The English Pupil Study Guide

The English Pupil by Andrea Barrett

Contents

Introduction

□The English Pupil□ by Andrea Barrett appears in Barrett's highly acclaimed collection of eight stories, *Ship Fever and Other Stories* (1996). Like all the stories in the book, this one is about science and scientists, and it focuses on the Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus (1707-1778). Linnaeus was famous for the innovative way in which he classified and named the three kingdoms of the natural world, animal, vegetable, and mineral. His work marked the dawn of a new era in natural history. Linnaeus also sent many of his pupils on travels all over the world, where they discovered new species, used Linnaeus's methods to classify them, and brought specimens back to Sweden.

□The English Pupil□ is set at Hammarby, Linnaeus's country estate in 1777, when he is old and confused and has only a few weeks to live. He looks back on his life with a mixture of pride and regret. Barrett skillfully distills a wealth of significant historical and scientific facts about Linnaeus and his followers and weaves them into a compelling narrative that explores not only Linnaeus's life and work but also the depth and complexity of the relationships between the old master and his young disciples, many of whom died on their travels.

Author Biography

Nationality 1: American

Birthdate: 1954

Andrea Barrett was born on November 16, 1954, in Boston, Massachusetts, the daughter of Walter Barrett and Jacquelyn Knifong. She grew up on Cape Cod, within walking distance of the ocean and always had a love of the sea.

Barrett did not finish her high school education. In the fall of her junior year, she started applying to colleges, and she left high school at the end of her junior year. She was accepted by Union College in Schenectady, New York, without a high school diploma. Barrett graduated from Union College with a Bachelor of Science degree in biology.

Barrett planned to become a biologist and enrolled in graduate studies in zoology at the University of Massachusetts. But she dropped out during the first semester. Later, she took graduate classes in medieval and Reformation theological history.

It was not until after her formal studies that Barrett started writing. She did not attend any writing school but taught herself how to write fiction through trial-and-error.

Barrett's first novel was *Lucid Stars* (1988), in which she tells the story of the breakup of an American family over a period of twenty years. In her second novel, *Secret Harmonies* (1989), Barrett tells the story of a family in rural western Massachusetts struggling to make sense of their lives.

In *The Middle Kingdom* (1991), Barrett's third novel, an unhappily married American woman on a 1986 visit to Beijing with her husband becomes fascinated with China, makes Chinese friends, and discovers a way to happiness and self-understanding. Barrett's fourth novel, *The Forms of Water* (1993), tells the story of several generations of a family living in upstate New York.

At about the time of the publication of this novel, Barrett had started to teach college creative writing courses. She was reading many short stories, a genre she had always loved, and studying them closely, in addition to reading her students' stories. She wanted to learn how to write short stories herself, and this desire was the origin of her first collection of stories, *Ship Fever and Other Stories*, which was published in 1996. All the stories in the collection, which includes □The English Pupil,□ are about science and scientists. *Ship Fever* won the National Book Award for fiction and put Barrett firmly in the literary limelight.

In 1997, Barrett used a Guggenheim foundation grant to do research for her next novel by traveling to Baffin Island, the largest island in the Canadian Arctic. The resulting novel was *The Voyage of the Narwhal* (1998), the story of a nineteenth-century Arctic expedition that is based on Barrett's historical and scientific research.

Barrett's second collection of stories, *Servants of the Map*, was published by Norton in 2002. It was a Pulitzer Prize finalist in fiction in 2003. In the same year, Barrett received the Award in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

Barrett has taught in the MFA program for writers at Warren Wilson College in Swannanoa, North Carolina; as of 2006, she was teaching at Williams College in Williamstown, Massachusetts.

Married to biologist Barry Goldstein, Barrett enjoys a leisure interest in playing African percussion instruments. In Rochester, New York, where they lived as of 2006, she and her husband played in a local musical group.

Plot Summary

□The English Pupil□ begins outside the town of Uppsala, Sweden, on a very cold late December afternoon in 1777. Carl Linnaeus, the famous naturalist, who is now seventy years old and dying, is riding in a horse-drawn sleigh. He orders his coachman to take him to his country estate, Hammarby, which lies beyond city limits. The coachman agrees only reluctantly, since he has been told by his employers not to take the sleigh outside of the city.

Linnaeus watches the landscape go by and thinks of Lappland, which he had explored when he was in his mid-twenties, learning about the natural world, which had amazed him with its beauty.

Linnaeus has suffered a series of strokes and now his once-famous memory has almost gone. He tends to forget what he is doing and where he is, he cannot remember the names of plants and animals or of places and people. His legs, one arm, his bladder and part of his face are paralyzed. He can barely speak.

When they arrive at Hammarby, Pehr, the coachman, lifts Linnaeus up and carries him into the house. Then he unhitches the horses from the sleigh and shoves the sleigh into the house, near the fireplace. He lifts Linnaeus back into the sleigh and begins to light a fire. Then after Linnaeus gestures toward his tobacco and pipe, Pehr lights the pipe and places it in Linnaeus's mouth. Linnaeus is happy to be at Hammarby; no one but Pehr knows where he is.

Linnaeus remembers his favorite dog, Pompey, who is now dead, and the names of some of his students, those whom he had taught at the university in Uppsala as well as private students who had come to Hammarby. They were of many nationalities, including an Englishman, who, Linnaeus thinks, is □still around.□ He remembers taking the students out to the botanical gardens in the city and keeping them there for twelve or thirteen hours at a stretch.

Pehr interrupts his thoughts, saying that his family will be looking for him. Linnaeus knows this is true and reflects that his family always wants something from him. His wife, Sara Lisa, always told him there was not enough money, and she was worried about their son, Carl Junior, who is lazy, and their three daughters, who need new clothes.

Linnaeus thinks back to his achievements in creating a system for the naming of plants. He had named almost everything, and he had become famous.

A man and a woman arrive at the house. Linnaeus thinks the woman must be his daughter Sophia, and the man may be her husband, although he has no memory of a wedding. The man then introduces himself as Rotheram, one of his pupils. Then Linnaeus's mind seems to wander, and he wonders whether the man is another student, maybe Lofling, or Christopher Ternström, or Hasselquist or Falck.

Sophia says they have been looking everywhere for him, and the young man raises him gently to a sitting position. Linnaeus's mind wanders, and he thinks back to the exploits of several of his pupils, when they and he were young. He imagines the young man is Christopher Ternström, who had sailed to the East Indies and eventually died of a tropical fever on an island off Cambodia. Then he imagines he is Fredrik Hasselquist, who had traveled widely gathering plants and animals and keeping a precise diary, and who had died when he was thirty. He remembers other students also, who had managed to return alive from their travels. He remembers a pupil named Rolander and wonders whether that is the man who is with him now. Rolander had lost his mind in Surinam and had come home with insects and seeds which he claimed to be pearls and which had been mistakenly washed away by the gardener. Linnaeus thinks he is still alive and living in Denmark on charity.

Sophia asks him why he did not come back, and the man asks Pehr how long Linnaeus has been weeping. Linnaeus wonders whether the man is Lofling, who had tutored his son, Carl Junior. Lofling had traveled widely and made a name for himself as a naturalist before dying of fever in Spain.

As Sophia asks her father if he is happy and strokes his hands, he remembers more of his □apostles,□ as he calls them, students who had traveled the world as an extension of himself: □extra eyes and hands and feet, observing, gathering, naming.□

He remembers Pehr Forskal, who traveled to Egypt and made a fine collection of new plants in Cairo; he died of plague in Arabia. He remembers Falck, too, who had traveled to St. Petersburg and beyond. Lonely and depressed in Kazan, he had shot himself.

Outside, it has begun to rain, and the man whom Linnaeus thinks of as Rotheram says they must leave now because the rain is ruining the track.

Linnaeus again remembers the student with a similar name□Rolander, who carried on his research even though on his way to Surinam he had been struck down with dysentery. Linnaeus remembers Kahler and Hasselquist and Pehr Kalm. He remembers the principles on which his system of naming was based and which he had passed on to his pupils. His apostles, he thinks, □had taken wing like swallows, but they had failed to return.□ He had a theory about swallows, that in the winter, they lived below the ice in lakes, waiting for spring. He had argued with a colleague over this theory, and he relishes the fact that he triumphed over all those who had opposed his work.

Linnaeus sees in his mind a group of men on the left of the fire. He thinks they are the students he has previously thought of, but there is another man there as well, whose name was Carl Thunberg. Thunberg had traveled to Japan, where he learned about Japanese flora on the island of Deshima. Thunberg was the pupil who kept in touch with Linnaeus most regularly, sending letters and herbarium specimens home and scrupulously following Linnaeus's methods.

Linnaeus listens as the men standing around him relate some of their stories. Thunberg describes the Japanese people and their gardens; Hasselquist tells him of Palestine;

Lofling describes the tropics, and Forskal describes Alexandria. Falck and Kahler also make remarks. Linnaeus silently conjures up some memories of his own.

Sophia tells him that they must leave now. Linnaeus sees his apostles holding leaves, twigs, and blossoms, all named by them on his advice. They are excitedly exchanging them among themselves. But he notices that Sophia and the English pupil do not notice the men. They are helping Pehr, the coachman, push the sleigh back outside, where a light rain is turning the snow to slush. Pehr douses the fire. The group of pupils looks displeased, and Linnaeus sees them holding the plants he had named for them.

Two sleighs make their way home from the estate. The first is Sophia's borrowed sleigh. In the second, the English pupil joins Linnaeus. In Linnaeus's mind's eye, he sees a third sleigh following them, containing the apostles. Linnaeus looks up at Rotheram and tries to express his grief over those whom death has taken from him, and the anxiety and care that are his present lot. Rotheram tells him to rest; they will be home soon.

Characters

Pehr Artedi

Pehr Artedi was a friend of Linnaeus's youth who became known for his study of fishes. He drowned in a canal in Amsterdam after a night of drinking. Linnaeus edited his book about fish.

Falck

Falck was a Linnaeus apostle. Linnaeus thinks he sees him standing by the fire. Named in the story only by his last name, the historical person was Johann Pehr Falck (1732-1774). Falck traveled to St. Petersburg, Turkistan, and Mongolia. In Kazan, according to Linnaeus's memory, he was lonely and sad and shot himself.

Pehr Forskal

Pehr Forskal (1732-1763) was a Linnaeus apostle who traveled to Alexandria, where, Linnaeus recalls, he concealed himself from marauding Bedouins by dressing as a peasant. Forskal made a collection of new plants in Cairo and traveled to Arabia, where he died of plague. Historically, he is known for being the first man to describe the plant and animal life of the Red Sea. His travel diary has been frequently republished. Linnaeus thinks he sees him standing by the fire at Hammarby.

Fredrik Hasselquist

Fredrik Hasselquist (1722-1752) was one of Linnaeus's apostles. Linnaeus remembers him as modest and poor. Hasselquist traveled widely throughout the Middle East, keeping a precise diary that Linnaeus edited. Hasselquist died in a village near Smyrna, Turkey, when he was thirty. Hasselquist's main interest was in learning about biblical plants and animals. Linnaeus thinks he sees Hasselquist standing by the fire at Hammarby and talking with some of the other apostles.

Martin Kahler

Martin Kahler was a Linnaeus apostle. Linnaeus recalls how Kahler returned from his travels with nothing, his health broken by shipwreck, fever, and poverty. Pirates stole the chest containing his collections.

Pehr Kalm

Pehr Kalm was a Linnaeus apostle. All that Linnaeus remembers of him was that he crossed the Great Lakes and walked into Canada. As a matter of historical fact, Kalm (1716-1779) traveled to North America in 1748. His work included a description of the now extinct passenger pigeon.

Carl Linnaeus

Carl Linnaeus (1707-1778) is the renowned eighteenth-century Swedish botanist. In the story, he is seventy years old and in very poor health, the result of a series of strokes. He is partially paralyzed and can hardly speak, sometimes only able to produce a syllable at a time. His memory is also failing him, and he cannot even be sure that the woman who comes to the house is his own daughter Sophia. He passes the time by reflecting on his achievements and those of his followers, whom he calls his □apostles.□ He recalls when he was a vigorous man of twenty-five, he explored □Lappland□ and was stunned by the beauty of the natural world. He is proud of the fame and honor his work brought him and that he managed to fend off all the attacks that were made on his work. He is also proud of the work of his apostles, but he is conscious that many of them died as a result of the travels that he inspired them to take, and this fact appears to weigh on his mind. He weeps as he recalls them, since almost all of them are dead. But in his wandering mind, he recreates some of them in his imagination, even believing that they are grouped together near the fire in the room in which he is sitting. Linnaeus does not appear to be closely attached to his family, except perhaps for Sophia; he is a man who chose to focus his life on his work rather than his family.

Sara Lisa Linnaeus

Sara Lisa is Linnaeus's wife. Linnaeus remembers how she would complain that there was not enough money to provide for their children. He thinks of her as a practical woman; she also appears to have a bad temper. Pehr fears that she will be angry, and ready to blame him, for the fact that Linnaeus has gone to Hammarby without anyone's knowledge. Linnaeus also thinks that his wife criticizes his every word. He recalls an incident in Sophia's childhood, when she dropped a tray full of dishes and he bought a new set to spare the child her mother's wrath.

Sophia Linnaeus

Sophia is the youngest of Linnaeus's three daughters. He thinks of her as unlike the others, and she is his favorite, with her □fine straight nose, her beautiful eyes.□ He remembers how when she was small he would take her to his lectures, and she would stand between his knees and listen. Sophia arrives at Hammarby with a young man who is probably her husband or fiancé, and they escort Linnaeus home.

Pehr Lofling

Pehr Lofling (1729-1756) was a Linnaeus apostle. Linnaeus recalls Lofling taking dictation from him when he was crippled by gout. Lofling made a name for himself in Spain where he moved in 1751. He then traveled to Venezuela, South America, and from that location, he wrote letters and sent bird specimens to Linnaeus. He died in Venezuela of fever.

Pehr Osbeck

Pehr Osbeck was a Linnaeus apostle who went to China and returned with a huge collection of new plants.

Pehr

Pehr is the coachman who drives Linnaeus in the sleigh to Hammarby. He has a wife and family to support and is worried that he will get into trouble with his employers for taking the sleigh beyond city limits. He is a quiet man who takes great care to look after Linnaeus as well as he can.

Daniel Rolander

Daniel Rolander was one of Linnaeus's apostles. He came back from Surinam with only a pot of Indian fig covered with cochineal insects, which his gardener mistakenly washed away. Rolander had lost his mind in Surinam. He thought the insects were pearls. When Linnaeus pointed out his error, Rolander was angry and left for Denmark, where Linnaeus believes he lives on charity.

Rotheram

Rotheram was Linnaeus's English pupil. Linnaeus thinks the man who arrives with Sophia at Hammarby is Rotheram, although this is probably a delusion of his failing mind. Linnaeus recalls how Rotheram fell ill several years ago, and Sophia nursed him. Rotheram was close to the whole family. Historically, although it is not given in the story, Rotheram was Dr. John Rotheram (1750-1804), an English naturalist. Rotheram was one of only two people present at the death of Linnaeus in 1778. (The other was Samuel Christoffer Duse, Sophia's husband.)

Christopher Ternström

Christopher Ternström was one of Linnaeus's apostles. Linnaeus recalls him as a passionate botanist. Ternström sailed to the East Indies in search of a tea plant and some living goldfish. He died of a tropical fever on an island off Cambodia. Linnaeus

believes that he sees Ternström as one of a group of men standing by the fire at Hammarby. Although the story does not state it, Ternström (1711-1746) was the first of Linnaeus's apostles.

Carl Thunberg

Carl Thunberg was one of Linnaeus's apostles. Thunberg had traveled to Japan and was passionate about learning all he could about Japanese flora. He spread knowledge of Linnaeus's methods amongst the Japanese. Linnaeus remembers that Thunberg introduced into Japan the treatment of syphilis by quicksilver. Linnaeus thinks he sees him standing by the fire and talking with other apostles.

Themes

There are a series of contrasts in the story between age and youth, present and past, death and life. Linnaeus is bitterly and painfully aware of these two sets of opposing realities, and he attempts to bridge the gap between them. The contrasts bring out the irony of Linnaeus's present condition. The aged, decrepit man was once famous for his prodigious memory, and his life's work consisted of naming and classifying things in the natural world. Now his mind is so diminished that he can barely recognize his own daughter and is confused about the identity of her companion. At the height of his powers, Linnaeus was like the Biblical Adam, who gave names to all the animals (Genesis 2:19). To name something is a sign of knowledge and power and is associated also with memory: □Nomenclature is a mnemonic art□; that is to say, it assists the memory. Conversely, to forget and to no longer be able to name things accurately, is a sign of the loss of power and the inability to create order in one's environment.

A sharp contrast is drawn between Linnaeus's aged condition now and the memory of his youthful vigor, when, □wildly energetic,□ he explored the natural beauty of Lappland. In those long-gone days, □with the whole world waiting to be named, he'd believed that he and everyone he loved would live forever.□ The same contrast of age and youth is drawn regarding his apostles, whom he remembers in the fullness of their young manhood, when they went boldly off to explore the distant corners of the globe. The contrast is between the vividness of life in all its exoticism and diversity□the sheer range of the unusual experiences lived by the apostles□and the weak flame that life has become in the old man.

Almost all the apostles are dead, though, a fact that Linnaeus dwells on repeatedly. Contrary to his youthful belief, nothing lives forever, and death is everywhere recalled in this story, not only of humans but also of some of Linnaeus's beloved animals. Pompey the dog, lovingly recalled, is dead. His monkey, Grinn, a present from the queen, is dead, as is Sjup, the raccoon, and the parrot who sat on his shoulder at meals and the weasel who wore a bell on his neck and hunted rats. Linnaeus sits in his kitchen □surrounded by the dead.□ All the dear departed are recalled with a sharpness of detail that eludes Linnaeus in the present. It is as if only the past is real for him now. Because so much has been lost, the present somehow has to be transformed into the past or the past made to live again, to ease his pain. This is why he creates in his imagination a group of the apostles, as they were in life, standing around the fire, and also why his mind leaves his body and seems to become the apostles themselves and re-travel their route: one moment he is Ternström, the next he is Hasselquist. This mind travel is for him a release from the burden of being the great Linnaeus, famous and learned but now half-paralyzed and with his mind fading away. These friendships with his young apostles have meant so much to Linnaeus over the course of his life. The apostles were like extensions of himself, □his own organs: extra eyes and hands and feet.□ This connection suggests an underlying theme of friendship and loyalty in pursuit of mutual goals; the ideal relationship between a teacher and his students that survives in spite of mental incapacity and even death.

Style

The Linnaeus of the story has loved the natural world so much that it has embedded itself in his thinking and the way he uses language. When he expresses his thoughts to himself or when the narrator explains his state of mind, it is through metaphors and similes drawn from the natural world. The erosion of his memory, for example, is conveyed by a metaphor of a gradually expanding dark lake: □His mind, which had once seemed to hold the whole world, had been occupied by a great dark lake that spread farther every day and around which he tiptoed gingerly.□ Similarly, the facts that were once at his command now □darted like minnows across the water and could only be captured by cunning and indirection.□

Because he can no longer recognize people or be fully aware of what is going on around him, Linnaeus has a habit of translating his present experience into images of nature that remain clear to him. The man who accompanies Sophia, for example, bends down to address him □like the moon falling from the sky,□ and when the man□Rotheram or whoever he is□introduces himself, his voice □is like the wind moving over the Lappland hills.□

In a story that focuses so much on death and loss, some of the images convey continuity in nature; the individual may die, but the species lives on, and through their discoveries, the □apostles□ continue to live, also. For example, Pehr Forskal dies of plague, but months later, Linnaeus receives a letter from him containing a stalk and a flower from a tree Linnaeus has always wanted to see, □the evergreen from which the Balm of Gilead was obtained.□ The image suggests resurrection and a kind of immortality for the apostle who sacrificed his life in the pursuit of knowledge. This point is also conveyed by the fact that Linnaeus sees in his mind's eye the apostles holding the plants that he had named for them, including □*Artedia*□ (for Pehr Artedi) and □*Osbeckia*,□ for Pehr Osbeck.

Linnaeus's vision of the apostles standing by the fire indicates that they still live in his mind, and he sees them holding □leaves and twigs and scraps of blossoms, all new and named by them with their teacher's advice.□ Once again, these images drawn from nature suggest rebirth and new life, and they also affirm the eternal bond between teacher and student.

Historical Context

Carl Linnaeus was born in 1707 in Sweden. His father was a Lutheran minister. Even as a child, Linnaeus was interested in botany. At the age of five, he looked after his own garden. As a young man, he studied medicine and natural history at the University of Lund and University of Uppsala, graduating with a degree in medicine from the latter. In 1730, he was appointed lecturer in botany at the University of Uppsala, and two years later he embarked alone on his journey to Lappland in northern Sweden, the natural history of which was almost unknown at the time. This is the trip referred to in □The English Pupil□ and as a result of his published findings, Linnaeus became well known in Sweden. According to Arvid H. J. Uggla, Linnaeus's diary of his Lappland adventure □is one of the treasures of Swedish literature. It shows his brilliant power of quick perception and intuitive description of what he saw.□

Linnaeus's reputation was further established by the publication, with the financial help of the botanist Jan Fredrik Gronovius, of his *Systema Naturae* in 1735, in which he detailed the system he had developed for the classification of plant species. The system was based on the number and arrangement of the plant's reproductive organs; a plant's class was determined by its stamens (male organs), and its order by its pistils (female organs). This system made it easy for newly discovered plants to be placed in a certain category, and it quickly became immensely influential, even though the book amounted to only seven pages in extra large folio. Two years later, in 1737, Linnaeus published his *Genera Plantarum*, which described all the known species of plants.

In 1736, Linnaeus visited England, where he met the leading botanists of the day; he also traveled to Holland and then to Paris. As a result of his travels, he became a well-known figure in European scientific circles. Returning to Sweden in 1738, he practiced medicine with considerable success. In 1739, he was elected the first president of the newly established Academy of Science in Stockholm. In that year also, he married Sara Lisa Moraea, the daughter of a distinguished doctor.

Linnaeus was awarded a professorship at the University of Uppsala, Sweden's most prestigious university, in 1741. His students found him an inspiring teacher and traveled the world researching natural history, bringing back interesting plant specimens to Sweden and promoting Linnaeus's methods of classification internationally. Linnaeus referred to them as his □apostles,□ and many of them were among the leading scientists of the eighteenth century.

Linnaeus remained a teacher for the rest of his life, until ill-health prevented him. He also continued to publish important new works. In 1753, he published *Species Plantarum*, a description of the six thousand species of plants then known. Each species is named as simply as possible, with one word in addition to the generic name. Linnaeus regarded *Species Plantarum* as his greatest achievement.

In 1758, Linnaeus bought a small one-storey house at Hammarby, outside Uppsala. He liked to spend as much time as he could there, away from the bustle of Uppsala. He

built a larger building at Hammarby for the sake of his children's future, which was completed in 1762.

In 1761, Linnaeus was granted a Swedish patent of nobility, and from then on, he was known as Carl von Linné. During his later years, he suffered from ill health and became increasingly pessimistic. His memory began to fail when he was sixty. In 1774, he had a series of strokes, and he died in 1778. His son Carl (the lazy one, according to □The English Pupil□) succeeded to his professorship at Uppsala but had little of his father's ability.

Critical Overview

Reviewers were generous in their praise of Barrett's collection of eight short stories, *Ship Fever and Other Stories* (1996), in which □The English Pupil□ appeared. Donna Seaman in *Booklist* comments that Barrett □has used science as a conduit to understanding the human psyche. . . . [Her] stories are precise and concentrated, containing a truly remarkable wealth of psychology and social commentary.□ The reviewer for *Publishers Weekly* makes a similar point: □The quantifiable truths of science intersect with the less easily measured precincts of the heart in these eight seductively stylish tales.□

For Thomas Mallon, in the *New York Times Book Review*, the figure of Linnaeus hovers over all eight stories as a □kind of muse.□ Mallon points out that in □The English Pupil,□ Linnaeus □still makes use of 'the thread of Ariadne' that he had strung through nature's species□only now it helps his wavering consciousness keep his daughters straight.□ (Mallon is referring to the passage in which Linnaeus thinks of the physical characteristics of his daughters in order to discover that the young woman visiting him is Sophia, who is unlike the others and □seemed to belong to another genus entirely.□)

Lisa Schwarzbaum, who reviewed *Ship Fever and Other Stories* for *Entertainment Weekly* after it was announced that the book had won the National Book Award, also thought that Linnaeus is presented □as a kind of magnetic north to whom all scientists bend.□ She offers the opinion that each of the stories □is intricate and beautifully chiseled; taken together, the tales flow one to the other, linked by the author's fascination with and tender appreciation of science and scientists.□

Her appreciation was shared by the reviewer for the *New Yorker*, for whom □The title novella is devastating: as with every story here, you enter right into it, and cannot entirely leave it behind.□

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Aubrey holds a Ph.D. in English and has published many articles on twentieth-century literature. In this essay, Aubrey discusses the character of Linnaeus and the challenges he faced, as revealed in the story and historical sources, as well as his relations with his apostles.

The writer of any short story about a historical personage is faced with the challenge of deciding at what point in the person's life the story is to take place. Will it be at the time of his or her greatest achievements, for example, or at a time of great controversy or perhaps when the person is old and is looking back at his or her achievements? Andrea Barrett chose the last of these options. Carl Linnaeus died in January 1778, only one month after the time in which the story takes place. Choosing to set the story during that dark time in his life, when Linnaeus was incapacitated by a series of strokes, supplied Barrett with the contrasts and ironies between former greatness and present impotence that make □The English Pupil□ effective. Barrett also packs a great deal of historical detail into her thirteen-page story. As perhaps befits a writer on science and scientists, the facts, incidents, and ideas that the author has Linnaeus recall in the story are historically accurate, and Barrett must have done much research in order to pick out some of the most colorful incidents in his life. Just to give one example, Linnaeus and the hundreds of followers whom he led on walks through the Uppsala countryside really were accompanied by musicians as they returned triumphantly to town. Eventually, as Patricia Fara reports in *Sex, Botany, and Empire: The Story of Carl Linnaeus and Joseph Banks*, the rector of the University of Uppsala banned students from participating in these mass excursions because he thought it encouraged them to neglect their duties.

In packing her story so densely, Barrett drops a number of clues to the kind of man Linnaeus was and the challenges he faced. His description of nature as □an alphabet written in God's hand,□ and the motto inscribed over his bedroom door, □Live blamelessly; God is present,□ suggest a man imbued with a deeply religious spirit. This was indeed the case. As the son of a Lutheran country pastor, Linnaeus took his religion seriously, and his beliefs were in keeping with the spirit of the eighteenth century. He believed that the natural world was created by God and that every creature in the mineral, vegetable, and animal kingdoms had its fixed place in the chain of being, from the simplest of organisms up to the highest expression of life, the human being. Linnaeus had a literal belief in the Biblical account of creation in Genesis and thought that the Garden of Eden had been a small island at the equator on which all the world's plant species had been present. In the botanical gardens that he cultivated at Uppsala, his aim was to recreate the order and plenitude of that original divine garden, a paradise on Earth. Linnaeus, it must be remembered, lived a hundred years before Charles Darwin published *The Origin of Species* (1859), which put forth Darwin's theory of the origin and evolution of species through natural selection, which would bring into question the notion of a stable, fixed natural order created by a beneficent God.

Given the religious framework of Linnaeus's beliefs, his skill as a classifier, and his choice of profession, it is perhaps not surprising that he thought of himself, as Heinz Goerke points out in his biography of the naturalist, as a □second Adam,□ a man charged by God with the naming of the three kingdoms of nature and classifying each one according to its natural hierarchy. Perhaps unsurprising also is the fact that although Linnaeus believed in the omnipotence of God and offered up the praise of a humble worshipper, there was more than a trace of arrogance in his convictions about his own role in the divine plan. He believed he had been specially appointed by God to fulfill a mission. Goerke states:

In no other naturalist of the period does the conviction of being the Lord's elect, predestined of God, find such clear expression. For this reason, he felt sure that none of his colleagues could equal him in science, let alone excel him; to him only this task had been given.

As the story makes clear, Linnaeus had his enemies, those who attacked his work, and perhaps it was the arrogance of the man, his □autocratic procedure in the matter of nomenclature,□ as Goerke puts it, that irked his opponents as much as what they claimed was the unnatural and arbitrary manner of his sexual system of plant classification. A picture emerges in □The English Pupil□ of a man proud of his success and his fame□his pride is obvious in his story of how the king of England built a garden called Kew and named each plant according to Linnaeus's system□and also ready to do battle with his opponents. Recalling the disagreement he had had with an English naturalist over his theory that swallows wintered beneath the lakes, Linnaeus remembers, □But always there had been people . . . who criticized his every word. He had fought off all of them. The Queen had ennobled him: he was Carl von Linné now.□

Most of Linnaeus's opponents were foreigners; in Sweden, he was an honored man and had no serious rivals. Although he apparently dreaded public quarrels, Linnaeus knew how to take care of himself in these intellectual conflicts, and at times, he could not only be unreasonable but also vindictive and sly. When one contemporary, a man named Johan Georg Siegesbeck, from St. Petersburg, criticized his system of naming plants, Linnaeus retaliated by naming a particularly unpleasant weed, Sigesbeckia. When Lorenz Heister, a professor of medicine and botany, attacked Linnaeus's system in letters and articles, Linnaeus gradually removed his name from the later editions of his botanical works.

But it is with Linnaeus's pupils, and his relationship with them, that the story is principally concerned. Historically, it was in 1750 that Linnaeus first described the students he dispatched to distant parts of the world as his □apostles.□ The term indicated that he saw their work as a missionary one. They were to take direction from him, follow his system, and make his name famous as they collected and documented the natural world as they encountered it. Scholars of Linnaeus consider the work of his apostles, since he directly inspired them all, to be part of his life's achievement.

There were seventeen Linnaeus apostles (some sources say the number was nineteen), and they traveled to all the continents. Their destinations included Arabia,

China, Southeast Asia, Japan, Australia, the Arctic, and North and South America. There was plenty of work to do, since in the mid-eighteenth century, only one tenth of the plants and animals in the world were known.

Linnaeus benefited greatly from the work of his apostles. Pehr Kalm, for example, in his work in North America, especially Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York, and Canada, discovered many new plants and informed Linnaeus of his work, greatly increasing Linnaeus's knowledge. Linnaeus's book, *Species Planatarum* (1753), listed more than seven hundred North American species, ninety of them discovered by Kalm.

Many of these adventurous young naturalists, as □The English Pupil□ makes clear, met early deaths as a result of their brave exploration of unknown lands. Some of them regretted their choice of work, and as Goerke notes, Fredrik Hasselquist reportedly cursed his teacher for starting him out on such a hazardous career. Linnaeus was also, according to Goerke, reproached by the wife of Christopher Ternström, who claimed that Linnaeus had lured her husband away from her and made her a widow.

The poignancy of the story lies in Linnaeus's sorrow and possible feelings of guilt over the fate of so many of his apostles. Has he lived blamelessly, as the inscription above his door commands him to? Only he knows. Certainly, he knows how much he owes to the apostles. At Uppsala, he remembers, his pupils would sit and listen to him lecture about the specimens they had discovered and brought home. Linnaeus may be known and revered for his vast knowledge of □Fossils, crystals, the causes of leprosy and intermittent fever,□ as well as exotic creatures and plants such as the mud iguana of Carolina and Siberian buckwheat and bearberries, but □all these things he had known about because of his pupils' travels.□

From the evidence of the story, the bond between master and disciple was a deep one. Linnaeus still believes that he and the disciple Thunberg (whom he imagines is in the room with him) share an intimacy that only they can understand. (They exchange a secret signal, or so Linnaeus thinks.) The naturalist seems to have thought of many of the apostles as his own family. When he thinks of the death of his two-year-old son, Johannes, he places it by remembering the deaths of Hasselquist and Lofling that took place immediately before and after.

It is this awareness of loss, rather than the triumph of his many accomplishments, that weighs most heavily upon Linnaeus at the end of the story. Indeed, his final words, which are, with the exception of one word uttered earlier, the only words of his that appear in quotation marks in the entire story, are full of despair: □The death of many whom I have induced to travel has turned my hair gray, and what have I gained? A few dried plants, accompanied by great anxiety, unrest, and care.□

But the final note is a compassionate and moving one. Rotheram, the English pupil, says to the old man, □Rest your head on my arm. We will be home before you know it.□ The image of the old master resting his head on the arm of the disciple is an affirmation of the bond of affection between Linnaeus and all the apostles, living and dead. It also suggests the continuity of the scientific enterprise, the transmission of

knowledge from one generation to the next. Individuals may die, but the quest for knowledge and understanding of the natural world goes on.

Source: Bryan Aubrey, Critical Essay on □The English Pupil,□ in *Short Stories for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Topics for Further Study

Collect four or more flowers or plants, identify them, and research how and why they acquired their names. Make a class presentation in which you show the plants, identifying them according to Linnaeus's method and discussing your findings.

Read Barrett's story □Rare Bird,□ in *Ship Fever and Other Stories*, which centers on Linnaeus's theory that swallows hibernate under water. How does this story complement □The English Pupil□? What more does it tell the reader about Linnaeus, the scientific method, and the role of women in science? Make a class presentation in which you summarize the story and explain its relevance to □The English Pupil□ and the history of science.

Research the current debate between the theories of evolution and creationism. What are the main arguments on each side? On which side of the debate do you think Linnaeus would stand? Should creation science and evolution both be taught in public schools? Form a team with two or more students and debate the issue.

What is science? What is the scientific method? How does the story illustrate the scientific method? Is science the most useful and reliable way of gaining knowledge? Research two major scientific discoveries that have changed our understanding of the world in which we live or which have greatly benefited human life. Write an essay in which you describe your findings.

Compare and Contrast

Eighteenth century: This is a time of political turmoil for Sweden. In 1718, following the death of King Charles XII and defeat in battle, Sweden is forced to give up almost all its overseas possessions. Up to that point, it had been a formidable military power. Sweden then establishes a parliamentary government and drastically reduces the power of the monarch. This period, from 1718 to 1772, is known as the age of liberty. Natural science, culture, and the Swedish economy flourish in the longest period of peace Sweden has known since the second half of the sixteenth century.

Today: Sweden is a liberal parliamentary democracy that has created a high standard of living for its citizens by adopting a mixed system of high-tech capitalism and extensive welfare benefits. Timber, hydropower, and iron ore are the most important elements in the economy, which depends heavily on foreign trade.

Eighteenth century: Beginning in 1741, Linnaeus is responsible for the Uppsala University Botanical Garden. Under Linnaeus's influence, the garden houses more varieties of plants than any garden in the world. Linnaeus uses the garden for his scientific observations and for teaching his students.

Today: The Linnaeus' Garden at Uppsala is a reconstruction of Uppsala University Botanical Garden as it was during Linnaeus's days. It contains approximately 1,300 species of plants and is arranged according to Linnaeus's own plan that reflects his sexual system of classification. The marsh pond contains the flower named after Linnaeus, Linnaea borealis.

Eighteenth century: During this period, known as the Age of Enlightenment because of the dominant belief in the power of reason to improve the lot of humanity, naturalists believe that the world was created by God and is under His beneficent supervision. Although Linnaeus accepts that new species of plants have appeared as a result of hybridization, he believes that all species were potentially present from the beginning, in the Garden of Eden.

Today: The theories of evolution and natural selection put forward by Charles Darwin in the nineteenth century remain profoundly influential for modern naturalists. Naturalists still continue Linnaeus's practice of classification of species, and much of his system remains in use, but the emphasis is on the evolutionary rather than fixed relationships between different groups of organisms.

What Do I Read Next?

Like Barrett's story, Gjertrud Schnackenberg's poem □Darwin in 1881,□ which can be found in her *Supernatural Love: Poems 1976-1992* (2000), examines the mind of a great scientist as his life draws to a close. Also like the story, the poem interweaves past and present as Darwin looks back on his life. He does not view it with any sense of accomplishment.

Barrett's novel *Voyage of the Narwhal* (1998) begins in May 1855, when the *Narwhal* sails from Philadelphia to the Arctic in search of a long-lost expedition. On board is the naturalist Erasmus Darwin Wells, who sees this voyage as a chance to make his reputation. The voyage does not go according to plan, and by September, the ship is ice-locked and will have to see out the winter in the Arctic. As the weather worsens, morale sinks. The well-researched story has many twists and turns and is full of memorable characters.

Dr. Copernicus (reprint, 1993), by John Banville, is a historical novel based on the life of the astronomer Nicolas Copernicus (1473-1543), who asserted that the Earth is not the center of the universe. The novel explores the effect this major discovery, which permanently altered the way humans viewed God, the world, and themselves, had on Copernicus and the Catholic Church.

QED: A Play (2002), by Peter Parnell, is an exploration of the life of twentieth-century physicist Richard Feynman. Like □The English Pupil□ and □Darwin in 1881,□ the play is set near the end of its subject's life, when Feynman has just realized that he has terminal cancer. The play, which was a hit on Broadway, captures Feynman's lively personality and explores the ideas that won him the Nobel Prize in physics.

The Museum of Paleontology at the University of California, Berkeley, maintains a webpage at http://www.ucmp.berkeley.edu/history/linnaeus.html that includes a biography of Linnaeus, an explanation of his scientific thought, and many links to other relevant websites, including sites on which Linnaeus's botanical garden and his manor home and garden at Hammarby (the setting for □The English Pupil□) can be viewed.

Further Study

Blunt, Wilfred, *The Compleat Naturalist: A Life of Linnaeus*, Viking Press, 1971.

In this comprehensive, well-illustrated biography, Blunt captures Linnaeus's passion for his work and shows how his system was used by naturalists all over the world and was the foundation of modern botanical science. An appendix on Linnaean classification provides a basic survey of his work.

Farber, Paul Lawrence, *Finding Order in Nature: The Naturalist Tradition from Linnaeus to E. O. Wilson*, Johns Hopkins Introductory Studies in the History of Science series, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000.

Farber examines the contributions of a variety of scientists to classifying and systematizing the natural world. He covers thinkers such as Nicholas Baudin, Julian Huxley, Charles Lucien Bonaparte, Stephen Jay Gould, and Edward O. Wilson. He also argues that the work of cataloging the natural world remains vital today as biodiversity shrinks.

Hawks, Ellison, *Pioneers of Plant Study*, 1928, reprint, Books for Libraries Press, 1969.

The focus of this volume is biographical and historical. Hawks explores how knowledge of plants has been gained through the ages, from ancient Egypt to the end of the nineteenth century. One chapter (pp. 232-38) is devoted to Linnaeus.

Koerner, Lisbet, *Linnaeus: Nature and Nation*, Harvard University Press, 1999.

In this scholarly biography, Koerner draws on letters, poems, notebooks, and secret diaries to tell the story of Linnaeus's life. It is an engaging, sometimes amusing, and also tragic portrait.

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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.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. “Margaret Atwood’s “The Handmaid’s Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,” Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9–16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133–36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. “Richard Wright: “Wearing the Mask,” in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69–83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59–61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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