Exchanging Glances Study Guide

Exchanging Glances by Christa Wolf

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Introduction

"Exchanging Glances", or "Blickwechsel," as it is known in the original German, was first published in Germany in 1974 in a collection titled *Gesammelte Erzahlungen.* The story appeared in English translation in 1993 in a collection named after and including Christa Wolf s most controversial novella, *What Remains and Other Stories.* In "Exchanging Glances," Wolf began to explore her memories of her childhood and the effects that World War II had on her and her view of the world.

The story's German perspective is unique for most American and western European readers. The events that the narrator recalls in the story take place in the closing days of World War II when Hitler's regime was collapsing and Russia's Red Army was marching through what is now Poland, where Wolf and her family had lived. She recounts watching American planes strafe the ragged columns of German families attempting to move to safety; hearing the news of Hitler's death; and watching Polish hired men abandon their oxcarts and turn back the other way. But the most chilling of all her memories, and the moment that gives the story its title, is the encounter the fleeing families have with liberated survivors of concentration camps. Wolf's courageous portrayal of the complex emotions of the moment—and the memory—explains why she is regarded as one of the most important German writers of her generation.

Author Biography

Wolf was born Christa Ihlenfeld on March 18, 1929, in the village of Landsberg an der Warthe (now the Polish city of Gorzow Wielkopolski). After attending school in Landsberg, Wolf fled with her family, which consisted of her parents, who were grocers, and younger brother, to Mecklenberg in 1945, when Russia's Red Army invaded her homeland during the final months of World War II. Having been born too late to be implicated in the horrors of Hitler's regime, Wolf has remained in Germany her entire life, and was a resident and supporter of East Germany's Socialist regime until the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. When she was studying German literature at universities in Jena and Leipzig, Wolf met and married fellow student and writer Gerhard Wolf. Their two daughters were born in 1952 and 1956.

Wolf published her first major work in 1961. Her reputation continued to grow both in Germany and outside of it when her next two books were translated into English. She won numerous prizes, was allowed extensive foreign travel (a rarity for East German citizens at that time, especially intellectuals), and saw many of her books translated into other languages and made into films.

Though her work had always been somewhat autobiographical and had relied on historical materials, the publication of *The Search for Christa T.* in English in 1971 (originally published in Germany in 1968) began a more controversial phase of her career. Though a believer in socialism's potential to deliver equality and justice, Wolf was becoming increasingly skeptical of the East German government' s ability to live up to its promise. In *The Search for Christa T.,* however, Wolf became more openly critical. In the words of critic Gail Finney, the first person narrative "unmistakably criticizes the state's molding of a human being according to its conformist precepts." Nevertheless, by 1976 Wolf had become a member of the executive committee of the state-sponsored Writers' Union.

However, with the publication of her novella *What Remains and Other Stories* in Germany in 1990, Wolf's career became even more controversial. In this autobiographical story, a woman writer describes the experience of being watched by the Stasi, East Germany's notorious secret police. Published a year after the fall of the Berlin Wall, though written in 1979, the story attracted criticism from all sides. She was accused of sentimentality, of trivializing the very real suffering of many victims of the secret police, and of cowardice and opportunism for releasing the book after it no longer posed any danger to her. She was also criticized for living her entire life in Socialist East Germany and for not leaving in protest like so many other intellectuals and artists of her generation. "Exchanging Glances" and six other short stories, and the novella were collected in a single volume published in English as *What Remains and Other Stories* in 1993.

Wolf continues to make her home in Berlin. Her most recent book is a rewriting of the ancient story of Medea, published in an English translation in 1998. She is widely considered the most well-known living writer of the new unified Germany.

Plot Summary

Taking Flight

"Exchanging Glances" takes place in the German countryside in the spring of 1945, in the final days of World War II. The narrator, who occasionally interrupts the story to comment on her own memories, recalls her family's experiences as refugees forced to leave their homes—in what is now part of Poland—to make new lives in the Western part of the country.

In the first part, the young narrator and her family are in a group with other refugee families. The narrator's family includes herself, her younger brother, mother, uncle, aunt, grandmother, and grandfather. They have loaded all the possessions that they could onto a handcart, which they have to push and pull themselves. The story opens with the narrator, now an adult, remembering the moment when the SS officer (Nazi soldier) told her family that they had to leave or risk capture by the "Asian hordes," or Russians. The narrator remembers her grandmother's reluctance to leave and her mother's despair, but she also recalls her own unusual reaction: ' T am shaken with laughter, the impropriety of which I find deeply offensive."

After dark, the family is led by a man named Kalle to a corner of the stable on an estate owned by Herr and Frau Volk. The Volk' s property and aristocratic status does not protect them from the advancing army, and they too join the column of refugees.

The narrator's uncle hires on to drive Herr Volk's oxcart so that the family doesn' t have to pull its own cart.

Buried Memories

The second part of "Exchanging Glances" opens with the adult narrator commenting on the problem and process of memory. She had intended the story to be "about *liberation,"* she says, and expected that writing it would be simple. "The machine will start running, and everything will appear on paper as if of its own accord—a series of accurate, highly defined pictures." But memory is imperfect and selective, especially when it deals with experiences of fear and trauma. The narrator realizes that she must "accept that the series of images [that she can recall] will not add up to anything." Instead of the transparent story that she had hoped to tell, the narrator offers several scenes that she remembers from those days with her family: the death of Wilhelm Grund, the frightened horses, the wounded ox, and the faces of the American pilots as they fly overhead.

A Country's Shame

The third and final section of the story describes the moments when the narrator exchanged glances with concentration camp survivors—people who have experienced the war differently than she has. She has these insights into alternative perspectives in the moments following the German surrender and the death of Hitler. She learns of Hitler's death from a soldier who is nonchalantly washing up at a pump and is amazed to see that the world does not seem permanently altered by the sentence, "The Fuhrer is dead."

The narrator sees a large group of concentration camp survivors, a surprising and disturbing sight. Despite their ragged condition, the prisoners of war look to the narrator as if they are coming to "take revenge." Imagining that the former prisoners will "seize hold of the flour and sausage we just snatched," the narrator is frightened and horrified in contemplating her complicity in the atrocity:

"And to my horror I felt, it is just, and I was horrified to feel that it was just, and knew for a fraction of a second that we were guilty. I forgot it again."

The narrator realizes that the world in which she has lived for the past six years "had truly turned topsy-turvy." Herr Volk's servant, Kalle, is yelling at him. The Poles are shouting with joy, "free to express their emotions," while the narrator and her family, representing the defeated Germany, are excluded from the celebrations and hide their feelings inside themselves. The story ends with a chilling scene in which a concentration-camp survivor joins the family by their fire that evening and asks them, "Where, then, have you lived all these years?"

Characters

Brother

The narrator's younger brother does not play much of a role in the story but is part of her memories of a happy childhood before the war and Germany's defeat.

Grandfather

The narrator's grandfather is also with the narrator and her family. In the absence of the narrator's father, who, if the family represented in the story is indeed drawn from Wolf s own life, is in a Russian prisoner of war camp, the grandfather becomes the man responsible for providing food and shelter and safety for the family.

Grandmother

The narrator's grandmother accompanies the narrator and her mother and brother. It's the grandmother's inappropriate shoes that the narrator remembers, but she also wonders why she'd recall her grandmother so vividly since "during her lifetime she was never pushy."

Kalle

Kalle is a peasant who works for Herr Volk and who directs the narrator's family to a place to sleep in the stable. He is described as not quite right in the head and is likely an alcoholic. He hires the narrator's uncle to drive Herr Volk's oxcart, which allows the family to ride rather than walk.

Mother

This character is the narrator's mother although it is unclear whether she is daughter or in-law to the grandparents. She is reluctant to leave the family's home for the dangerous and uncertain status as refugees. She is torn between her ties to her past and her need to protect her children and provide them with some sort of a future. According to the young narrator, her mother is "forever disappearing when it's time to move on; she wants to go back and must go on."

Narrator

The narrator is a German woman in 1970 who recalls the spring of 1945, when she was sixteen and she and her family fled their home in front of the advancing Red Army. The

narrator appears in the story as both the young girl and as the 41-year-old who is remembering the events of those days. From her perspectives both in 1945 and in 1970, she is trying to make sense of the war and its impact on her and her family. Using the child's perspective, the more mature narrator is able to express the complex emotions she and her fellow Germans felt when Hitler was killed and the Third Reich was defeated.

Frau Volk

Frau Volk is married to Herr Volk. The narrator notices her condescending ways and does not like her because she calls her by her first name and because she pampers her pet dog while the rest of them are struggling to find enough to eat.

Herr Volk

Herr Volk is a wealthy landowner who nevertheless must also flee with the rest of the refugees. The narrator remembers that he was dressed in fancy hunting clothes for the occasion.

Themes

Perspective

"Exchanging Glances" is unique in its presentation of a view of World War II from a young German girl's perspective. Most accounts of the war in English and American literature narrate events from an Anglo-American point of view and characterize the German people as ruthless at worst and ignorant at best. Wolf presents the last days of the war through the eyes of a child, but even the young narrator realizes she must share some of the guilt for the atrocities committed by Nazi Germany.

What is unusual about Wolf's story, however, is that the narrator's perspective changes over time. In fact, as critic Gail Finney points out, another meaning of the story's title is "change of perspective." What the story suggests, Finney continues, is that "one's perspective on the events narrated is as important as the events themselves." Specifically, according to Finney, the narrator's perspective changes as she matures. The narrator thinks about the span of time between the beginning and end of the war and declares, "In those six years I had stopped being a child."

The narrator's perspective on the events and causes of the war changes as a result of her maturing. In the final weeks and days of the war, when the action of the story takes place, the narrator is forced to come to terms with the realization that the definition of who is right and who is wrong is not as clear as she once thought it was. Finally, at the end of the story she recognizes that as Germans, she and her family now occupy a subordinate position to those they once scorned. In the final scene of the story, the narrator sees the American soldiers arm in arm with German girls and knows that the order of her world is permanently changed.

Death

The threat of death hangs over the narrator of "Exchanging Glances" throughout the story. Because the story takes place during a war, this threat is not unusual. What is notable about the theme of death in Wolf's story is that it cannot be simply understood as the inevitable result of armed conflict. In the narrator's initial encounter with death, she is forced to see "her first corpse at the age of sixteen," which is "rather late for those years." Nevertheless, the narrator is deeply affected by Wilhelm Grund's death.

Wilhelm Grund, father of Gerhard (who is the same age as the narrator), is killed by gunfire from low-flying American planes that have attacked the column of retreating refugees. His death serves no heroic purpose in the larger framework of the war, and the narrator is unnerved by its randomness:

"Chance had it that Wilhelm Grund was lying there instead of me, for pure chance alone had occupied my uncle with a sick horse in the barn that morning, so that we weren't

ahead of the others heading toward the country road alongside Grund's oxcart as usual."

After the families bury Grund hastily and unceremoniously, Herr Volk tries to comfort Gerhard by reassuring him that his "father died a soldier's death." Though it's unclear whether this reasoning convinces Gerhard, it definitely does not convince the narrator. "It wasn't the way a soldier's death had been described in the textbooks and newspapers," she muses, and concludes that "a man and a father of four children did not deserve such an end as this." In other words, Wilhelm Grund's meaningless death is at odds with "the ideal of death for Fuhrer and Reich," in which she's been taught to believe.

Style

The narrative technique that Wolf uses in "Exchanging Glances" is called meta-narration. Through this literary device, the narrator both tells the story and also comments on how she tells the story. Critic Margit Resch writes that Wolf is "unusually self-conscious, even for a writer," and this tendency toward self-reflection emerges in her fiction. Early in the story, she tells readers that the details about her grandmother's sweater and button-up boots are memories from "that April day I have chosen to recall here." But memory is imperfect, and the writer's task, Wolf suggests, is to subject the process of recollection to an ongoing critique. Wolf's position, according to Resch, is that "literature should articulate the author's experience as truthfully and precisely as possible." In her fiction, Wolf relies on her memory "to retrieve stories, characters, historical context, physical setting, and language." But her use of meta-narration takes her beyond autobiography. "During this retrieval," Resch explains, Wolf "simultaneously submits everything to a rigorous analysis."

Historical Context

It is often said of Christa Wolf that she is a writer who has lived in three different Germanies. She was a child in Nazi Germany and a teenager at the end of the war when the events in "Exchanging Glances" take place. During most of her adult life, she lived in Socialist East Germany and since 1989 has resided in the new, unified democratic Germany.

Wolf is too young to have been a full participant in the political or cultural life in Nazi Germany and, therefore, has escaped the pressures to justify her work that writers a decade or two older than she have had to do. She has spent most of her career, except for a few residencies abroad, living and writing in socialist East Germany, and it is in this unique historical context that her work should be understood.

When Nazi Germany surrendered to Allied forces in 1945, Germany was in ruins. It was also at the mercy of the political aspirations of the two major powers that emerged from the war: the United States and the Soviet Union. When Germany divided into two separate nations four years after the war, each side of the Berlin wall developed in entirely different economic, political, and cultural directions. While the democratic Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany), under the control of the United States and its western allies, quickly regained economic strength and cultural vigor, the socialist, Soviet-controlled German Democratic Republic (East Germany) moved in an entirely different direction. Despite having the most robust economy of all the eastern bloc nations, the citizens of East Germany for decades lived with shortages of basic goods and severe restrictions on their personal liberties.

For writers and other artists, the choice was clear: live in exile in the West, face persecution for creating truthful work, or censor creative work so that it did not criticize the regime. Wolf has often been criticized for not speaking out against the repressive government and for benefiting personally and professionally from favors from communist leaders. In the words of reviewer Peter Demetz, Wolf "felt it made more sense to go on hoping for change than to leave," as did many of her socialist colleagues, and to "raise her voice, however quietly, instead of silencing herself in a self-destructive head-on clash with the authorities."

Critical Overview

"Exchanging Glances" got very little attention from critics when the English translation of *What Remains and Other Stories* appeared in 1993. The reasons for this have more to do with politics than literature. The eight pieces in *What Remains* represent nearly thirty years of Wolf s writing, and all but the title story had been published thirteen years earlier in German. The English translation included the controversial, and most recently written, title story, "What Remains."

This story stirred controversy in the West because of its depiction of a writer who discovers that her "apartment is shadowed by three frankfurter-munching members of the secret police," in the words of book reviewer Peter Demetz, writing in a review for the *New York Times.* Summarizing the reaction to the story, Demetz goes on to say that "it was certainly legitimate to ask whether Ms. Wolf was ill-advised to publish the story at the time when many brutal facts about life in the East came to light." The controversy only worsened when Wolf revealed in an interview with a Berlin newspaper that she had once been an informant for the secret police. Later in his review, Demetz devotes one sentence to praising "Exchanging Glances" as his favorite story in the collection, and gives the rest of the space to a discussion of Wolf's political affiliations and how that affects her literary legacy.

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Piedmont-Marton has a Ph.D. in English. She teaches in a college in Texas and writes frequently about the modern short story. In this essay, Piedmont-Marton discusses the way memory works in Wolf's highly autobiographical story.

"Exchanging Glances" is a story drawn from the narrator's childhood memories, and yet it's also a story about the partiality and fallibility of memory. Wolf's powerful story about her family's experience as refugees at the end of World War II is fashioned from memory, but it is also a critique and an interrogation of the way memory shapes history and self-knowledge. At intervals in the story, the narrator intrudes to comment on the limits of her ability to remember the events of so many years ago.

Readers have their first indication that memory is problematic in "Exchanging Glances" when they read the first words of the story: "I've forgotten." Though it's a trivial thing that she's forgotten— what dress her grandmother is wearing on a particular day—the narrator seems to want to prove the reliability of her memory to convince her readers of her credibility. She goes on to demonstrate that although what her grandmother wore that one time is lost to her, she remembers "all her dresses" and proceeds to catalog them along with the occasions when they were worn: "the brown one with the crocheted collar, which she wore on Christmas and all family birthdays." The effect of this juxtaposition of forgetting and remembering, of the display of memory's prowess and its failing, is to warn readers that memory is an untrustworthy but necessary guide to the past.

The narrator further complicates the notion of memory when she claims that the images she has been portraying of her grandmother in her "little button-up boots," perched "on the edge of an airraid cot," all belong to a single day in April she has *chosen* to recall in this story. The narrator's assertion that she has memory under her control, that she can summon its powers for precise purposes and silence its urgings when she wishes, is at odds with her portrayal of memory as inexact and fickle. If it's possible to choose to remember something, can one also choose not to remember? In this way, the narrator is attempting to demonstrate her mastery over memory and to solicit readers' trust in her ability to accurately describe the events of that time in her life. Using rich and precise details, like her grandfather's "cap with earflaps and a herringbone jacket," the narrator dramatizes the virtuosity of memory properly harnessed and controlled. "Now I can see them clearly," she says, referring to the image of her younger self and her family.

By the end of the first section of "Exchanging Glances," the narrator's display of mastery over her memory falters. What disturbs the flow of images from the past is her growing sense of her own divided consciousness. She recalls the time when "someone inside me said slowly and clearly, You'll never see this again." Describing her experience as if she can stand outside herself, she can "watch the ebb and flow of rumors and hopes swell and fall." Finally, she vividly portrays the consequences of fragmented consciousness in terms of a self divided against itself: "But the stranger in me ate at my insides and grew, and possibly he would soon refuse to obey in my stead." If the

connection between the "I" who is the narrator and the "I" who is the character is not continuous, then how can memory be trusted to faithfully narrate the events of those weeks? Precisely when readers may be beginning to question the credibility of the narrator's memory, she interrupts the story to comment on the limits of memory and the story's construction.

In the second part of "Exchanging Glances," the narrator interweaves memories from her family's time with the refugee caravan with a commentary on memory itself. In a gesture reminiscent of the story's opening words, "I've forgotten," the narrator confesses that she has been unable to do what she set out to do. "This is supposed to be a report on *liberation,*" she concedes, but other stories intruded and memory fails to deliver on its promise. Instead of finding the story of the hour of liberation "ready and waiting, fully completed in her memory," the narrator retrieves only bits and pieces and gets sidetracked by details such as the clothes her grandmother was wearing. This technique of addressing the reader directly and commenting on the making of the story is what critics call meta-narration style. In this section, the narrator appeals to the reader by arguing that she has tried to remember in good faith, that the twenty-five years since the events "should surely have erased, or at least faded" the reasons to lie. Her intentions are true, in other words, even when the mechanisms of memory and narrative do not work the way she had hoped and expected.

Memory, like human experience itself, is not as neat and organized and explainable as she had hoped. It is not a "machine" she can "start running, and everything will appear on the paper as if of its own accord"—a series of accurate, highly defined pictures." Since "memory is not a photo album," the narrator acknowledges that she'll need to search "for a new approach, which only succeeds in bringing one a little closer and no more." What follows in the remainder of the second part, then, are the twin vignettes of the death of Wilhelm Grund and his son's grief, and the injuring and then killing of one of the family's oxen.

Having already confessed that she has no dominion over memory, the narrator has given herself permission to present these stories side by side and to show how, in the confusion of that traumatic time, people displayed more emotion toward the dead ox than the dead human being. She remembers feeling guilty when she looked at the animal, but can't remember why. Her grandfather "who had stood silently alongside the dead Wilhelm Grund" is inconsolable and furious about the ox. If memory were a machine, if it were always possible to choose what to remember and what to forget, then maybe the story wouldn't unfold this way, the narrator seems to suggest, and she wouldn't have to relive it and readers would not have to witness it.

In the third and final section of "Exchanging Glances," the narrator tries once again to describe the elusive experience of liberation. No longer making any grand claims for the powers of memory or the cohesiveness of her own experience, she promises only to "record what today's memory is prepared to yield on the subj ect." What memory offers up in this section is the story of how "liberation" feels to those who are not freed, but vanquished. The narrator's experience of the day in May 1945 when Germany surrendered is one of deep moral ambiguity and confusion in a world that "had truly

turned topsy-turvy." Watching the freed prisoners of war approach, she fears they'll take revenge on her and her family. The narrator also recognizes for a moment that it would be just if they did, and "knew for a fraction of a second that we were guilty." When she then says, "I forgot it again," readers may question what it means to forget. Does one choose to forget? Is it an act of will or an accident of fate? How can she remember that she forgot? Is that the same thing as remembering? This sentence has powerful resonance because the narrator has foregrounded the problem of memory by disrupting the narrative and calling attention to its unreliability.

By making memory as much the subject as the source of her story about her own traumatic experiences as a German teenager in the final weeks and days of World War II, Wolf is able to lend authenticity and emotional credibility to the fragmented, partial and sometimes inexplainable scenes that she remembers. Ultimately, the story of "liberation" escapes her grasp, but it does so for reasons not available to her at the beginning of the story. She cannot tell the story of liberation not because she cannot remember but because she can: the truth is that on that day in May she "didn't feel up to liberation."

Source: Elisabeth Piedmont-Marton, Critical Essay on "Exchanging Glances," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

Korb has a master's degree in English literature and creative writing and has written for a wide variety of educational publishers. In the following essay, Korb examines the narrator's understanding of the different sides of war.

Wolf's "Exchanging Glances" tells of a German woman's recollection, from a distance of 25 years, of the end of World War II, as her country stood on the brink of its final defeat. A teenager at the time, the narrator has grown up under the teachings of the Führer and the Reich with her childhood lost to war. She has been indoctrinated with false ideals through textbooks and newspapers, to the point of accepting hatred and extermination as "household words." Now, at the edge of adulthood, she can hardly fathom the future because the world seems to offer no possibilities that are "desirable, or even bearable."

The narrator's perceptions and memories demonstrate the stark opposition that is inherent to war. There are two sides to every conflict, and one side will always suffer. This basic principle is most directly underscored in the second section of the story, when the narrator uses the word liberation for the first time to refer to the invasion of Germany. While the Allied military maneuvers certainly represent liberation for many people—most notably those imprisoned in the Nazi concentration camps— for the narrator and her family, the onslaught of armies represents the antithesis. The very action that results in the freeing of several groups of people— the Jews, the European citizenry of those countries under Nazi occupation—renders the German people weak and captive to a long-hated foe. At one point in the story, the narrator muses, "the need arises to specify what one has been liberated from, and if one is conscientious, perhaps to what purpose as well." She recognizes that the answers she comes up with, such as the "passing of my fear of low-flying fighter planes," are inaccurate. In truth, she is unable to provide any valid answer since the real answer would be that she has been liberated from the despotism of Adolf Hitler and the evil that his regime has imposed. For a child who once threw cigarette packs at the German army convoys rolling eastward to a blindingly quick victory in Poland, this answer is not admissible. Indeed, the story bears out that for her, and her family, no liberation has taken place. Instead, she has been thrust into a world in which she finds nothing worthwhile for the German people; instead, there is only, for the time being, subjugation.

The narrator recalls that her world started to darken and constrict when her family was first routed from their home on a "cold January morning" to escape the advancing Soviet army. She was "greatly surprised at how gray indeed was that town in which I had always found all the lights and all the colors I needed." From that moment on, the narrator is forced to experience a "horror [that] was indescribable." These words apply to her feelings as she is cast out of her home forever. However, this horror can be further extended to her sights and experiences along the westward refugee path, as well as her utter dismay at moving into the future, an almost monstrous sensibility for a girl of only sixteen and one that shows just how much of a dislocation she is undergoing.

The war has turned the narrator's "settled, proper, respectful" family into an "exhausted little troop" of wanderers. No longer quite human, they are reduced to performing the labor of workhorses, pulling handcarts in which the possessions of their two-story house must now fit. The narrator sees their entourage as a "humdrum train *Reality* [that] veers off the tracks and races crazily out of control right into the wildest 'unreality.'" The family responds to the utter chaos into which they have been thrust by acting erratically. The grandmother initially refuses to even leave their home and only agrees to do so on the basis of an SS officer's unrealistic assertion that "'the Russians lop women's breasts right off.'" The mother is torn between following common sense and following her irrational desires, for she is "forever disappearing when it's time to move on" because "she wants to go back and must go on." She makes gratuitous threats of killing herself, but her children "still dwell in the realm where words are taken literally," and her violent words throw the narrator into further confusion.

As the family migrates westward, everything that the narrator encounters serves to emphasize that the "world had truly turned topsy-turvy," both literally, in the sights she sees, such as her first corpse, and emotionally, in the utter destruction of the society that has thus far defined her existence. The very trajectory of the journey reiterates this confusion as they go "straying from the country road, groping about in the darkness on side paths." When they are surrounded by the Soviets, the refugees are ordered on a forced march toward the Americans, leading the narrator to muse that

anyone who was still capable of asking himself questions would have had to find it quite strange how everyone was surging forward toward that enemy which had been after our lives for days now.

Now the refugees' fate irrevocably lies in the hands of others. They have no control over their own future, as epitomized by the narrator's observation that "summer was coming again, but I had no idea how I would spend it."

The people the narrator sees along their route also emphasize this dislocation. The newly freed concentration camp prisoners literally symbolize the upending of the power structure. The narrator thinks the prisoners would take advantage of the Germans' weakened state and steal the clothes and the food that they themselves had just stolen from a deserted convoy. The freed prisoners, whom the Reich had "declared animals," however, act with humanity. They eschew taking revenge, as the narrator thinks they will. Although they arm themselves with the guns left alongside the road and mount sentries, they do not scream or shoot at the passing Germans, but instead stand silently and peacefully, watching them. It is no wonder that "everything about them was completely foreign" to the narrator. In marked contrast, the French people greet the Polish drivers, who are turning back eastward, with camaraderie. These two groups are able to communicate their joy at liberation, despite not being able to understand one another's language. The most telling instant during the interaction with the concentration camp prisoners, however, comes when the narrator mentally chastises her own people for what they have done to the prisoners. She comes to understand "for a fraction of a second that we were guilty."

Throughout the journey, the narrator also witnesses stark examples of the complete usurpation of German society, both from within and from without. She reveals that the refugees willingly give up the famed German adherence to discipline and structure when they spy an abandoned supply truck. The "order of the column dissolved" as the people haul off as much food as they can carry. On the exterior level, she sees "a Polish migrant worker push aside a German estate farmer," an action so shocking that Herr Volk, the man in question "automatically reached for his whip." However, someone prevents him from lashing out and "the Poles walked on."

Herr Volk and his wife are among those people who fail to comprehend the depth by which their circumstances have changed. They continue to act like they number among the powerful. When the narrator's family joined with the Volks' group, Frau Volk "came to bestow a kind and cultured word on the women who now, in one way or another, numbered among her domestics." Herr Volk goes through the formalities of hiring his new coachmen, the narrator's uncle, "in person ... with a handshake." Yet, these "high-class people" will suffer the same fears, threats, and indignities as all the other displaced Germans. To the American victors, they are all merely civilians to be "frisked" for weapons and stripped of their valuables.

The utter inability of the refugees to "cope after a messed-up end of the world" is also demonstrated through specific people's reactions to the end of the Third Reich. The narrator recalls that she learned of Hitler's death from a solider, clothed not in his uniform but in a white undershirt with the sleeves rolled up. He delivered the news in "the same way one says, 'Nice weather today,'" which stuns the narrator more than the news itself. This sentence, which reverberates in her mind, should "have echoed frightfully between Heaven and earth," for it signals the complete dissolution of the familiar past, as well as signals the ineffectiveness and senselessness of the long-fought war. Enhancing these feelings, the narrator notes all of the abandoned "precious war equipment" lining the side of the road, which now has no purpose. Another woman the narrator meets talks about the "miracle weapon longed for by the Führer"—the atomic bomb— which would kill everyone, the Germans and the enemy; "Let them go ahead and use it, is what she said." The narrator confesses to understanding how the women feels.

However, the narrator and her family survive the march, eventually reaching the American lines. The meeting with the victorious army is signaled by a "call from the front . . . this could mean only one thing: the final steps toward freedom lay ahead." Here the narrator uses the word freedom with deliberate irony. Instead of granting liberty, the American soldiers take from the refugees, demanding of them objects, such as watches and guns, as well as obedience. In contrast to the refugees who are fraught with tension and anger and "special humiliation," the soldiers stand casually, chewing gum, viewing the stream of people with "their indifferent glances."

The narrator does not know how to react to "Herr Dragon"—the American army—now that it has stopped "breathing fire." As she acknowledges, "The world consisted of the victors and the defeated," but now somehow two mortal enemies must learn how to cohabitate as "private citizens." The narrator imagines that the best way to do so is

show no emotion, for the "enemy should not see us weak," so she calls upon her prodigious resources of pride, which "absolutely demanded" that she hate all American soldiers. Even the knowledge that "possibly no bomb or MG shrapnel would ever again be dropped on me" fails to make up for being placed in a subservient position to the enemy. When the narrator says, "I wasn't curious as to what would happen now," it is because she knows that nothing could happen that she would want to happen. Her immediate future consists of recriminations, such as when a concentration camp prisoner asks in a voice filled with "sadness" and "dismay," "'Where, then, have you lived all these years?'" Only sixteen, the narrator knows that the German people will be forced, for the next immeasurable amount of time, to depend on Herr Dragon for even the basic essentials of life, such as a bucket of water. More perilously, many Germans will stoop to cajoling the enemy for favors, an example of which the narrator already witnesses in an American soldier with "a squealing German girl hanging on each arm." The girls' defection and self-betrayal represents the definitive end of Germany as the narrator knows it, and she "finally . .. had a reason to turn away a little and cry."

Source: Rena Korb, Critical Essay on "Exchanging Glances," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #3

Semansky's stories, poems, and essays appear regularly in literary journals. In the following essay, Semansky analyzes the nature of memory in Christa Wolf's short story,"Exchanging Glances."

On one level Christa Wolf s autobiographical story, "Exchanging Glances," is a German woman recounting the events surrounding the end of World War II. On another level, the story is about the very nature of identity itself, and the ways in which memory can both liberate and imprison the person remembering.

Wolf's narrator tells the story of her family's flight from the advancing Russian Army, but in the process she also tells the story of her own emotional and psychological development. In this way she is both a subject (that is, the person doing the remembering) and an object (that is, the person being remembered). As subject, the narrator lays out the details of the April day her family left their village as Allied bombers poured into Germany and strafed the country. She is confident that her memories are accurate and takes pains to alert readers to this. On the first page of the story, she recounts her grandmother's difficulty finding the right clothes to wear, and says, "this is not just my memory playing ticks with me." A few sentences later, she writes that she has, "chosen to recall" these memories. Both her insistence that her memory is accurate and that intention is the catalyst for her story are the first clues that readers shouldn' t necessarily trust the teller.

The way that memory works can be seen in the way the story is told. The narrator will often make a reference to an event, for example, "the time that nasty word" Asia "got . . . [grandmother] back on her feet," then drop it, and pick it up a few pages later, clarifying its meaning and context. Human memory often works in a non-linear fashion, as details trigger unforeseen associations that, in turn, lead back to the original memory. By using the organic processes of memory to structure her story, the narrator gains more narrative latitude to tell what happened to her, rather than just show it. Fiction writers often claim that their job as storytellers is to show rather than tell what happens. This means that concrete description rather than exposition should comprise the bulk of a story, the aim being to present a picture readers can visualize. In treating herself as the object of her remembering, however, and commenting on the events even as she describes them, Wolf combines the techniques of both storyteller and essayist. She asks readers to do two things simultaneously: to see the events being described, and to question the mental state and moral position of the person describing them.

For Wolf's speaker, the allied occupation also signaled an occupation of a different sort: the invasion of a new self. Significantly, this comes when the girl stops dreaming that she has different parents, and when she leaves her hometown for the last time. It is at that point, the speaker says, "someone inside me said slowly and clearly, You'll never see this again." The split self, hinted at earlier when the speaker describes her laughter, which is offensive to her and which she cannot control, becomes more pronounced. She is on board a truck hurrying out of her town, and she describes her change as follows:

My horror was indescribable. The sentence was irreversible. All I could do was keep that which I knew to myself, truthfully and faithfully; watch the ebb and flow of rumors and hopes swell and fall; carry on for the time being, which I owed the others, to say what they wanted me to say. But the stranger in me ate at my insides and grew, and possibly he would soon refuse to obey in my stead. Already he had begun to nudge me from time to time, and the others were casting sidelong glances in my direction. Now she's laughing again. If we only knew what at.

This dissolving, chaotic self parallels the defeated and dissolving Germany, also in the process of becoming something else. Wolf artfully illustrates the 1960s' slogan that "the personal is political" by tying the changing identity of the narrator to the changing identity of the state. After beginning her story with assurances that her memory of the past is accurate and her motivations clear, the narrator shifts mid-story to question her previous claims. Wolf emphasizes the idea that memory is always a construction and not of discovery of something that is always there, waiting to be found out or "accessed." After detailing the time and place her new self was "born," the narrator questions the foundation of the very facts she has just presented by casting doubt on her own story:

Against all expectations, I got caught up in the question of what clothes my grandmother was wearing on the road, at which point I happened upon that stranger, who, one day, had turned me into herself and now has become yet another, pronouncing other sentences, and ultimately I must accept that the series of images will not add up to anything, memory is not a photo album, and liberation depends not only on a date and the coincidental movements of the Allied troops but also on certain difficult and prolonged movements within oneself. And while time may erase reasons, it also continuously creates new ones, rendering rather more difficult the selection of one particular hour; the need arises to specify what one has been liberated from, and if one is conscientious, perhaps to what purpose as well.

Wolf sees the past as a process, not a product, and the person remembering the past as part of that process. Stories are conventionally thought of as representations of events, but Wolf casts doubt on that idea by questioning her own reasons for remembering, the ways in which they change over time, and how those changes affect the events remembered. Rather than being a representation of past events, then, her "story" is really an enactment of the fragile nature of history and self, the very basis of reality.

This fragility is evident in how the girl responds to the sudden death of Wilhelm Grund, the farm foreman. Dwelling on the role of chance, she considers how it could very well have been her, or one of her family, who was killed instead of Grund. She uses the memory of Grund's death as a catalyst for speculating on her own death, and how history might or might not have been different. She explores this idea of reversal further when describing her encounter with the concentration camp prisoners, now in the position of victors:

Now the ragged would put on our clothes and stick their bloody feet in our shoes, now the starved would seize hold of the flour and the sausage we had just snatched. And to my horror I felt, it is just, and I was horrified to feel that it was just, and knew for a fraction of a second that we were guilty. I forgot it again.

Rather than portray herself as a victim of circumstance, the narrator describes her complicated response to the former prisoners in all of its contradictions and ugliness. Her former role as citizen of a conquering nation was now reversed, and she had to simultaneously navigate shame and guilt for her part in Germany's atrocities, and fear and disdain for the conquering forces. The narrator's acute self-awareness of her responses during this time is a product of the person the girl had become twenty-five years after Germany's fall. Her recall of the events of 1945 is inextricably tied to her reasons for remembering. The liberation she struggles to name throughout the story isn't the liberation of France or Poland, or even the concentration camp prisoners; it is the narrator's liberation from the need to make sense of her past. Paradoxically enough, it can only be achieved in the act of doing that very thing.

Source: Chris Semansky, Critical Essay on "Exchanging Glances," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2002.

Topics for Further Study

At one point in the story, the narrator says that memory is not like a machine. What other metaphors for memory appear in the story? Can you think of others?

"Exchanging Glances" is so powerful because it depicts the end of World War II from a different perspective than to what readers are accustomed. What have you learned in your history classes that contradicts the account that Wolf gives? How does the story add to your understanding of the events of the period?

At the end of the story, the narrator's group is approached by a fellow German and a concentration camp survivor who asks them where they have lived all these years. Wolf chooses to leave that question unanswered and invites readers to speculate about the answers. Write the dialog that would continue this conversation and then explain the choices you made.

Psychologists have pointed out the effects of trauma on an individual's ability to remember details of an event. Do some research on the subject and then analyze the narrator's state of mind and evaluate the reliability of her memory.

Compare and Contrast

1940s: The Nazi Regime in Germany exterminates many of its own Jewish citizens and engages much of the rest of the world in war.

1960s-1989: Germany is divided by the Berlin Wall, creating two distinct nations, one democratic and one socialist.

Today: Germany is reunified into one democratic country. Many of the hardships and abuses of the East German government are revealed.

1930s and 1940s: Thousands of Germans, mostly Jews, flee when the Nazis take power. When WWII breaks out, 300,000 refugees have already left Germany. As Hitler's armies advance, the situation fast becomes a major crisis. Many countries, including the United States, refuse to increase the number of refugees they will accept. The vast majority of Jews in occupied Europe end up in concentration camps.

1960s and 1970s: The United States engages in, and withdraws from, the Vietnam War. Bombings, defoliation, and combat, along with economic hardship and "re-education camps," lead to an exodus of more than 1.5 million refugees from North and South Vietnam, most of whom end up in the United States.

Today: Pakistan harbors roughly two million Afghan refugees as a result of both the Russian aggression in Afghanistan and later, the brutal practices of the Taliban regime. In 2001 the terrorist attacks of September 11 provoke the United States into waging war against Afghanistan for harboring Osama bin Laden, the leader of the group thought to be behind the attack. A new wave of more than one million refugees are expected to flee to Pakistan as a result.

1930s and 1940s: The political secret police force of the Third Reich, the GESTAPO is the principal means for eliminating enemies of the Nazi regime. They are also one of the major agencies used in the persecution of the Jews.

1950s: The BGS is established, the first federal police organization allowed by Ally-occupied Germany, which is primarily used for border patrol. In Russia Stalin's secret police are succeeded by the KGB after his death in 1953. Less prone to violent purges and devastation than its predecessor, the KGB is still used to suppress political and religious dissent.

Today: Now a unified country, the German Democratic Republic utilizes two major federal police agencies: The BGS, the border patrol left over from its years of occupation; and the BKA, the equivalent of the FBI in the United States.

What Do I Read Next?

The Quest for Christa T. (1971) is Wolf's well-known autobiographical novel about growing up in times of conflict.

A Model Childhood (1983) is another autobiographical novel by Wolf that examines the effects of German fascism on the lives of those of Wolf's generation.

Diary of Anne Frank (1952) is the classic story of one Jewish girl's experience of World War II as recorded in the diary she kept while hiding in an attic.

Night (1960), by Elie Wiesel, is a harrowing personal memoir of being Jewish during the war.

German Boy: A Refugee's Story (2000), by Wolfgang W. E. Samuel and Stephen E. Ambrose, is the story, told through the eyes of a 10-year-old boy, of a German family's escape from the Russians at the end of World War II.

Boy Soldier: A German Teenager at the Nazi Twilight (2000), by Gerhardt B. Thamm, tells of a boy who was conscripted to fight on the Eastern Front until the last few days of World War II.

Hitler's Willing Executioners (1996), by Daniel Johah Goldhagen, draws from previously unused archival evidence and testimonies to show that many ordinary German citizens in Nazi Germany willingly persecuted and tortured Jews. Goldhagen's nonfiction account defies previously held myths that most Germans were unaware of the expanse of Hitler's destruction and were unwilling agents in the mass killings of Jewish people.

Further Study

Benn, Melissa, review of *"What Remains" and Other Stories,* in *New Statesman & Society* Vol. 6, April 23, 1993, p. 29.

In her review of the book, Benn weighs the accusations against Wolf and warns against oversimplification.

Fries, Marilyn Sibley, ed., *Responses to Christa Wolf: Critical Essays,* Wayne State University Press, 1989.

A useful collection of essays, this book also contains background and biographical materials. This collection was published before *"What Remains" and Other Stories* was published in English.

Kuhn, Anna, *Christa Wolf's Utopian Vision: From Marxism to Feminism,* Cambridge University Press, 1988.

Also published before *"What Remains" and Other Stories,* this book is more theoretical than other sources.

Paley, Grace, "The Quest for Christa T.," in *Nation,* Vol. 256, April 5, 1993, pp. 454-57.

Paley explains the controversy over the timing of Wolf s publication of her stories concerning her involvement with the East German secret police.

Resch, Margit, *Understanding Christa Wolf: Returning Home to a Foreign Land,* University of South Carolina Press, 1997.

This text is a thorough but readable introduction to the life and work of Wolf.

Bibliography

Demetz, Peter, "The High Cost of a Dream," review of *"What Remains" and Other Stories,* in *New York Times,* April 4, 1993.

Finney, Gail, *Christa Wolf,* Twayne Publishers, 1999.

Resch, Margit, *Understanding Christa Wolf: Returning Home to a Foreign Land,* University of South Carolina Press, 1997.

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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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