Don't Look Now Study Guide

Don't Look Now by Daphne Du Maurier

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

When Daphne du Maurier wrote the short story "Don't Look Now," sometimes referred to as a novella for its length, she was firmly established as a popular writer. However, as Nina Auerbach notes in *British Writers,* though du Maurier was an immediate success when she first started publishing in the 1930s, she was also immediately "dismissed by the cultural establishment as too readable to be literary." Her work was criticized as being mere romantic escapism, but this opinion never seemed to dim du Maurier's efforts, considering she wrote until her last days.

"Don't Look Now," published in 1970, is a tale of the supernatural involving a British couple vacationing in Venice to escape the pain of their young daughter's recent death. An encounter with two sisters at a cafe, and the blind one's claim that she can "see" the deceased child sitting with her parents, launches a series of events that ends violently. The story was made into a suspense movie a few years after it was published and has remained one of du Maurier's best-known tales.

Author Biography

Du Maurier and her family lived in a comfortable world insulated from hardships. Most of du Maurier's youth was spent sailing, traveling with her friends, and writing stories, which a well-connected uncle shepherded into publication. Many see her charmed and relatively easy life as one of the reasons why du Maurier's writing is much more conventional than that of her contemporaries who were busy experimenting with avant-garde techniques such as stream-of-consciousness and who were writing on war and poverty.

In 1931, du Maurier published, to critical acclaim, her first novel, *The Loving Spirit,* a romantic family tale. The novel so impressed thirty-five-year-old Major Frederick Browning that he sailed a small boat past the du Maurier country home in an effort to meet the young author. Browning and du Maurier married in 1932, and in 1946 du Maurier became Lady Browning when her husband was knighted. She and Browning had three children and a comfortable life, but all was not straightforward in du Maurier's personal life; she was widely known to have had a number of affairs, both heterosexual and lesbian.

Rebecca, her most famous and well-considered novel, was published in 1938 and received Britain's National Book Award. In 1940, *Rebecca* was made into a movie, which won the Academy Award for Best Motion Picture. Other du Maurier novels and stories have been made into films, including "Don't Look Now," originally published in 1970, and "The Birds."

Du Maurier continued writing nearly to the end of her life. In 1971, a collection of her horror stories, including "The Birds" and "Don't Look Now," was published as *Don't Look Now* (released in Britain as *Not After Midnight).* She died in Par, Cornwall, England, on April 19, 1989. According to Nina Auerbach in *British Writers,* the cause of death was "stubborn self-starvation."

Plot Summary

In Torcello

"Don'tLookNow," opens with John, aBritish tourist in a small town outside of Venice, noticing two elderly twin sisters sitting at a nearby table. He and Laura, his wife, create wild scenarios to describe the sisters and their possible business in Torcello. The couple joke like this for some time, giving John some hope that his wife is getting over a recent traumatic event. Laura decides to follow one of the sisters into the bathroom to see if she is a woman or a cross-dresser. Meanwhile, John thinks about the recent death of their five-year-old daughter, Christine. Her death was a huge blow to Laura, and John hopes that their vacation will ease her pain.

A few minutes later, Laura emerges from the bathroom looking shocked. She tells John that the sister in the bathroom explained that her twin is a blind psychic. She had been staring at John and Laura because she had "seen" Christine sitting between the couple, laughing and happy. "You see, she isn't dead, she's still with us," explains Laura happily. John is not so pleased at this turn of events. "It's what I've been dreading. She's gone off her head," he thinks. John is doubtful and worried but, because Laura seems happy, he grudgingly accepts the incident.

Later at a cathedral, Laura is engrossed with the architecture and art. John suddenly sees the twins, much to his dismay, although Laura does not, and the blind sister's eyes are fixed on him. He feels "an impending sense of doom" and is unable to move, thinking, "This is the end, there is no escape, no future." He becomes angry and grabs Laura for a walk along a canal.

Back in Venice, Later That Evening

John and Laura, relaxed and back in their Venetian hotel room, make love and get ready for dinner at a restaurant. They take a walk before dinner but get lost in the tangled back streets of the city. Suddenly, John sees from the corner of his eye a small child, in a cloak with a hood covering her head, running away from someone. Laura has already moved up the street and does not see the incident, and he does not share it with her.

They find a restaurant, but just as they sit at a table and order drinks, John sees the twin sisters being seated, too. He is suspicious that either the sisters are following them or Laura told them where they would be eating that night. Much to John's dismay, Laura sees the women and goes over to speak to them for a long while.

When Laura returns to their table, John is drunk and angry. Laura tells him that the blind sister has had another vision that Christine is unhappy and that John is in danger and must leave Venice as soon as possible. This talk enrages John, and they fight. Laura also tells John that the blind sister believes that he is psychic but doesn't know it yet.

When they return to their hotel, there is a telegram waiting for them, stating that their son, Johnnie, back in England, is sick and may have to undergo surgery for appendicitis. Laura decides that this means that their son is the one in danger and not John.

The Next Morning

Laura wants to leave immediately for England to be with Johnnie, but John is less concerned and feels that booking a train for the next night should be sufficient. Laura is insistent and manages to secure a seat on a charter flight with a group of British tourists. John must drive by himself to Milan to pick up the train, and he is not happy about it.

After Laura leaves, John takes a ferry to San Marco to pick up his car. He is sure he sees his wife, looking distressed, on a ferry returning to Venice. She is with the twin sisters. John returns to his hotel, but no one has seen or heard from his wife or the sisters. A check with the charter company confirms that the plane left on time with all its seats filled. Although this would seem to indicate that Laura indeed took her reserved seat on the plane, John nevertheless constructs a scenario in which Laura never intended to catch the plane and instead "made an assignation with the sisters." Or possibly, he thinks, the twin sisters somehow tricked Laura, in her agitated state, and kidnapped her.

John goes to the police station to report Laura's disappearance. While there, John meets a British couple who tell him about a murderer loose in the city. A policeman listens to John's story, including his suspicions about the twin sisters' possible involvement.

John returns to the hotel and places a phone call to the headmaster's house, whose wife assures him that Johnnie has gone through the surgery well. He is relieved at the good news about his son but shocked when she puts Laura on the phone. He tries to explain to Laura his confusion about her whereabouts.

Later at the hotel, the police show up to take John to the station, where they are holding the twin sisters for questioning. John tries to explain the mix-up to the police and apologizes to the twins. The sighted sister explains to John, "You saw us . . . and your wife too. But not today. You saw us in the future."

On the way back to his hotel, John sees the frightened little girl in the cloak and hood again, this time with a man in pursuit. He is worried for her, especially now knowing about the murderer. He follows her into a room and bolts the door against the man chasing her. The hood slides away, and the little girl turns out to be a "little thick-set woman dwarf . . . grinning at him." John hears police outside the door, but the dwarf throws a knife at him, which sticks in his throat. As John dies, he realizes that his vision of Laura and the sisters on the ferry is the future when his wife returns to Venice to pick up his body.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

As the story begins, John and Laura, his wife, are having lunch in a café in Torcello, a small town outside of Venice, Italy. During their meal, John notices two women at a nearby table who appear to be watching them. He tells Laura what he sees and the two of them launch into a humorous discussion of who they think these women are and what they are doing in Italy, a game they typically play when on vacation. John soon realizes that the women are twins.

We also learn that John and Laura have recently experienced some sort of personal tragedy and are using this vacation to help heal a particularly painful emotional wound. John is relieved that he is able to get Laura to laugh and hopes that this is a sign that she is beginning to feel better and that she is putting whatever has happened in their past behind her.

Before long, one of the women gets up from her table and heads toward the restroom. Laura decides to follow her to see if she can learn anything more about the woman. As the woman passes, she is described as being in her middle sixties, tall with angular features and close-cropped hair.

As John waits for Laura to return, he has a cigarette and finishes the last of the wine. We also learn that the tragedy they had experienced is the loss of a child, a little girl. At the time of the child's death, John was told by doctors that it would take a great deal of time for Laura to get over the loss, yet John believes that Laura will never recover.

As he is waiting for Laura to return, John notices the twin of the woman who had gone to the restroom staring at him from her table. John describes the stare as uncomfortable and feels as though the woman's eyes are penetrating him. John smiles at the woman, but she doesn't break her stare. Feeling increasingly uncomfortable and looking for a distraction, John calls for the waiter to bring the check and when he finally looks at the woman again, she appears to be sleeping.

Noticing Laura has been gone for more than ten minutes, John begins to think of how he can tease her about her prolonged trip to the restroom. As he begins to construct an outlandish scenario, he notices the older woman returning from the restroom. Reaching her table, she helps her twin to her feet and the two leave the café.

Laura emerges a moment later and immediately, John notices that something is wrong. Helping Laura back to the table, he asks if she is ill. As he does, he notices that Laura's expression changes from shock to exaltation. She tells John that while in the restroom, the woman approached her and explained that her sister, who is blind, is a psychic. During their meal, the sister said she "saw" their dead daughter, Christine, happily sitting between John and Laura at lunch.

Hoping to provide a distraction, John tells Laura that he has already paid the bill and so they are free to go and continue their sightseeing before having to head back to Venice. Too excited by all that has happened, Laura doesn't respond to John's suggestion and insists on telling John about her encounter in the restroom.

Laura senses that John does not believe her. Not wanting to upset his wife, John tells Laura that he believes what she is saying and that he is only upset because she seems to be upset. Laura insists that she is not upset, rather, she feels as if the sadness she has been experiencing since their daughter's death has finally lifted and she can allow herself to fell happy again.

Laura then goes on to explain that the two women are from Edinburgh, Scotland. The woman Laura spoke with is a retired doctor. Her sister, who has studied the occult all her life and claims to have psychic powers, lost her eyesight in the recent past and since then, has been able to "see" things. In fact, when the woman described her vision of Christine, she described a specific dress that little girl wore to a birthday party shortly before she died.

As Laura has a cigarette, John concedes that if this encounter brought Laura a sense of peace and happiness, then it was probably worth the unease it brought him. While he couldn't account for Laura's experience on a scientific level, he believes that it did occur exactly as Laura described. Even so, he finds himself wishing they had picked a different spot for lunch so that the encounter could have been avoided.

Hoping that this would be the last encounter with these women, John casually asks Laura if she had made any arrangements to meet with them again. Laura assures John that she has no further reason to speak with them and suggests they continue with their sightseeing.

Leaving the restaurant, John and Laura set out for a cathedral they wish to tour, however, John finds himself deeply troubled by all that has happened and is unable to concentrate and appreciate the beautiful architecture. On a whim, he turns around to see the elderly twins. Fearful that Laura will see them as well, John finds himself to be enormously relieved when he spots the twins leaving the cathedral.

John's relief soon gives way to anger and he begins to resent the women for the effect they seem to have had on his wife. Suspecting they are up to no good, he begins to worry that the women have specifically singled out Laura and will prey upon her vulnerability.

Finding himself increasingly frustrated, he abandons their sightseeing tour and takes Laura for a walk along the canal. Sitting to rest along the water's edge, Laura asks John if he thinks their daughter is with them, just as the elderly women said. Not wanting to upset Laura any further, he says that if Laura feel's Christine is there, and then she must be. Feeling restless, Laura suggests they head back. John suspects she wants to look for the old women and tries to distract her by suggesting they buy some souvenirs.

On their way back to Venice, Laura remarks to John that she has had a lovely day and that she feels as if she can finally begin to enjoy their vacation.

Relieved at this news, John suggests having dinner at a new restaurant, rather than the place they typically dine.

Back in their hotel room, the couple makes love for the first time in several weeks. Afterwards, Laura comments that she is not very hungry and suggests they eat in the hotel dining room. John protests, saying he is in a particularly good mood and wants to celebrate. Laura relents and the two set out in search of a restaurant.

After walking for a time, Laura begins to sense that they may become lost and suggests they turn back and return to the more heavily traveled streets. John insists his instincts will guide them and that they will be fine.

Walking in a desolate area, Laura becomes increasingly uncomfortable and implores John to turn back. They press on, and as they are about to turn down an alley-way, they hear a cry. Laura is frightened and John tries to assure her by saying it was probably the cry of a drunken person. Laura nonetheless hurries away, however, John spots a small figure, quite possibly a little girl, creeping from the cellar of one of the houses on the opposite side of the street. The figure leaps through several boats before disappearing again into another house.

Just as the figure disappears, Laura returns to see why John didn't follow her. John is glad that Laura does not witness this as he is sure that the sight of the little girl would have greatly troubled her. They walk a little further and finally reach a familiar area. They find a restaurant and go inside. John orders two drinks, then looks around the restaurant and is shocked to see the elderly twin women on the opposite side of the room.

Angry that the women were there, John wonders if Laura had pre-arranged to meet them. Hoping to distract Laura so that she would notice the women, John suggests taking a drive the next day to Padua to see St. Anthony's tomb. He soon realizes, however, that Laura has seen the women and appears to be genuinely surprised.

Laura wants to speak to the women so she can tell them about the wonderful day she has had. John protests, saying their drinks have just arrived and they haven't had a chance to order their meal. Still, Laura is determined, and, asking John to order her scampi, leaves the table to visit with the old women.

John remains seated at their table. He orders a second drink and then their dinner. Laura remains with the twins, heavily engaged in conversation. Their meal arrives, and John, feeling the effect of his two drinks, pokes at his food. Laura returns to the table, and without saying a word, begins to eat her meal. They eat in silence and only after Laura finishes her meal, does she speak.

While she acknowledges that John will probably not believe what she has to say, Laura tells him that the old women reported having another "vision" of their daughter. This

time, however, they said their daughter had a specific message: that they would be in danger if they remained in Venice.

John becomes even angrier, feeling that the sisters are trying to control their lives. He doesn't respond to Laura's discovery until she implores him to speak. Frustrated, John refers to the women as freaks and tells Laura that he believes the sisters have "suckered" her.

Laura suggests that John go speak with the women so that he might learn for himself that they are both sincere and legitimate. She also tells John that the women believe he is psychic as well. Not wanting to hear any more, John signals for the bill and suggests they return to the hotel so they can decide whether or not they should leave Venice as suggested. Before leaving, Laura goes back to the old women to say good-bye.

John and Laura return to their hotel and as Laura walks toward the elevator, John retrieves the room key from the night-porter. He is also given a telegram that arrived while they were at dinner. The telegram contains notification that their son, Johnnie, who is at boarding school, has taken ill. Laura decides that this is the message their daughter was trying to deliver.

The next morning, John and Laura call the boarding school and learn that Johnnie is suffering from appendicitis and may face surgery. While the headmaster's doesn't feel that Johnnie's life is in danger, she does recommend that they return home. After some discussion, John and Laura decide that Laura will fly home that evening and John will follow by train. Laura goes off to make the necessary travel arrangements with the hotel porter while John attempts to pack their belongings.

After Laura leaves for the airport, John goes to the hotel terrace for lunch before departing for the train station in Milan. As he rides away from the hotel in a ferry shuttle bound for the train station, John finds himself lost in thoughts about past trips he and Laura have taken to Venice and wonders when they might return. As he reminisces, he notices another ferry boat filled with passengers just beginning their trip, heading toward the hotel. Among the passengers on that boat are Laura and the elderly twins.

John is too startled to speak and so does not call out to Laura as she passes. Assuming Laura has missed her flight and was returning to the hotel so that they could travel together by train, John decides to call the hotel as soon as his ferry docks so that he can leave word for Laura that he will be returning to get her.

Arriving back at the hotel, John is surprised that his wife is not waiting for him. Even more disturbing to John is that the clerk hasn't seen her either. The manager offers to telephone the airport to see if the flight was indeed cancelled. As the telephone call is being placed, John wonders what could possibly have happened. The manager returns and reports that the flight took off as scheduled.

John goes outside to have a cigarette and contemplate all that has happened. He is particularly troubled by the fact that the elderly twins were with Laura and he wonders if they had any role in her disappearance. He decides to see if he can locate the sisters.

The first place he goes is the restaurant where they had dinner the previous night. Although the restaurant's proprietor remembers seeing the women, he does not know their names. Not knowing where else to turn, he decides to go to the police.

While waiting, he speaks with a couple who were victims of a purse-snatching. While talking with this couple, John learns that there is a murderer loose in Venice that has slashed the throats of at least two victims.

When John finally is escorted into an inner office, he recounts his story to the officer. The police officer listens to his story and gets a detailed description of the elderly twins. The officer suggests that John return to the hotel and wait for word from them.

John returns to the hotel and requests a room for the night. Once inside, he asks the bell-hop to bring him a double-whisky which he intends to drink before placing another call to Johnnie's school. Before he can make the call, however, the telephone rings. The call is from the headmaster's wife and she reports that Johnnie has come through his surgery well and is resting comfortably. She then tells John that Laura is waiting to speak with him.

John is shocked, but he manages to tell Laura that he is still in Venice. Laura senses that he his drunk and so John confesses that he was sure he has seen Laura with the elderly twins heading back to the hotel. He recounts the day's events to her before promising to travel to Milan the next day to begin the journey home.

After hanging up, John tries to make sense of all that has happened, including the fact that he is sure that he had seen Laura with the sisters on a ferry heading back to the hotel. He knows he needs to tell the hotel manager that Laura has been located and that she is safe, but he is embarrassed. He eventually decides to have dinner and a drink, hoping that will give him the courage to face the manager.

Following dinner, John makes his way to the hotel lobby where he finds a police officer waiting. The officer tells him that the elderly twins have been located. John tells them that he has located his wife and apologizes for the needless work and anxiety. Sensing that the police officer is agitated, John offers to accompany him back to the station to apologize to the twins in person.

The sisters are gracious about the mix-up and request that they are allowed to return to their hotel. John offers to walk with them so that he can explain precisely what happened. John again explains all that has transpired since the previous night. The twin tells John that her sister believes he is psychic. As proof of this, she suggests that John's sighting of Laura on the ferry was actually a vision of something that will happen in the future.

The twin tells John that they will be in Venice for another ten days before departing for Scotland. John gives them their address in London and invites them to visit should their travels bring them in that direction. As John turns to leave, the psychic twin utters words about John and Laura's dead daughter, which the other twin explains is a sign that she is entering a trance state. John helps to get her inside and then sets out for his hotel.

As he walks, he realizes that he is not familiar with the area, but believes he isn't far from the area he and Laura had traveled through the previous evening. As he walks through the desolate streets, he catches sight of the same small figure he saw the previous night, only this time, she was being chased by a man. He contemplates turning and walking in the opposite direction, but afraid the child is in danger, he instead decides to follow her. He eventually follows the figure into a room and bolts the door behind him, confident that he has saved the child from harm. It is only then that he realizes that the figure isn't a child at all, but an adult dwarf. As the police reach the door and attempt to gain entry, the dwarf reaches into her sleeve, draws a knife and throws it at him.

As John lay dying, he realizes that he is indeed psychic and that his vision of Laura on the ferry is actually her making the sad trip back to Venice to claim his body.

Analysis

"Don't Look Now" is a short story that has the elements of a mystery, a thriller, a drama and even a comedy.

The story begins on a fairly light note, with the principal characters John and Laura having lunch in an outdoor café while on vacation in Venice.

When we first meet John and Laura, they are having a playful conversation regarding some of the restaurant's other patrons. As is their custom when traveling, John and Laura are making a game of surmising what lives of the other people in the restaurant may be like. They seem to be particularly interested in two elderly women – twins – who, because of their rather conservative dress, have prompted John and Laura to concoct a tale that involves the women being murderers and then transvestites. Given their jovial mood, we initially assume John and Laura are a young couple with few cares.

We soon learn, however, that John and Laura are in Venice with the hope of healing a rather deep emotional wound – the death of their young child. As the story unfolds, we also learn that John, although troubled by his daughter's death, isn't nearly as affected as his wife. John describes the previous weeks as being particularly difficult and that it was his hope that the trip to Venice would help to lift Laura's spirits. While John doesn't mention it specifically, it is fairly obvious that he is becoming frustrated with his wife's depression and is at a loss as to how to best deal with it.

Even so, John is very protective of Laura. In the beginning of the story, he tries to think of ways to extend the playful mood of their luncheon. After Laura's encounter with the twins, he tries to avoid further contact by suggesting that they abandon the traditional tour route for a walk along the canal. Even when they are out walking the evening John first encounters the dwarf, he resists the urge to follow the small figure, and because he knows that by doing so he will bring additional stress and worry to his wife. When they decide to return to London after learning of their son's illness, John offers to fly with his

wife and return at a later date for their car and belongings, a suggestion that Laura dismisses as absurd and unnecessary. In fact, when John spots Laura on the ferry returning to the hotel, he assumes her flight was cancelled or that she simply decided she wasn't fit to travel alone.

It doesn't take long for us to realize however, we learn that Laura is quite strong. She obviously needed to draw upon her strength to get through the days and weeks following her daughter's death. She also shows strength in her interactions with John after learning of the psychic's visions of their daughter. While she recognizes that many psychics are not credible, she truly believes the old woman has had some sort of supernatural contact with their daughter and tries to share her enthusiasm and beliefs with her husband. Rather than dropping the subject as one might expect a weaker person to do, Laura doggedly maintains her belief that their daughter is somehow speaking to them. In addition, she is firm in her resolve to leave Venice following the twins' warning to do so, even though John is against the idea. Indeed, Laura secures her own travel arrangements following the call from their son's boarding school while John remains in their hotel room attempting to pack their belongings. Another example of Laura's strength is found at the end of the story when she returns alone to Venice to claim her dead husband's body.

It doesn't take long to realize that Laura is clearly frustrated and angered that John does not believe that the woman has "seen" their daughter, Christine. In attempt to placate his wife, John tells her that his low-key reaction is based more on shock than skepticism. Even so, Laura senses that John does not share her enthusiasm for what she has learned, and this is quickly becomes a divisive issue. Rather than being pleased that his wife has finally broken free of the depression that has consumed her, John appears to be resentful of the twins and their visions of their daughter.

Perhaps part of John's frustration stems from the fact that the elderly twins have succeeded where he has failed; they have given Laura a renewed sense of hope and purpose. We know that John's primary purpose for bringing Laura to Venice is to recapture some of the happiness of their wedding, for he mentions that they had honeymooned in that city several years earlier. He also hopes that the time away from home will help her to heal, yet he fears the psychic's vision of their daughter will continue to keep the pain Laura feels at the surface.

In fact, however, the opposite occurs. Rather than adding to her sorrow, Laura's encounter with the twins seems to give her strength and allows her to begin the healing process. We know that John is perplexed by her reaction because on a few occasions he describes being surprised that Laura doesn't respond with more emotion or hysteria. Rather than plunging deeper into depression, Laura begins to seem to enjoy life again.

Given John's deep desire to have his wife put all this sadness behind her, his reaction to the twins is a little surprising. Clearly, John does not put much faith in their "visions" nor does he believe the psychic twin's instinct that he too may have psychic abilities. His skepticism is apparent from the beginning when he decides to "play along with her" when Laura first describes what had transpired when she met one of the twins in the

restroom. It becomes even more pronounced later in the story when he believes the women have something to do with his wife's disappearance.

In the beginning, John hopes to protect Laura from being hurt any further. Before long, however, he becomes increasingly frustrated with his inability to shield his wife from the twins and this frustration quickly turns to anger. Clearly, John's decision to get drunk while Laura is speaking to the twins in the restaurant after meeting them for the second time as well as his refusal to leave Venice on their recommendation, are signs that he has transformed from being sympathetic and supportive to angry and resentful.

Interestingly, toward the end of the story when he learns his wife is safely back in London, John feels a sense of responsibility and obligation to the twins and offers to walk them back to their hotel so that he can explain why he thought they might be involved in Laura's disappearance. He even extends an invitation to the twins to visit them in London should they ever find themselves there.

It is also interesting that it is the vision of a blind woman that significantly alters the lives of Laura and John. First, the woman's vision of their daughter and the assurance that she is happy appears to be the tonic Laura needs to restore some happiness to her own life. Next, the twins unheeded warning of the danger awaiting John and Laura should they chose to remain in Venice, results in John's untimely death. Ironically, it is Laura that leaves Venice even though the twins warn them that their daughter seems to be particularly concerned for John's safety.

There is also a fairly significant amount of foreshadowing in this story. Indeed, as the story begins, John and Laura are joking that the twins may be murderers traveling from city to city who change their appearance at each stop. This seemingly meaningless exchange can be interpreted as an indication that things often turn out to be different from what we first assume them to be. This is particularly true of the small figure that John mistakenly assumes is a small child. John's misinterpretation of the dwarf ultimately leads to his death.

John's visit to the police station gives us another indication that there may be trouble brewing. While there, John learns that there is a murderer on the loose in Venice. His concern is quickly abated however, when the police officer assures him that the murderer will soon be apprehended. This is indeed what happens, for John is murdered just as the police are about to enter the room.

The biggest hint, however, is John's sighting of his wife and the twins on the ferry traveling toward the hotel. While we later learn that this is actually a premonition, at the time John is certain that he actually saw his wife even though there is no logical explanation for her being on that boat. Yet, even when he walks the twins back to the hotel after learning his wife is safe, he refuses to believe their pleas that the entire experience should be heeded as some type of warning. It is only as he lay dying a short time later that he realizes that he actually did see his wife – and she was returning not because she missed her flight but because she needed to claim his body.

Characters

The Blind Twin Sister

The blind twin sister appears with her sighted twin sister at the restaurant where Laura and John are having lunch in Torcello, Italy, near Venice. She is from Edinburgh, has a shock of white hair, and often stares toward John as though she sees him. John guesses that she is in her mid-sixties. She is the psychic one, according to her sister, and has studied the occult for many years. During lunch in Torcello, she "sees" Christine sitting between Laura and John, describing her right down to one of her favorite dresses, and adds that Christine is doing well and is happy. The blind sister tells John that he, too, has a psychic gift and can see into the future. The sighted sister often speaks for the blind sister and helps her walk.

Christine

Christine is John and Laura's daughter, who has died from meningitis at age five. She is described as a "waxen, dark-haired sprite." According to the blind sister, Christine is always with her parents and is usually happy. But later in the story, Christine, according to the blind sister, is worried about her father and the danger that awaits him if he stays in Venice.

The Dwarf

When John first sees the dwarf, he mistakes her for a young, frightened child running through the streets wearing a hooded jacket. John's second sighting of the dwarf is at the end of the story. He follows the dwarf into a room and, thinking that he has rescued the frightened child of the day before, he bolts the door. With a closer look, John realizes that the child is actually a small woman, barely three feet tall, with gray hair. She laughs and suddenly throws a knife at him, which hits him in the throat and kills him.

John

John is married to Laura. While he is not a heartless man, he has trouble sympathizing with the depth of Laura's grief over the death of their child. He has brought Laura to Venice because this is where they spent their honeymoon, and he hopes the trip will lighten her mood. Laura's eagerness to believe the twin sisters' stories about Christine makes John uncomfortable at first and then angry later when the twins show up again at dinner.

When their son Johnnie becomes ill, John is not as anxious, or as eager to return to England, as is Laura. He believes that the headmaster and his wife will take care of his

son just as well as he and his wife would. His major concern is that Laura and he have some time to relax and be together as a couple.

John tries to protect his wife as if she were a fragile creature. When John hears a cry on the street and first sees a hooded character that he assumes to be a child in distress, he is glad that Laura is not around. He is worried that such a sight would "have a disastrous effect on her overwrought nerves." His response to Laura's wanting to believe that the blind sister has seen Christine is conciliatory and almost paternalistic. "He had to play along with her, agree, soothe, do anything to bring back some sense of calm," he believes.

Johnnie

Johnnie is Laura and John's school-aged son, who develops appendicitis while the couple is vacationing in Venice. He is described by John as "a tough one . . . someone in his own right," separated from Christine by a number of years.

Laura

Laura is John's wife and is most likely in her twenties or thirties, as their physician notes that she and John are "both young still" and that she can bear another child. She is on vacation in Venice with John to get over the death of her youngest child, Christine, from meningitis. Laura and John also have a son, Johnnie, who is in school in England. She and John seem to be comfortably middle-class because they have traveled overseas a number of times, own a car, and can afford to send their son to a boarding school.

Laura desperately wants to believe the blind twin's story that she has had a vision of Christine, laughing, sitting between Laura and John at lunch. Her grief and guilt over Christine's death are somewhat mitigated by the thought that her child is happy and doing well, even though she is not living on Earth. Her grief at losing Christine exacerbates her response to the news that Johnnie may have appendicitis. She tells her husband that she has lost one child and does not want to lose another and wants to return to England immediately.

Laura seems to be at her best when she is in control of what is happening. Her mood improves when she has something to do that is constructive, such as when she must arrange to return to England to take care of Johnnie or when she follows a guidebook to learn about the art in a cathedral.

The Sighted Twin Sister

The story begins with John noticing twins having lunch at a nearby table. The sighted twin is a physician from Edinburgh, tall and dressed in a slightly masculine fashion, and is responsible for her blind sister. According to John, she looks exactly like her blind sister except that her hair is less white. She is forgiving, and although she is upset that

John has accused her and her sister of some wrongdoing in the case of Laura's disappearance, she accepts John's apology and has no intention of filing a complaint against him. In a vision of the future, John sees the sighted twin and her sister with his wife on the boat going back into Venice.

Themes

The Supernatural

The story is, at its core, a tale about seeing and talking with the dead, as well as about psychic visions and premonitions. Laura and John have lost their daughter but meet up with a blind woman who has visions of the dead child and can hear her warnings to her father. John's death is a result of his denial of supernatural forces at work.

The blind sister has not always been blind, but discovered that losing her sight enabled her to see into another world. She had always studied the occult and similar topics, and the two sisters now keep a diary of supernatural happenings. After John apologizes for implicating the sisters in his wife's apparent disappearance, they explain that when he saw Laura with them on the boat he was probably experiencing a premonition. He still does not believe in such things, but the sighted sister assures him that this has probably happened to him before, but he chose not to acknowledge it. "So many things happen to us of which we are not aware," she says. "My sister felt you had psychic understanding." By the time the story comes to its violent conclusion, John realizes too late that this is true and that the scream and the child/dwarf running the previous day were a warning vision.

Mystery and Confusion

A sense of mystery infuses du Maurier's story from the opening lines. John starts off by warning Laura that two women across a restaurant are trying to hypnotize him and that she should be careful about simply turning around to look at them. The couple launches into a lighthearted game of guessing and imagining who these women might be: are they jewel thieves or murderers, or are they even women at all, but men dressed in drag? When Laura follows one of the women into the bathroom to see if she is really a he, the one left at the table stares at John but doesn't acknowledge John's smiles.

As well, du Maurier reveals only a bit about the sadness that Laura holds, waiting until the story is well on its way before she uncovers the mystery of her daughter's death. In fact, Christine's death is mentioned at first by John as the narrator, without many details, and it is only later that the cause of her death is divulged.

The mysteries continue, even after Laura discovers that the women are simply sisters traveling together and that one is blind, which explains her failure to respond to John. The blind sister is purportedly psychic and has seen John and Laura's dead child sitting between them at the restaurant. This upsets John because he is convinced that something suspicious is brewing with these sisters, and that they must want something from him and Laura. John's concern deepens when he sees them at a church later and again at dinner that night, where they tell Laura that he is in some kind of danger and should leave Venice immediately. John's suspicions about the sisters increase when he

apparently sees them on a boat with Laura at a time when Laura should be on a plane to England.

More confusion and mystery appear in the story, from when John mistakes a murderous dwarf for a child in a hooded coat to when he can't figure out where his wife is and to the couple's becoming lost in the tangled streets of Venice and hearing an unidentifiable scream. Very often, as well, a sense of danger and fear accompanies the mystery and confusion in the story.

Relationships

John and Laura have what seems to be a conventional but generally satisfactory marriage. John obviously loves his wife, but he acts as if she is exceedingly fragile and must be protected when, ironically, he ends up being the one who is in danger. Their relationship is full of denial: they come to Venice to get away from the pain of their daughter's death, and John is willing to let Laura believe anything so long as she is not depressed. When she first tells him that the blind sister has seen a vision of dead Christine sitting next to them, he panics and doesn't want to consider what this means, as long as Laura is happy. "He had to play along with her, agree, soothe, do anything to bring back some sense of calm," he narrates. Most of all he does not want to discuss what has happened. He eventually becomes angry and argues with Laura about the sisters. As well, when he hears a scream and sees a child running in fear, he never tells Laura about it, even though she is just around the corner. He wants to cover it up, fearing that the incident would have "a disastrous effect on her nerves."

Meanwhile, Laura's relationship with the sisters is a warm one. They seem to give her what she needs emotionally. She is able to speak with them about Christine, something she has not really been able to do with John, who simply wants her to get over their daughter's death. Laura expresses the joy that she now feels, knowing that Christine is happy in the afterlife, according to the blind sister. She explains to John, "You know what it's been like all these weeks, at home and everywhere we've been on holiday, though I tried to hide it from you." Though John tries to connect with Laura, he ultimately fails, and it is up to the sisters to do so. And in the end his inability or unwillingness to listen to women is the cause of his death.

Style

Foreshadowing

Almost mimicking the story's visions and premonitions, du Maurier has filled the narrative with moments that point to some future event. She uses foreshadowing to indicate that trouble is coming soon, such as when John sees what he thinks is a small child wearing a hooded jacket fleeing danger through the streets and jumping from boat to boat across the canal. He has an uneasy feeling about what he has just seen but does not express this to Laura.

Barely twenty-four hours later, John sees the same little girl running for her life, and he follows her, calling out that he will protect her. But when he gets into a room with the "little girl," she ends up being a "little thick-set woman dwarf." The dwarf stabs John and, as he dies, he sees again his wife and the twin sisters on a boat—something that he saw earlier in the day but did not recognize as a premonition—and understands that he was and is now seeing them in the future as they return to Venice to pick up his body. The boat is moving down the Grand Canal, "not today, not tomorrow, but the day after that, and he knew why they were together and for what purpose they had come."

In fact, most of the foreshadowing points to John's death. The story opens with the couple joking that the two women in the restaurant are murderers, traveling around the world, changing their appearance with each stop—not unlike the murderer dwarf who first looks like a child. When John sees his wife on a boat inexplicably sailing back to Venice, only later does he understand that this was a foreshadowing of his own death. And when he visits the police station to report his wife's mysterious disappearance, he meets with another British couple who mention that there is a murderer loose in Venice. Talking with the police officer later, John mentions the murderer. The officer responds, "We hope to have the murderer under lock and key very soon," pointing to just a few hours later, when John will mistakenly bolt the door to a room where he is trapped with the murderer and will hear the police just outside the door.

Humor and Sarcasm

Du Maurier has John and Laura use humor and sarcasm to break the tension of the atmosphere around them, heavy with the memory of their dead daughter. The story opens with the two joking about a pair of sisters sitting at another table in the restaurant. They imagine that the sisters are cross-dressers, which causes Laura to laugh almost hysterically. John has succeeded in distracting her thoughts from their dead child, and "her voice, for the first time since they had come away, took on the old bubbling quality he loved." He continues thinking about the need for humor and jokes, adding, "if we can pick up the familiar routine of jokes shared at holiday and at home . . . then everything will fall into place."

John reacts to the possibility of psychic visions with sarcasm. After seeing the sisters at the church, he suspects them of "touring the world, making everyone they met uncomfortable." And when Laura tells him that the blind sister believes him to be psychic, he answers, "Fine, my psychic intuition tells me to get out of this restaurant now," wanting to get as far away from the sisters as possible. After the sighted sister explains to him that the twins can deliver any message from their dead daughter "in the spirit world," John envisions the sisters "putting on headphones in their bedroom, listening for a coded message from poor Christine."

Historical Context

Venice

Venice is an ancient seaport city in northeastern Italy, famed for its beautiful buildings and art and considered one of the most romantic cities in the world. It is a favorite destination of honeymooners and lovers. The city covers more than one hundred islands separated by 177 canals. The Grand Canal, on which John sees Laura in a ferry, winds through Venice for about two miles. The four hundred bridges in the city are for pedestrians only. For centuries the gondola, a flat-bottomed boat propelled by a single oar, provided most transportation. Today, the gondolas are used almost exclusively by tourists, while motorized boats transport almost all freight and passenger traffic throughout Venice.

Modern Venice has struggled with physical damage from flooding, pollution, and age, as well as the loss of population to other areas. While flooding has been commonplace throughout the history of the city, 1966 saw an especially severe flood. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) coordinated an international effort to renovate and preserve many of the city's historic structures.

England in the 1960s

The London of the 1960s, in which John and Laura lived and worked, was a focus for much of the popular culture of the world at that time—Mary Quant's creation of the mini-skirt and the famous English model Twiggy made the city the focus for much of the fashion world, while the Beatles and the Rolling Stones helped make England the epicenter of rock and roll during the decade.

Pressure during the 1960s on British lawmakers to address the disparity between women's and men's salaries resulted in the Equal Pay Act of 1970, doing away with what were referred to as "men's rates" and "women's rates" for the same job. Women's political power also increased in the 1960s, with 29 women holding seats as Members of Parliament in the House of Commons in 1964—the largest number since women were first allowed to stand for election in 1918.

Critical Overview

Du Maurier's reputation has been defined by the fact that most critics do not consider her to be a writer of "serious literature." According to Nina Auerbach in *British Writers,* "the name Daphne du Maurier was synonymous with atmospheric, feminine romance that was escapist rather than artistic." While many critics toss du Maurier in with a group of women writers who primarily wrote romances and simple horror stories, Auerbach argues that she may be more closely aligned with writers such as Joyce Carol Oates, Isak Dinesen, Shirley Jackson, and Angela Carter—like these writers, du Maurier "extracts fear from ordinary social transactions." Auerbach believes that du Maurier has been wrongly categorized as a writer of escapist romances and that she is actually "an author of extraordinary range and frequent brilliance." However, as Wayne Templeton notes in *Dictionary of Literary Biography: British Novelists Between the Wars,* a "reassessment of the canon has led in recent years to the 'discovery' of several previously neglected figures in British literature," one of whom is du Maurier.

Richard Kelly, writing in his *Daphne du Maurier,* celebrates the fact that the author's work took a traditional road that, he argues, appeals to women readers. Du Maurier wrote "old-fashioned novels with straightforward narratives that appealed to a conventional audience's love of fantasy, adventure, sexuality, and mystery," he says. Du Maurier rewarded her readers' loyalties, in fact, "by embodying their desires and dreams in her novels and short stories." He believes that "Don't Look Now," and her short story "The Birds" and novel *Rebecca* "stand out among her works as landmarks in the development of the modern gothic tale" and establish the "twentieth-century sense of dislocation." According to Kelly, her writing "set the stage" for hundreds of "imitators" to write lesser stories for the Harlequin Romance series and others.

But even an admirer of du Maurier, such as Kelly, can acknowledge that her stories may be less than perfect. In his article about du Maurier in *Twayne 's English Authors Series Online,* Kelly acknowledges, "character, atmosphere, language, social commentary—all are of secondary interest to her" and adds that many of her characters are "manipulated by their contrived future." Du Maurier's world does not ask much introspection of readers, only that they come along for the ride. Even though Kelly lauds "Don't Look Now," he allows that du Maurier "does not develop her characters to the point where we can have any strong feelings of sympathy for them. Instead, we watch with curiosity what *happens* to them."

When the collection entitled *Don't Look Now* came out in 1971, Margaret Millar reviewed it for the *New York Times Book Review.* In her article, Millar notes that du Maurier has been "a household word for more than thirty years," but the reviewer is rather unenthusiastic about the title story. Referring to the mysterious events in the story, Millar writes, "Is Laura really dead? No. Are the sisters dead? No. Is the story dead? A bit." She argues that du Maurier is least effective when writing in the third person and that Laura and John are "superficial and dull."

But, ultimately, the readers have spoken, and du Maurier's work continues to be hugely popular. In 1969, she was made a dame of the British Empire for her literary distinctions, and many of her stories and novels have been made in major motion pictures, including *The Birds,* directed by no less than Alfred Hitchcock.

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Sanderson holds a master of fine arts degree in fiction writing and is an independent writer. In this essay, Sanderson examines how a community of women is created in Daphne du Maurier's novella.

Daphne du Maurier's short story, or novella, "Don't Look Now" is a tale of the supernatural, full of mysterious premonitions, blind soothsayers, and messages from the next life. Critics refer to it as a fine example of contemporary romantic horror writing, and the film made from the story sent chills up the spines of many moviegoers in the 1970s.

But this story also looks at men's and women's relationships with each other. Nina Auerbach, writing about du Maurier in the book *British Writers,* notes that the author has developed an "emphasis on the animosity between the husband and the wife." Against John's sarcasm, disbelief, and fear, the primary female characters in the story—who outnumber John four to one—create a community of women whose actions denote strength and power. With the help of her fellow females, Laura takes steps to grow, while John is literally and figuratively left behind.

When the story opens, John and Laura look like any relatively happily married couple enjoying their vacation to romantic Venice. They are away from their child and can laugh and joke as if they haven't a care in the world. But after only a few paragraphs, the novella reveals a tense side to their merriment: they are on vacation to get over the death of their five-year-old daughter, Christine. John is tired of Laura's depression over the loss of their child and hopes that they can "pick up on the familiar routine of jokes shared on holiday and at home . . . [and] life will become as it was before." John seems to hope that his life will not be changed by Christine's death and that Laura will simply forget about Christine— an attitude that marks him as immature.

His hopes for an unaffected life are dashed, though, when Laura learns that the blind sister is able to "see" a happy Christine seated next to Laura and John as they eat lunch. Despite the fact that his wife is obviously overjoyed by this news, John's only thought is to move along to the next tour stop. He decides he must "play along with her, agree, soothe, do anything to bring back some sense of calm," but he is the only one losing his calm here. His response to Laura's discovery is, "What do I do? How do I cope?," and he desperately looks for a way to move her off the topic and onto something he can understand.

If the news has stunned and confused John, the experience has left Laura stronger. As she speaks of the sister's vision, her demeanor changes to one of control and strength. "The dazed expression," he notices, "had given way to one of dawning confidence, almost of exaltation." Instead of being reassured by this, John panics that Laura is "going off her head." Here is an instance in which a supposed caretaker is the one in need of care, a theme that is repeated in this story a number of times.

John sees himself as Laura's protector because, in his eyes, she is weak and fragile. He does not tell her about seeing the hooded character he assumes to be a child in danger, because it "might have had a disastrous effect on her overwrought nerves." When John catches a glimpse of the sisters at the cathedral, he keeps this from Laura, too, believing that the old ladies are out to bother them or even to get money from them. When he thinks that Laura has disappeared, John begins to believe that the sisters have tricked her into getting off the plane. He imagines her being susceptible to the sisters' wild stories of premonitions and choosing to let the plane leave without her, "all without question." When John goes to the police station to report her missing, he agrees with the police officer that Laura has been "suffering the aftereffects of shock" and that she may be so stressed from the blind sister's visions of Christine that she could have had "a sudden attack of amnesia." In John's mind, Laura is not the master of her own mind or actions—someone must be controlling her as if she were a puppet.

But Laura does come to know her own mind, with the help of the other three major female characters in the story: the elderly twin sisters and Christine's ghost. When the story begins, Laura is suffering from the grief of losing Christine to meningitis. By all accounts she has been depressed and not her usual self. John brings her to Venice to forget her grief and recapture her former happiness, but meeting the sisters and hearing their news about Christine is what puts Laura back on the road to recovery—not John. After Laura finds out about the blind sister's visions of Christine, she is exuberant and energized and can confess to John that she has been trying to hide her depression from him. "You know what it's been like all these weeks," she says, "though I tried to hide it from you. Now it's lifted, because I know."

After her confession to John, Laura feels a great sense of relief and begins to take more control over her actions. At the cathedral she wades into a crowd of sightseers, "undaunted," and begins studying a guidebook, "as had always been her custom in happier days." When the telegram arrives with information that their son, Johnnie, has appendicitis, Laura takes charge and handles the return trip to England. She seizes the phone from John and makes arrangements so that she is able to fly back home that afternoon. She is all organization and purpose, arranging for John's later departure and watching over the porter who has been assigned to find her a seat on a plane. John notices that Laura "no longer looked anxious and drawn, but full of purpose. She was on her way."

In both the literal and the metaphorical senses, Laura is "on her way," leaving John and flying to England. The sisters have helped Laura with this progress, letting her know that Christine is happy in the afterlife and sympathizing with the pain she carries from losing her daughter—something John is unable to do. Indeed, as John fears, the sisters "lure Laura beyond marriage into new, transforming perceptions," according to Auerbach. She is reborn, in a sense, as a confident woman, finding more strength in the company of women than in that of men. When John sees Laura in the passing ferry with the sisters, he misinterprets the scene on two levels: first, by failing to recognize it as a premonition; and second, by believing that Laura is helplessly under the spell of the sisters when, in fact, the sisters are supporting Laura as she returns to Venice to claim John's body after his murder.

The sisters also serve as a conduit for Christine, who has two messages to share with her parents: first, that everything is fine with her, and second, that John is in extreme danger and must leave Venice immediately. Laura hears and appreciates both of these messages, but John, in his arrogance, will not listen. The four women have created a club, of sorts, a place where lives are renewed, but John rejects their attempts to include him, eventually paying for this with his life.

The sisters act as wise crones, a little frightening but filled with vision and understanding. Laura chooses to listen to them, despite her husband's dismissal of their powers. Du Maurier has never been classified as a "feminist" writer and, in fact, according to Auerbach, "has become identified with a femininity distasteful to misogynists and feminists alike." But a close reading of "Don't Look Now" that focuses on the relationships between the main characters, combined with the understanding that du Maurier wrote this story late in her life, raises some interesting issues. For here is a story of two sisters and a female ghost helping another woman through a tough ordeal. Thanks to his own stubbornness, a female murders Laura's husband. Despite the fact that the story ends with John's violent and bloody death, the chronologically final scene of the story—John's unwitting premonition of Laura and the sisters returning to Venice to claim his body—is one of female companionship and bonding through troubled times.

Source: Susan Sanderson, Critical Essay on "Don't Look Now," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

Moran is a secondary school teacher of English and American literature. In this essay, Moran examines the ways in which du Maurier's story dramatizes the human desire to impose order on strange and unexplainable situations.

In *The Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791), the biographer James Bos well recounts a remark made by the subject of his book:

It is wonderful that five thousand years have now elapsed since the creation of the world, and still it is undecided whether or not there has ever been an instance of the spirit of any person appearing after death. All argument is against it; but all belief is for it.

In this case, argument and belief are offered as contradictory approaches to the issue of ghosts: the fact that there has been no empirical evidence confirming their existence does not deter many people from a nagging suspicion that there may be instances where the dead return to the earth and show themselves to the living. Sometimes, these contradictory outlooks can be found in the same person (like Johnson himself). This notion that the belief in the supernatural lacks a logical "argument" yet simultaneously solicits an irrational but unshakable "belief" is what drives Daphne du Maurier's "Don't Look Now," where John is presented as a man constantly searching for rational "arguments" to explain the unexplainable, only to eventually find his rational view of the world (and his deceased daughter's role within it) compromised by a growing "belief' in the supernatural. As the story progresses, John grows increasingly paranoid as his bulwark of logic is assaulted—and eventually toppled—by the existence of psychic phenomena.

Many tales and novels dealing with the supernatural feature a character who begins as a rational thinker but ends as a believer in the paranormal (and scientifically impossible) events created by the author. For example, in *Frankenstein* (1818), Mary Shelly's novel of the "modern Prometheus," Frankenstein tells his story to Robert Walton, an explorer and seeker of "knowledge and wisdom" who eventually accepts the "strange and terrific" story of how Frankenstein reanimated dead tissue. The mystery of Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) is unraveled by Mr. Utterson, a **dull,** uninquisitive and methodical lawyer who, by the novel's end, understands the nature of his friend's odd behavior and experiments. Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) is narrated, in part, by Dr. Arthur Seward, a psychologist in charge of an asylum who initially looks to science to account for the strange events occurring around him (since he lives in what one character calls the "skeptical, matter-of-fact nineteenth century") but ends the novel chasing the elusive vampire through the hills of Transylvania. Even Shakespeare's Hamlet—who, before the events of the play, was a student at Wittenberg—revises his view of the world after meeting his father's ghost: he tells his scholarly friend, "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

"Don't Look Now" draws on this convention of the logical protagonist in its depiction of John who, like Walton, Utterson, and Seward, finds his unshakable faith in logic and reason tested, and eventually broken, by the story's end. At first, the reader shares John's unease at the blind sister's sighting of Christine and empathizes with him when he expresses his fear that the sister's vision will prove unhealthy for Laura: "Oh God," John thinks after Laura tells him of the vision, "She's going off her head." Like many people do when confronted with the unexplainable, John struggles to impose order on a situation that defies it; his attempts to use rational (and Johnsonian) "argument" to account for the strange events that befall him are what drive the story.

John's attempts to impose order on his little section of Venice begin as a joke but grow more desperate as the story continues. The opening scene (in which he and Laura conjecture about the nationalities and sexual orientation of the sisters) is merely a game, but one in which they (albeit laughingly) try to discern everything they can about this strange pair of women: "You know what it is," John tells Laura, "they're criminals doing the sights of Europe, changing sex at each stop." Laura (who has not yet learned of Christine's presence and is therefore still, like John, prone to explain away any oddities she encounters) adds, "They're a couple of pathetic old retired schoolmistresses on holiday, who've saved up all their lives to visit Venice. They come from some place with a name like Walabanga in Australia. And they're called Tilly and Tiny." Playing such a game makes John and Laura feel superior to the sisters, as John hopes his rational mind will prove him superior to whatever threatens it as the story continues.

John's thoughts during the game also reveal a crucial component of his character: his slight yet detectable sense of superiority over his wife:

Her voice, for the first time since they had come away, took on the old bubbling quality he loved, and the worried frown between her brows had vanished. At last, he thought, at last she's beginning to get over it. If I can keep this going, if we can pick up the familiar routine of jokes shared on holiday and at home, the ridiculous fantasies about people at other tables, or staying in the hotel, or wandering in art galleries and churches, then everything will fall into place, life will become as it was before, the wound will heal, she will forget.

"At last she's beginning to get over it"—these are the words of a man who has grown tired of his wife's slow recovery to the world of jokes and holidays. John does not scorn Laura, but he does pity her and view her as one whose means of dealing with the immense grief of losing a child are a source of constant frustration and weariness. Their very trip to Venice is John's attempt to bring Laura back to his world of level-headedness; he sees himself as something like a cult deprogrammer with a duty to restore his wife's wits to their "proper" sphere. His idea that "life will become as it was before, the wound will heal" is indicative of his shallow belief that a change of scenery will somehow ease the pain felt by a grieving mother. John hopes that the holiday "could yet turn into the cure she needed, blotting out, if only temporarily, the numb despair that had seized her since the child died." The pragmatic John views Laura's emotions as an illness he must "cure" with this vacation; his means of dealing with Christine's death are

never articulated by du Maurier because his approach to the problem is to view his daughter's death as an obstacle that needs to be overcome. As he later tries to make sense of his seeing Laura on the canal boat, John tries to make the way in which his wife approaches her grief more like his own. Of course, such a man with such an attitude is (like Dr. Seward and Mr. Utterson) one of a horror writer's favorite targets, since the writer can slowly convince the reader of the impossible events while simultaneously dramatizing this growing belief in the mind of a character.

The crucial difference between John and Laura is that Laura immediately forfeits her social superiority over the sisters in exchange for the emotional comfort they provide with their news of Christine. In Johnsonian terms, Laura finds "belief" much more convincing than "argument." Upon learning of Christine's ghostly presence, she becomes "happy, so happy" that she begins crying and remarks, "Neither of us need worry about anything any more." To Laura, the story is over. John, however, cannot fathom a mind so at ease with the unexplainable and a heart that counters grief in a manner so different from his own, which is why he immediately begins discounting the sister's vision as a ruse: "Give them half a chance and they would have got money out of Laura—anything." Again the reader sees John as a would-be manager of his wife who finds the idea of Christine's presence a pebble in the shoe of his rationality. As the story progresses, John repeatedly attempts to account for anything that might threaten his superiority by failing to register on his logical radar: he thinks the sisters are con artists, he tells Laura that the first cry heard in the alley is that of "some drunk" and that the sisters "found a sucker" in her, he thinks the vision of Christine near the table is "damned stupid" simply because "in earthly life she would have been tucked up hours ago in bed," he ascribes the blind sister's trance to "epilepsy" rather than a psychic vision and even finds himself agreeing with the policeman's plausible yet highly unlikely theory that he saw Laura on the canal boat with the sisters because Laura had "a sudden attack of amnesia" and therefore "clung to them for support."

The reader, however, cannot shake the sense of paranoia—and, as du Maurier shows, neither can John, despite his struggle to remain rational. After learning of the murderer from the English tourists at the police station, John revises his previous description of the sisters as "freaks" to "diabolical" criminals who "might even be the murderers for whom the police sought"—but he immediately recognizes the dent in his logical armor by thinking, "This is the way people go off their heads." When the police officer tells John that "there will be some satisfactory explanation" for Laura's reappearance on the canal boat, John says nothing but thinks, "All very well . . . but in heaven's name, what?" When he telephones Mrs. Hill for news of his son, thoughts of Johnnie "dying, or already dead" infect his mind. His increased consumption of alcohol adds to the idea that he is losing a battle with the irrational side of his mind—a battle which Laura never has to fight because she is naturally more emotional and less interested in her own superiority than her husband is in his own. Although he mocks the sisters' explanation of his own psychic powers (imagining them visiting he and Laura in England and holding "a séance in the living-room, tambourines appearing out of thin air"), he leaves their hotel in a hurry once the blind one falls into her trance. As the story grows more and more ominous, the "Laura side" of John's mind, like the murderous dwarf, grows more powerful and dangerous.

At the very end of the story, however, John's mix of irony and alcohol will prove no match against an event so unexpected yet plausible. When he first sees the "child," he wonders why she is running "as if her life depended on it" and comes up with a wholly rational explanation: "A man was in pursuit"—and this man must be the same man who had chased the child the other night and must also be the murderer presently being hunted by the police. Of course, this perfectly logical explanation turns out to be perfectly wrong, but the first-time reader is in complete accordance with John's theory. The story's ending comes as such a shock because, like John, the reader rationally but incorrectly assumes that the child is the victim. When the child is revealed to be a maniacal dwarf, a reader may balk at the improbability of such a plot twist— but this improbability is the whole point. John's final thought—"what a bloody silly way to die"—perfectly reflects his personality: his death is "silly" because it comes about as the result of an absurd yet plausible event. By the time he acknowledges the validity of his own psychic powers (and, by extension, of the supernatural in general), he is almost a corpse. There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in John's philosophy and it takes a knife-throwing dwarf disguised as a frightened child to drive this lesson home to John—a lesson that his wife and the sisters learned without any resistance.

Du Maurier's story is, therefore, one that uses impossible, supernatural events to dramatize a common element of human nature: the desire for logical and emotional superiority. When the police officer asks John, "You not speaka the truth?," he could just as well be interrogating du Maurier herself, whose answer might be, Scientifically, no—but psychologically, yes.

Source: Daniel Moran, Critical Essay on "Don't Look Now," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay excerpt, Shallcross reviews the quality of the film adaptation of du Maurier's "Don't Look Now."

Although Daphne du Maurier has written many selections of short stories, many with supernatural and occult themes, none has grabbed the attention so successfully as 'Don't Look Now'. Throughout her career, she wrote about places rather than about people—and this particular story about supernatural or occult forces that led to a violent death in Venice conjured up wonderfully sinister visions of out-of-season Venice, that most mysterious of waterlocked Italian cities, with its canals, crumbling buildings and eerily deserted hotels full of shrouded furniture.

Daphne always preferred to stay in places out of season, so that she could absorb the atmosphere, and she used the insights she gained in her writing. Abroad, she was a different person, almost gregarious, and far more interested in eating out and socializing than she was at home. One of her holidays abroad was in Venice where she went with her son, and where she gained the background and ideas for 'Don't Look Now'. This story was published in 1971 in a collection entitled *Not After Midnight* in the UK, and *Don't Look Now* in the United States.

The book concerns a young couple, John and Laura Baxter, who have the misfortune to lose one of their two young children who dies of meningitis. In an attempt to overcome her grief, Laura accompanies John to Venice, where his work has taken him, and as they stroll through the city they catch glimpses of a small figure who looks from a distance just like their daughter. Laura has a series of encounters with two strange sisters, one of whom is blind and psychic. Laura's desire to believe that their daughter is still with them leads her to attend a seance, and she is told that the little girl has returned to warn of impending danger to her father. Laura is called back to England, but John sees her dressed in mourning, apparently going to the cemetery; a phone call to England establishes that she is safe. While she is away, John sees his daughter again, and pursues her through Venice, into a church; but it is not his daughter, it is a female dwarf, who murders him.

Various elements went into the writing of 'Don't Look Now'. At the time of Daphne and Kits' visit to Venice everyone was talking about a series of murders, committed by someone the newspapers described as a dwarf. Daphne got the idea of incorporating such a person into her story when she saw a small girl running by a canal. 'She turned her head, and revealed herself to be an evil-faced dwarf,' she told me. Daphne also happened to be passing a canal when the body of a woman was being taken out, and in St Mark's Square she saw elderly twin women. 'Right from childhood,' she told me, 'I have always enjoyed the challenge and discipline of constructing short stories, and they are generally based on some sort of personal experience. In "Don't Look Now", which is based in Venice, I saw the two old women, twins—one of whom was blind—sitting at a table in St Mark's Square, like some sinister sort of Greek chorus. In my story I gave the blind one psychic powers.'

Two years after the story first appeared in print, there was also a film version made by the brilliant director, Nicolas Roeg. Whenever the death knell sounds for the British film industry, someone appears whose work seems to offer a guarantee of its continued existence. In 1973, that person was Roeg. He has a photographer's eye for striking visual detail and was a distinguished cinematographer before becoming a director. He can juggle images with great skill to build up a complex pattern of associations, though in *Don't Look Now* his sophisticated approach is held in check by the limits imposed by du Maurier' s story and the conventions of the horror thriller.

What attracted Roeg to Daphne du Maurier? 'Actually, it's rather a curious thing. As I read that short story, this premise never left my mind: "Nothing is what it seems in life." I thought this idea to be a wonderful disguise, and a great way to start a movie . . . Daphne writes from inside the human condition; all her characters have depth, that is why she is a wonderful writer . . . Also, the idea that nothing in life is what it seems sums up a lot of du Maurier's work, such as "The Birds" and *Rebecca . . .* François Truffaut said to me, "Isn't it strange, Nick, we seem to make the same movie over and over again." This is why her work transfers so well to the screen, because it touches issues concerned with the human condition.'

This was what first attracted Roeg to this story, and this multiplicity of levels also strikes a chord within him. His film of *Don't Look Now* explores the theory that behind one door there is another, and behind that door . . .

'When I did the recce for the film,' said Roeg, 'I felt that Venice itself had some sinister qualities, and was not what it seemed. It has been called the most beautiful prison in the world, because you couldn't get away from it. In *Don't Look Now* there is not one shot of St Mark's Square. I did not want to fall into the trap that everyone seems to fall into when photographing this famous city.'

It could be argued that Roeg outdoes Hitchcock both in terms of dazzling visual style, and the creation of an atmosphere of dread and foreboding. His first film as a director was *Performance,* vehicle for one of rock's most unpredictable stars, Mick Jagger (and he would later direct the controversial David Bowie); he brought Daphne du Maurier's vision of out-of-season Venice, full of menace and dread, to the cinema screen in a brilliant personal statement.

The film was cast with Julie Christie as Laura Baxter, Donald Sutherland as John Baxter, and Hilary Mason as the blind Heather. When Hilary Mason first visited Roeg at his London office, she was able to tell him that she already knew 'Don't Look Now', having read it some time earlier; 'I told him this and he took it as a good omen, because he is a very superstitious man.' Julie Christie would have difficult scenes to play as Laura, in which she would have to attend a seance, and before filming started, Roeg took her to a famous direct-voice medium so that she would have some background knowledge.

From a casual opening showing a happy ordinary family, the film develops into a ghostly mystery involving telepathic powers. A series of repudiations and mistaken assumptions

run round in a circle to the dimly foreseen disaster. The first shots are of the Baxters' pleasant rambling house in the English countryside, just after Sunday lunch. Their two children—a boy and a little girl wearing a red mackintosh—are playing quietly in the garden. Nothing could be more ordinary. John, who is a restorer of ecclesiastical artwork, picks up a slide he has recently taken of the interior of a Venetian church; as he examines it it becomes blotched with a bloodlike stain. Impelled by a mysterious premonition, he rushes into the garden—his daughter has fallen into a pond and disappeared beneath the surface. John dashes into the water after her, and seconds later is rocking her lifeless body in his arms.

The young couple go to Venice, leaving their son at his boarding school. Baxter is there to help restore Venetian churches, Laura to get over her grief. During their stay they meet two strange sisters, one (Heather, played by Hilary Mason) blind and psychic. Walking through the dark and brooding city of Venice, they catch glimpses of a small fleeing figure, clad in a red coat as their daughter had been when she was drowned.

The couple are trying to forget their tragedy, but Heather tells Laura she has seen the ghost of her daughter, and continues to describe her, and what she was wearing on the day she drowned. The child, she assures Laura, is very much with them. This news has a traumatic effect on Laura, who faints. When she is revived she feels a strange sense of elation that her little girl has not left her completely. John, on the other hand, is annoyed at the 'mumbo-jumbo' and refuses to have anything to do with Heather and her sister.

He cannot, however, dissuade Laura from attending a seance one night at the small *pension* where the two women live. While Laura is there, John spends the evening getting drunk and wandering up and down bleak alleyways in the city. The blind Heather, meanwhile, tells Laura that her daughter has returned to warn her father that his life is in danger, and that he must leave Venice immediately. John does not take the warning seriously, but a couple of days later, when he is working high up on a rafter of a church, matching some mosaics, he is overcome by vertigo. It is only by clutching at a dangling piece of rope that he saves himself from almost certain death.

Laura is called back to England because their son has had a slight accident at school. On the same morning that she has left John sees her dressed as a widow, standing with the two mysterious sisters alongside a coffin on a boat which is, he realizes, making for the cemetery. He calls her name, but she does not seem to hear him. He rushes to the police station, to report the incident, but the police are involved in the hunt for a murderer who has already claimed several victims. Although they are sympathetic to John's story, they hardly take it seriously. A couple of hours later he telephones England and finds Laura has arrived home safely. It is ironic that he thinks it is Laura who is in danger; we know already that he, too, may have second sight, and that he may be foreseeing his own funeral.

While Laura is away, John sees his daughter again: he chases through the back streets of Venice, over bridges and canals and through the swirling mist, into a deserted church where he thinks his daughter has taken refuge. He follows the little figure in the red

coat, and calls and talks, hoping for a friendly response. At last, the 'child' turns round and there—instead of his beloved daughter—is a hideously deformed female dwarf, who produces a machete and hacks John to death. His blood flows along the floor of the church, and the following images transform the earlier messages as the film comes to its dramatic and gruesome conclusion.

Don't Look Now was filmed entirely on location in Venice and England, and in many ways it exceeds even Visconti's *Death in Venice* in its exploration of the city's atmosphere. Venice is the major moving force in both the du Maurier story, and in the Roeg film. An exciting psycho-thriller, it is full of visual and verbal shifts, about superstition and faith and the other-worldliness of religion. Repeated images, either juxtaposed or echoing more remotely, create surging associations. The opening sequences seem almost too calculated with their metronome precision of the red-stained glass, the red mackintosh, John throwing a packet of cigarettes, the little girl throwing her ball, the knocked-over glass and the spreading stain as John rushes out, too late to save his daughter.

When the bereaved couple reach Venice, red as a colour is associated not only with death, but with love and sex. The church is an ambivalent source of spiritual balance, and the spreading stain is like a forensic clue, linking with the Venetian police's frantic hunt for a maniac killer. (These sequences bring to mind a line of poetry from John Donne: 'I run to Death, and Death meets me as fast.') Many images run through the film, prefiguring danger, and music by the Italian composer Pino Donaggio complements these and the underlying sinister qualities found in Daphne's story.

Roeg's expertly conceived visual metaphors sustain a powerful foreboding. His Venice, like hers, is a grey workaday city of shadows and lapping water, its hotels emptying for the winter. Never has it been photographed so well, and the whole film is so atmospheric and pictorial that the acting need only have been competent. It was, however, excellent.

On its release, the film received stunning reviews: it was called an 'atmospheric, over complicated, but seriously frightening film', a 'stunning effective adaptation'. *The Spectator* declared:

'The best performance is given by Hilary Mason, as the blind psychic woman . . . genteel and ordinary, until shaken like a leaf in a storm by her psychic powers. She inspires the right mixture of disbelief, graduating into fear and respect.'

Alexander Walker, writing in London's *Evening Standard,* summed it all up when he wrote, 'We'll be lucky if such a film experience is repeated.'

Daphne was pleased with it, too . . .

Seeing the US version rather than the British meant that Daphne missed the famous love scene between Donald Sutherland and Julie Christie, which was edited out so as not to upset American audiences. (Donald Sutherland told me, 'I enjoyed making the film immensely, although cinema audiences in the USA did not enjoy the picture that

much.') At the time it was about as permissive as the contemporary cinema had ever offered. 'I still don't know what I missed, except from my son's graphic description,' Daphne said soon afterwards. 'The scriptwriters and director kept very well to the original, and what they put in helped to make the whole thing more convincing on the screen. All the reviews I have seen are very good, with the exception of the *Daily Telegraph,* but I don't see its readers turning out for an evening of suspense, from whatever quarter it might come!'

She was also impressed by the acting of Julie Christie and Hilary Mason, which she described as 'superb'. Julie Christie told me that she enjoyed playing the part of Laura, and liked her as a person. Her memories of making the film included staying in a rented house on the Guidecca in Venice, and of doing a lot of night shooting, to capture the empty feeling of Venice out of season. 'Nick Roeg spent a lot of time with the lighting to create the sinister atmosphere of the picture, and giving Venice this eerie feeling of dread and menace. I enjoyed working with Donald, and I think we did make a convincing married couple. That film, along with *Dr Zhivago,* is one of my favourites—though, looking back, I never thought it would become a cult classic. Every time anyone mentions *Don't Look Now,* they immediately have sinister visions, due mostly to Daphne du Maurier's chilling story.'

Don't Look Now was the first large-scale film for Hilary Mason, who won rave reviews for her portrayal of the psychic Heather. To generate more sinister tension, Roeg told her that the audience should be able to believe that Heather might be either good or bad. Her trance scenes were carefully directed; in the first, she recalled, he told her, 'You can make people believe you are trying to get Julie into your grasp when you tell her, "I can see your little girl."' The second trance was difficult to get right, and Roeg continued to film the scene again and again, until Julie Christie and Hilary Mason were nearly hysterical. 'You are pushing the spirit out of you, it's coming from the depths,' Roeg urged them. It was Hilary's own idea that, in the last trance, when she tried to warn about impending doom, she should have an epileptic fit, an idea the director accepted. 'Roeg is a totally exhilarating man to work for,' she said, 'and he manages to obtain startling performances from his actors.'

'We filmed *Don't Look Now* during January and February 1973 in Venice, which was very cold and empty. Nick gave Venice sinister qualities, and I remember Julie Christie saying how wonderful the light was, like the inside of a pearl. I had to wear two pairs of contact lenses (which was very uncomfortable) because Nick wanted to photograph me really closely. With these in, I could only just see. At the end of the film, in a scene where Heather was supposed to be guided by her sister, Nick said, "Leave her, let's see what she'll do," and I kicked my toe against the steps as if I really were blind.

'Nick was very kind to Julie, who was understandably nervous and worried; she told Nick, "You want me to walk and talk at the same time." Her hair had to be recurled for almost every shot, because the damp in the air made the curls drop out; Donald Sutherland wore a wig.

'His vertigo scene in the church was difficult to film. The stuntmen didn't want to do it, and Donald did quite a lot himself. Watch that scene very carefully, and you'll notice a pole—that's Nick Roeg pushing Donald further out! The dwarf who murders him was a flower seller from Rome. She didn't need much make-up, she was exactly as you saw her on the screen. While she was on location in Venice she was escorted around the city by two full-sized circus people who looked after her. She would never have managed on her own, but she was an enchanting person, with a lovely smile—I think she made some money from the film.'

During the 1970s *Don't Look Now* became a staple of programmes in film theatres all over the world, and surely it must be one of Roeg's most innovative films. He told me that the film did quite well in the States, and that it still plays to cinema club audiences all over the place. 'The calibre of writer Daphne was,' he said, 'is proved by the letter she wrote me . . . Lesser writers would have objected to the changes that I made but somehow I had captured Daphne's initial vision, and she was pleased with my results.'

He has not yet attempted another du Maurier story, although Daphne felt that there were 'several awaiting a cunning hand'. 'Don't Look Now' is not only a tale of two civilizations, English and Venetian, but also a confrontation beween two kinds of mind, the rational and the superstitious. His adaptation of it just about finds a meeting point between psychological realism and Gothic fantasy; his treatment is such that the spectator is soon caught up in seeking the visual clues rather than finding the dramatic faults.

It is as landmarks in the development of the modern Gothic tale that film treatments of Daphne du Maurier's work stand out. *Rebecca* is a classic story of the 'other woman' with a twist. The continuity of time itself is in question in *Don 't Look Now* as the future blends into the present. And in both that film and *The Birds,* forces arrayed against the protagonists leave their places in the accepted order, when lovable children and even harmless birds become evil, life-threatening creatures.

Source: Martyn Shallcross, "Sinister Stories," in *Private World of Daphne du Maurier,* Robson B ooks Ltd., 1991, pp. 144-55.

Adaptations

In 1973, Paramount Pictures released *Don't Look Now,* a film adaptation starring Julie Christie as Laura and Donald Sutherland as John. The film, directed by Nicolas Roeg, is available on VHS or laser disc from Paramount Home Video.

Topics for Further Study

A couple of times in the story, John and Laura find themselves wandering lost around the streets of Venice, a city known for being difficult to navigate. Find a tourist map of Venice, and locate the churches they visited. See if you can discover where they were when they were lost. Also look at a map of Italy to see how close Padua and Torcello are to Venice.

Du Maurier does not offer much background information on John and Laura. Consider what you know about the couple, and create biographies for them that include where they were born, what they studied in school, what they

were like as children and young adults, and how they met. Also imagine what kind of work John and Laura do at the time of the story and what kind of life they have in England.

Investigate psychic visions or premonitions. What is the latest scientific research on them? Also, explain whether or not you believe that such phenomena are real and why.

Learn about meningitis. What are its causes and symptoms, and how is it treated? Does it appear more often in some parts of the world, and are some people more susceptible to it than others?

Compare and Contrast

1960s: In 1966, Venice suffers some of the worst floods in its history.

Today: Work continues throughout Venice to keep the city from literally sinking into the water that surrounds it. The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has headed an effort to renovate and preserve the damaged historical buildings in the city.

1960s: British women make their presence known in the political world when 29 are elected as Members of Parliament to the House of Commons in 1964—the largest number since women were first allowed to stand for election in 1918.

Today: Women's political power in Great Britain continues to increase substantially. After the 2001 general election, 118 women are Members of Parliament in the House of Commons. Betty Boothroyd, speaker of the House of Commons from 1992 through 2000, is now a life peer—one who may sit in the House of Lords and exercise lifelong voting privileges.

1960s: More than 50 percent of men in England, like John, smoke cigarettes.

Today: The smoking rate for men in England has steadily dropped over the past thirty years, recently leveling off at a rate of just under 30 percent.

What Do I Read Next?

Seaward is Brad Leithauser's 1993 novel about Terry, whose life is transformed when he sees what he believes to be the ghost of his wife, who drowned the previous year. Although Terry is a changed man, he is confused as to exactly what has brought about the change.

Shirley Jackson's 1949 collection, *"The Lottery" and Other Stories,* is an eerie group of stories set in a world where nothing is at it seems. In the title story—Jackson's most famous work and some say one of the scariest stories of the twentieth century—a small town conducts a frightening and terrible yearly ritual.

Many say that Daphne du Maurier' s 1938 classic novel, *Rebecca,* is a variation of the Cinderella tale. At the great Cornwall estate of Manderley, the timid second wife of Maxim de Winter lives with the haunting legacy of Maxim's first wife, the beautiful and cold Rebecca, who died in a sailing accident.

Daphne du Maurier's collection *Don't Look Now,* published in 1971, contains five frightening tales, including "The Birds."

Further Study

Bakerman, Jane S., ed., *And Then There Were Nine: More Women of Mystery,* Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1985.

This is a collection of essays about nine women mystery writers, including Daphne du Maurier.

Forster, Margaret, *Daphne du Maurier: The Secret Life of the Renowned Storyteller,* Doubleday, 1993.

Another recent biography, this one drawing on du Maurier's correspondence and interviews. Forster explores du Maurier's relationships with people of both genders, including her affair with Gertrude Lawrence.

Norwich, John Julius, *A History of Venice,* Vintage Books, 1989.

This book traces the rise of Venice from the fifth century through 1797, when Napoleon ended the city's thousand-year-old republic. Maps and photographs are included.

Shallcross, Martyn, *The Private World of Daphne du Maurier,* Robson Books, Ltd., 1999.

This biography includes information about how Du Maurier's stories were made into movies as well as details from her final, reclusive years.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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

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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Short Stories for Students

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

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

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

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

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