An End to Dreams Study Guide

An End to Dreams by Stephen Vincent Benét

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.

Contents

An End to Dreams Study Guide....1

Contents....2

Introduction....3

Author Biography....4

Plot Summary....5

Characters....8

Themes....11

Style....13

Historical Context....14

Critical Overview....16

Criticism....17

Critical Essay #1....18

Critical Essay #2....21

Topics for Further Study....25

Compare and Contrast....26

What Do I Read Next?....27

Further Study....28

Bibliography....29

Introduction

Stephen Vincent Benét is one of America's most popular short story authors. His *The Devil and Daniel Webster* is considered a classic, and his "An End to Dreams" appeared in *Pictorial Review* and won the O. Henry Award in 1932. Benét refused to follow the literary trends of his era, presenting instead in his work a more positive view of the American character in its historical moment. In his study of Benét in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Joel Roache claims that Benét's vision of the human ability "to transcend its limitations" has assured that his short stories will enjoy a "secure reputation."

"An End to Dreams" focuses on the life of James Rimington as he dreams about it, while anesthetized in a hospital. As he lies in a hospital bed after a serious operation, James dreams about his personal and professional past. In his dream, he imagines that ambition prompted him to reject his small-town values, along with his childhood sweetheart, in order to gain power and wealth through the single-minded pursuit of corporate success. This success then alienated him from those he cared about and cost him any sense of peace. Just at the moment he dreams about dying alone in the hospital, he awakens, and the reader learns his life has taken a very different path. Benét's complex portrait of James, as he is portrayed in his dream and upon waking, presents a compelling exploration of the consequences of the pursuit of the American dream.

Author Biography

Stephen Vincent Benét was born on July 22, 1898 in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. He felt a strong military influence during his childhood from his father, J. Walker Benét, who was an army colonel, and his mother, Frances Neill Benét, who descended from a Kentucky military family. Colonel J. Walker Benét was a great reader, especially of poetry, which helped shape his son's own love for reading and later writing. When Stephen was ten years old, he was sent to the Hitchcock Military Academy where he was quite unhappy. He was often abused by his school mates for his love of reading and dislike of athletics.

Benét was seventeen when his first book, *Five Men and Pompey*, a collection of verse, was published. During World War I, Benét worked in Washington, D.C., as a clerk, since, due to his bad eyesight, he was unable to serve in the military. He later attended Yale and received a master's degree. Instead of writing a thesis for his diploma, he submitted a volume of poems called *Heavens and Earth* (1920). His poetry received awards at Yale, including the first John Masefield Poetry Prize and the Ten Eyck prize. Benét published his first novel, *The Beginning of Wisdom* in 1921.

Benét continued his studies, this time in France, where he met Rosemary Carr, the woman he later married. Carr was a writer and journalist and together they lived a bohemian lifestyle until 1923 when they returned to the United States. During the 1920s Benét continued to write, and with the publication of *Tiger Joy* in 1925, his literary reputation was firmly established.

In 1926, Benét went back to France where he started to write *John Brown's Body*, an epic poem about the Civil War. Benét had always been fascinated with Civil War stories and had read through his father's old *Rebellion Records*. *John Brown's Body* received acclaim from critics and won Benét his first Pulitzer Prize in 1929.

In 1929, Benét was elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters and in 1932 he won the O. Henry Award for the short story, "An End to Dreams." His popular short story "The Devil and Daniel Webster" was published in 1937 and was later made into a play, an opera, and a film.

Benét was a great advocate of America's entry into World War II as evidenced by a speech he wrote for President Roosevelt. He also worked as a screenwriter in Hollywood and wrote a series of radio scripts, including *Listen to the People* (1941) and *They Burned the Books* (1942). Benét was plagued with bad vision throughout his life, and he also suffered from arthritis and mental illness. He died of a heart attack in New York City, on March 13, 1943. In 1944, Benét was awarded his second Pulitzer Prize posthumously for his epic poem *Western Star*.

Plot Summary

The last thing James Rimington remembers in "An End to Dreams" is being given general anesthesia before an operation. As the story begins, he is looking up at himself in a mirror that appears to be held by a nurse. When he contemplates how strange that is, he is filled with terror. He then calms himself by deciding that he is alive "and over the worst." James recognizes that he needs a lot of sleep in order to recuperate before returning to work.

The next several passages contain scenes that slip through James's mind as he dreams. He wonders about how to fix a business deal and later about how he came to be so successful. Thinking back to when he was nine, Rimington remembers how ashamed he was of the patch on the jacket that he wore to school every day and how his classmates made fun of him by calling him "Patches." Their taunts roused him to anger, but some of the school boys overpowered him as their friends continued to mock him.

James dreams about being rescued by eight-year-old Elsa Mercer, which further humiliated him. Next, he dreams about his poverty and about Toby Beach, who although "fat and placid," had friends because his father was rich and had bought him a pony. James realizes, "If you had a pony and your father owned the bank, they wouldn't laugh at you." After that incident, young James determines, "I'm going to be rich" and then the children would want to play with him.

James dreams about coming home without the patched jacket that he had thrown away and about his mother talking to him about the reality of their situation. In defiance, he insisted to himself, "you could stop being poor if you wanted to enough." James understands how hard his mother worked but then insists that he became successful through hard work, which proves to him that all one needs is ambition. He wonders over how many people turned up for his mother's funeral in Bladesburg, his hometown, but decides that was due to the fact that she lived all of her life there. After the funeral, the townspeople had shown him the improvements they had made to the town but he secretly scorns their "small-town" mentality.

James's dream thoughts turn to how he looked as a teenager, and he smiles at the memory. Many evenings he would spend time with Elsa on her porch. He remembers working at the local bank and wonders how it has survived the recent "hard weather." In James's dream, Mr. Beach had turned down an idea James had for the bank, insisting "we're here to serve our own folks, not the Easterners." James thinks about how his plan had been "the first stepping stone" of his success.

He and Elsa had professed their love to each other and complained about not having enough money to get married. James does not regret his relationship with Elsa since it had prompted him to go to New York where he earned his fortune. Mr. Beach had warned him about getting involved with John Q. Dixon in New York because the man had the reputation of being "a pirate." Beach offered him a position as assistant cashier,

suggesting that he would eventually move higher up in the bank, which would have given James the opportunity to marry Elsa.

He had considered the offer, imagining what life would be like as he slowly moved up from assistant cashier to "perhaps" owner at fifty. The townspeople would then have respect for him, no longer calling him "Patches." But he rejected this path, even while admitting that going to New York would mean that he could not continue to send his mother money. He also knew that even though he had promised, he would never come back to Elsa.

His dream memory jumps to his success in New York, where he was called "the quiet earthquake." James appears to have used Dixon's own tricks against him as the latter asked, "how much do you expect me to settle for, Jim?" Dixon suggested here that James had become as corrupt as he was. James catalogues the things he acquired as a result: expensive homes and a yacht where he could impress guests who came to find out how to gain similar success. There were also many "hollow" women who, he concludes, "had no importance" because the only thing that mattered to him was the work and the power it afforded.

In the dream, Elsa had in the meantime married Toby Beach with whom she had children. As James lies in bed, he weighs his choices. Even though he insists, "he had bought life on his own terms," he appears to regret his decisions, especially since he lost Elsa in the process. He tries to convince himself that what was important was work and power and averts his gaze from the mirror.

When he hears doctors talking in hushed tones, he looks through the mirror in an effort to discover what they are talking about. He gets annoyed when he decides they are not focusing on him. When he tries to get their attention, he finds that he is unable to speak. He tries to think who he could contact to help him but realizes that he has no friends. Eventually, he thinks about Elsa and conjures an image of her. As she tends her garden, he tries to make her think of him. She stops for a moment, with a concerned look flashing across her face, but returns to her work, for "the feebly burning lamp that had to do with James Rimington winked out." Her family is her main concern now.

His dream consciousness returns to the hospital where he seems to hear his doctor refer to a "sudden collapse" and call for oxygen as he concludes that men such as James do not have much to live for. James interprets this to mean that he is dying. After hearing one of the voices suggest that a mirror be used to see if he is still breathing, James looks at it and discovers that it is blank. Then all goes dark.

The scene jumps to a middle-aged woman sitting in a chair, who the reader discovers is Elsa Rimington. James wakes up in the hospital confused, asking her if they are married. She confirms that they have been for thirty years. When he asks if she remembers his patched coat, she tells him how he kept wearing it, convincing the other children that it brought him luck. She tells him that the doctor is sure that he will be fine and that his children "are just crazy" to see him. James looks up at the ceiling and sees a spot of sun shining like a mirror and begins to tell her what he "saw," but he appears

to realize that it has all been a dream. The story closes as James, filled with a sense of peace, takes Elsa's hand.

Characters

Toby Beach

Toby is a popular classmate of James, even though the boy is "fat and placid." He teaches James that "if you had a pony and your father owned the bank, they wouldn't laugh at you." Toby's father offers James a job at his bank that, in his dream, he rejects. In reality, though, James becomes a successful banker after accepting the position.

John Q. Dixon

In James's dream, one afternoon John Q. Dixon gets stuck in Bladesburg while traveling to New York City. James finds the courage to talk to the man, who is considered to be a "pirate" by the New York press. Dixon is James's hero, and he models himself after the man whom he believes has succeeded in realizing the American dream. Dixon is the epitome of the soulless robber baron of the early part of the twentieth century. His eyes can "look through a man" as he sizes him up to see what he can gain from him. James's association with Dixon corrupts him, however, to the point where James has become as much of a pirate as his mentor.

Elsa Mercer

In her childhood, Elsa is strong and kind. This "pig-tailed avenger" rescues James from the taunts of his classmates. James has a vision of her in his dream that seems to coincide with her true nature. In the dream, her patience becomes evident when she understands James's need to go to New York to seek his fortune and insists that she will wait for him. But James never returns to her in his dream. He admits that she gives him the courage to speak to John Q. Dixon that afternoon in Bladesburg.

Elsa exhibits this same level of support after James wakes from his dream. She is at his side, praising him for his ingenuity when as a child his classmates made fun of his patched coat. She claims that he is the best patient at the hospital and tells him that their children and his sister are "just crazy" to see him. It is obvious that she provides him with the peace he experiences at the end of the story.

James Rimington

Benét presents two versions of James, one in the dream and the other in reality. Perhaps Benét is suggesting that James is a combination of both versions. The dream James is ruled by his monomaniacal drive to escape the grinding poverty of his childhood. Humiliated by his family's circumstances, which force him to wear a patched jacket, James recognizes that "when you were poor, people laughed at you." He also

learns that money will buy friends as evidenced by his classmates swarming around the son of the local banker.

Lacking compassion, he views poverty as a weakness, insisting "you could stop being poor if you wanted to enough" and so regards his mother, who has worn herself out with work, with disdain. Beach has provided a way out of his poverty in Bladesburg, but the job does not offer James the level of success he craves. Beach admits that the plan James brings to him is "a brilliant scheme" but insists that they "can't touch it" because they are there "to serve our own folks, not the Easterners." James's response is to mock the older man's decent business practices.

When he thinks about leaving for the city, James recognizes that he would not be able to send his mother any money for a long time since "Dixon paid his clever young men starvation wages at first." He also acknowledges that he will never return for Elsa either, but his selfish pursuit of his dreams presses him to leave.

In his dream, James relocates to New York and becomes hardened by his drive for success and is nicknamed "the quiet earthquake." He thinks back to the days when he played the mandolin for Elsa, considering himself a foolish boy then. He has disciplined himself to focus only on work and his drive for success. In New York, he has become a "pirate" like his mentor John Dixon, who told him "when a man's tired making money he's tired of life." When James eventually defeats him, Dixon admits that he learned well his advice to "always squeeze the shorts" and looks at the younger man with "passionless comprehension." Success has made the dream James rigid and demanding, and as a result friendless.

At the hospital, the dream James becomes angry when he thinks that the doctors are not taking good care of him and insists that he should be their first priority. This James, however, is not strong enough to buy himself life, and thus he dies.

The true James emerges at the end of the story. We only learn a few details about him through Elsa that reflect his character. Apparently, he was strong enough to deflect criticism regarding his poverty when he convinced his classmates that his patched jacket brings him luck. This James turns into "a solid man. A settled, small-town citizen" who is loved by his wife and family and who has found ultimate peace in his situation.

Benét complicates our vision of James, however, by his juxtaposition of the two versions. The author suggests that James has dual impulses: to get out of his small town and pursue a selfish dream of power and wealth, and to become a "decent" citizen of his small town, living a quiet, settled life with his family. This duality creates a more complex and so more realistic vision of James's character.

Mrs. Rimington

James's selfless mother always looks "bewildered." James concludes that her inability to focus on and complete a task results from her being the sole caretaker to her five

children. She is well-respected in their hometown, as evidenced by the kind words all say about her at her funeral.

Themes

The American Dream

Benét explores the destructive aspects of the American dream and suggests an altered version. In his dream, James follows the traditional plot of the dream, which involves rising from poverty to the top of the corporate world, amassing wealth and power along the way. He envisions, however, the destructive consequences of this achievement since it necessitated moving away from his family and the woman he loved.

In his dream, James imagines himself as hardened by his immersion in the corporate world of New York City. He becomes as corrupt as his idol, John Q. Dixon, beating the tycoon at his own game. When he returns for his mother's funeral, he scoffs at the small-town values of his hometown, with its decent, hard-working members like his mother, and had not "cracked a smile" when given a tour of the new buildings. James's success has caused him to alienate and isolate himself from others except the "women of various ages and different looks . . . light and hollow as figures made of pasteboard" who "had no importance." As he lies dying in his hospital bed, he can think of no one who would come to his side. James recognizes the wrong path he has taken when he admits that he was "meant to grow up and marry Elsa and do all sorts of things." At that moment, his corporate "dream" dies. The doctor holds the mirror up to his face and finds there is no breath as darkness falls.

Benét's alternate vision of the American Dream involves a more gradual and less steep path to success. When James wakes from his dream, he finds that he is successful on a smaller scale as provider for his family and has been married to Elsa for thirty years. He has channeled his ambition in a different direction. Elsa reminds him that when his classmates teased him about his patched jacket, he convinced them that it helped him shoot marbles more accurately. As a result, "by the end of the year, every boy in school wanted a patch." James learned to make the best of his situation in his hometown and so determined to find a more comfortable version of the American dream.

Subconscious Desires

According to Sigmund Freud (1856—1939), founder of modern psychoanalysis, there are different levels of consciousness, one on the surface and the other beneath and often hidden from the conscious mind. The subconscious harbors desires that people do not recognize consciously. Often, these suppressed desires emerge in the form of dreams. Benét's story of James's dream focuses on material wealth, professional importance, and corporate success. Perhaps these dream subjects represent suppressed desires in James. In Benét's words, the dream emerges as James experiences a "shaken point of consciousness," which occurs when James believes he is coming out of anesthesia.

James's detailed reconstruction of his past suggests that he is unfulfilled on some level. While he is attended lovingly by his wife at the end of the story, he admits to a sense of defeat when he realizes that his vision of his success is only a dream. Even the title, "An End to Dreams," suggests that James's vision of his corporate rise was a suppressed desire. Benét's depiction of these dual levels of consciousness paints a more complex portrait of his main character.

Style

Foreshadowing

Benét uses foreshadowing to good effect in the story as he drops hints that Rimington is not what he appears to be. When he looks in the mirror as he is lying on the hospital bed, he admits that his face "seemed like the face of an utter stranger." He is in a "shaken point of consciousness" when he first stars at the mirror. As he looks at his reflection, "the lines began to smooth away, the heavy cheeks grew younger . . . as if he gazed at one of those magic tricks of the camera." A magic trick is being performed by his psyche, which has been suppressing his dreams of success in New York City. At the end of the story readers learn that his subconscious has manufactured this version of James through a dream. Another moment of foreshadowing occurs when he notes that his mother's only desire was "to have her children grow up decent small-town citizens," which is exactly what the real James has become.

Symbolism

Benét uses the mirror as a symbol of James's subconscious, which enables the author to present a dual vision of his main character as well as the ironic twist at the end of the story. Before he is completely conscious, James sees his reflection in what appears to be a mirror that he assumes a nurse is holding over his head. This mirror allows him to examine his past as it presents him with a look at what might have been. Sometimes it clouds, suggesting that the visions are false, as when James wonders what would have happened if he had "stayed in Bladesburg, worn the patched coat." When it clears, he continues his dreams of wealth and power.

Historical Context

The Jazz Age

American society went through a period of dramatic change in the aftermath of World War I. Traditional beliefs in God, country, and humanity were shaken as Americans faced the devastation of a war of this magnitude. The resulting feelings of confusion and dislocation led to a questioning and often a rejection of conventional morality and beliefs. In the 1920s, Americans recognized that an old order had been replaced by a new, freer society, one that adopted innovative fashions in clothing, behavior, and the arts. F. Scott Fitzgerald named this decade the "Jazz Age," which along with the "Roaring Twenties" came to express the cultural revolution that was then taking place.

Despite this era of being one of Prohibition (sale and consumption of alcohol was prohibited by the Eighteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which became law in 1919), Americans experimented with expressions of personal and social freedom in dress, sexuality, and lifestyle. Women cut their hair short and wore shapeless "flapper" dresses that gave then an androgynous air. Premarital sex began to lose its stigma, and exciting developments in musical styles pulled whites into predominantly black neighborhoods. The pursuit of pleasure, especially as related to the accumulation of wealth, became a primary goal, overturning traditional notions of hard work, social conformity, and respectability. Literary historian Margot Norris notes that during this age, "the aesthetics of glamour produced by material and social extravagance" were "simulated and stimulated by the celluloid images of the burgeoning movie industry."

Literature in the 1920s

Literature in the 1920s in America was dominated by a group of American writers that felt a growing sense of disillusionment after World War I. As a result, many left the United States and lived in Europe. T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound initially relocated to London, while Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway traveled to Paris, which appeared to offer them a much freer society than America or England did. During this period, Paris became a chosen destination for these expatriates, who congregated in literary salons (gatherings in private homes or apartments of artists and writers), restaurants, and bars to discuss their work in the context of the new age. Gertrude Stein, who hosted one such salon, announced: "you are all a lost generation," a line Hemingway used as an epigraph for *The Sun Also Rises*. Stein, an author herself, supported and publicized artists and writers in this movement. In addition to Hemingway's work, Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* came to be seen as a penetrating portrait of this lost generation.

The characters in works by these authors reflected their growing sense of disillusionment along with the new ideas in psychology, anthropology, and philosophy that had become popular in the early part of the twentieth century. Freudianism, for example, which may have contributed to more open sexual expression during the Jazz

Age, began to be studied by these writers, as they explored the psyche of their characters and recorded their often-subjective points of view of themselves and their world. Hemingway's men and women faced a meaningless world with courage and dignity, exhibiting grace under pressure, while Fitzgerald's characters sought the redemptive power of love in a world driven by materialism.

The Great Depression

The Great Depression held America in its grips during the 1930s. The depression was a severe worldwide economic crisis that occurred in the United States after the stock market crash of 1929. The impact on Americans was staggering. In 1933, the worst year, unemployment rose to 16 million, about one third of the available labor force. During the early years, men and women searched eagerly and diligently for any type of work. However, after several months of no sustained employment, they became discouraged and often gave up. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal policies, which offered the country substantial economic relief, helped mitigate the effects of the depression, but the recovery was not complete until the government channeled money into the war effort in the early 1940s.

Critical Overview

Although Stephen Vincent Benét gained popularity for his poetry and stories during his lifetime, little scholarly attention has been paid to his work. Some of his works, however, including his epic poem about the Civil War, *John Brown's Body*, and his short story "The Devil and Daniel Webster" are considered minor classics. He was awarded two Pulitzer Prizes: one for *John Brown's Body* and the other for *Western Star*, a long poem about American pioneers. "An End to Dreams" won the O. Henry Award in 1932.

Benét's work seems to lack originality and be old fashioned in its unabashed patriotism. Henry W. Wells, in his article on Benét for *College English*, argues that he "suffers from an inescapably romantic and youthful disposition for extremes of sentiment." Yet he also claims that Benét should be remembered and read for his inspired historical reflections. Wells insists that his two Pulitzer prize-winning works are "noble and refreshing contributions to American literature" from "one of the most enlightened poets of our times."

Basil Davenport, in his introduction to Benét's *Selected Prose and Poetry*, echoes Wells's assertion when he suggests, "There is no one to touch Benét in the variety and skill of his treatment of American themes." He also asserts that "The Devil and Daniel Webster," is a "legend so perfect that it seems to have been always a part of our folklore." In his article for *Modern Language Notes*, Gordon Bigelow (in a review of a book by Charles A. Fenton) writes, "Benét's best work in prose or verse usually came when he was able to exploit imaginatively the myth and fact of the American past." In his study of Benét, Joseph Wood Krutch, considers his work to be "solid" and insists that "it uses American material in a way which is not only interesting but tending at the same time to make the American past more dignified, more meaningful and more comprehensible to the imagination."

R. L. Duffus wrote in the *New York Times*, "Whether he wrote in solid prose or in measured lines he was a poet. He had the kind of imagination that sees meaning . . . and relations[hips]" that others miss. In his study of Benét in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Joel Roache claims that Benét's vision of the human ability to "transcend its limitations" will assure for his short stories "a modest but secure reputation for at least several more generations."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Perkins is a professor of American and English literature and film. In this essay, Perkins examines Benét's mix of modernist and realist elements in the story.

Modernism, one of the most fruitful periods in American letters, emerged in the decade that followed World War I (1914—1918). Modernist authors such as Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald became part of what Gertrude Stein called, the "lost generation"□the generation who saw, often firsthand, the horrors of war and who struggled to survive despite a sense of lost values and ideals.

The 1920s became an age of confusion, redefinition, and experimentation. The spirit of the Roaring Twenties, or the Jazz Age as Fitzgerald called this period, was reflected in modernist themes. On the surface, the characters in many of the literary works of this decade live in the rarified atmosphere of the upper class. They drink, party, have sexual adventures, but underneath the glamorous surface emerges the meaninglessness at the heart of their existence. This meaninglessness was compounded in the 1930s when the Great Depression hit and so many Americans lost their wealth. The modernists reflected the *zeitgeist* (a German word for "spirit") of their age□a time when, in the aftermath of World War I, many Americans lost faith in traditional institutions such as the government, social norms, religion, and even the worth of family relationships.

Each modernist writer focused on different ways to cope with this loss: some of their characters try to drown a sense of emptiness in the fast-paced life of the 1920s, some in sexual relationships, and some in personal notions of courage. All ultimately have difficulty sustaining any sense of fulfillment and completion in the modern age.

Not all writers in the 1920s and 1930s dramatized the tenets of modernism in their works. Many, such as Zora Neale Hurston and Willa Cather, continued the tradition of realism, the dominant literary mode of the end of the nineteenth century. Realism focuses on the commonplace and the everyday, giving readers an impression that what is being presented is an accurate portrait of ordinary experience. Some incorporated the old with the new, combining elements of both schools. One such writer was Stephen Vincent Benét. In his award winning short story "An End to Dreams," Benét adroitly combines modernist subjects with realist sensibilities as he explores one man's pursuit of the American dream.

James Rimington could walk into any story by F. Scott Fitzgerald and be at home. Like Jay Gatsby, James is devoted to the American dream, to the belief that anyone can achieve financial success. Humiliated by the "grinding" poverty of his youth, which forced him to wear a patched jacket, James vows not to let anything stand in his way as he strives to gain wealth and the power it affords. After seeing a rich classmate gain popularity, James concludes, "if you had a pony and your father owned the bank, they wouldn't laugh at you." He believes that "you could stop being poor if you wanted to enough."

He is unable to recognize the decency of the residents in his small town, including his mother, who works selflessly for her family, and the value of their slow-paced but fulfilling lives. He turns down a job offer from the president of the local bank, which promised advancement but not the kind that would satisfy James. His ambition drives him to abandon the girl he loves and move to New York City where he becomes as corrupt as the "pirate" John Q. Dixon, eventually beating the powerful tycoon at his own game.

James ends up like many modernists characters. His single-minded pursuit of wealth has thrown him into a world of "the books and the pictures, the charities and the gifts" because "one was not interested enough." He had plenty of women, but they were "light and hollow as figures made of pasteboard; they had no importance." All he had was his work and the power it gained him, but ultimately those were not enough to save him. Money could not buy him health, and as he lies apparently dying in his hospital bed, reviewing his life, he cannot find one person to help him, not one person who cares about his fate.

If the story had ended here, it would be an apt illustration of modernist themes with its focus on the meaninglessness in the materialism and superficiality of the American dream. But this ending would not fit Benét's own sensibilities. When James awakes from his dream of what might have been, he becomes a realist hero: he has made a nobler choice for the direction of his life. He is rewarded for that choice by the loving attention his family offers him, the immediate attention his wife Elsa expresses to him in the hospital. She refuses to leave his side and his children and sister are "just crazy" to see him.

Realist literature centers on conduct and the consequences of actions, especially on the dynamics of cause and effect relationships. While realist writers incorporated the idea of individuality from the Romantics, they focused on the ability to choose, which involved deliberation, weighing alternative actions through a consideration of consequences. A responsible choice produces a moral hero, and as such, a definition of self. A classic illustration of this point can be found in Mark Twain's novel *Huckleberry Finn*. Huck's decision to "go to hell" on behalf of Jim the runaway slave makes him a realist hero. In the southern states before the American Civil War, Huck makes the moral and risky choice of helping Jim escape against the socially approved evil of slavery.

James weighs his alternatives in the story, deliberating about whether to stay in his hometown and marry Elsa or strike out for success and glory in New York City. By the end, James has made a responsible choice, rejecting the shallow pursuit of wealth and power and opting for the quiet but fulfilling small-town life with the comforts of human connection in his family. Benét's own sensibilities are evident here in his depiction of the extremes of the two choices: one offering a materially successful but emotionally empty existence, while the other offers the joys of family life.

Benét's vision of the American dream is illustrated in James's choice. Basil Davenport, in his introduction to Benét's *Selected Prose and Poetry*, writes that the attitude Benét expresses in his work is that life is "too good to waste in being rich and proper."

Commenting on Benét's continuing popularity in America, David H. Webster concludes in his review of Benét's *Selected Prose and Poetry* (1960) that Benét is "significant in the sixties partly just because he rejected some of the attitudes common in the twenties and thirties."

In "An End to Dreams," Benét gives James a clear choice that is not available in modernist works. Relationships do not work out so smoothly in Fitzgerald's and Hemingway's worlds. They are destroyed by the pressures of the post-war age. Benét's ending appears to ignore those pressures in its celebration of family values and commitment. Yet the story presents a more complex vision of human desire. Ironically, through the depiction of his realist hero, Benét employs a modernist technique as he focuses on James's subconscious.

Influenced by the theories of Sigmund Freud, modernists explored the psychology of their characters, often attempting to convey both subconscious and conscious motivations. To accurately reflect these levels of consciousness, modernists employed stream-of-consciousness narratives (disjointed reflections of the conscious mind) and replaced traditional omniscient narrators with subjective points of view limited by the narrow, sometimes distorted vision of reality of a given character.

While James's narrative is not strictly stream of consciousness, it is subjective and fragmented as it jumps back and forth in time. Benét explores in a Freudian way James's subconscious desire for wealth and power that is so strong that it causes him to dream about an alternate world based on a moment in his past when he had to choose his path. Benét thus creates a realist text with an ironic modernist twist in its Freudian suggestion of dual layers of consciousness.

"An End to Dreams" echoes and at the same time overturns the modernist focus on spiritual stagnation, yet Benét complicates the issue in his presentation of James's dual worlds, suggesting Freud's contention that dreams reveal the dreamer's subconscious desires. At the end of the story, after James awakes from his dream and finds Elsa at his side, he is "at peace," but in that final moment, he knows "the measure of his victory and defeat." His choice to stay in his hometown can be viewed as a defeat since it denied his ambition, his dreams of glory. Despite the fact that he is at peace, his dream and sense of defeat suggest that he has some regret about the choice he has made.

Benét's adept combination of modernist themes and technique with realist sensibilities creates a compelling portrait of one man's ambivalent attraction to the American dream. In his examination of James's conflicting desires, he illustrates the complex nature of that dream.

Source: Wendy Perkins, Critical Essay on "An End to Dreams," in *Short Stories for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Critical Essay #2

Goldfarb has a Ph.D. in English and has published two books on the Victorian author William Makepeace Thackeray. In the following essay, Goldfarb discusses the stark choice between two competing lifestyles depicted in "An End to Dreams."

In Stephen Vincent Benét's most famous story, "The Devil and Daniel Webster," Daniel Webster is able to convince a jury of damned souls that, despite promising his soul to the Devil in return for material prosperity, Jabez Stone should not have to surrender his soul after all, even though he did indeed receive ten years of prosperity. Avoiding the fact that Jabez Stone is breaching his contract, Webster focuses on the fact that there is good and bad in everyone and in all of American history, and without that good and bad together there could be nothing new.

Similarly, in his story "Johnny Pye and the Fool-Killer," Benét has his hero argue that there can be no progress unless people do foolish things. And in his story "Doc Mellhorn and the Pearly Gates," the central character is frustrated in Heaven because there are no sick people there on whom to practise medicine. He ends up going to Hell for a while in order to have a chance to practise his chosen profession, there being plenty of sick people there.

What emerges in all these stories is a sense of dualism, a sense of a need for good and bad. To live in Heaven without a chance to visit Hell once in a while would be stultifying. To be unable to do foolish or even evil things once in a while would mean an end to progress. What Benét argues for in these fairly well-known stories of his is for a mix of good and evil, a mix of ambition and morality, of adventure and staying home. Thus in "Johnny Pye and the Fool-Killer," Johnny Pye gets a chance to run away from home and take up with a snake-oil salesman, a money-obsessed merchant, and a band of soldiers before returning home to become a postmaster and marry his childhood sweetheart.

It is different in Benét's less well-known story, "An End to Dreams." Instead of a chance to have it all, James Rimington, the hero of "Dreams," is forced to choose. He has no possibility of pursuing both ambition and home-town values; he must choose one or the other. As he says rather unhappily, "Of course you made a decision and took one path out of two. That was what life was for." In this story there seems no hope of duality.

In some ways, "An End to Dreams" is much like "The Devil and Daniel Webster" and "Johnny Pye and the Fool-Killer." All three stories tell of a suffering central character. There is Jabez Stone in "Daniel Webster," for whom nothing seems to go right. There is Johnny Pye in his story, who is abused by his adoptive parents. And then there is James Rimington in "Dreams," who is teased and bullied by the other schoolchildren because he is poor and wears patches on his clothes. "Patches," they call him. Like Johnny Pye, James Rimington decides to run away from home. And like Jabez Stone, he makes a deal with a devilish sort of figure. Not the literal Devil as in "The Devil and Daniel Webster," but a shady financier named John Q. Dixon. He is warned that Dixon

is "crooked," and in order to become rich like him he has to cut his ties with his mother, his sweetheart, and his whole hometown; but he goes ahead, or so it seems, and as the story draws to a close it appears that he has done exactly what Jabez Stone did: sold his soul for material prosperity.

At the very end, though, in the little coda to the story, it turns out that all of James Rimington's life as a successful businessman was just a dream. Actually, he did not choose to leave his sweetheart and his hometown. His sweetheart, Elsa, is his wife of thirty years, and she is by his side in the hospital when he wakes up from an operation. All of his life as a hard-edged, powerful businessman seems to have been a dream induced by anesthetic during that operation. At first this seems like a good thing. Most of the story consists of James Rimington reviewing his apparent life as a prosperous businessman and not seeming to like it. It may have given him money and power, houses and women, but the women were "light and hollow" and they passed away with no importance in his life; and when he fears he is dying in the hospital there is no one to care about him. He frantically reviews who there might be. He seems not even to have any friends. The only people he can think of are his employees and his servants, and he knows they will not care about him dying. Even his sister would think first of their mother, not of him.

Thus when he wakes up from the operation and finds that he is alive and well in his old hometown with Elsa at his side, he is relieved. The last words of the story say he is "at peace." And yet the very same sentence says that he knew "the measure of his victory and defeat," an odd thing to say if choosing to stay with Elsa in the small town was entirely the right thing to do. Why is it a defeat as well as a victory? Moreover, the use of the word "defeat" reminds the reader of the earlier description of James Rimington the successful businessman as having "bleak, undefeated eyes." As a businessman, James Rimington did not suffer defeat; his life may have been bleak, but it was a life of triumphs. In contrast, James Rimington as the man who stayed in his hometown has in some way been defeated.

It is as if at one level Benét is pushing the reader to think that it is better to renounce the "crooked" world of the John Q. Dixons, as if it is best not to follow the path of ambition, while at the same time the story suggests some dissatisfaction with such a renunciation. In this context, it is interesting to consider the story's title. What are the dreams that are supposed to be ending in this story? On a literal level, the one dream there seems to be is the one about James Rimington pursuing a shady financial career; that is the dream he wakes from at the end of the story. Since that dream ends so badly, with James Rimington dying all alone, uncared for in a hospital bed, one might expect it to be referred to as a nightmare. But the story is not called "Escape from a Nightmare" or even "An End to Bad Dreams." It is "An End to Dreams."

Now, the word "dreams" usually has a positive connotation, and looking closely at what the word might be referring to in this story, the reader is likely to think of dreams of success and ambition. Is that what is ending for James Rimington? But is it an altogether good thing to give up one's dreams and ambitions? Perhaps not. And

perhaps that is why at the end of the story James Rimington feels defeat as well as victory.

Joel Roache, in an article analyzing Benét's works in general, says that in Benét's stories the conflicts "are too easily resolved." That may be true of Benét's other stories, but it does not seem true at all of "An End to Dreams." Here the conflict between big city ambition and small town values remains totally unresolved. The life of ambition seems empty and bleak, but life in a small town, where James Rimington has taken a job in the local bank, seems lacking in achievement. He could have done so much more; in his dream he did do more□but at a price. As he himself says, "You can buy anything there is . . . but you have to pay for it." In this story it seems that the price of success is giving up the comforts of a wife and family. It seems a high price to pay, and yet not to pay it seems a problem. As James Rimington says, speaking as the successful businessman from the middle of the bad dream, staying in the small town and working in the bank, becoming a "settled small-town citizen," would have meant "thirty years of rolling a stone uphill."

The stone reference is an allusion to the ancient Greek myth of Sisyphus. Sisyphus is condemned by the gods to an eternity of rolling a stone up a hill, only to see it roll back down to the bottom as soon as he gets it to the top. The myth is a symbol of futility, and that is how James Rimington sees life as a small-town banker married to Elsa. Of course, that is James Rimington the big-city businessman speaking, and perhaps his view is not to be trusted, but his view is there in the story competing with the view that small-town ways are best.

The two competing views remain unreconciled in this story. Indeed, the choice between them is so stark and absolute that at times there seem to be two James Rimingtons in the story, the one who went off to become a businessman and the one who stayed home. In the middle of the dream, James Rimington thinks, "Suppose you'd stayed in Bladesburg, worn the patched coat? Would you still be James Rimington?" Near the end of the dream, when the dying businessman tries to contact Elsa telepathically, he thinks, "If he could only make her think of him□of him, not merely James Rimington . . ." It is as if there is a "him" separate from James Rimington, a core personality perhaps beneath the successful businessman or a small-town boy different from the businessman.

In any case, what the story presents is two paths so different that to pursue either is to call one's identity into question. To become James Rimington the successful businessman is almost to become a different person from the little boy who lived in Bladesburg and who might have grown up to work in the local bank. Thus in the end the story leaves us with two irreconcilable options, neither of which seems altogether appealing.

Robert Combs, in an article on "The Devil and Daniel Webster, says that the Faustian bargain of selling one's soul to the Devil for material prosperity is Benét's "great theme." It is certainly the theme of "The Devil and Daniel Webster" in a quite literal way. It also is the theme in a figurative sense of "An End to Dreams." But whereas in "Daniel Webster"

it is possible to sell one's soul and somehow get it back, in "An End to Dreams" there is no such possibility.

In "Daniel Webster" and some of the other stories, the world Benét depicts is one in which a person can do some foolish or questionable things and still return to a life of virtue. In "An End to Dreams" there seems to be a brief yearning for such a situation, when the dying James Rimington thinks, "It couldn't be true. James Rimington couldn't be there dying. James Rimington was a boy in a patched coat who meant to grow up and marry Elsa and do all sorts of things."

The trouble is that the boy cannot marry Elsa and also do all sorts of things if those things are supposed to include big city success in the financial world. In this story, the boy can grow up to do one or the other, but not both. It is a sad conclusion, sadder than that in "The Devil and Daniel Webster."

Benét is more optimistic in "Daniel Webster," as he is in "Johnny Pye" and "Doc Mellhorn." In those stories Benét is able to create resolutions, but perhaps they are too easy resolutions as Joel Roache says. As an author Benét had his own choice to make, between suggesting that the pursuit of ambition could be reconciled with family and small-town values and suggesting that there could be no reconciliation between these approaches to life. It is a choice between a perhaps too easy resolution on the one hand and dissatisfaction on the other. In "An End to Dreams," he opted for dissatisfaction.

Source: Sheldon Goldfarb, Critical Essay on "An End to Dreams," in *Short Stories for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Topics for Further Study

Read F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and compare its treatment of the American dream to that of "An End to Dreams."

Imagine a screen version of the story. How would you depict James's dream and the transition into reality?

Investigate Freud's theories on dreams. Is James's dream an illustration of these theories? Explain how they are or are not.

Compare and contrast the subject of success in "An End to Dreams" and "The Devil and Daniel Webster."

Compare and Contrast

1925—1935: After the devastation of World War I, some Americans turn to a pursuit of happiness through the acquisition of wealth. Their extravagant and unchecked spending habits contribute to the economic crisis at the end of the 1920s.

Today: After a decade of unprecedented and unrealistic spikes in the stock market, the Dow dropped considerably in the first years of the twenty-first century. As a result, many who amassed fortunes from employment in the technology sector, found themselves jobless. The market slowly recovered during 2004, but some economists worry that the slow economy will drive it down again.

1925—1935: After a decade of buying on credit in the 1920s, Americans find themselves in the grips of a severe economic depression in the 1930s.

Today: Economic policies, like unemployment compensation, are in place that would prevent the country from falling into a severe depression that would devastate the lives of American citizens as it did in the 1930s. However, suggested changes in Social Security may reduce benefits for Americans.

What Do I Read Next?

"The Devil and Daniel Webster" (1937), one of Benét's most famous stories, focuses on the battle of good and evil in the soul of a Yankee farmer.

F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby* (1925) shares many of the same themes as Fitzgerald's short story "Winter Dreams."

The Sun Also Rises (1926), by Ernest Hemingway, one of Fitzgerald's "lost generation" compatriots, focuses on a group of disillusioned Americans living in Paris after World War I.

Discontented America: The United States in the 1920s (1989), written by David J. Goldberg and published as part of the American Moment series, presents an overview of this decade and focuses specifically on how World War I affected American society.

Further Study

Berman, Ronald, *Fitzgerald, Hemingway, and the Twenties*, University of Alabama Press, 2001.

Berman presents a penetrating analysis of the literary world in the 1920s.

Fenton, Charles A., ed., *Selected Letters of Stephen Vincent Benét*, Yale University Press, 1960.

This collection of Benét's letters catalogues his responses to the political and social climate during his lifetime as well as his theories on writing.

Griffith, John, "Stephen Vincent Benét," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol. 48, *American Poets, 1880—1945, Second Series*, Gale Research, 1986, pp. 9—19.

For those interested in a study of Benét's poetry, Griffith presents a comprehensive examination of his major poems.

Stroud, Parry, *Stephen Vincent Benét*, Twayne, 1962.

This biographical study also includes analyses of Benét's main works.

Bibliography

Benét, Stephen Vincent, "The Devil and Daniel Webster," in *Selected Works of Stephen Vincent Benét*, Vol. 2, Farrar & Rinehart, 1942, pp. 33, 42—43; originally published in the *Saturday Evening Post*, October 24, 1936.

□□□, "Doc Mellhorn and the Pearly Gates," in *Selected Works of Stephen Vincent Benét*, Vol. 2, Farrar & Rinehart, 1942, pp. 418—20; originally published in the *Saturday Evening Post*, December 24, 1938.

□□□, "An End to Dreams," in *First-Prize Stories, 1919—1960*, Hanover House, 1960, pp. 224—25, 228, 229—33; originally published in *Pictorial Review*, February 1932.

□□□, "Johnny Pye and the Fool-Killer," in *Selected Works of Stephen Vincent Benét*, Vol. 2, Farrar & Rinehart, 1942, pp. 90—91, 92—97, 108; originally published in the *Saturday Evening Post*, September 18, 1937.

Bigelow, Gordon, Review of *Stephen Vincent Benét: The Life and Times of an American Man of Letters, 1898—1943*, in *Modern Language Notes*, Vol. 75, No. 1, January 1960, pp. 60—62.

Combs, Robert, "Waking from Nightmares: Stephen Vincent Benét's Faustian America," in *Stephen Vincent Benét : Essays on His Life and Work*, edited by David Garrett Izzo and Lincoln Konkle, McFarland, 2003, p. 163.

Davenport, Basil, "Introduction," in *Selected Works of Stephen Vincent Benét*, Holt, 1966, pp. iv—xii.

Duffus, R. L., "A Benét Anthology, and Three Novels," in the *New York Times*, November 28, 1943, p. 6.

Hemingway, Ernest, epigraph, in *The Sun Also Rises*, Scribner, 1926.

Krutch, Joseph Wood, "Stephen V. Benét and the American Past," in *New York Herald Tribune Books*, June 21, 1942, p. 1.

Norris, Margot, "Modernist Eruptions," in *The Columbia History of the American Novel*, edited by Emory Elliot, Columbia University Press, 1991, pp. 311—30.

Roache, Joel, "Stephen Vincent Benét," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol. 102, *American Short-Story Writers, 1910—1945, Second Series*, edited by Bobby Ellen Kimbel, Gale Research, 1991, pp. 11—19.

Webster, David H., Review, in *College Composition and Communication*, Vol. 12, No. 2, May 1961, p. 125.

Wells, Henry W., "Stephen Vincent Benét," in *College English*, Vol. 5, No. 1, October 1943, pp. 8—13.