura Lee to hear what was being said. Laura Lee assumed that Mrs. Clairborne was in some sort of trouble, because although she had been offered large sums of money for some of her antiques in the past, she would never part with them; they were family heirlooms. Eventually, Mrs. Clairborne and Beasley left; Mrs. Clairborne returned a short time later and told Laura Lee that all of the arrangements for their trip to Savannah to bury Tom had been made and that the tickets were in her purse. The next day, Laura Lee and Mrs. Clairborne had boarded a train for Savannah, and, after a lovely funeral service, they had buried Tom.

Having completed that part of the story, Laura Lee re-emphasizes her belief in Mrs. Clairborne's innocence by telling the jury that she had no reason to run away; she has plenty of money and receives an interest payment every six months which she uses for her living expenses. Laura Lee explains that Mrs. Clairborne simply went to Miami to rest; between the death of her own husband and then Tom, the last few years had been emotionally draining and had taken their toll. Laura Lee says that Mrs. Clairborne had never mentioned having borrowed money from anyone.

Laura Lee then recounts the day in question. She describes how Beasley arrived at their home and asked for Mrs. Clairborne. When Laura Lee told him she was in Miami, he asked when she was due to arrive home. Laura Lee went inside to get a letter Mrs. Clairborne had sent so that she could give him the address at which she could be reached. The next morning, he returned with a moving van and ordered Laura Lee to stay out of his way while he cleared the house of its furnishings. When Laura Lee protested that she couldn't allow this to happen since she had been left in charge of the home, Beasley once again ordered her to stay out of his way. Rather than step aside, Laura Lee braced one arm across the doorway to keep him from entering. This infuriated Beasley, and after exchanging a few more words with Laura Lee, he struck her twice in the chest before kicking her. After she recovered, Laura Lee threw a punch which landed Beasley prone on the ground. Then, grabbing him by the heels, she repeatedly threw him against a pillar on the porch before letting him go. When he didn't move, she accused him of playing dead and then picked him up and threw him over the fence and into the street. When it was over, Laura Lee said she felt proud of herself for protecting Mrs. Clairborne's property. Even so, she couldn't help feeling that if Tom were alive, he would have disapproved of her actions and told her that once again, she had taken on more than she could handle; for the first time in her life, she wondered if he was right. Noting that she has not received a reply to the letter she wrote to Mrs.

Clairborne describing the trouble she is in, Laura Lee tells the jury that her steadfast loyalty comes from the fact that Mrs. Clairborne had been "given" to her when she was five years old.

With this statement, the prosecutor interrupts, telling the judge that Laura Lee has been given the chance to tell her side of the story and should not be allowed to continue. The judge denies this request and reminds the prosecutor that because Laura Lee is unlearned, she needs to be permitted to tell the story in her own way.

The judge tells Laura Lee to continue with her story, and so she tells the jury about how, when Mrs. Clairborne had been born, she had been placed under Laura Lee's care. This was customary during that period, and although the baby, who was named Celestine Beaufort, remained at home with her parents, she and Laura Lee shared a special bond. When Laura Lee was sixteen, her father died and Tom came to take over his job. Soon enough, she and Tom began courting, even though there was another young man who wanted to marry her. Laura Lee said that she decided against marrying the other man, because he wanted to move far away, and neither her mother nor Celestine wanted her to go. Although Laura Lee saw this as her chance to free herself from Celestine, she could not bear to leave, and so she eventually decided to marry Tom. This decision made Celestine and her family so happy that Celestine's father built a home for the couple on their property and gave them lifetime rights to it. Eventually Celestine married as well; her husband was J. Stuart Clairborne, a young lawyer.

Soon after the wedding, Laura Lee's mother and Mrs. Beaufort both died, followed by General Beaufort. By this time, Mr. Clairborne's law practice was starting to flourish. The next five years passed happily enough, but then Mr. Clairborne became ill. Celestine spent a great deal of money sending him to doctors in the hope of making him well, but to no avail; he died four years later. In the months following Mr. Clairborne's death, Tom became restless and begged Laura Lee to agree to leave so they could find better paying work elsewhere. Refusing to leave her friend when she was needed most, Laura Lee had told her husband that she wouldn't leave. Shortly after, Celestine came to Laura Lee and told her that the house and property were becoming too difficult for her to maintain. She had found a buyer for her home and was planning to move to Jacksonville, Florida. She asked Laura Lee and Tom to join her but said she would understand if they didn't want to go. As a show of appreciation for all they had done, she offered them the cash value of their property if they chose not to go.

Laura Lee immediately knew that she wanted to go to Florida but told Celestine that she had to consult with her husband. Tom refused to entertain the idea of going and said that he was much too old to start over. He finally changed his mind when Celestine made a promise that if he should die first, she would make sure he was brought back to Savannah to be buried. Similarly, if she died first, Tom and Laura Lee were to do the same for her and would become heirs of her estate.

Laura Lee finishes her story by telling the jury that perhaps she was wrong for staying with Celestine all these years and taking responsibility for her affairs. She admits that she hurt Beasley, but says that it was justified and that she expects that under similar

circumstances, each one of the jurors would have done the same thing. With her testimony concluded, Laura Lee returned to her seat.

The judge tells the court that he has obtained the record of Mrs. Clairborne's loan and points out that the due date on the note is more than three months away. Based on this, there was no reason for Beasley to have been on Mrs. Clairborne's property on the day in question. The judge admonishes Beasley for trying to use the court for his own gain when, in fact, he was the one who had committed the crime. He defends Laura Lee's actions by telling the court that she was only trying to protect the property with which she had been entrusted. Then, after providing the court with a short history of the human rights movement in the United States, the judge instructs the jury to rule in favor of the defendant.

When Laura Lee approaches the judge to offer her thanks, he tells her that he is the one who should be thanking her. She is somewhat confused and completely overwhelmed by the throngs of well-wishers who offer her a place to stay. Finally returning home, Laura Lee pauses for a moment before entering and tells herself that she is ashamed for ever having doubted Celestine. Then, before sitting down to eat, she takes out one of Celestine's finest silver platters and polishes it to a high sheen.

Analysis

Zora Neale Hurston's short story "The Conscience of the Court" is a tale that illustrates the important role that basic human rights play in every American citizen's life. The story's setting - the post-Civil War South - as well as the fact that the principal character is a black woman accused of a brutal crime against a white man, are valuable tools that the author uses to demonstrate the effects felt when basic human rights are denied.

When we first meet Laura Lee Kimble, she is awaiting the start of a trial in which her guilt will be determined. She, as well as the entire courtroom, assumes she will be found guilty and that she will be sentenced to life in prison or death by the electric chair. Almost immediately, we know that this matter is largely a racial one; by Laura Lee's own assessment, the trial is merely a show being conducted to assure the public that justice will be served. Later, when the prosecution rests its case against Laura Lee, she feels that the silence that permeates the courtroom is yet another indication that she is about to be found guilty. The pessimistic tone stands in stark contrast to the jubilant tone at the end of the story when Laura Lee is eventually found to be innocent and her accuser found guilty of violating her human rights.

While there certainly is nothing funny about the circumstances that bring Laura Lee to court, Hurston still succeeds in using humor to illustrate the problems associated with making judgments about people based on their race, ethnicity or other factors. Take for instance the passage in which Laura Lee describes her altercation with Beasley; the mental image conjured when reading about how she picked Beasley up from the sidewalk and threw him over the fence and into the street is nearly comical. Yet we know that it wasn't Hurston's intent to make us laugh; rather she wanted to show us that

it is equally ridiculous to assume a person accused of a crime is guilty based on nothing other than someone else's testimony.

While Hurston's portrayal of Laura Lee as an uneducated black woman may cause us to think that perhaps her actions, though not malicious, were borne out of an inability to properly discern right from wrong, this is not Hurston's intent. Rather, by portraying Laura Lee in this manner, Hurston is telling us that human rights are a basic entitlement afforded to all people, not just those of certain means or background. Further, Laura Lee's constant referral to the fact that she is "unlearned" and her frequent mispronunciations have an effect that is contrary to what might be expected; rather than causing us to see Laura Lee as an ignorant woman, her many limitations actually endear her to the reader , placing her in the role of protagonist fairly early in the story.

In spite of this, it is clear that her limitations are responsible for landing her in the court. Recall the scene in which Mrs. Clairborne and Beasley are walking through her home and looking at her possessions. Laura Lee can't understand why Mrs. Clairborne would want to sell these things now since she has refused many similar offers in the past. Laura Lee believes her employer is financially stable, which apparently isn't the case. It is interesting that she never asks the question of why Mrs. Clairborne needed to take a loan for the burial, again providing an indication of the extent to which her limitations go.

Another theme that needs to be examined is that of loyalty. We know that Laura Lee is steadfastly loyal to Mrs. Clairborne; in fact, despite the fact that she had at least three specific opportunities to leave and live her own life, she has always chosen to stay. What we're not entirely certain of, however, is Mrs. Clairborne's loyalty to Laura Lee. While it would seem that she has a bond with her employee, we do begin to question whether Mrs. Clairborne is keeping Laura Lee around out of obligation rather than compassion. We know that Laura Lee's family has served the Beauforts for many years, and from that perspective, it makes sense that she would have a hard time letting Laura Lee go. Mrs. Clairborne does make good on her promise to bury Tom, yet the fact that she disappears right after the funeral and does not respond to Laura Lee's plea for help cannot be overlooked.

There are two possible explanations for this. The first is that Mrs. Clairborne really did go to Miami to relax and refresh and that she did not answer Laura Lee's letter simply because she did not receive it. Laura Lee herself implies that this may have been the case when she says "maybe it reached her, and then maybe again it didn't" when describing to the court the letter she had written to her employer from jail. The second explanation is that Mrs. Clairborne had known that she would be unable to pay back the loan and had left town so that Laura Lee would be the one to deal with the fallout. As the story begins, this seems to be the most likely scenario, and it isn't until the story is nearly completed that the reader comes to understand that there likely wasn't anything malicious about Mrs. Clairborne's actions.

The manner in which Hurston tells this story provides another illustration of the problems associated with assuming a person's guilt without examining the real evidence. As the story begins, she provides several indications that Laura Lee is indeed

guilty; in fact, Laura Lee herself admits that perhaps she is guilty of the crime for which she stands accused. The judge's initial reaction is to believe that this is the case; clearly his judgment is based on popular opinion, for when he finally meets Laura Lee, he wonders how a woman of her stature could have committed such a crime. It is also apparent that the crowd assembled in the courtroom believes in her guilt. Finally, based on her lack of contact, it would appear that Mrs. Clairborne thinks she is guilty as well. As a result, the reader is also left to assume that Laura Lee is guilty.

As the story unfolds, however, Hurston begins to provide small hints that Laura Lee might not be guilty of this crime. One of the first hints comes when the judge asks Beasley why he hasn't submitted the loan note as evidence. Beasley's reluctance to provide an explanation tells us that there is more to this story than what has been told thus far. The second hint comes when the judge permits Laura Lee to tell the court about the circumstances surrounding her relationship with Mrs. Clairborne. Although we do not know for sure, it is possible that by this point in the story, the judge has seen the loan note. By providing Laura Lee the opportunity to tell her story, he is allowing the jury and the assembled crowd to look past the fact that she is a black woman accused of beating up a white man and to view her with compassion. As we see by the story's end, this works to Laura Lee's advantage, for she gains the sympathy of the crowd. Finally, when we learn that the note isn't due for another three months, we begin to realize that Mrs. Clairborne's absence is likely legitimate and that she probably has no idea that her friend is in trouble. As the story concludes, we see that Laura Lee has returned to the home she shares with Mrs. Clairborne to resume her life. Her act of shining the silver platter is symbolic of her undying gratitude to her employer for their life-long friendship.

Characters

Clement Beasley

Clement Beasley (whose name, not coincidentally, sounds like "beastly") is manipulative, untrustworthy, and opportunistic. By the end of the trial, everyone realizes that he is a liar, a thief, and a bully. He takes advantage of Mrs. Clairborne by attaching her valuable belongings as collateral to a loan that is worth far less than her possessions, and then when she is out of town, he comes to collect on his loan. In reality, he is trying to steal Mrs. Clairborne's valuables, but he underestimates Laura Lee. When she tries to prevent him from taking anything, he does not hesitate to respond with violence, punching and kicking her. Then when she beats him and throws him off the property, he seeks revenge in court. He expects his crooked lawyer and his pitiful appearance (he arrives on a cot, even though it is three weeks after the attack) will sway the jury.

Mrs. Celestine Clairborne

Although Mrs. Clairborne never appears in the story, her character is extremely important to the events. Born Miss Celestine Beaufort to wealthy landowners, she grew up with Laura Lee. She depended on her for friendship and comfort, almost like a second mother, even though Laura Lee is only five years older. Through the years, she treats Laura Lee with nothing but respect and honor, making sure her needs are met and her dignity is preserved. As loyal as Laura Lee is to Mrs. Clairborne, Mrs. Clairborne seems to be equally loyal to Laura Lee. She wanted so much for Laura Lee and her husband, Tom, to accompany her on her move from Georgia to Florida that she made the offer irresistible to them both. She made promises to them that she keeps, even at high costs, because she values friendship and loyalty above possessions. Her influence on Laura Lee is profound, and without Mrs. Clairborne, Laura Lee would have become a completely different person.

The Judge

The judge in the story is the character who undergoes the most change. At the beginning, he has practically decided that Laura Lee is a vicious would-be killer before he even hears her case. Her demeanor in the court and the innocent trust she exhibits remind him of why he loved the law as a young man. He remembers the passion he felt toward justice and how he longed to be like his hero, Justice John Marshall. These thoughts and feelings sweep over him, and his conduct and attitudes change completely. He disregards an unethical deal he had obviously made with the prosecuting attorney, and he allows Laura Lee to say as much as she wants to say, even when it goes beyond the scope of the case itself. When he discovers that Beasley had intentionally tried to hide the promissory note because it was damning to his case,

he is filled with righteous indignation. He not only lectures Beasley about his offense to the court, but goes on to lecture him about the Constitution and justice itself.

Laura Lee Kimble

Forty-nine-year-old Laura Lee Kimble works as a maid in the house of Mrs. Celestine Clairborne. She has been taking care of Mrs. Clairborne since she was born, and she loves her with a deep, motherly love, although she is only five years her senior. Laura Lee's love for Mrs. Clairborne has motivated all of her major life decisions (who to marry, where to live, and what opportunities to ignore), and now it is just the two of them.

Laura Lee's parents were servants of Mrs. Clairborne's family, and she grew up in a small servant's house on their property. She then became a maid for them, a position she never wanted to quit. She was with Mrs. Clairborne through her childhood and her marriage and is now with her in widowhood. Laura Lee is also a widow with no children.

Laura Lee is uneducated, outspoken, bold, strong, devoted, loving, and extremely determined. Although she is humble, she has a strong sense of herself and is accepting of whatever life brings her way. She is not intimidated by Beasley, the judge, or the jury but freely speaks her mind. Completely lacking in ego, she does not understand the judge's admiration after the trial and merely returns home to continue taking care of Mrs. Clairborne's house.

Themes

Loyalty

Laura Lee's devotion to Mrs. Clairborne compels her to protect her things, even if it means putting herself in the path of a violent man. She bodily defends her employer's furniture when Beasley arrives to take it, and when he hits and kicks her, she incapacitates him. She is passionate in her loyalty, and she will not let Beasley steal Mrs. Clairborne's treasured possessions without a fight.

Laura Lee's story of her history with Mrs. Clairborne is moving to the reader and to the jury. Her relationship began at Mrs. Clairborne's birth, and the affection between the two women deepened over the years. Unable to think about life away from Mrs. Clairborne, Laura Lee convinces Tom, her husband, that they should follow the family. Laura Lee's devotion seems to have a dual nature: She loves Mrs. Clairborne and wants to be with her for that reason, but she also wants to continue to play a part in taking care of her. It is a familial love she describes when she says, "I love her so hard, and I reckon I can't help myself."

In return, Mrs. Clairborne is loyal to Laura Lee. She continues to employ her and see that her needs are met, and she trusts her. When Laura Lee is widowed, Mrs. Clairborne offers to pay for Tom's body to be transported back to his hometown for burial, something Laura Lee would never have been able to afford on her own. In truth, Mrs. Clairborne cannot afford it either, and she must borrow the money until her next dividend check. She offers as collateral the most cherished and prized possessions in her home, items she has refused to sell repeatedly because she loves them so much. But to keep her promise to her friend to bury her husband in the family cemetery in Georgia, she includes them in her negotiations with Beasley. She values her friendship more highly than her finest possessions.

Justice

The title, "Conscience of the Court," underscores Hurston's theme of justice as a moral and reliable force in the American judicial system. Even though the case presented in the story is one involving a lowly black maid with no attorney against a moneyed white man, the side of good wins in the end. At the beginning of the story, justice is at a disadvantage, as the people in the room and the judge himself all look on Laura Lee as guilty. Hurston writes that when Laura Lee entered the courtroom, "The hostility in the room reached her without her seeking to find it." When the judge sees her struggling to understand protocol, he hesitates before helping her because "[t]his was the man-killing bear cat of a woman that he had heard so much about." Besides all of the impressions and rumors Laura Lee must overcome to attain justice, there is clearly a secret deal between the judge and the prosecutor of which she is unaware. Faced with the trusting innocence of Laura Lee, the judge remembers his early fervor for justice when he was a

professor, and it awakens in him his old sense of judicial integrity. So when the issue of the promissory note is presented, he demands to see it, which is clearly in violation of an agreement made with the prosecutor. Hurston describes the lawyer's response: "The tall, lean, black-haired prosecutor hurled a surprised and betrayed look at the bench."

Despite so much weight against her case, Laura Lee manages to win. The judge and jury set aside any prejudices that initially impede good judgment, and they are able to see clearly that Laura Lee was justified in her attack on Beasley and that he is petty and has violent tendencies.

Style

Flashback

Because the story involves a court case in which the parties testify, Hurston uses flashback to relate the story of the fight between Laura Lee and Beasley. Of course, the two versions do not match, and when evidence is introduced, Beasley loses his credibility. This is an interesting use of flashback because Hurston in effect uses it with two different narrators, one reliable and one not. It demonstrates the flexibility of flashback as a narrative technique, and it reminds the reader to approach flashbacks with the same critical eye as any other style of storytelling.

Laura Lee's explanation of why she loves Mrs. Clairborne so much is another use of flashback, as she recounts her long and emotional history with her friend and employer. In this case, Hurston uses flashback for emotional effect, taking the reader (and the jury) to the origins of the love and the long-standing closeness between the two women.

Dialect and Vernacular

Hurston is famous for her use of dialect in fiction; she loved the way it brought her characters to life and gave her stories a streak of realism. "Conscience of the Court" is no different. Besides doing much of the work in revealing Laura Lee's personality, her dialect and vernacular serve as a reminder to the reader (who cannot see the characters, but who can hear them) of how different Laura Lee is from Beasley. Hurston introduces this element almost immediately in the story, as she reveals Laura Lee's first thoughts upon entering the courtroom: "*Lawdy me*! she mused inside herself. *Look like I done every crime excepting habeas corpus and stealing a mule*." Her personality and self-expression is consistent, whether she is talking to herself or to the jury. A humble woman, she tells the jury, "It don't surprise me to find out I'm ignorant about a whole heap of things. I ain't never rubbed the hair off my head against no college walls and schooled out nowhere at all." Her sayings become even more colorful and amusing when she tells the story of the actual fight between herself and Beasley. She says, "He just looked at me like I was something that the buzzards laid and the sun hatched." Then later, "He flew just as hot as Tucker when the mule kicked his mammy," and in response she says, "I jumped as salty as the 'gator when the pond went dry." Laura Lee's unique expressions give a sense of her strong personality and make her real and likeable to the reader.

Historical Context

Race Relations in the 1940s

In the years following World War II, changes in race relations began to gain momentum. Racial tensions heightened in part because black soldiers returning from the war had a new perspective on segregation and other restrictive measures taken against them at home. Having risked their lives and seeing their fellow soldiers lose theirs, they found it difficult to accept second-class status.

Advocacy groups were organized, calling for more social and political equality. Areas such as housing, public accommodations, education, and the military were targeted for reform. More cases were tried before the Supreme Court, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People played an important role in legal battles at almost every level. Tensions were especially difficult in the South, where 75 percent of African Americans still lived in 1945. Although major changes would not sweep American society until the 1950s and 1960s, the seeds of the Civil Rights movement were planted in the 1940s.

The Harlem Renaissance

After World War I, many people moved to northern cities, and African Americans began creating a community in Harlem. Because Harlem became the center of African American culture in the 1920s, the artistic efforts of African Americans during this dynamic and prolific time is known as the Harlem Renaissance. A major literary and cultural movement, the Harlem Renaissance was the first to support African American voices expressing and interpreting their unique experiences and histories. One of the most influential contributors to the Harlem Renaissance was Alain Locke, a Harvard University professor and the first black Rhodes scholar. He also edited *The New Negro*, an anthology that gave a forum to fresh voices in fiction, drama, poetry, and essay. Other prominent figures of the Harlem Renaissance were Langston Hughes, W. E. B. Du Bois, Claude McKay, Zora Neale Hurston, Wallace Thurman, Duke Ellington, and Louis Armstrong. Poet and novelist Arna Bontemps was a participant in and historian of the movement, ensuring that its accomplishments would be preserved.

Although black writers were recognized and appreciated in the United States, the Harlem Renaissance generated the cultural effort required to give this body of writing the stature it deserved. Over the course of the movement, black writers were encouraged to develop their unique voices and styles. As a result, there were fewer imitative works, or works heavily reliant on dialect, and more works exploring the heart of the culture. Novels, plays, poetry, and art reflected the depth of the heritage, and they empowered their creators to express their frustration, hope, and pride in their identity. The Harlem Renaissance was inclusive, featuring not just works of African American blacks, but also writers like Claude McKay, who came from Jamaica. As a result of

these creative efforts, the African American experience reached people all over the country.

When the depression hit the United States, the Harlem Renaissance waned as writers, artists, and musicians were forced to seek other work, often in other cities.

Critical Overview

Much of Hurston's writing is overshadowed by *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, especially her drama and short stories. As a result, there is little critical commentary specifically about "Conscience of the Court." It was published in 1950 in the *Saturday Evening Post* but was not published in a collection during Hurston's lifetime. In fact, it was the last work of fiction she had published, and it seems to bring to light the complex race issues she had witnessed in the 1940s.

In *The Columbia Companion to the Twentieth-Century American Short Story*, Blanche H. Gelfant and Lawrence Graver consider "Conscience of the Court" in the context of Hurston's other fiction. They observe, "If outcomes are not necessarily happy, it is important in Hurston's stories that innocence triumph over corruption," explaining that Laura is the "beleaguered innocent" in the story, who is released by the court. Ultimately, however, they find the story confusing, noting that "the story draws on conventions that may make the reader queasy. Is Hurston assuring whites of black loyalty? Blacks of white protection?" In their "Introduction" to *Zora Neale Hurston: The Complete Stories*, Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Sieglinde Lemke comment, "This story is about altruism. . . . It is also about an idea of justice and the fact that the court was on the side of a simple black woman." As if considering the historical context of the story they add, "Good is being rewarded□even in black skin□and those who mean well will be rewarded in the end."

Gates and Lemke view "Conscience of the Court" as thematically representative of Hurston's short fiction. They observe that "morality is the issue in most of her stories, which usually end happily for the disenfranchised and powerless. The moral values that Hurston cherishes are loyalty, justice, and love." Commenting on her narrative style, they note that her pace is never rushed, instead allowing the reader to enjoy and absorb "the nuances of speech or the timbre of voice that give a storyteller her or his distinctiveness." Speaking in general terms about Hurston's short fiction and the place it deserves in American literature, Gelfant and Graver write:

Hurston's stories are playful and provocative but somehow they never quite conform, never seem to play by any rules. Which is hardly to say that these stories are not valuable, both for students of Hurston and for students of the short story. . . . [T]he best of them can stand on their own alongside any of the short fiction of her contemporaries and should be included in anthologies of classic American short stories as fine examples of the genre. Zora Neale Hurston was deeply interested in the form of the short story, particularly its adaptability to oral traditions, folklore, and the vernacular, and she returned to it again and again throughout her life, experimenting with its possibilities and bringing to bear on it all of her varied and complex interests.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Bussey holds a master's degree in interdisciplinary studies and a bachelor's degree in English literature. She is an independent writer specializing in literature. In the following essay, Bussey compares Zora Neale Hurston's short story "Conscience of the Court" with Harper Lee's novel To Kill a Mockingbird*.*

Zora Neale Hurston's "Conscience of the Court" is about an outspoken black woman whose fierce loyalty to her friend and employer lands her in jail. While defending herself and her employer's belongings from an unethical moneylender, Laura Lee attacks a white man and is sent to jail to await trial. Her trial goes favorably, and she is exonerated when the prosecutor's deception is revealed. Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* also concerns a court case that happens to involve interracial conflict. Tom Robinson is falsely accused of attacking and raping Mayella Ewell. Although the very capable and honorable white attorney Atticus Finch represents Tom, the jury in his trial finds him guilty. These two stories have some common ground and also draw some sharp contrasts. There is enough common ground to warrant a closer look, but it may be necessary to look at the texts hand in hand with their social contexts to find meaning in the comparison.

The authors themselves bear some interesting similarities and differences. Hurston was a well-educated black woman who is now strongly associated with the Harlem Renaissance. Although she is best known for *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, she wrote other novels, along with nonfiction, short stories, and plays. Her life's ambition was to be a writer, and at the end of her life she worked odd jobs to support herself, all the while clinging to the hope of completing another novel. Harper Lee is also well educated, although her career path is law. *To Kill a Mockingbird* is her only published fiction, and she seems to have no desire to follow it up with another. She is not associated with a particular literary movement. Despite the differences between the authors, these two obviously intelligent and perceptive women had something to say about justice and the legal system when they wrote the works discussed here. Examining the texts themselves will begin to reveal their motivations for writing their respective works.

In general terms, there are important similarities between "Conscience of the Court" and *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Both stories involve court cases with interracial implications, and both cases are observed by members of the community. Although the community anticipation in *To Kill a Mockingbird* is greater than it is in "Conscience of the Court," both trials begin under the scornful eyes of onlookers. When Laura Lee is brought into the courtroom, "The hostility in the room reached her without her seeking to find it." Similarly, when Tom's trial begins, the courtroom is packed with members of the community. The seating is segregated, and the white section is noticeably hostile. Another similarity is that both defendants are black and charged with attacking a white person, yet they both receive the sympathy of other whites who help with their cases. Laura Lee wins the sympathy of the judge and the jury, and Tom is fortunate enough to have the representation of Atticus Finch. That both stories are set in the

South—"Conscience of the Court" in Jacksonville, Florida, and *To Kill a Mockingbird* in Maycomb, Alabama—only heightens the racial implications of the trials.

There are also significant differences to consider in comparing these two fictional trials. While both trials involve interracial conflict, *To Kill a Mockingbird* is about charges of a black man sexually assaulting a white woman, which is a weightier charge than the black woman's physical attack on a white man in "Conscience of the Court." At a deeper, philosophical level, the two stories are divergent. Written in 1950, "Conscience of the Court" presents an ultimately optimistic view of the legal system. Written ten years later, however, *To Kill a Mockingbird* depicts a pessimistic view of the court system as one that is vulnerable to the flaws of the people on the jury. Atticus says this explicitly in his closing arguments when he appeals to the jury to do their job responsibly because the judicial system can really only be as honorable as the people who serve in juries. Despite Atticus's plea, Tom Robinson is deemed guilty by a prejudiced jury. His life ends tragically when he is killed trying to escape while en route to prison, his innocence relegated to irrelevance. In contrast, Laura Lee is deemed not guilty, is commended by the judge, and returns home to polish silver. These are two dramatically different results.

At the center of the differences between *To Kill a Mockingbird* and "Conscience of the Court" are the contrasts between the protagonists. Tom is quiet, imposing, betrayed by someone to whom he showed kindness, and courageous even in his fear. Laura Lee is more approachable-looking, outspoken, bold, loyal, fearless, and betrayed by someone with whom she has no personal relationship. Both characters are black and living in the South, and thus have little social power or influence. And both are brought to court by white accusers who expect their privileged social status to ensure their victories. Laura Lee's accuser is wrong about that, but Tom's accuser is right.

What do all these comparisons and contrasts mean, besides the fact that two different authors with different experiences will inevitably write two different stories? Hurston and Lee are both ultimately writing about where to find justice and racial harmony in American society, and where to find hope for change. The message of *To Kill a Mockingbird* seems to be that there is little hope in a flawed legal system that relies on flawed people to determine innocence and guilt but that there is tremendous hope in personal relationships. As badly as Tom was treated by the people of Maycomb, and specifically the Ewell family, he was treated with respect as a fellow human being by Atticus and his family. In short, Lee offers a model for change—one *individual* at a time. On the other hand, the message of "Conscience of the Court" seems to be that there is hope in the legal system with its heritage of justice and pursuit of fairness. The courts, the Constitution, and the judicial legacy all feed into a reliable source of justice in the legal system. In short, Hurston offers a model for change—one *case* at a time. Either way, change takes time and patience, whether it comes about on an individual level or at a legal level.

It is interesting that the message of hope in the legal system comes not from the white lawyer (Lee), but from the black writer (Hurston). Speculation can be made that Lee was more jaded, having experienced firsthand the inner workings of the legal system. In all

likelihood, she had witnessed how people are sometimes mistreated by it. If Lee herself had doubts about the legal system, her fictional attorney, Atticus Finch, did not. In his closing remarks to the jury, he declares:

But there is one way in this country in which all men are created equal□there is one human institution that makes a pauper the equal of a Rockefeller, the stupid man the equal of an Einstein, and the ignorant man the equal of any college professor. That institution, gentlemen, is a court. . . . Our courts have their faults, but in this country our courts are the great levelers, and in our courts all men are created equal.

Atticus reminds the jury that the court system can only be as good as the men in the jury. He appeals to them to do the job they came to do, and to do it responsibly. Atticus knows that for all the preparation and planning, the evidence and the witness testimony, if the jury decides to make a decision based on racism or fear of community backlash, the system will fail Tom. He knows he is fighting an uphill battle, but it is one he must fight because it is for the cause of right. Lee shows that the legal system entire is really the collective efforts of individual Americans.

There is also the issue of social and historical context to consider. Hurston's story was published in 1950 as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People was gaining prominence in its support of the growing number of legal battles being fought for equal rights at every court level. Lee's story was published in 1960, after the tumultuous decade of the 1950s that saw racial tensions intensifying and resolution coming too slowly. It is easy for the reader to assume that Hurston and Lee are commenting somehow on what they have seen and experienced as reality, when in fact there may be an element of teaching or warning in their writings. Hurston may have hoped that her depiction of justice would serve as a model for how the courts *should* operate, and Lee may have intended her depiction as something of a cautionary tale. Without explicit instructions from the authors, readers are left to speculate on how these works are to inform their perceptions of the world around them, just as great literature almost always challenges us to do.

Source: Jennifer Bussey, Critical Essay on "Conscience of the Court," in *Short Stories for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2005.

Critical Essay #2

Carter is currently employed as a freelance writer. In this essay, Carter explores Hurston's notions of justice and altruism and how these values ultimately impact the outcome of the story.

In "Conscience of the Court," as in many of her stories, Zora Neale Hurston creates a narrative framework that serves to raise broader questions about the notions of justice and altruism, particularly the legitimacy of the legal system and the consequences of serving one's community. The character of Laura Lee illuminates these principles. She is, in many respects, the "conscience" of the court. Her lack of faith sparks the conscience of the judge, causing him to pause in shame over the circumstances of her arrest and renewing in him an interest in seeing justice served, despite the color of Laura Lee's skin. Ultimately, it is Laura Lee's fierce devotion to her employer that also serves her well. Her outstanding character, specifically her generous nature, is recognized and rewarded by the judge, and she is exonerated.

From the moment he sees her in the courtroom, the judge is moved by Laura Lee's presence. His assessment of her somehow runs counter to all that he has heard about Laura Lee and her supposed crime. Consequently, he sees her as "a riddle to solve" and "a challenge to him somehow or other," rather than the "man-killing bearcat of a woman" described by the prosecutor. It is Laura Lee who puts her position into perspective for the judge when she refuses the right to an attorney, suggesting that because of her race and social standing, her prosecution is inevitable. And the judge's response moves from one of curiosity to one of deep shame. Laura Lee is not a mystery to be solved. The judge recognizes his folly in not seeing her as a human being deserving of the rights and protections John Thurgood Marshall dedicated his life to promoting, protecting, and preserving.

Much of what drives Hurston's story is the notion of justice. The judge does not forsake Laura Lee; rather, in the name of "two thousand years of growth of the concepts of human rights and justice," he is resolved to hear her side of the story. Despite overwhelmingly negative testimony to the contrary, Laura Lee is asked to tell her side of the story in earnest, leading to a promissory note and ultimately the discovery that, in fact, the so-called victim or plaintiff is guilty of far more than Laura Lee. The judge in this case demonstrates what John Thurgood Marshall truly believed, that by following the letter of the law, justice would ultimately prevail, or lead to the truth of the matter in question. Certainly, by allowing Laura Lee to speak, the prejudice of the court room is all but erased with a simple presentation of the facts surrounding the alleged attack against the plaintiff.

In the story, the judge's "greatest hero" is John Marshall, "his inner resolve to follow in the great man's steps, and even to interpretations of human rights if his abilities allowed." The judge claims Laura Lee has revived his college fascination with human rights and justice and his resolve to uphold Marshall's values.

According to journalist Juan Williams, in a National Public Radio (NPR) interview concerning his work *Thurgood Marshall: American Revolutionary*, Justice John Thurgood Marshall began his career in the 1930s working as a lawyer for the NAACP, before his appointment to the Supreme Court. It is felt by many historians that Marshall, more than any figure, black or white, has done more to advance the rights and liberties of blacks in America. By using the Constitution to remedy the issue of segregation, he took some amazing strides to resolve social inequities: he won equal pay for white and black teachers; he opened Southern juries on primary elections; he filed several law suits that integrated school buses; and he banned discrimination in suburban neighborhoods. And, in the landmark Supreme Court case, *Brown v. Board of Education*, Marshall outlawed segregation in public schools.

Marshall's passion was fueled by a belief that integration was necessary to change the hearts and minds that made up a community. A brilliant legal mind, his success was predicated or dependent on his ability to bring a more human element to his courtroom. He was a calming force with a manner and attitude that complemented his legal skills, and attracted people from all walks of life. And unlike Dr. Martin Luther King, he did not advocate passive resistance as a means of accomplishing his objectives. Marshall had been trying to get blacks out of jail all along, and recognized the mistreatment and violence that protestors may encounter in jail for their acts of civil disobedience. An advocate for justice, Marshall believed in following the law with the belief that ultimately, through reform, justice would indeed prevail.

The "conscience" of Hurston's "court" is Marshall, and by extension, Laura Lee. It is Laura Lee who stirs the judge's own conscience, admitting to him that she has little faith in the court, and for obvious reasons. By virtue of her skin color, as the narrator intimates or suggests, Laura Lee has been typecast in the roles of "savage queen," and "two-legged she-devil." The judge flushes in shame at Lee's assertions and his failure to recognize her as a person worthy as any other of the protections of the law. Just as Marshall won over his biggest critics with his superior intellect, charm, and grace, Laura Lee, a simple black woman, wins over the judge with a proud, erect stance and humble nature. She readily admits she does not know whether she is innocent or guilty, and that she is not educated in the ways of the court or much of anything, for that matter, stating, "I ain't never rubbed the hair off of my head against no college walls."

And, like his idol, John Thurgood Marshall, the judge brings a human element to his court room by insisting that Laura Lee speak on her own behalf. Hearing her side of the story not only humanizes her in the eyes of the jury and all present in the courtroom, but it leads the judge to make some conclusions on his own that ultimately lead to Laura Lee's acquittal. Laura Lee's story reveals a woman genuinely respectful in the courtroom, and one so devoted to her employer that she would fight to the death to protect her. Her story also brings to light the inequities of the defendant, whose case is ultimately destroyed with one simple promissory note. Given a proper representation of all of the facts, justice was indeed served. As Marshall ultimately believed, so too did Hurston believe in the notion that justice would always prevail, no matter how initially daunting or discouraging the evidence may seem.

Interestingly, despite his regard for the famous Supreme Court Justice, the judge rests his decision on the idea that "the protection of women and children," was "implicit in Anglo-Saxon civilization," and attributed the English-speaking people (those of "civilized" or Anglo-Saxon descent) the honor of giving the world "its highest concepts of the rights of the individual." At the root of true justice for all, then, according to the judge, would be the white or Anglo-Saxon culture, a culture that at its core has been historically reluctant to rescind or withdraw the notion of segregation. Hence the reading of the story becomes decidedly more complex, even problematic. Justice does indeed prevail, but it does so at the whimsy of a judge whose long-buried college ideals have been suddenly revived. In support of his romantic notions, the judge responds to the prosecutor's rude interruption of Laura Lee, stating: "The object of a trial, I need not remind you, is to get at the whole truth of a case."

The judge's notions of justice, however romantic, ultimately save Laura Lee. Readers never learn the judge's name, amplifying the idea that perhaps ultimately it is the "law," rather than the judge, that prevails. As some critics have suggested, the story is to be read as one concerned with the quality of justice, and rightly so. In more than one instance the judge appears to have been "shaken out of a dream," or restored to a sense of reverence more fitting to his profession. In fact, the judge does indeed acknowledge the key role Laura Lee has played in his so-called enlightenment, at least in her case, responding to her gratitude at the story's end by stating: "That will do, Laura Lee. I am the one who should be thanking you." But this vote of confidence is no consolation; rather, it leaves the reader to speculate how many people of color the judge has overlooked in similar circumstances.

Presented hand in hand with the notion of justice is the concept of altruism in the story. Laura Lee was devoted to her employer to the degree that she was willing to suffer a jail sentence for her in order to protect her. It could be argued that leaving Laura Lee to watch over Celestine's things was a less than appropriate choice. Arguably, given the tenor of the community and its prejudice toward blacks, such a move could be seen as an open invitation for abuse, making Laura Lee an easy target. As demonstrated by the nature of her arrest, Laura Lee had been tried and convicted by the citizens of the town, most of whom had made assumptions concerning her crime without much substance. This bias demonstrates the lack of respect, and by extension, the lack of security with which black citizens of the town were accustomed to living.

Laura Lee recognizes her folly in her generous assessment of her neighbors, now surrounding her in the courtroom, filled with hostility. She herself admits "The People was meddlesome and unfriendly passel and had no use for the truth." She also chides herself for not listening to something her husband Tom had told her repeatedly: "This world had no use for the love and friending that she was ever trying to give." And, worse than the "atmosphere that crawled all over Laura Lee like reptiles," was the notion that Celestine had failed her by not coming to her aid. Again, her generous spirit does not go forsaken. Because of her devotion, Laura Lee is not only exonerated by the judge, but is made an example of, "which no decent citizen need blush to follow."

In the introduction to Hurston's collection of short stories, *The Complete Stories*, Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Sieglinde Lemke discuss the concepts of justice and altruism in Hurston's "Conscience of the Court." They claim, that in the story, "Good is being rewarded□even in black skin□and those who mean well will be rewarded in the end." Morality, in fact, is the thematic glue that binds all of Hurston's stories. Despite the odds, "a simple black woman," as Laura Lee is lovingly referred to by the editors, realizes justice as a result of her steadfast loyalty and fierce love for her employer, all qualities Hurston deeply valued and has woven into much of her work.

Source: Laura Carter, Critical Essay on "Conscience of the Court," in *Short Stories for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2005.

Topics for Further Study

Put together a character sketch of Laura Lee that includes her personality strengths and weaknesses, her motivations, her relationships, her appearance, and anything else you find interesting or relevant. Wherever there is missing information, feel free to speculate, as long as your conclusions do not conflict with what Hurston provides about Laura in the story.

How realistic do you think the trial is, given its time and place? Why? Imagine that the trial had concluded unfavorably for Laura Lee, and write a script depicting how you think it would have gone. Recruit classmates to act out your version; then discuss the differences with the class.

Dialect is difficult to write but generally easy to read. Choose a dialect other than the one used by Hurston in the story, and rewrite Laura Lee's testimony with a new character. In addition to dialect, be sure to incorporate sayings and vernacular as appropriate. When you are done, write a brief reflection describing the experience of writing this way. If it changes the way you think about Hurston and other writers who use dialect, include some comments about that too.

The judge in the story is reminded of the way he once respected the law and the Constitution, and it changes the way he conducts himself for the rest of the trial. He remembers his hero, Justice John Marshall, and what an influential figure he was to the judge in his university days. Who was John Marshall, and what is his significance in American history? Why would he have been the judge's hero, and why would his example alter the way the judge performs his job?

Hurston's depiction of the friendship between Laura Lee and Mrs. Clairborne is touching and memorable. How are friendships between women depicted today? Think of three examples of female friendships in modern literature, movies, drama, or television. Try to find three that are very different from each other. Create a visual presentation of the similarities and differences between the three you have chosen and the one in "Conscience of the Court"; for example, you may want to make a simple table or be creative with a collage. Of the four, which do you think represents the most typical friendships between women today?

Compare and Contrast

1940s: Major legal battles are waged to establish more equality under the law for all races. Changing attitudes are slowly making it easier for African Americans to get fair decisions handed down by courts. For example, the Supreme Court declares that whites-only deed restrictions are unenforceable (1948) and that segregated interstate travel is unconstitutional (1946).

Today: Tremendous progress has been made in the interest of equality under the law. The law calls for equal treatment in education, travel, business, hiring, military service, and other aspects of daily life. Although court cases continue to be filed, the legal standard is for everyone to receive equal opportunity and free access to the justice system.

1940s: Fully 75 percent of the African American population resides in the South. With racial tensions on the rise, this creates a great deal of social unrest in the South, and change is inevitable.

Today: The African American population is represented throughout the United States. Racial tensions have subsided dramatically, although racially motivated incidents are not yet obsolete. These incidents, however, can occur anywhere in the United States, not just in the South.

1940s: Some households still have live-in servants (maids, cooks, etc.), especially in wealthy Southern families whose prior generations hired the prior generations of their servants' families to live with them. In most cases, the servants are minorities employed by white families. This is becoming less common as work opportunities become more available for minorities and racial dynamics change.

Today: Only the wealthiest households have live-in domestic staff, and members of such staffs can be of any race. Given the history of race relations in America, most families employing such staff members would not even consider hiring only minorities.

What Do I Read Next?

Robert E. Hemenway's *Zora Neale Hurston; A Literary Biography* (1977) provides the student with information about Hurston's unique life and influences, with a particular eye toward her writing career. Much of Hurston's life story is unknown, so Hemenway focuses instead on her place in American literature.

Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) is now considered an important contribution to the Harlem Renaissance and feminist writing in general. It is the story of Janie, who finally finds love in her third marriage, only to be widowed. Her story is one of overcoming adversity, maturing, and self-determination.

Written by Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) is a classic American novel about race relations, small communities, and the justice system. In this story, Atticus Finch, a white lawyer, suffers the scorn of his town when he defends a black man accused of attacking a white woman.

The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader (1994), edited by David L. Lewis, is a comprehensive sampling of the contributors and key works that defined the movement. The works of forty-five writers are included.

Further Study

Howard, Lillie P., ed., *Alice Walker and Zora Neale Hurston: The Common Bond*, Greenwood Press, 1993.

Hurston is an influential writer for many African American authors, and Walker has been among her most outspoken champions. Here, Howard analyzes Hurston's and Walker's writings to find similarities and areas of influence.

Klarman, Michael J., *From Jim Crow to Civil Rights: The Supreme Court and the Struggle for Racial Equality*, Oxford University Press, 2004.

Beginning with 1896's *Plessy v. Ferguson*, Klarman summarizes landmark Supreme Court decisions as they pertain to racial issues and civil rights. In addition to the facts of the cases themselves, Klarman includes the political and social contexts and ramifications for each case.

Peters, Pearlie Mae Fisher, *The Assertive Woman in Zora Neale Hurston's Fiction, Folklore, and Drama*, Garland Publishing, 1998.

Hurston, an independent and outspoken woman, is credited with creating assertive female characters that were in many ways ahead of their time. Peters draws from Hurston's canon of work to evaluate the importance of her bold protagonists. Unlike many studies of Hurston's work, this one considers her drama alongside her fiction.

Watson, Steven, *The Harlem Renaissance: Hub of African-American Culture, 1920—1930*, Pantheon, 1995.

Going beyond the writings that came out of the Harlem Renaissance, Watson explores the cultural influences of the movement, along with the cultural forces that led to it. Watson enhances his exploration with photos and art from the period.

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Howard, Lillie P., *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol. 51, *Afro-American Writers from the Harlem Renaissance to 1940*, edited by Trudier Harris, Gale Research, 1987, pp. 133—45.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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

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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Short Stories for Students

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

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

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

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

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

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

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

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

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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

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