French Stories Study Guide

French Stories by André Gide

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Micromegas by Voltaire

Micromegas by Voltaire Summary

Voltaire was a French writer who dabbled in a variety of fields, including philosophy, drama, and novel writing. He is especially well-known for his critical writings of religion and his advocacy of liberal political philosophy.

The story begins with the introduction of a "young man" from a planet named Sirius named Micromegas. Like everyone from Sirius, Micromegas is enormous, around 120,000 feet tall. In fact, in just about every imaginable way, Sirians exceed humans: they live far longer, they have more senses, and they are much smarter. Micromegas is forced to leave his home planet, however, when he is banished by the local mufti—that is, the local religious authorities—for writing a book that is supposedly heretical: in this book, Micromegas discussed the question of whether Sirian slugs were of the same substance as Sirian fleas.

His exile is set to last eight hundred years and he decides to use this time to explore the universe and see what other planets are like. After a long journey, he arrives at Saturn and meets a Saturnian. Saturnians are much smaller than Sirians; the fellow he meets is a dwarf in comparison, a mere six thousand feet tall. The two discuss the differences between their worlds for awhile, noting that Sirius seems to be a larger and more complex world in every way they can imagine. Micromega convinces the Saturnian to come on his adventure with him, and he agrees, but not without upsetting his Saturnian wife, who is peeved that he is leaving her after a "mere" one hundred years of marriage.

They travel past Jupiter and Mars and finally arrive at Earth, a planet that is so tiny that they can traverse the entirety of it in thirty-six hours. Life on earth is so small in comparison to them that they do not notice it at first. With the use of microscopes, they finally discover a whale and momentarily assume that whales must be the dominant life form. This assumption is undermined when they discover an object larger than a whale which turns out to be a ship returning home from an Arctic expedition. On the ship are, among others, several philosophers. The two giants pick up the ship and talk to them (they have to speak through a toothpick so that the power of their voices does not deafen the men).

After establishing that the men are in fact sentient—they are skeptical whether something so small could have a soul—Micromegas begins to question them about their philosophical and theological beliefs. Four of the philosophers provide answers representing various schools of thought—Aristotle, Leibniz, Malebranche, and Locke—but they do not impress the giants. A chaplain on the ship, referring to Thomas Aquinas' "Summa Theologica", claims to understand everything: everything in the universe, including the giants, was made for man's sake. This answer causes the giants to erupt in laughter and also provokes some resentment: They wonder how such small creatures

could be so incredibly proud. Micromegas writes mankind a book which, he promises, will explain everything. When the men open the book, the pages are all blank.

Micromegas by Voltaire Analysis

Generically, "Micromegas" might be considered a very early example of science fiction. Voltaire, as many writers during the Enlightenment, was fascinated by scientists, even though he was not a scientist himself. Science was seen as a refreshing departure from the paradigm of religious dogmatism and Voltaire capitalizes on this new and strange worldview to create the imaginative world of Micromegas. Of course, Voltaire takes quite a bit of liberty in this short novel; there was certainly no scientific evidence for massive extraterrestrial creatures. Nonetheless, Voltaire's incorporation of various astronomical discoveries—including, for example, the fact that Earth is not a perfect sphere—is sufficiently innovative to deserve notice.

As original as the story's setting, characters, and circumstances are, the plot of the story might be accurately described as an updated version of a very traditional theme. From the time of the ancient Greeks, writers frequently used the smallness of the Earth as a way to show how silly earthly ambitions are. Voltaire makes this point explicitly: "Imagine a being which could hold the earth in its hand, and which had organs in proportion to ours. It is quite possible that there are a large number of these beings. Then I beg you to imagine what they would think of those battles which won for us two villages which later we had to give back" (27). To further diminish the importance of human events (and perhaps humanity in general) the giants continually refer to men as "atoms" (cf. 29) or "insects" (31).

In the Middle Ages, this kind of story was meant to diminish the importance of the world in order to magnify the importance of God. Voltaire's purpose here is obviously quite different. Indeed, as insufficient as human philosophy is, human religion is completely absurd to the giants. It is the pinnacle of pride for these tiny creatures to believe that the entire universe, a universe populated with creatures millions times larger than they are, could be made entirely for them.

The Mass of the Atheist by Honore de Balzac

The Mass of the Atheist by Honore de Balzac Summary

Balzac wrote in the 19th century and is heavily influenced by the Romantic writers. As such, his work tends to magnify—perhaps exaggerate—the intensity and significance of emotion. Though the editor believes Balzac's work to be flawed in many ways, he points out that he does seem to have at least mastered his niche: the realistic depiction of an individual in his circumstances.

Balzac begins the story by introducing the Desplein, a surgeon renowned throughout France for his expertise and skill. The narrator notes, with a hint of sadness, that the fame of the surgeon tends to be as short-lived as the fame of an actor; for some reason, neither profession seems to be able to create a legacy which will survive past their deaths. Desplein had a natural kind of affinity with the human body which made surgery easy for him, though certainly his skill was also the result of long hours of hard work and study. Desplein's familiarity with the physical side of human existence led him to be an atheist, almost by default. He understood the roles of the nervous system and the brain and could not see any room, so to speak, for the operation of a soul. Fame always brings detractors with it, and Desplein's case was no exception to this rule. There was not much about him that warranted legitimate criticism and so his enemies tended to harp on his eccentric habits.

One of Desplein's brightest students is a man named Horace Bianchon, a man who will later become a brilliant and famous doctor in his own right. Bianchon has an unimpeachably good character and inspires respect and even admiration among all who meet him. On account of his many virtues, Desplein allows Bianchon to accompany him in all of his work and the men wind up becoming quite close. One day, Bianchon tells Desplein about a water carrier from Auvergne who had fallen quite ill. Desplein treats the man for free and, moreover, tells him to bring any of his friends who fall ill to him. Though such charity was certainly not contrary to Desplein's generally good nature, Bianchon could not help but be a little surprised by the depth of his generosity.

He is even more surprised when he sees Desplein enter a church and attend Mass. Bianchon assumed that Desplein, like all intellectuals, was an atheist who detested Christianity. Without revealing that he had seen him, Bianchon asks Desplein his opinion of Christianity. As expected, Desplein agrees with Bianchon's condemnation and quite eloquently points out the many societal ills the Church has been responsible for over the years. Unable to reconcile Desplein's actions with his words, Bianchon begins to doubt whether he really saw Desplein enter the church, but, a year after he first saw him, he sees Desplain once again enter the church. This time, Bianchon is more assertive and follows him into the church and even kneels by him. After the Mass, he

asks the priest if Desplein comes frequently to Mass; the priest says that he comes four times a year and, in fact, he even sponsored the Mass that is said on those days. At a total loss for understanding, Bianchon directly confronts his mentor and asks him why he, a professed atheist, would attend Mass so regularly.

He acknowledges that there is no coherence between his beliefs and his actions—like many men, he is externally religious but internally atheistic. However, he does have his reasons for attending Mass. He explains that as a young man, he was very poor and was on the verge of being homeless when an Auvergnat water-carrier, out of utter, selfless generosity, paid his rent and made sure that Desplein would have whatever was necessary to continue his studies. The water-carrier was a devout Catholic but never tried to impose his beliefs on Desplein. When the man died, Desplein decided to establish the Mass in his honor and prayed to God—in whatever way his agnostic soul could—for the repose of the water-carrier's soul.

The Mass of the Atheist by Honore de Balzac Analysis

Like "Micromegas," "The Mass of the Atheist" takes a generally negative view of religion. Both writers do not believe that religion is something fit for a true intellectual and is, if anything, only suited for the simple minds of the common man. There is an important difference of tone between the two, however. Voltaire seems to have no respect for religion at all, and his denunciation is completely unqualified. Balzac, on the other hand, sees a certain value in religion. While clearly disagreeing with it, he understands why someone might be religious and his rejection of it is not complete. If Desplein's attitude is any indication of the author's—and it would not be implausible to think so—Balzac might be more accurately described as an agnostic rather than an out-and-out atheist. Desplein's own atheism is not really a principled sort; it does not even seem to be a particularly conscious sort. His atheism seems to flow almost naturally from his dedication to science: his familiarity with human physiology so dominates his mind that the question of a soul never arises. His explicit condemnation of religion need not necessarily be understood as a representation of his own views. Desplein knows that religious devotion is considered a vice among French intellectuals and so might simply be playing the part when Bianchon questions him. He certainly does just that when he lies to another man and says he visited the church to tend to the priest's injured knee.

Though Balzac's assessment of religion is certainly more nuanced than Voltaire's outright rejection, there is a certain amount of elitism implicit in the story's treatment of Christianity. Desplein's words and actions seem to imply that an intellectual should be, more or less, like him: an atheist, or at least an agnostic. He has no problem, though, with the average man being a Catholic, and even sees a certain amount of value in it: perhaps these men could not be virtuous without it. Enlightened souls like Bianchon and Desplein can ground their morality in reason, but the simple water-carrier could probably not be expected to do the same.

The Legend of St. Julian Hospitaler by Gustave Flaubert

The Legend of St. Julian Hospitaler by Gustave Flaubert Summary

Julian is born to the lord and lady of a castle, owners of a wealthy estate. Almost immediately after his birth, prophecy surrounds him. His mother has a vision of a strange hermit who tells her that her Julian will be a saint. His father is told by a strange beggar that his son will be a great ruler and conqueror. Both are greatly pleased by these prophecies but decide to keep the prophecies a secret from one another.

As a young boy and a young man, Julian shows no immediate sign of fulfilling these prophecies. He is, indeed, decidedly wicked and his greatest source of amusement is in killing animals. As he grows older, his father teaches him how to hunt which opens up possibilities for his depravity he could not have imagined before. He takes great pleasure in riding through the wilderness and pointlessly massacring dozens of animals. One time, while in the midst of massacring hordes of animals, a stag supernaturally gains the power to speak. Before it dies, it curses him and tells him that he will one day kill his parents. Horrified by this prophecy, he returns to the castle and vows to never hunt again. While practicing javelin throwing with his friends, he nearly kills his mother. He is so horrified by the prophecy nearly coming true that he decides to leave the castle.

He becomes part of a band of adventurers and quickly rises to the command of a company of men. Julian's skill, intelligence, and courage are unrivaled and he makes a name for himself throughout Europe. He and his army always take the side of the oppressed and conquered and, in return, are blessed with Divine protection. When he frees the Emperor of Occitania from Muslim invaders, the Emperor gives him his daughter in marriage. He also gives Julian some land and a castle and Julian decides to finally settle down. He continues to keep his vow not to hunt—fearing still that the stag's prophecy will come true—and explains his fears to his wife. She tries to console him and tells him that his parents are probably already dead anyway. Encouraged, Julian decides to go hunting. While he is gone, his parents arrive and meet his wife. They have spent almost all of their money trying to find their son and have been reduced to wearing rags. They are amazed to discover that their son has done so well, each seeing it as a confirmation of their respective prophecies. They are obviously weary from all of their traveling and so his wife lets them sleep in her bed.

Julian's hunting trip, meanwhile, is a kind of surreal nightmare. He is unable to kill anything and he gradually realizes that all of the animals have banded together against him. He runs away and escapes to his home, but his rekindled desire to kill something has not been satisfied. When he discovers that there are two people sleeping in his bed, including a man, he hastily concludes his wife is sleeping with another man and

murders them both. He realizes, to his horror, that it was his parents in his bed. He makes his wife promise to give them a grand funeral and leaves the castle.

In penance for his sin, he decides to live as a beggar in a nearby village. As an act of humility, he readily confesses his story to anyone who asks and quickly becomes a despised outcast. He builds a crude cottage for himself and decides that he will live the rest of his life ferrying people across a lake. He survives on whatever crude scraps of food or money his customers give him, though they are often so disgusted that they give him nothing. One night, he picks up a disgusting leper. The leper has a strange quality about him, however; despite his terrifying exterior, there seems to be something important about him. Julian takes him back to his cottage and gives him everything he has—his food, his wine, his bed. He even lays in bed with him to keep him warm. Before his eyes, the leper transforms into Jesus Christ and Julian is taken up to Heaven for his generosity.

The Legend of St. Julian Hospitaler by Gustave Flaubert Analysis

Flaubert's treatment of religion is completely different from the caustic treatment in Voltaire and condescending depiction in Balzac. "The Legend of St. Julian Hospitaler" is a sincere attempt to authentically recreate the legend of St. Julian, a legend which Flaubert references explicitly in the final paragraph of the story. The story immerses the reader in the atmosphere of Medieval piety. Prophecy and supernatural occurrences are frequent and Divine favors flow freely upon Julian when he obeys Christ's commandments. This piety is not at all ironic; there is no suggestion that the Medievals were silly or simple or backward to see the hand of God so directly in human affairs. If anything, Flaubert might be somewhat sentimental, a characteristic which was quite common among 19th century European authors.

Flaubert does take a number of liberties in his telling of the legend, though there is nothing which could be considered a canonical form of the story. Legends, by their very nature, lend themselves to innumerable variations and discrepancies. That said, Flaubert's version incorporates a number of elements which betray the story's 19th century origin. The Romantic reverence of nature is clearly at work when Julian's sadistic inclinations are being developed. A Medieval audience may not have seen much wrong with killing animals as Julian did; after all, hunting was a pretty common sport and it was often a pretty cruel affair for the game involved. While Julian's slaughters certainly exceeded the typical scope of a hunt, the difference really was only one of degree, and probably not a great difference at that. For Flaubert, the destruction of nature is unequivocally a mortal sin and his regard for nature is made obvious by the fact that nature itself, in the form of the prophetic stag, revolts against him.

Flaubert's knowledge of an interest in psychology is also an indication of his historical situation. The connection between violence toward animals and violence toward other humans is almost a cliche today, but such an insight would probably be quite new and interesting to a 19th century reader. To a Medieval reader, the connection could only be

grasped dimly. Certainly, animal cruelty was not thought to be particularly healthy, but it was never seen as a symptom of deeper mental illness; indeed, the very notion of mental illness did not have a clear definition until around Flaubert's time.

The Spleen of Paris by Charles Baudelaire

The Spleen of Paris by Charles Baudelaire Summary

Baudelaire, who wrote in the 19th century, earned a dubious reputation for his bizarre, immoral, and even sometimes satanic writing. Beneath his eccentric exterior, however, was a truly modern writer, in the sense that he was keenly aware of the disorder that existed both in the world and himself.

"The Spleen of Paris" is a collection of three very short stories. The first of these is "The Old Clown" which takes place during an unspecified holiday. The spirit of festivity is so infectious that no one is completely immune to it, even the most austere and serious. The narrator finds himself swept up in the holiday celebrations. Through the chaos of dancing, drinking, laughter, and fireworks a clown catches his attention. By itself, seeing a clown at a holiday is nothing remarkable: entertainers of all forms capitalize on the festivals to make up for the slow seasons of the year. This clown, though, is sad and old, and as such has been shunned by the crowds. The narrator is torn between embarrassment and sympathy and intends to leave some money for the clown, but is swept away by the crowd. As he is carried off, he realizes the clown is an analogy for the man of letters whose time has passed.

In "The Poor Boy's Toy," the narrator mentions how he often brings small, cheap trinkets with him on walks to give away to the poor street urchins he comes across. The boys have learned to be mistrustful, but when they finally take the toy their joy is obvious. One day, he sees a rich boy playing in a garden with an appropriately fancy toy. The boy's attention is focused on something else, though. On the other side of a fence is a poor street urchin who is playing with his own, poor toy: a live rat trapped in a box. The two boys laugh with one another and the narrator notes how similar their white teeth appear.

In "The Rope," a painter tells the narrator the story about a young boy he adopted. He begins the story by noting how one expects that a mother always loves her child; it is almost a universal truth. Yet, his story is an exception to this general rule. He recalls using a particularly amiable young boy—who happened to be quite poor—as a model for many of his painters. He is so fond of the boy that he asks his parents if he can adopt him and give him a better life; all the boy will be required to do, he informs them, is a few easy tasks, like cleaning his brushes. The parents readily agree. The painter finds the boy to be more trouble than he had imagined. The boy has become so fond of sweets that he has even started stealing to satisfy himself. After the painter threatens to send him back to his parents, the boy hangs himself. The painter is horrified by the sight and begins to prepare to have the child buried before undertaking what he anticipates will be the most difficult part of the process: telling the child's parents. To his surprise, though, the parents are more or less unmoved, and only seem interested in having the

rope the child hanged himself with. The painter is swamped with letters from people of all classes who are interested in the story and he realizes that the mother only wanted the rope so that she could sell it as some kind of relic.

The Spleen of Paris by Charles Baudelaire Analysis

Baudelaire continues themes which have already been treated by some of the earlier writings in this collection, though his approach is uniquely his own. Like Balzac and, to a lesser extent, Baudelaire has a kind of sentimental appreciation for the poor and downtrodden and all three of the stories touch upon this. The narrator in "The Old Clown" is the only person the crowd who cares about the shunned clown, but even in a short space Baudelaire is able to give quite a bit of dimension to this sympathy. It is not complete: the narrator is torn between wanting to help the clown and the humiliation of being associated with him. The latter, tragically, wins out and the narrator is swept off in the crowd.

The admiration of children in "The Poor Boy's Toy" is a typically Romantic motif. The Romantics see children as a pure, not yet tainted by the ideologies and corruptions of society. Thus, the two children, though symbolically separated from one another by their different economic statuses, are still able to laugh "fraternally" (151). As the rich child grows older and is indoctrinated with bourgeois values, perhaps he will begin to look down on poor people, but for now the two children can just be children.

"The Rope" uses the notion of childhood innocence for a different purpose. In this case, the young boy is conspicuously not child-like. He has presumably suffered a difficult childhood, not only on account of his family's poverty but mainly because of his parents' lack of love for him. The image of a child committing suicide is an almost unimaginable tragedy and, juxtaposed with his mother's indifference, emphasizes the misery of the young boy.

The story's rather obvious use of symbolism also ties in with the anti-religious themes already seen in Balzac and Voltaire. The fascination with the implements of the child's death is meant to cast a morbid light on Christian fascination with the Cross on which Christ was killed. If there were any uncertainty in his allusion, Baudelaire makes it utterly clear by referring to the "fatal and beatific rope" (159).

Minuet by Guy de Maupassant

Minuet by Guy de Maupassant Summary

De Maupassant was a prolific writer during the middle of the 19th century. Like many other Romantic writers, de Maupassant tends to define his characters by a single, powerful passion which can have the effect of creating an impressive character that, nonetheless, lacks a realistic depth. His literary career was cut short at a young age when he died of a sexual disease.

The narrator begins the story by noting that the death of a child or a parent is the greatest pain a person can feel, but those pains eventually go away. Other, more subtle tragedies can remain fresh for a lifetime. The narrator recalls the misfortune of witnessing such a tragedy as a young man studying law. While on an early morning walk—which is his custom—he spies an old man, unaware that anyone is watching, break into dance briefly then continue on his way. He sees the same spectacle again the next day and finally asks him. The old man explains he used to be the dancing master for Louis XV and his wife is the famous La Castris, another dancer in the King's court. Of course, after the revolution, the two found themselves out of a job, but dancing still remains their great passion.

The narrator meets the old man again in the afternoon and this time his wife is with him. The two are enthralled with a chance to teach a young man about dance, but find themselves unable to accurately explain the essence of the minuet. Finally, they decide to give a demonstration. The narrator is greatly disturbed by the sight: he feels like he is watching two ghosts of an era long past. After the dance is over, the old man and his wife weep and embrace. The narrator parts ways and never sees them again, but wonders if they continue to roam the Earth as a reminder of France's forgotten history.

Minuet by Guy de Maupassant Analysis

It would be easy to read this story as a condemnation of France's royal history, but it would seem that de Maupassant's assessment is more nuanced and even uncertain. The narrator is indeed horrified by the ghostly sight of watching the "ancient" couple dance, but he also describes their era as "the gallant century which seems to have left in the world an odor of love" (169). A more plausible interpretation of the story might be that de Maupassant recognizes the beauty of the defunct French monarchy and the heritage it left for posterity but acknowledges that France, and history in general, has permanently moved on from that time. Just like the minuet, monarchy and aristocracy are out of place in the modern world.

The Death of Judas by Paul Claudel

The Death of Judas by Paul Claudel Summary

Claudel, who wrote in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, is a controversial figure among both scholars of French literature and Catholic intellectuals. His attitude toward fellow writers was almost hostile and the tone of his writing is always gravely serious, even angry at times. He was heavily involved in the Catholic revival in France during the early part of the 20th century and his religion heavily informs both the tone and content of his works. However, his reception by Catholics has not been uniformly positive.

"The Death of Judas" is a monologue written by Judas after he has committed suicide by hanging. His first concern is to make sure the reader understands his status among the Apostles. He is, he claims, the most distinguished and worthy of Christ's disciples, the remainder of whom he refers to as "fish scrapers" (176). He praises his abilities as administrator—Judas was in charge of managing the funds of Christ's ministry—and defends himself against the accusations that he stole from the funds. He does not deny that he occasionally dipped his hand into the ministry's purse, but, he claims, it was for the common good; it would damage both his and Christ's reputation if he did not have enough money for a proper lifestyle.

He witnessed many of Christ's miracles, but he was never terribly impressed by them. Christ's miracles, he claims, created as many problems as they solved—perhaps even more. Jerusalem had become accustomed to having cripples lay around and it often seemed that an exorcised demoniac regretted losing the spirits which had possessed him. Christ's actions, Judas claims, simply did not agree with his common sense. Christ said many fine things about Heaven and death and sin, but very little that was of use to people still living. He especially disagreed with the divisive attitude of Christ's comments. Judas did not want alienate the Jews and the Pagans, but rather saw them as potential allies whose services may one day be useful.

Moreover, his priorities were all wrong and one case of particularly egregious imprudence pushed Judas over the edge and forced him to betray his master. One of the women in the ministry, Mary Magdalen, who was supposed to help secure funds, instead wasted all of the money on a vial of perfume to anoint Christ with. When he protested, Christ rebuked him and from that moment Judas decided that, for the sake of society, he had to have Christ arrested. He told the temple authorities where Christ would be so that they could arrest him. He came with the soldiers and greeted his former master with a kiss. He never imagined how cowardly the other disciples would act, like Peter, who denied even knowing Christ. Judas was greatly upset when he saw the violence that was being done to Jesus. He claims he had no idea that the Romans and Jews had any such malicious intentions.

Overcome by grief, and even claiming to be a victim of betrayal himself, he visited his master's corpse—which he had no faith would rise again—and then hanged himself

over Potter's field. While hanging there, he finally felt free: He was no longer bound by the mundane reality of the ground. He swung freely in whatever wind swept by. He contrasted his tree to Christ's cross. Christ's cross, composed of two perpendicular beams, represents a black-and-white worldview which acknowledges only one way to be right and one way to be wrong. Judas' tree, on the other hand, with its many, gnarled branches represents a more ambiguous and subjective outlook.

The Death of Judas by Paul Claudel Analysis

Claudel's devotion to Catholicism is obvious in this piece. It might even be considered a kind of morality piece, for in it he purposefully associates many very modern, practical attitudes with the behavior of the arch-betrayer, Judas. It should first be made clear that Claudel is in no way trying to defend Judas or his actions by giving them justification. Indeed, the piece is less of a justification than a rationalization, as one frequently gets the sense that Judas is not being honest with the reader or even himself. For example, there is surely a hint of disingenuousness when Judas claims to be overcome with grief when he learns that Christ is being tortured and executed. He was quite familiar with the attempts that had already been made on his master's life by the same temple authorities. He is unwilling to acknowledge his guilt, though, out of pride, and there is perhaps a suggestion that this proud insistence on his innocence is why Judas was damned.

However, in this piece, Judas' primary vice is not pride, but excessive practicality. He is the ultimate pragmatist and thus revolts at the often otherworldly nature of Christ's mission and message. The miracles were, he claims, impressive for awhile, but they became boring in time, and he even regrets the practical problems that they caused. Judas is either unable or unwilling to acknowledge the spiritual effects of these miracles, which was their chief purpose. Christ was less interested in healing a cripple than in inspiring a faith which could heal his soul. Judas' gaze was firmly fixed downward, however, and thus such an end could be of no value to him.

The Return of the Prodigal Son by Andre Gide

The Return of the Prodigal Son by Andre Gide Summary

Gide's interpretation of the biblical parable of the prodigal son created quite a bit of controversy in France, not least among his close, Catholic friends. Gide felt a strong personal attachment to the work, however, and was not to be deterred in publishing in it.

The story begins by narrating, with expanded detail, the original gospel story. The prodigal son, who has wasted his inheritance toiling away in foreign lands, comes back to his father's house and is warmly welcomed by his parents, who thought he was dead. They feast sumptuously and the older brother mulls over why his parents do not seem to cherish him as much, even though he never even left.

Thus ends the parable and the remainder of the story is wholly original. The prodigal son wakes the next day and speaks to his father, who asks him why he left. The son explains that he never felt that he really left, since he, his father, is everywhere. He distinguishes the house from the father—though he left the house, it does not mean he was leaving his father. The son explains that it was not really love which caused him to return, but a kind of laziness. Slaving away in the desert and wilderness was tiring, but he was not altogether unhappy. Though the pleasures of that lifestyle were different and more temporary than the comfort known at his father's house, he does not regret them, and cherishes their memory. The father is finally moved to change his approach and apologizes for his harshness. It was the prodigal son's older brother that made him say that salvation could not be found outside the house. He promises his son that if he called to him—wherever he might be—he would be there.

The next day, the prodigal speaks with his older brother. Unlike his father, the older brother is completely rigid about the necessity of returning to and staying in the house. He enjoins the prodigal son to a life which is lived in a strict and orderly way. The prodigal son protests that he felt like he had to discover who he was and that he could not do it in the house. The house forced him to conform and be like everyone else and he felt like he was suffocating.

He speaks to his mother the following day. She has little to say in way of theology or doctrine, but her gentle, inviting, maternal presence makes the prodigal son forget why he ever left and he resolves to stay with the house forever. He tells her the great trials he endured while away. He often ate rotten food and was forced, out of crude, financial necessity, to serve a variety of wicked masters. He tells her he intends to become just like his older brother and even plans to take up a wife and start a family like him. She tells him that already there is a child he should look after: his younger brother. His younger brother, only ten years old, seems to be headed down the same path he was

on before he ran away. Though he has not left the house, his mind has begun to wonder. He associates with foreigners and gazes out on the countryside beyond the limits of the family's property.

He speaks with his younger brother the next day, but first must overcome the latter's resentment. He is mad that his brother waited so long—three days—to say even a word to him and is hardly willing to talk to him. He expresses his hatred for their oldest brother and tells the prodigal son how his heart leapt when he saw him return, "covered with glory" (225). He regrets, however, the apparent change of mind. The boy rebukes his brother for giving up on his dream of self-realization for the comfortable and uncomplicated life back at home. He tells him that he plans to run away the following day and means to leave permanently. He resolves to finish the project which his brother left incomplete.

The Return of the Prodigal Son by Andre Gide Analysis

In order to understand the significance of Gide's retelling and expansion of the parable of the prodigal son it is of course necessary to first understand the original parable. In Gide's cultural situation, the parable had a decidedly Catholic interpretation. The prodigal son represents a wayward sinner and the father represents God, who mercifully takes him back. Thus far, all or most Christians will agree, but Catholics generally see the father's house as the Church, and this interpretation is the one Gide addresses in the story: The connection is made more or less explicit when he paraphrases the doctrine of "Outside of the Church there is no salvation" (cf. 209).

The story expresses an unquestionable devotion to God but a suspicion of such formal, dogmatic structures like those which exist in the Church. The prodigal son, with whom Gide personally identifies, left the house because he wanted to find his own personal identity. The implication is that the Church applies such heavy pressures to conform that any individuality is lost. Gide, though, a free-thinker, feels compelled, duty-bound even, to understand the world for himself, and though he seems to be unsuccessful, he does not altogether regret his adventure, nor does he believe that God will judge him negatively for straying. This last point is dramatized by his father's admission that he was there for him wherever he was, even if it was outside of the house.

As attractive as free thought is, though, it is not an easy life—the prodigal son had to serve strange masters and eat rotten food. Symbolically, this suggests that a life outside of the strictures of orthodoxy has many pitfalls, and one may very well find himself believing all manners of strange and even erroneous doctrines. Undoubtedly, Gide also has in mind the social costs of apostasy—a cost which, the editor notes, he incurred himself in writing this story. These are, so to speak, the price a free thinker must pay and which, ultimately, the prodigal son was unwilling to pay. Insofar as the prodigal son represents Gide, this amounts to a kind of confession of ambivalence. Gide is torn between the comfort of orthodoxy—embodied in the gentle person of the mother—-and the freedom of heterodoxy. The ideal man, perhaps, as represented by the idealistic

younger brother, will stay committed to freedom of thought, regardless of how difficult it might be.

Grand-Lebrun by Francois Mauriac

Grand-Lebrun by Francois Mauriac Summary

In this very short and ambiguously autobiographical story, Mauriac recalls the effect reading poetry had on him as a child. The formalities of education were a kind of incarceration which he dreaded each day, and his only reprieve during the day was study hall. During this time, he spent no time on homework, but instead studied the great French poets like Baudelaire and Rimbaud. The words and—it seemed—even the spirits of the poets seemed to surround his daily life and imbue it with a new, exalted significance. This air of austerity had mixed effects on the young boy. Sometimes he felt completely unworthy of it and sometimes he felt so superior that the rest of the world seemed worthy only of his contempt.

Grand-Lebrun by Francois Mauriac Analysis

This brief story reflects a very modern fascination with psychology and development. Mauriac traces the roots of his own development as a writer and artist and sees in his childhood the roots of the skills which would later bring him great success. His understanding of emotion is complex and subtle, especially in his analysis of how he wavered between the extremes of worthlessness and exaltation.

The Passer-Through-Walls by Marcel Ayme

The Passer-Through-Walls by Marcel Ayme Summary

Ayme's reputation is actually much greater among American readers of his translated works than his original French audience, who would never place him at the same level as authors like Sartre or Blanchot. He wrote during the early and middle parts of the 20th century and produced an impressive body of work, spanning several art forms, including plays, children's stories, and even theoretical works. Of the writers considered so far, Ayme is perhaps the least philosophical and ideological. He is a skilled storyteller whose greatest gift, perhaps, is his creativity.

Ayme begins "The Passer-Through-Walls"—an awkward translation, perhaps, of the French "Le Passe-Muraille" or "The Wall Passer"—by introducing the protagonist, Dutilleul. Dutilleul is a simple government clerk who lives a boring and monotonous life, though he seems to take some pleasure, or at least comfort, in his routine. He discovers one day, entirely by accident, that he has the power to pass through walls as if they were not there. He has no taste for the unusual, however, and consults a doctor who locates the problem in his thyroid and prescribes him some pills. Dutilleul takes the pills once but soon forgets about them.

Dutilleul is only too happy to maintain the same, slow rhythm of his life as a government clerk, but his lifestyle is interrupted when his manager is replaced by a man named M. Lecuyer. He insists that Dutilleul depart from the normal way he opens his letters and adopt a new, though equivalent greeting. Dutilleul is too formed by habit, though, and finds the transition difficult, earning him Lecuyer's wrath. He is tucked away into a dark, old storage closet. Fed up with his mistreatment, Dutilleul decides to use his peculiar ability to get revenge. His storage closet borders Lecuyer's office, so he pops his head through the wall and curses his boss. When Lecuyer walks to Dutilleul's room, the latter pretends to be diligently engaged in his work, totally unaware of what just happened. Dutilleul repeats this trick several times during the course of the day and Lecuyer is eventually committed to a mental asylum.

Originally, all Dutilleul had wanted was to be able to write letters the way he was accustomed to, but he felt a new desire growing within him: he wanted to pass through walls. He began to do so at home, but it felt pointless merely to walk through walls for its own sake, and he decided to use his ability for burglary. He goes on a rash of such burglaries and becomes one of the richest men in Paris. At each crime scene, he always leaves a calling card that identifies him as the "Werewolf." The Werewolf burglar excites the curiosity and admiration of his fellow co-workers. He decides to tell them that it is him, but they laugh off his confession. In order to prove his identity, he allows himself to get caught by the police while robbing a jewelry shop. Of course, imprisonment was of little consequence to Dutilleul as he could easily escape through

the walls and, in fact, he took great pleasure in passing through his cell's thick walls. Before he leaves, however, he toys with the guards by stealing their possessions and placing them in his cell. He finally decides to leave, but continues to play with the police by making no attempt to conceal his identity. They keep arresting him and he keeps escaping.

He finally decides that he has had enough and so changes his appearance just enough to conceal his identity. A painter named Gen Paul, whose trained eyes cannot be so easily fooled, recognizes him, though. At this time, Dutilleul begins to fancy a beautiful blond woman, but he is told by Gen Paul that she has a possessive and violent husband who locks her away every night while he carouses. Of course, this is no obstacle for Dutilleul, and he tells the blond that he loves her and intends to visit her that night. He stakes out her apartment and after her husband is gone, he goes into her room. The next day he comes down with a minor headache and reaches into his drawer to take some aspirin. He returns to the blond again that night but finds that he can not so easily pass through the walls: he realizes, with horror, that he took the pills the doctor had given him long ago on accident and they were producing their effect. He becomes permanently trapped in the wall and is only able to let out a weak murmur to the occasional passerby. During the winter, Gen Paul occasionally treats his petrified friend to a song.

The Passer-Through-Walls by Marcel Ayme Analysis

In many ways, this story does not seem as modern as it is. It was written in 1943, but it incorporates so many elements of older literature that it could, in many ways, be plausibly placed in the mid-19th century. Stylistically, it is reminiscent of a number of Russian short stories, especially those by authors with an affinity for folklore like Gogol. Indeed, it is curious that Ayme chose to make his protagonist a government clerk, the profession of so many protagonists in Russian literature. Dutilleul's peculiar ability, and its consequences, arguably has parallels even in ancient stories. In Plato's "Republic" for example, one of the characters references Gyges' ring, an item which grants its owner the power of invisibility. The characters argue that such a ring would corrupt anyone because it would be so easy to commit crimes with impunity, a temptation to which Dutilleul himself winds up succumbing.

Though certainly not a "pure" fantasy, "The Passer-Through-Walls" certainly makes little attempt to construct a realistic or believable world. The characters, even Dutilleul, have no real depth. All the reader really knows about him is that he is a slavish and ridiculous love for routine. The rest of his actions in the story are not really motivated by anything about him, but the temptations created by his power. The other characters in the story are developed even less, if at all. Nothing is said, for example, about the blond woman he visits and all the reader knows about Gen Paul is his keen eyesight. The absurd encounter with the doctor at the beginning of the story surely has a bit of fantasy—the pills contain centaur hormones—and there seems to be a bit of satire about modern science and medicine. Dutilleul's power certainly seems supernatural, but the doctor is able to quickly, almost routinely diagnose it as a thyroid condition. Aymes, perhaps, is

mocking the excessive confidence of the scientific community, which at that time had begun to dominate other fields and even society as a whole (historians and philosophers, for example, were only too ready to make their theories "scientific").

The Guest by Albert Camus

The Guest by Albert Camus Summary

Camus was one of the leading French writers of the early 20th century. His reputation was earned not only by his skillful fiction-writing, but also by his powerful philosophical and political ideas. Indeed, he accrued quite a following in his time, especially among the youth. His existentialist philosophy of the absurd appealed to many with a philosophical bent, but his humanistic conception of social organization enjoyed a more general popularity.

"The Guest" opens with an Algerian schoolteacher, Daru, watching two men tread slowly up a snow-covered hill. He watches from his empty classroom, which is connected to his house. The men finally arrive. He recognizes one as Balducci, a Corsican gendarme, who is escorting an Arab prisoner to prison. Daru invites the two in and warms them up with some hot tea. Balducci informs Daru that police forces are stretched rather thin—there is unrest in the province and they fear revolt among the Arabs. As a result, the duty of conveying the prisoner has fallen to Daru. Daru thinks that Balducci is joking, for he has no association with the military or police, but Balducci insists. Daru's resistance does not seem to be a general antipathy for service. He says he is willing to fight, but something about delivering this prisoner to his unknown fate—perhaps he will be executed—is more than he is willing to do. Balducci does not give him a choice, though, and leaves the two alone.

Daru is a large, strong man and is not threatened by the relatively small Arab. The two eat together and then go to bed so that they can set out the next day. Daru watches the Arab man get up in the middle of the night, seemingly to make an escape, but does nothing. He is surprised to find the Arab sleeping in bed the next morning. As they prepare for their journey, Daru keeps thinking he hears someone sneaking around his house, but is not able to find the source. He packs some provisions and the two head out. After a short while, he hands the Arab the package of provisions and tells him how to get to the prison and how to get to the nearest camp of Arab nomads. He leaves it to the Arab to decide where he will go and leaves. On his way back, he looks back from the top of hill and sees that the Arab is headed to the prison. When he returns to his house, he finds a message scrawled on the chalkboard promising revenge for turning the Arab in.

The Guest by Albert Camus Analysis

The primary theme of this story is the notion of free will, a major component of Albert Camus' existential philosophy. A central problem for existentialism—or, really, for any philosophy—is how one ought to make choices. What makes a decision right or wrong? Camus vehemently rejects morality, believing that it prevents an individual from fully experiencing the human condition. The only purpose of life, according to Camus, is to

experience. As death is the end of experience, it is the ultimate evil. Daru's reluctance to send the Arab to his probable execution, then, is understandable. It is interesting, however, that Daru opens up the choice of life or death to the Arab. This suggests Camus' respect for individual autonomy. Even if he thinks that a person ought to live—because it perpetuates experience—it is not for him to decide. If the Arab wants to die, it is his choice to make.

A native Algerian (though of French descent), Camus was very sensitive to the political situation of Algeria. As a liberal, he was ideologically opposed to imperialism and, therefore, could hardly justify France's colonization of the African nation. At the same time, his quite human nationalist ties to France made him hesitate to completely condemn it. Camus' own ambivalence is embodied by Daru. Daru's commitment to the French military is inconsistent. He is willing to fight and kill Arab rebels but, for some reason, he is not willing to escort the Arab prisoner to jail. Of course, the latter unwillingness is not complete either. He does, after all, set out with the Arab and only decides on the way there that he cannot, in good conscience, complete the act.

Characters

The Prodigal Sonappears in The Return of the Prodigal Son

The prodigal son is a character Andre Gide borrows from Christ's parable in the Gospel of Luke. According to the parable, the son of a very wealthy man runs away from home hoping to find pleasures in foreign lands. He winds up poor and miserable and returns to his father, who mercifully and joyfully accepts him. The Catholic interpretation of this suggests that the return to the father's house indicates a return the Catholic Church and, therefore, stresses the importance of being Catholic. This is the interpretation that Gide has in mind in this story.

After narrating the story up to the point where Christ's parable ends, Gide invents the rest. The prodigal son explains that he does not altogether regret leaving. Though the pleasures outside of his father's house were more fleeting and he had to endure quite a bit of hardship, it was still worth it. He felt confined in the house. There was such a pressure to conform and think like everyone else that there was no space for his own individual, personal development. He felt compelled, as if by duty, to leave and discover who he truly was. He returned only out of a kind of laziness. It is easier to just accept doctrines from authority; it is much harder to play the role of skeptic and try to discover truth for oneself. In this sense, the prodigal son represents a kind of failure or compromise. He was not able to complete the journey to self-realization. His younger brother rebukes him for this and promises to finish what his brother left incomplete.

Judasappears in The Death of Judas

Judas is one of Christ's Apostles whom Claudel gives a voice in "The Death of Judas." Claudel's Judas is an exceptionally proud but also exceptionally practical man. He believes that he is the greatest of all of the Apostles or, at least, the most refined and sophisticated. He seems to be ashamed that he has to share his title with fishermen like Peter and John. Judas is given control over the finances for Christ's ministry. As they all live very poorly, he does not have much to work with, but prides himself on his ability to make so little money stretch so far. He likens his financial "miracles" to the literal miracles Christ performed.

Judas does not care for the impractical nature of Christ's ministry. The miracles Christ's performs, he notes, tend really not to make the world a better place; at least, Judas' pessimistic nature does not let him see the effects. Jerusalem is accustomed to cripples, he says, and the economy is based on the assumption that people will die, an assumption which is undermined whenever Christ raises someone from the dead. He hates how divisive Christ's message are and is not surprised at how many enemies Christ has created for himself among Jews and Pagans alike. Judas, for his part, is far more diplomatic: "As for me, I am a pagan with pagans, I am a Christian from

Christians; and I am a camel-driver with the children of Ishmael" (185). It is ultimately Judas' worldliness which leads him to betray Christ. He is outraged when Mary Magdalen spends all of the ministry's funds to buy perfume to anoint Christ with. He is even more shocked when Christ's rebukes him for chastising her. He decides, at that moment, that Christ will create more problems than he will solve and thus, for the good of society, he must be arrested. He claims not to realize that the temple officials will kill his master—though their violent intentions were rather clear—and kills himself after he sees what has been done.

Micromegasappears in Micromegas

Micromegas is a giant (he is 120,000 feet tall) who is from the planet Sirius.

Despleinappears in The Mass of the Atheist

Desplein is a renowned surgeon and professed atheist. He seems to waver on the question of unbelief, though, and regularly attends Mass for the repose of his dead friend's soul.

Julianappears in The Legend of Saint Julian Hospitaler

Julian is a Catholic saint whose life Gustave Flaubert recreates in "The Legend of Saint Julian Hospitaler." He is born to wealthy parents but shows a violent, sadistic nature from an early age. One of the animals he cruelly slays prophesies that he will one day kill his parents. Scared by the prophecy and by its near-fulfillment when he barely misses his mother with a javelin, he runs from home and joins a band of adventures. He becomes a famous and revered conqueror and winds up settling down in a castle of his own. When his parents come to visit him, he mistakes his mother for his wife and his father as another man and kills both of them. When he realizes his mistake, and gives up his wealth to dedicate himself to penance. He meets Christ in the form of a leper and is taken up to Heaven.

The Old Clownappears in The Spleen of Paris - The Old Clown

Among the various entertainers at a holiday celebration is an old, decrepit clown. The narrator is torn between pity for the clown and social pressure to shun him; the latter ultimately wins out.

The Older Brotherappears in The Return of the Prodigal Son

The prodigal son's older brother represents the strict, dogmatic nature of the Church, which insists that one must belong to the Catholic Church in order to know God and be saved.

The Younger Brotherappears in The Return of the Prodigal Son

The younger brother represents the logical conclusion of the prodigal son's flight from home. He tells the prodigal son that he intends to leave home but, unlike his brother, plans never to return.

Dutilleulappears in The Passer-Through-Walls

Dutilleul is a government clerk who discovers he has the power to travel through walls. At first, he makes little use of his ability, but eventually turns to burglary. He becomes trapped in a wall when he accidentally takes a pill that cures his condition.

Daruappears in The Guest

Daru is an Algerian schoolteacher. He is morally torn between his sympathy for the Arab rebels and his dedication to France.

Objects/Places

Siriusappears in Micromegas

Sirius is the Micromegas' home planet. Everything is much larger and more complex than on Earth.

Saint-Sulpiceappears in The Mass of the Atheist

Saint-Sulpice is the church Desplein secretly attends.

The Poor Boy's Toyappears in The Spleen of Paris--The Poor Boy's Toy

The poor boy's toy is a live rat in a box. The rich boy, who looks at it through the gate, is not yet corrupted by society and is able to enjoy it as much as the poor boy.

The Minuetappears in The Minuet

The old couple the narrator meets perform a minuet for him. It hearkens back to France's royal history and greatly disturbs the narrator.

Judas' Treeappears in The Death of Judas

Judas' Tree has many branches which extend in every imaginable direction. It represents a highly subjective, ambiguous worldview in which all beliefs are equally valid.

Christ's Crossappears in The Death of Judas

Christ's Cross is composed of two perpendicular beams and represents a worldview which acknowledges right and wrong in black-and-white terms.

The Father's Houseappears in The Return of the Prodigal Son

The Father's House represents the Catholic Church and one of the central questions of the story is whether it is necessary to be in the house to know and love God.

The Outside Worldappears in The Return of the Prodigal Son

The outside world represents all of the ideas and cultures outside of the Catholic Church. Curiosity and a desire for knowledge (both of oneself and the world) inspire the prodigal son and, later, his younger brother to leave their father's house.

Grand-Lebrunappears in Grand-Lebrun

Grand-Lebrun is Francois Mauriac's old school. While studying there, he discovered his passion for poetry.

Algeriaappears in The Guest

Algeria is a nation on the northern coast of Africa. At the time of the writing of "The Guest," it is occupied by France. Camus is torn between his devotion to France and his liberal hatred of imperialism.

Themes

The Insufficiency of Religion

Many authors included in this collection have negative opinions of Christianity and particularly the Catholic Church. These opinions range from completely hostile in the case of Voltaire to sympathetic but agnostic in the case of de Balzac. In "Micromegas," Voltaire satirizes religion by creating a universe filled with sentient creatures that are much larger and more intelligent than people on Earth. Yet the Catholic priest, even when confronted with a giant thousands of times larger than he is, claims, on the authority of his religion, that everything is made for man's sake. The wise giants laugh at the immense pride of such a claim. A similar kind of hostility is briefly displayed in "The Rope," one of the stories contained in Baudelaire's "The Spleen of Paris." In it, he likens Christian fascination with the Cross—the implement of Christ's execution—with the morbid desire for the rope the child used to hang himself.

In "The Mass of the Atheist," de Balzac presents a more moderate and sympathetic view of religion. It is almost taken for granted that an intellectual like Desplein is an atheist and he is desperate to keep up his appearance. He secretly attends Mass four times a year for the repose of his old friend's soul, whose faith he envies. There are several plausible interpretations of the author's attitude toward Christianity, but perhaps the most convincing interpretation is a kind of elitism. In de Balzac's world, Christianity is fit for simple minds, but a true intellectual cannot bind himself with it.

Gide presents a similar notion in "The Return of the Prodigal Son," but does so without condescension. He argues that the strict orthodoxy of Catholicism puts so much pressure on an individual to conform that it prevents the development of personal identity. Thus, the prodigal son feels bound by conscience to leave his father's house and discover who he really is. He returns, not out of religious piety, but out of laziness—it is difficult, he finds, to reach the truth on one's own. It is much easier to fall into the maternal embrace of the Church where everything is already decided. This compromise is criticized by the prodigal son's younger brother, who resolves to complete the project of free thinking begun, but not finished, by his brother.

Devotion to Catholicism

While many of the writers in this collection are enemies of the Church to varying degrees, others represent a return to Catholic piety. The influence and popularity of religion in France, especially among artists and intellectuals, was greatly diminished during the Enlightenment and French revolution. Catholic devotion was not altogether extinguished, however, and Gustave Flaubert's "The Legend of Saint Julian Hospitaler" is a testament to that fact. Flaubert's story is indeed a strikingly traditional story. He draws his inspiration from a stained glass window in a cathedral and the work resembles Medieval and Renaissance hagiography both in style and substance.

Flaubert emphasizes many very typical and Catholic themes. The supernatural realm is constantly influencing the events of Julian's life, even from the time of his birth when his parents receive prophecies. St. Julian is the prototypical wayward sinner, a kind of prodigal son. He is a violent, even sadistic man whose wrath eventually causes him to kill his parents. Horrified by his crime, he commits himself to a life of poverty and penance, the kind of renunciation which is frequently enjoined in the Gospels. Christ's appearance to him in the form of a leper is a direct reference to Christ's description of the last judgment in Matthew 25.

Claudel's "The Death of Judas" makes no attempt to hide the author's devotion to the Catholic religion. Indeed, it could be plausibly read as a kind of morality piece, exhorting the reader to give up his worldly ways and dedicate himself to Christ. Claudel gives a voice to Judas, a universally despised character, and explains why he betrayed Christ and killed himself. Judas' rationalizations are meant to sound familiar to the modern reader, for his reasons are exceedingly practical. He was concerned only with running the ministry efficiently and creating peaceful relationships with all religions. When he found Christ's message not only to be impractical, but socially disruptive, he felt compelled to help the religious authorities arrest him. He claims not to have known that they would torture and kill his former master, and his despair over the discovery drives him to suicide. Judas' reasoning seems quite reasonable, and this is intentional: Claudel wants the reader to consider his own life and see to what extent it resembles Judas'.

Free Will and the Meaning of Existence

A central theme in "The Guest" and Albert Camus' existential philosophy in general is the notion of choice. Existentialists deny a given, predetermined human nature. One's nature is rather what one makes it and thus choice becomes paramount of everything else. In "The Guest," the characters face several difficult choices and Daru, for the most part, exemplifies how an existentialist would face those decisions. Daru's biggest choice in the story is what to do with the Arab prisoner. He is reluctant to hand him over the authorities, because it will probably mean that he will be executed. For existentialists, death is a singular evil. The meaning of life is to experience as much as possible, and the only thing that can end experience is death—even suffering is a kind of experience and is not intrinsically worth any less than pleasurable experiences. Daru's reluctance, then, is understandable.

The reader might question why Daru offers the choice to the Arab of either turning himself in or escaping to live with nomads. After all, if Camus is an unwavering proponent of life, why would Daru, the author's representative in the story, offer the choice of death? While Camus certainly is dedicated to life over everything else, this dedication must be within the bounds of free choice. As a political liberal, Camus despises coercion of any type, and that must include even the coercion to do what one ought to do. Daru surely hopes that the Arab will escape—he even hopes the Arab will escape while they are still at his house—and probably is sad that the Arab chooses to turn himself in, but he recognizes that, ultimately, it is not his choice to make.

Style

Point of View

Voltaire's point of view in "Micromegas" is one of the most interesting and original in the collection. Though written in the 18th century, the story contains many elements of science fiction, a genre which would not really develop for several decades. The narrator is very precise and scientific. He reduces the characters and settings, whenever possible, to quantities. He measures exactly the sizes of the different creatures—Micromegas, for example, is 120,000 feet tall while the Saturnian is a "mere" 6,000 feet tall. While certainly an exercise in creativity, Voltaire creates this imaginative universe in order to prove a point. In perspective, human affairs seem ridiculous and trivial: it seems absurd that thousands of men should die fighting over a spot of land that is only a fraction of the size of Micromegas' toe. Especially absurd is the Christian notion that the universe was created entirely for man's sake. Given the background of a universe which is almost infinitely bigger than earth, filled with creatures of enormous size and intelligence, such a claim is the pinnacle of pride.

Claudel is perhaps the direct opposite of Voltaire regarding religion. As a devout Catholic, his writing is meant to illuminate and glorify Christ's teaching. This end informs his unusual use of perspective in "The Death of Judas." Claudet gives Judas a voice and provides what he believes to be the rationale for Judas' betrayal and suicide. Judas, who is a universally reviled villain, should strike the reader as being remarkably mundane. He is not some kind of demoniac who spews hatred and blasphemy; he may, indeed, sound all too familiar. He is, above all, exceedingly practical. As the manager of the ministry's funds, he prides himself on how he was able to make such little money spread. Given his obsession with money, it is understandable that he would be so disappointed when Mary Magdalen spent all the money to buy perfume for Christ's feet. He was not interested in worship, but efficiency. He was already upset with how divisive Christ's message was—he was inspired by the very human fear of conflict—and so resolved to put an end to the disruptive ministry.

Setting

In many of the stories, France itself and its history become points of interest for the author. In "Minuet," for example, Guy de Maupassant examines the relationship between France's monarchical past and the modern world. He acknowledges that that era had a certain beauty to it, a beauty which the modern world in many ways cannot match. Yet, it is a past that is irretrievable; the modern world has, so to speak, passed it by, and those who wish to return to it are like the ghostly couple dancing for the story's narrator.

The political situation of Algeria is an incredibly important consideration in Albert Camus' "The Guest." Albert Camus was a native of Algeria but of French descent. As a political

liberal, he could not, in principle, approve of France's imperial occupation of Algeria. At the same time, his national and ethnic loyalties made him reluctant to completely condemn his home country. This wavering is embodied by Daru in the story. His willingness to help the French military is inconsistent and maybe even incoherent. He is unwilling to convey the Arab prisoner to his probable execution and he treats the Arabs in general with a kind of humanity that someone like Balducci would never imagine. The Arab is even shocked that Daru is willing to eat with him. At the same time, Daru tells Balducci that he is willing to fight, if necessary, to keep down the rebels. There is probably no principled way to reconcile this apparent contradiction. Like Camus himself, Daru simply seems hopelessly conflicted.

Language and Meaning

In "Micromegas," Voltaire uses a very mathematical and scientific style to create his universe. This choice probably reflects the Enlightenment's interest in science, but is probably not entirely serious. The world he creates is really an absurd and inconceivable one. The creatures are so large that they cannot be imagined—Micromegas is 120,000 feet tall—and many of the aspects of their worlds literally could not be conceived by the reader, like the fact that Sirius has thirty-nine colors instead seven like Earth (or Saturn). Voltaire is well-known for his humor and so this should not be surprising, but the immensity of the universe also helps serve his purpose of satirizing the pride of religion. In a universe with creatures as massive and intelligent as Micromegas, it is patently absurd to claim, like Christians do, that the universe was created for humanity's sake.

Marcel Ayme exhibits a similar interest in scientific terminology in "The Passer-Through-Walls" when Dutilleul meets with a doctor to discuss his ability to pass through walls. The purpose here, however, is clearly comedic, perhaps with the vague hint of lampooning the confidence of scientists.

Structure

The collection is arranged chronologically, spanning from the 18th century with Voltaire to the middle of the 20th century with Albert Camus. Though all covered by the heading of "story" or "conte," the selections really cover a wide variety of formats and genres. Marcel Ayme's "The Passer-Through-Walls" is perhaps the most conventional short story. As the editor notes, Ayme's great strength is his storytelling ability and he lacks the ideological dimension which pervades the writings of most of the other authors in the collection. Francois Mauriac's "Grand-Lebrun" is a very brief autobiographical reflection on his childhood and the seeds of his passion for poetry; seemingly, it is not fictional at all.

Gustave Flaubert's "The Legend of St. Julian Hospitaler," Paul Claudel's "The Death of Judas," and Andre Gide's "The Return of the Prodigal Son" all bear some generic similarities. All three are reinterpretations of a traditional religious story, biblical stories in

the case of the latter two. Both Flaubert and Claudel are interested in promoting Catholic piety, and Flaubert does this in a very conventional way. Indeed, "The Legend" is reminiscent of Medieval hagiography both in its style and substance, though certain themes betray the Romantic heritage of its author. Claudel shares a similar interest, but his tactic is far more modern. "The Death of Judas" portrays the unfaithful apostle Judas and rationalizes his actions. The familiarity of Judas' reasons is intentional and, therefore, the story might be accurately described as a morality piece. Claudel invites his readers to examine their lives and see to what extent they identify with the loathsome Judas. Gide's purpose is quite different from both; he uses the parable of the prodigal son as a starting point to justify apostasy from the Catholic faith.

Quotes

"I do not doubt that if some captain of the tall grenadiers ever reads this work, he will add two feet at least to the hats of his troop. But I warn him that this will be in vain, that he and his men will never be anything save infinitely small." (27)

"Before being an interne at the Hotel-Dieu, Horace Bianchon was a medical student, living in a wretched pension of the Latin Quarter, known under the name of the Maison Vauquer. There this poor young man suffered from bitter poverty, a kind of crucible from which great talents come forth pure and incorruptible as diamonds which can be submitted to all blows and never break." (53)

"With the good faith of the doubter I say: 'Lord, if there is a sphere where you place after their death those who were perfect, don't forget good Bourgeat. And if there is something for him to suffer, give me his sufferings so that he may sooner enter what is called paradise!' That, dear fellow, is all that a man of my opinions can allow himself. God must be a kind old fellow and he won't blame me. I swear to you that I would give my entire fortune if Bourgeat's belief could penetrate my mind." (81)

"And that is the story of St. Julian the Hospitaler, more or less as you find it, on a stained-glass window a church in my town." (139)

"But the next day I received a bundle of letters. Some were from tenants of my house, others from nearby houses. One from the second floor, another from the third, another from the fourth, and so on; some in a half-joking style, as trying to disguise under an obvious banter the sincerity of the request, others grossly insolent and misspelled, but all concerned with the same purpose, namely to obtain from me a piece of the fatal and beatific rope." (159)

"And I watched them, my heart troubled by extraordinary sensations, my soul moved by indescribable melancholy. It seemed to me I was looking at a mournful and comic apparition, the out-of-fashion ghosts of an epoch. I wanted to laugh and felt like crying." (171)

"To feed thirteen people on a silver farthing is almost as hard as to feed 5000 with two small fishes." (177)

"With the Cross there are just two directions baldly indicated, the left and the right, yes or no, good and evil, true and false. That is enough for over-simple minds. But you can never completely circle the tree which men like me colonize. Its endlessly ramified branches open up in all directions to the most attractive possibilities: philosophy, philology, sociology, theology. It is so thick that you lose your way in it. The best thing is to choose a branch in order to take a firm position on it and give to that captious rope, but which is somewhat uncertain, and with which in a word you can do what you want, which we wear around our loins, the desired rigidity by the very simple method of placing it around our neck and trusting ourself to it." (193)

"'My son, why did you leave me?'
'Did I really leave you? Father, are you not everywhere? Never did I cease loving you.'" (205)

"'I felt too clearly that the House is not the entire universe. I myself am not completely in the boy you wanted me to be. I could not help imagining other cultures, other lands, and roads by which to reach them, roads not yet traced. I imagined in myself the new being which I felt rushing down those roads. I ran away.'" (211)

"I moved from one extreme to another, at times looking up myself as puny, as the most ludicrous and the weakest of creatures, defeated before he began; and at other times, convincing myself of my intellectual superiority, I was horrified that my teachers did not seem to consider me a chosen vessel." (245)

"The doctor was able to convince himself that the man was telling the truth [about his ability to pass through walls] and, after an examination, discovered the cause of the disease in a helicoidal hardening of the strangulatory wall of the thyroid vesicle. He prescribed intensive work and, at the rate of two pills a year, the absorption of tetravalent pirette powder, a mixture of rice flour and centaur's hormones." (251)

Topics for Discussion

In "Micromegas," explain the effect and intent of Voltaire's use of precise, mathematical descriptions.

In "The Mass of the Atheist," what point is de Balzac trying to making about religion?

In "The Rope"—one of the stories which comprises Baudelaire's "The Spleen of Paris"—why is the story told indirectly by a painter? Why did Baudelaire not just make the painter the narrator?

In "Minuet," why is the narrator so disturbed by the memory of the elderly couple dancing?

In "The Death of Judas," explain the significance of the shape of Judas' tree.

In "The Return of the Prodigal Son," why does Gide choose a Gospel parable as the basis for his story?

In "The Guest," why is the Arab so indecisive when Daru gives him the choice of turning himself in or escaping? Why does he choose to turn himself in?