The Challenge Study Guide

The Challenge by Mario Vargas Llosa

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

In 1958 (at the age of twenty-two), Mario Vargas Llosa won first place for his short story "The Challenge" in a fiction contest sponsored in Peru by *Revue française.* His prize was a trip to Paris, a city he had longed to visit and to which he later returned to seriously pursue writing.

Among the themes common in Vargas Llosa's fiction is that of establishment of power by means of violence. Although "The Challenge" was written very early in his career, this idea is already forming. In the story, the Gimp demonstrates his strength, power, and believability by killing the man he challenged, Justo. That the Gimp wants his opponent to surrender rather than be killed has less to do with the theme of power than with the particular character of the Gimp. The sense of disillusionment often portrayed in Vargas Llosa's work is also present in "The Challenge"; when Justo loses the fight, his father is left with the hollow victory of knowing that his son fought bravely.

Author Biography

Mario Vargas Llosa was born on March 28, 1936, in Arequipa, Peru. His family was well to do, and when his parents separated shortly after his birth, Vargas Llosa accompanied his mother to live with her parents. Her father was a diplomat, so many of Vargas Llosa's formative years were spent moving from place to place in Latin America. In 1950, his parents reconciled, and he and his mother went back to live with his father. The father-son relationship was strained, because Vargas Llosa's father believed the boy had been spoiled by his years with his grandparents, and he saw the boy's interest in writing as too feminine. To offset these "inadequacies," he sent his fourteen-year-old son to Leoncia Prado Military Academy. Vargas Llosa considers these years to be among the worst of his life.

Vargas Llosa's years at the academy did not squelch his interest in writing, and when he was older, he longed to travel to Europe to focus on writing. He completed his undergraduate work in literature and law at the University of San Marcos in Lima, Peru, and then earned a grant to study in Spain. While in college, he had married his aunt (by marriage) Julia. The union between the nineteen-year-old man and the thirty-two-year-old woman was a scandal in the family. During his college years, he had supported himself and his wife by securing work as a reporter with local television stations and newspapers. Another important development during his college years was his introduction to the world of politics, a forum that would become his passion for the rest of his life.

Vargas Llosa and his wife left for Spain, and when Vargas Llosa's grant ended, the couple moved to Paris so he could continue working on his novel about his years in the military academy. Vargas Llosa had loved Paris since his first visit in 1958; that trip was a prize he won in a fiction contest for his short story "The Challenge."

Vargas Llosa's first novel, *The Time of the Hero,* was published in 1963 and catapulted Vargas Llosa into the ranks of writers associated with the "boom" in Latin American literature. This novel, based on Vargas Llosa's military academy experiences, was condemned by military leaders, and one thousand copies were burned. This controversy only increased public interest in the book.

Vargas Llosa continued to write and became increasingly involved in politics when he returned to Peru. His leadership in a protest movement eventually led to his presidential campaign in 1989. His party advocated democracy, a free-market economic system, and personal liberty. Despite losing the race, Vargas Llosa brought credibility to his party because of his stature in Peru.

Today, Vargas Llosa lives in Spain with his second wife. They have three children. He continues to write and is often mentioned as a Nobel Prize candidate. His work includes novels, short stories, literary criticism, essays, journalism, and drama.

Plot Summary

As the story opens, the narrator, Julian, is sitting at the River Bar with his friends Leon and Briceño. Leonidas, an older man, arrives and joins them. He informs them that Justo (another member of the group) will be fighting the Gimp at the raft that night. When Leonidas leaves, Briceño says that Justo is likely to lose, and the others tell him to be quiet.

Julian goes home briefly, changes clothes, wraps up a knife and puts it in his pocket, and tells his wife he will be back later. He returns to the River Bar, where he talks to the owner, Moses, who has already heard about the fight. Because Justo is his friend, Moses offers to help in any way he can. He fears for Justo and tells Julian that the Gimp and his friends were in the bar the previous night, bragging about how they were going to get Justo. When they finish talking, Julian notices Justo sitting alone. Justo tells Julian how he ran into the Gimp and his friends and how they challenged him to the fight. Julian shows Justo the knife he has brought, and Justo says he will use his own. They finish their beers and go to meet Leon and Briceño.

Leon and Briceño show confidence in Justo's ability to win the fight with the Gimp, despite earlier doubts. The four young men arrive at the raft, which is actually a huge carob tree that fell into the river years ago and moves only slightly every year. They see that the Gimp and his group are already there, and members of the two opposing groups exchange hostile, sarcastic words.

Leonidas arrives, to the surprise of the fighters and their friends, but he insists that he has as much right to be there as any of them. Julian checks out the Gimp's knife; he examines the width, length, weight, and sharpness and declares it fair. Before having his own knife examined, Justo asks Leonidas why he is there. Leonidas replies that he came because he wanted to come. Chunga checks out Justo's knife and declares it fair.

Justo and the Gimp prepare to fight, and Leonidas approaches Justo with words of advice about how to win the fight. The fight begins slowly, but soon escalates. Both fighters manage to knick the other, but eventually Justo is seriously hurt. Still, he refuses to surrender, and the Gimp pleads first with Julian (who was once his friend) and then with Leonidas to make Justo give up the fight. Justo refuses, and the fight continues. Soon, Justo collapses. The Gimp and his group slowly leave the area while the others pick up Justo's lifeless body.

Leon turns to Leonidas and says, "Don't cry, old-timer. I've never known anyone brave as your son. I really mean that." When the young men offer to take Justo's body to Leonidas' hut, he says, "Yes."

Summary

"The Challenge" is Mario Vargas Llosa's short story of machismo and honor among young Hispanic men in a classic scenario of physical conflict, man versus man.

At the beginning of the story, the narrator describes how a man named Leonidas enters the River Bar where the narrator and some other friends are having some beers, as is their usual Saturday night routine. The narrator pours a beer for Leonidas and can tell that Leonidas is preoccupied with something. When prompted, Leonidas reveals that a man named Justo will be fighting another man tonight and wants his friends in the bar to come.

One of the men at the table, Briceno, asks Leonidas what caused the fight, and Leonidas says that Justo met up with his opponent at a place called Catacaos earlier today. One of the other friends, Leon, tells the distracted Leonidas that Justo knows how to fight and knows what he is doing.

Leonidas finishes his beer and tells the young men that the fight will be tonight at "the raft" and that Justo will look for them at the bar at ten-thirty before the eleven o'clock fight. The friends watch Leonidas walk down the street, and Briceno tells the others that Justo is sure to be killed by the Gimp, the man who has challenged Justo to the fight.

The young men separate briefly, and the narrator returns home to change clothes and get a knife, which he wraps in a handkerchief and puts in his back pocket. Telling his wife that he will be home again soon, the narrator leaves his house to return to the River Bar. The bar owner, Moses, tells the narrator that Justo has been antagonizing the Gimp for quite awhile and that this fight tonight has been inevitable.

Moses offers help and tells the narrator that last night in the bar, the Gimp and his friends were bragging about how they intend to kill Justo. The narrator declines Moses' offer to help in the fight and leaves the bar, where he sees Justo sitting at one of the outside tables.

Justo seems scared and vulnerable sitting alone, and the narrator asks Justo what happened to bring about the fight tonight. Justo replies that he encountered the Gimp and his friends at a bar called The Sunken Cart where a priest intervened to stop an immediate fight. Then, the Gimp posed the challenge to Justo to fight at "the raft" tonight.

The narrator offers up his knife to Justo, who compares it to the one he has brought. Justo decides to use his own knife because he is comfortable with it. After drinking a beer and having a cigarette, Justo suggests that he and the narrator leave to head out to the site of the fight.

Upon seeing Justo, Leon and Briceno are full of bravado and lighthearted confidence for Justo. As the young men walk toward the riverbank, Briceno notes that it is a very

cloudy night and that the Gimp will not want to fight in the dark. Justo does not encourage speaking of delaying the fight until tomorrow, and the friends are quiet until they reach "the raft."

"The raft" is the remains of a dry carob tree that fell into the river, and it stretches almost the entire way across the riverbed. The tree's size and weight make it prohibitive to move except by the ebb and flow of the water, which moves it slightly every once in awhile.

The Gimp and his colleagues are already in place at the site of "the raft," and the narrator moves toward the group and identifies himself as Julian Huertas when prompted by the Gimp's friends. The Gimp approaches Julian and wants to know why Leonidas has come along. To Julian's surprise, Leonidas is arriving in the dark to join Justo's supporters and walks up to the Gimp to challenge him over his right to be here at the fight.

As Justo's representative, Julian is extended the courtesy of inspecting the Gimp's knife, and Julian does so as Leonidas holds a lighted match with trembling hands. Chunga is appointed to inspect Justo's knife and does so after Justo throws it. Chunga has to bend to retrieve it from where it has fallen in the sand. Justo challenges Leonidas on why he has come tonight, and Leonidas declares that he has a right to be here just like all the rest of the men.

The two sides are ready for the fight, and Justo and the Gimp approach each other after Leonidas provides Justo with some last minute instructions on how to win. Justo wraps his left arm in Leonidas' poncho, approaches the Gimp and makes the first attack. Justo's friends watch as Justo manages to lunge and slash the Gimp, but the Gimp is much more experienced and manages to get Justo in closer where he can wound Justo.

The two men remain engaged in a close range fight, and for awhile it looks as if they are one person struggling in some macabre gyrations. Suddenly the two men break apart, and Leon suggests that someone make an attempt to break them up. The Gimp and Justo roll together on the sand, slashing each other until the Gimp rises and yells to Julian to tell Justo to give up.

Justo does not surrender, and he and the Gimp fight again. Now the Gimp yells at Leonidas to tell Justo to give up, but Leonidas yells back at the Gimp to shut up and fight. Justo tries once more to attack the Gimp, but Justo's wounds have sapped his strength. He is unable to move and collapses to the ground.

Justo's friends rush to his prone body and realize that Justo is dead. Leon and Briceno wrap Justo in their jackets, and Julian covers Justo's face with Leonidas' poncho. Justo's body is hoisted onto the shoulders of Julian, Leon, Leonidas and Briceno. Leon tells Leonidas not to cry because no one has ever been as brave as Leonidas' son. Leonidas does not reply as the four men bear the body of Leonidas' son to his home.

Analysis

The time and location of the story are never identified and are not really necessary as the story addresses a universal conflict of man versus man as it relates to the themes of honor, pride and machismo of young Hispanic men. The reason for the challenge is never identified, but it is enough that a challenge has been issued. The core of the male Hispanic youth stems from pride, and no challenge can go unanswered in some way. The challenge itself is unimportant. The important elements are Justo's pride and honor in the face of that challenge.

The theme of violence is important as the young men fight for little or no reason, and the mechanics of the challenge are understood as well as the code of the actual event proceedings. There is a sad twist of honor achieved at the price of death among this group of young men. For many generations, honor has been more important than life.

Amazingly, no one in the town tries to stop the fight with the exception of the priest, who intervened on the previous night. Justo's friends offer support, and Julian extends the offer of his best knife for the event, realizing that the challenge, once thrown out, will have to be met one day. A man of honor addresses his challenge immediately and with the courage of a real man.

In the beginning of the story, when Leonidas enters the bar and admits that he is dying of thirst, this briefly foreshadows the story's end. Before long his own son will be dying with parched lips on the riverbank at the end of the evening's fight with the Gimp.

The author provides some interesting visual techniques such as the simile used to describe Justo and the Gimp fighting in the dark. "From a distance, half hidden by the night's warm darkness, they didn't look so much like two men getting ready to fight as shadowy statues cast in some black material or the shadows of two young, solid carob trees on the riverbank, reflected in the air, not on the sand."

In an ironic plot twist at the end of the story, Leonidas is revealed to be Justo's father, not merely an interfering old man from the town. When this is revealed, it is particularly poignant to consider the scenes when Leonidas provides his poncho so that Justo can wrap his arm for protection and the brief instructions whispered into Justo's ear preceding the fight. Leonidas is heartbroken at the prospect of Justo's fate but cannot interfere with destiny, tradition and Justo's right to defend his own honor.

Analysis

The time and location of the story are never identified and are not really necessary as the story addresses a universal conflict of man versus man as it relates to the themes of honor, pride and machismo of young Hispanic men. The reason for the challenge is never identified, but it is enough that a challenge has been issued. The core of the male Hispanic youth stems from pride, and no challenge can go unanswered in some way. The challenge itself is unimportant. The important elements are Justo's pride and honor in the face of that challenge.

The theme of violence is important as the young men fight for little or no reason, and the mechanics of the challenge are understood as well as the code of the actual event proceedings. There is a sad twist of honor achieved at the price of death among this group of young men. For many generations, honor has been more important than life.

Amazingly, no one in the town tries to stop the fight with the exception of the priest, who intervened on the previous night. Justo's friends offer support, and Julian extends the offer of his best knife for the event, realizing that the challenge, once thrown out, will have to be met one day. A man of honor addresses his challenge immediately and with the courage of a real man.

In the beginning of the story, when Leonidas enters the bar and admits that he is dying of thirst, this briefly foreshadows the story's end. Before long his own son will be dying with parched lips on the riverbank at the end of the evening's fight with the Gimp.

The author provides some interesting visual techniques such as the simile used to describe Justo and the Gimp fighting in the dark. "From a distance, half hidden by the night's warm darkness, they didn't look so much like two men getting ready to fight as shadowy statues cast in some black material or the shadows of two young, solid carob trees on the riverbank, reflected in the air, not on the sand."

In an ironic plot twist at the end of the story, Leonidas is revealed to be Justo's father, not merely an interfering old man from the town. When this is revealed, it is particularly poignant to consider the scenes when Leonidas provides his poncho so that Justo can wrap his arm for protection and the brief instructions whispered into Justo's ear preceding the fight. Leonidas is heartbroken at the prospect of Justo's fate but cannot interfere with destiny, tradition and Justo's right to defend his own honor.

Characters

Briceño

Briceño is one of the young men in the central group of friends in the story. He speaks his mind, such as when he announces that he thinks the Gimp will kill Justo in the fight. When he sees Justo, however, he expresses nothing but confidence in Justo's ability to win the fight.

Chalupas

Chalupas is the Gimp's most vocal supporter on the night of the fight. He belittles Justo and has an air of hostility about him.

Chunga

Chunga is one of the Gimp's supporters. He is the one responsible for checking Justo's weapon to be sure it is acceptable.

The Gimp

The Gimp is Justo's opponent in the fight. Despite being crippled, the Gimp is strong and skilled at fighting. The Gimp is confident in his ability and, according to Moses, was set on challenging Justo to a fight. The Gimp is like the other men in the story in that he participates in talking tough before the fight. Despite his talk, he does not actually want to kill Justo, as seen when he pleads first with Julian then with Leonidas to get Justo to give up the fight.

The Gimp is described as being very ugly. He is quite tall, has a dark, pimply complexion, and is beardless. He has small eyes, long cheekbones, and thick lips. His left foot is lame, and there are rumors that he has a huge scar on his left foot from a pig bite, although nobody has ever seen the scar.

At some point in the past, the Gimp and Julian were friends, although no explanation for the estrangement is offered. Still, toward the end of the fight, when the Gimp fears he will have to kill Justo to stop him, he pleads with Julian to make Justo surrender. The Gimp seems to understand that Julian values friendship, so he calls on him, in the name of past friendship, to save Justo for the sake of present friendship.

Julian Huertas

Julian is the story's narrator. He is levelheaded, loyal, and trustworthy. He is the man on Justo's side who is given the responsibility of looking over the Gimp's weapon to be sure it is acceptable. Julian is married and has a son, but little is said about his relationship with his family. Julian is not afraid of the Gimp or his friends. When Chalupas speaks to him in a threatening way, Julian responds with insults.

Justo

Justo is a skilled fighter who is challenged by the Gimp. Justo is Julian's friend, and he relies on the support of the other young men in his social group when he goes to fight the Gimp. Julian describes Justo as looking "like a kid, a woman: from [a certain] angle, his features were delicate, soft." From another angle, however, Justo's large purple scar across his face is visible. It extends from the corner of his mouth to his forehead.

Leon

Leon is one of Julian's friends; he is also a supporter of Justo in the fight. His compassion is seen at the end of the story when he tries to comfort Leonidas by telling him that he has never seen anyone as brave as his son.

Leonidas

Leonidas is an older man who is friends with the central group of young men (Julian and his friends) in the story. Leonidas lives alone just outside of town in a small hut. He shows up on the night of the fight, which seems to surprise everyone. He is not afraid of the Gimp or his friends and chastises them for questioning his right to be there. Just before the fight, he whispers advice to Justo to help him with the fight. At the end of the story, the reader learns that Leonidas is Justo's father.

Moses

Moses owns the River Bar, where Julian and his friends sometimes go to have a beer. When Moses hears about the fight, he offers to help even though he feels that Justo's chances of winning the fight are not good.

Themes

Loyalty

Each character portrayed in "The Challenge" is loyal to either Justo or the Gimp. The battle lines are clearly drawn throughout the story, as no characters attempt to stop the fight or arbitrate the tension between the two sides. Although Briceño and Moses express doubt about Justo's ability to win the fight, they remain loyal to their friend. Loyalty is presented as something that is grounded in friendship and personal relationships rather than in a self-serving need to be on the winner's side. When Briceño sees Justo before the fight, he never shows his uncertainty to Justo but expresses nonchalance and confidence in his friend's ability to win the fight. He knows that Justo will not back down from fighting the Gimp, and his loyalty prompts him to be supportive in words and actions. Similarly, Moses offers to help in any way he can, despite his belief that Justo may not win.

The type of loyalty portrayed in "The Challenge" is loyalty within the parameters of fairness and honor. The fighters and their supporters adhere to an agreed-upon set of rules, and they do not interfere in the fight. This shows that they are loyal to their friends (Justo and the Gimp) to the extent that they will respect their decision to fight to the end, even if it means death; to do otherwise would be to compromise their friends' dignity.

Machismo

According to Sara Castro-Klaren in *Latin-American Writers,* the word *machismo* refers to exaggerated masculinity; *American Heritage Dictionary* adds that machismo is characterized by aggressiveness, virility, and emphasis on physical courage. Vargas Llosa came face to face with machismo during his years in the military academy, and in "The Challenge," the characters depict this quality.

In the story, machismo is portrayed in a variety of ways. The challenge issued by the Gimp to Justo to meet him at the raft to fight comes when Justo finds himself surrounded by the Gimp's group at a bar called the Sunken Cart. A fight immediately breaks out, but a priest stops it. This indicates that Justo finds himself alone on the Gimp's "turf," and he is punished for this. The tough talk by everyone involved in the fight is also an example of machismo. Each fighter and his friends try to intimidate the others by saying things that are snide and/or threatening. Their comments have nothing to do with actually warning the other men but are attempts at posturing for a superior position. That the fight is carried out in an up-close, hand-to-hand manner also reflects machismo. Justo and the Gimp are skilled knife fighters, showing that they are not afraid to get physically close to their opponents despite the obvious danger.

Style

Descriptions

Julian, the narrator, provides detailed descriptions of characters' appearances, settings, and actions. He also has a tendency to use similes in his descriptions. He remarks that the Gimp (once a friend of his) is

much taller than all the others. In the dark I couldn't see but could only imagine the face armored with pimples, the skin, deep olive and beardless, the tiny pinholes of his eyes, sunken like two dots in that lump of flesh divided by the oblong bumps of his cheekbones, and his lips, thick as fingers, hanging from his chin, triangular like an iguana's.

Later, while Justo's knife is being approved by one of the Gimp's friends, Julian describes the setting using descriptive sensory words and phrases:

For a few minutes, we were silent, inhaling the perfume from the cotton plants nearby, borne by a warm breeze in the direction of the bridge. On the two sides of the riverbed in back of us the twinkling lights of the city were visible. The silence was almost total; from time to time barking or braying ruptured it abruptly.

As peaceful as the description of the landscape is, Julian soon describes the action of the fight as Justo and the Gimp begin to focus on defeating each other. His description is interesting, because he begins by describing the two fighters up close and gradually moves outward. This suggests that he is focused on the fight but may also be attempting to distance himself emotionally from an unpleasant outcome. Julian explains:

For a few seconds they stood motionless, silent, surely saying with their eyes how much they hated each other, observing each other, their muscles tight under their clothing, right hands angrily crushing their knives. From a distance, half hidden by the night's warm darkness, they didn't look so much like two men getting ready to fight as shadowy statues cast in some black material or the shadows of two young, solid carob trees on the riverbank, reflected in the air, not on the sand. As if answering some urgently commanding voice, they started moving almost simultaneously.

As the fight escalates, Julian says that Justo

moved in and away from the Gimp at the same time, shaking the poncho, dropping and keeping up his guard, offering his body and whisking it away, slippery, agile, tempting and rejecting his opponent like a woman in heat.

Again, Julian uses simile to enhance his description of the constant movement of his friend in the fight.

Minimal Characterization

Although the narrator knows the characters very well, he provides little comment on them. While he gives surface information, such as where Leonidas lives and what the Gimp looks like, he never talks about his broken friendship with the Gimp or why there is tension between the Gimp and Justo. When Briceño sees Justo before the fight and expresses confidence in his ability to win, Julian merely says that Briceño seems to have decided to adopt this approach in talking to Justo; Julian is apparently not sure. This lack of knowledge is more characteristic of a passive third-person narrator than of an involved first-person narrator. The story reads as if Julian assumes the reader knows the characters. He describes how the characters relate to one another (to a limited extent; the reader does not know that Leonidas is Justo's father until the end) and leaves the rest for the reader to infer. Vargas Llosa seems to use this technique in order to challenge the reader to become involved in the story and to make assumptions and draw conclusions without being told what to think about the characters.

Historical Context

Latin-American Literature

Prior to Vargas Llosa's arrival on the literary scene, twentieth-century Peruvian literature was dominated by the works of José Carlos Mariátegui, Cesár Vallejo, and José Maria Arguedas. Mariátegui's work reflects his belief that Peru's people provide the key to understanding the country's past and future. Vallejo's poetry, prose, and drama gained special recognition after he took his life in 1938. His work reflects his belief in the importance of solidarity among human beings. Arguedas drew on the works of Mariátegui and Vallejo as he wrote about rural and urban life in Peru.

In the 1960s, there was a "boom" in Latin-American literature. During this period, the work of prominent Latin-American writers received international attention and acclaim. As a result, related areas also expanded, such as translation, literary criticism, and North American graduate programs related to Spanish-language studies. The type of fiction that developed during the boom was new in that it was less documentary-like in style, presented the characters' inner lives, and offered different ways to interpret reality. This last element provided the foundation for magical realism, a type of fiction that is strongly associated with Latin American writers and has gained a substantial following worldwide. Magical realism is a type of fiction that is realistic and conventional on the surface, but contains elements such as the supernatural, fantasy, or myth.

Writers whose work is credited with contributing to the boom include Gabriel Garcia Marquez,Jorge Luis Borge, and Julio Cortazar. Many of their works are considered enduring masterpieces of modern literature. In addition to being one of the youngest writers associated with the Latin American boom, Vargas Llosa is also the main Peruvian writer of the period.

Realism in Literature

Realism in literature, which became especially prominent around the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, refers to an author's factual, lifelike rendering of people, things, and events. Such writing is often concerned with realistic consequences of decisions made by characters. Most realistic writers are interested in democracy and frequently depict life among common people. Realism often reflects the tendency to move away from neatly plotted stories with distinct beginnings, middles, and endings, because life does not happen this way. Realists do not cater to readers' needs for satisfying conclusions with all loose ends resolved. Instead, they prefer to represent an episode (or episodes) from real life, leaving questions unanswered and a degree of uncertainty about where the characters will go after the story ends.

Vargas Llosa combined the realism he admired in many European literary works with his own innovations. He added multiple perspectives, interior monologues, and fragmented narratives.

Critical Overview

Mario Vargas Llosa is considered one of the foremost writers in Latin American literature. Although his novels receive the most critical attention, his short works are also praised for their realism and their use of innovative techniques. Many top literary critics and writers, including Salman Rushdie, admire Vargas Llosa. Critics like Rushdie (in *New Republic)* and Regina Janes (in *Reference Guide to World Literature)* note that Vargas Llosa's career reflects the author's growing confidence in his ability to write complex fiction. His early works, these critics note, are more straightforward, yet are equally compelling. "The Challenge" typifies this observation because it is a simple story of an arranged fight between two men, supported by their social groups, yet the story is written in such a way as to encourage the reader to look more deeply into the characters' motivations.

In the context of Latin American literature, Vargas Llosa is considered one of the most important modern writers. His use of realism, combined with effective innovations and complexities, has earned critical and popular acclaim. The author believes that Latin American authors have a responsibility to communicate socially responsible themes and messages, and critics often cite these as strengths in his works.

Criticism

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

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 discusses Mario Vargas Llosa's use of irony in the characterization of the Gimp in "The Challenge" and how this irony reveals complex themes.

Mario Vargas Llosa's short story "The Challenge" is a seemingly straightforward story about a fight between two men, Justo and the Gimp. Although Vargas Llosa tells the reader little about them and thus does not fully develop any of the characters, he provides enough information about some of the characters to allow the reader to make assumptions and draw conclusions. Vargas Llosa relies more on irony than descriptive narrative to reveal the character known as the Gimp, and in doing so the author also portrays valuable lessons about judging a person. According to William Harmon and C. Hugh Holman in *A Handbook to Literature,* irony refers to "the recognition of a reality different from appearance." In characterizing the Gimp, Vargas Llosa leads the reader to make certain assumptions about him based on his appearance and public demeanor, but then he shows that these assumptions do not comprise a true picture of the Gimp.

The Gimp's appearance is not heroic or inspiring. He is described as a man who is taller than most, with a lame left leg. This information tells the reader that the Gimp also moves somewhat clumsily, probably swaying back and forth a bit when he walks. In many situations, this would be the type of man the reader would expect to be the follower, not the leader, in his social group, especially a group that emphasizes fighting and dominating others. His nickname is an outward acknowledgement by the public that he is lame, and his acceptance of this nickname reflects the character's acceptance of his physical limitations. In fact, Vargas Llosa never gives the Gimp's real name. In addition, his rough features and hard appearance give him a menacing, unapproachable quality. Together, these physical qualities suggest a person who is not a stereotypically strong, bold hero. His emergence as a leader respected by his peers is ironic, then, because all outward clues suggest a completely different social standing.

Despite his lame leg, the Gimp is the winner of the fight with Justo. Moreover, he wins by respecting the rules of the fight, when such a character might be expected to cheat. Too often, writers portray characters who appear as though they may have bad characteristics and then have the characters' actions validate this appearance. In "The Challenge," however, the Gimp not only adheres to rules of fairness, he also displays compassion when he is winning the fight. He pleads with Julian and Leonidas to make Justo surrender the fight, presumably so the Gimp does not have to kill him. This casts doubt on Moses' earlier comments to Julian that the Gimp was talking tough the night before about how he would "cut [Justo] up into little pieces." Even if the Gimp did make such comments, the truth about his character is revealed more honestly in his actions during the fight. It is ironic that the Gimp tries to spare Justo's life in a fair fight because the Gimp is presented as a tough, relentless fighting machine. In reality, he possesses at least some degree of compassion. When the fight ends with Justo's death, the Gimp does not brag to his friends or his enemies, he simply walks quietly away. This is the

last time the reader sees the Gimp, and it shows him as the unlikely victor in a physically demanding forum. Although the reader is led to take Justo's side in the story, it is difficult to hate the Gimp for killing him.

Another way in which Vargas Llosa uses irony in portraying the Gimp is in the pig imagery that describes him. First, the reader learns that there is a rumor that the Gimp's lame foot carries a large scar (shaped like a cross) from a pig bite he received many years ago. Although nobody has ever seen this scar, the rumor persists. During the fight, it is dark, but Julian imagines "the Gimp sweating, his mouth shut, his little pig eyes aflame and blazing behind his eyelids, his skin throbbing, the wings of his flattened nose and the slit of his mouth shaken by an unconceivable quivering . . ."

This language clearly casts the Gimp in the image of a pig; more specifically of a pig fearing for his life. This imagery is significant because it likens the Gimp to an animal that is typically slaughtered. The men are fighting with knives, which is the instrument commonly used to slaughter pigs. That the rumored scar on his foot is in the shape of a cross suggests that the expected slaughter (of the pig) will be sacrificial, as the cross symbolizes the Christian belief in Jesus' willingness to be sacrificed on the cross. Although the setting of this story is never given, it is probably Peru, since much of Vargas Llosa' s work is set in his native land. If it is not Peru, it is another Latin American country, as evident in the characters' names, which means that Roman Catholicism is the prevailing religious belief. This is significant because the cross—in the form of the crucifix, a cross bearing Jesus' body—is quite common among Catholics. The pig imagery associated with the Gimp creates tension and confusion about what sort of person the Gimp is. Is he a lowly pig to be slaughtered and therefore a villain? Or is he a sacrificial figure meant to die for the good of others and therefore a heroic figure? Either way, the pig imagery seems to foreshadow the Gimp's death.

This expectation of the Gimp's death sets up another of Vargas Llosa's uses of irony, because whether the Gimp is villainous or heroic, he wins the fight by killing his opponent. He is the one who takes a life with his knife rather than being slaughtered with a knife like a pig. Among Vargas Llosa's works, the theme of the powerless attaining power (often through force or violence) presents itself time and again. If the Gimp is supposed to be understood as unsympathetic livestock, his victory demonstrates that, sometimes, unlikely people ultimately gain power. On the other hand, if the Gimp is to be understood as a noble sacrifice, his use of force and violence in the fight takes away his opportunity to fulfill his destiny. If that is the case, then another of Vargas Llosa's themes—the folly of abused power— is depicted. Clearly, "The Challenge" is a complex story in which characterization and themes emerge from the tension created by irony.

The irony used in portraying the Gimp demonstrates that truth is found in action and that it is dangerous to make snap judgments of people based on their appearance. The reader's opinion of the Gimp has likely changed somewhat from the beginning of the story, because his actions demonstrate an opposing, though equally valid, reality about his character. Beyond the Gimp's nickname, physical appearance, and associations with the pig, there is something admirable in his character. He is brave, skilled, and

compassionate. These qualities are revealed to the reader not through the narrator's comments, even though he and the Gimp were once friends, but through the Gimp's actions.

Vargas Llosa empowers his readers to make decisions about what sort of person the Gimp may or may not be. Regardless of readers' conclusions, the truth about who he is has little to do with what the Gimp says or what is said about him but instead is found in his actions. This is an important message of "The Challenge." What the Gimp appears to be, he is not. He seems to be weakened, slow, and inhuman, yet the fight shows that he is strong, capable, and compassionate yet determined to preserve his honor and his life. On the outside, the Gimp looks like he might be a bad person but after all, he turns out to be rather heroic. In creating a character who is easy to misjudge and difficult to admire even at the end (he wins the fight by killing Justo, the narrator's friend), Vargas Llosa teaches a lesson about impressions and patience in understanding another person. The author's use of irony catches the reader off guard and forces him or her to consider complex questions about the Gimp and, by extension, about other people and situations. By showing the reader who the Gimp is, instead of simply telling, Vargas Llosa places demands on the reader that lead to a greater understanding of the Gimp in the end.

Source: Jennifer Bussey, Critical Essay on "The Challenge," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

Korb has a master's degree in English literature and creative writing and has written for a wide variety of educational publishers. In the following essay, Korb explores the many ambiguous elements of Vargas Llosa 's story.

In Vargas Llosa's prizewinning story "The Challenge," the meaningless death of a young man takes place within the confines of an unstable, impermanent world. In the environment that Justo and his friends inhabit, nothing is what it seems. Actions, people, and even relationships constantly shift and transform. Appearances cannot be trusted. This motif fixes the moral framework in which young men such as Julian and Justo grow up, helping to explain why violence, and their falsely brave reactions to it, outlines their lives.

In marked contrast to this motif, "The Challenge" opens with firm roots in the mundane, realistic world. "We were drinking beer, like every Saturday," Julian narrates, "when Leonidas appeared in the doorway of the River Bar. We saw at once from his face that something had happened." At this early point in the story, situations are still what they appear to be. Bad news is conveyed in the usual way, by a "pensive" expression on a person's face or a voice with a "strange" inflection. Julian and his friends soon find out what causes Leonidas to show concern—that evening their friend Justo will fight a tough rival known as the Gimp.

This news sets in motion a chain of events that plays out against the wavering realities that delineate the rest of the story. No longer are things as they seem; these senses—eyes and ears—can no longer be relied upon. To enhance this feeling, Vargas Llosa imbues the narrative with details that show just how unreliable appearances can be. Some of these details are small; for instance, although the men live in a city, the outskirts, "where the dunes started," are only walking distance away; or as he leaves home, Julian bumps into his wife, who holds their sleeping son in her arms, giving Julian "the impression he was dead." Other telling details surround the men and the upcoming fight. The Gimp, so-called because of a lame left foot, is actually an agile, skillful fighter. His gang jumped Justo that afternoon not like men but "like mad dogs" whom even the priest called "animals." Indeed, although the rivalry between the Gimp and Justo has developed from their city personas, the place it will finally end is outside of the city, distant enough that only the "twinkling lights" are visible.

Paralleling these disparities, Julian and his friends are forced to hide the truth from themselves and the other people who surround them. Julian lies to his wife about where he is going that evening and when he will return. More significantly, Briceño does not tell Justo that he believes that "the Gimp's going to kill" him. Instead, at the fight Briceño and Leon "seemed to have agreed on showing confidence and even a certain amount of light-heartedness in front of Justo." To carry out their goal, they lie about Justo's fighting prowess. "'You're going to cut him to shreds," says Leon, and Briceño backs him up, adding, "The Gimp couldn't touch you." Briceño, however, tries to stop the fight through the blatant subterfuge of suggesting it be postponed because there is not enough

moonlight to see. Such dishonesty can be dangerous. This danger, physically symbolized when Julian hides his knife in his pants pocket, is ultimately borne out in Justo's death.

From the moment that Julian leaves his house on this deadly evening, every action is overshadowed by shifting perception. At the bar where he stops off first, the changing nature of reality is reinforced when Julian and the owner discuss the Gimp. While Julian describes this foe's face as "really funny when he's mad," the owner says that the night before, when the Gimp was angry with Justo, "he looked like the devil." Justo's own appearance this evening is deceptive: "Seen from the side and against the darkness outside, he looked like a kid, a woman: from that angle, his features were delicate, soft." However, once Justo turns around and faces Julian, "the purple scar wounding the other side of his face, from the corner of his mouth up to his forehead" destroys that image.

The situation that evening, as well as the feelings of the men involved, is clearly amiss. The four friends descend to the riverbank differently than usual, along a longer, narrow path. The unusualness of the evening, despite the gang's brave talk, is demonstrated by Briceño's unfamiliarity with the terrain, and going down the path he "tripped and swore." The "raft," where the fight is to take place, is not even a raft but rather a tree that fell into the dry riverbed. Its impermanence and instability is reinforced through Julian's description: "It was very heavy and once it went down, the water couldn't raise it, could only drag it along for a few yards, so that each year 'the raft' moved a little farther from the city." All that is constant are the instruments of danger, for in comparing his knife with Julian's, Justo declares them to be "the same."

Nowhere, however, are Vargas Llosa's careful details more relevant than in the fight scene, when, again, nothing is what it seems. The Gimp's knife "felt like a piece of ice" when Julian checked it over. The poncho that Leonidas wears becomes a shield that Justo wraps around his arm, and later, after the men's ponchos have fallen off in the heat of fighting, it comes to resemble "a many-faceted rock." Justo and the Gimp "didn't look so much like two men getting ready to fight as shadowy statues cast in some black material or the shadows of two young, solid carob trees on the riverbank." As the fight is about to begin, the Gimp is hardly a man but a "limping shadow [that] slid toward the center of the space the two groups had marked off."

The moon is hidden that evening, shrouding the scene in darkness. When Julian first approaches the Gimp's gang they do not recognize him, and Julian's answer to their questioning who's there— "Julian. . . . Julian Huertas. You blind?"— underscores the complete blindness that Justo and his friends insist on maintaining; all of them know who will be the winner this evening. This murkiness is literally reinforced as Julian examines the Gimp's knife, which he only can do by the "feeble light" of a match. When he throws Justo's knife to the Gimp's friend to examine it, it falls on the ground, and Julian must resort to "groping on the sand in search of" the weapon.

The surrounding blackness forces the witnesses to "strain" their eyes "vainly" to see what is happening. Because of this, Julian's description of the fight is unreliable. However, Julian refuses to admit this. "I wasn't able to see their faces," he

acknowledges, "but I closed my eyes and saw them better than if F d been in their midst." Such a blatant misstatement is Julian's attempt to assert some measure of control over this hopeless situation, even to the minimal extent of elevating it to a fight filled with honor and courage rather than admitting it is merely a brutal, senseless fight between petty rivals. The partially viewed fight itself illustrates the slippery nature so prevalent in the story. The Gimp's movements and his circling around Justo are like "dancing." Justo, no longer an angry young man, responds by "offering his body and whisking it away . . . like a woman in heat." At one point, the "adversaries, as close as lovers, formed a single body."

Not surprisingly, the deadly blows come as a result of Justo's inability to accept the simple truth— the Gimp is the superior fighter. Justo, "his usual sneering mask intensified by anger and his lips moist with rage and fatigue," attacks the Gimp. To emphasize this deliberate obfuscation, Vargas Llosa uses words that relate to vision; as Julian narrates, "I opened my eyes just in time to see Justo pounce madly, blindly on the other man." Justo's refusal to accurately assess his own ability as a fighter leads him to give his opponent "every advantage, offering his face, foolishly exposing his body." Significantly, although Justo's friends witness the final knife thrusts, they are unable to really understand what is happening. They can't tell "who was who ... whose arm delivered which blows, whose throat offered up those roars that followed one another like echoes." All that they can see with certainty are the "naked knife blades in the air . . . blazing, in and out of sight, hidden or brandished in the night as in some magician's spectacular show."

The Gimp attempts to bring an end to the fight before it takes its final turn. In a "voice we all knew but which we wouldn't have recognized if it had taken us by surprise in the dark," the Gimp shouts out to Julian to tell Justo to give up. At this crucial moment, Julian again is rendered blind to his friend's needs. Unable to answer, he turns for Leonidas's opinion and thus fails to witness the fatal cut. Significantly, the hand with which Justo launched his final attack on the Gimp was the one that he had been holding over his face "as if he wanted to drive some horrible sight away from his eyes." As Justo opens his eyes fully to the "bitterness of his defeat," he dies. Yet, in this twisted environment, even death cannot be constant. Justo's body becomes that of a "limp, damp, cold . . . beached jellyfish." His friend's shoulders, now for carrying Justo, become a coffin.

The evening culminates, taking on greater power and emotional resonance, with the revelation that Leonidas is Justo's father. This is a surprise ending, even though Vargas Llosa has strewn many clues along the path of the story: Leonidas was the first person to show discomfort with the fight and to react to it; Leonidas insisted that he knew the truth about Justo's scar; Leonidas showed up unexpectedly to watch the fight; the Gimp called Leonidas "Pop" three times and begged him, after Julian, to tell Justo to stop fighting. These clues are among the very few elements that can be taken at face value; however, they are obscured by the uncertainty of the other details of the story. However, this new knowledge helps clarify the shadowy world of false appearances and duplicity in which these young men live. Writes Dick Gerdes in *Mario Vargas Llosa,* "[t]he reader comes to realize that the characters' lives are based on appearances, deceit, and

fatalism." By the story's end, all that is certain is that the rule of violence and machismo will prevail.

Source: Rena Korb, Critical Essay on "The Challenge," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #3

Warren has a master of fine arts degree in writing from Vermont College and writes young adult fiction. In this essay, Warren explores the narrative voice as it reflects the author's experience and defines the story.

"The Challenge," by Mario Vargas Llosa, contains a strong feel of the emotional undercurrents that were a part of the author's world as a boy and young man. Writers acquire inspiration and material from their environment, from experience and observation. Vargas Llosa, one of the great contemporary South American writers who helped bring South American themes and their writers to the attention of the world, has continuously pulled from the intrigues of his life. As the author says in "Is Fiction the Art of Living," an article written for the *New York Times,* "as in everything I've written, I began with experiences still vivid in my memory and stimulating to my imagination and then fantasized something that is an extremely unfaithful reflection of that material."

"The Challenge" defines an ever prominent theme of Vargas Llosa: the coming of age in a world of social injustice and revolution. It was a violent world that surrounded the young author as he pursued his own struggle through adolescence in the late 1940s and 1950s in Peru. The year was 1959 when "The Challenge" was first published as part of a collection of short stories entitled *Los jefes,* translated as *The Cubs and Other Stories.* The author was recently graduated from college. The images and experiences he writes about in this collection he retrieved from his life beginning at the age of ten. At ten, he had moved to Piura, Peru, and lived there for two years with his grandparents, aunts, and uncles. From Piura, he moved to Lima to live with his father and mother. At fourteen, he was sent to a military school. Throughout this period of his life he began to learn about machismo, hatred, love, and honor. The author says in his autobiography, *Making Waves,* that "memories of Piura" were the inspiration for several stories in *The Cubs.* He says of his youth, "Peruvians of my age grew up in the midst of this tender violence—or violent tenderness—that I tried to recreate in my first stories."

Vargas Llosa describes Piura as being

full of incidents that fired the imagination. There was La Mangacheria, an area made up of mud and reed huts, where the best chicha bars could be found, and La Gallinacera, located between the river and the abattoir. Both districts hated each other and there were sometimes pitched battles between mangaches and gallinazos.

"The Challenge" reflects the turmoil of living among mixed classes, close to the streets, and at a time when honor was all important.

The author's impressions by other writers is apparent in "The Challenge." In the 1950s, he and his friends were reading mostly North American and European writers: Henry Miller, Joyce, Hemingway, Proust, Malraux, Celine, Borges. "But, above all, Faulkner," he says in *Making Waves.* Nicholas Shrady, in a *New York Times* article, "Why He Jilted Sartre," quotes Vargas Llosa as saying, "The world out of which he [Faulkner] created

his own world is quite similar to a Latin American world." There were mixed cultures, traditions, and races in both environments, "all forming a difficult coexistence full of prejudice and violence." In "The Challenge," as in other writing by the author, social conflict and violence have a prominent role.

This short narrative at first appears to be a scene from a larger work. Its faceless characters are minimally described, as if the reader already knows them. From its first line, "We were drinking beer, like every Saturday, when Leonidas appeared in the doorway of the River Bar," the story's telling is straightforward and minimal. It is with Leonidas's arrival that the plot becomes apparent. There is to be a fight between their friend and a feared rival.

Vargas Llosa maintains his theme of hatred, machismo, relationships, and honor by limiting his settings. "The Challenge" reads like a play. The boys disband, then come back together with their friend, Justo, who is to face the evil and ugly adversary, the Gimp. It takes only one sentence to describe their walk to the riverbed, where the fight is to take place. This leaves the biggest scene—the fight—for the rest of the telling.

The only character with a physical description is the Gimp, but this description is given only after he has been built up as a legend to be feared. In the darkness of the fight scene, the narrator imagines the Gimp's face as "armored in pimples," with "olive skin and beardless," and "tiny pinholes of his eyes," and with "his lips, thick as fingers, hanging from his chin, triangular like an iguana's." By giving this much attention to him, whether he did so consciously or not, Vargas Llosa has made the Gimp more real than the other characters, bigger than life, so to speak. Even the Gimp's lameness has a mysterious quality, said to have been the result of a pig's bite while he was sleeping, "but nobody had ever seen that scar."

Justo, the boy who is to fight the Gimp, is only described throughout the story by a few mannerisms such as his "usual sneer," a "brusque gesture," and "walking on the sand with firm steps, his head up." Justo's feelings of hatred, anger, and impatience combined with his quick movements during the fight give him his physicality. The reader knows little about him other than what is surmised. The narrator and his other friends are a mix of observers and victims. The focus of the story remains on the action and emotions.

The tension of the life-and-death duel between the adversaries is increased by the darkness of a moonless night. Knives are inspected and approved by both sides as per the unspoken rules. Both fighters assume a familiar stance, crouching low, and moving in rhythm with the other. Each has a poncho-covered arm held high to protect his face.

One boy is tall, ugly, lame, and a seasoned opponent. He is known and feared, even respected. The other boy is small by comparison but quick, with an attitude that seems to have gotten him into this situation. He has some fear, but he has more hatred and anger, and he is not about to back down. An audience of close friends supports both fighters. Even Leonidas, the old man, has come to support Justo.

Another writer who intrigued Vargas Llosa was Jorge Luis Borges. Nicholas Shrady says in his *New York Times* article that "the appeal of Borges's fantastic tales of gauchos, knives, labyrinths, and tigers was powerful" for Vargas Llosa. This description is intriguing in light of Vargas Llosa's fight scene. The fighters proceed much like two animals stalking each other, circling, crouching, then lunging and retreating, seeking to fool the other into dropping his guard. The labyrinth analogy is an apt one. The fighters move, not only within a circle but toward and away from its center until, at last, one fighter suddenly finds himself alone in the center of the labyrinth, victorious. Then there is the journey back to the outside, the walk home, with kudos or regrets, praise or sorrow, and the lessons learned. Honor is either maintained or lost, whether in life or death it seems not to matter.

Throughout the fight the author keeps readers in suspense, even to the retreat from the center, when readers finally learn of the puzzling relationship between Justo, the smaller fighter, and the old man. Leonidas obviously had an investment in the outcome of the battle. At its outset, he instructs Justo as a trainer might at a boxing match and gives him his poncho for protection. His final instruction is, "Carry yourself like a man." It is not until the fight is over and the damage done that readers discover the father/son relationship between the two. Stranger yet is the reaction of Leonidas just prior to the end of the fight. He is implored by The Gimp to stop Justo, who is obviously wounded. Leonidas's reply: "Shut up and fight."

Why did Leonidas respond so? What was the relationship between him and his son? And what was the strength of his honor, his code of morality? Was the honor for his son's sake or his own? Perhaps both. There are many questions readers are left with that bring the story full circle, bring it to the point of its existence. What was the author showing the reader, telling him or her, and on how many levels does it play out?

Certainly there is the obvious historical connection with culture and society in the authors life, not only in Piura but also on a larger scale, that honor is often more important than outcomes. Then there is the question of Vargas Llosa's relationship with his own father.

When the author was young, his father, Ernesto Vargas, had abandoned his mother and him. When he was twelve, his father and mother reconciled, and young Mario was sent to Lima to live with them. Vargas Llosa says, in *Making Waves,* that living with his father meant "submitting to the discipline of a very severe man who was a stranger to me." Mario disliked his father and disliked Lima, where he witnessed even greater social injustices. Leonidas and Justo, likewise, appeared to be estranged. There is definitely an unseen, unknown element between the father and son of the story, and a possible connection with the author's experience.

At fourteen, Vargas Llosa's father sent him to the Leoncio Prado Military School, as the author says, because he was writing poetry. In his memoir, *A Fish in the Water,* quoted by Alan Riding in *a New York Times* article, "The Misadventures of Mario Vargas Llosa," the author says, "To write poems was another of the secret ways of resisting my father . . . since I knew how much it irritated him." Paraphrasing his father, in *Making*

Waves, the author says "a poet is condemned to die of hunger—and for my manhood—because poets are always homosexuals." Was this to save Mario, his father, or both? Was it about honor? Was it a father's duty? Vargas Llosa had his own understanding that may well have impacted his characters in stories yet to come. Mario despised military school, but it became the inspiration and setting for his first novel, *The Time of the Hero.*

Writers give their experiences, thoughts, and emotions to their characters. Was Vargas Llosa making a statement to or about his father? Was this a conscious act or perhaps unconscious? Either is possible. Even without making specific statements about their beliefs or feelings, authors will use them to move a story forward, or feed them to a character for motivation and direction.

Realist fiction is a compilation of reality and rings true even when it is beyond the reader's experience. Even as some of the author's earliest published writing, "The Challenge" brings together observation, emotional experience, and imagination. Its telling takes the reader into a reality, though far removed from his or her own, that is a place of feeling and as real in a deeper sense than a mere entertainment.

Source: Ray Warren, Critical Essay on "The Challenge," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2002.

Topics for Further Study

To what extent do you think Latin American culture drives the action of this story? Choose three different countries with varying cultures and summarize how the story would be the same or different as a result. Look for similarities and differences across cultures and also bear in mind what you understand human nature to be.

Think about how this story portrays a certain type of fighting. Compare it to modern American gang-related violence to see what similarities and differences there are. Is there a code of honor in each type? Are there established rules? Is there closure or resolution? Try to account for the differences between the two approaches and suggest motives for each.

Read about Vargas Llosa' s strained relationship with his father. What relevance might this have to the relationship between Leonidas and Justo in "The Challenge"? Does the author's background provide you with any insight into the fictional characters, or vice versa? Using your conclusions, prepare a brief presentation for a middle school English class in which you demonstrate that there is often a relationship between an author's personal experience and his or her writing.

Compare and Contrast

1950s: Fights between opposing groups are settled by arranging a time and place for a fight between two men, one from each group. The fights are often (but not always) carried out according to rules of fairness, and other members do not interfere with the fight. Weapons are generally fists or knives.

Today: Interpersonal violence tends to be the result of criminal activities and heightened political tensions rather than simple grudges. The accessibility of guns has raised the stakes of such violence.

1950s: The political atmosphere in Peru is changing. Dissatisfied groups determined to see improvement are challenging current authorities. In 1956, President Prado begins making sweeping changes, but economic instability and inflation cause riots and strikes. Students organize protests on campuses, and citizens are making their voices heard. The economy does not improve significantly until a 1959 series of government initiatives is enacted.

Today: Over the past fifty years, new political parties have emerged in Latin America. Peruvians have experienced coups, military rule, and democracy in an effort to establish a stable form of government. While the political climate is still tense and often unstable and border disputes are still a reality, the emphasis has shifted from trying to change existing regimes to trying to form workable new approaches to government.

1950s: Roman Catholicism is not only the predominant religion in Peru but also the established religion by law. Other religions are allowed to practice freely, however, and there are small numbers of Protestants, Jews, and Muslims.

Today: Roman Catholicism remains the predominant religion, with 90 percent of the population practicing.

What Do I Read Next?

Edited by Roberto Gonzales Echevarria, *The Oxford Book of Latin American Short Stories* (1999) is a collection of the work of more than fifty writers. Ranging from the sixteenth century to the present, this anthology enables the reader to follow the development of short fiction in Latin America.

Vargas Llosa's memoir, *A Fish in the Water* (1994) traces the author's experiences from his early days of strife with his father through his military school years and impressive career as an author to his days as a presidential candidate. Because it is autobiographical, this book allows the reader insight into Vargas Llosa's background as well as into the author himself.

Vargas Llosa's *The War of the End of the World* (1981) is considered by many to be the author's masterpiece and has, therefore, received considerable critical attention. It is the story of a Brazilian preacher whose apocalyptic prophecies earn him a sizeable following.

Further Study

Christ, Ronald, "Talk with Mario Vargas Llosa," in *New York Times Book Review,* April 9, 1978, pp. 11, 32, 33.

Christ interviews Vargas Llosa about his fiction and his experiences. While many interviews with the author concentrate on the political turmoil in Latin America, this interview pursues the author's writing more deeply.

Colchie, Thomas, ed., *A Hammock beneath the Mangoes: Stories from Latin America,* Plume, 1992.

Colchie's anthology of short Latin American fiction includes the work of twenty-six writers. The stories are written both by established writers and by emerging voices in Latin American letters, and the book is organized by geography.

Kristal, Efrain, *Temptation of the Word: The Novels of Mario Vargas Llosa,* Vanderbilt University Press, 1999.

Kristal provides critical analysis of Vargas Llosa's career as a novelist, commenting at length on the author's importance among Latin American writers since the 1960s. Kristal notes how Vargas Llosa's fiction taps into the intense political climate of his native land and suggests divisions in his writing according to political ideologies.

World Literature Today: Mario Vargas Llosa Issue, Vol. 52, No. 1, Winter 1978.

This entire issue is devoted to exploring the life and work of Vargas Llosa. A variety of contributors comment at length about such topics as Vargas Llosa's belief that Latin-American writers have a responsibility to be socially aware.

Bibliography

Castro-Klaren, Sara, "Mario Vargas Llosa," in *Latin American Writers,* Vol. 3, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1989, pp. 1421-36.

Gerdes, Dick, *Mario Vargas Llosa,* G. K. Hall & Co., 1999.

Harmon, William, and C. Hugh Holman, "Irony," in *A Handbook to Literature, Seventh Edition,* Prentice Hall, 1996, pp. 277-78.

—,"Magical Realism," in A *Handbook to Literature, Seventh Edition,* Prentice Hall, 1996, p. 304.

Janes, Regina, "Vargas Llosa, (Jorge) Mario (Pedro)," in *Reference Guide to World Literature,* 2d ed., St. James Press, 1995, pp. 256-58.

Riding, Alan, "The Misadventures of Mario Vargas Llosa," in *New York Times,* May 15, 1994.

Rubel, David, ed., "Mario Vargas Llosa," in *The Reading List: Contemporary Fiction,* Henry Holt and Company, 1998.

Rushdie, Salman, "Peruvian Master," in *New Republic,* Vol. 191, No. 15, October 8, 1984, pp. 25-27.

Shrady, Nicholas, "Why He Jilted Sartre," in *New York Times,* March 10, 1991.

Vargas Llosa, Mario, "The Country of a Thousand Faces," in *Making Waves,* Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999.

—," I s Fiction the Art of Living ? " in *New York Times,*October 7, 1984.

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