Four Summers Study Guide

Four Summers by Joyce Carol Oates

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Introduction

Joyce Carol Oates's short story "Four Summers," initially appeared in *The Yale Review* in spring 1967 and the next year was included in *The American Literary Anthology*. Subsequently, the story was included in Oates's story collections *The Wheel of Love* (1970), *Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?: Stories of Young America* (1974), and in *Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?: Selected Early Stories* (1993). It also appears in anthologies such as *Fiction 100: An Anthology of Short Fiction* (2001). Like many of Oates's early stories, "Four Summers" takes childhood and the family as its subjects and explores the pain and confusion that accompanies a young person's introduction into the adult world. In four short sections, each describing incidents from four summers, Oates chronicles the changes of Sissie, the narrator, as she moves from childhood to adulthood, trying to understand what she should do and who she should be. By using a first-person point of view, Oates gives readers insight into the thoughts and motivations of a young girl who is coming of age. The story's language is spare and accessible, and young women, in particular, will be able to identify with Sissie's responses to events and changing perceptions. Oates draws on her own working-class upbringing in developing her characters.

Author Biography

A celebrated professor at Princeton University and one of contemporary literature's most prolific authors, Joyce Carol Oates comes from humble beginnings. Born in Lockport, New York, on June 16, 1938, to Frederic James Oates, a tool and die designer, and Caroline Bush Oates, a homemaker, Oates began her education in a one-room country schoolhouse, the same one her mother attended decades before her. She developed her interest in storytelling as a child, constructing elaborate illustrated books while still in elementary school. At Syracuse University, where she studied philosophy and literature, she churned out a novel a term, flabbergasting her professors. Her favorite authors during this time included Franz Kafka and William Faulkner. Oates broke into the publishing world in 1959, when she was named co-winner of the *Mademoiselle* College Fiction Award for her short story "In the Old World," which subsequently appeared in that magazine. In 1960, she received her bachelor's degree, serving as class valedictorian.

The turning point in Oates's career came in 1961 while she was studying for her Ph.D. in English at Rice University in Houston, where she had moved to be with her husband, Raymond Smith. After discovering that one of her stories had been cited in the honor roll in the latest volume of Martha Foley's *Best American Short Stories*, Oates decided to quit graduate school and become a full-time writer. She published her first novel, *With Shuddering Fall*, in 1964 and since then has published plays, novels, short story and poetry collections, and critical studies. Though she draws on her childhood experience for much of her early fiction, as evidenced in pieces such as "Four Summers," Oates's subjects in her later work are varied, ranging from boxing to Shakespeare. In interviews, she sometimes describes her writing as a form of daydreaming that she revises minimally. However, critics have praised her technical skills and willingness to experiment with narrative structure as much as they have her intellect and energy.

Since winning the *Mademoiselle* award, Oates has accumulated a mind-boggling number of prizes for her writing, including five National Book Award nominations. In 1970, she won the award for her novel *them*. Other awards include more than twenty O. Henry Awards for individual stories; National Endowment for the Arts grants; a Guggenheim Fellowship; a National Institute of Arts and Letters Rosenthal Foundation Award; the Lotos Club Award of Merit; the F. Scott Fitzgerald Award for Lifetime Achievement in American Literature; the PEN/ Malamud Award for Lifetime Achievement in the Short Story; the Bram Stoker Award for Life Achievement; the Bobst Award for Lifetime Achievement in Fiction; and the Rhea Award for the short story. Her books of stories, poems, plays, and criticism have been nominated for scores of other awards as well. Oates's most recent work includes her novel *Beasts* (2002), her story collection *Faithless: Tales of Transgression* (2001), and a collection of poems, *Tenderness* (1996).

Plot Summary

Part 1

"Four Summers" refers to the four summers that Sissie, the narrator, recounts during the course of the story. In this first section, she is with her parents and brothers at a lakefront tavern. It is early afternoon, a parade has recently disbanded, and men in uniforms are all around. The setting resembles that of Memorial Day. While her parents drink beer with their friends from the old neighborhood, the children pester them for a ride in a boat. The boys, Jerry and Frank, play by themselves, and Sissie stays close to her mother. Lenore's cousin, Sue, gives Sissie a sip of beer, which she does not like. The couples discuss people from the old neighborhood such as Duane Dorsey, a "nut" who was always in trouble, and June Dieter, who now has a serious disease. The war they discuss is probably World War II.

At the end of the section, the children see a blackbird flailing in the scum on the water's surface. One of the children pokes it with a stick, and others, including Frank, throw stones at it. Sissie writes: "I watch them throw stones. I am standing at the side. If the bird dies, then everything can die." Sentences like these mark Sissie's innocence and her position as observer.

Much of the dialogue does not have attribution, and so readers have to infer who is speaking from the context. Ernest Hemingway popularized this kind of spare, elliptical writing in his short stories and novels.

Part 2

In this section, Sissy is at the boathouse tavern again with her father and Jerry. Oates marks the passage of time through details about the characters: for example, her mother has had another baby, and Frank is at a stock car race. Jerry is twelve years old, and Sissie says he is "like Dad, the way his eyes look." Jerry says he hates his father, remarking, "All he does is drink." Jerry and Sissie wait for their father to take them on a boat ride to an island in the center of the lake. Throughout the section, Sissie describes the loudness and vulgarity of the tavern and the men who drink there. Sissie's descriptions in this section also focus on her father, whom she both admires and fears. When they arrive at the island, it is different from the way Sissy and Jerry thought it would be. At the end of the section, the children witness their father vomiting into the water, sick from drinking and rowing.

Part 3

In this section, Sissie is fourteen years old and displays all the thinking and behavior of one her age. She is self-conscious, cocky, sarcastic, angry, and hateful towards almost everyone. Lamenting that she cannot attend the show with her friends Marian and Betty,

because she has to help her mother take care of her baby sister, she says, "Poor fat Linda, with her runny nose!" The setting is again the boathouse tavern. The characters present include Sissie, her mother and father, her baby sister, and her aunt Lucy and her uncle Joe. In the first part of this section, the adults bicker about how to secure tickets for a game show, with the women speaking admiringly of the emcee, Howie Masterson, and the men claiming he and the show are phony. In the second part, Sissie encounters a man in the tavern who sweet talks her and then attempts to seduce her. Showing her bravado, Sissie walks with him for a bit, and then after he kisses her and becomes sexually excited, she runs away.

Part 4

It is five years later, and Sissie is nineteen years old, married, and pregnant. She and her husband, Jesse, stop at the Lakeside Bar, the same tavern she had come to with her parents in previous summers. Oates uses the proper name of the place now, as Sissie is now an adult. The way she sees the bar is different from the way she remembers it. It is smaller now and "dirtier." Her description is in keeping with the differences between how human beings perceive the world when they are young and when they are adults. Sissie reflects on the times she and her family had come to the bar. She sees a man she thinks might be the same one who kissed her when she was fourteen, but she is not sure and so says nothing to her husband. Sissie mixes description of the bar with information about what has happened in the last five years, including a mention of her father's accidental death at the factory. She also compares her own life with her parents' and hopes that Jesse, whom she describes as being like her father, will not turn out like him. At the end of the story, readers are left with an image of a young woman who is still struggling to understand her past, the choices she has made, and what has shaped her desires.

Part 1

Part 1 Summary

Sissie, a young child and the narrator of the story, is playing a game with her mother. She describes her mother as pretty with long hair. Sissie and her family are seated at a table by the water when her father returns with glasses of beer. Friends of her parents' have joined them and are chatting away. They have all just come from a parade in which one friend, a volunteer firefighter, marched.

Sissie's brothers, Jerry and Frank, have been playing near by. They approach their father and beg to be taken out on the lake in a boat. He brushes them off and returns to his conversation. The boys run out to the boats and Sissie follows. The children wait impatiently for their father, before giving up and heading back to the table.

Again, their father brushes the children off and one of the women at the table offers to take the kids out on the lake. She is not serious, however, and the boys begin to whine again. Their father, who is beginning to get annoyed, shoos them away again. Sissie stays by her mother and one of the women offers her a sip of beer. This causes a bit of a commotion with the woman's husband, but Sissie tastes the beer to be polite.

One of the men at the table tells Sissie's father that he made a good decision, moving from the old neighborhood. Her parents bicker more about taking the kids out in a boat, but nothing comes of it. A young soldier named Jimmy joins their table. Frank and Jerry come back to bug their father again, and this time there is anger in his voice when he tells them no. Their mother tells them to go play by themselves. The kids wander back to the boats. They spot a blackbird stuck in the scum on top of the water. There are other children gathered around; one is throwing stones and the others follow suit. The bird is unable to get away. Sissie is horrified, "If the bird dies, then everything can die, I think." (Page 217)

Part 1 Analysis

The most fascinating element in this section is the clarity with which the narrator's voice evokes the thoughts and feelings of a young child. This perspective is so challenging in part because young children lack the language and comprehension to process all that is going on around them. Sissie's narration provides a glimpse into the mosaic of her world, which revolves around the pillars of her mother and father. Sissie tries to stay out of the way of her two older brothers, realizing already that they don't enjoy her tagging along. The tavern on the lake is, for Sissie, a magical place where the laws of the universe are explored.

Sissie is aware of the imperfections in the world, noting the layer of scum on top of the water. When the children discover the trapped bird, Sissie feels powerless to protect it. The other children maliciously throw stones at it, but Sissie realizes that the fear she

feels is real. Those children could kill that bird, instead of rescuing it. Knowing that the bird, alive and struggling, could die makes the transitory nature of life very apparent. This knowledge makes Sissie feel vulnerable, clouding the innocence of childhood. This image can also be seen as foreshadowing Sissie's later sense of being trapped in her life and powerless to make changes.

Part 2

Part 2 Summary

It is a Sunday afternoon. Sissie and her family are again at the boathouse. The maturity in Sissie's narration indicates that some time has passed. Sissie's mother is home with a new baby and her brother Frank is off with friends, so it is only she and Jerry who wait by the water for their father.

Jerry is 12 now and has pimples. He is whining for his father to hurry, though his father cannot hear him. Sissie describes the flies that hover around the sticky mess left on the tables. She tells Jerry that it won't be long now, trying to pacify him. They can see their father chatting animatedly with a fat bartender.

Jerry angrily announces that he hates his father because all he does is drink. Sissie remembers how Jerry got in trouble in school a month before. She admits that she is scared of him when he is mad and notes that he is much like their father in that way. Jerry speaks up again, wishing his father dead. Sissie watches their father trying to make his way over to them through the crowds of familiar faces. She notices how unlike the other men he is. Her father is still thin, with strong arms. She notices women dressed in their church clothes walking past the group of men who break into laughter.

Sissie's father appears at last with a bottle of beer. He selects a boat and lifts Sissie into it, though she is a little too big to be picked up. Jerry climbs in and their father slips a little bit, but catches himself and shoves off with one oar. Their father rows quickly and Sissie thinks about how he is always in a hurry to get things done. He has wedged his beer between his leg and the side of the boat so that it won't fall. Jerry says that he wants to go out to the small island in the middle of the lake and their father agrees. He squints as he rows into the sun and Sissie realizes that he looks like a stranger. She thinks about how though the boat floats in the water; she herself would sink. She watches her father's throat as he gulps down his beer. He jokingly offers to let her row, but then pushes on, his face getting red. Sissie watches him spit over the side of the boat, thinking that he looks angry.

The group land on the island and the kids run around exploring. Sissie notices napkins and beer cans littered around. Heading back to their father, they realize that he is throwing up into the water. This frightens them and they run to the other side of the small island, wishing they were back at the boathouse.

Part 2 Analysis

The second segment of the story is again set in the summer, several years later. The language with which Sissie narrates the second section indicates an increased level of maturity and the passage of time. Frank, her eldest brother, has finally been granted the independence to go off by himself with friends. Sissie's mother is at home with a new

baby, so Sissie and Jerry are at the boathouse with their father. Sissie notices the pimples on Jerry's face and his dirty sneakers and thinks his impatience is a part of being twelve years old. Jerry is whining for their father to hurry, and Jerry grows angry, despite Sissie's efforts to reassure him that their father won't be long. Sissie thinks, "Jerry is like Dad, the way his eyes look." (Page 218) Their father is drinking and talking with the bartender. The children overhear the bartender say something about a "nigger," indicating that they are most likely somewhere relatively rural where such ignorance is unfortunately all too common.

Jerry is angry at his father for drinking and tells Sissie that he hates him. She remembers how Jerry got in trouble at school and confesses that she is afraid to look at him when he is mad. Jerry declares that he wishes his father would die. Sissie watches their father trying to make his way over to them but he keeps getting caught up in conversation with people. She thinks about how he is thin, unlike the other men, and well dressed from church. Sissie clearly loves her father and does not wish to see him the way Jerry does.

When Sissie's father finally approaches and the group get into a boat, Sissie notices he wobble a bit. She also sees the way he is so careful not to spill his beer. Though she is getting too big to be carried and it hurts a little under her arms where he picked her up, Sissie seems grateful to still be her father's little girl. The tenderness with which she holds on to this image of her father can be seen as a foreshadowing of her fear of losing him.

Sissie watches her father row ferociously out to the small island in the middle of the lake, watching his face get red like it does when he's angry. She notices that when her father squints into the sun, he looks like a stranger to her. Sissie thinks about the water beneath the boat, how it keeps them afloat, but should she fall in, she would drown. A bit uneasy, she watches her father gulp down more beer, straining with the effort of rowing much harder than necessary. She can't help but watch him spit over the edge, though it makes her uncomfortable.

The threesome land on the island and the kids get out of the boat to explore. When they discover their father getting sick into the water, it frightens them and they run away, wishing that they had not gone out in the boat.

Part 3

Part 3 Summary

Sissie's narration once again displays a new level of maturity, indicating that several years have passed. It is summer. Her friends, Marian and Betty, have gone to see a show. Sissie was not allowed to go and instead has been dragged to the tavern on the lake to help her mother take care of Linda, her little sister. Sissie complains that there is too much smoke, that her root beer is flat, and that her parents are too loud. Her aunt Lucy and uncle Joe have joined them and Sissie is embarrassed by Lucy's false teeth. Sissie's mother asks Lucy about a letter she wrote to the Howie Masterson show and teases Sissie about thinking he is cute. Sissie is mortified and declares that she hates him. She notices Joe's bald head with the fringe of gray hair and thinks about how her father is still handsome despite the slight sag of his jaw and bulge of his gut. Sissie is aware that other women look at her father and imagines that they wonder why he has a wife like her mother. Sissie thinks that her mother's hair was cut too short last time. She imagines that it makes her look queer and remembers a photograph from when she was young and pretty with long hair. It is difficult for Sissie to remember that her mother was beautiful. Anger wells up inside her. She watches the way her mother looks at Linda, how her forehead wrinkles. Sissie remembers when Linda was only a year old and her mother was washing the kitchen floor and screaming at the baby that she was an accident, that nobody wanted her. Sissie thinks about how she has kept that secret from all but her closest girl friends, and how she didn't know how to feel about her mother after that.

Sissie's mother and father are still arguing about the TV show. Her father turns to her uncle and tells him how he is working the night shift now, though clearly her mother is unhappy about the situation. Sissie watches her father spill some beer as he pours it into his glass. She thinks about how she still loves him, but hates to see him here like this. She thinks about how she would rather be in her room, staring at the pictures of movie stars on her walls. She thinks about how her parents never stop quarrelling.

Sissie asks her mother if she can wait in the car since Linda is asleep. Her mother reluctantly agrees but assures Sissie that they won't be hurrying on her account. Sissie feels self-conscious as she walks through the tavern, overly aware of how skinny she is. Once outside, her anger dissipates. A man watches her from the doorway. He approaches her and says that he mistook her for someone else. Sissie's heart pounds and she thinks about how she and her friends smile at strange men from the school bus. She reminds herself that she is not afraid of them.

Sissie tells the man that she comes here often, so he has probably seen her around. It is a game. The man seems as though he wants her to go inside the tavern with him, but they continue talking out in the dark. She thinks about how the other girls are wild and how she could be like them, with no fear. Sissie tells the man that someone took her out rowing here once and the man offers to take her out. She notices that the man is

handsome, but is aware that when he smiles, he is laughing at her. He asks who she is with. She tells him that she left them after a fight. He asks how old she is and she tells him that it is none of his business. He tells her that she is cute and she can feel her heart pounding. It is chilly for June and when the man notices the goose bumps on her arms, he pulls her toward him. The man kisses her on the lips and tightens his grip on her shoulders. She tells him that she has to go. He kisses her again. She thinks about how his breath smells like beer, like her father's. She feels numb, as if she has forgotten how to play the game. Sissie is fourteen. She thinks of Linda sleeping in her mother's lap and she feels afraid. The man asks her what's wrong, but she doesn't answer. She knows that he sees she is afraid. The man pulls her toward him again and kisses her neck. Sissie feels frozen with fear. She feels like she is suffocating. This man wants too much from her. He wants to take her to his car. She tells him to stop before turning and running back to the tavern.

Part 3 Analysis

It is evident from Sissie's language and attitude that she is now a teenager. She calls her mother "Ma" now and feels a general frustration and anger toward her parents. Sissie feels very self-conscious, imagining that everyone is staring at her and her embarrassing family. She reacts strongly against being lumped in with the women, as when they tease her about liking Howie Masterson. She is already aware on some level of the hierarchy of the sexes. Sissie loves her father, though she sees him aging and becoming sloppy with the drink. She feels hatred toward her mother for getting ugly and resenting her baby sister. She keeps the secret of Linda's accidental arrival buried in her heart. It has broken her trust in her mother.

Sissie's father works nights now, which means that Sissie's mother has to raise the children and take care of the household by herself. Her father sleeps during the day, "What's there to do during the day?" (Page 223). Sissie is aware that the burden of the family lies on her mother. She resents being a burden and the idea that this will be her unhappy lot in life as well. This foreshadows the sentiments that she expresses in segment four, when thinking about the birth of her first baby. She thinks instead about the movie stars in the pictures on her bedroom wall. Those beautiful people who say nothing, always poised, never arguing. She knows that this is what the world expects of her, but sees the discrepancy between the image and reality.

In order to escape, Sissie asks her mother if she can wait in the car. Her mother reluctantly agrees. "When she has drunk too much there is a struggle in her between being angry and being affectionate; she fights both of them, as if standing with her legs apart and her hands on her hips, bracing a strong wind." Sissie sees her mother's battle and knows that when she's been drinking and her guard is down, the struggle becomes even more apparent.

When Sissie has gotten outside, away from her parents and their awful friends, she feels a moment of peace. The handsome man approaches her, well aware that she is very young. She willingly plays the game, testing out her charm and newfound powers

of seduction. He calls her bluff, pulling her toward him and kissing her. She stiffens and tells him that she has to get back. "I am wearing a face like one of those faces pinned up in my room, and what if I lose it? This is not my face. I try to turn away from him." Here Sissie is illustrating one of the thematic metaphors present throughout the story: that of pretending to be someone or something she is not. This discrepancy between what she sees and what she is asked to believe extends beyond this moment and plays into her sense of living a life that she is not meant for in segment four. The man is clearly aware of how frightened and young Sissie is, but he wants more. She feels him wanting too much, selfish, greedy and demanding. She tells him to stop and sees a look of betrayal in his eyes before she runs back to her parents.

Part 4

Part 4 Summary

Jesse wants to stop at the Lakeside Bar. Sissie sees that it is the same, but seems smaller, dirtier. She thinks about how she hasn't been back there in years. There is a custard stand nearby that didn't used to be there. Jesse caresses Sissie's arm. She feels ugly and heavy in her cheap maternity dress. She reluctantly agrees, saying that her father used to drink here too.

As the pair approaches the tavern, Sissie wonders why the place feels so ugly to her, fear welling up inside her, pushing out her breath. She glances at her reflection in the window and thinks about how she is grown now and how the young girls probably look at her in awe, memorizing the way she moves through the world. She thinks about how her mother is proud of her for being pretty and is sure that she will fill out after the baby. Sissie has trouble identifying feelings toward her mother.

Sissie thinks about Jesse, so handsome and barely a man. He is twenty and she is nineteen. He is the kind of man that little girls swoon over. Sissie can't help but notice the garbage littered everywhere and the flies. The place smells dark and familiar. She thinks about how she and Jesse used to go to places like this, prerequisite dating. Now they are married and going to have a baby. Sissie knows that her life will be very different once the baby arrives. She feels that her body is already filled with love for the baby.

Sissie and Jesse sit at a table and Sissie imagines that her father would have liked Jesse. Sometimes, when he laughs, he reminds her of her father and she holds on to him tightly, remembering the drinking and the accident at the factory that took her father's life. She hopes that underneath his quick loud voice that he is really someone else. She wonders why she married him.

Sissie turns and sees the man who she kissed that night outside the bar. Her heart pounds and she is not sure if it is the same man. He is older, tired-looking, and does not recognize her. A feeling of anger wells up inside her when she realizes that she can't remember his face. She reminds herself that she is a married woman, anchored to the earth by the baby growing inside her. She knows that her love for her husband will subside as her parents' love did, but she feels that nothing can surprise her. She wonders why men grow old so quickly and why they are always so tired. She thinks about how Jesse is young, but she can already see the outline of what he will become.

The man at the bar stands to leave and Sissie imagines that she can hear her parents' laughter. She wants to call to him to stop, terrified of being left here with her family, with Jesse. Sissie feels trapped, suffocated by the path she thinks her life will take. She is angry with herself for not having gone with the man to his car when she was fourteen, as though he could have provided her some escape from this life, this world. She puts

her hand on her stomach to remind herself of her love for the baby and for Jesse and for their life that is so difficult for her to embrace at this moment.

Part 4 Analysis

The fourth segment of the story takes place during the summer, as the title indicates. Five years have passed since that night at the tavern Sissie described in the third segment of the story. The language of her narration has again matured. Sissie is nineteen now and married to a twenty-year-old man named Jesse. Jesse has stopped at the Lakeside Tavern for a beer and Sissie notices fear welling up inside her. She feels like there is some secret here, something dirty and dark that she wants to hide from. It is the same feeling she ran from as a child, the inescapable dirt and litter of her life here, of her destiny.

When Sissie catches her reflection in the window, she thinks about her image. Part of the secret she keeps is that she is pretty like everyone else. There is nothing that distinguishes her from the other women of the town, nothing special that sets her apart. Sissie feels like she knows everything, has learned all that this town has to offer. She thinks about her mother, grown fat, and is unsure whether she loves or hates her. When she thinks about her mother, she feels empty. Sissie does not want to follow in her mother's footsteps; she feels certain that this baby will change her in a way that having children never changed her mother.

Sissie and Jesse sit down at a table near the bar and she thinks of how much he reminds her of her father. She imagines that her father would have liked Jesse, had he survived to meet him. "Why is a certain kind of simple, healthy, honest man always destined to lose everything?" (Page 229) Though this is the last segment of the story, this line can be seen to foreshadow Jesse's future loss. Sissie thinks about her father's drinking and the fatal accident at the factory. She hopes that her future with Jesse will be different. Secretly, she wishes that Jesse were different, that he was more quiet and careful and would age smoothly and gracefully. Sissie wonders silently why she married him, but she already knows the answer. She followed the path that had been laid out for her by her mother and her friends. She did what she was supposed to do - went on dates, got married, got pregnant. Sissie still struggles against her life. When she possibly spots the man from the bar who kissed her five years ago, she feels angry with herself for not remembering him clearly. Sissie is angry about losing the memory and feels that she loses everything. This moment harkens back to the first segment of the story, when watching the trapped bird made Sissie realize that all things die. She feels like the trapped bird, with no control over her own life. She is not pleased with the way things are but feels powerless to change them.

Sissie attempts to reassure herself with her husband's love but it is a weak remedy. She believes that, like her parents, their love will dissipate over time. She thinks about the men in this bar, in this town, in her life and wonders why they are all so tired, why they are so angry with their children, why they drink so much and age so quickly. Sissie can already see the man that Jesse will become. She thinks about her love for the baby that

she carries and reminds herself that all she really has is this moment that she is struggling to live through.

Characters

Duane Dorsey

Duane Dorsey is a former neighbor of Sissie's family. He is frequently in trouble with the law and was recently arrested for breaking windows in his mother-in-law's house. Harry and Sue's husband discuss Duane's antics at the Lakeside Bar.

Frank

Frank is the oldest brother. In the first section, Sissie says he is ten years old and "very big." With other children, he cruelly throws stones at a blackbird drowning in the water's muck. During the second summer he is at a stock car race with his friends.

Harry

Harry is Sissie's father. He is handsome, muscular, and suntanned. Sissie describes him as a harddrinking man who "is always in a hurry to get things done." Although he has a troubled relationship with his sons, Jerry and Frank, he treats Sissie well. Harry works the night shift at the factory, telling Uncle Joe, "I can sleep during the day. What's the difference?" Although he takes Jerry and Sissie for a ride to the island in the middle of the lake during the second summer, he generally ignores his children, spending time at the bar talking with his friends. This is his natural element and the place he is happiest. In conversation, Harry is bitter and angry, saying that his father "is better off dead" and frequently quarreling with his wife. He dies after an accident at the factory, somewhere between Sissie's fourteenth and nineteenth years.

Jerry

Jerry is the middle child who appears in the first two sections of the story. During the first summer he is around eight years old, and in the second he is twelve, with "pimples on his forehead and chin." Sissie says, "Jerry is like Dad, the way his eyes look." And, like his father, he is angry. Referring to his father, Jerry tells Sissie, "All he does is drink . . . . I hate him." After Jerry, Sissie, and Harry row to the island, Sissie and Jerry watch as their father throws up over the side of the boat.

Jimmy

Jimmy is a young soldier who sits and drinks with the two couples at the Lakeside Bar. He is very young but old enough to drink beer. His face is "raw in spots, broken out," but Sissie says he has "nice eyes." His parents, like Harry's, are from the "Old Country."

Uncle Joe

With his wife, Lucy, Joe appears during the third summer. Sissie says he is tired all the time, that he has a gut, a saggy jaw, and a "bald head with the little fringe of gray hair on it," which Sissie claims to hate. Nonetheless, Sissie describes him as "handsome." Joe agrees with Harry that game show host Howie Masterson is a "phony."

Lenore

Lenore is Harry's wife and the mother of Frank, Jerry, and Sissie. In the first summer, she is "pretty" and shows Sissie affection and attention. By the third summer, she is a loud-mouthed drunkard who no longer cares about her physical appearance and who tells her youngest child, Linda, that she was "an accident" and that she did not want her. Like her husband, she is prone to angry outbursts.

Aunt Lucy

Aunt Lucy appears during the third summer with her husband Joe. She has false teeth that Sissie believes make "everyone stare at her." Lucy wrote a letter to Howie Masterson, emcee of a game show, which the couples discuss.

Sissie

Sissie is the narrator of the story, who details events from four summers of her life. These summers depict Sissie's childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. Since Sissie is the narrator, readers never see her outside of her own self-descriptions. The only physical descriptions she provides are in the third section, when she is fourteen years old. Sissie says of herself, "My legs are too thin, my figure is flat." In the last section, she notes, "My secret is that I am pretty like everyone is . . . . I have a pink mouth and plucked darkened eyebrows and soft bangs over my forehead."

Sissie's emotional development, while typical in some ways, is heavily influenced by her family dynamics. Her parents are working-class drinkers who "chose" the only life they knew. They display the characteristics of people overwhelmed by their circumstances, responding to events rather than initiating them, and settling into a life of lowered expectations, alcoholism, lethargy, and gossip. Sissie's descriptions of her family show an awareness of how she too is being shaped to be like her parents. However, this awareness appears to come too late—after she is pregnant and has married someone just like her father.

Sue

Sue is Lenore's cousin, and she and her husband are with Harry and Lenore at the Lakeside Bar during the first summer. Like the others, Sue is drinking. She is enamored of Sissie, calling her "cute" and saying that she wishes she had a daughter like her. From her comment and her husband's response to it, readers can infer that she is perhaps childless. She offers Sissie beer, which disturbs her husband, but Sissie eventually takes a sip after being encouraged by her mother. Sissie describes Lenore as having "darkish" teeth, with pale skin and blotches on her red face.

Sue's Husband

Sissie describes Sue's husband as "a big man with a thick neck." A volunteer fireman who just finished marching in the parade, he is loud and at times violent, cursing at his wife and making comments about her appearance and weight. "His eyebrows are blond, lighter than his hair, and are thick and tufted," Sissie remarks. Sue says that he spends most of his weekends drinking in the backyard, leaving the house in disrepair.

Themes

Marriage

Oates questions the possibility that romantic love provides fulfillment for individuals and the idea that romantic love and marriage are necessarily linked. In doing so, she undermines the notion that romantic love, particularly as it is embodied in the institution of marriage, remains both a means and an end to a satisfying life. Sissie's depiction of her own parents' marriage and that of Sue and her husband suggest, instead, that marriages are often more like contractual obligations from which both parties cannot extricate themselves. Sue's husband belittles his wife, while she in turn mocks his laziness and drinking. Sissie describes the relationships between her own parents as one dominated by drinking and quarreling. She even questions her own marriage to Jesse, hoping, against evidence to the contrary, that he will be different from her father. Of her own marriage, Sissie says, "Like my parents' love, it will subside someday."

Free Will

Western, and especially American, notions of individuality are built upon the idea that human beings are free to choose their own destinies. Sissie's experience suggests just the opposite. Throughout the first three summers, she describes her parents' marriage and her family in generally unappealing terms. Her father works constantly, and when he is not working, he is drinking. She is not close to either of her brothers, and one of them, Jerry, says he "hates" his father. Though she is sympathetic to her mother, she describes her in unflattering terms, writing that she looks "queer" and is "fat," with varicose veins darkening her legs. In the third section, the fourteen-year-old Sissie catalogues what she "hates" and thinks is "ugly." These things include her baby sister, Linda, the boathouse tavern, and Howie Masterson. Yet, in the last section, Sissie is married and pregnant at nineteen, to a man very much like her father—loud and working-class. Though confused by her "choices," Sissie rationalizes them. Her attitude towards her own life is embodied in her description of her husband's. Of him and of men like him, Sissie writes, "Their lives are like hands dealt out to them in their innumerable card games: You pick up the sticky cards, and there it is: there it is. Can't change anything."

Class

Though she never uses the word "class," Sissie's description of her family underscores the idea that human beings are social animals, whose opportunities in life are determined by their socioeconomic status. The activities she describes—beer drinking, card playing, her father's factory work, and so forth—and the desires of her family, such as wanting to be contestants on a television game show, mark working-class life. Sissie describes the trappings of such a life in stereotypical class terms, focusing on how

"loud" her parents talk, their constant bickering, and her father's friends' language (e.g., the bartender's use of the word "nigger"). Though she is obviously repelled by these things, Sissie nonetheless finds herself duplicating the very same kind of life.

Style

Point of View

Point of view refers to the perspective from which a story is told. Oates uses a first-person point of view, as Sissie narrates the events of four summers. In these events, Sissie, the story's "I," is alternately observer and participant. Sissie is not, however, Oates herself but a character Oates creates to relay ideas about growing up in a working-class American family. Sissie is a reliable narrator insofar as her actions, language, and perceptions reflect her age in the story's parts. However, her descriptions must be read in light of her character, which both influences and is influenced by those around her. Other stories in *The Wheel of Love* are told using second-and third-person points of view. In the latter, the narrator presents action without commenting on it and without insight into characters' thoughts; in the former, the narrator uses the pronoun "you" as if addressing the reader.

Plot

Story refers to what happens; plot refers to how the narrator presents what happens. By organizing the action of "Four Summers" into four sections, each of which details events surrounding Sissie during the course of four days in four summers, Oates is better able to develop her subjects and themes. These include the relationship between free will and determinism, the role of social class in shaping human desire, and the emotional development of a young girl. Since each section of the story deals with events from a different summer, readers have to use their imaginations to fill in what happens to Sissie during the intervening years. By using the present tense, Oates gives the story an emotional immediacy that would otherwise be lost.

Imagery

Imagery refers to concrete descriptions of the material world that appeal to readers' senses. Symbolic imagery is imagery that resonates with ideas implicit in the text itself. Oates uses symbolic imagery to emphasize the squalidness of Sissie's childhood years and her disdain for the kind of life her parents led. Her descriptions of adults, her parents, and others, for example, highlight the effect of years of drinking and bad food. Sue's face is "blotched . . . some parts pale and some red," and all the men, except her father, have "big stomachs." In other places, Oates uses symbolic imagery to suggest the situation of Sissie and others like her. For instance, she draws an implicit connection between Sissie and the blackbird trapped in the lake's polluted waters at the end of the first section, writing, "The bird's wings keep fluttering but it can't get out. If it could get free it would fly and be safe, but the scum holds it down."

Historical Context

When "Four Summers" was initially published in 1967, the United States was in turmoil. Not only were American troops fighting the North Vietnamese, but the government was battling antiwar protesters at home. With 429 major and 2,972 minor military bases around the globe, it had set itself up as the world's policeman, often acting covertly to change the political complexion of countries such as the Dominican Republic and Chile. Not only was the Central Intelligence Agency active overseas but President Johnson had also authorized it to conduct surveillance and compile dossiers on protestors at home. The CIA was joined in its efforts by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, run by J. Edgar Hoover, a rabid anticommunist who initiated a wiretapping campaign to discredit civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. and directed counterintelligence efforts against government critics. Many of those protesting government involvement in Vietnam belonged to the baby boom generation —those born after World War II. During the 1960s, more than 70 million "boomers" became teenagers and young adults. Those who turned eighteen became eligible for the military draft. It is quite possible that Jimmy, the soldier from the old neighborhood who sits with Sissie's parents at the boathouse tavern in the first section, was drafted.

In the second section of the story, Sissie overhears the bartender of the boathouse use the word "nigger." Such epithets were common in the 1950s and 1960s (and even today) among people who practiced discrimination (consciously or not) against others who were not like them. The Civil Rights movement attempted to change such behavior. Black leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr. and Stokely Carmichael led peaceful protests and sitins, often joined by non-blacks, advocating for greater representation and equality in law for blacks. In 1964, the Twenty-third Amendment to the Constitution was ratified, outlawing the poll tax, a measure many southern states used to keep blacks from voting, and in 1965 the Voting Rights Act was passed, abolishing literacy tests and leading hundreds of thousands of blacks to register to vote. However, resistance to greater black participation in Johnson's "Great Society" continued, and during the mid and late-1960s protests and riots erupted throughout the country in major urban centers such as Detroit, Newark, and Los Angeles. Oates lived in Detroit, teaching English at the University of Detroit between 1962 and 1967, and in her 1969 novel, *them*, she provides a fictionalized account of events in this city during the summer of 1967, when hundreds of buildings were burned to the ground in a violent week of rioting. During the late 1960s, the term "black" became an acceptable replacement for the word "negro," as leaders such as Malcolm X preached about black pride and groups such as the Black Panthers advocated black separatism. In 1968, Otto Kerner, head of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, blamed the racial unrest on institutionalized white power and racism and claimed the country was moving towards two societies.

Working-class families like Sissie's from small towns and rural America, however, were not rioting in the streets. When children finished their school-work and the adults came home from a day at the factory, they often turned on the television and watched quiz shows, like the one that Sissie's parents and her aunt Lucy and her uncle Joe discuss at the tavern. The possibility of winning "easy money" was irresistible to people like Lenore

and Lucy, and shows such as *The Price Is Right, People Are Funny*, and *Do You Trust Your Wife*? capitalized on the fantasies of working-class women.

Critical Overview

The reviews for *The Wheel of Love* were good, though some reviewers had reservations. Writing for *Publishers Weekly*, Barbara Bannon is effusive in her praise, claiming The Wheel of Love "May well be Joyce Carol Oates's finest collection of short stories yet . . . the effects on the reader are apt to linger long after he has finished the individual stories." A reviewer for *Kirkus Reviews* writes, "These rich, intent stories . . . have the supra-reality of the bleak hours before dawn as Miss Oates' characters, taut with awareness, suffer the last turn on the wheel of love." In a somewhat mixed review for *The New York Times Book Review*, Richard Gilman calls "Four Summers" one of the best stories in the collection, remarking that it "create[s] a verbal excitement, a sense of language used not for the expression of previously attained insights or perceptions but for new imaginative reality."

Academic critics are paying increasing attention to Oates's work as well. For example, in her essay "Joyce Carol Oates's Craftsmanship in 'The Wheel of Love,'" appearing in *Studies in Short Fiction*, Joanne V. Creighton makes connections between Oates's narrative techniques and the content of her stories, suggesting that Oates's stories fail as often as they succeed. Creighton argues, "The characters of the collection offer a dismal view of the human being's incapacity to enjoy a healthy and wholesome emotional life." In his study *Understanding Joyce Carol Oates*, Greg Johnson notes that *The Wheel of Love* contains a mix of traditional and experimental stories. Johnson writes, "Oates displays the impressive range of fictional technique and subject matter that characterizes all her short story volumes." Johnson praises Oates's ability to "manipulate . . . formal conventions in order to revitalize the genre."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Semansky is an instructor of English literature and composition who writes about literature and culture for various publications. In this essay, Semansky considers the narrator's emotional growth.

Psychologists often chart the development of human beings in stages or phases. Eric Erikson, for instance, lists eight stages of psychosocial development that human beings typically pass through during their lives, including the oral-sensory stage, the stage of adolescence, and the maturity stage. Other psychologists have different models. In "Four Summers," Oates shows Sissie's emotional development through her behavior towards her family and peers, emphasizing both her interconnectedness with others and her quest for individuation.

In the first section, Sissie describes her surroundings in generalities, beginning her story, "It is some kind of special day." Her sentence structure and descriptions are similar to those of a young child. For example, she writes of her mother: "She is pretty when she laughs. Her hair is long and pretty." She refers to her father as "Daddy" and desires to stay by her mother's side rather than play with her brothers Jerry and Frank. Sissie never tells readers how old she is, but she does mention that Frank is ten and "very big." From her descriptions and language, readers can infer that Sissie is around six years old. By primarily using dialogue in this section, Oates dramatizes the action and characterizes Sissie through her responses to what is happening around her. Sue, her mother's cousin, dotes on Sissie, repeatedly calling her "cute," and her father refers to her as "baby." She cannot refuse the adults' desire that she have a sip of beer, remarking, "I have to say yes." The key marker of Sissie's emotional development is her response to the scene at the end of the section, in which her brothers and other children are pelting a drowning blackbird with stones. Sissie remarks, "I watch them throwing stones. I am standing at the side. If the bird dies, then everything can die." This awareness of death and of her own mortality marks Sissie's exit from the world of innocence and her entrance into the world of experience.

The first section of the story establishes the point of view, and in doing so it draws readers into the story. It is hard not to be sympathetic with a young girl, especially one so passive, innocent, and trusting as Sissie. Since readers understand things that Sissie can only describe but cannot comprehend, they feel a kind of paternal empathy towards the girl. This response only deepens as the adults' behavior becomes more unsavory. Oates also does something else in the first section: she withholds information. By setting her story in four days of Sissie's life, each representative of a phase of her development, Oates creates suspense. Readers become emotionally invested in the story, desiring to discover the trajectory of Sissie's growth.

In the story's second section, readers learn that Sissie has a new baby sister, a fact that will be elaborated on in the third section. Sissie never states her age, but readers can infer that she is younger than her brother Jerry, who is now twelve and "up on the sixth-grade floor." Oates mixes a good dose of Sissie's self-reflection in this section into the

dialogue and description. Typical of many ten-yearold girls, Sissie is full of admiration and awe for her father. For example, she describes the men he speaks with at the bar but comments that her father's stomach is not big like the others. She writes, "He has his shirt sleeves rolled up and you can see how strong his arms must be." Sissie dotes on her father, describing how fast he rows and how he smiles. Sissie also notes her older brother Jerry's contempt for their father. Jerry says of their father that, "All he does is drink." When the three are rowing to the island, Harry and Jerry exchange words, and Sissie says her father's face reddens "the way it does at home when he has trouble with Frank." Sissie's father never has a cross word for her, however, calling her "sugar" and generally treating her as his favorite child. Her description of his behavior, however, and of his relationship with her brothers, suggests a dysfunctional family in which open communication is a struggle.

Much of the family's problems stem from the parents' heavy drinking, especially Harry's. For the children, the drinking is a problem; for the adults, it is not. This is typical of how alcoholics view their behavior. Drinking is a regular part of Harry's day, helping him deal with the stress of having four children and a low-paying factory job. In every scene Sissie describes, beer plays a central role. Whether the adults are relaxing at a table or the father is rowing the children across the lake, beer is present, lubricating Harry's every moment. Not only is compulsive and regular drinking part of the alcoholic's lot but so is drinking to excess, which Harry does in the second section, vomiting into the water once he reaches shore.

The father's anger at his children for needing attention and the children's anger at the father for not providing it are also traits of a family marked by alcoholism. Sissie notes that, already at twelve, Jerry has adopted his father's propensity for anger. Aggressive behavior is common among children of alcoholics, and the boys, and Sissy in the third section, show it. Sissie's observation of her brother's similarity to her father foreshadows her own budding awareness in the last section that her own desires have in large part been shaped by her family dynamics.

In the third section, Sissie is fourteen, displaying all the behaviors and attitude of someone that age. She is obnoxious, obsessed with her body, and contemptuous of adults. Her anger is catalyzed by her rampant hormones and shaped by years of watching her parents drink themselves through the day, fighting. Once again, she is inside the tavern with her mother and father, only this time she can no longer stand it. Sissie says, "Inside me there is something that wants to run away, that hates them. How loud they are, my parents!" Being embarrassed by one's parents is a common enough feeling for young teenagers, but the intensity of Sissie's rage asks readers to look more deeply than to mere adolescent growth pains. One place to look is Sissie's description of her mother, whom she describes as oblivious both to her own personal appearance and to her baby, Linda. Sissie recalls her mother screaming at the baby, "Nobody wanted you, it was a [g—d—] accident." Sissie is no longer the cloying six-year-old she was at the story's opening. She is now beginning to individuate, to see herself as separate from her mother and the adults around her. She says, "I narrow my eyes and watch my mother . . . and think that maybe she isn't my mother after all, and she isn't that pretty girl in the photograph, but someone else." Sissie is also developing an

awareness of her own sexuality, flirting with a man she meets in the tavern. Though she is becoming aware of her powers, she is still largely ignorant of her own body, panicking when the man begins to kiss her and asking, "What is he doing? Do they all do this? Do I have to have it done to me too?"

Cut to the last scene in the story, and Sissie is nineteen, pregnant, and married. Oates marks the changes in her perception of the world by having Sissie describe the tavern in detail for the first time. The Lakeside Bar is now "that big old building with the grubby siding, and a big pink neon sign in front, and the cinder driveway that's so bumpy." These details underscore the attention that Sissie now pays to her surroundings as she attempts to make sense out of her life. Like many adults looking back on places of their childhood, the Lakeside Bar does not measure up to her memories. Sissie also pays more attention to herself. In this section, she is consumed with questions about the decisions she has made, and she is tortured by the possibility that she has made a colossal mistake in marrying Jesse. Her responses to the men in the bar, one of whom may be the man she flirted with five years ago, suggest that she is second-guessing her choice of a mate. The paragraphs in this section are the longest in the story and primarily comprise Sissie's thoughts. Rather than delve more deeply into what her responses are telling her, Sissie instead buckles down and attempts to accept her life, to convince herself that all will work out. She says:

I let my hand fall onto my stomach to remind myself that I am in love: with this baby, with Jesse, with everything. I am in love with our house and our life and the future and even this moment—right now— that I am struggling to live through.

One can imagine her mother doing the same thing when she was Sissie's age.

Source: Chris Semansky, Critical Essay on "Four Summers," in *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Cushman provides an analysis of "Four Summers," asserting that Oates is "more interested in psychology than sociology," and finding the story "another version of American Gothic."

Joyce Carol Oates's "Four Summers" is a rich, rewarding, complex story that has received no critical attention. Featured in James H. Pickering's popular anthology, *Fiction 100*, the story is being read these days by a large number of students and teachers. In this essay I will try to account for the story's effectiveness.

Mary Kathryn Grant has pointed out that in "Oates's works three themes—women, city, and community—merge into all-too-real nightmare." All these ingredients are present in "Four Summers." The protagonist and narrator, Sissie, is a girl who, like almost all of Oates's heroines, is a victim. The beaten-down characters in the story exist on the periphery of urban life. Community is not possible in such a world; the extremity of Sissie's isolation makes us keenly aware of the absence of community. "Four Summers" contains no overt violence, but the story is sufficiently nightmarish just the same.

The characters in the working-class milieu of "Four Summers" are trapped by their own limitations and by the conditions of American life. They are poorly educated and unable to communicate meaningfully. They yearn to escape from their empty, dreary lives, but no escape is possible. Indeed the abortive effort to escape is a unifying motif in the story.

The social milieu is sharply realized, but social commentary is not the central concern of "Four Summers." Oates feels compassion for the characters in her story and outrage at the system they are part of. Yet she is more interested in psychology than sociology: "Four Summers" is above all a portrait of Sissie. Though she is sensitive and intelligent, she is also unhappy, afraid, and profoundly insecure. In the final analysis "Four Summers"— like so much of Oates's fiction—can be understood as another version of American Gothic. Sissie, an abused, exploited female child, belongs in the same company as such other victimized American heroines as Maisie Verver, Maggie Johnson, and Candace Compson.

"Four Summers" doesn't exactly have a plot. Plot depends on progression and development, but in "Four Summers" people grow older but cannot change. Instead Sissie records four summer outings at the same lakeside tavern. Sissie's compelling descriptions of these four summer days are deeply colored by her anxieties. I will briefly summarize each section of the story here so that I will be able to organize my argument topically and thematically.

Sissie is about five in the first section. The grown-ups sit around playing cards though the children clamor for a boat ride. To amuse themselves Sissie's mother and her mother's friend give the terrified girl a drink of beer. The section ends with one of her brothers, frustrated and angry, and other children stoning a bird caught in some scum

while Sissie stands watching. In the second section Sissie's father rows her, now about ten years old, and a brother to a nearby island, but this attempt at parental concern is just as wretched as the neglect in the first section. The island turns out to be a miniature wasteland, and the father, sick from too much exertion after too much beer, starts throwing up. In the third section Sissie is fourteen, rebellious but afraid to rebel. She leaves the tavern, flirts with a man outside, and then runs back into the tavern when he starts to molest her. In the fourth section Sissie, nineteen, married, and pregnant, tries to convince herself that she is happy, but she knows she isn't.

"Four Summers" is bound together not only by its unity of place and mood but also by its careful manipulation of imagery and motifs. Sissie grows in sophistication and self-awareness throughout the story, but at the end she is just as frightened as she was at the beginning. The final section provides resolution only in the sense that after all her yearning to escape from her parents' world, she is now irrevocably trapped by her marriage and pregnancy. "Four Summers" is painful to read because it forces the reader to experience Sissie's entrapment in all its oppressiveness and does so four times over. Even though the reader soon realizes that there is no exit for Sissie, he cannot help hoping that somehow she will escape.

Oates's clever control of point of view is an important element in the story's effect on the reader. Sissie narrates the story of each of the four days. This narration is so convincing in the way it captures both Sissie's character and the world she describes that it is possible to overlook the sleightof-hand act that Oates is performing.

Consider, for example, that Maisie Verver's developing consciousness is presented to the reader only via James's narrative mediation. James translates his young heroine's thoughts and feelings into his own elevated language. This is often handled for comic effect, but, more importantly, he solves the technical problem of how to present the consciousness of a character too young to create an extended narrative. Mark Twain allows Huckleberry Finn to tell his own story, but often Huck becomes merely a mask for Twain's own voice and sensibility.

In "Four Summers" Oates must convince us that a very young child can tell her own story. It's not even possible to explain logically the relationship between Sissie's words and her audience. She isn't telling her story *to* anyone, nor is there any premise that she is writing it down (which in any case would be impossible except in the fourth section). Neither is the narration a representation of her stream-of-consciousness, for it is neat and coherent. The story is not logically credible as a narrative presented by Sissie unless it is the mature Sissie who is conjuring up in retrospect those earlier days and earlier selves. Sissie the child could not possibly present such polished accounts of her miserable summer days. Furthermore, she is sometimes endowed with a reflectiveness beyond her years. It is not likely that a five-year-old, watching older children throw stones at a bird, could observe that "if the bird dies, then everything can die."

And yet for the most part the reader accepts the narrative without question. Oates relies in part on the conventional nature of first-person narrative and the reader's willingness—and eagerness—to accept that convention. We also accept Sissie's narration because

in each section Oates convinces us that she is accurately conveying the sensibility of the growing girl. This sensibility is so strikingly captured that most readers are not apt to notice the violation of credibility. Let me briefly illustrate how Oates registers the consciousness of her young heroine at four different ages.

"It is some kind of special day," the five-yearold Sissie reports at the beginning of the story, articulating the child's dim perception of the mysterious workings of the adult world (and in retrospect making the reader wonder what the ordinary days must be like if this one is special). The diction is understandably at its simplest in this section, and so are the perceptions: "When I run around her chair she laughs and hugs me. She is pretty when she laughs. Her hair is long and pretty." When a courting couple rows up to the dock, laughing together, Sissie—too young to be aware of sexual relationships—simply observes "two people come in, a man and a woman." Sissie is the little sister, tagging along after her brothers with her "bag of potato chips."

Sissie at about ten in section II is more able to generalize about herself and her world. She notices that "Jerry is like Dad." She has a changed relationship with her father, "always in a hurry to get things done," who is now "like a stranger." The fact that her father's appearance "surprises" her reveals her greater awareness. Her mother has changed from "Ma" to "Mommy." Sissie at ten can relate present to past. The men who hang around the tavern "are familiar. We have been seeing them for years."

Sissie at fourteen is in the throes of puberty, worried that "my legs are too thin, my figure is flat and not nice like Marian's." She now has fantasies of running away from her parents, whom she finds embarrassing. Oates masterfully captures the sensibility of the young teen-aged girl at this awkward age: "Where would I rather be? With Marian and Betty at the movies, or in my room, lying on the bed and staring at the photographs of movie stars on my walls—those beautiful people that never say anything—while out in the kitchen my mother is waiting for my father to come home so they can continue their quarrel." She has become openly scornful of family members: "And my aunt Lucy and uncle Joe, they're here. Try to avoid them." Self-conscious and insecure, she crosses "through the crowded tavern, . . . conscious of people looking at me."

Only in the final section has Sissie evolved into full consciousness. Her voice is now mature though self-divided. The completeness of her self-awareness means only that the trap is closed. She is now able to perceive her world with great clarity: "It's the Lakeside Bar. That big old building with the grubby siding, and a big pink neon sign in front, and the cinder driveway that's so bumpy. Yes, everything the same. But different too—smaller, dirtier." Sissie's insights now display a high level of awareness and even poignancy, as when she wonders why the worn-out men in the tavern are "always tired" and why they "flash their teeth when they smile, but stop smiling so quickly." Sissie at nineteen is very much the same person she was at five, ten, and fourteen, but Oates makes us believe in the growing-up and in the changes in consciousness along the way.

Sissie is finally a very typical Joyce Carol Oates heroine, which means, as Grant has put it, that she is one of those "frustrated, neurotic human beings psychically crippled by the events of their lives and the tragic frustrations with which they cannot cope." Sissie

is dominated by her fear and insecurity. Though she wants to act, she is paralyzed by her self-doubt.

Sissie's parents are not cruel people. Instead they are insensitive, too absorbed in their own unhappiness to pay much attention to Sissie, the third of their four children and their first daughter. We never learn Sissie's real name. She is simply "Sissie," most likely a child's diminutive for sister, a detail which suggests her neglect. Sissie's brothers have to fend for themselves too, but since they are boys, this sort of independence receives support. Sissie's lot has always been to tag along: "The boys run out back by the rowboats, and I run after them." Though the brothers tolerate Sissie, "they don't like me, I can see it."

Above all Sissie feels unwanted. At one crucial point she remembers her mother screaming at her little sister:

"Well, nobody wanted you, kid," she once said to Linda. Linda was a baby then, one year old. Ma was furious, standing in the kitchen where she was washing the floor, screaming: "Nobody wanted you, it was a goddamn accident! An accident!" That surprised me so I didn't now what to think, and I didn't know if I hated Ma or not; but I kept it all a secret . . .

This nightmarish scene must have left a big impact. It resonates against—and contributes to— Sissie's own feelings of being unwanted.

Sissie's personality is dominated by fear that leaves her nearly paralyzed. It is inadequate to remark that she is a detached, isolated outsider and observer: except for the dialogue with the man who paws her in the parking lot, we scarcely even see her talking. Instead we watch her "standing at the side," observing intensely, consumed by her fear.

That fear is everywhere in the story. In the first section as she looks at a man leaning against the railing overlooking the lake, she is "afraid it will break and he will fall into the water." The scene in which the unthinking adults make her drink the beer vividly captures the terror of childhood. She is also frozen with terror as her brother and the other children kill the bird caught in the scum.

Sissie's fear is also explicitly present in each of the other three sections. In the second section as her father rows her and her brother toward the island, she sits "very still, facing him, afraid to move." She is "afraid to look at" the brother "when he's mad." When they reach the island, "the boat bumps; it hurts me. I am afraid." When she sees her father throwing up, she runs after her brother, "afraid." In the third section as she begins to flirt with the man, she tells herself five times that she isn't afraid— heavily underscoring her fear. Just before the man begins to kiss and caress her, she acknowledges that "something frightens me;" he "sees I'm afraid." When the kissing begins, "something dazzling and icy rushes up in me, an awful fear, but I can't move." In the final section the married Sissie thinks she sees the man who had molested her five years earlier. Thrown into the past, she imagines hearing the voices of her parents and

aunt. As the man at the bar starts to leave, she is "terrified at being left" by herself with the presences of her family. Sissie's fears are so deep and abiding because of her own lack of inner security. Nothing lasts, nothing is safe.

Sissie's habit of intense, detached observation is related to her fear. Like the young Stephen Dedalus, she is keenly sensitive to the sights and sounds around her. What makes her remarkable is her habit of focusing on the ugliest details available. Even as a small child, when she looks at the boats she observes that "the paint is peeling off some of them in little pieces." She notices the "pink lipstick smudges on the glass" of beer and the "darkish" teeth of her mother's friend.

In the second section as her father rows toward the island, Sissie fixes on his "throat, the way it bobs when he swallows:" "His face is getting red, the way it does at home when he has trouble with Frank. He clears his throat and spits over the side; I don't like to see that but I can't help but watch." That inability to look away is expressive of the inner disturbance. Sissie needs to fix on the ugliness, as if such sights confirm her sense of reality. The second section culminates with the vision of "napkins and beer cans, . . . part of a hotdog bun, with flies buzzing around it" and with her father "throwing up in the water and making a noise like coughing."

Sissie relentlessly seeks out the squalid. The young teenager stares at her aunt's "false teeth" and the "white scalp" beneath her uncle's hair, and she watches her little sister "sleeping in Ma's lap, with her mouth open and drooling on the front of her dress." In the final section Sissie observes that the ground outside the tavern consists of "bare spots and little holes and patches of crab grass, and everywhere napkins and junk." Inside is no better: "there is a damp, dark odor of beer and something indefinable—spilled soft drinks, pretzels getting stale?" Her husband picks the label off his beer bottle with his "thick squarish fingernails."

The ugliness is not imaginary. People come to the grim, depressing Lakeside Bar to escape for a little while from the treadmill of their lives, not realizing that the tavern is itself a station on that treadmill. Oates is conveying a social reality in her depiction of unattractive people inhabiting the squalid world of the tavern.

But the point is that throughout the story Sissie's state of mind is more important than any objective reality. Though the ugliness is there, the most notable fact is that Sissie's eye always goes right for it and fixes there tenaciously. The squalid world of "Four Summers" is at least half created by its young narrator. Sissie's fixation on ugliness is finally inseparable from her fear.

At the same time the unhappy Sissie is extraordinarily sensitive and self-aware. Though she is perhaps partly self-victimized, she is also acutely intelligent. Only Sissie seems troubled by the world she inhabits and by the clumsy behavior of her family. Only Sissie is able to reflect and make generalizations about life, and in the fourth section these generalizations are particularly perceptive. She yearns desperately to escape her destructive environment, and yet at the end she is trapped, a princess who has

somehow not been rescued from the prison of the Lakeside Bar. Why isn't she able to escape?

Sissie above all needs to develop a sense of her own worth, but the story provides no way that this could have happened. The only patterns for emulation available to her are the blighted lives of her parents and their friends. Though Sissie is so conscious of the emptiness and so eager to find something better, she does not know where to turn. The best she can do is marry a man whom she first met when he was "wearing a navy uniform"—a pathetic glimpse of the world beyond the tavern.

Indeed one of the bleakest motifs in "Four Summers" is that of the cyclical pattern of life, repeating mindlessly from generation to generation. This motif contributes powerfully to the story's feeling of claustrophobia. The more we react against our fathers and mothers and struggle to develop our own identities, the more we become like our fathers and mothers—in fact, the more we *replace* them. When a writer like Tolstoy shows that the important events in a human life, both joyful and sorrowful, happen to everyone, he presents this situation as a triumph for human community. The very commonplace quality of the crucial experiences brings us together. Oates's perception is similar, but her perspective is quite antithetical. We are doomed to repeat our parents' lives and experiences no matter how intensely we attempt to escape.

The courting couple at the beginning of the story is a reminder that Sissie's parents were once a young, handsome courting couple themselves. Sissie's mother even comments that "Sue and me used to come here a lot," though "not just with you two, either." The generational motif is picked up by Sissie's father when he talks about his father's desire to return to Europe:

He looks as if something tasted bad in his mouth. "My old man died thinking he could go back in a year or two. Stupid old bastards!"

"Your father was real nice. . . ." Ma says.

"Yeah, real nice," says Dad. "Better off dead."

"I hate him, I wish he'd die," Jerry says of his father before the ride to the island. In "Four Summers" each son grows up to hate his father.

In the second section Sissie observes that "Jerry is like Dad, the way his eyes look:" he hates his father, he is becoming his father. A snapshot Sissie talks about in the third section further emphasizes the unhappy cycle of life:

There is a photograph taken of her when she was young, standing by someone's motorcycle, with her hair long. In the photograph she was pretty, almost beautiful, but I don't believe it. Not really. I can't believe it, and I hate her.

Beautiful Sissie, with the intolerance of youth, cannot accept that her mother was once young and beautiful. Though she hates her mother, she follows in her mother's footsteps in marrying a man much like her father. By the end of the third section, as the

man paws her in the parking lot, she must realize that she is trapped in the same cycle: "I think, What is he doing? Do they all do this? Do I have to have it done to me too?" "Girls your age are all alike," the man has observed. This man, like the man Sissie marries, reminds her of the one man she cannot escape: "His breath smells like beer, maybe, it's like my father's breath . . . "

Sissie at nineteen is all too aware that she has reached the end of the line in marrying a younger version of her father. Jesse drinks beer, just as her father did, and "when he laughs Jesse reminds me of him." When she holds Jesse at night, she thinks of "my father and what happened to him." She prays that Jesse will be different, knowing full well that he won't be.

When Sissie and Jesse were courting, they were simply going through the motions required by that part of the cycle: "Before we were married we went to places like this, Jesse and me and other couples. We had to spend a certain amount of time doing things like that." They had courted as her parents courted, they will become as her parents became: "He still loves me. Our love keeps on. Like my parents' love, it will subside someday." In the first section the grown-ups sit around playing cards instead of taking the children for a boat ride. The card game reappears, climactically and rather too obtrusively, near the end of the story. People are trapped within inherited genes and inherited patterns:

Jesse is young, but the outline of what he will be is already in his face . . . Their lives are like hands dealt out to them in their innumerable card games. You pick up the sticky cards, and there it is: there it is. Can't change anything . . .

If the cycle of generations functions as a trap in the story, so does the Lakeside Bar. The tavern is dark and stale, and the popular music always playing on its jukebox is a strained, unsuccessful attempt at gaiety. Even when Sissie is outside the bar, there is no escaping the bar. As the children stone the bird caught in the scum—a bird obviously emblematic of Sissie and her fate—Sissie can hear that "inside the tavern there is music from the jukebox." The second section plays off the first, for after staying to play cards in the first section, the father rows his children to the island in the second. But the island, ugly and strewn with garbage and litter, is neither improvement nor escape: "On the other side we can look back at the boathouse and wish we were there."

In the third section Sissie, who now hates "this noisy place and these people," restlessly leaves the tavern. But her attempt at romance leads only to molestation, and she turns to "run back to the tavern." (At least Humbert Humbert takes Lolita away.) The idea of no exit is especially strong in the final section, for Sissie has made her ultimate mistake. As she sits with her husband in the tavern, pregnant and entrenched, she has become the next generation.

The characters in "Four Summers" have nowhere to run. Sissie's aunt fantasizes about a television quiz show host, while at fourteen Sissie tries to lose herself in staring at the photographs of movie stars in her bedroom. Oates presents antisocial behavior as another response to the entrapment these characters feel. Duane Dorsey, the local

punk (and obviously admired by Sissie's mother and aunt), has landed in jail in the first section. His offense? "He was breaking windows in his [mother-in-law's] house," clearly an allusion to the motif of attempted escape. Broken windows lead Duane Dorsey not to freedom but to jail.

And of course the men in the story attempt to escape through drink. No recent American story is more awash with beer than "Four Summers," but it's not the sort of story that would sell more Budweiser. The beer the men drink is associated with the futility of their lives and with their entrapment. Usually they drink too much, attempting to blot out the lives they live. The men drink because they are broken and because they have become selfdestructive.

It is not every story that has beer as its dominant image. Sissie's mother asks her husband to "leave off drinking" and take the children on the boat ride. There are beer cans on the island, there is beer on the breath of the man in the parking lot, and Jesse drinks beer. Beer is even cunningly associated with death. In the first section the grown-ups cluck their tongues over the "kids or somebody" who "was out in the cemetery and left some beer bottles." Beer and death are unmistakably joined, for the beer drinkers of the story are walking dead men. "Why do they grow old so quickly, sitting at kitchen tables with bottles of beer?"

Beer figures most importantly and ingeniously in the episode in which the young Sissie is forced to drink beer. The mother's bored friend is responsible for this dim idea. Sissie's father angrily protects her, but the women are persistent:

"Who's getting hurt?" Ma says angrily.

Pa looks at me all at once and smiles. "Do you want it, baby?"

I have to say yes. The woman grins and holds the glass down to me, and it clicks against my teeth. They laugh. I stop swallowing right away because it is ugly, and some of it drips down on me. "Honey, you're so clumsy," Ma says . . .

This is the story's most Gothic moment. The monstrous adults force the terrified child-victim to drink alcohol, they laugh at her, and then they criticize her when she unhappily closes her mouth and some beer spills. The scene is also a cruel ceremony of initiation. The drink the grown-ups give Sissie, however, is no magic potion but rather the liquid of their futility and entrapment. After this rite of passage Sissie is symbolically one of them.

It is rarely wise to speculate about a character's fate beyond the boundaries of the story, but I believe that Oates points us in exactly that direction. Sissie is on her way to spending some fifth summer recuperating from a nervous breakdown. I have already elaborated upon her psychic fragility, her fears and insecurities, her extreme isolatedness, her tendency to seek out ugliness. In the final section not only has her entrapment become irrevocable, but she is also conscious of it. Sissie's good looks have been the only source of her sense of self-worth, but now even this has no value: "My hair is long, down to my shoulders. I am pretty, but my secret is that I am pretty like everyone else." If she is "proud of my legs," she also realizes that she has "little else."

Even worse, she knows her marriage is a mistake. It is five years since the episode in the parking lot, but she thinks she sees the same man in the bar, "wearing a cheap gray suit," looking "tired" and "years older." Sissie must be close to the edge if an encounter with *this* man produces tears and a feeling of lost opportunity. She fantasizes that she could have "gone with him to his car" at the age of fourteen and somehow escaped, somehow broken out of the cycle. It is hard to imagine a more threadbare fantasy.

So Sissie is left trapped inside the bar and inside her life. Her only recourse is to try to pretend that she is happy and that everything will turn out well:

I think of the baby all the time, because my life will be changed then; everything will be different. Four months from now . . . It will be different with me because my life will be changed by it, and nothing ever changed my mother . . .

As hard as she tries to believe this, she cannot:

I let my hand fall onto my stomach to remind myself that I am in love: with this baby, with Jesse, with everything. I am in love with our house and our life and the future and even this moment—right now— that I am struggling to live through.

This young woman is under a great deal of strain. The conflict between the reality of her situation and her fierce desire to transform that reality into something better could lead to a nervous breakdown. At that, the Oates country has its share of nervous breakdowns: think of Clara in *A Garden of Earthly Delights* and Karen in *With Shuddering Fall.*

Critics take Joyce Carol Oates to task for writing too much and too self-indulgently. Often, especially in the recent novels, her urgent need to communicate her bleak vision of contemporary American life has ridden roughshod over artistic considerations. Even the award-winning *them* spins out of control after the brilliant first half. Furious and unrelieved passionate onrush can grow wearisome.

"Four Summers" is an excellent story precisely because the characteristic Oatesian vision has been artistically contained. The despair feels earned rather than imposed. All the emotional power and empathy of Oates at her best are present. The story succeeds, however, not because of the quality of feeling behind it but because that feeling has been controlled by a tightly organized, richly harmonious artistic structure. "Four Summers" seems to demonstrate that for Joyce Carol Oates less can be more.

Source: Keith Cushman, "A Reading of Joyce Carol Oates's 'Four Summers,'" in *Studies in Short Fiction*, Vol. 18, No. 2, Spring 1981, pp. 137-47.

Adaptations

A number of Oates's stories have been adapted into films, including her short story "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" This story was made into the 1985 film *Smooth Talk*, directed by Joyce Chopra and starring Laura Dern and Treat Williams.

Another adaptation of an Oates's novel is *We Were the Mulvaneys* (2002), directed by Peter Werne and starring Blythe Danner and Beau Bridges.

Released as a two-part television movie, *Blonde*, an adaptation of an Oates's novel of the same name, was shown in 2001. Joyce Chopra directed the film, which stars Ann-Margaret, Eric Bogosian, and Griffith Dunne.

Topics for Further Study

Write a story of your own emotional development from childhood through adolescence or adulthood (whichever is appropriate) following the method laid out by Oates in "Four Summers". Do this by writing about an event or events in four different summers.

Reflect on your own experiences as a fourteen-year-old. Is Oates's representation of Sissie's thinking and behavior in the third section typical of someone that age? Discuss as a class.

Compose a list of your parents' character traits, and then compare them with the lists of other students. Do you notice traits in your parents that you feel you want to emulate or escape? Evaluate in groups why or how you might take on or deny certain traits, describing how social and economic conditions have shaped your outlooks and observations.

Break up into four groups. Each group is charged with adapting one section of Oates's story for the stage and is responsible for writing a script for that section. Make sure that each group member has a role, either writing, acting, directing, or securing and managing props. After each group has performed its scene, discuss the respective performances as a class.

What are some of the activities you associate with the following terms: "working class," "middle class," "upper class," "blue collar?" Into what class would you place your own family? Discuss as a class.

Sissie describes her parents as arguing all the time. In groups, discuss some of the possible reasons they argue, supporting your claims with evidence from the story.

"Four Summers" ends with the nineteen-yearold Sissie married and pregnant, sitting with her husband in the Lakeside Bar. Write the fifth section, picking up Sissie's story five years in the future, when she returns once again to the tavern.

Compare and Contrast

1960s: Race riots consumed major American cities such as Los Angeles, Detroit, and Newark as African Americans protested economic and political exploitation and police harassment.

Today: Most Americans see racial conflict and division as major social issues, though the number of violent protests has considerably diminished.

1960s: Television quiz shows such as *Play Your Hunch, Concentration, Truth or Consequences*, and *The Face is Familiar* appeal to working-and middle-class American fantasies of easy riches.

Today: Television quiz shows such as *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire, The Weakest Link*, and *The Chair* appeal to working-and middleclass American fantasies of easy riches.

1960s: The minimum wage for Americans is $1.00.

Today: The minimum wage for Americans in 2002 is $5.15.

What Do I Read Next?

Raymond Carver, like Oates, frequently wrote about his working-class upbringing. His collection of stories *Cathedral* (1983) was nominated for the National Book Critics Circle Award and was runner-up for the Pulitzer Prize.

Oates's novel *them* (1969) concerns the race riots in Detroit in the late 1960s, when Oates lived in the city. The novel received the National Book Award in 1970.

In 1987, Oates published the critically acclaimed nonfiction study *On Boxing*, which led to her television appearance as a commentator for a boxing match.

Oates often discusses her own working-class background and its influence on her fiction. For a clearer understanding of the work world in America, read Studs Terkel's *Working: People Talk about What They Do All Day and How They Feel about What They Do* (1974). Terkel presents the true-life stories of more than one hundred Chicago working people, from the prostitute to the waitress to the rich businessman, taken from interviews with Terkel.

Further Study

Bastan, Katherine, *Joyce Carol Oates's Short Stories: Between Tradition and Innovation*, Peter Lang, 1983.

Bastan provides an overview of some of Oates's short fiction, focusing on her style and the relation of her stories to those of other major authors.

Johnson, Greg, *Invisible Writer: A Biography of Joyce Carol Oates*, Dutton, 1998.

Johnson has written two other critical studies of Oates's work. He was given access to Oates's letters and archival materials for his biography, the only one on Oates.

Matusow, Allen J., *The Unraveling of America: A History of Liberalism in the 1960s*, HarperCollins, 1984.

Matusow describes the political climate of America during the 1960s, focusing on the major voices of liberal social and economic policies.

Wagner, Linda W., ed., *Critical Essays on Joyce Carol Oates*, G. K. Hall, 1979.

Wagner collects some of the more important essays written on Oates up until 1978.

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Gilman, Richard, "The Disasters of Love, Sexual and Otherwise," in the *New York Times Book Review*, September 25, 1970, p. 4.

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Review of *Wheel of Love*, in *Kirkus Reviews*, August 1, 1970, p. 825.

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Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
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

Research
Michelle Campbell, Nicodemus Ford, Sarah Genik, Tamara C. Nott, Tracie Richardson

Data Capture
Beverly Jendrowski

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Mary Ann Bahr, Margaret Chamberlain, Kim Davis, Debra Freitas, Lori Hines, Jackie Jones, Jacqueline Key, Shalice Shah-Caldwell

Imaging and Multimedia
Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

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
http://www.gale.com

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