Fever Study Guide

Fever by John Edgar Wideman

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Throughout his career, John Edgar Wideman has emerged as a prominent voice of the African-Ameri-can consciousness. Yet, he does not narrow his field only to African-American issues. His work, demonstrating an understanding of the greater themes that affect people of all races, speaks a universal language.

Wideman has also shown a drive for literary exploration, constantly searching for new ways to tell his stories. These characteristics combine in the title story of his 1989 short story collection, *Fever.* The author calls the challenging and complex "Fever" a "meditation on history." Through its examination of Philadelphia's 1793 yellow fever epidemic, it explores the racial ambiguities that exist in society. Wideman draws on real-life events and people to give his story a more credible and human feel. As his narrators explore the problems brought on by the fever, they present a concrete picture of the devastation the epidemic leaves behind, both in physical and emotional terms. Readers and critics alike admire "Fever" for its literary risks as well the significance of Wideman's message. Critics have consistently noted that it is one of his most ambitious pieces of short fiction.

Author Biography

John Edgar Wideman was born on June 14, 1941, in Washington, D.C., but he spent the first 10 years of his life in Homewood, a poor African-American neighborhood in Pittsburgh. As a child, Wideman had two loves: basketball and storytelling. When he was 12, Wideman and his family moved to a predominantly white neighborhood, where Wideman attended a racially integrated high school.

Wideman was very successful throughout high school. He was a basketball star, senior class president, and valedictorian. During high school, Wideman pursued intellectual self-development, but he found the white-dominated world of academia to be incompatible with the African-American experience. Wideman tried to keep these two worlds separate to such an extent that he spent his free time with other African-American students but his class time with white students. Because of these actions, Wideman often felt isolated from his own community.

Wideman was awarded a basketball scholarship to the University of Pittsburgh, where he studied psychology and English. He continued in his attempts to divide his white world from his black world, essentially setting aside his racial identity. Wideman felt he needed to do so in order to excel academically.

In 1963, Wideman became only the second African-American Rhodes Scholar, and he studied at Oxford University in England for three years. Wideman next was made a Kent Fellow in the creative writing program at the University of Iowa, after which he joined the faculty at the University of Pennsylvania. Although he was a member of the English Department, he also helped create the Afro-American Studies program, which he chaired from 1972 to 1973. During his first year at the university, in 1967, Wideman published his first novel, *A Glance Away.*

In the 1960s, Wideman began to read African-American literature for the first time, beginning the process of redefining himself as an African-Ameri-can man and writer. However, he still felt isolated from other African Americans. This problem was exacerbated when he and his family moved to Wyoming, where Wideman had accepted a university job. In the early 1970s, after returning to Homewood to attend his grandmother's funeral, Wideman began to integrate African-American traditions and cultures with the intellectual world that he inhabited.

Wideman has enjoyed a productive and successful literary career. He has published numerous novels and short stories as well as autobiographical meditations, primarily based on personal misfortunes that have affected his family. He is a two-time winner of the PEN/Faulkner Award for fiction, in 1984 and 1991. He is currently a professor of English at the University of Massachusetts—Amherst.

Plot Summary

The story opens in Philadelphia in 1793. The city, one of the centers of commerce and culture of the early United States, is gripped in the throes of a yellow fever epidemic. Those people with the means have fled the infected city, while the poor have been forced to remain behind, most likely to die. The city has essentially closed down.

The story's primary narrator is an African-American man called Allen. Although Allen has a wife and daughter, he has chosen to stay in the city, where he works for Dr. Rush, a practitioner determined to treat the fever's victims and understand the cause of the disease. Allen, once the founder of an African-American church, now spends his days caring for the sick and dying and burying the dead.

According to white Philadelphians, the disease has been brought to the city by slaves from Santo Domingo (present-day Haiti). This belief is based, not on any scientific evidence, but merely on racist ideas. Since the fever first began to spread, African Americans have been treated as pariahs; however, their services as caregivers and cemetery workers are still in great demand. In order to secure the services of African Americans for the sick, whites even falsely claim that African Americans are immune to the disease.

Prior to the outbreak of the epidemic, however, such ingrained racism was not always apparent. African-American slaves had fled to the North, seeking freedom in this Quaker haven where Christians claimed to uphold ideas of equality. While this standard had not been adhered to everywhere—at church, African Americans were forced to worship at the back of the pews—African Americans and whites had previously gathered together to commemorate the foundation of Allen's new church. A few Philadelphians do not fall prey to this racist rhetoric, however; some view the fever as a physical manifestation of problems inherent in present-day society, particularly slavery.

While working for Dr. Rush, Allen has the chance to observe the doctor's autopsies. The autopsies of both black and white victims of the disease are the same—that is, there is no difference in the effects of the fever on the human body. Rush hopes to use the results of these autopsies to prove that in order to prevent the disease, the body's toxic fluids must be drained away.

Throughout the story, a series of disjointed voices intrude on Allen's meditations. These voices represent people of different backgrounds, including a Jewish merchant, an African aboard a slave ship, a contemporary African-American hospital orderly, and flu victims. They fault Allen for helping Dr. Rush when he should be serving his own people, talk of racism and human suffering, discuss how African Americans view freedom, and point to the universality—over both time and place—of prejudice. The narration also talks about another tragedy that took place in Philadelphia: a firebombing that took the lives of 11 people, including several children.

The story, which does not follow a chronological plot line, has no definite end. Neither Allen's fate nor that of many of the other characters is made clear. The final image is that of an autopsy in which the doctors will find the miniature hand of a child next to the dead person's heart.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

"Fever" opens with a man staring out the window of a ship at the naked trees. In his mind, he compares them to "barren women starved for love"—and to himself. It is winter, the days are shorter, and he is alone. In the hold of a ship, another man—a slave—wonders why the gods have chosen to put him here, chained to other captives, bumping and shaking in puddles of waste. A mosquito squats on him, drinks his blood, but he does not kill her. He thinks of her as a woman straddling and entering him; if she returns day after day, eventually she will drain all of his blood and he will disappear. The mosquito is an ominous sign of the spread of the fever.

Between these two points of view, an omniscient narrator and a first-person plural narrator, in the form of a collective ("we"), alternately describe the effects of yellow fever and Dengue, two diseases transmitted by mosquitoes and producing chills, headache, sick stomach, pains in the limbs, and yellowed eyes. Some of the sick languish a week or more, others only a few days. Some go mad, while others simply go to sleep.

The story takes place primarily in low-lying Philadelphia in the summer of 1793. The city, ravaged by an epidemic, has been abandoned to the dead and dying, slowly deteriorating like the people succumbing to the fever. An old man who has seen the fever before compares the city to a slave—held captive—with poisons circulating through it. He says it is cyclical like the seasons and that most will survive and with the frost, it will disappear, as surely as it will come again. Some believe the fever has been brought by slaves on the ships from Santo Domingo, but the old man says, "Fever grows in the secret places of our hearts, planted there when one of us decided to sell one of us to another. The drum must pound ten thousand years to drive that evil away."

Tending to the sick is Allen, a free black minister who emerges as the central character. Allen sees himself as a kind of Moses to his people, dreaming of leading them out of this land, where they escaped slavery only to fall victim to dissolute living. Philadelphia, though a Quaker refuge, is still a city divided, where every immigrant had come from the water dreaming of a holy city, but only whites had managed to find their way out of the riverfront shanties. Even in church, the blacks cannot kneel at the front of the gallery, and so Allen built his own church, where blacks and whites came together briefly before the epidemic to celebrate what might be the dawn of a new day. When the sinners among his people—the weak and the outcast—spurned him, Allen took his preaching to them, enduring their jeering and spitting with an unfathomable love.

With the outbreak of fever, the tentative fiction of equality has been exposed. Blacks are accused of having brought and spread the contagion, and then are said to be immune. At first, they are unwelcome, discharged, called evil. Then they are commanded to tend to and bury the dead, being blessed by an immunity that is as much a lie as their

equality. Ordered to save the city, their constant exposure spreads the disease among the black population, which is too poor to seek help.

Allen is one of those who have been commandeered to treat the afflicted. He works for Dr. Rush, who believes only draining the poisons from the blood will save the victims, and who autopsies the dead in an attempt to find the cause of the disease. Allen, torn between his duty and his desire to help the sick among his own population, watches Dr. Rush dip his hands into the black and corrupted blood of the victims, noting that on the inside all the afflicted look the same.

As Allen moves from house to house, patient to patient, he thinks about the river, filled with waste, rising and threatening to drag him down. He watches carts move past filled with bodies, parentless children wandering the streets. The thought of spoil obsesses him. At the same time, it strikes him that fever has made him freer than he's ever been: the government has collapsed, he can come and go as he pleases, amass a fortune, sell himself to the highest bidder as a nurse or a surgeon trained by the famous Dr. Rush.

Voices in his head accuse him of hypocrisy, working to save the white people instead of his own. In one house, he finds a white family dead, their black servant ill and exhausted, having chosen to stay. As he wonders why she, finally free, hadn't chosen to run away, a voice in his head calls him names, demands to know why *he* stays. This voice tells Allen his fatal flaw is narrowness of vision; if he would only be a Moses to his people and lead them out of the city, he would find a better place.

Another voice, an old Jewish merchant, perhaps a patient, remembers his own experiences with prejudice and tells Allen that in leaving his wife and children to build his wealth, he lost them, implying the same will happen to Allen. He tells Allen to abandon the city and Dr. Rush and go to his wife and daughters. Another patient asks Allen why he really stays, what "sacred destiny, what nigger errand" keeps him. He says perhaps Allen cannot imagine being other than he is—a free man with no one to blame, "the weight of your life in your hands." Like the others, he tells Allen to run away, rescue his family.

Far in the future, an old man has lived to see the slaves freed. Having shed the city, he still does not know if he is free or has only "crawled deeper into the sinuous pit." He searches a child's face, looking for himself, and thinks of parents, children, himself, all of them orphans, poorer than they were before. "Pray for me, child," he says. "For my unborn parents I carry in this orphan's potbelly." Elsewhere, a young orderly is tending to white people, barely scraping by. However, since he has no family, it is enough, and, he declares, he is free.

Allen finds two Santo Domingan refugees dead, husband and wife with their backs turned to each other, as if they could not stand the horror. Just before uncovering their faces, Allen has a vision of the faces of his wife and daughter. He longs to rearrange the dead couple, hide the vision from the undertakers, though no one knows anything of the recent immigrants, no one has dared ask any questions. The couple has left two

screaming brown babies behind. Before word reaches Allen, his wife and daughters are dead.

As the fever ends, the population is determined to put it behind them. A new century will soon dawn and the horrors must be forgotten. Only, the mayor of the same city two hundred years later kills half a dozen children when he bombs the residence of an outspoken African-American organization. Proclaiming a new day, he thanks city officials and volunteers for returning the city to its destined glory.

Analysis

"Fever" is a story of slavery and disease, both caused by the poison in men's hearts. It is a complex narrative composed of many different voices that use a range of points of view, or perspectives: third-person limited, third-person omniscient, first-person, and even first-person plural (the collective "we"). In fact, this, along with the nonlinear, or non-chronological, structure, is the most striking feature of the story.

At its essence, "Fever" tells the story of a free black man who, during the course of a yellow fever epidemic in 1793 Philadelphia, discovers he is still enslaved. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Philadelphia was known as a refuge for runaway slaves, a city founded on Quaker egalitarian ideals. However, through the perspective of Allen, we learn that Philadelphia at the time of the story does struggle with inequality; although blacks and whites can come together to celebrate the founding of Allen's church, Allen was forced to build the church because blacks were not allowed to sit in the front of white churches. The Delaware River, which brings white and black immigrants, slaves and freed (and escaped) slaves, is thick with waste, and forms an invisible barrier between white and black. Here, white immigrants learn English and move on, while black immigrants, though they learn English, are destined to live the remainder of their days in the squalid filth of the caves they have dug for themselves.

These caves are a symbol of the dark future Allen sees for his people, who, having obtained their freedom, have fallen victim to poverty and complacence. He tries to preach to them of dreams of parting the river like Moses and leading them away, but he is interrupted by the outbreak, which only throws the racial division of the city into sharper relief. Blacks are accused of both having caused the plague and being immune to it, the latter only when it serves the purposes of the white population. Nevertheless, the central question of the story is why Allen, a free man, chooses to stay in the infected city and treat the whites.

Allen, obsessed by what he sees as spoil all around him—both physical waste in the river and the dissolution of the sinners among his people—is conflicted between his desire to save his people and the waste he sees among them. In fact, they fling waste at him, curse him, spit at him; they do not seem to want his help, while the white population does. It is this sense of duty to those who demand his help that Allen, on the surface, believes is keeping him in the city. In watching Dr. Rush bleed the sick and autopsy the dead, Allen sees that all the victims, black and white, are the same on the

inside, their blood sluggish and vile, much like the river and the poisoned arteries and veins of the city.

The city is a key metaphor in the story, compared both physically and figuratively with the people who have been left in it during the outbreak. It is wasted and dying, its streets the veins and arteries that distribute the poison. The poison—prejudice, poverty, hopelessness and isolation—manifests itself in a devastating fever that enslaves everyone, both black and white. While this epidemic runs its course, everyone is a slave—and everyone is equal.

Free from both slavery and infection, Allen could choose to run away before he carries the infection home, but he does not. He recognizes the possibility when he sees the black servant who remained with her dying family, but he is unable to make the same choice he would demand of her. Some of the narrative voices function as Allen's internal critics, cursing and insulting him in an effort to get him to leave. Despite his vision of leading his people, Allen is never able to make that decision.

Although he ostensibly remains to save lives, whether black or white, Allen also recognizes that the anarchy reigning in the city is an opportunity to advance him. People need him, and they want him because he has worked with a famous white doctor; their physical wellbeing is far more valuable than their souls to both Allen and the people he treats. Allen suffers from the same temptation as the people he preached to, one of the voices suggesting he's more comfortable remaining enslaved, is perhaps afraid of the responsibility of being truly free—able and obligated to make his own decisions and accept the consequences. This is his hypocrisy, and his downfall, and it is foreshadowed directly by the story of the old Jewish merchant who tells Allen that in seeking his fortune he lost his family. In tending to the sick white population, Allen abandons his own freedom in the hope of obtaining more materially, but in doing so, he loses what he loves the most, his wife and daughters, who die of the fever.

Family seems to be a central bond in the story, without which the entire community can never overcome the poison killing it. The essential isolation of every character, from the dead couple found back-to-back to the Jewish merchant to the old man in the future—the orphan who carries his unborn parents in his belly—seems to result from a loss of family, and an inability to clearly envision a positive future, or past. The devastation of the city results from the destruction of many families, and the isolation of slavery, whether self-imposed or not, is as much a poison as the fever.

Present-day narrators offer a deeper view of slavery than could have been provided by Allen's single perspective, in that they show that while the institution of slavery has been abolished, much of mankind is still enslaved—isolated, impoverished, hypocritical. As the epidemic ends and a new day dawns, the city turns its back on the horror rather than face it, much like the dead husband and wife Allen longed to rearrange. In the same stroke, two hundred years pass and the municipal government of Philadelphia purges violence with violence in attempt to restore its illusory glory. The firebombing results in the deaths of half a dozen children.

There is no traditional structure to this story, any recognizable beginning, middle, or end. Rather, the narrative—and the narrators themselves—moves in and out of the central time of the story, lending perspectives of both time and distance. The opening imagery, in which the trees are described as barren women, foreshadow the conclusion, which uses the voices of present-day characters to describe a Philadelphia as sick and dying as it was in 1793. The opening description of winter, the epidemic of the summer, and the recurring theme of the ebb and flow of the water that gave birth to the city all make for a cyclic narrative, in which the reader is brought to understand that as long as poison exists in men's hearts, epidemics will recur and slavery will continue.

Characters

Master Abraham

Master Abraham is a Jewish shopkeeper from Europe. He came to America only to experience the same prejudice that drove him from Antwerp, where his son was killed in a racial attack. By the time he speaks in the story, he has become afflicted with the fever.

Allen

Much of the story is told by an African-Ameri-can man named Allen, both from the first-person point of view and the second-person point of view. Many critics have suggested that Allen is based on Richard Allen, the founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Allen serves as an assistant to Dr. Rush; he helps care for the victims of yellow fever, and in some cases, helps bury them. He also has a wife and a daughter from whom he is separated for fear that he will infect them. Allen spends much time thinking about the cause of the fever and ruminating on his life and the lives of other African Americans, both free and enslaved.

Before the fever epidemic, Allen had been a preacher and founder of a church for African Ameri-cans. How he has come to aide Dr. Rush is not made clear in the story, but Allen expresses his devotion to remaining in Philadelphia to help the dying. He does so out of concern for the sick, but also because the fever has, perversely, made him freer than ever because it has given him the opportunity to learn the skills of the white doctor. Allen is joined in his ministrations by his brother, Thomas.

Dr. Rush

Alternately called a charlatan and a lifesaver, Dr. Rush has remained in the city to care for the sick and to conduct research on what causes the fever. Dr. Rush has been attacked by other members of the medical profession for his practice of purging and bleeding patients. The autopsies he has performed on the bodies have led him to believe that fever victims die from drowning in their own toxic bodily fluids, and he publishes literature to this effect.

Voices

About halfway through "Fever," Allen says, "I recite the story many, many times to myself, let many voices speak to me. . . ." Wideman includes a number of different voices in "Fever," and these voices and their narratives expand the story's themes from the deaths in Philadelphia and the white people's placement of blame on African Americans to racism and prejudice in general. The characters who speak include an

African aboard a slave ship; a modern-day African-American hospital orderly; and an unidentified person who refers to a firebombing that killed 11 Philadelphians in the 1980s.

Wilcox

Wilcox serves as an undertaker, carting the dead to their burial plots. After two months of such work, he is infected by a body and soon falls fatally ill with the fever himself.

Themes

Prejudice and Racism

One of the prevailing themes found in "Fever" is that of prejudice. The white Philadelphians place all blame for the yellow fever that grips the city on slaves who have been sent from Santo Domingo to Philadelphia. Although there is no factual or medical evidence linking the slaves to the spread of the fever, this belief continues to prevail. African Ameri-cans are shunned throughout the city except for when their services are required, such as for caring for the sick and burying the dead.

Through the different voices, prejudice against people other than African Americans is explored. A Jewish character, Abraham, reports how he was hated by even his employees. He also explores the universality of racism in his recollection of how European Jews were often accused of bringing fever and disease that killed entire cities.

Racism is inherent in the way African Americans are treated, both during this time of crisis and prior to it. Allen remembers how African Americans were forced to remain at the back of the church, so he founded a church solely for the worship of African Americans. At the same time, however, the story points to a time when African Americans and whites came together on an equal level, such as at the founding of Allen's new church. The tenuous connection between white and black Philadelphians is demonstrated by the ease with which it is severed.

Slavery

Slavery is an underlying theme that affects almost all of the story's major narratives. The description of a slave ship makes clear the horrible conditions under which Africans were brought to the Americas. The story also equates the plight of free African Americans in Philadelphia with their brothers and sisters still in chains. Thus, the issue of slavery is present in all aspects of African-Ameri-can life in the 1700s, whether the African Ameri-cans are free or enslaved. Ironically, many African Americans were drawn to Philadelphia because it was a predominately Quaker city; followers of the Quaker faith emerged as some of America's earliest opponents of slavery.

Allen, though a free man, lives in a sort of self-imposed slavery. One of the voices accuses him of following Dr. Rush like a "loyal puppy" and then proceeds with a litany of racist slurs to emphasize how Allen is not truly acting freely but instead buckling under and becoming what the whites expect of him. The voice makes the slavery analogy more explicit by comparing Allen to a potential Moses for his people. Instead of leading the He-brews out of slavery in Egypt, the voice challenges Allen to lead African Americans from the drudgery of their Philadelphia lives and their "lapdogging" to white people to a place where they would be appreciated for their own talents and skills.

Yet another voice—that of an afflicted person—emerges to speak of what slavery means. This voice maintains that sick people are more enslaved than anyone, white or black, for those with the disease have no choice but to follow its bidding. This voice urges Allen to break the bonds of his slavery to Dr. Rush and return to his family.

Finally, voices from more contemporary times emerge to give their reflections on slavery and freedom. A former slave recalls what it was like to be at the beck and call of a master. Another thoroughly modern voice speaks out, telling of his unpleasant job in a nursing home, but ending with the words, "But me, I'm free. It ain't that bad, really."

Illness and Death

In a story about a raging yellow fever epidemic, illness and death play a major part. The effects of yellow fever on the body are described in the autopsy reports, as are the maladies suffered by the afflicted people. However, the illness that holds Philadelphia in its grip is also reflected in the stillness of the streets and the stoppage of business. Philadelphia has become a place utterly transformed by the disease that decimates its inhabitants, and African Americans the scapegoat for the wrath and fear of the white inhabitants. Clearly, the yellow fever epidemic has affected not only its victims' physical bodies but also its victims' and soon-to-be victims' mental states.

The shadow of death pervades the story. Death manifests itself in the bodies piled high in the cemetery carts, in the cries of the orphans, in Allen's refusal to return to his wife and child, and in the almost-emptied city. However, death has the power to grab hold of everyone, as it captures Wilcox, who had been faithfully burying bodies for two months.

Style

Point of View

"Fever" does not maintain any one consistent point of view. Much of the story is told from Allen's perspective, both from the first-person and third-person point of view; it is he who describes the dead bodies, the transformed city, and Dr. Rush's efforts and experiments. Allen is the character that readers most closely identify with. He appears to be knowledgeable and sincere in his desire to help fever victims and in his concern for chronicling life before and during the epidemic. Because he is a person of authority and respect in his community and because he shows such care for the victims of the disease, Allen's opinions and reflections are generally trusted.

However, many other voices, some of them not easily identifiable, emerge to give a more complete story and to broaden the story's field of inquiry. These other voices, which include persons who range throughout time, raise issues of slavery, prejudice, and racism. They allow the reader to see other perspectives on the way in which such evils can destroy a society and its people.

There is also the point of view of a detached narrator. This narrator gives historical background about the yellow fever epidemic, describes how it is blamed on African slaves, and explains the effects it has on its victims. Such inclusion helps ground the story more firmly in the reality of Philadelphia's 1793 yellow fever epidemic. The factual voice lends credibility to the story, making readers take its implications of racism inherent to American society more seriously.

Narrative

"Fever" utilizes a more complex narrative structure than many other short stories. It does not tell a complete story in the sense that the reader can read through and identify a clearly defined beginning, middle, and end. Instead, all the distinct sections of the story—some of which, however, do unfold chronologically and in a more ordered fashion—work together to make a composite picture of a specific time and place as well as to present more general themes about the human condition.

The story opens by firmly rooting the events about to unfold in their historical perspective by use of a quote and an address to a real person, Matthew Carey. From that point on, however, the story skips between Allen's narration, other voices, and factual presentation concerning yellow fever's origins and its effects on the human body. The end of the story returns the reader to contemporary times—when the story was written—with its discussion of a firebombing in Philadelphia.

Setting

The setting of the story is primarily late 18th-century Philadelphia. Wideman describes what the city was like before and during the epidemic period. He presents the complex society of Philadelphia in the interaction of its African-American and white inhabitants. Philadelphia's general racial progres-sivism is made clear through references to the Quakers; however, the delicate nature of such racial tolerance is also made clear in the abrupt change that the city undergoes as a result of the deadly fever.

However, the story has other settings as well. Voices of characters who live in Europe and in contemporary Philadelphia also emerge. This multitude of settings serves to demonstrate that some of the ills of 18th-century Philadelphia, such as racism, fear, and lack of communication, are prevalent facets of all societies, past and present.

Metaphor

The use of metaphor is an important aspect of "Fever." The fever becomes indicative of both suffering and injustice. Indeed, Wideman uses the yellow fever epidemic to demonstrate the insidious and destructive nature of racism. The same way that the fever has the power to destroy its victims, the racism of whites has the power to destroy goodwill and good relations between all people. The fever also represents the powerlessness that people hold over their own lives as it becomes the ultimate master of its victims, enslaving both whites and African Americans in its clutches.

Wideman makes use of other metaphors in the story. The attempts of doctors, or the holders of knowledge, to understand the cause of the disease becomes a metaphor for the attempts of humans to understand hate. Disease comes to represent not only a physical ailment but the manifestation of the sins of the unholy and unjust.

Historical Context

18th-Century Philadelphia

In 1682, colonial Pennsylvania's capital city Philadelphia was founded by Quakers, a Protestant sect that believed in the equality of men and women, religious tolerance, and nonviolence. Only a few years later Quakers in Pennsylvania lodged the first recorded colonial protests against slavery. Throughout the next several centuries, Philadelphia, and Pennsylvania, remained a capital of Quaker thought and ideology. Pennsylvania, a state that bordered the South, also was the destination of many fleeing slaves. However, the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793, which allowed slaveowners to capture runaway slaves without a warrant, led to the capture of many legally freed African Americans.

Despite such Quaker tolerance, true racial equality and lack of discrimination did not exist in Phila-delphia. For instance, white Methodists favored the emancipation of the slaves, but they did not treat African Americans as equals.

Richard Allen and the Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1793

In 1793, Philadelphia was hit by a yellow fever epidemic that decimated the city. The Black Plague, as it is known, took the lives of thousands of Philadelphians. While many people fled the city, others stayed behind to help care for the sick. The minister Richard Allen was one of these people. Although he had no medical training, Allen was a noted "Bleeder," which is roughly the equivalent of a present-day surgeon. Along with his fellow African-American preacher Absalom Jones, Allen organized Philadelphia's African-American population to nurse the yellow fever victims. Dr. Benja-min Rush, a leading physician of the time and also a signer of the American Declaration of Independence, praised Allen for the service he gave to Philadelphia during this difficult time.

Allen was born into slavery, but through hard work he was able to buy his freedom from his owner. After heading North and becoming a Methodist preacher, Allen was appointed as assistant minister to a mixed congregation in Philadelphia. When church officials denied several African-American worshipers, including Allen, the right to pray at the front of the church and instead confined them to the rear, Allen decided to build an African-Ameri-can owned church. In 1794, he and a group of 10 other African-American Methodists converted a blacksmith shop into the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church. In 1816, several other African-American congregations joined with Bethel to form the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and Allen was named its bishop.

Racial Issues in the 1980s

Throughout the 1980s, joblessness remained high among African Americans, especially unskilled workers in the inner cities. African Americans, who on the average had less education than whites, were, along with Hispanics, the last to be hired and the first to be fired. More than 30 percent of all African Americans, or nine million people, lived in poverty. Half of these families lived in a household headed by a woman.

African Americans, however, continued to rise to political power in the nation's cities. African-American leaders won or held the mayoral office in such prominent urban centers as Philadelphia, Chi-cago, New York, Los Angeles, Detroit, and Wash-ington, D.C. On a federal level, the Reagan administration attacked and even reversed some civil rights legislation and policies. A 1988 *Newsweek* poll showed that 71 percent of the African-American respondents believed that the federal government was doing "too little" to help them. The Reverend Jesse Jackson, who ran for president in 1984 and 1988, became an important civil rights advocate.

Significant racial incidents also occurred in the 1980s. Riots took place in Miami, Florida after four white police officers were acquitted of beating an African-American man to death; young white men fatally shot an African American in Bensonhurt, New York; and neo-Nazis and members of the Ku Klux Klan attacked civil rights marchers who were celebrating the new Martin Luther King, Jr., holiday. Racial incidents on college campuses also rose, and many African-American students reported feeling greater hostility from whites.

The Bombing of MOVE

In May 1985 the Philadelphia police department bombed the residence of MOVE, a radical African-American group. The members had already resisted repeated orders to leave the premises, and the police force, knowing they were armed, decided that force was necessary to remove the group. The ensuing helicopter bombing of the MOVE house turned into a deadly fiasco. Police intended the bomb to open a hole in the house so officers could throw in tear gas canisters. Instead, the bomb caused a fire that killed 11 MOVE members, including 5 children. The fire soon raged out of control and burned down 53 houses located on the block, leaving an estimated 225 people without homes. This government intervention has since been called the bloodiest and the most aggressive action ever undertaken against an urban African-American community in the United States.

Critical Overview

Throughout his career, Wideman has been perceived as a serious, important interpreter of the African-American experience in America. He has examined issues ranging from the deterioration of African-American urban life, the meaning of being an African-American man, and the role that violence plays in American life. Many of these issues are raised in *Fever,* Wideman's second collection of short stories, which was published in 1989.

These stories all deal with suffering, death, the failure of communication, and the quest for redemption. Wideman, however, sees "Fever" as "the key story, the pivotal story." In an interview with Judith Rosen of *Publishers Weekly* in 1989 he explained: "I see the others as refractions of the material gathered there. All the stories are about a kind of illness or trouble in the air. People aren't talking to one another or are having a difficult time talking to one another. There's misunderstanding, not only on an individual level but on a cultural level."

Reviewers of *Fever* also single out the title story, noting its uniqueness, its range, and its message. Susan Fromberg Schaeffer, writing for *The New York Times,* calls "Fever" "almost majestic in its evocation of the goodness and evil of the human heart." She further notes the peculiar perspective used by Wideman in this collection, which she expresses as "not quite human but godlike, not limited by the conventions of ordinary storytelling." She finds that "Fever" makes use of this style of storytelling successfully, culminating in "an almost unbearably anguished meditation on human nature in plague time, the power and sadness of the story are enormous, its vision triumphant."

Wideman's career can be characterized by his search for new ways to explore themes and ideas and to express the African-American experience. "Fever" is a boldly experimental work, one that floats back and forth between time periods and narrators and thus defies easy labeling or analysis. Randall Kenan of *The Nation* forthrightly deals with Wideman's slipping back and forth in time; he presents his own reasoning: "It is as if Wideman is again playing games with us, forcing us to see the past and the present as one; how we are affected by what has gone before, not only in our thinking but in our acting and in our soul-deep believing." Despite the story's elusive nature and Wideman's claims to Rosen that the story "shouldn't be tied to any historical period," reviewers note his evocation of a specific period in American history. Other reviewers comment on the way Wideman collapses time to present a composite picture of a certain place and mindset. Cara Hood writing for the *Voice Literary Supplement* claims that present-day Philadelphia emerges as the protagonist of the story.

Reviewers do not overlook the significance of Wideman's message in examining his style. Herbert Mitgang in the *New York Times* finds that even after reading the story, he is left with the knowledge of Wideman's search for "some sort of universality" to the human condition. Some reviewers, however, do not care for the way in which Wideman attempts to get his message to readers. For instance, Clarence Major of the *Washington Post* believes "Fever" to be the most ambitious if not the most artistically

successful story of the collection. Mitgang recognizes the importance of what Wideman is saying when he writes that Wideman's "voice as a modern black writer with something to report comes through." Despite this praise, Mitgang does not believe that the rest of the stories are successful, asserting in his review of the collection that they add nothing to Wideman's reputation as a writer.

In Wideman's extensive and accomplished body of work, "Fever" occupies only a small spot. Yet, if it accomplishes nothing more, it demonstrates Wideman's careful exploration of relationships among people and the effects that these relationships have on society. Wideman's interest in the issues he raises in "Fever"—including racial relations, communication, personal freedom, and violence—is seen in the works that he has written later in his career. *Philadelphia Fire* picks up the final section of the story in its fictionalization of the 1985 MOVE bombing. *The Cattle Killing* explores the devastating effects of racial prejudice on the Afri-can Americans who remained behind in Philadel-phia during the 1793 yellow fever epidemic in greater detail. The body of Wideman's work strengthens Robert Bones' assertion, made in 1978, that Wideman is "perhaps the most gifted black novelist of his generation."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
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Critical Essay #1

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, she examines how Wideman presents themes of racism and equality in "Fever."

John Edgar Wideman's life could read as any of the dramatic, brooding novels and short stories that he has produced over the course of his long, successful career. Raised in a predominately African-Ameri-can neighborhood in Pittsburgh, he nonetheless moved with fluidity in both the black and the white worlds. His talent at basketball led to a scholarship at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, where he proved himself a brilliant and diligent student. He won a Rhodes Scholarship in 1963, which brought him international attention because he was only the second African American to do so. Also that year, he was the subject of a magazine article in *Look* entitled "The Astonishing John Wideman."

Wideman saw his career as a writer take off in 1967, when he was only 26, with the publication of his first novel *A Glance Away.* While his writing brought him acclaim and contributed to a secondary career as a professor, his personal life was beset with difficulties. In 1976, his brother was convicted of murder and sentenced to life in prison after a man was killed by his accomplice in a burglary attempt. Then, in 1986, Wideman's teenage son stabbed and killed a classmate during a summer-camp trip; he was sentenced to life imprisonment. After this event, articles that appeared in *Vanity Fair* and *Esquire* characterized Wideman as filled with controlled racial anger.

Wideman, whose work often focuses on the unique experiences of African-American men, the deterioration of African-American urban life, and violence and criminal behavior in America, has used his writing to work through these devastating experiences. His memoir about his brother, *Brothers and Keepers,* was nominated for the National Book Award. *Philadelphia Fire* interweaves personal feelings about what happened to his son with a plot centering around the 1985 police bombing of the Philadelphia headquarters of the radical Afri-can-American group, MOVE.

These works do not follow a traditional storytelling style, using a much freer method for exploring issues raised by questions about suffering, race, and redemption. For instance, part II of *Philadelphia Fire* draws on literary, historical, and sociological commentary to broaden the scope of Wideman's narrative. The stories in *Fever,* Wideman's second collection published in 1989, also stretch the limits of the mainstream short story; his narrations play with historical time, style, voice, and sequence. Perhaps none of these stories do so to the extent of "Fever," which is in Wideman's opinion, the key story of the collection.

"Fever" centers around a deadly yellow fever epidemic that struck Philadelphia in 1793 and the effects it had on the city's African-American population, who were largely blamed for bringing the disease. The main figure in the story is a man named Allen, who Wideman leads the reader to believe is based on (or indeed is) the historical figure

Richard Allen. The real-life Allen, like the fictional Allen, risked his own life to remain in Philadelphia to nurse the sick and dying. However, the story is truly much more than just the story of an epidemic and one man's role in it. It brings up significant issues of racism and prejudice and how these problems can destroy a community. In utilizing different voices and moving through time, Wideman makes clear that these problems are not tied merely to 18th-century America, but have existed throughout the world and throughout time and continue to the present day.

In discussing *Brothers and Keepers* Wideman had already presented his belief that telling stories in chronological order was pointless and even detracted from a truer meaning: "You never know exactly when something begins," he wrote. "The more you delve and backtrack and think, the clearer it becomes that nothing has a discrete, independent history; people and events take shape not in orderly, chronological sequence but in relation to other forces and events, tangled skeins of necessity and interdependence and chance that after all could have produced only one result: what is." In "Fever," some of the most startling innovations in the story are Wideman's use of a nonlinear time and multiple narrators, although these voices are often difficult to identify and distinguish. While such characteristics might make a cursory read of "Fever" confusing, these stylistic devices serve Wideman's greater purpose and message: that of the prevailing nature of racism and hatred among people.

The culminating force of the various voices point out the disharmony to which racism leads. While most white Philadelphians believe that Afri-can slaves from Santo Domingo have brought the affliction to their city, no scientific evidence exists to this effect. However, such racist thought is not to be dispelled, and African Americans in Philadel-phia are shunned and treated as "evil incarnate." Allen notes, "A dark skin was seen not only as a badge of shame for its wearer, . . . It mattered not that some of us were born here and spoke no language but the English language, second-, even third-generation African Americans who knew no other country." Allen then compares African Ameri-cans to European immigrants who do not even speak English, making clear that prejudice against Philadelphia's African Americans is based merely on the color of their skin. The European immigrants exhibit more typically foreign traits, such as "clodhopper shoes, strange costumes, . . . Lowlander gibberish that sounded like men coughing or dogs barking"; yet, these white people are not blamed for any disease. Perhaps even more indicative of the malignant nature of white Philadelphia's racism is the false charge that African Americans are immune to the disease, a story manufactured solely for the purpose of sending them out to the sick community as caregivers. In reality, the fever struck a severe blow to the city's African-American population. As Allen attests, "Among the city's poor and destitute the fever's ravages were most deadly and we are always the poorest of the poor."

Although Allen recognizes these falsehoods, expressing his anger against whites for their unfounded accusations—"My fellow countrymen searching everywhere but in their own hearts," he says, "the foulness upon which this city is erected"—he still remains within the disease-stricken community to help the sick, both white and African American. For this action, some of the story's other narrators chastise him: "Can you imagine yourself, Allen, as other than you are?" the voice of an afflicted person charges. Without

his ties to Dr. Rush and the dying community, Allen would truly hold "the weight of your life in your hands," rather than the weight of others' lives. For Allen, this would be the harder task. "Tell me what sacred destiny, what nigger errand keeps you standing here at my filthy pallet?" asks the voice, implying that Allen, a free African American, is fulfilling the most common role of his race in America—that of a slave. Although a voice urges Allen to "dare be a Moses to your people and lead them out of this land," Allen resists the call and instead lingers in Philadelphia under the orders of Dr. Rush, a white man.

The story also makes clear, however, that captivity can exist in many forms. Allen identifies that former African-American slaves who had struggled to reach freedom in the North fell prey to a new form of slavery, the "chains of dissolute living." A fever victim speaks to Allen, claiming that he is "more slave than you've ever been," for he does the fever's "bidding absolutely." Even the city itself is held captive by "long fingers of river," and the city in turns holds many of its residents captive. One of the final voices of the story also affirms the precious gift of freedom. This voice belongs to an African-American hospital orderly who, although he complains about his job and the elderly people he cares for, ends his monologue with the words: "But me, I'm free. It ain't that bad, really."

The emphasis Wideman places on the various forms of slavery strengthens his thesis that the fever has not been brought by the Santo Domingan slaves but has been wrought by the evilness that lurks in human's hearts. "We have bred the affliction within our breasts.... Fever descends when the waters that connect us are clogged with filth.... Nothing is an accident. Fever grows in the secret places of our hearts, planted there when one of us decided to sell one of us to another." If fever is caused by slavery, slavery, he says, is caused by a failure to see beyond the color of a person's skin.

Yet, the fever also demonstrates that humans are all the same in their response to the disease. Autopsy reports confirm that the insides of the bodies of fever victims, both whites and African Americans, look alike. "When you open the dead," a narrator intones, "black or white, you find: . . ." The narrator then goes on to list the states of the various organs. The outer skin of the victims does, however, undergo a transformation. The skin of white people turn black, and one victim even acknowledges to Allen that "When I die, they say my skin will turn as black as yours." The fever is truly an equalizing force, for it makes everyone bow to its will.

Another device employed by Wideman to show the inherent, though often denied equality of humans is that of twinning. Literal and figurative twins abound in "Fever." People are paired: Dr. Rush and Deveze, Allen and his brother Thomas; the members of these two pairs perform the same function and are interchangeable. For each person, someone exists who is on the same level. The fever itself is seen as the twin to "Barbados's distemper" and is linked to epidemics in Europe. Allen also finds twin brown babies in a cellar where two Santo Domingan refugees have died. The twinning metaphor can be further drawn. For instance, Master Abraham and Allen have very real similarities; both have left their wife and children behind to lose them forever. Further, Master Abraham's references to Palatine fever in Europe's cities, which many people

claimed was brought by Jews, show that minority populations become the butt of racist fear at the hands of the majority. Such similarities further emphasize Wideman's thesis of racism as a universal feeling, one that has the ultimate power of destroying those who are its victims as well as those who perpetuate it.

In many ways, however, "Fever" resists comprehensive analysis. There are simply too many unexplained and unidentified persons, events, and references. Wideman has truly produced a work that, while opening a door onto new ways of looking at issues, also shuts it in its complexity. But with a writer of Wideman's stature and talent, clearly this confusion is intentional. Wideman may be seen as deliberately conflating characters and events in order to show that the themes of the story are so prevalent and so universal. His characters, as well as his narrative, defy labeling, even though the story actually challenges readers to do so. For instance, at times it is not even clear whether a speaker is African American or white, even though the story is so closely tied to racial issues. Wideman makes a reader ponder serious issues but allows for no real answers to any questions raised. In so doing, he opens a world of possibility for interpretation, which in turn, allows for greater personal understanding of the story.

Source: Rena Korb, Overview of "Fever," for *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 1999 .

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Piedmont-Marton explores Wideman's use of the fever as a metaphor for racism.

Wideman calls "Fever" a meditation on history. Using the powerful and disturbing metaphor of plague or fever for racism and hatred, Wideman moves through history and brings together voices from the 18th to the late 20th centuries. He meditates on history, or past events, but also on history as the means by which human beings record and pass on knowledge. His commentary is as much about the process of history as it is about the events.

In the story's powerful opening paragraph, readers are introduced to the first of several unnamed characters. This paragraph is not located in any particular historical moment, and its ominous imagery of dead trees and impending darkness is timeless. The narrative then veers sharply from the universal to the specific as Wideman piles on the details of a terrible fever epidemic in Philadelphia. He also distinguishes yellow fever from dengue and explains the symptoms of each as if preparing readers to enter the infected area or reminding them to check themselves for rashes or aching joints. Wideman imagines the epidemic's beginning in the hold of a slave ship and characterizes the mosquito that transmits the disease as a succubus, or evil female spirit. "In the darkness he can't see her, barely feels her light touch on his fevered skin. Sweat thick as oil but she doesn't mind, straddles him, settles down to do her work. She enters him and draws his blood up into her belly."

Back in Philadelphia the narrator seems to know about the origins and course of the disease, as if he has been present at its beginnings and during other epidemics. He says: "No one has asked my opinion. No one will. Yet I have seen this fever before, and though I can prescribe no cure, I could tell stories of other visitations, how it came and stayed and left us, the progress of disaster, its several stages, its horrors and mitigations." It's tempting to blame the newest outsider, the narrator says, the former slave refugees from the uprising in Santo Domingo, but "to explain the fever we need no boatloads of refugees, ragged and wracked with killing fevers, bringing death to our shores." He knows that "fever descends when the waters that connect us are clogged with filth," but he also advances a more metaphysical and moral cause, originating from the mosquito on the slave ship: "Fever grows in the secret places of our hearts, planted there when one of us decided to sell one of us to another." Fever will come again and again so long as hatred and racism continue to exist.

The narrator's work with the dead and dying, then, can be seen as an attempt to treat both the symptoms and the real cause of the disease, to ease suffering and to combat racial hatred, but even his service to the sick must be understood in the context of racism itself. Even the devastation of the epidemic isn't enough to level the barriers between white and black. The narrator spends his days helping the prominent white Dr. Rush, but still tries to devote some energy to the poorest and most desperate of the city's black population in the caves and tunnels they live in on Water street, where they

are especially vulnerable to the fever. As genuine as the narrator is in his attempts to heal the sick and comfort the dying, he knows he is being used: "The fiction of our immunity had been exposed as the vicious lie it was, a not so subtle device for wresting us from our homes, our loved ones, the afflicted among us, and sending us to aid strangers." When fever gripped the racially divided city, the narrator explains, "We were proclaimed carriers of the fever and treated as pariahs, but when it became expedient to command our services to nurse the sick and bury the dead, the previous allegations were no longer mentioned. Urged on by desperate counselors, the mayor granted us a blessed immunity. We were ordered to save the city." If the narrator is correct that the disease has a moral as well as a biological cause, if we have "bred the affliction within our breasts," then the mayor's despicable plan will only ensure fever's cyclical and inevitable return.

If the black population's immunity to the physical symptoms of the fever is a lie, then the narrator is also susceptible to the more insidious moral infection of the epidemic. When he enters the home of a rich white family to find everyone dead except one "loyal black maid, sick herself, who'd elected to stay when all others had deserted her masters," he wants to ask "why she did not fly out the door now, finally free of her burden, her lifelong enslavement to the whims of white people." Instead, he asks himself why he doesn't fly, why he "was following in the train on Rush and his assistants, a functionary, a lackey, insulted daily by those I risked my life to heal." That the narrator even has to consider the question demonstrates the horrible power of racism because it demands that he choose between freedom and life and asks him to give up his loved ones for the possibility of greater autonomy and material gain. The narrator explains: "Fever made me freer than I've ever been. Municipal government had collapsed. Anarchy ruled. As long as fever did not strike me I could come and go anywhere I pleased. Fortunes could be amassed in the streets." Finally, with words as clearly evident of fever's possession as the yellowed eyes of the dying, he says, "I could sell myself to the highest bidder."

As the grim prophecy of the disease's course predicts, the selling of human flesh—even yourself—demands a heavy price. The narrator's wife and children succumb to the fever and he never sees them again. Also, the narrator has not achieved the freedom and wealth that he was willing to trade all else for. In the story's final pages he is challenged, and called by name, by a elderly Jewish patient: "Can you imagine yourself, Allen, as other than you are? A free man with no charlatan Rush to blame. The weight of your life in your hands." The narrator is trapped, enslaved, "by an endless round of duty and obligation." The old man finally charges him: "Your life, man. Tell me what sacred destiny, what nigger errand keeps you standing here at my filthy pallet? Fly, fly, fly away home." But the story of fever and its devastating consequences is a story that has "no beginning or end, only the waters' flow, ebb, flood, trickle, tides emptying and returning."

Wideman's chilling conclusion to "Fever" proves the narrator's claim in the beginning of the story that the fever's "disappearance is as certain as the fact it will come again." As the story lurches forward into the late twentieth century, the familiar narrator's voice is interrupted by the distinctly modern voice of a hospital or nursing home attendant complaining about his job and about how badly the white people smell. Clearly the fever still grips Philadelphia. If readers doubted that, Wideman adds one more piece of

evidence, "almost an afterthought." The narrator describes the city recovering, returning "to products, pleasures, and appetites denied during the quarantine months." But this is not aftermath of the fever epidemic that we've been reading about in some remote past. This is now, and the Mayor is referring to his decision to bomb a block of houses where poor blacks lived in an attempt to eradicate crime. "A new century would soon be dawning. We must forget the horrors. The Mayor proclaims a new day. Says lets put the past behind us. Of the eleven who died in the fire he said extreme measures were necessary as we cleansed ourselves of disruptive influences." But like fever, history refuses to stay in the past. Hatred and racism will never be eradicated because they, like fever, thrive in darkness and filth, and because we guarantee future outbreaks by not recognizing that we breed "the affliction within our breasts," that "fever descends when the waters that connect us are clogged with filth."

Source: Elisabeth Piedmont-Marton, Overview of "Fever," for *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 1999.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Seidman provides a brief summary and analysis of "Fever."

"Fever," the title story in Wideman's 1989 collection of short fiction, provides an illuminating metaphor for the various episodes of racial antagonism depicted in the volume. As one of the story's narrative voices explains, "Fever grows in the secret places of our hearts, planted there when one of us decided to sell one of us to another. The drum must pound ten thousand thousand years to drive that evil away."

The narrative focus of the tale reflects Wideman's desire to correct the inaccurate historical record about the role of African Americans during the 1793 yellow fever epidemic that devastated Philadelphia; he dedicates the story to the author of one such fraudulent account and relies instead upon the eyewitness record left by black commentators. Among the chorus of voices in the text are those of two black men, one of them the historical Richard Allen and the other his fictional-ized brother Thomas, whose differing perspectives on the disaster and its resultant hypocrisies work in counterpoint. Allen, a former slave, minister, and the founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, is a deeply spiritual man who identifies his vision of the mass emancipation of slaves with the promise of Christianity. Allen has been ordered to serve a Dr. Rush in his ministrations to and autopsies of plague victims. After performing exhausting labor among the whites, he turns to the destitute habitations of poor blacks whom the disease ravages with equal savagery and devotes himself to their spiritual and physical health despite their contempt.

Like many other elements of the narrative, Thomas' story further documents the presence of blacks in the public sphere of American history: Thomas fought with the rebels in the Ameri-can Revolution and, as a prisoner of the British, recognized the degree to which he had been denied participation in the society whose ideals he championed. His embittered outlook on the situation now facing blacks in the plague-ridden city stems from the opportunistic shifts of white opinion regarding blacks during the epidemic; while slaves were initially blamed for importing the disease following a bloody revolt in the Caribbean, blacks were later declared immune from its ravages and coerced to serve sick and dying whites. Each of these civic fictions exposes the denial of humanity underlying racism and responsible for the cultural pathology which is Wideman's principal target.

Philadelphia operates as symbolic setting for this story on religious as well as political grounds: Its Quaker egalitarianism does not preclude Allen's being refused a place at the communion table with white Christians, nor does the city's birthing of the young republic ensure that its African-American citizens will be accorded the same possibilities for prosperity available to the unending waves of Euro-pean-born newcomers. Rather than boasting a vigorous democratic climate, Wideman's Philadelphia festers in a stagnant environment whose waters breed contagion both literally and metaphorically. Nor is water the only sinister natural element pervading the landscape; apocalyptic fire fills the streets of the city as a grim purgative for its soul-sickness.

The story evolves through a polyphonic orchestration of voices combining the points of view of slave and freedman, black and white, Christian and Jew, historian and eyewitness.

Wideman's characteristically fractured narrative jarringly shifts perspective to suggest that no one interpretation or "story" exists independent of the wider human drama playing itself out across time. Within his textual montage, Wideman melds such disparate elements as a newly enslaved Afri-can making the middle passage; a series of scientific descriptions of the fever and its assumed insect carriers; and a report of autopsy results documenting the common physical devastation visited upon Black and white plague victims alike.

Added to the individualized voices of Richard and Thomas Allen is the combative monologue of a dying Jewish merchant who describes his own experiences with bigotry and aggressively challenges Allen's continued attentions to the white populace. This character, Abraham, alludes to the Lamed-Vov, or "Thirty Just Men" of Judaic tradition, designated by God "to suffer the reality humankind cannot bear" and bear witness to the bottomless misery and depravity of existence. Rich-ard Allen is one such figure among many in these stories whose compassion in the face of unbearable injustice and grief offers the only hope for salvation that Wideman can envision.

To underline the timeliness of this meditation on so seemingly remote a historical episode, Wideman introduces toward the end of the story the voice of a contemporary black health-care worker contemptuous of his elderly white charges and the society that has discarded them. Finally, within a single paragraph, Wideman links the disease wasting Philadelphia's citizens in the late eighteenth century to the factual 1985 bombing of a black neighborhood ordered by the city's first black mayor, Wilson Goode, to eradicate the black radical group MOVE. Wideman claims that in "Fever" he "was teaching myself different ways of telling history"; with the publication of *Philadelphia Fire* in 1990, a novel that extends his analysis of the MOVE bombing, he returned to this later historical incident as evidence of the paradoxes of the United States' continuing racial self-destructiveness.

Source: Barbara Kitt Seidman, "Fever," in *Magill's Survey of American Literature,* edited by Frank N. Magill, Salem Press, 1991, pp. 2109-11.

Critical Essay #4

In the following excerpt, Kenan discusses the manner in which Wideman manipulates time in "Fever."

Like present-day cosmologists, Wideman seems to have in mind not merely a blurring of the two concepts [Time and Space] but their elimination. He metajokes about our Western cultural bias toward "clock time, calendar time," to time "acting on us rather than through us" and "that tames space by manmade structures and with the *I* as center defines other people and other things by nature of their relationship to *I* rather than by the independent integrity of the order they may represent." Wideman's true mission appears to be to replace the *I* at the center of all his stories, to make it subject to an internal order of things rather than to external structures and limitations. Unlike Ishmael Reed, his humor does not slice to the bone to the truth; Wideman's humor is sparse if not (at times) nonexistent. And unlike Amiri Baraka, his rage is far from militant; it is sublimated, almost repressed.

Nowhere in this collection [*Fever*] is this more evident than in the title story. More a meditation than an eyewitness account, "Fever" centers around Philadelphia's yellow fever epidemic of the late eighteenth century. Snatching up bits and pieces of history here and there, he brilliantly creates an organism, like a New Age psychic channeler, that transports the sufferers from the 1700s to the present, and takes us back in time as well. Its scenes bring to mind images from Herzog's *Nosferatu* of a plague-ridden town debilitated, full of coffins, corpses, rats and decay: "A large woman, bloated into an even more cumbersome package by gases and liquids seething inside her body, had slipped from his grasp.... Catching against a rail, her body had slammed down and burst, spraying Wilcox like a fountain." Yet without warning the story shifts to the present, to the aftermath of the 1985 MOVE massacre, to the voice of a black hospital orderly. It is as if Wideman is again playing games with us, forcing us to see the past and the present as one; how we are affected by what has gone before, not only in our thinking but in our acting and in our soul-deep believing. Science (knowledge) becomes a metaphor for understanding hate; disease, a euphemism for the plague visited upon the wrongs of the unholy.

And the voices. Wideman leads us to believe the main character of "Fever" to be none other than Richard Allen, who founded the African Methodist Episcopal Church. His voice, initially eighteenth-century and pious, merges with a chorus of victims, singing of guilt, of racism, of ignorance. Ultimately the voices question Allen—a freedman—for staying in Philadelphia, abandoning his wife and children, risking his life by working with the virus-infected, practically enslaving himself to strange, clueless physicians. And Allen can articulate no reason for staying to combat the "unpleasantness from Egypt." . . . Unlike Amiri Baraka, his rage is far from militant; it is sublimated, almost repressed."

Source: Randall Kenan, "A Most Righteous Prayer," in *The Nation,* Vol. 250, No. 1, January 1, 1990 , pp. 25-7.

Topics for Further Study

What insights can you draw about late 18th-century race relations from "Fever"? Explain your answer.

Investigate the 1793 yellow fever outbreak in Philadelphia. Try and find answers to such questions as how many people died; how people of different races were affected; how did the outbreak affect business and daily life; how and why did the outbreak end. After answering these and other questions, hypothesize how this epidemic affected the development of Philadelphia.

In a 1996 interview, Wideman equated the 1793 yellow fever epidemic in Philadelphia with the present-day AIDS epidemic, which was not a serious medical factor at the time he wrote "Fever." Do you find such a comparison apt? Why or why not? Conduct additional research as necessary to formulate your argument.

Research the Black Plague, which devastated Europe in the 1300s, killing perhaps as much as 25 percent of the population. Draw comparisons between the Black Plague and the 1793 yellow fever epidemic of Philadelphia.

Find an artistic representation of any plague period. Then compare the depiction of that plague with the one described by Allen in "Fever."

How experimental a work of fiction do you find "Fever"? How do the devices and narratives that Wideman employs affect your reading and your understanding of the story? Find other examples of experimental stories, and compare them to "Fever."

Compare and Contrast

1790s: African Americans in Pennsylvania number 10,274; the white population numbers 424,099.

1990s: African Americans make up 1,157,000 of Pennsylvania's total population of 11,881,643.

1790s: Slavery is practiced in many places around the world. The United States, Great Britain, the West Indies, South Africa, France, Denmark, Mexico, Holland, Puerto Rico, Cuba, Brazil, and Chile, as well as most parts of Central America and most Spanish colonies in South America make it legal to hold slaves.

1990s: Most nations throughout the world have abolished slavery, although it is still practiced in some parts of Africa, Asia, and South America. The Anti-Slavery Society for the Protection of Human Rights in London estimates that forms of servitude affect more than 200 million poor people.

1790s: Severe yellow fever epidemics occur in the West Indies, the United States, Spain, and parts of southern Europe, South America, and Central America.

1990s: Populations in areas susceptible to yellow fever are generally vaccinated, but the sporadic appearance of the disease is reported in Africa and the Americas.

What Do I Read Next?

Narrative (1794) by Absalom Jones and Richard Allen is a personal memoir of Philadelphia's 1793 yellow fever epidemic.

Forging Freedom (1988) by Gary B. Nash explores the formation and development of Phila-delphia's African-American community from the 18th century and until the mid 19th century.

Bring Out Your Dead (1949) by J. H. Powell chronicles the yellow fever epidemic that hit Philadelphia in 1793.

Burning Down the House (1987) by John Ander-son and Hilary Hevenor explores the establishment and development of MOVE and chronicles events surrounding the 1985 bombing.

John Edgar Wideman's *Philadelphia Fire* (1990) presents a fictionalized account of the only survivor of the 1985 bombing of the MOVE house in Philadelphia.

Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1923), a collection of short stories and poetry, explores life for southern and northern African Americans after slavery.

Albert French's novel *Billy* (1993) explores how racial hatred in the South leads to a horrible crime perpetrated against a young boy.

Also by Wideman, *The Cattle Killing* (1996) traces the path of an African-American preacher and other African Americans who nurse the victims of Philadelphia's 1793 yellow fever epidemic.

Further Study

Coleman, James W., *Blackness and Modernism,* University Press of Mississippi, 1989.

Discusses Wideman's career in terms of his reorientation within the African-American community and cultural setting.

Mbalia, Dorothea Drummond. *John Edgar Wideman,* Susquehanna University Press, 1995.

Analyzes the early works of Wideman's career as Eurocentric and the later works as indicative of his effort to reclaim the African personality.

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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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