The Far and the Near Study Guide

The Far and the Near by Thomas Wolfe

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Thomas Wolfe's short story "The Far and the Near" was first published in *Cosmopolitan* magazine in 1935 and was reprinted later that year in Wolfe's first short—story collection, *From Death to Morning.* For a writer known by his long, sprawling novels such as *Look Homeward, Angel: A Story of the Buried Life* and *Of Time and the River,* this ultrashort short story is a rare occurrence. While Wolfe's novels have often fallen under criticism for their excessive autobiographical sources, the influence of their editors, and Wolfe's wordy style, many critics in the last half of the twentieth century began to praise Wolfe for his short fiction. "The Far and the Near" details the story of a railroad engineer in the 1930s who passes a certain cottage every day for more than twenty years, waving to the women who live there but never actually meeting them or seeing them up close. Upon his retirement, he goes to see the women, but they treat him badly and destroy the idyllic vision that he has built up around them. Within its few pages, Wolfe's short story emphasizes the potentially devastating effects on a person who is forced to confront the reality behind a vision. Since the work was written during the Great Depression, the loss of hope that takes place in the story would have been extremely familiar to Wolfe's audience. The story can be found in the paperback edition of *The Complete Short Stories of Thomas Wolfe,* which was published by Collier Books in 1989.

Author Biography

Thomas Wolfe was born on October 3, 1900, in Asheville, North Carolina, a resort community. Wolfe was a good student at the local elementary school, and in 1912 he was sent to a private school. At the ripe age of fifteen, he entered the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. In 1919, one of Wolfe's plays, *The Return of Buck Gavin: The Tragedy of a Mountain Outlaw,* was staged by the Carolina Playmakers, with Wolfe playing the lead role. Wolfe graduated in 1920, and, emboldened by his initial success in the theater, he entered Harvard University the same year, where he studied playwriting.

In 1922, Wolfe graduated from Harvard with his master's degree, although he remained in Cambridge, Massachusetts, writing plays and unsuccessfully trying to sell them. In 1924, he started teaching English at Washington Square College of New York University, a position that he held on and off until 1930. In 1924, he also traveled to Europe, returning the next year. On his voyage home, he met Aline Bernstein, a married woman nineteen years his senior, with whom he started a long affair. The two stayed together in England during Wolfe's 1926 trip and shared a New York apartment when they both returned to the United States. His first novel, *Look Homeward, Angel: A Story of the Buried Life,* was published in 1929. For this first publication, Wolfe and Maxwell Perkins, an editor at Charles Scribner's Sons, worked closely together. In 1930, Wolfe gave up his teaching post, ended his affair with Mrs. Bernstein, and traveled to Europe again. In 1935, he published his second novel, *Of Time and the River: A Legend of Man's Hunger in His Youth.* The same year, he published his first short—story collection, *From Death to Morning,* which included the story "The Far and the Near."

In 1935, Wolfe published *The Story of a Novel,* an essay detailing his writing methods and theories. In a review of the essay, Bernard DeVoto attacked all of Wolfe's work, stating that Wolfe depended upon the heavy editing of Perkins. As a result, Wolfe eventually left Scribner's, signing with Harper's in 1937. However, he was unable to publish any more works before he died of tubercular meningitis in Baltimore, Maryland, on September 15, 1938. Following his death, Wolfe's editor at Harper's, Edward C. Aswell, set about creating distinct volumes out of the massive amount of manuscripts, notes, and outlines that Wolfe had left with him. From this assortment, Aswell created several works, including two novels—*The Web and the Rock* (1939) and *You Can't Go Home Again* (1940)—and a short story collection, *The Hills Beyond* (1941). In 2001, the original, unedited manuscript (according to its editors) of *Look Homeward, Angel: A Story of the Buried Life* was published as *O Lost: The Story the Buried Life.*

Plot Summary

Wolfe's "The Far and the Near" starts out with a description of a little town, which contains a small cottage on its outskirts. The cottage appears clean and comfortable. Every day, just after two o'clock in the afternoon, an express train passes by the house. For more than twenty years, the train engineer blows his whistle, prompting a woman inside the house to come out on her porch and wave to him. Over this time, the woman's little girl grows up, and she joins her mother in waving to the engineer. The engineer grows old during this time and sees a lot of tragedy during his service for the railroad, including four fatal accidents on the tracks in front of him. Throughout all of this tragedy, however, he remains focused on the vision of the cottage and the two women, an image that he thinks is beautiful and unchangeable. He has a father's love towards the two women and, after so many thousands of trips past their cottage, feels that he knows the women's lives completely.

As a result, he resolves to visit the women on the day he retires, to tell them what a profound effect they have had on his life. When that day comes, he walks from the train station into the small town. As he walks through the town, he is unsure of his decision, because the town seems so unfamiliar— much different from how it has looked from his train cab. When he gets to the women's cottage, he is even more unsure, but he decides to go through with it. When he meets the woman, she is instantly suspicious of him, and the train engineer is sorry that he has come. The woman whom he has idealized all of those years appears different, and her harsh voice is not what he expected. He explains who he is and why he has come, and the woman reluctantly invites him inside and calls for her daughter. The engineer sits down with both women in an ugly parlor and awkwardly talks to them while they fix him with hostile looks. Finally, the engineer leaves, and he is shaken from his experience. He is distraught because the one aspect of his life that he thought was pure and beautiful is stained. With this revelation, he realizes that he has lost all hope and that he will never be able to see the good in life again.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

The story takes place in the United States in the 1930s on the outskirts of a small town located along the railroad tracks. The engineer of an express train sees a small tidy house from his high seat in the cab as the train passes. The engineer has been riding the same route for twenty years and always looks forward to seeing this house each time he travels this route between two cities.

The house is white with neat green blinds. It is bordered with flowerbeds and has an arbor with grapes that ripen each August. He can see a neatly laid-out vegetable garden and three large oak trees in front that shelter the house from the summer heat. The engineer is able to get a good view of the house and its occupants because his train slows as it approaches the town and just begins to pick up speed and resume its normal rhythm as it passes the house.

For twenty years, the train passed the house every day at the same time, and the engineer blew the whistle for a woman and a little girl who came out onto the back porch and waved to him. Over the years, the engineer has watched as the girl grew from a child to a woman, just as his own children grew up and married during the same period. He himself has aged, but he feels that what he has seen and what he experienced on the job humbled him and made him wiser.

Over the years, the engineer has seen the woman, her daughter, and the house in every kind of light and condition, ranging from the gray of winter to the green of spring. He feels a real tenderness toward the house and the women, tenderness similar to what he feels for his own children. He has seen horrible and tragic accidents on the train tracks, but in the midst of any tragedy or tedium, he finds that the view of the little white house and the women waving from the porch always brings him hope and happiness.

He feels that he knows the inhabitants of the house in every way, that he knows every aspect of their lives. The relationship he believes he has with the women in the house becomes the focus of all his hopes for the future.

He promises himself that one day, when he retires from the railroad, he will go to the house and meet its occupants. He will talk to the women who live there and whose lives, from his perspective, have been so entwined with his own.

When that day comes, and he leaves his job of twenty years, the engineer comes down from the train onto the platform of the station in the little town where the women live. He walks through the town and down the road to the house. From this new perspective, everything seems strange and new. He even questions if this can be the same town seen from the tracks everyday from the high train windows. It was as "disquieting as a

city in a dream." He becomes more confused and disoriented as he walks through town toward the outskirts where the little white house is located.

When he reaches the house, he knows it is the right place because he recognizes the three sheltering oak trees in front, the flowerbeds, and the grape arbor. He also sees the glint of rails shining on the tracks in the distance beyond the yard. The engineer is surprised to find himself feeling doubtful and hopeless as he goes through the gate toward the porch. He had expected to feel comforted and happy. When he knocks on the door he hears footsteps inside, and then the door opens to reveal the woman of the house standing in front of him.

As soon as he sees her, he is sorry he came. He feels an immediate sense of loss and begins to grieve. Her face is sallow and worn, pinched and harsh. She seems like a mistrustful and suspicious person instead of like the friendly and brave woman he had viewed from the train.

In his attempts to explain why he has come, the engineer sounds terrible and unreal, even to himself. He continues to talk, fighting his feelings of confusion and regret. The happiness and hope he had received from the woman and the house when he saw them from the train disappear, and he feels almost ashamed to have made this visit.

The woman unwillingly allows him to come inside the house and calls to her daughter to join them. Her voice is harsh and shrill. The engineer sits for a while in the woman's ugly parlor and tries to make conversation as the women look at him with "dull hostility" and "sullen, timorous restraint." Finally, he leaves the house and again walks the road back to town.

When he traveled through the area on the train, the land had been familiar to him and made him glad. He felt confident and brave when he rode the rails through the town and picked up speed by the little white house. Now, as he moves on foot through the same area, he feels sick and doubtful. The way had become strange and horrible. He realizes that this world had existed all the time close to the shining tracks. When he traveled the rails, the town and the house had a magical and bright aspect, but now, the "small good universe of hope's desire" he perceived from the train had disappeared forever, and he would never feel the same way again.

Analysis

The story describes the difference between perception and reality. The main character of the story, an engineer on an express train, imbues a house near the tracks with all his hopes for order, love, and happiness. He sees the house and its occupants, two women who come to the back porch to wave at him as the train passes by, for only a few minutes each day for twenty years, yet he believes he knows everything about them. The house represents an unchanging stability and warmth for the engineer, contrasting strongly with the constant movement of his daily life and the tragedy he has witnessed on the tracks.

From his train cab above the tracks, he has seen several accidents where single people and families with children were hit by the train. The expressions on their faces as they realize, immobilized with fear at the train bearing down on them, haunt him. In this context, the unstoppable train rushing toward the victims suggests an abrupt confrontation with reality that cannot be avoided. It is a strong foreshadowing of the engineer's own shock when confronted with the reality of the town and the women in the little house.

The story also addresses the idea that the world one knows is shaped by projections of one's own assumptions. The engineer believes he knows everything there is to know about the house and the women who live there by seeing its garden and trees from the high vantage point of the engine's cab as it picks up speed along the rails. The fact that the train is a "limited express" suggests that the engineer's point of view is restricted and less than complete. The word "express" also suggests the expression of emotion, indicating that the engineer has difficulty expressing himself in his daily relationships.

This may be the case particularly concerning his children, who are mentioned several times in the beginning of the story. The reader is told that the engineer's children have grown up and married while he spent twenty years on the job, watching the woman and her daughter at the little white house age along with him. The author also mentions that the engineer feels the same tenderness toward the woman and her daughter as he does toward his own children. There is a sense that the engineer's life as been spent away from his family and that there is a stability he wanted but could not obtain because his job kept him away from home and always on the move. His movement has always been on the one track, however, and his life has been limited. The engineer uses the house and its occupants as surrogates for a closeness he misses in his life, and they take on great importance to him as the years pass.

When he retires from his job, the engineer comes down from his high seat in the train and is forced to face reality as symbolized by the small town, the hot and dusty road to the little white house, and meeting the women inside the house. Because he has built up a dream world around the women, the actuality of the meeting is a shock to him.

He had imbued the house and its inhabitants with attributes such as bravery, warmth, friendliness, thrift, and comfort when he watched from the train as the woman waved to him from her back porch and he blew the whistle. When he is confronted with the harsh and hostile reality of the woman on her front porch, he immediately grieves for the loss of his dream. He knows he cannot stop or avoid reality from bearing down on him, just as the victims of the train accidents could not stop or avoid the train they knew would kill them.

The conversation with the women in what he must acknowledge is an ugly parlor, so different from the exterior of the house and its tidy aspects, only emphasizes the distance between his perception of the house and its reality. He tries to explain to the women, and to himself, why he wanted to visit them, but his reasons and even his own voice seem unreal to him.

The author uses the words "strange" and "unreal" when describing the engineer's descent into reality (he came down from the train onto the platform) in a reversal of what would be expected. While it would be more common to describe dreams as strange and unreal, the engineer has lived within his own perceptions for so long, it is the real world that surprises him. An area he traveled for twenty years suddenly became unknown to him, because he went down onto the railroad station platform changing his point of view.

This is a major theme in the story: how things appear from different vantage points. When the engineer is up in the train cab, the small town and the little white house appear as examples of order and comfort. When he is walking up the dusty road to the house after leaving his job on the train, he sees the glint of the tracks and the shining rails beyond the house, indicating that when seen from the harsh reality of the house, the train tracks now represents the dream, "the bright lost way".

There is a suggestion that the woman who has been waving at him for twenty years has perceived the train as her dream and as a symbol of hope. To be confronted with the reality of an aged man on her porch, a man who is no longer the driver of a magical train, is as great a shock to her as it is for him to confront her sagging skin and ugly parlor after all those years of blowing the whistle in acknowledgement of her wave. The hostility and suspicion she expresses during his visit are understandable in this context.

In the end, the engineer feels as though he has deluded himself and is ashamed at his delusion. He realizes that the world he experiences now, walking along the road, had been there all the time, close to the train tracks he traveled for twenty years. When he rode the train, he felt confident and hopeful, but now he had lost the magic of "that shining line". He had lost the "imagined corner of that small good universe of hope's desire," as represented by the little white house, and he would never be the same again. He has been hit by the unavoidable reality of the world, and it crushed him just as if he had been hit by the train.

Characters

The Train Engineer

The train engineer is the protagonist of the story, whose idealistic vision is shattered when he sees the reality behind it. Every day for twenty years, the engineer's express train passes a cottage on the outskirts of a little town. Each time, he blows the train's whistle, and the woman in the cottage comes out and waves at him. As the years pass, he watches her little girl grow into a woman, who joins her mother to wave at the engineer. He has never met either of the women but feels he knows all about them and their lives. In fact, the beauty of his vision of the women is so strong that he relies on it to get him through hard times—including the four fatal accidents he witnesses when people get stuck on the train tracks in front of him. He resolves to go visit the women when he retires, to tell them about the impact they have had on his life. However, when he goes to do this, it is not the idealistic trip that he had envisioned. The town is unfamiliar, and the women are hostile and suspicious, even when he explains who he is. In addition, the women look different— older and more haggard—than how they appeared from the engineer's train cab. Still, he forges ahead, and by the time he leaves the women, he is shocked and disappointed and has lost his hope and his ability to see the good in life.

The Woman in the College

The woman in the cottage waves to the train engineer every day for twenty years but is very hostile to him when he comes to visit her. Although she is comfortable with waving to the engineer when there is a safe distance between them, she is suspicious of him when he comes to her cottage. As a result, she and her daughter—who has grown up with the daily waving ritual—are on guard against the engineer, and the conversation is awkward. Her unexpected hostility shatters the engineer's idealistic vision.

The Woman's Daughter

The woman's daughter grows up in the cottage by the railroad tracks, where she joins her mother in the daily waving ritual to the train engineer. When the engineer sits down to talk to the two women, the daughter is as guarded and suspicious as her mother.

Themes

Appearances

For more than twenty years, the engineer blows his train whistle every day as he passes the cottage, and "every day, as soon as she heard this signal, a woman had appeared on the back porch of the little house and waved to him." Although he has seen the woman—and later the two women—do this from afar, the engineer nevertheless allows his mind to fill in the gaps about how the women might appear up close. In his mind, he crafts these assumptions about the women's appearance into an idealistic vision, in which he feels very connected to them. The narrator reports, "He felt for them and for the little house in which they lived such tenderness as a man might feel for his own children." As the years pass, this vision builds in strength, until the engineer feels that he knows "their lives completely, to every hour and moment of the day." However, when he meets the women face to face, his vision is shattered. The reality is that, even though the two women have waved to him from afar, up close they are suspicious and fearful of him. Also, while he has imagined their beauty, when he comes face to face with the woman who owns the cottage, he sees that her face is "harsh and pinched and meager," and her flesh sags "wearily in sallow folds." When the engineer finally leaves the house of the two women, he realizes as he is walking away that he has allowed himself to be fooled by a distant appearance. Now, he can see "the strange and unsuspected visage of the earth which had always been within a stone's throw of him, and which he had never seen or known."

Happiness

While he is under the spell of his false vision, the engineer is truly happy: "The sight of the little house and of these two women gave him the most extraordinary happiness he had ever known." When he prepares to go visit the two women, he is even more happy, because he will finally be able to tell them how their "lives had been so wrought into his own." In turn, he thinks they will be happy to see him and that they will welcome him as a friend. While he is working as a train engineer, he never has the opportunity to go and visit the women, and so the ultimate realization of his vision—meeting the women—remains a goal. While this goal is not met and he still has the desire to go see them, he is happy. However, once he leaves the safety of the train and its distance from the women, his happiness is quickly undermined. He is overcome by a "sense of bewilderment and confusion" as he walks through the town. Nothing lives up to his idealistic vision, and his happiness diminishes with each disappointment, from his confusing journey through the town to the hostile treatment by the two women.

Regret

Although the engineer is confused when he walks through the town, he pushes on, thinking that the situation will improve when he gets to the cottage. However, the engineer starts to regret his journey as soon as the woman in the cottage opens the door: "And instantly, with a sense of bitter loss and grief, he was sorry he had come." Still, the engineer tries to talk to the women, determined to overcome "the horror of regret, confusion, disbelief that surged up in his spirit." After he leaves the cottage, this sense of regret has physical effects, as the man suddenly loses his strength—which his vision provided him—and realizes that he is old and frail. "His heart, which had been brave and confident when it looked along the familiar vista of the rails, was now sick with doubt and horror." Even more crushing is the realization that his vision has been a lie and that his former happiness is gone forever. He knows "that all the magic of that bright lost way, the vista of that shining line, the imagined corner of that small good universe of hope's desire, could never be got again."

Style

Mood

For roughly the first half of the story, Wolfe paints an idealistic picture of a railroad engineer who has built up a silent relationship with two women. The reader is led to believe that this is going to be a positive story, since even negative events like the deaths the engineer has witnessed are tempered by his idyllic vision. However, a little more than halfway through, the mood. or emotional quality of the story, starts to change: "Everything was as strange to him as if he had never seen this town before." From this point on, the reader's awareness of the changing mood increases as the engineer's "perplexity of . . . spirit" increases. When the engineer gets to the cottage and sees the woman's face, he—along with the reader—realizes that his idyllic vision is a lie. As the story progresses to its negative ending, the reader empathizes with the engineer's feelings of regret, sadness, and disappointment.

Setting

Setting The physical setting is extremely important in this story. The setting is established with the first line: "On the outskirts of a little town upon a rise of land that swept back from the railway there was a tidy little cottage." The cottage is located by the tracks, but it is "swept back from the railway." This distance shields the engineer from the reality of the two women's appearance and thus becomes the means by which his mind creates the idyllic vision. If the cottage were located close to the tracks, the engineer would see the true appearance of the women. Also, the distance serves as a safety buffer for the two women. The women are comfortable waving to the engineer when he is far away but are suspicious of him when he is up close. If the setting were slightly different and their cottage were located close to the train, the two women might not have felt comfortable waving to the engineer. On a similar note, the cottage is located at a bend in the tracks, where each day, the train "swept past with a powerful swaying motion of the engine, a low smooth rumble of its heavy cars upon pressed steel, and then it vanished into the cut." During this brief time, the engineer and the women only have a few moments to view each other. Just like the distance factor, the time factor plays a part in helping to build the engineer's vision. If he had had more time to observe the women as he passed by, he might have a more accurate picture of the two women, which would also decrease his chances of blindly following a self—made illusion.

Another aspect of the setting, the cottage's distance from the train station, is important in the story. The cottage is "on the outskirts" of town, while the train station is located in town. As a result, on the day he retires and gets off at the train station, he must walk through the town to reach the cottage. As noted above, it is during this walk that the engineer gets an increasing sense of apprehension. If the cottage were located close to

the train station, the engineer would not have to walk as far, and Wolfe would not have the time he needs in the story to slowly build the negative mood.

One last aspect of the setting deserves mention. The town is located either in a northern or a mountainous region, since the narrator talks about the "wintry gray across the brown and frosted stubble of the earth." The fact that the town experiences seasons is important to the engineer's perception of the women because he has "seen them in a thousand lights, a hundred weathers," and thinks that this diversity gives him a greater understanding of their lives. Since they appear the same in his idyllic vision, no matter what the weather conditions, it becomes proof to his mind that they must be as he imagines them.

Tragedy

In his many years working for the railroad, the engineer witnesses several tragedies, including four fatal accidents. "He had known all the grief . . . the peril, and the labor such a man could know." However, despite all of this tragedy, the engineer maintains his happiness and his optimistic view of life, as a result of "the vision of the little house and the women waving to him." The vision becomes a coping strategy by which the engineer is able to look past the tragedy. He sees the women as the one aspect of his life that is "beautiful and enduring, something beyond all change." Unfortunately, the engineer's determination to realize this vision proves to be his tragic flaw—the personal quality that leads to his downfall. The engineer is sure that his vision will play out exactly as he imagines it. When he gets to the town, it is unfamiliar and strange, but he pushes on nevertheless, determined to see the two women. Had the engineer given up on his goal to see the women once the town failed to live up to his vision, he would have preserved his fond memory of the women through blissful ignorance. He does not back down from this resolve, however, even when the gate to the cottage appears unfamiliar, the woman opens the door and the engineer is obviously unwelcome, and the two women sit "bewildered" while he talks. At any point, he could have left and tried to salvage some of his memories, or at least his dignity. Instead, by "fighting stubbornly" against his apprehensive feelings, "his act of hope and tenderness" ultimately feels like a shameful one, and at the end of the story, he must live with the tragedy of tainted memories and a failed dream.

Historical Context

Following a revitalization that had taken place in the economic good times of the 1920s, the railroads were well equipped to handle the 1930s—or so they thought. Unfortunately, several factors led to the bankrupting of many railroad companies. Chief among these factors was the severe national economic downturn that the country experienced in the 1930s, called the Great Depression. Although the exact causes of this economic catastrophe are still debated, most historians give at least some blame to the stock market crash of 1929. The Great Depression bankrupted many individuals and sent the unemployment rate skyrocketing to a high of more than 23 percent. Hunger and poverty became common in many areas of the country. Some families who lived by railroad tracks were so desperate that they sent their children to search for dropped coal from passing trains so that they could heat their homes and operate their cooking appliances. As widespread panic and despair gripped the nation, the suicide rate rose, and millions of families migrated to other areas of the country, only to find that those areas were just as bad—if not worse. Dislocated families set up makeshift shelters on vacant lots in cities and towns. These collections of makeshift dwellings became known as Hoovervilles, after President Hoover, whom many blamed for the Depression.

Businesses were affected, too, including the railroad industry. Railroad traffic—both freight and passenger—plummeted, and many railroads went out of business. When they did, their rail lines were often taken over by other railroad companies that were more financially stable. However, even these companies faced many challenges. As the decade progressed, railroads faced increasing competition from other transportation industries, including automobiles, trucks, buses, and airplanes. Collectively, these industries threatened both freight and passenger transportation on railroads. To make matters worse, many of these industries were supported by government funds and were not burdened by heavy regulations, while the railroads were privately owned and still heavily regulated—a side effect of earlier government involvement. The fact that railroads were privately owned led to another inherent problem in the industry. Railroads required a lot of maintenance, such as replacing track, and railroad owners were on their own to cover these expenses. The railroads that did survive were innovative, using new technologies such as the diesel locomotive, a faster and more efficient locomotive that was first introduced at the end of the previous decade. Railroads also courted passengers by using improved passenger cars, many of which were air conditioned, and by slashing the ticket fares.

Critical Overview

Like much of Thomas Wolfe's short fiction, the stories in From Death to Morning, including "The Far and the Near," were formed from leftover material that did not fit into his novels—in this case, 1935's Of Time and the River. Although the novel sold well, the collection of stories did not. In addition, as Ladell Payne notes in his 1991 entry on Wolfe for the Dictionary of Literary Biography, although Wolfe was famous in 1935, "he also was stung by the criticism that he was too wordy, too autobiographical, and too dependent upon Perkins." Payne is referring to Maxwell Perkins, Wolfe's editor at Charles Scribner's & Sons.

These three criticisms were brought up again the next year by Bernard DeVoto. In his nowfamous piece for the Saturday Review of Literature, "Genius Is Not Enough," DeVoto used the review of Wolfe's essay The Story of a Novel as an opportunity to discredit Wolfe himself. "Mr. Wolfe is astonishingly immature," says DeVoto, adding that Wolfe has not mastered "the psychic material out of which a novel is made nor the technique of writing fiction." In addition, DeVoto says that if Wolfe "gave us less identification and more understanding," people would stop "calling him autobiographical." Finally, DeVoto criticized the influence of Perkins and the other editorial staff who helped Wolfe with his novels, calling them "the assembly line at Scribner's."

Although others had brought up these concerns before, most acknowledge that DeVoto's influential review helped guide criticism of Wolfe in general for much of the twentieth century. As Terry Roberts notes in his 2000 article for the Southern Literary Journal, DeVoto's essay "set the tone for critics ever since who wished to establish their own intellectual superiority by attacking Wolfe in print." Despite this fact, however, Wolfe did regain some critical favor. In his 1970 article for the South Atlantic Quarterly, Martin Wank notes one of the first events that helped inspire this revival: the 1953 publication of The Enigma of Thomas Wolfe, a collection of critical essays. Wank notes that this collection was followed by several other biographical and critical works on Wolfe. One of these was B. R. McElderry, Jr.'s 1964 Thomas Wolfe. In this work, McElderry notes that, amidst all of the negative critical attention given to Wolfe's longer works, not much has been said about his short fiction. Says McElderry: "The detailed study of these shorter pieces, their precise relation to the novels, and to such manuscripts as survive, has not been carried very far."

Over the next decade, more critics started to notice Wolfe's stories, although the attention was not always positive. In his 1947 book, Thomas Wolfe, Herbert J. Muller notes of Wolfe's From Death to Morning that it "is a collection of short pieces which, with a few exceptions, add little to his stature or to our understanding of him." Muller also says that many stories seem incomplete and singles out "The Far and the Near," saying that it is "a bare outline for a potentially good short story." Others disagree. In his 1974 entry on Wolfe for American Writers, C. Hugh Holman, a noted Wolfe scholar, says that From Death to Morning "has never received the attention it deserves." Holman also notes that, contrary to the belief that Wolfe's works lacked structure, "he showed a

control and an objectivity in his short stories and his short novels that effectively belie the charge of formlessness."

For the short stories, this positive criticism has continued to increase. In her 1981 entry on Wolfe for the Dictionary of Literary Biography, Leslie Field notes that From Death to Morning "contains many fine pieces." In his 1983 article for Thomas Wolfe: A Harvard Perspective, James Boyer cites the quality of Wolfe's story collection, saying that this quality is largely due to the influence of his agent at the time, Elizabeth Nowell. Boyer singles out Wolfe's "The Cottage by the Tracks" (the original title of "The Far and the Near"). As Boyer notes, stories like this "represent units complete in themselves." In her 1984 book, Thomas Wolfe, Elizabeth Evans calls "The Far and the Near" "a sentimental story" and notes how the destruction of the engineer's "idyllic scene" leaves him "disappointed and lonely, since the reality of the unfriendly cottage inhabitants precludes his hopes of friendship with them and indeed ruins his memory." With the 1987 publication of The Complete Short Stories of Thomas Wolfe, Wolfe's short stories received even more attention.

Although Wolfe's overall literary reputation is still in question, several critics, like Roberts, continue to focus on Wolfe's short fiction. As Roberts notes:

in the short fiction he wrote during the nine brief years between the publication of Look Homeward, Angel and his death, Wolfe managed to turn almost all of the critical stereotypes about his work inside—out.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Poquette has a bachelor's degree in English and specializes in writing about literature. In the following essay, Poquette discusses Wolfe's pervasive use of opposites in "The Far and the Near."

The story title "The Far and the Near" presents two diametrically opposed concepts. In fact, if readers examine the title of the collection in which the story was included, From Death to Morning, they find two more opposite concepts. When death is associated with a time of day, it is usually night. Likewise, when morning is used to represent a life stage, it usually symbolizes birth. As C. Hugh Holman notes in his entry on Wolfe for American Writers, most of Wolfe's books featured opposites in their titles in either a suggestive or an overt way. Holman notes that this had to do with Wolfe's view on life: "Thomas Wolfe grappled in frustrated and demonic fury with what he called 'the strange and bitter miracle of life,' a miracle which he saw in patterns of opposites." This obsession with opposites is also evident in the content of Wolfe's tales themselves. "The Far and the Near" is a particularly vivid example of Wolfe's use of opposites. In the story, Wolfe employs distinct contrasts in imagery and word choice to increase the effectiveness of the story's mood shift.

This mood shift takes place at a very specific point in the story, directly after the engineer gets off his train and walks "slowly through the station and out into the streets of the town." Everything up to this point is described in positive terms, while everything past it is negative. This is most apparent in Wolfe's use of imagery. When the story begins, the reader is exposed to part of the vision that the engineer has survived on for more than twenty years. The town is described as the place where the train "halted for a breathing space" on its journey between its two destination cities. This quaint description associates the town with restful images, making it sound like a comfortable, tranquil place. This idea is amplified by the initial description of the house that the engineer passes every day: "a tidy little cottage of white boards, trimmed vividly with green blinds." The house also features "a garden neatly patterned" and "three mighty oaks" that provide shade. As the narrator notes, "The whole place had an air of tidiness, thrift, and modest comfort."

This positive image of the town and the cottage only increases when the engineer begins the waving ritual with the woman in the cottage, a routine that is prompted by the whistle of his train. "Every day for more than twenty years . . . a woman had appeared on the back porch of the little house and waved to him." The simple image of a woman waving at him becomes fixed in his mind and helps flesh out his overall vision of the town, cottage, the woman, and her daughter. This idyllic image gets the engineer through tough times because he thinks his vision is "something beautiful and enduring, something beyond all change and ruin."

When he goes to meet the women and tell them how this positive image has profoundly affected his outlook on life, he expects that the whole experience will be positive, too, since that is how for years he has anticipated this day. However, when he walks into the

town for the first time, the imagery does not match his mental picture: "Everything was as strange to him as if he had never seen this town before." This feeling grows in the time he takes to walk all the way through the town to the women's cottage. When he gets to the cottage, he is able to identify it by "the lordly oaks," "the garden and the arbor," and other familiar characteristics such as the house's proximity to the railway. However, these images do not have the same positive connotations that they did in the beginning. The town and cottage are no longer quaint and comfortable. Instead, "the town, the road, the earth, the very entrance to this place he loved" has turned unrecognizable, like "the landscape of some ugly dream." The ugliness of this imagery increases when he is finally let into the house and led into "an ugly little parlor."

The women also turn out to be contrary to what he expected. In the first half of the story, his unwavering belief in the goodness and beauty of the women—created by the image of their waving— leads him to believe that he knows "their lives completely, to every hour and moment of the day." Perhaps more importantly, he assumes that they will greet him as a welcome friend. However, in the second half of the story, this image is also shattered. When he meets the older woman face—to—face, he knows "at once that the woman who stood there looking at him with a mistrustful eye was the same woman who had waved to him so many thousand times." However, just as the correct identification of the house by its exterior brings him no joy, neither does the woman's appearance. Her face is "harsh and pinched and meager," and the flesh sags "wearily in sallow folds." Even more disappointing, she does not welcome the engineer but instead views him with "timid suspicion and uneasy doubt."

In addition to the stark contrast in physical imagery, Wolfe also chooses contrasting words to represent the distinctly positive and negative ideas and feelings of the story's two halves. In the beginning, Wolfe's narrator instills a sense of strength in the engineer's train. The train is "great," "powerful," and achieves "terrific speed," and its progress is "marked by heavy bellowing puffs of smoke." The engineer is also described in terms that emphasize his strength: "He had driven his great train, loaded with its weight of lives, across the land ten thousand times." The fact that the engineer has successfully completed so many journeys, safely delivering his human cargo, underscores the idea of strength and dependability. In addition, the engineer has "the qualities of faith and courage and humbleness," and his old age is described in the best possible terms, with "grandeur and wisdom." He also feels "tenderness" for the two women, whose image is "carved so sharply in his heart." Even the tragedies he has seen on the railroad tracks have not affected his positive mood thanks to his idyllic vision of the two women.

However, when the engineer gets off the train and views the unfamiliar town, Wolfe starts to use words that seem uncharacteristic to the reader since they immediately follow the positive language of the first half. The engineer is no longer strong and sure, and neither is anything else. His "bewilderment and confusion" grow as he walks to the "straggling" outskirts of town, where "the street faded." Even the engineer's walk is described as a "plod" through "heat and dust." All of these words have negative connotations, which increasingly give the town and cottage a feeling of stagnation and

impending death. These feelings intensify when he first sees the older woman and feels "a sense of bitter loss and grief."

Even sounds become negative, both the woman's "unfriendly tongue" and the engineer's own voice, which he is shocked to find sounds "unreal and ghastly." Like the descriptions of the town, the engineer's physical qualities, such as the strength of his voice, degrade in the second half of the story. After he spends his "brief agony of time" with the women, feeling "shameful" for coming, the man leaves, at which point he realizes that he is "an old man." Unlike the first half of the story, when his age is described with terms like "grandeur and wisdom," old age by the end of the story is unpleasant. The shock of reality has withered him, and his heart is "sick with doubt and horror." The engineer is no longer part of the railroad company, and thus he can no longer identify with the train, which sustained his illusion. At this point, he is truly alone and without hope.

As Elizabeth Evans notes in her book, *Thomas Wolfe:* "The engineer is left disappointed and lonely, since the reality of the unfriendly cottage inhabitants precludes his hopes of friendship with them and indeed ruins his memory." This painfully negative ending is a huge contrast to the extremely positive beginning. This distinct difference between the two halves of the story gives it more impact, since readers experience two emotional extremes within a very short period of time. Holman notes the effectiveness of stories like this one: "On the level of dramatic scene, fully realized and impacted with immediacy, Wolfe could construct magnificently. Single episodes of his work, published separately as short stories, are powerful narrative units." In his article in *Thomas Wolfe: A Harvard Perspective,* James Boyer makes a similar observation about stories like this one, which were originally intended for Wolfe's novels. Says Boyer, they "represent units complete in themselves which were to have functioned in the novel to illustrate various themes or facets of the national character."

This idea may cause readers to question Wolfe's motives behind the story. What was he trying to say about the national character? When one examines the historical context in which the story was written and compares this context to the use of time in the story, a possible answer presents itself. In the story, the engineer staked his faith on an idyllic vision in the past, which has failed to come true in the present. In fact, the present reality is horrible for him, and it destroys his optimism and hope. This transition directly parallels the time in which the story was written. In the 1930s, when Wolfe wrote the story, the United States was caught in the grip of the Great Depression, a time when people's optimism from the past was shown to be unfounded. The previous decade, the 1920s, had been a very positive time, since the nation had a strong economy. Many people assumed that the economy, and life in general, would continue to improve, and so they staked their futures—and in some cases their fortunes—on this vision by investing heavily in the stock market. When this vision failed, many were overcome with despair and hopelessness, just like the engineer. In the end, images such as the woman's "harsh and pinched and meager" face—a sign of poverty and possibly hunger—may be Wolfe's way of indicating the tough times that his public was experiencing during the Great Depression, when reality intruded on many dreams, and optimism was often met with disappointment and sorrow.

Source: Ryan D. Poquette, Critical Essay on "The Far and the Near," in *Short Stories for Students,* Gale, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay excerpt, Evans discusses and evaluates the writing of Wolfe's collections of short fiction From Death to Morning, The Hills Beyond, *and* The Short Stories of Thomas Wolfe.

Although Wolfe published many short stories, he admitted that he did not know what magazines wanted and declared he would "like nothing better than to write something that was both very good and very popular: I should be enchanted if the editors of *Cosmopolitan* began to wave large fat checks under my nose, but I know of no ways of going about this deliberately and I am sure I'd fail miserably if I tried." Most often his short stories were segments of the larger manuscript he was always working on at the time, and he felt uncertain about excising a portion and shaping it as a short story. Once when he sent Elizabeth Nowell approximately seven typed pages out of a manuscript (a piece about two boys going to the circus) he wrote, "The thing ["Circus at Dawn"] needs an introduction which I will try to write today, but otherwise it is complete enough, although, again, I am afraid it is not what most people consider a story." ("Circus at Dawn" was published in *Modern Monthly* in 1935; it was also included in *From Death to Morning.*) Wolfe generally left such decisions and selections up to Nowell.

All fourteen stories that *From Death to Morning* (1935) comprises appeared in magazines or academic journals between July 1932, when The *Web of Earth* was published, and October 1935, when *"The Bums at Sunset"* appeared. Seven of these stories were published by *Scribner's Magazine,* two by *Modern Monthly,* and one each by *The New Yorker, Vanity Fair, Cosmopolitan, Harper's Bazaar, and the Virginia Quarterly Review*—a wide variety of publications. Letters in 1933 indicate that Wolfe was hard pressed for money; selling stories was therefore essential. He was down to $7, he said, when the sale of *No Door to Scribner's Magazine* brought him $200. Although he welcomed this sum, Wolfe wrote George Wallace (a former member of Professor Baker's 47 Workshop at Harvard) that he was considering taking his stories to another agent, one who had indicated he could get higher prices than *Scribner's Magazine,* Wolfe's most frequent publisher, offered. Obviously Wolfe would indeed welcome "large fat checks" from *Cosmopolitan.* These stories earned him funds first as single sales and then in the collected volume *From Death to Morning.* This volume appeared eight months after *Of Time and the River* was published, making 1935 an important year of publication for Wolfe.

Wolfe attributed the unenthusiastic reviews of *From Death to Morning* to the criticism that continued to be made about *Of Time and the River:* excessive length. The favorable reviews stressed the lyrical prose, humor, realism, and engaging characters. Nevertheless, this neglected volume generally has been underrated, with just a few stories receiving serious attention; indeed, Richard Kennedy thinks that *From Death to Morning* is a book that discourages a second reading. While critics wisely avoid extravagant claims for this collection, they need not shy away from confidently praising Wolfe's variety of narrative forms, his range of subject matter, the large number of effectively drawn characters, the careful attention to place, and the emotional power.

Indeed, emotional power is the significant feature, one that Wolfe conveys best through a pervasive feeling of loneliness in characters and through some extraordinarily violent scenes.

Narrative forms include the episodic, epistolary, stream—of—consciousness, as well as slice—oflife, the form that describes "Only the Dead Know Brooklyn" and "The Bums at Sunset." Each of these stories concerns a problem, for which no solution is reached. Like most of the stories in this collection, these two implicitly explore the theme of loneliness that is prevalent even in *The Web of Earth,* a piece of writing whose main character, Wolfe says, "is grander, richer and more tremendous" than Joyce's Molly Bloom at the end of *Ulysses.* In both "Only the Dead Know Brooklyn" and "The Bums at Sunset," the characters are flat, distinguished only by age and basic reactions. The bums are a chance collection of lonely men exiled for unknown reasons from families and productive work. Both stories center on the arrival of a stranger. In "The Bums at Sunset," the appearance of the young, uninitiated bum threatens those who know the ropes and are suspicious of his lack of experience. "What is dis anyway?" one of them sneers, "a———— noic'ry [nursery], or sump'n." In "Only the Dead Know Brooklyn," the big guy who presumes to learn all of Brooklyn by asking directions and studying his map baffles the narrator, who declares, "Dere's no guy livin' dat knows Brooklyn t'roo and t'roo." While the voice of the Brooklyn native narrates this story, an omniscient voice tells the story of "The Bums at Sunset," and his diction contrasts with the bums ungrammatical speech and limited vocabulary in its use of figurative language; for example, the fading light of sunset looks, he says, "like a delicate and ancient bronze." And in picturing these nondescript men, the narrator emphasizes that their inescapable loneliness tells "a legend of pounding wheel and thrumming rod, of bloody brawl and brutal shambles, of the savage wilderness, the wild, cruel and lonely distances of America."

"Gulliver," a brief character study of an excessively tall man, relates the discomfort of someone who never fits into chairs, beds, or Pullman car berths—of a giant in a world of normal—sized people. Furthermore, the central character is subjected to the same insults wherever he goes: "Hey—y, Misteh! . . . Is it rainin' up deh?" His physical size dominates the story and causes the pain and incommunicable loneliness that mark his life. In "The Far and the Near," a very short piece originally entitled "The Cottage by the Tracks," Wolfe tells a sentimental story about a railroad engineer who finally discovers the reality of what he had thought to be an idyllic scene: a mother and a daughter who live in a country cottage near the tracks. For twenty years the engineer has waved to them as his train roared past, and now that he has retired, he comes to greet them in person. From the moment the older woman opens the door, he knows he should not have come. The idyllic scene he saw for years now fades before her suspicious attitude, her harsh voice, and her unsmiling face. The engineer is left disappointed and lonely, since the reality of the unfriendly cottage inhabitants precludes his hopes of friendship with them and indeed ruins his memory. If the engineer has any other life to go to, we are not told of it.

The subjects of loneliness and death coalesce in the story of the dying man in "Dark in the Forest, Strange as Time." Because he is ill, the man must go away alone for the

winter to warmer climate; his wife promises that she will join him in the spring. Other people board the train, many of them talking and laughing as they leave. The dying man's wife settles him in the compartment, turns, and quickly leaves to join her young, robust lover who waits on the platform. This desertion is repeated in a lesser way with the American youth assigned to this same compartment. His good health and youth contrast sharply with the dying man's condition. And when the youth leaves the compartment for the conviviality of the dining car, the older man dies. He never fulfills his modest desire of knowing well just "vun field, vun hill, vun riffer."

As it appears in *From Death to Morning, No Door* is only the first segment of a much longer work of the same title, a short novel Max Perkins considered bringing out in a limited edition. He did not do so, however. In the original version, this first segment is subtitled "October 1931." Structurally, the brief version in *From Death to Morning* fails to develop a unified plot. The story begins in the luxurious apartment of the host, a rich man who has taken the requisite trip to Europe, collected a suitably impressive collection of sculpture and rare books, and lives among furnishings that are of "quiet but distinguished taste." His young mistress is at his side when his guest (a writer) relates painful glimpses of Brooklyn's low life. The host appears to listen, but he responds incongruously—"grand," "marvelous," "swell"—even though the young man tells of men who live in alleyways, beat their wives, and consider murder and robbery honest toil. In some detail the guest relates an episode about the loud demands of a lonely prostitute for her $ 3 payment. Her client refuses to pay her until, as he puts it, she will "staht actin' like a lady." Oblivious to the irony, the host continues to murmur "grand," and he envies the young man the rich experience of living among such people.

In the final pages Wolfe abandons the host, his mistress, the tinkling cocktail glasses, and the penthouse penthouse balcony to recount the haunting story of a priest's death. One of Wolfe's finest vignettes, this episode stays in the narrator's mind "like the haunting refrain of some old song—as it was heard and lost in Brooklyn." At evening, a man and a woman appear in their respective apartment windows to talk, their voices issuing banalities such as "Wat's t' noos sinct I been gone?" Although Father Grogan has died while this speaker was away, the priest's death is little more than a piece of news to be reported by one nameless character to another. It is not a grief to be shared, as one can see by the response to the news: "Gee, dat's too bad . . . I musta been away. Oddehwise I woulda hoid." Although the narrator is fully aware of the tragic implications of the priest's death, he makes no overt judgments about the insensitive speakers. The scene ends with a simple line: "A window closed, and there was silence." The casual announcement of Father Grogan's death and the equally casual reaction lead the narrator to consider time, in whose relentless power fame is lost, names are forgotten, and energy is wasted. Indeed, Father Grogan and all mankind die in darkness; they are remembered only superficially, if at all.

Related as it is to loneliness and violence, the theme of human dejection is present throughout these stories. The host may be wealthy, but he is a man who has never really lived. Indeed, Wolfe says this man measures time not by actual deeds but "in dimensions of fathomless and immovable sensations." His young guest lives in a run—down section of Brooklyn, an environment in stark contrast to his host's penthouse.

When the young man describes the abject conditions of his neighborhood, the host considers such tales colorful and alive, unlike his own rich but dead world. The diverse reactions of these two men cannot be reconciled. The unrelieved loneliness, the failure of communication, and the narrator's search for certitude and meaning are problems introduced but left unresolved. Solutions are hinted at through brief passages whose imagery expresses a momentary harmony—"all of the colors of the sun and harbor, flashing, blazing, shifting in swarming motes, in an iridescent web of light and color for an instant on the blazing side of a proud white ship." The color flashes and then is gone, however; what remains for the narrator is unspeakable loneliness. . . .

Source: Elizabeth Evans, "*From Death to Morning, The Hills Beyond,* and the Short Novels," in *Thomas Wolfe,* Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1984, pp. 95—133.

Adaptations

Wolfe's *From Death to Morning,* which includes "The Far and the Near," was adapted as an unabridged audiobook in 1997. It is available from Books on Tape, Inc.

Wolfe's *Look Homeward, Angel: A Story of the Buried Life* was adapted as an audiobook in 1995 under the title Look Homeward, Angel. It is available in two parts from Books on Tape, Inc.

Wolfe's *Of Time and the River: A Legend of Man's Hunger in His Youth* was adapted as an audiobook in 1996 under the title Of Time and the River. It is available in two parts from Books on Tape, Inc.

Topics for Further Study

Research the various documentation that explores how Wolfe and his editors created his books and stories. Find another author—from any point in history—who has been accused of having overzealous editors and compare this author's life to Wolfe's life.

Research the various railroads that were operational in the 1930s. Plot all of these railway lines on a map of the United States. For each railway line, use photos, illustrations, or any other form of visual representation to depict the types of trains that were run on each line. Also, provide a short description for each railroad, which details what its primary use was and how the Great Depression affected its business.

Research the history of the toy train industry and discuss how it began. Compare the decline in the use of railroads to sales figures for their toy equivalent and discuss any apparent trends. Then, write a short report on the state of the toy—train industry today.

In the story, the engineer witnesses several deaths on the railroad tracks during his many years of service, although he is initially able to cope with them through his optimism. Research the psychology of death and dying and discuss at least two coping mechanisms that people may use after they have witnessed a violent death.

Compare and Contrast

1930s: The United States is in the midst of the Great Depression. The unemployment rate reaches more than 23 percent, and poverty and hunger are common in many areas.

Today: The United States is in the midst of an economic downturn. The unemployment rate rises from a thirty—two—year low of 4 percent in 2000 to hover in the 5 to 6 percent range in 2002.

1930s: Following the widespread adoption of trucks in the United States in the 1920s, the railroads lose business on their freight trains.

Today: Although the railroads' percentage of domestic freight traffic has decreased at a relatively steady rate since World War II, their higher percentage of freight traffic than trucks has been maintained.

1930s: During the Great Depression, many railroads fall into bankruptcy. Those that survive do so in part because of their adoption of new technologies, such as the diesel locomotive, which help make the trains faster and more efficient.

Today: In the United States, subways and passenger trains are popular options for daily commuting, although subways exist only in large cities such as New York, Boston, and Chicago. In Western Europe and Japan, however, railroads are experiencing a renaissance, thanks in part to the availability of technologically advanced, high—speed trains.

What Do I Read Next?

Unlike "The Far and the Near," which features an unnamed railroad engineer, the majority of Wolfe's longer works employ autobiographical characters, like Eugene Gant. Wolfe's first novel about Gant, *Look Homeward, Angel: A Story of the Buried Life* (1929), was set in his hometown of Asheville, North Carolina. The narrative follows Gant through his turbulent childhood and young adulthood, and its often negative depiction of the townspeople and the American South in general angered many residents.

Wolfe's *Of Time and the River: A Legend of Man's Hunger in His Youth* (1935) continues the story of Eugene Gant, following him into adulthood and throughout Europe. Like its predecessor, the book was highly autobiographical and drew directly upon Wolfe's experiences in Europe, including his adventures with two contemporary writers, F. Scott Fitzgerald and Sinclair Lewis.

At a writers' conference in 1935, Wolfe presented an essay describing the way that he wrote his books and his close editorial relationship with his editor at Scribner's, Maxwell Perkins. The essay was published in 1936 as *The Story of a Novel* and was reprinted with another essay in 1983 under the title *The Autobiography of an American Novelist.* Although both *The Story of a Novel* and *The Autobiography of an American Novelist* are currently out of print, they are available at many libraries.

Voltaire's satirical prose work *Candide; or, All for the Best* was first published in both French and English in 1759. The story criticizes one of the optimistic philosophical theories of Voltaire's time, which stated that humans live in the best of all possible worlds, ruled by a benevolent God. Voltaire challenged this idealistic idea by placing a number of optimistic characters in realistic situations where they are forced to face war, dismemberment, and death, among other horrors.

Further Study

Bloom, Harold, ed., *Thomas Wolfe,* Modern Critical Views series, Chelsea House, 2000.

This collection of essays offers a representative selection of the current criticism on the author. Like other books in this series, this volume features an introductory essay by Bloom, a bibliography, and a chronology.

Griffin, John Chandler, *Memories of Thomas Wolfe: A Pictorial Companion to "Look Homeward, Angel,"* Summerhouse Press, 1996.

Wolfe was known for his use of autobiographical elements in his fiction, starting with *Look Homeward, Angel: A Story of the Buried Life.* In this book, Griffin collects extracts from Wolfe's novel, along with photographs from Wolfe's life, giving readers an insight into how Wolfe constructed the tale.

Holliday, Shawn, *Thomas Wolfe and the Politics of Modernism,* Peter Lang Publishing, 2001.

Holliday offers reasons why Wolfe, who was once held in the same esteem as writers like Hemingway and Faulkner, now holds an uncertain place in the literary canon. Holliday attributes this to many factors, including Wolfe's critics (who, according to Holliday, misunderstood Wolfe's modernistic writing style) and editors (who, according to Holliday, tampered excessively with Wolfe's drafts).

Nowell, Elizabeth, *Thomas Wolfe: A Biography,* Greenwood Publishing Group, 1973.

Drawing on her experiences as Wolfe's agent—particularly during the period in which he wrote much of his short fiction—Nowell gives an in—depth look at her famous client. This first full—length biography of Wolfe was originally published in 1960.

Thorne, Martha, ed., *Modern Trains and Splendid Stations: Architecture, Design, and Rail Travel for the Twenty—First* Century, Merrell Publishers, 2001.

Although the popularity of railroads reached their peak in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the United States, in Western Europe and Japan they are experiencing a renaissance. This book details the look and feel of the modern trains—many of which are high—speed vehicles—and their corresponding train stations.

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Wank, Martin, "Thomas Wolfe: Two More Decades of Criticism," in the *South Atlantic Quarterly,* Vol. 69, No. 2, Spring 1970, pp. 243-55.

Wolfe, Thomas, "The Far and the Near," in *The Complete Short Stories of Thomas Wolfe,* edited by Francis E. Skipp, Collier Books, 1989, pp. 271-73.

BOOKRAGS

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Project Editor
David Galens

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Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

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Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
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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:

Editor, Short Stories for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535