Dominoes Study Guide

Dominoes by Jack Agueros

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Introduction

"Dominoes" is the title story in Jack Agüeros' collection of short stories, *Dominoes and Other Stories from the Puerto Rican.* Agüeros is a writer of Puerto Rican heritage who has lived his entire life in New York City. This is his second book, following the publication of a collection of poems, *Correspondence Between the Stonehaulers* in 1991. Agüeros also writes plays and drama criticism.

"Dominoes" is about four Puerto Rican men who are playing a game of dominoes on the sidewalk in East Harlem (also known as Spanish Harlem), the Puerto Rican community of New York City. A violent quarrel suddenly erupts, leaving one man dead and another maimed for life. The story is notable for the insight it gives into aspects of Puerto Rican culture, such as the concept of machismo; it also has an underlying philosophical theme of fate versus free will. Stylistically, "Dominoes" is notable for its sharp, vivid images, and its deft portrayal of characters with just a few telling details.

"Dominoes" is also an important contribution to an emerging body of "Nuyorican" literature. This term refers to work by Puerto Rican writers living in New York City, which has the largest Puerto Rican community in the continental United States.

Author Biography

Jack Agüeros was born in 1934 in East Harlem, New York City, the son of Joaquin Agüeros and Carmen Diaz Agüeros. Joaquin Agüeros moved to New York City in the mid-1920s from Puerto Rico, where he was a policeman; Carmen Diaz arrived in New York from Puerto Rico in 1931. Life for Puerto Ricans in New York during the depression of the 1930s was hard; work was not easy to find, and Agüeros grew up in relative poverty in an immigrant area.

Agüeros' early ambition, instilled in him by his parents, was to become a doctor. He was also an avid reader, and it was his literary interests that eventually dictated his career choice. After receiving his B. A. from Brooklyn College in New York and an Master of Arts in Urban Studies from Occidental College in Los Angeles, Agüeros soon began to distinguish himself as an award-winning writer in many different fields. As a poet, he published *Correspondence Between the Stonehaulers* (1991) and *Sonnets from the Puerto Rican* (1996); he had one-act plays produced off Broadway; and he wrote for television, including "Sesame Street" and WNBC-TV. He also published his collection of short stories, *Dominoes and Other Stories from the Puerto Rican* (1993), and compiled and translated *Song of the Simple Truth: The Complete Poems of Julia de Burgos* (1997), a bilingual edition of the writings of Puerto Rico's greatest poet. Agüeros has published essays as a critic, especially of Spanish-language theatre, and he has reviewed plays for the *Village Voice* and the *SoHo News.*

As a community activist, Agüeros has participated in many projects, including Mobilization for Youth, an anti-delinquency project in New York City's Lower East Side. He was also involved in the Henry Street Settlement and the Community Development Agency. He is executive vice president of the Institute for Multicultural Communications Cooperation and Development, Inc. (IFMCCADI), and for ten years he was director of El Museo del Barrio in New York City, the only Puerto Rican museum in the continental United States.

Plot Summary

Double Six: The Box of Teeth

"Dominoes" begins with a game of dominoes between four Puerto Rican men on a sidewalk in New York City. Ebarito and Wilson make up one pair of players and Paco and Tito the other. Paco leads with a double six, and Ebarito is irritated that he must pass because he does not have a six in his hand. When he finds he must pass a second time, he becomes even more disgruntled. He feels that Paco has the luck and the skill that enable him always to win. Ebarito has been given a handicap of one hundred points, but even that is not enough. It is clear that Ebarito is the odd man out in this group.

Double Five

Paco's young niece Alma leans on the ledge of her second floor window, watching what is going on in the street. Her uncle has taught her how to play dominoes, but she does not enjoy the game. She thinks that winning at dominoes is just a matter of luck although Paco tried to explain to her that there was skill involved too. Rather than playing dominoes, Alma prefers to spend her time looking out of the window or, in winter, playing cards. At this moment, she is waiting for her new boyfriend Pee Wee to arrive, hoping they will go for a walk in Central Park or to a movie.

Double Four

The game continues. Paco wins decisively, and they begin another game. Paco mixes up the dominoes and each player takes a new hand. As Ebarito takes his seven dominoes, he continues to feel unhappy. He gets a hand that includes three doubles (which increases his chances of having to pass) and realizes that he will lose again, this time by two hundred and fifty points. This will be embarrassing and humiliating for him. Although he knows he should be a graceful loser, he feels unable to rise to the challenge.

Double Three

Alma hears the dominoes snapping down on the wooden board. She looks over and sees that Ebarito looks angry. She cannot see Paco's face, but she can see Wilson, whom she does not like. She recalls a conversation she once had with him in which he told her that she associated with the wrong kind of men, those who were not machos. Alma contrasts Wilson and her uncle Paco with Tito, whom she likes because he is kind and friendly.

Double Two

As the game continues, bad feeling emerges between Paco and Ebarito. Tito accuses Ebarito of cheating, and Paco says Ebarito must admit either to cheating or being unable to count. Ebarito becomes enraged and hits Paco with the metal milk crate he has been sitting on. Paco jumps up, and the dominoes scatter. Paco grabs the milk crate and pushes it against Ebarito's chest. The two men fall to the ground, with Paco on top. With his hands around Ebarito's throat, Paco begins banging Ebarito's head against the sidewalk. Ebarito pulls out a pair of long barber's scissors and stabs Paco in the ribs.

Double One

Alma screams for the men to stop fighting and begs Wilson and Tito to intervene. But no one takes any notice of her. PeeWee arrives and heads for the nearest telephone, which is at the corner drugstore, to call the police. Wilson tries to prevent Tito from intervening, but Tito wriggles free from his grasp. He grabs the scissors from Ebarito's hands and pulls at Paco. Paco stands up, believing Ebarito to be dead. He staggers off, bleeding from twelve scissor wounds that Ebarito inflicted on him during the struggle. He collapses near a fire hydrant and dies.

Double Blank: The Dead Man's Box

Ebarito awakens in a hospital. He finds it difficult to open his eyes, and he is in pain. When he finally manages to open his eyes, everything is clouded and unfocused. He hears a doctor telling him he is lucky to be alive. But he is seriously injured, nonetheless. The doctor tells him that his trachea is cracked and he has severe damage to his vocal cords, as well as being paralyzed. He may never be able to speak or walk again.

Summary

"Dominoes" is Jack Agueros' short story of Puerto Rican culture as exhibited by a game of dominoes played by four men, Ebarito, Paco, Tito and Wilson, in Spanish Harlem in New York City.

The narration describes the dominoes playing style of each of the men involved in the game. Each of the men has a personal playing habit that unnerves one or more of the others and that may be used as a tactic to disturb the concentration of the opponents. Ebarito, in particular, likes to hold six dominoes in his left hand but wishes he could hold all seven at once.

As the men continue to play, Paco begins to emerge as the winner, a fact that incenses the extremely competitive Ebarito. Ebarito finishes his beer but declines another one because the others will not drink with him. Paco's niece, Alma, watches the dominoes game from an upstairs window in which she perches to watch the world go by. Alma prefers playing cards to dominoes, although her uncle tried to teach her to play one night when Alma's old boyfriend stood her up for a date. Alma knows that although her uncle did not mention it, this was his way of providing some comfort for her on a difficult night. Alma is half waiting for her new boyfriend, Pee Wee, to come walking down the street to offer to take her to a movie or just out for a walk in Central Park, but Pee Wee does not show up.

The story moves back to the dominoes game, which Paco has won. The men decide to play again, and Ebarito is displeased with his hand. Wilson comments on Ebarito's bad hand, and Ebarito reminds Wilson that the game was "invented by a mute," which is Paco's signal to be quiet.

Ebarito secretly consoles himself that his prowess is with women and his barbershop, not this game with these men. Ebarito's hand reveals three doubles, otherwise known as "La caja de muerto," or "the dead man's box," and Ebarito knows that he cannot win this hand. Ebarito tells himself that he needs to exhibit good sportsmanship and bow out gracefully, but his pride will not allow him to do that.

The play continues, and Alma's attention is once again focused on the dominoes game by the sound of someone slapping a domino onto the wooden board with great force. The tension among the men increases as mild-mannered Tito accuses Ebarito of cheating. Paco also accuses Ebarito of inappropriate behavior, and immediately Ebarito stands, picks up the metal milk crate on which he was sitting and knocks it into Paco's head.

Paco is able to gain control of the milk crate and pushes it into Ebarito's chest, pushing Ebarito backwards and making him lose his balance. Soon Paco is on top of Ebarito, choking his throat in a death grip. Wilson interrupts Tito's attempt to break up the fight, and the two men watch Paco and Ebarito struggle on the ground. As Paco repeatedly knocks Ebarito's head against the sidewalk, Ebarito pulls thinning shears from his

pocket and stabs Paco in the rib cage again and again. Still, Tito and Wilson stand by and watch.

From Alma's perch in her window, she suddenly spots Pee Wee, who is yelling and motioning wildly toward the fight at the scene of the dominoes game. When Alma realizes what is happening, she screams for help, but all in the area seem paralyzed. Pee Wee regains his senses and runs toward a phone booth, and Alma runs out of her building and toward the men still struggling on the ground.

Wilson still restrains Tito from intervening in the fight, admonishing Tito that Paco and Ebarito are "machos" and that "they know what they want." The sight of Alma pulling at her uncle Paco finally gives Tito the strength he needs to break away from Wilson and kick the scissors out of Ebarito's hand.

When Paco stands up, he thinks for a moment that Ebarito is dead, but he moves away from the scene by staggering a few steps. Seemingly unaware of the blood gushing from his twelve stab wounds, Paco walks a few steps more before collapsing dead on the sidewalk. Alma is overwrought with shock and screams, "You killed him, you let him be killed, you killers."

Ebarito is taken to a hospital, where he awakens after surgery to hear the doctor telling him that he is lucky to be alive. The doctor informs Ebarito that his trachea is cracked and that there has been severe damage done to his vocal chords. The extent of Ebarito's injuries means that he will probably never speak again. At best, he can make some growling sounds. One eye may be blinded, but it will be a few weeks before the diagnosis can be made for sure. Ebarito tries to point to his mouth to indicate that he needs water, but he finds that his left arm is shackled to the bed.

Analysis

This story is told from the third person narrator point of view, although it is restricted, which means that the reader can understand the facts and events but has access to the thoughts and feelings of only two of the characters, Alma and Ebarito. The characters of Paco, Tito, Wilson and Pee Wee are known only through their dialogue and actions.

The author sets up the differences between Alma and Ebarito's views of the game of dominoes to signify the difference in the male perspective versus the female perspective. Alma is only mildly interested in game playing and prefers to watch the world pass in front of her from her window. Ebarito is the epitome of the macho Puerto Rican male, and for him, the game is an extension of his manhood, making winning a vitally important endeavor.

The setting for the story is a sidewalk somewhere in the Spanish Harlem section of New York City, where a huge Puerto Rican population resides. The dialect of the Puerto Rican people adds to the authenticity and pacing of the story.

The author also uses the element of foreshadowing in a couple of instances in the story. For example, at the beginning, readers learn that Ebarito likes to hold his hand of six dominoes all in his left hand, which gives him a feeling of control and power. At the end of the story, Ebarito's left hand is shackled to the bed, which renders him helpless and in control of nothing.

Another example of foreshadowing is the mention of the "La caja de muerto," or "the dead man's box," which Ebarito holds in his last hand. This devastatingly bad hand humiliates Ebarito and causes him to fly into a rage at Paco, an act that ultimately ends in Paco's death.

The theme of the machismo, which is so vital to the Puerto Rican male, has deadly consequences, and Alma is really the brave one in the story, screaming at everyone and no one with her rage and grief over the senseless maiming of her beloved uncle Paco.

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Characters

Alma

Alma is Paco's niece. She doesn't care for the game of dominoes; she even dislikes the sound of the dominoes hitting the board. She cannot understand why the men are so obsessed with the game. Alma prefers to entertain herself by gazing for hours out of her second-floor window at the street life below or sometimes by playing cards. While the four men play dominoes, Alma waits for her boyfriend PeeWee to arrive and take her out. In her relations with the other characters, Alma prefers the friendly Tito to Wilson, whom she does not like.

Ebarito

Ebarito is one of the four men who are playing dominoes. He is not liked by the others, who usually try to avoid him. The odd man out in the group, he is the only one who is drinking. Ebarito is a barber by profession, and he is a good one; he also has success with women, which may in part account for why the other men dislike him—they are envious. But, Ebarito is a poor domino player and has to be given a handicap by Paco to make the game more evenly matched. Paco especially dislikes Ebarito. Paco once told Alma, "Ebarito is nothing but a barber and a pretty boy. He can't play dominoes and he's always trying." The use of the expression "pretty boy" suggests that Ebarito is handsome but possibly also vain. Ebarito is quick to feel anger and resentment, and he may have feelings of inferiority because his occupation as a barber is not held in high regard by the others. He also feels humiliated by the fact that he is losing the game, and it is he who provokes the quarrel with Paco. He stabs Paco to death in the fight but is so badly wounded himself that he will never be able to speak again.

Paco

Paco left Puerto Rico when he was sixteen to join the merchant marine, in which he spent twenty or thirty years traveling the world. A big man, Paco is also intelligent, but he says little. Known as an excellent dominoes player, he always seems to have the luck and the skill to win the game. Paco believes the game of dominoes is decided as much by skill as by luck. At the critical point in the story, he rises to Ebarito's challenge and insults him twice. But Paco is then killed in the subsequent fight.

PeeWee

PeeWee is Alma's boyfriend. He arrives at the scene during the fight between Paco and Ebarito and calls the police.

Tito

According to Alma, Tito is kinder than the other men are and he is more talkative. He is also social, friendly, and fun loving. But Tito is not as strong as the other men, and they are sometimes able to persuade him to do the opposite of what he believes. This is illustrated when the fight breaks out. Tito, who has played no role in the sudden quarrel, tries to break the fight up, but Wilson holds him back. For a while it is as if Tito is paralyzed by Wilson's stronger will. Eventually, Tito breaks free of Wilson's grasp and succeeds in pulling Paco off Ebarito even though the damage has already been done.

Wilson

Wilson is Paco's best friend. Like Paco, he spent many years in the merchant marine. He is a master dominoes player and a hard man who believes in the ideal of machismo. For a while, Wilson prevents Tito from breaking up the fight between Paco and Ebarito because he believes the two men should just fight it out.

Themes

Fate and Free Will

The philosophical theme of fate versus free will crops up several times in the story. Is human life ruled by a predetermined fate, or can people influence and change their fate by the exercise of free will?

The first hint of this theme occurs when Ebarito alludes to the "wheel of fortune." He says that the handicap the other players give him in the game of dominoes is only useful if it "wobbles" that wheel, in other words, if it can somehow alter his luck and change the outcome of the game. The wheel of fortune, which occurs often in literature of the medieval period, suggests that human destiny is a matter of fate. A person may do well with the wheel of fortune for a while, but as the wheel keeps turning, eventually his luck will run out, and his time for misfortune will come. There is little he can do about it.

The theme becomes explicit when one of the characters, Wilson, tells Alma that he believes in fate. But he has an unusual definition of what that belief implies: "Men who are real men can live their lives anyway they like—because their destiny is clear." This is a paradox. Wilson believes in fate (that each man has a destiny), but he believes that knowledge of that destiny, rather than binding a man, actually sets him free to chart his own course in life.

Agüeros cleverly links the theme of fate and free will to the game of dominoes. The game thus becomes a metaphor for human life. For Alma, dominoes is "just a matter of following the numbers." The winner is determined when the dominoes are first dealt because the hand given cannot be altered. The same idea is later expressed by Tito, who says to Paco, "the game is over as soon as you get your hand. Isn't it?"

But Paco disagrees. He argues strongly that strategy is involved in the game too. A player can overcome or mitigate a less than ideal hand by the skill with which he plays it. If a player has a two-five and a four-five, for example, he has a choice of which piece to play. That choice can be based on his shrewd assessment of what pieces the other players have; he can play his own hand to maximize his own advantage. The parallel with human destiny is clear: People have choices; their fate is not fixed; they can forge their own destinies.

It is appropriate, then, that at the end of the story it is Paco (the character who believes that a man can alter his fate in dominoes) who manages to alter his own fate in his final, dying act. He defies fate. Fate, the narrator tells the reader, had decreed that Paco die where Ebarito also lay. But Paco manages to stagger away, the instinctive movements of his stricken body overruling the fate that had been decreed: "[I]t had refused to die where fate had ordained—he didn't want to be near Ebarito. Death had wanted him there, but he would go here."

Pride

The simple game of dominoes is a matter of great importance and pride to the four players. They play it day and night, whatever the season. It seems to be a test of their standing as men. Each man has his own pet strategy for the game and even a distinctive way of holding and arranging his set of dominoes. Because Ebarito is not as good as the others and has to be offered a handicap, his pride is hurt. Masculine pride is an element in the social code known as machismo, which seems to be an integral part of this New York Puerto Rican community. It is pride that stops Ebarito from being a gracious loser, and it is pride and machismo that spark the deadly quarrel, since neither Paco nor Ebarito can let an insult pass. At the end of the story, Ebarito is so badly injured that he will never be able to speak or walk again. These ailments appear to be a punishment for having so much pride. Earlier, he was unable to utter gracious words about his approaching defeat. The necessary words "stuck in his craw like a thing he could not swallow, could not spit." Having failed this test, Ebarito's fate is never to be able to utter another word. Such are the fruits of pride.

Style

Point of View

The story is told by a limited third person narrator. This means that the narrator does not possess insight into what all the characters are thinking; he can see into the minds of only Ebarito and Alma, and he tells the story from their alternating points of view. The other characters, Wilson, Paco, and Tito, are known only by their words, actions, and what others say and feel about them. Their own thoughts are not revealed.

The fact that Ebarito is the main viewpoint character helps to establish the idea that it is he who is the odd man out in the group of four. The tension in the story builds through his thoughts and feelings, which reveal his growing frustration and resentment. It is Ebarito's state of mind, irritated and uneasy from the beginning, that eventually produces the explosion that propels the story to its tragic end.

Switching the point of view to Alma in several of the short sections provides a change of scene and a contrast. While the four men are totally committed to the game, which is a matter of great importance to them, Alma does not share their interest. Telling part of the story through Alma's point of view provides an opportunity to reveal information and anecdotes about Wilson and Tito that Ebarito would not have known.

Style

The writing style is simple and colloquial, using the rhythms and vocabulary of everyday speech. The characters speak in a way that reflects their working-class background. Conversation is spare; the main characters are men who do not waste words in idle chatter. The frequent occurrence of words and phrases in Spanish—such as *jibaro, vida, cabeza,* and *infección*—help to create the feeling that the characters are part of a distinctive, in this case Puerto Rican, culture.

Historical Context

The Puerto Rican Community in East Harlem

The New York Puerto Rican culture in which "Dominoes" takes place is the same culture in which Agüeros was born and raised. The area known as East Harlem or Spanish Harlem stretches from Central Park on the west to Franklin D. Roosevelt Drive on the east and between East 97th Street in the south and East 118th Street in the north. It includes the part of Lexington Avenue mentioned in the story, where Alma hopes to go to the movie theater. (Lexington Avenue is also where the Agüeros family moved in 1941.) And Alma's boyfriend Pee Wee lives in the heart of Spanish Harlem, on 112th Street, near Third Avenue.

During the middle of the twentieth century, large numbers of Puerto Ricans, as well as African Americans, began to move into East Harlem. In 1930, there were 45,000 Puerto Ricans living in New York City; by 1950, this number had more than quadrupled to 187,000. Twenty years later, in 1970, the figure was over 800,000. This period is often known as the "Great Migration."

Agüeros reports in his essay "Halfway to Dick and Jane," in *The Immigrant Experience,* that the influx of Puerto Ricans to East Harlem after World War II ended strained the resources of the neighborhood to the breaking point. Unemployment and poverty were widespread, and Puerto Ricans, many of whom could not speak English, faced prejudice and resentment. By the year 2000, 40 percent of Puerto Ricans living in New York City were classified as poor.

Today, many of the earlier immigrant groups have moved out of East Harlem. It is now populated mostly by African Americans and Puerto Ricans although the number of Puerto Ricans is declining as other Hispanic groups such as Mexicans and Dominicans move into the area.

"Nuyorican" Literature

One of the pioneering figures in Puerto Rican literature written in English by authors living on the mainland of the United States was Jesús Colón (1901-1974), who settled in New York City in 1917. He published a collection of his writings, *A Puerto Rican in New York and Other Sketches,* in 1961. In general, Puerto Ricans who were part of the "Great Migration" to the United States were slow in developing a literature of their own. This was partly because the Puerto Rican migrants of that period were mostly undereducated and poor, with neither the leisure nor the financial resources needed to devote themselves to writing.

This situation began to change in the 1950s and 1960s. Inspired by the American civil rights movement, Puerto Ricans began to be more assertive in proclaiming and taking pride in their own cultural identity. A new generation of writers, including Agüeros, began

to give expression to their experiences as an often-despised minority group. Second-generation Puerto Ricans living and writing in New York City became known as "Nuyoricans." Central to the growth of Nuyorican literature was the Nuyorican Poet's Café, founded in the 1960s by Miguel Algarin and still in existence today. The Café gave Nuyoricans a forum where they could share their work with a sympathetic audience. By the 1970s, a considerable body of Nuyorican literature, much of it emphasizing social and political issues relevant to the impoverished Puerto Rican community, had been created.

However, acceptance by mainstream American culture of literature written by Puerto Ricans living in the United States has been slow in coming. For years, such writing was virtually ignored. An exception, and a landmark in Puerto Rican literature, occurred with the publication of Piri Thomas' *Down These Mean Streets* by a major New York publishing house in 1967. In this book, Thomas describes his own experiences growing up in Spanish Harlem. It was a bestseller.

In today's cultural environment, the movement known as multiculturalism has helped to promote greater awareness of Puerto Rican literature. Large publishing houses have been more open to publishing such works; *Growing Up Puerto Rican: An Anthology* (1995) is a recent example. The three books published by Agüeros in the 1990s, although published by small presses, are also examples of the trend toward greater acceptance of Puerto Rican literature.

Critical Overview

Dominoes and other Stories from the Puerto Rican was well received by reviewers although few single out the title story for special comment. The emphasis of critics is on the variety of the stories and how telling a portrait they provided of the life of the Puerto Rican community in New York City.

Raúl Niño in *Booklist* writes, "In these eight vivid stories that both shock and delight, the language is colloquial, the themes the difficult realities of an immigrant's experience." Niño no doubt had "Dominoes" in mind as one of the stories that shock. Niño argues that the experiences of Puerto Ricans in these stories are no different than those of any other immigrant group in the United States although Agüeros "also conjures up the special texture of the culture from which it stems."

The reviewer for *Publishers Weekly* comments on how the "intimate portraits" of the characters in the stories reveal the "complexities of people whose indigenous culture often conflicts with their new urban life. Though [Agüeros'] prose is spare, the tales brim with telling details that define the time and place with indelibly vivid images." The reviewer also comments that "Dominoes" "describes a routine game of dominoes that erupts in violence because machismo rules the behavior of the players."

Dominoes and other Stories from the Puerto Rican has proven popular with educators and is used in literature classes in many public schools. It was named to the New York Public Library 1994 list of Recommended Books for the Teen Age. This reflects the country's continuing interest in multiculturalism.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4

Critical Essay #1

Aubrey holds a Ph.D. in English. In this essay, he considers Agüeros story in relation to the concept of machismo.

Puerto Rican culture, whether on the island or in migrant Puerto Rican communities in the continental United States, is often associated with the concept of machismo. Machismo is a set of beliefs and attitudes that emphasize male dominance, control, and aggressiveness. It is often viewed in a negative fashion by outsiders. The values of machismo underlie Agüeros' "Dominoes"; the author presents the concept mostly in a negative light, with the exception of one passage, which might permit a more positive interpretation.

What is machismo? The term is used to refer to a concept of masculinity found not only in Puerto Rican culture but also in other Latino societies, as well as a range of Hispanic groups in the United States. Some elements of machismo are also found in non-Hispanic societies.

Puerto Rican scholar Tirso Mejía Ricart, in an influential 1975 study quoted in Rafael L. Ramírez's *What It Means To Be a Man: Reflections on Puerto Rican Masculinity,* names twenty principal characteristics of machismo. Male cultural, intellectual, and physical superiority to women is a central characteristic. Other characteristics of machismo include sexual potency; "Don Juanismo," named after the legendary lover, meaning a man who possesses an unlimited number of women and supports several of them simultaneously; emotional rigidity, especially in critical situations; independence (which is denied to women); aggression, physical or psychological violence is an acceptable way of settling differences; hunger for power, which is shown by wanting to exercise control in all situations; physical strength; personal courage; honor (often associated with the behavior of the man's wife rather than the man himself); and extravagance, with the purpose of showing off financial power.

Mejía Ricart regards machismo in an entirely negative light and advocates its eradication. However, other researchers have found positive aspects in machismo. Alfredo Mirandé, in *Hombros y Machos: Masculinity and Latino Culture,* conducted a survey of Latinos living in the United States. He found that Latinos had mixed responses to the concept of machismo. In addition to the negative characteristics mentioned above, there are positive qualities as well. Courage, which in the negative view has connotations of recklessness and courting danger, is seen as the ability to stand up for a person's rights. Other positive values associated with machismo are responsibility and selflessness, meeting obligations, and a "general code of ethics" or set of principles that guide behavior in all areas of life. This includes respect for oneself and others, acting with sincerity, and being a man of your word.

Aspects of machismo form the cultural backdrop to "Dominoes." Perhaps the most noticeable characteristic is the attitude toward women, and their place in society. It is clear that at least two of the male characters regard women in a patronizing light.

Wilson tells Alma that she associates with the wrong kinds of men, men who are not machos. When she inquires about how his observations about fate apply to women, he replies with a disparaging remark that he knows nothing of women, recommending a spiritualist and the church, "One will tell you the future and the other will console you about it. But I'm not sure which does what." The repeated protestations of ignorance about women's concerns suggest an inability to exercise empathy for a person of the opposite sex. The remark also brings attention to a woman's power-lessness. Her future is not in her own hands; her only option is to seek solace for what is beyond her control.

After Wilson's pronouncements, he and Paco, who had apparently also been present, had "broken into very heavy prolonged laughter," which suggests a male camaraderie that is hostile to women, or at best refuses to take them seriously. Alma finds this distasteful and contrasts their attitude to that of Tito, who is more kind.

Alma's role in the plot reinforces this suggestion of powerlessness. In her first appearance in the story, she is presented as largely passive. She likes to sit in front of the window for hours just watching the street life. The implication is that in this society, women do not participate in life as fully as men do. Alma's concerns are frivolous; she thinks mostly of her new boyfriend and where he will take her on their date.

When she sees that a fight has broken out, she screams at the men to stop and for someone to call the police. But no one moves, which suggests that the voice of a woman is ineffectual. This is emphasized again later in the same section, as Alma kneels over the wounded Ebarito, screaming. But although Alma makes her terror plain, no one seems to take any notice of her: "She screamed at everyone. She screamed at no one."

The aspect of machismo known as Don Juanismo, the power to seduce women, is also present in "Dominoes." It centers on the character of Ebarito, who appears to excel in only two areas of life: he is a good barber, and he has success with women ("His game was women"). This perhaps accounts for why the other men do not like him. They envy his sexual prowess and the "pretty boy" looks that contribute to his success. In that respect, Ebarito is more of a macho than the others.

Sexual competitiveness, then, is an element that underlies the quarrel between Ebarito and Paco. This is hinted at in the very first paragraph of the story. Ebarito likes to show off by holding six dominoes in his left hand; he would like to hold seven, which would mean he would be better than Paco, who even though he has larger hands, cannot hold seven dominoes at once. This might be interpreted as a displaced reference to male competitiveness over the size of their sexual organs, which is another characteristic of relations between men in some societies that embody machismo. As Ramírez puts it:

As part of the cultural construction . . . that embodies sexuality and power in the genitals, the man pays particular attention to his penis, which is valued according to its size. From childhood, we Puerto Rican men compete on the basis of the size of our penis, and this competition continues into adulthood.

Ebarito's concern with how many dominoes he can hold in his hand, and his desire to hold more, suggests that his sexual exploits, and his sense of himself as a man embodying machismo, mask feelings of inferiority. This exactly matches the opinions of the respondents in Mirandé's study who viewed machismo in a negative light. They described it as "exaggerated masculinity"; a man who embodied machismo was "one who acts tough and who is insecure of himself." Adding to Ebarito's insecurity is the fact that he works in an occupation that commands little respect in his community.

Another aspect of machismo as defined by Mejía Ricart is power hunger, the desire always to be in control in any social situation or relationship. This accounts for Ebarito's extreme discomfort when he finds he is powerless to reverse his losing situation in the game of dominoes. The loss of power and control he experiences leads directly to the sudden explosion of violence, when Ebarito can no longer contain his frustration.

Similarly, it is machismo that motivates Wilson to stop Tito from trying to break up the fight. "They are *machos,"* Wilson says, "they know what they want." Firmness of purpose, rigidity, and standing one's ground whatever happens, even if a man knows he is in the wrong, are all characteristics of machismo. Although such values are by no means exclusive to machismo cultures and are not all entirely negative, in the context of "Dominoes" they quickly lead to catastrophe.

The largely negative connotations of machismo in "Dominoes" may be partially offset by one cryptic passage in the story. It is when Alma recalls what Wilson said to her once, in the context of fate and destiny: "Men who are real can live their lives anyway they like—because their destiny is clear. To be a *macho* is the destiny." The comment is somewhat ambiguous, and Wilson nowhere elaborates on what he means. But it does reveal him as a thoughtful man. The comment might be read as a license for arrogance, suggesting that a macho can simply do what he likes without any moral or ethical scruples. But another, more elevated interpretation is equally possible. Being a macho fulfills one's destiny as a man; the macho lives by the code that is honored in his society, and because of this he never has anything to fear, and in that sense he is free to do what he wishes. It does not matter how he acts because he is firmly rooted in the integrity of his own being. He is who he is supposed to be, and his actions flow from that integrity. This would be similar to the positive values of machismo identified by some of the respondents in Mirandé's study who linked the concept to qualities such as honor, sincerity, and responsibility, which form part of a general code of ethics or set of principles that guide a man through his life.

Of course, whether Ebarito fulfilled his destiny by killing Paco, and Paco his by dying of scissor wounds inflicted by a man he despised, is another matter. Perhaps for both of them, being a macho was not enough.

Source: Bryan Aubrey, Critical Essay on "Dominoes," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

Madsen Hardy has a doctorate in English and is a freelance writer and editor. In this essay, she discusses the idea of masculinity in relation to the imagery in Agüeros's story.

Jack Agüeros's short story "Dominoes" shows how a simple game of dominoes becomes a matter of life and death for two men in New York's Puerto Rican community. The story traces a chain reaction— a series of events, seemingly as inevitable as dominoes falling—that leads from an afternoon's pastime to murder and mutilation. For the players, success at the game of dominoes is a mark of manhood. Therefore, the game takes on an important status in the social fabric of the community. Though there is nothing inherently masculine about this table game, it represents a certain idea of manliness that is very important to the men who play. They ascribe to it their own values of what it means to be a man.

Agüeros offers an understated critique of *machismo* through his carefully observed characterizations and his interplay of images. While the men he portrays see masculinity as their sole source of power and control, Agüeros shows how they are actually trapped in the role that they believe empowers them. "Dominoes" is replete with images of containment. Agüeros's characters are stuck— they can't move and can't speak. The game of dominoes revolves around closing off opportunities for your opponent to play. Even the flow of the narrative itself is contained within six sections, each named for a domino. These include particular dominoes that have names suggesting both death and containment—double sixes, known as *la caja de dientes* or box of teeth and *la caja de muerto* dead man's box. By the end of the story, the game's eerie slang seems to have foreshadowed the violence that erupts at the dominoes table. Agüeros's men are boxed in—dead or mute and paralyzed—because of the rules they use to define what it means to be a man.

Three of the story's six sections make readers privy to the thoughts and feelings of Ebarito, a young barber who is unpopular with the other men in the neighborhood and bad at dominoes. Nevertheless, the others let him play with them with a hundred-point handicap. These sections alternate with those reflecting the thoughts and feelings of Alma, a woman who watches the game from her window. Alma is the niece of Paco, against whom Ebarito plays and whom he eventually murders in a fight over the game. She is largely irrelevant to the main events of the plot, and yet, because she supplies context and explains the actions of the men at the dominoes table, she is given equal time in the story's organization.

Alma represents the contrasting feminine position, without which masculinity loses much of its meaning. She is contained in the house, waiting her date, while the men dominate the public space. While this might suggest that she is the one who is repressed, their narrations offer a different perspective. Ebarito's sections narrate the immediate events of the game, while Alma's offer a wider view. Her sections offer a context for the men's behavior at the dominoes able, including their feelings toward

Ebarito and their personal histories as merchant marines that helped form them into "hard" men, as well as the rules of the game itself. Alma herself doesn't like the "ridiculous game," or men who are *machos* in the sense evoked by dominoes. The back-and-forth effect created by the shifts in narration serves, among other things, to emphasize the contrast between male and female perspectives and to highlight the issue of gender difference.

Though Ebarito doesn't seem to be the same sort of man as those who dominate the dominoes game, he wishes to prove himself according to their standards. The game takes place in the public space of the street but is understood implicitly to be the domain of men. Women don't play dominoes, though they can, like Alma, watch the goings on of the game from their homes. Thus the game involves an element of display, public image, and pride. Ebarito knows he is not good at dominoes—"his game was women; the barber shop"—but he still seeks to sit, be seen, and hold his own with the elder men of the neighborhood.

The players associate success at dominoes with a specifically masculine relationship to fate. Wilson professes that a real man has a clear destiny. "Men who are real men can live their lives any way they like. . . . To be a *macho* is the destiny." There is some contradiction to this idea, as there is to the idea of masculinity that drives the events of the story. Destiny normally signifies a *lack* of control over what the future will bring. But *machos* don't feel that the strictures of fate control them—they feel, as Paco does in dominoes, that they are in control. Paco believes that the game is a matter of skill, not luck. There is some basic strategy involved in choosing which piece to put down if you have more than one combination with the number in play, but Alma and Tito both see the game as a matter of luck—or fate. Tito says, "the game is over as soon as you get your hand." The winner and loser are already determined. As soon as Ebarito draws his losing hand, the rest of the game is inevitable. And, within the strictures of the code of behavior that the dominoes players adhere to, not only is the rest of the game inevitable, but so are the rest of the events of the story, up to its violent end.

Ebarito's lack of skill as a dominoes player signifies—to him and to the others—a deficit in masculinity. Agüeros's descriptions of Ebarito suggest that he is less than fully a man according to the macho definitions of manhood that dominate the community. The suffix "ito" in Spanish means little. It is a diminutive term suggesting childishness. Furthermore, Agüeros introduces Ebarito by describing his wish for larger hands. As he plays with the other men, he is aware of not measuring up—both physically and as a player. Paco describes Ebarito to Alma as a "pretty boy," an insult that characterizes him as simultaneously feminine and childish. Later, he confronts him by calling him "little barber"—again, undermining his masculinity by insinuating that he is small and that his profession is feminine.

Ebarito senses that when he loses at dominoes, he is conceding to these attacks on his masculinity. If you don't have the number in play, you're stuck, you must pass. This is an uncomfortable position because it is a passive one, associated with femininity. Humiliated simply because he has drawn a bad set of dominoes, he feels that it is impossible for him to admit that he is not good at the game: "he had but one recourse

now—to lose gracefully—to be a good sport—say the obvious out loud—'You are too good for me.'" Agüeros uses an image of suffocation and muteness to describe Ebarito's feelings about admitting to his impending loss. The words "stuck in his craw like a thing he could not swallow, could not spit."

This simile for paralysis and speechlessness resonates with the men's ethos of silence, enforced with the statement, "The game was invented by a mute." The macho code of dominoes is a code of silence signifying strength. The men speak with their actions—in the game and in life. Paco "couldn't express too many things," though he is smart and gruffly caring toward Alma. She observes that Tito is "kinder and he talked more, but he was not as strong" as Wilson and Paco. Though he is outwardly less macho than Paco and Wilson, Ebarito shares with them a belief that silence is a sign of strength and that expression is weak.

The physical imagery for emotional repression Agüeros uses to describe Ebarito's silence also foreshadows the events that play out as the tension amongst the players mounts and explodes into violence. Ebarito suggests that Tito's table talk is part of a cheating scheme and, within moments, a fight breaks out. The male onlookers are unresponsive; only Alma screams and runs. Though it is Tito's impulse to break up the fight, when Wilson curses Ebarito, "Tito just stopped, as if Wilson's venom had paralyzed him." Alma begs for action, "but no one moved." "They are *machos*," says Wilson, at last conferring on Ebarito the status he had sought, "they know what they want."

Ebarito stabs and kills Paco with his delicate barber's scissors, while Paco only succeeds in asphyxiating Ebarito with his bare hands, crushing his voice box, and driving part of his larynx into his vertebra, thus paralyzing him. Agüeros again uses strikingly similar imagery when he describes Ebarito's injury. His tongue feels "as if he had a washcloth stuffed there," and when he tries to speak, "he could not move the wash rag in his mouth, nor spit it out." Ebarito will never speak again, except to "maybe growl," in the words of his doctor. The story ends with Ebarito suffering an extreme physical manifestation of the pride that figuratively boxed him in and made conciliatory words stick in his craw. In the closing section, Agüeros vividly characterizes Ebarito's condition of silence as a sign of being out of control rather than in control, particularly through his portrayal of the doctor's patronizing assumptions about Ebarito's knowledge of the English language. His attempts to be manly leave Ebarito completely passive and disempowered.

Source: Sarah Madsen Hardy, Critical Essay on "Dominoes," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #3

Piano is a Ph.D. candidate in English at Bowling Green State University. In the following essay, she explores the personal histories and cultural tensions that generate violence between two men while they are playing an ostensibly innocent game of dominoes in Agüeros's short story.

"Dominoes," a short story written by New York author Jack Agüeros, investigates the intricate relations and personal histories of four Latino men playing dominoes on a neighborhood street in New York one summer day. The men, Ebarito, Paco, Tito, and Wilson, know each other almost too well, and it is the tension that results from their familiarity during an ostensibly innocent game of dominoes that engenders the violence at the end of the story. By using the game of dominoes as both a setting for the story and its central metaphor, Agüeros creates a complex world in which the simple act of playing dominoes can explode into violence. To an outsider, the death of a man over a game of dominoes may seem random and abrupt, yet through exploring the histories and tensions among these men, Agüeros offers some insight into the strict and inviolable rules that these men abide by. What is highly unique about this story is how Agüeros uses the game of dominoes, one of the most widely played games in the world, to comment on inner city violence and despair.

Divided into seven segments, the story uses the doublet tiles from the game that range from double six, also known as "the box of teeth," to the blank tiles, known as "the dead man's box," to build the tension and suspense among the dominoes players.

As the doublets descend from six to zero so does the game deteriorate from one of skill and luck to brute violence and eventual death. The story focuses on the tense and bitter relationship between Ebarito, the egocentric barber who cannot play well, and Paco, the man whom the others respect and admire for his luck and skill. Though there are two other dominoes players, Tito and Wilson, it is the contrast in skill between Ebarito and Paco that shifts a friendly neighborhood game into a deadly match of wills.

The differences between these men do not stop at skill in dominoes but are found in their disposition and physical appearance: Ebarito is known in the neighborhood as a "ladies man" and "a pretty boy" while Paco is a former merchant marine, a sailor who has been all over the world. In addition, Paco is a man of few words whereas one assumes Ebarito's charm lies in his ability to smooth talk. Their contempt for each other is seen in the very first paragraphs of the story when Paco mocks Ebarito for having to pass twice because he does not have any sixes to play. Paco's simple exclamation "ha" exacerbates Ebarito's desire to beat him even though he does not have the necessary skill to do so. "Paco had the luck and skill. It was very hard to beat him in a game of dominoes." Their dislike of each other is so well known in the neighborhood that even Alma, Paco's niece, notices how odd it is to see the two of them playing together.

In fact, it is the alternating points of view in the story that give the reader some insight into the characters and their relationship to each other. Whereas most of the story is told

from Ebarito's point of view, from ground zero so to speak, the doublets—Double Five, Double Three, and Double One—are told from Alma's point of view. She is outside the circle of acrimony that permeates the dominoes game. Instead, hers is the voice of reason and compassion in the story. Her inability to understand why her uncle and his friends love dominoes so much is a sign of her youthful naivete. She cannot relate to the men's obsession with dominoes because she is uncorrupted by the urban environment that has hardened these men. However, despite her innocence, Alma displays a maturity and self-awareness that her uncle does not share. She instinctively does not like Wilson because he is hard-hearted and lives by a philosophy that will eventually kill Paco, his best friend. As he tells Alma, "'Men who are real men can live their lives anyway they like— because their destiny is clear.'" Through her, the reader gains an understanding of the secret rules that underlie Wilson and her uncle's conception of being a man as well as the histories that bind and divide these men.

Although Alma may have a grasp on what these domino-playing men are like, she does not know how far a *macho* will go to prove he is a man; therefore, she continues to muse and daydream, not suspecting the violence that is about to erupt. Her ignorance may be based on her gender, which, in a culture that puts strict definitions on both men and women, prevents her from understanding the extremes to which Paco and Ebarito will go in their dislike of each other. In a sense, Alma is both physically (from her second story perch) and spiritually (her name in Spanish means "soul") above contemplating or committing acts of violence. Thus, Alma's perspective is limited, unlike Ebarito who knows well what Paco and Wilson are like and deliberately sets out to prove himself worthy of playing them, even if it means breaking the rules.

In the doublets narrated from Ebarito's perspective, Ebarito acts as a first-hand witness to the dominoes games that results in the death of Paco. Through his thoughts, the reader understands that he is the perpetrator of the violence that occurs. At first it seems odd that Agüeros writes from Ebarito's point-of-view rather than Paco's. Because Ebarito is such a desperate character, it is easy for the reader to dislike him as the men playing with him do. In fact, despite his taciturn personality, it is Paco who elicits the reader's sympathy. This sympathy toward Paco is partly due to Agüeros's success at creating a character, who despite his "pretty boy" looks, is morally repugnant. Playing with men who openly dislike him, Ebarito attempts to prove that their conceptions of him as a terrible player are wrong, yet he continues to lose. It is from Ebarito's angle of the game that the reader senses the trivial stakes involved. Ebarito does not want to be humiliated in front of these men. "He knew he was going to lose, he knew he had one recourse now—to lose gracefully . . . but—damnit he couldn' t do it . . ." Merely a matter of pride, Ebarito foolishly moves the stakes of the game to another level. By trying to win so badly, he invites violence and possibly death.

Because dominoes is a game of skill and luck, its outcome is often unknown. However, among these players, Paco is the king player. He is the master of cool, able to develop strategies through counting tiles and confident enough to let everyone choose their dominoes before him. "It was like a boxer dropping his gloves to his sides and daring his opponent to hit him." Though Paco's control of the game and his competitive spirit are admirable, his stoic countenance hides an irrepressible anger that unravels when he

hears Ebarito insult his mother. Within seconds, Paco crosses the line from being a king player of dominoes to a terrifying street fighter. His transformation signals that this game of dominoes is more than a friendly neighborhood competition. Instead, it is a game representative of a certain ethos, ruled by certain behaviors and unsaid laws that once transgressed must be punished. These are the laws of the street, and it is the tough inner city environment of New York that condones physical violence as a way of resolving personal conflicts. Thus, the cool attitude Paco displays while playing dominoes is merely a facade covering the violent attitude necessary to survive the streets of New York.

Yet, what is most disturbing about the gruesome fight between Ebarito and Paco is the fatalistic attitude of Wilson who prevents Tito from trying to break the two men up. From Wilson's point of view, the violence between the men was meant to happen as when he claims, "'They are *machos . . .* they know what they want.'" Unfortunately, his cold-hearted attitude results in one man's death and another's paralysis. Just like the rules of dominoes that are simple but must be adhered to, so too do these men have a set of social rules that must be upheld. They must fight until the finish and without intervention. Intervening in a fight would merely upset what is destined. That a simple game of dominoes could turn into a death match between two men comments on the value of using violence as a way for men such as Wilson to define their masculinity. For men like Wilson, violence is a part of being a *macho* even if it means incurring death.

Although Paco dies because he could not restrain himself, his death is in some ways grimly heroic. His ability to get up and walk away from Ebarito, the man he despises, before keeling over dead, grants him a certain dignity that is not given to Ebarito, who ends up a broken mass of flesh in a hospital bed with his future as yet uncertain. Most likely, Paco will become a neighborhood legend, someone who physically shut Ebarito up by destroying his ability to speak. Meanwhile, Ebarito's condition reveals the consequences of his actions. Not only is he unable to move his body, he is chained to his bed. This last image demonstrates Ebarito's psychic immobility. In other words, he cannot remove himself from an environment that has influenced his actions and behavior. Thus, his inability to raise himself from his bed reveals an impossibility to rise above the conditions of life in the street where violence is the only solution to conflict.

Source: Doreen Piano, Critical Essay on "Dominoes," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #4

In the following review excerpt, Inez says Agüeros "honors the savvy and the lexicon of both laborer and artist."

Born in East Harlem at the height of the Depression, Jack Agüeros, the Puerto Rican poet, playwright, and community activist, knows the territory of open hydrants, needle parks, pushers and junkies, salsa, and the riffs of long hot summers. With compassion for and indignation at social injustice, he pays homage to the fallen heroes of the barrio, and to those lost in the blur of repetitive work, made invisible, or distorted by the lenses of ignorance, fear, and bigotry. He draws his strength as an artist from these unsung bodega clerks, laundry and restaurant workers, artisans, and women in the garment trade. . .

Dominoes, a collection of tales that span the period of the 1940s to the 1990s, is set in the tenements and highrises of New York. Agüeros's prose, like his poetry, sinks its roots in the gritty life of East Harlem. With a poet's keen eye for atmospheric detail and knack for compression, he forces us in non-didactic prose to reconsider what Zola called "the resurrection of dead hours":

Each finished piece was only about 3 inches in diameter. They had to be sewn together, and the women decided what went well where. It was time consuming. By hand. By whirr and whoom of the machine motor starting, winding and stopping. (from "One Sunday Morning")

With verve and accuracy Agüeros depicts the women quilting. The falling meters of short sentences and the purring alliterations of initial "w"s and medial and terminal "r"s imbue this scene with quiet poise. The prose enacts the women's sewing know-how and the clattering rhythm of their machines.

In the same autobiographical tale, Agüeros celebrates his seamstress godmother Titi's gift for nurturing. Like the Almighty in Genesis, Titi begets "herb yielding seed" and "moving creatures that hath life." Agüeros employs a grand biblical prose mixed with homey details (her apartment is a Garden of Eden of ingenious artifacts for horticulture) and the reassuring cadences of echoing words:

And the plants multiplied as if they were rooted in the Puerto Rican soil with the Puerto Rican sun shining on them. And every available tin can had a plant in it from the Export Soda cracker can to the Danish butter tins. And the fish were multiplying also, and the prune juice bottles, which looked like round cookie jars, had fish in them . . .

The poet is at his conjuring work in "Agua Viva." Alfred Gonzalez, an eccentric collector of castaway iron, shrugs off the taunts of neighborhood punks and saves the life of one of them, an arsonist about to destroy his work. Tugging at a mass of chains, pulleys, and scrambled metal parts, Gonzalez cannily reflects on the nature of the materials he needs to create his consummate sculpture, the "Agua Viva" of the title:

Iron and steel do not tangle like thread, cord or rope. Perhaps, chain tangles like logs, and words like jam or snag would be better to describe what happens when links twist out of line and chains of different gauge twine like tresses.

Giving evidence of Gonzalez's expertise, the poet in Agüeros conjures music from the near-rhyming vowels of "snag" and "jam," of "cords" and "logs," and from the sinuous recurrence of "t"s, as in "tangle like thread" and "twine like tresses." Here, as in the other stories, rhythmic sentences sail across the page carrying a cargo of incantatory phrases. "Iron, steel, gauge, chain": By recording these words and others that belong to the vocabulary of work, Agüeros honors the savvy and the lexicon of both laborer and artist. *Dominoes*adds substantially to the literature of the Puerto Rican working class.

Source: Colette Inez, "Jack Agüeros," in *Parnassus,* Vol. 20, Nos. 1 & 2, 2001, pp. 453, 456.

Topics for Further Study

Research the Great Migration of Puerto Ricans to the United States in the period from 1945 to 1965. Why did it take place? What were the difficulties encountered by Puerto Ricans migrating to the mainland?

Explore the status of Puerto Ricans in New York City today. Why do they have such high rates of poverty? Why do they participate so little in the political process, and why are they underrepre-sented in city government and bureaucracies? Have Puerto Ricans who settled elsewhere in the United States fared better? If so, what factors might account for the differences?

Explore the issue of assimilation versus maintenance of cultural or ethnic identity. Do you think groups such as Puerto Ricans should assimilate into mainstream American society or should they attempt to maintain their distinct cultural and linguistic heritage?

Why do you think games and sports so important for so many people? Why is the game of dominoes so important to the characters in the story? Why does Alma not share this view? What human needs do you think are fulfilled by participating in or watching sports?

What Do I Read Next?

Agüeros' *Sonnets from the Puerto Rican* (1997) are loosely structured sonnets in which the author speaks as an advocate of the downtrodden, the poor, the homeless, and the disenfranchised in a voice that has been compared to the early Allen Ginsberg.

Puerto Rican Writers at Home in the USA (1991), an anthology edited by Faythe Turner, includes fiction and poetry by seventeen contemporary Puerto Rican writers. Nuyorican writers are strongly represented, but writers from elsewhere in the United States are featured as well.

In *When I Was Puerto Rican* (1994), a coming-of-age memoir by Esmeraldo Santiago, the author describes her childhood in Puerto Rico in the 1950s and her family's move to a rundown tenement in New York City when she was thirteen. Santiago overcame adversity and eventually graduated from Harvard University.

Boricuas: Influential Puerto Rican Writings: An Anthology (1995), edited by Roberto Santiago, contains more than fifty pieces, including poetry, fiction, plays, essays, monologues, screenplays, and speeches by Puerto Rican authors born in the United States and Puerto Rico.

Aloud: Voices from the Nuyorican Poet's Café (1994), edited by Miguel Algarin and Bob Holman, is a selection from the poetry read at the famous Nuyorican Poet's Café in New York, cofounded by Algarin.

One of the best-known Puerto Rican writers is Judith Ortiz Cofer. Her *An Island like You: Stories of the Barrio* (1996) contains twelve stories about young people in the Puerto Rican community of Paterson, New Jersey.

Puerto Ricans in the United States (2000) by Maria E. Perez Y. Gonzalez examines the Puerto Rican experience in the United States from the early 1900s to the present.

Further Study

Augenbraum, Harold, review in *Library Journal,* Vol. 118, July, 1993, p. 123.

This is a brief review of the collection *Dominoes,* in which Agüeros is praised for his keen eye for detail and his ability to create memorable characters, mainly men.

Díaz, José O., review in *MultiCultural Review,* Vol. 3, June 1994, p. 72.

Díaz argues that the collection *Dominoes* should be seen not only as Puerto Rican literature but also as literature that possesses a universal theme, the examination of the human condition.

Green, Katherine, review in *Small Press,* Vol. 12, Winter 1994, p. 43.

This is a laudatory review of *Dominoes* that sees the short story collection as an exploration of the meaning of community and heritage.

Pinto, L. L., review in *Choice,* Vol. 31, January 1994, p. 776.

This is a review of *Dominoes* that picks out "Horologist" as the best story in the collection. Pinto points out that all the stories are unusual in that they focus on the lives of the Puerto Rican working class in New York City, people whose voices are seldom heard.

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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

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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