Dante and the Lobster Study Guide

Dante and the Lobster by Samuel Beckett

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

"Dante and the Lobster," published by London's Chatto and Windus in the 1934 collection *More Pricks than Kicks,* is in many ways the first important work of Samuel Beckett's illustrious, and ultimately Nobel prize-winning, career. An early version of the story was published in 1932, but in its final form "Dante and the Lobster" provides a fitting and enlightening introduction to Beckett's body of work. Most of his important themes are here: aimlessness, the desire not to act but rather to wait, and the ultimate meaninglessness and futility of existence.

These themes are in their infancy in this story, though, and the story is deeply indebted to Beckett's then-mentor, the Irish writer James Joyce. Where Beckett's later work is constricted and ruthlessly stripped-down, "Dante and the Lobster" takes place in a recognizable place (Dublin) and boasts a protagonist who has yet to descend to the levels of the tramps and decrepit chatterers of Beckett's postwar plays and prose works. Belacqua Shuah is a young man, like Beckett a student at Dublin's Trinity College. The work also depends heavily on allusion, both to literature and to religious (specifically Catholic) tradition. Belacqua's name, for instance, is taken from Dante and from the Bible. In his later works, Beckett drastically reduced the number of allusions and buried them inside the consciousnesses of his narrators rather than placing them on display as he does here. The story is a fascinating look at a young writer just beginning to find his voice and to emerge from under the immensely powerful influence of the greatest writer of the age.

Author Biography

Samuel Beckett was born on April 13, 1906, in Foxrock, near Dublin, Ireland, to a middle-class Protestant family. Beckett was an active and athletic boy, and he excelled at cricket. "You might say," Beckett said, "that I had a happy childhood . . . although I had little talent for happiness. But I was often lonely." He had a close and warm relationship with his father, Bill, but tension prevailed between Beckett and his mother, May. He attended the Portora Royal School in Enniskellen beginning in 1920, and upon graduation he matriculated at Dublin's prestigious Trinity College in 1923.

Beckett studied French and Italian at Trinity, and finally his bright academic potential began to be realized. By the end of his third year at Trinity, he won the Foundation scholarship, the most prestigious award given to undergraduates. While studying the French and Italian classics, he also became interested in contemporary literature, reading the avant-garde French poet Apollinaire and attending Dublin's Abbey Theatre. Impressed by Beckett's promise, Trinity selected Beckett for an exchange post as a tutor and researcher at the Ecole Normale Superieure in Paris.

Beckett arrived in Paris in 1928, and almost upon arriving, he became friends with another Irishman, Thomas MacGreevey, who introduced Beckett to the experimental literary circles of Paris. Beckett gravitated especially to James Joyce, another Irishman, who was generally recognized as the most important English-language writer alive. Joyce took Beckett on as a kind of assistant, and Beckett learned a great deal from Joyce. Most importantly, it was during this period that Beckett decided to start his own writing career: he wrote a short story (his first) and a poem and a critical study of Joyce, both of which achieved publication.

Beckett returned to Dublin in September 1930 to take up a post as a lecturer in modern languages at Trinity. After Paris, Dublin seemed provincial and conservative to the young academic, and Beckett's home life (specifically his difficult relationship with his mother and his father's death in 1933) exacerbated his unhappiness. He quit in 1932, and for the next few years he lived a wandering and unsettled life, going between Dublin, London, Paris, and Germany. During these years, though, Beckett continued writing, finishing two novels *(Dream of Fair to Middling Women,* which remained unpublished in his lifetime, and *Murphy)* and a collection of short stories *(More Pricks than Kicks,* from which "Dante and the Lobster" is taken). Finally, in 1937, Beckett returned to Paris—this time permanently.

Beckett resumed the life he had lived eight years earlier in Paris and immersed himself in writing. In 1940, the Nazis invaded the city, and Beckett fled to the south of France, where he and his companion Suzanne Deschevaux-Dumesnil joined the French Resistance. When their cell was betrayed, Beckett and Deschevaux-Dumesnil hid in the Vaucluse region, where they waited out the war and where Beckett finished his third novel, *Watt.* When the war ended, Beckett and Deschevaux-Dumesnil returned to their apartment in Paris.

With the end of the war, Beckett's writing underwent a dramatic change. Eliminating all traces of the influence of James Joyce, Beckett began writing about wanderers in unnamed landscapes, tramps, the aimless. He also began writing in French. From 1945 to 1955, Beckett produced most of the works that gave him fame: the trilogy of novels *(Molloy, Malone Dies,* and *The Unnamable),* the *Stories and Texts for Nothing,* and his masterpiece plays *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame.* Although his work was yet to find a large audience, a few readers and critics appreciated his novels, and one important director, Roger Blin, staged *Godot* and was a champion of Beckett's works for the rest of his life.

During the rest of his life, his writing continued to become even more compressed, stark, and unsparing. He wrote in many genres—stage plays, mimes, a film screenplay, radio plays, short prose pieces. He insisted that directors stage his plays exactly as he specified in the script and accepted no deviation. In 1960, he finally married Deschevaux-Dumesnil, but their relationship was never that of a traditional married couple. Rather, they seem to have been life partners more than lovers. In 1969, Beckett won the Nobel Prize for literature. From 1970 to his death in 1989, Beckett continued to produce short performance pieces that were ever more pared down to the barest elements: motion, light, sound, and, at times, language. He also continued to produce short prose pieces. Diagnosed with emphysema in 1986, Beckett died of respiratory failure in December 1989, following Suzanne Deschevaux-Dumesnil by eight months.

Plot Summary

The story opens with Belacqua Shuah, the protagonist, studying the "canti of the moon" of the *Paradiso* of Dante Alighieri. He is confused by the text and becomes bored with it. Frustrated, he slams the book shut and thinks about what he has to do with the rest of the day. "First lunch," he thinks, "then the lobster, then the Italian lesson." To prepare lunch, he spreads out a newspaper on the table and then goes over and lights the gas burner on the stove. He takes out the toaster and thinks about the proper way to make toast. Slicing some bread, he carefully and methodically toasts it. Coating the toast with mustard, hot pepper and salt, he prepares to eat it, then thinks better of it. He wraps the toast in newspaper and leaves his apartment.

Keeping his head down so as not to be bothered as he walks the streets of Dublin, Belacqua goes quickly to the cheese shop where, he knows, the proprietor has a slab of Gorgonzola waiting for him. But when Belacqua arrives at the cheese shop, he refuses to take the cheese; it is not rotten enough for him. However, he relents, and cursing Angelo, he nonetheless takes the cheese and leaves without paying. Leaving the cheese shop, he reconsiders his schedule. He thinks that he can probably spend his money on beer and drink it while he waits for the fishmonger's shop to open in the afternoon.

As Belacqua nears the school where his lesson is to take place, he thinks back on the lunch that he has consumed and is immensely satisfied with it. Even though the cheese seemed like it would be mild, it ended up being quite strong. Reminiscing on the painful experience of chewing hard, toasted bread, he then begins musing about condemned murderers who might be executed in the near future. He picks up the lobster from the fishmonger, is confused by the man's description of it as "lepping fresh," and proceeds on to his Italian lesson. Immediately, he asks Signorina Ottolenghi, his teacher, about the canti of the moon. As they talk, the French teacher, Mlle. Glain, knocks on the door and wants to know what is in the package outside the door, since the cat was attacking the package and almost tore it "to flitters." When Belacqua and Signorina Ottolenghi begin their lesson again, Signorina Ottolenghi expresses exasperation that they never seem to make any progress.

After his lesson, Belacqua walks to his aunt's house for dinner. Seeing a dejected couple in a doorway, he thinks of the Bible and then of the condemned murderer McCabe and his last meal. When he arrives at his aunt's, he finds her in the garden. She embraces him, and they go into the basement kitchen, where she unwraps the package containing the lobster. He is stunned to discover that the lobster is alive, and his aunt laughs at him for that. When he asks what she intends to do with a live lobster, she says, "Boil the beast, what else?" He is horrified, thinking that it has survived so many perils only to be boiled alive. He reassures himself by thinking that it is a quick death, after all; the narrator, though, answers that "It is not."

Summary

Belacqua is studying Dante's *Paradiso* one morning and is having great difficulty with the canti in the moon. He has been able to make it through the first part without much difficulty, but he has become hopelessly bogged down in the second part. Although he is bored, he refuses to quit and instead forces himself to understand the meaning of the words that are in front of him. He continues to work diligently until he hears the clock signal that it is mid-day. As the clock chimes, he emphatically closes the book and puts it aside.

Freed from the rigors of his studies, Belacqua contemplates how to spend the rest of the day. It seems that there is always something to be done, and in Belecqua's case these things include having lunch, getting a lobster, and then going for his Italian lesson. He isn't sure what he will do after his Italian lesson but is positive that something requiring his attention will come up between now and the time his lesson ends.

As Belacqua sets about the task of preparing his lunch, he hopes that he will be able to complete the task without interruption. An interruption would not only ruin his preparations, but the meal as well. To help guard against any possible intruders, Belacqua locks the door. Then, turning his full attention to the task at hand, he lays an old newspaper on the kitchen table before lighting the stove. Next, he takes the toaster from its place on the wall and sets it squarely on the flame. Noting that the flame is too high, and not wanting to risk the chance of toasting his bread too quickly, he turns the burner down. Satisfied that the flame has now been properly regulated, he turns to the next task: slicing the bread. With his knife, he cuts two slices of identical size before returning the remaining portion of the loaf to its tin. He takes the two bread slices to the stove and lays them one on top of the other on the toaster. The bread must be toasted in this manner, because the toaster isn't large enough to accommodate the slices side-by-side. The entire toasting process takes quite a bit of time, but Belacqua is a firm believer in the idea that anything worth doing is worth doing well. When he is satisfied that the bread is properly toasted, he removes the toaster from the flame and returns it to its nail on the wall.

Next, Belacqua spreads mustard, salt and Cayenne pepper on each piece of bread, taking care to make sure each piece is evenly coated. As he does this, he thinks about the delight he will feel when he finally begins to eat. However, he is not quite finished preparing this meal; there is still more work to be done before it can be eaten. Slapping the two pieces of bread together, he wraps them in newspaper and prepares to leave his house. As he does this, Belacqua hopes that he doesn't meet anyone he knows along the way, for any delays will certainly ruin this meal that he has so painstakingly prepared. As he makes his way through the streets, Belacqua keeps his head down to minimize the chance that he will be recognized by a passer-by. He reaches his destination - a small grocery store - and enters.

The grocer has had a piece of Gorgonzola cheese waiting for Belacqua since that morning. Belacqua looks at the piece of cheese; not very happy with what he sees, he

turns it over to see if the other side is any better. Growing increasingly angry, Belacqua confronts the grocer and asks if this cheese is the best he has. The grocer assures him that he wouldn't be able to find a rottener piece in all of Dublin. Although Belacqua is not completely satisfied with this answer, he takes the cheese, places it between the two pieces of bread, and tells the grocer that if he cannot do better, he will be forced to buy his cheese elsewhere. Belacqua walks away from the store with great difficulty as his feet are crippled from various ailments. The grocer feels badly for Belacqua, but he also realizes that he cannot afford to continue to let him take the cheese without paying for it.

As Belacqua walks through town, he thinks once again about his schedule and decides that perhaps he has some time to spend in the bar before the fishmonger's shop opens later that afternoon. Considering this plan further, he decides that provided his aunt placed the order for the lobster early enough, he should be able to retrieve it without much of a wait and still make it to his class on time. He thinks about what he might like to drink and decides to make sure he keeps enough money for a tram ride in case he runs late.

With all of this decided, Belacqua begins to think of his upcoming lesson. He has not prepared one of the lessons he had been assigned, but he doesn't seem overly concerned. His teacher, Signorina Adriana Ottolenghi, is a charming and intelligent woman who is unlike all of the other women Belacqua has ever known. At his last lesson, she had suggested that they would read *Il Cinque Maggio* together this time, but Belacqua plans to ask her if they could postpone that lesson for another time. Instead, he plans to ask for her help with the canti in the moon passages that have been giving him such difficulty.

After spending some time in the bar, Belacqua makes his way toward the school. As he walks, he thinks again about his lunch and decides that it ranks among the best he has ever had. He also reminds himself that in the future, he must not be so quick to judge a piece of cheese based on its smell. He is also pleased that the transaction involving the lobster went as smoothly as it did; in fact, when the clerk had handed him the package, he had told Belacqua that the lobster was "lepping fresh," which he took to mean that it was freshly killed.

Belacqua arrives at the school, and after hanging his coat and hat in the hall, he makes his way to the Italian room where Signorina Ottolenghi is waiting. About thirty minutes into the lesson, when Signorina Ottolenghi compliments Belacqua on his progress, he decides to ask her about the passages from the canti in the moon that have been troubling him. Signorina Ottolenghi tells him that she is familiar with the passage, and although she cannot remember its significance, she offers to look it up for him. As they discuss this further, they become aware of a commotion in the hall outside the classroom. The school's French instructor, Mlle Gain, enters the room carrying a cat and asks what is in the package that Belacqua had left in the hall. When Belacqua replies that the package contains a fish, Mlle Gain tells him that she prevented the cat from getting into the package "in the nick of time." After Mlle Gain leaves the room, Belacqua attempts to get Signorina Ottolenghi to resume their lesson, but she is unwilling to do so.

Belacqua makes his way to the home of his aunt. When he arrives, she is tending to the plants in her garden. After she greets Belacqua, they make their way to the kitchen, and once there, his aunt unwraps the parcel containing the lobster. As Belacqua tells his aunt that he had been assured that the lobster is fresh, he sees it move. He is startled, and as his aunt goes off to get her tools, he watches the lobster move on the table. When his aunt returns, he asks what she intends to do to it. When she replies that she intends to boil it, Belacqua is mortified. Even her assurance that the lobster will not feel any pain does not placate him. He thinks about how the lobster had managed to survive living in the ocean, being captured, and being discovered by the French teacher's cat only to meet its end in a pot of boiling water. As his aunt drops the lobster into the pot, Belacqua consoles himself in the fact that the lobster's death will be a quick one.

Analysis

Samuel Beckett's short story "Dante and the Lobster" describes an afternoon in the life of Belacqua. We don't know much about Belacqua, only that he is studying Italian and that his feet cause him a great deal of pain.

What is obvious about Belacqua is that he seems to become easily bogged down with the details of his life. As the story begins, he is struggling to understand a portion of Dante's *Paradiso*. While it seems as though he is committed to learning the complexity of the prose before him, when the clock signals the mid-day hour, he quickly puts his work aside and sets about the task of making his lunch. It is interesting that, for as much as that passage perplexes him during the morning, when the time set aside for study is over, finding the answers no longer seems important to him. We begin to see that perhaps Belacqua has some peculiarities; his obsession with making the perfect lunch provides our first sign. Other indications come during his outburst in the grocer's over the quality of the cheese as well as his preoccupation with making sure every moment of his afternoon is accounted for.

Despite the fact that Belacqua approaches these tasks with such exacting precision, it is not because he has many important things to do, but rather because he has nothing else to occupy his time. Recall that when he put aside his work and contemplated what to do next, he lamented that "there was always something that one had to do next." Yet these "things" which need to be done are merely mundane chores and tasks. We also see that he thrives on having each moment of his day precisely planned. Recall the amount of contemplation that he gives to deciding when he should pick up the lobster; clearly if this is the most pressing matter before him, it is likely that he has very little else to occupy his thoughts. We see another example of this later in the story when he spends a great deal of time trying to decide precisely how to ask his instructor for help with the passage from Dante that has been troubling him. Despite the amount of time and effort he puts into considering this, he fails to ask the question and leaves his lesson without the information he seeks.

Belacqua's fear of being interrupted as he goes about his various tasks also causes him to take such extreme measures as locking his door as he prepares his lunch and

refusing to walk the streets with his head up. This preoccupation with the smallest of details helps to portray Belacqua as a pathetic, lonely man. Adding to his peculiarities is the fact that his chronically painful feet cause him to walk with an unusual gait.

Given all of this, we see that the main theme of the story is futility. The author chooses to use Belacqua's character to illustrate how feelings of futility and dissatisfaction can overcome a person and make them feel as though their life is meaningless. Indeed, Belacqua's failure to grasp Dante's work can be seen as symbolic of that sense of futility. His belief that his meal will be ruined if he is interrupted while preparing his lunch is also an example of the sense of futility he feels. Another example can be found in his anxiety over whether or not he will need to wait for the lobster; he believes that the time he could spend waiting would negatively impact the rest of his plans for the afternoon.

It is simultaneously interesting, humorous and somewhat ironic that a man of Belacqua's intellect would not realize that a lobster needs to be alive when it is boiled for consumption. Although he does not say this, it is likely that when Belacqua realizes the lobster is still alive, he assumes that he will be unable to have his dinner as planned. This provides yet another example of how, for Belacqua, any unplanned occurrence will keep him from doing the things he had planned.

While it seems that Belacqua may not totally recognize the emptiness within his life, as the story ends, we begin to see that he does. As he contemplates the fate of the lobster, he begins to associate it with his own life; despite the fact that the lobster survived being captured, sent to market and a near miss with the French instructor's cat, it will nonetheless meet an unceremonious death in a pot of boiling water. Likewise, despite the time and effort he puts into carefully planning his day, Belacqua knows that any number of things can get in the way of allowing him to proceed with his plans.

The author uses the two most important items in Belacqua's life this day - Dante's work and the lobster he has been asked to pick up - in the story's title. The connection between these two seemingly unrelated items is clear; Belacqua seems to know that his quest to understand Dante's work is futile, yet he persists. Similarly, the lobster manages to survive a number of harrowing experiences despite the fact that it is destined to meet its death in a pot of boiling water.

Analysis

Samuel Beckett's short story "Dante and the Lobster" describes an afternoon in the life of Belacqua. We don't know much about Belacqua, only that he is studying Italian and that his feet cause him a great deal of pain.

What is obvious about Belacqua is that he seems to become easily bogged down with the details of his life. As the story begins, he is struggling to understand a portion of Dante's *Paradiso*. While it seems as though he is committed to learning the complexity of the prose before him, when the clock signals the mid-day hour, he quickly puts his work aside and sets about the task of making his lunch. It is interesting that, for as much as that passage perplexes him during the morning, when the time set aside for study is over, finding the answers no longer seems important to him. We begin to see that perhaps Belacqua has some peculiarities; his obsession with making the perfect lunch provides our first sign. Other indications come during his outburst in the grocer's over the quality of the cheese as well as his preoccupation with making sure every moment of his afternoon is accounted for.

Despite the fact that Belacqua approaches these tasks with such exacting precision, it is not because he has many important things to do, but rather because he has nothing else to occupy his time. Recall that when he put aside his work and contemplated what to do next, he lamented that "there was always something that one had to do next." Yet these "things" which need to be done are merely mundane chores and tasks. We also see that he thrives on having each moment of his day precisely planned. Recall the amount of contemplation that he gives to deciding when he should pick up the lobster; clearly if this is the most pressing matter before him, it is likely that he has very little else to occupy his thoughts. We see another example of this later in the story when he spends a great deal of time trying to decide precisely how to ask his instructor for help with the passage from Dante that has been troubling him. Despite the amount of time and effort he puts into considering this, he fails to ask the question and leaves his lesson without the information he seeks.

Belacqua's fear of being interrupted as he goes about his various tasks also causes him to take such extreme measures as locking his door as he prepares his lunch and refusing to walk the streets with his head up. This preoccupation with the smallest of details helps to portray Belacqua as a pathetic, lonely man. Adding to his peculiarities is the fact that his chronically painful feet cause him to walk with an unusual gait.

Given all of this, we see that the main theme of the story is futility. The author chooses to use Belacqua's character to illustrate how feelings of futility and dissatisfaction can overcome a person and make them feel as though their life is meaningless. Indeed, Belacqua's failure to grasp Dante's work can be seen as symbolic of that sense of futility. His belief that his meal will be ruined if he is interrupted while preparing his lunch is also an example of the sense of futility he feels. Another example can be found in his anxiety over whether or not he will need to wait for the lobster; he believes that the time he could spend waiting would negatively impact the rest of his plans for the afternoon.

It is simultaneously interesting, humorous and somewhat ironic that a man of Belacqua's intellect would not realize that a lobster needs to be alive when it is boiled for consumption. Although he does not say this, it is likely that when Belacqua realizes the lobster is still alive, he assumes that he will be unable to have his dinner as planned. This provides yet another example of how, for Belacqua, any unplanned occurrence will keep him from doing the things he had planned.

While it seems that Belacqua may not totally recognize the emptiness within his life, as the story ends, we begin to see that he does. As he contemplates the fate of the lobster, he begins to associate it with his own life; despite the fact that the lobster survived being captured, sent to market and a near miss with the French instructor's cat, it will nonetheless meet an unceremonious death in a pot of boiling water. Likewise, despite the time and effort he puts into carefully planning his day, Belacqua knows that any number of things can get in the way of allowing him to proceed with his plans.

The author uses the two most important items in Belacqua's life this day - Dante's work and the lobster he has been asked to pick up - in the story's title. The connection between these two seemingly unrelated items is clear; Belacqua seems to know that his quest to understand Dante's work is futile, yet he persists. Similarly, the lobster manages to survive a number of harrowing experiences despite the fact that it is destined to meet its death in a pot of boiling water.

Characters

The Aunt

Belacqua's aunt lives in Dublin. He goes and visits her, bringing her a lobster for their meal. She is a very down-to-earth and practical person, focused on the facts of everyday life. In many ways, she is the opposite of Belacqua.

Mademoiselle Glain

Mademoiselle Glain teaches French lessons next door to the room where Signorina Ottolenghi works. She has a cat that tries to eat Belacqua's lobster while Belacqua is taking his Italian lesson. Because of this, Belacqua decides he hates her, calling her a "base prying [b—]" and "a devout, virginal blue-stocking, honing after a penny' s worth of scandal."

The Grocer

According to the narrator, the grocer is "a warm-hearted human man [who] felt sympathy and pity for this queer character who always looked ill and dejected." However, he is a "small tradesman" and is not motivated entirely by charity. Belacqua goes to the grocer's shop to buy a slab of Gorgonzola cheese for his sandwich. Belacqua thinks of the grocer as a "decent, obliging" person, but he also behaves badly toward him, quickly changing his mind about the grocer, calling him an "impudent dogsbody" [or low servant]. Although he curses the grocer for giving him a second-rate piece of cheese, he takes it anyway and leaves without paying. Because of his "small tradesman's sense of personal dignity," he is unwilling to make the effort to chase after Belacqua for the few pennies he steals from him.

McCabe

McCabe is a murderer who is to be put to death in the coming days. Belacqua sees his picture in the newspaper that he lays out on his table as the story opens, and thoughts of McCabe go through Belacqua's mind as he goes through his day. He symbolizes death, and since Belacqua has his mind on death throughout the day, death takes on the face of McCabe. He appears in many of the stories in *More Pricks than Kicks,* the collection in which "Dante and the Lobster" appears.

Adriana Ottolenghi

Signorina Adriana Ottolenghi is Belacqua's Italian tutor. He calls her "the Ottolenghi," a name similar to the names he gives to other women in other stories in *More Pricks than*

Kicks—the Smeraldina, or the Alba, for instance. He has a "crush" on her (calling her "charming and remarkable") and looks forward to their meetings. The narrator says that he "had set her on a pedestal in her mind, apart from other women." She is "of a certain age," which means that she is no longer precisely young and marriageable, but neither is she old quite yet. The narrator says that she found "being young and beautiful and pure a bore," a trait which must certainly be alluring to the perverse Belacqua. During the class, he attempts to impress her with his knowledge of an Italian saying and by asking her questions about the particularly difficult passage in Dante's *Paradiso* that he was studying at the beginning of the story. At the start of the class, she compliments Belacqua on his progress in Italian, but by the end she mutters of how she regrets his lack of progress, saying that they are "where we were, as we were."

Belacqua Shuah

Belacqua Shuah is the main character both of "Dante and the Lobster" and of the collection *More Pricks than Kicks* as a whole. His primary characteristics are aimlessness and futility, characteristics that he takes from his namesake, Belacqua from Dante's *Purgatorio.* That Belacqua is condemned to remain in the Ante-Purgatory for a time equivalent to his entire life span and cannot enter Purgatory (where his sins will be purged and where he will be prepared for entry into Paradise) until that time has ended. Dante sees him slumped "with his arms around his knees, and between his knees he kept his head bent down" *(Purgatorio* VI. 107-8). "What's the use in climbing?" he asks Dante when Dante questions him about his lack of motivation.

When we first see Belacqua Shuah, he is "stuck" or "bogged" in his reading, and the story follows him as he attempts to accomplish things. Some he does accomplish (he makes toast, after concerted effort, and obtains a slab of quite satisfactory cheese); others, he does not (the encounter with Signorina Ottolenghi does not go as well as he had hoped). It takes Belacqua an enormous amount of effort to accomplish the smallest things, and he seems always on the verge of getting stuck and not going on. He is also followed by images of death, thinking repeatedly of condemned murderers and finally realizing that the lobster he carried around all afternoon is in fact alive and that he will be present for its death. The lobster begins to represent him: "for hours, in the midst of its enemies, it had breathed secretly. It had survived the Frenchwoman's cat and his witless clutch." Like Belacqua, the lobster survives a hostile world only to be plunged into boiling water to meet its death. Futility, it seems, is at the very core of human (and crustacean) existence.

Themes

Dante

As suggested by the title, Dante is an important presence in "Dante and the Lobster." The medieval Italian poet Dante Alighieri wrote an epic poem, the *Divine Comedy,* in 1307-1308. It is difficult to accurately assess the importance of Dante's accomplishment, but it is certainly not an overstatement to say that Dante brought classical literary traditions and Christian themes together more successfully than any other writer ever did, before or after, and that his poem showed writers that great literature could be written in local languages, not only in Latin or Greek.

The poem, written in 100 "canti," or chapters, tells the story of Dante himself, who "in the middle of life's journey" finds himself lost and aimless. He comes upon the gates to Hell and is guided through the underworld by Virgil, the greatest Roman poet. After witnessing the torments and punishments suffered by sinners, Dante exits Hell and journeys through Purgatory (where sinners wait to have their sins purged so they can be allowed into Paradise) and ultimately to Paradise, where his beloved Beatrice explains to him the mysteries of God and the heavens. The poem attempted to systematize Christian belief and to apply mathematical structure to Christian cosmology. It also, on a very human level, reassured medieval readers that punishments would be meted out in strict proportion to the offense and detailed the nature of sin in an attempt to provide a model for Christian comportment.

Beckett was an Italian scholar at Trinity University and knew Dante well. He was especially captivated by the figure of Belacqua, a character from the fourth canto of the *Purgatorio* who embodies laziness and aimlessness. When Dante asks him why he does not climb up into the entrance to Purgatory, he responds, "O brother, what's the use of climbing?" Beckett was struck by this idea of futility, of incomprehensible forces bent on thwarting all efforts, and of the response of apathy and aimlessness. The world is cruel and life is suffering, Beckett feels, so what's the use in striving? Belacqua in Dante and Belacqua in "Dante and the Lobster" both embody this philosophy.

Futility

As one who has adopted an almost dropout attitude toward the world, Belacqua is a character particularly attuned to feelings of futility. The story is full of images of being at an impasse or of the fear of being thwarted. In the first sentence, we learn that Belacqua is "stuck in the first of the canti of the moon"—he is "bogged," he cannot get through this "impenetrable" passage. And then, the narrator tells us, "there is always something that one had to do next." The next thing for Belacqua is to prepare lunch. This comes off quite successfully, for he takes great precautions: locking the door, keeping his head down in the street, making sure that his cheese is rotten enough. After his success in the cheese shop, though, the narrator again focuses on what holds

Belacqua back: he has a "spavined gait, his feet were in ruins, he suffered with them almost continually." Signorina Ottolenghi compliments him on his "rapid progress," but he is stalled in his conversation with her; she neither explains the canti of the moon to him nor does she translate the phrase *"qui vive la pieta quando e ben morta"* for him. Just before he leaves, Signorina Ottolenghi contradicts her earlier positive statement, telling Belacqua that they are still "where we were, as we were." No progress has been made. Finally, the story ends with the image of the lobster, who has been alive even though thought dead all afternoon, finally being killed—slowly. The only progress we can make, Beckett asserts, is to death—and that slowly.

Style

Allusion

As would be expected from a story that alludes to Dante in its title and has a protagonist named after a Dantean character, "Dante and the Lobster" is rife with allusions. The allusions, in fact, give the story much of its meaning. *The Divine Comedy,* of course, is the primary text Beckett alludes to, but Christianity also appears prominently in the text in many explicit and implicit ways. The lobster, for instance, represents Christ and man in general in many ways (going through the travails of life only to be sacrificed), but smaller events and details in the story also carry Christian meaning: Belacqua "scoops up" his copy of Dante and holds it flat in his hands like a priest holding a Bible; the narrator refers to the "canti of the moon" as a "quodlibet," or a theological debate; the grocer, "instead of washing his hands like Pilate, flung out his hands in a wild crucified gesture of supplication." Christianity and Dante, Catholicism's most important poet, are the texts, or stories, that form the allusive backbone of "Dante and the Lobster."

Allusions are a very characteristic technique of the modernist writers. Although Beckett is not considered precisely a modernist, at the time "Dante and the Lobster" was written, Beckett was profoundly influenced by the most important of all modernists, James Joyce. Joyce's novels take place on many different symbolic levels, levels that can be disentangled and examined only by studying the allusions (to mythology, to Christianity, to literary history, to politics) embedded in the text. Many modernists felt that all of history simply repeated itself over and over again, and by using allusions these writers sought to underscore the similarities between stories and events that took place in different periods of history. As Beckett's writing evolved, he buried his allusions deeper into his text. In his later writings, he would not make such explicit allusions as he does here, although he continued to allude (albeit elusively) to such ideas as God in texts like *Waiting for Godot.*

Narration

The voice that narrates "Dante and the Lobster" is a third person narrator who can see inside the head of Belacqua and, at one point, inside the head of the grocer. For the most part, this is a traditional narrator, reliable, who plays no games with the reader and who subsumes any personality he or she has into Belacqua's personality. We hear Belacqua's thoughts, and the narrator reports them as if they were his or her own: "the first thing to do was to lock the door. Now nobody could come at him." However, at isolated points in the story, the narrator exhibits signs of a personality, of editorial judgments made about the characters and events of the story. The most notable instance of this is at the end of the story when the narrator notes that Belacqua, thinking about the imminent demise of his lobster, comforts himself that "it's a quick death, God help us all." The narrator, making almost the only direct assertion of the story, responds that "It is not." Because of this separation of the narrator and the main character at the

very end of the story, the reader's impression of Belacqua changes. For the vast majority of the story, the narrator reports Belacqua's thoughts without commenting, and from this we have no reason to doubt Belacqua's authority. He is a reliable character, no matter what judgments we may make of his personality and character flaws. But this flat contradiction of Belacqua's idea makes Belacqua seem smaller, more foolish, sillier. It gives the reader a reason to judge Belacqua more harshly.

Historical Context

Samuel Beckett wrote this story in the early 1930s, at the very start of his writing career. Those years were a tumultuous time in Beckett's life (he was aimless and dissatisfied and did not settle down until he moved to Paris permanently in 1937), but it was a traumatic time in Europe. The Treaty of Versailles that ended World War I created a shortlived peace but set the stage for the power struggles that would culminate in World War II. Germany was impoverished because of the war and the reparations it had to pay to the victors; out of that humiliation rose Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party. At the same time, Soviet Communism was hardening into a dogma, and the Soviet Union began pursuing its own national interests, which included encouraging left-wing movements throughout the world. The bourgeois republican nations of Europe (specifically France and England) found themselves caught between two aggressive radical forces and ideas: communism and fascism.

At first, fascism took the upper hand. Benito Mussolini took control of Italy in the early 1920s, and Hitler was elected to national office in Germany soon after. In the early 1930s, Spain became a kind of proving ground for the conflict between these two forces, and a civil war broke out between workers' groups (funded and supported by the Soviet Union, but also provided with troops from the United States) and a fascist force headed by Francisco Franco. After a bloody conflict, the fascists triumphed. The democratic powers in Europe waited and hoped for the best as fascism grew in power and, eventually, allied itself to communism with the German-Soviet non-aggression pact.

The leading democratic powers in the world at this time were Great Britain, the United States, and France. Because France is on the continent of Europe, it has been historically decimated by fighting on its soil. France has a different kind of relationship to European power struggles; in addition, France has a different relation to the history of art and culture in Europe than does London or Madrid or Berlin. In the period between the two world wars, and to a lesser degree in the post-World War II period, Paris was the center of artistic experimentation in the Western world. In Paris, bohemianism was common. Artists of all kinds could find a sympathetic group of like-minded people who would support each other both morally and, at times, financially. In the 1920s, the "Lost Generation" of American writers and artists took advantage of the low cost of living in Paris and flocked there. Ernest Hemingway, Gertrude Stein, Robert McAlmon, Man Ray, Ezra Pound, and many others made Paris their home. The city appealed to American artists because it was the absolute opposite of the conservative, philistine, bourgeois culture that dominated almost everywhere in the United States. Paris also appealed to writers and artists from another repressed, religious country: Ireland.

Arguably, two of Ireland's most important exports to Paris of the early twentieth century were James Joyce and Samuel Beckett. Joyce came to Paris earlier than Beckett (in the early 1920s) but left Ireland before that, living in Switzerland and in the city of Trieste (today part of Italy) as well as in Paris. Like Beckett, Joyce was a promising young academic in Dublin, and, like Beckett, Joyce found the conservative Catholic

environment of Ireland stifling to artistic creation. Most of his writings take place in Dublin, but it is a Dublin that the characters long to flee. These characters, of course, were simply versions of Joyce himself. Once he reached Paris, Joyce's immense talent was recognized immediately by his contemporaries, and during the years it took him to compose his masterpiece, *Ulysses,* he was supported financially by many friends and patrons. *Ulysses* was published in 1922 to immediate acclaim, and Joyce spent much of the rest of his life composing a wildly experimental novel initially called *Work in Progress* and ultimately titled *Finnegans Wake.*

While he was working on *Finnegans Wake,* Joyce collected around him a circle of admirers. In 1928, Beckett met Joyce and quickly became a close associate, helping with the composition of the book and contributing an essay to a collection of studies of the (then unpublished) *Finnegans Wake* entitled *Our Exagmination Round His Factification for Incamination of Work in Progress.* Beckett, like Joyce, bothered by repressive Dublin and dubious about a career in academia, loved the bohemian life in Paris but soon had to return to Dublin. However, in 1937 he returned to Paris, this time for good. Beckett, unlike Joyce, relocated his consciousness to Paris. Whereas Joyce always wrote in English, immersed in the English literary tradition, and about Dublin, Beckett underwent a dramatic change in his writing during World War II and became an entirely different kind of writer. Whereas Joyce filled his works with particulars and details and local facts, Beckett voided his works of the particular after 1945. He also began writing in French. Whereas Joyce never returned to Ireland but also never left it mentally, in many ways Beckett (who occasionally returned to Dublin) became more French than the French, became almost the emblem of the Parisian intellectual.

Critical Overview

"Dante and the Lobster" was originally published in the collection *More Pricks than Kicks,* one of Beckett's earliest published works. At the time of the book's publication, Beckett was almost completely unknown. He had published a poem, "Whoroscope," and essays on Joyce and Proust, but this book marks Beckett's entry into what became his real career. Chatto and Windus, Beckett's London publishers, tried to interest American publishers in the collection but were unsuccessful, so the book appeared only in England.

The collection received reviews that were quite favorable, especially for a first book. Gerald Gould of the *Observer* remarked that the book was "dry, harsh . . . not untouched by beauty, though betrayed by an artificial whimsicality and unnecessary obscurity." *Time and Tide's* Richard Sunne and the London *Times Literary Supplement* dismissed the book as an imitation of Joyce, but another reviewer, Arthur Calder-Marshall of the *Spectator,* argued that the main influence was not Joyce but the humorist Ronald Firbank and that the humor of the book deserved praise. Edwin Muir of the *Listener* was impressed by the book's originality and called the style "witty, extravagant, and excessive."

These early stories were almost forgotten when Beckett embarked upon the most famous and accomplished phase of his career in 1945, and it was not until the 1970s that critics began again to look at these beginnings of a great writer's *oeuvre.* The stories, then, were almost exclusively read for the light they shed on Beckett's work as a whole. In a study of all of Beckett's short fiction, Robert Cochran points out that these stories show a "heart" and "compassion" that readers of Beckett's major works rarely saw. Most of the critical writing about Beckett has concentrated on his plays, while studies of his novels have been second in importance. Studies of his short fiction (which he continued to write until his death) are few. However, most of them discuss "Dante and the Lobster," not for its own sake, but instead as a precursor to his later, more polished and self-contained work. One of the few critics to pay attention specifically to "Dante and the Lobster" is John Pilling, who writes that the story is "one of the more impressive stories in a collection which varies in quality" and that it is, nonetheless, "by no means representative of *More Pricks than Kicks* as a whole" (largely, according to Pilling, because in the story Belacqua's relations with the women are not amorous).

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Barnhisel directs the writing center at the University of Southern California. In this essay, Barnhisel discusses the Dantean and Joycean parallels of the story and how, in his later fiction, Beckett refined his work of these influences in order to arrive at a more individual voice.

In a story with Dante in the title and in which the protagonist bears a name taken from Dante, readers expect allusions to the greatest of medieval poets. In "Dante and the Lobster," the work that in many ways commences Beckett's career as a writer, Beckett provides these allusions in significant numbers. However, it is too simple to read this story just as a response to or a rewriting of an episode from Dante. Also present, more powerfully, although much less explicitly, is the great literary figure of Beckett's life and the man who was Beckett's mentor during the years when he began writing: James Joyce. At the time he wrote "Dante and the Lobster," Beckett had a close relationship with the elder Irish writer, serving as his assistant and, at one point, even going on a date with Joyce's daughter. If Dante was the presence Beckett wanted to have in his story, Joyce's is the presence that Beckett could not keep out.

The literary critic Harold Bloom sees literary history as a giant trans-historical Oedipal drama: "Great poets" fall under the dominating influence of a predecessor writer, then unintentionally "misread" that writer in an attempt to get past his influence, in effect "slaying the father." "Dante and the Lobster" is Beckett's attempt to bring his two literary fathers together so as to forge his own space. Dante could be acknowledged in the text, for he was so distant in history that he was not a threat to Beckett's own identity as a writer. Joyce, however, as an Irish writer in exile in Paris, was initially a liberating and ultimately a crippling influence on Beckett. Harold Bloom might say that the absence of any explicit allusions to Joyce clearly proves Beckett's need to repress this influence, given the story's Joycean themes and main character.

But before discussing the Joycean resonances of "Dante and the Lobster," it is first necessary to examine the figure that Beckett proposes as the real influence: Dante. Specifically, from the time of his Italian studies at Trinity, Beckett found himself drawn to the hellish imagery of the *Inferno* and, perhaps even more, to the ambivalent darkness and promise of the *Purgatory.* According to Mary Bryden, Beckett's writing, "both early and late," is "imprinted with purgatorial characteristics which resonate within a Dantean context." In Dante, Purgatory is a locus of waiting and purgation where sinners, or other figures (from Greek and Roman times, for instance) who lived virtuous lives without knowing Christ, go to await admittance into Heaven. Salvation cannot be achieved though works performed in Purgatory, so the inhabitants of Purgatory must just wait for their time to expire or for enough members of the living to offer up prayers on their behalf.

Belacqua, the character in the *Purgatory* after whom Belacqua Shuah is named, embodies sloth and lassitude. At the end of the fourth book, while Dante is still in the Ante-Purgatory, Dante and his guide come upon a man "sitting with his arms around his

knees" who looked "more languid than he would have been were laziness his sister." Belacqua tells Dante that his laziness and nonchalance come from the fact that he is condemned to just wait: he must wait before the entrance to Purgatory for a period of time equal to his own life on Earth unless some living people offer up prayers to shorten his time in Ante-Purgatory. Belacqua's sin was (appropriately enough) sloth: he never took the time or expended the energy to live as a good Christian while on earth.

Belacqua Shuah's primary characteristic is also laziness and a lack of forward motion. In the first paragraph of the story, the narrator describes him as "stuck" and "bogged." He takes a long time and a great deal of effort simply to get lunch; then, he dawdles on his way to the fishmonger and his Italian lesson. His intellect is also slow; he does not know that his lobster is alive the whole time he is carrying it around. The only mention of speed or quickness in the entire story is at the end. Reconciling himself to the fact that the lobster will be boiled to death, Belacqua thinks that "it's a quick death, God help us all." The narrator then retorts, "It is not," undermining this one instance of anything being done quickly. Belacqua never gets anywhere, is always stuck in one place. "Where are we ever?" Signora Ottolenghi asks Belacqua. "Where we were, as we were."

The critic Rubin Rabinovitz extends Belacqua's sloth into his failure to do good deeds or even to be polite to others (this, of course, was the original Belacqua's downfall). Belacqua steals cheese from a shopkeeper (who allows him to do so out of pity); he does not thank Mlle. Glain when she saves his lobster from her cat, instead thinking that she is a "base prying [b—]." Signora Ottolenghi suggests, Rabinovitz points out, that Belacqua should study "Dante's rare moments of compassion in Hell," but, "thinking that she has only linguistic instruction in mind, Belacqua responds by quoting *'Qui vive la pieta quando e ben morta.'* Belacqua, carried away by the cleverness of the comment, never considers the unsettling ethical questions it raises." Rabinovitz points out that for Beckett, there are two types of compassion: one for undeserving victims (like the grocer and the lobster), and one for deserving victims (like Belacqua). The grocer and the lobster are described as being in "cruciform" position, like the crucified Christ, while Belacqua himself is imagistically associated with the condemned murderer McCabe. (Throughout his life, Beckett was fascinated by the image of Christ crucified between the two thieves, one of which was saved; the difference between Belacqua and the grocer and lobster could represent the difference between the saved thief and the condemned thief.)

We are all condemned to suffering and death, the story tells us, whether we live a good life or whether we avoid our chances to do good. The critic Robert Cochran argues that this is the essential core of the story:

From Dante's moon spots to the lobster in the pot, from the story's beginning to the story's end, the message is the same. The moon with its spots was Cain, 'seared with the first stigma of God's pity, that an outcast might not die quickly.' The lobster does not die quickly either.

The desire for and impossibility of achieving a quick and painless death pervades all of Beckett's work. In his most famous plays, *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame,* the

characters wait, saying to each other the same things they have said every day in memory and the things that they will continue to repeat. Characters make comic attempts at suicide: the branch holding the noose breaks, autosuffocation fails, the limbs wither and freeze, but the compulsion to go on never ends. In the trilogy of novels he wrote immediately after the Second World War, the characters can do nothing but endlessly speak and grow ever more decrepit. Molloy fades away in a ditch, and the Unnamable ends the trilogy by saying, "I can't go on. I'll go on." In "Dante and the Lobster," Beckett first writes of this always-thwarted desire for a quick and painless end.

What makes this incarnation of Beckett's master-theme unique in "Dante and the Lobster" is the influence of Joyce, a writer who loved the world and all of the sensual pleasures it offered. "Dante and the Lobster"'s Belacqua bears many similarities with Joyce's sensitive young scholar-hero, Stephen Dedalus. Both, for instance, have improbably obvious allusive names (Belacqua Shuah's to Dante and the Bible, Stephen's to the St. Stephen myth and to the Greek mythological figure Daedalus). Both are young Dublin intellectuals who find no ultimate satisfaction in what they are doing. But where Stephen is an affectionate, if self-critical, portrait of Joyce himself as a younger man, Belacqua is ultimately a comic character with few redeeming qualities. Stephen, in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man,* must fly free of the nets of his home country's conservative culture, and in *Ulysses* Stephen seems in need of a father-figure to guide him away from narcissism. Rarified, hyperintellectual, and self-destructive Stephen Dedalus, once under the influence of the earthy and pleasant Leopold Bloom, could have become Joyce himself (but in *Ulysses* Stephen rejects Bloom's offer). Joyce could have lived easily in the world of metaphysics and quodlibets and literary history, but he was also just as comfortable in drinking bouts with French barflies, and *Ulysses* seems to suggest that he thinks the Stephen in him benefited from the influence of a Leopold Bloom at some point in his life.

Belacqua, though, is a self-contained entity. He is Stephen made significantly more petty, more inward, more selfish and contemptuous of the world around him. Belacqua, it seems, would never attract Bloom enough to merit an offer of stepfatherhood. A sneaky and rude character who is associated throughout *More Pricks than Kicks* with Cain and the murderer McCabe, Belacqua proceeds in the course of the book from a smug and simplistic dismissal of a lobster's death to his own comic and improbable demise.

For Beckett, Stephen must have been an indelible character, in many ways reminiscent of himself. How could Beckett write autobiographical short stories when another writer had already written the very stories Beckett wanted to write about himself? What character that he could create could serve as a better repository for his own traits than Stephen? His solution was to make Belacqua darkly comic and to condemn him more strongly than Joyce condemned Stephen. But in doing so, Beckett came upon the themes that would make his career: suffering, waiting for a death that never seems to come soon enough. Using the systematic afterlife Dante created, Beckett could confront the metaphysical questions that had obsessed him since his collegiate study of Descartes and Geulincx. Using the form and the characters used by Joyce, Beckett could dramatize his own worst characteristics. Later, though, in the postwar dramas and

novels, the distinction between those who deserve compassion and those who do not becomes very blurry. Belacqua, the grocer, and Signora Ottolenghi meld into one another and become the eternal pairs—Hamm and Clov, Vladimir and Estragon, Molloy and Moran, Pozzo and Lucky—that are the center of Beckett's greatest works. Could these later duos have been initially inspired by "Dante and the Lobster"' s duo of influences, Dante and Joyce?

Source: Greg Barnhisel, Critical Essay on "Dante and the Lobster," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Stevenson examines the original version of "Dante and the Lobster" and Beckett's revision, finding increased "balance, or ambiguity" in the character of Belacqua in the latter.

The first sentence of Samuel Beckett's "Dante and the Lobster" — "It was morning and Belacqua was stuck in the first of the canti in the moon" —gives the reader pause. Or it should. Some ideal combination of information and ignorance is demanded by the story. Those experienced in Beckett's fiction may know too much, or assume they do, about his early collection of stories and therefore find it difficult to feel again the edge of wrongness in that opening sentence. Belacqua "stuck in the first of the canti in the moon?" How the hell did he get there? And in the morning, as well. In the context of Dante's *Commedia* the time is wrong, the place is wrong, and the action—or kind of inaction "stuck" establishes—is, if not quite wrong, certainly not quite right. It is precisely noon when Dante enters the sphere of the moon, where those inconstant in their vows glow and rejoice now in the grace which saved them. Belacqua does not belong in the canti of the moon, *Paradiso* II-V, at all; Dante met him far away, back in the fourth canto of *Purgatorio,* waiting with others late in repentence for a span of time equal to his earthly life before he can enter purgatory proper. He is waiting with striking stillness and lassitude—"more indolent than if sloth were his sister"—but this immobility has a completely different quality from that of "stuck." That would be an odd verb even in relation to *Purgatorio* and it is absurd for *Paradiso,* explicitly absurd given that in the second of the canti in the moon Piccarda and other blessed shades smile at Dante's ignorance when he asks whether they don't desire a higher place; she corrects his assumption that they might feel stuck in this lowest sphere of paradise: "In His will is our peace. It is that sea to which all things move."

Though "impatient to get on to Piccarda," Belacqua slams shut his book when he hears midday strike. Here Belacqua of Dublin is distinguished from Belacqua of Florence, but with a minimum of circumstantial evidence. In later stories of *More Pricks Than Kicks* he acquires a surname, a "strong weakness for oxymoron," and various girlfriends. Knowing such details is far from necessary; indeed they can obscure the achievements of "Dante and the Lobster," the first story in the collection and one of the few which Beckett was willing to see reprinted for more than three decades. Students of Beckett too familiar with Belacqua Shuah may treat him with contempt. Raymond Federman, who considers all the stories of *More Pricks Than Kicks* together, describes Belacqua as if he were a consistent character and asserts that his "pedantry, arrogance, egocentricism, and morbidity reject the compassion aroused by Beckett's later heroes." He is, in "Dante and the Lobster," less easily summed up. Furthermore, a number of the changes Beckett made in revising the story between its first appearance in *This Quarter* (Winter 1932) and *More Pricks Than Kicks* (1934) work to increase the balance, or ambiguity, of Belacqua's presentation, and thus increase the tension between judgment and charity which is a major theme. Any single pronouncement about Belacqua would be as inappropriate as a single view of the moon, which presides over all three clearly marked sections of the story.

When Ruby Cohn briefly surveys the revisions made between the 1932 and 1934 printings, she concludes that "the main purpose of revision was to sharpen the comic." Despite admiration for Beckett's "early elegance," she finds the three incidents of the story inadequately unified and focused: "Each . . . is described in such meticulous and sardonic detail that the underlying theme, the difficulty of reconciling divine mercy with divine justice, frequently fades away." Concerned with comic techniques, she underestimates the seriousness of the story. I think that more needs to be said about the revisions, in relation to Belacqua, to the question of unity, and to the stylistic elegance which is a source of the comic and troubling effects. Both the instances she cites of comic incongruity arising from "an image that is ludicrously out of key with what it describes" will repay further exploration: "In 'Dante and the Lobster,' there are several examples of incongruity which are sharpened in the revised version: 'to feel his fangs break through the splendid hard crust of toast into a yielding zone' becomes 'to feel his teeth meet in a bathos of pith and dough.' Similarly 'so that the whole presented an appearance of a diamond and square with common centre' is changed to 'so that the whole resembled the Japanese flag.'"

In the first of Cohn's examples, Beckett is naming explicitly a central rhetorical device for "Dante and the Lobster." From the title onward, equilibrium in the reader is troubled by juxtaposition of the grand and the commonplace. What have Dante and a lobster to do with each other, coupled in a coordinate phrase? Bathos is, again, wittily dominant in Beckett's play on the significance of the moon, as Belacqua moves from the blessed souls of *Paradiso* to a sandwich of green cheese. The bathetic and profound jostle in Belacqua's day: as his "three large obligations" of lunch, lobster, and Italian lesson parody Dante's trinitarian structures, as the story links the deaths of McCabe, Christ, and a lobster, and as his thoughts swing from banality ("We live and learn, that was a true saying") to theological questions ("Why not piety and pity, even down below? Why not mercy and Godliness together?").

The pattern of a Japanese flag, in Cohn's second example, contributes not simply to incongruity in general, but to the single most important image unifying Belacqua's progression through lunch, lesson, and lobster. After Beckett has changed the shape of Belacqua's loaf of bread from square to round, thus providing a new pattern on his toaster, Japan's rising sun is mirrored by the charred, seared moon on whose spots Beckett continues to muse. Beginning in the moon *of Paradiso,* "Dante and the Lobster" is as moonstruck as *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* and it triumphantly combines materials as diverse. Dante's moon underlies the high seriousness of the story, for in *Paradiso* the moon figures both the salvation of Piccarda and the wanderings of Cain (since Dante includes this folklore identification of the man in the moon by having Beatrice refute it). Lower comedy, and a different folklore about the moon, appear in Belacqua's exuberant, obsessive examination of the central ingredient in his lunch. It lacks any odor of sanctity: "He rubbed it. It was sweating. That was something. He stooped and smelt it. A faint fragrance of corruption. What good was that? He didn't want fragrance, he wasn't a bloody gourmet, he wanted a good stench. What he wanted was a good green stenching rotten lump of Gorgonzola cheese, alive, and by God he would have it." For the third section of the story, the moon makes a final, more puzzling appearance. "Let us call it Winter," says Beckett, "that dusk may fall now and a moon

rise." Now this is a bit like the scarves in *Murphy;* it simply doesn't work out. Twice a year in the Northern Temperate Zone, thus in Dublin, sunset and moonrise coincide—for a few days around full moon at the autumnal equinox ("harvest moon") and again at the next full moon ("hunter's moon"). Neither could be called "Winter," and if there is definitely no autumnal fruition in the story, at least it is not the moon of Cain, tiller of the field. What Beckett provides here is typically Beckettian, in its wintry but not entirely dark setting, and in its fictive impossibility. It is also highly Dantean. At first I was inclined to think that Beckett was deliberately creating something entirely new. Reflection, however, produced—reflection. This winter moonrise is equal and opposite to the Dante's first sunrise. In the *Commedia,* the moon sets as the sun rises on Good Friday 1300. But scholars searching for a cluster of astronomical facts which will fit the descriptions find that "there is no day in the year 1300 which meets all these conditions" established by Dante for the sun and moon. Like Dante, Beckett creates an ideal rather than a naturalistic pattern.

In so moonstruck a story, it is natural that Belacqua should have some tinges of lunatic, lover, and poet. The virtuosity with which Beckett plays with his identity is not confined to the initial double-take, Belacqua of Florence and Belacqua of Dublin. In curious ways, at various points, he is associated with Dante and with the lobster, with Christ and with Cain.

Studying Beatrice's different explanation of spots on the moon, Belacqua is something of a model for the literary critic: "Still he pored over the enigma, he would not concede himself conquered, he would understand at least the meanings of the words, the order in which they were spoken and the nature of the satisfaction that they conferred on the misinformed poet, so that when they were ended he was refreshed and could raise his heavy head, intending to return thanks and make formal retraction of his old opinion." In that sentence, "he" isatfirst firmly linked with Belacqua but becomes Dante by the end. The grammatical slippage does not occur in the *This Quarter* version; one of Beckett's revisions supplies the parallel series of verbs: "he would not concede . . . he would understand" to "could raise his heavy head." Moreover, in 1932 the next sentence, opening paragraph two, begins unequivocally" Belacqua" but in 1934 "He."

Dante's *Convivio,* from which Beckett had quoted shortly before, in his contribution to *Our Exagmination . . .*(1929), provides a link between verbal structures and the recurrent, changing moon. Dante associates the planetary spheres with the seven liberal arts, and the moon is the sphere of grammar. The kind of literary criticism with which Belacqua starts is that of the grammarian—the meanings of the words, the order in which they were spoken. What satisfactions follow? If one picks up a copy of *Paradiso* to check on the passage over which Belacqua is poring, finding there Dante raising his heavy head after Beatrice's explanation, and reads on to the appearance of Piccarda, one finds a gently ridiculous picture of Dante adjusting his view. When Piccarda appears, Dante takes her for a reflection, a mirror image, and he turns around, looking behind him. Reading "Dante and the Lobster" demands similar readjustments, recognition of mirroring relationships, the discovery of congru-ity in incongruous materials. Here is wit in Locke's sense, perception of likeness in unlike objects. Moreover, Beckett induces in the reader something like the habitual self-corrections, the

scrupulous rejections of easy formulations, which he gives his most moving major characters.

A paragraph on moonspots (identical in the 1932 and 1934 versions) is sandwiched without transition between paragraphs describing Belacqua madly, methodically charring bread for his sandwich: "For the tiller of the field the thing was simple, he had it from his mother. The spots were Cain with his truss of thorns, dispossessed, cursed from the earth, fugitive and vagabond. The moon was that countenance fallen and branded, seared with the first stigma of God's pity, that an outcast might not die quickly. It was a mix-up in the mind of the tiller, but that did not matter. It had been good enough for his mother, it was good enough for him." Something odd is going on with the pronouns again. In "he had it from his mother," who is "he" and what is "it?" Is it the explanation of moonspots Belacqua had from his mother (the explanation which Beatrice rejects in the first of the canti in the moon), or is the mother not Belacqua's but Eve, and "it" the original sin Cain inherits from her? As the first of Beckett's footsore protagonists ("his feet were in ruins, he suffered with them almost continuously"), Belacqua has other links with wandering Cain. The description of his charred toast as "burnt ... offering" could make him equally close to Cain or to Abel—as the name of condemned criminal McCabe makes him son of Abel or son of Cain.

He is curiously close to the lobster as well, partly because of marine metaphors. He "suddenly dived into a little family grocery" and goes "diving into the public, as usual"; he reflects that "all had gone swimmingly" with lunch and the collection of the lobster. In revising the first paragraph between 1932 and 1934, Beckett expands watery images. The phrase "complicated and up in the air" is abandoned; "straightforward" is replaced by "plain sailing." In 1932 Belacqua "was bogged, and could not get on." In 1934, "He was so bogged that he could move neither backward nor forward." A reader may recollect that one of the striking characteristics of lobsters is their swimming backward, and further reflect that Belacqua's movement in the story is in some sense a backwards version of Dante's pilgrimage, regressing from Paradise in the early paragraphs "down into the bowels of the earth, into the kitchen in the basement" for the final pages. There, in his shock at finding that lobsters are boiled alive, Belacqua mirrors "Dante's rare moments of compassion in Hell" with distant punning on the phrase he had quoted in his Italian lesson: "qui vive la pietà quando è ben morta," that is, "here pity lives when by rights it is dead."

The lobster is twice compared with Christ. Belacqua and his aunt contemplate it "cruciform on the oilcloth." Earlier, he identifies it for the French teacher as a fish, with a play on the Greek anagram IXT?S: "He did not know the French for lobster. Fish would do very well. Fish had been good enough for Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour. It was good enough for Mlle. Glain."

Belacqua's name, according to Hugh Kenner, is "compounded from Dante and gutter-Irish (Bollocky)." Amorous activity, prominent in other stories of *More Pricks Than Kicks,* plays little part in "Dante and the Lobster," except insofar as Belacqua's sentimental and flirtatious relationship to his Italian teacher, a middle-aged woman "who had found being young and beautiful and pure more of a bore than anything else," remotely parodies

Dante's relationship to Beatrice. The qualities, and the quality, of "Dante and the Lobster" are apt to be obscured when *More Pricks Than Kicks* is discussed as a collection in which "In the main, Belacqua is involved in adventures with various ladies." While "Bollocky" possibilities are not developed, literal translations of the name into English and Irish underline the unity and the contradictions of the story. The epithet "Blissful Beatrice" in the opening paragraph encourages a reader to translate names directly. In English, Belacqua as "beautiful water" is ironically appropriate for the lobster's violent end. In Irish, the name changes to *fionn uisce* or Phoenix (the transformation by which Phoenix Park got its name), evoking one of the traditional symbols of Christ, as the phoenix which once in a thousand years bursts into flame and arises again from the ashes.

In both versions of the story, Belacqua's identity is fluid, as befits his name. In the second version, however, there occurs what might be called an improvement in his character. Some phrases are toned down: "a vicious piece of hooliganism" becomes "hooliganism pure and simple." Given the etymological precision with which other words are employed, the disappearance of "vicious" is particularly significant. When Belacqua "deployed an old Herald," the verb has the full sense of *dis-plicare,* unfold, and a white slice of bread is literally a "candidate." Belacqua does not, of course, become fully virtuous by such a revision, but he becomes more ambiguous. A few sentences of no great importance, but generally unsympathetic, disappear completely: "His mind was tired, it could not be bothered carrying him beyond the lesson. ... He did not feel like fake enthusiasm at the moment." In both versions, his lunch is "spiced" by the news that McCabe will hang at dawn. But in 1932, "If anything was wanted to crown that exquisite gastronomical experience, it was just such a piece of news," while in 1934 zest gives way to unspecified pungency: "Belacqua, tearing at the sandwich and swilling the precious stout, pondered on McCabe in his cell."

When Belacqua calculates his timetable for picking up the lobster, "Assuming that his aunt had given her order in good time . . . so that her nephew should on no count be delayed" becomes more roughly phrased: "aunt" becomes "lousy old [b—] of an aunt," and "nephew" becomes "blackguard boy." Curiously, however, the two derogatory phrases almost cancel each other; if Belacqua (or the narrator) is casually abusive about the aunt, he is also jocularly dismissive about the nephew. Furthermore, "blackguard" may be a small etymological joke: the equal and opposite of "candidate"; the first definition for "blackguard" in the *OED* reads: "The lowest menials of a royal or noble household, who had charge of pots and pans and other kitchen utensils, and rode in the wagons conveying these during journeys from one residence to another; the scullians and kitchen-slaves." One sentence added in 1934 is more ambiguous. After "He had burnt his offering, he had not fully dressed it," Beckett inserts, "Yes, he had put the horse behind the tumbrel." First, by turning a proverbial phrase around so that the cart is not (verbally) ahead of the horse, Beckett is neatly repeating and exemplifying the idea of lobster-like progress backwards. Secondly, however, the substitution of "tumbrel" for "cart" links Belacqua not with the lobster, innocent as Abel, but with executioners. There are many of these in the story: Cain, God as punisher of Cain, Ellis the hangman cros sing from England to dispatch McCabe, and Belacqua's aunt matter-of-factly lifting the lobster into the pot.

Perhaps influenced by Joyce, Beckett radically simplified punctuation in the 1934 edition. One result is to make the distinction between Belacqua and the narrator, which is fine in both versions, even harder to draw. Beckett leaves such tags as "He thought," but removes the quotation marks which in 1932 mark the ends of internal direct discourse: "At the corner of the street a horse was down and a man sat on its head. I know, thought Belacqua, that that is considered the right thing to do. But why? A lamplighter flew by on his bike, tilting with his pole at the standards, jousting a little yellow light into the evening." The inquiring spirit of Belacqua, one of his attractive qualities, is clear. It is not, however, clear whether the metaphoric perception of the lamplighter as a knight belongs to him or to the narrator. In 1932 quotation marks signpost "But why?" as the end of Belacqua's conscious thought, but here as in other paragraphs the modulation between Belacqua's consciousness and the narrator's is subtle or disconcerting. Except for the third-person pronoun, a description of Belacqua's eagerness to "avoid being accosted" seems to be his own view of the situation, idiosyncratic but engagingly vigorous: "To be stopped at this stage and have conversational nuisance committed all over him would be a disaster." Two sentences later, Beckett changes the 1932 phrasing "hunger—obviously more of mind than of body" to "hunger, more of mind, I need scarcely say, than of body," and thus jostles a reader not only by the shift from vivid hyperbole to cliché but also by the insistent, intrusive I.

In 1934, the triangle of asterisks which set off the three sections of the story disappear, although a few centimeters of white space are left. Any reasonably alert reader can see without the help of the asterisks that, like the *Commedia,* the story is tripartite. Belacqua lists the major units—lunch, lesson, and lobster—and the second and third sections begin with the same phrase: "Belacqua drew near to the school ... Belacqua drew near to the house of his aunt." Given a reference to McCabe's last supper, the phrase thus emphasized by position and repetition suggests the liturgical "Draw near with faith." For a reader steeped in Scripture, and alerted to echoes of the Bible by references to burnt offerings, Cain, Pilate, and Jonah, the phrase may recall Abraham's protesting at the destruction of Sodom: "And Abraham drew near and said, Wilt thou also destroy the righteous with the wicked?" It could also evoke Luke 15, a chapter in which Jesus tells three parables about God's mercy or his rejoicing over the saved, the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal son: "Then drew near unto him all the publicans and sinners to hear him." God's awareness of even the fall of a sparrow (though Belacqua sweeps away crumbs "as though there were no such thing as a sparrow in the wide world") and the story of "Jonah and the gourd and the pity of a jealous God on Nineveh" on which Belacqua ponders are among the clear Biblical allusions. Belacqua refrains from mentioning one obvious Biblical story, even more watery than Jonah's: by omitting the Flood he keeps the balance of justice and mercy tilted, precariously, toward mercy.

Simplified punctuation in 1934 shows Beckett trusting a reader to catch the allusion to Keats near the end of the story. In 1932, a snatch of the "Ode to a Nightingale," 1. 54, is set off with quotation marks and followed by ellipsis marks: "Take into the air my quiet breath . . ., " thus sending one off to look at its richly ironic context. Within the stanza, "easeful Death" and "To cease upon the midnight with no pain" contrast with the

lobster's boiling; in the larger pattern, wishful imagination is defeated by experience. The quotation appears in 1934 without any signal, except the shift from "it" to "my," that Belacqua's train of thought about the lobster has been complicated: "In the depths of the sea it had crept into the cruel pot. For hours in the midst of its enemies, it had breathed secretly. It had survived the Frenchwoman's cat and his witless clutch. Now it was going alive into the scalding water. It had to. Take into the air my quiet breath." I vaguely wondered whether the line was the refrain of a sentimental Irish tenor's song, and felt shocked and chastened when I finally placed it.

The longest addition to the story consists of two sentences inserted into the paragraph about Gorgonzola cheese: "He knew a man who came from Gorgonzola. He had been born in Nice but all his youth had been spent in Gorgonzola." These apparently random recollections reinforce Beckett's equally casual introduction of the *Herald,* the newspaper on which Belacqua slices his loaf. Dublin's *Evening Herald* is a major newspaper but hardly the only one he could have had at hand; it's the *Telegraph* that is mentioned in "Fingal." No messenger is to appear in this story with tidings of joy or a ram caught in a thicket, but the *Herald* and Angelo together join other oblique references to Dante and the moon. Angels proper, as distinct from the more elevated seraphim, cherubim, thrones, dominions, virtues, powers, principalities, and archangels, are the order presiding over the sphere of the moon. Dante catalogues the nine orders in *Paradiso* XXVIII.

Not quite the first published narrative by Beckett, "Dante and the Lobster" would be almost too neat a beginning for his career: dark but not completely dark, elegant and deliberately banal, comic and troubling, carefully crafted and calling attention to its artifice. In the penultimate sentence, Belacqua hopefully ameliorates the lobster's fate: "Well, thought Belacqua, it's a quick death, God help us all." Beckett's justly famous last sentence reproves easy resolutions.

Source: Kay Gilliland Stevenson, "Belacqua in the Moon: Beckett's Revisions of 'Dante and the Lobster,'" in *Critical Essays on Samuel Beckett,* edited by Patrick A. McCarthy, G. K. Hall & Co., 1986, pp. 36-45.

Topics for Further Study

Research the life and times of the Italian poet Dante Alighieri. When did he live? Where? What was the political and the social life like in his times? What were his interests?

In the 1930s, Europe's balance of power was precarious, and events such as the Spanish Civil War altered that balance. Research the years leading up to World War II in terms of competing national interests and power blocs.

Beckett's friend and mentor James Joyce experienced censorship throughout his life, and Beckett also encountered publishers and governments that refused to allow his work to circulate because of its content. What were the United States laws about this in the 1930s? How does the Supreme Court determine whether a work is "obscene?" How have the laws changed in the last seventy years?

European universities are organized very differently from the way American universities and colleges are organized. Examine the differences in teaching, classes, and living situations between an American state university and a school like Trinity University Dublin or Cambridge University.

Compare and Contrast

1930s: Like the United States, Europe in the 1930s suffers through the Great Depression. Millions of people are out of work, and as a result political parties on the extreme left and right (communist and fascist) gain popularity.

Today: In the United States, the healthiest economy in decades begins slowing down. Many of the vast fortunes generated by the Internet "bubble" disappear quickly, and hundreds of thousands are "downsized" by companies that shrink or go out of business entirely.

1930s: American president Herbert Hoover is voted out of office in 1932 largely because people are frustrated with his handling of the Great Depression, which began in 1929.

Today: In an outcome marked by the most serious electoral dispute in American history, Texas governor George W. Bush loses the popular vote to Vice President Al Gore but, because of a favorable Supreme Court decision, wins the necessary votes in the electoral college and, therefore, the presidency.

1930s: After being banned in the United States on grounds of obscenity since its publication, James Joyce's *Ulysses* is finally allowed to be imported into and sold in America in 1934. The court decision holding that the novel is not pornographic is spurred by the publication of Modern Library publisher Bennett Cerf s American edition.

Today: The United States continues to struggle with changing ideas of permissibility. Controversies especially center on what can be aired on television: profane language, advertisements for birth control, and partial nudity all appear on television after being prohibited for decades.

1930s: Europe moves inevitably toward war. In Germany, the ruling National Socialist (Nazi) party begins instituting laws restricting the freedom of Jewish citizens. British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain meets in Munich with German leader Adolf Hitler and leaves reassured that Germany will not start a war. He is proven wrong on September 1, 1939.

Today: Another dictator, Yugoslavian Slobodan Milosevic, is deposed by a democratic "revolution." In 2001, Milosevic is handed over to an international court of justice to stand trial for crimes against humanity (specifically, for ordering massacres and repression in the Yugoslav province of Kosovo and in the Bosnian city of Srebrenica).

What Do I Read Next?

Waiting for Godot, first produced in 1953, is Beckett's masterwork. The play depicts two tramps who wait, through the course of the play, for a "Godot" who never arrives. Why they are waiting, or who Godot is, is never explained. The play is perhaps the ultimate statement of theatrical nihilism and modernist absurdity.

After writing stories, Beckett moved on to write a very successful trilogy of novels. They are not easy reads, but *Molloy* (1951), *Malone Dies* (1951), and *The Unnamable* (1953) tell the stories of decrepit men who are on the edge of death, who demonstrate Beckett's certainty that the only irreducible characteristic of humans is their endless desire to go on, no matter what.

James Joyce's short story collection *Dubliners* (1914) was initially reviled for its depressing tone and cynical portraits of Dublin and its citizens. Today, however, it is regarded as one of the most important collections of stories of the twentieth century.

The great literary work of medieval Europe, Dante's *Divine Comedy* (1308), is an immensely entertaining, moving, and thought-provoking epic poem. Telling the story of Dante's journey through Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise, the *Divine Comedy* is a primary influence on Beckett's "Dante and the Lobster" and on Western literature as a whole.

Further Study

Bair, Deirdre, *Samuel Beckett: A Biography,* Jonathan Cape, 1978.

Bair's was the first biography of Beckett, written years before he died, but in many ways it is the most readable.

Farrow, Anthony, *Early Beckett: Art and Allusion in "More Pricks than Kicks" and "Murphy,"* Whitston Publishing Company, 1991.

This very academic study details in great specificity the sources of the allusions of Beckett's two earliest books.

Gontarski, S. E., ed., *On Beckett: Essays and Criticism,* Grove Press, 1986.

This collection, edited by Gontarski—an important scholar of modernism and of modernist drama in particular—is probably the best introduction to the different kinds of writing on Beckett.

Kenner, Hugh, *Samuel Beckett: A Critical Study,* University of California Press, 1961.

Kenner's writing on modernism is both encyclopedic and idiosyncratic. In his early career, he was the first academic critic to devote whole studies to writers such as Beckett and Ezra Pound, and this book was the first significant critical statement on how Beckett fit into the modernist tradition.

Bibliography

Bryden, Mary, "No Stars without Stripes: Beckett and Dante," in *Romanic Review,* Vol. LXXXVII, No. 4, November 1996, pp. 541-56.

Calder-Marshall, Arthur, Review *of More Pricks than Kicks,* in *Spectator,* June 1, 1934, p. 46.

Cochran, Robert, *Samuel Beckett: A Study of the Short Fiction,* Twayne, 1991.

Cronin, Anthony, *Samuel Beckett: The Last Modernist,* HarperCollins, 1996.

Gould, Gerald, Review of *More Pricks than Kicks,* in *Observer,* July 2, 1934, p. 428.

Knowlson, James, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett,* Simon & Schuster, 1996.

Muir, Edward, Review of *More Pricks than Kicks,* in *Listener,* July 4, 1934, p. 34.

Pattie, David, *The Complete Critical Guide to Samuel Beckett,* Routledge, 2000.

Pilling, John, *Beckett before Godot,* Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Rabinovitz, Rubin, *The Development of Samuel Beckett's Fiction,* University of Illinois Press, 1984.

Review *of More Pricks than Kicks,* in *Times Literary Supplement* (London), July 26, 1934, p. 247.

Sunne, Richard, Review *of More Pricks than Kicks,* in *Time and Tide,* May 26, 1934, p. 26.

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