The Fat Girl Study Guide

The Fat Girl by Andre Dubus

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Introduction

In his lifetime, Andre Dubus was lauded for his highly realistic and captivating portraits of ordinary Americans. Honored throughout his long career by numerous and prestigious awards, his stories were often included in the pantheon of best American short stories.

His important role in the literary community was demonstrated in the late 1980s, after he was struck by a car while helping stranded motorists. The accident led to the loss of his leg and confinement in a wheelchair. In the ensuing years, Dubus came to see this accident as a transcendent experience, one that broadened his capacity for understanding human suffering and forgiveness.

"The Fat Girl," a story that was included in Dubus's 1978 collection *Adultery and Other Choices,* has been deemed one of his best short stories. Many reviewers praised his depiction of a young woman, Louise, torn between conflicting desires. Her plight has a universal quality in her quest for self-love and understanding.

Author Biography

Born into a middle-class Southern family, Andre Dubus was born on August 11, 1936 in Lake Charles, Louisiana. He attended a Roman Catholic high school, and throughout his career he credited his lifelong Catholicism for his strong compassion for others. In fact, when asked how he would describe his writings, Dubus answered, "Catholic."

After attending a state college and earning a bachelor's degree in English, Dubus joined the Marine Corps. At the age of nineteen, he began writing short stories; in 1963, he resigned his military commission to enter the prestigious Iowa Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa. Also that year, Dubus' first story, "The Intruder," was published.

After receiving his M.F.A., Dubus and his wife and children moved to Massachusetts, where he taught modern fiction and creative writing at Bradford College. He held this job until 1984. During his years as a professor, Dubus published his first novel, *The Lieutenant,* as well several collections of short fictions and novellas.

In 1970 his work was included for the first time in *Best American Short Stories*. Throughout the decade, he continued to garner a number of impressive reviews and awards, including a Guggenheim Fellowship, a National Endowment for the Arts grant, and inclusion in *Prize Stories: The O. Henry Awards*. In 1977 he wrote "The Fat Girl," considered to be one of his more significant short stories.

By the late 1980s, Dubus was widely considered to be an important contemporary writer, and his stories were studied in college literature classes.

In 1986, while helping a stranded motorist on a Massachusetts highway, Dubus was hit by car. His injuries led to the amputation of one leg and his permanent confinement in a wheelchair. In 1991 he wrote an account of the accident called *Broken Vessels*.

For several years after the accident, Dubus was unable to write fiction. The support of fellow American writers, such as Ann Beattie, E. L. Doctorow, and John Irving, helped Dubus during this difficult period. In the years afterwards, he came to see the accident as a transcendent experience that made him a more empathetic person and allowed him greater understanding of human suffering and forgiveness.

When he returned to fiction writing, his work again garnered impressive awards, including the prestigious MacArthur Fellowship. Dubus died in 1999 of a heart attack.

Plot Summary

"The Fat Girl" chronicles the story of a young woman named Louise as she searches for love and self-acceptance. As a young, fat girl, she feels like she is not accepted by friends and family. Her mother encourages her to watch what she eats, but Louise develops the habit of sneaking fattening foods, such as peanut butter or candy bars, at a young age.

Louise continues to binge in private when she goes away to college. Carrie, her roommate and only friend, encourages Louise to give up this habit. When the two young women are seniors in college, Carrie suggests that Louise go on a diet.

For the rest of the year, Louise follows a very strict diet to lose weight. As a result, she grows irritable and she feels hungry all the time; but she also loses seventy pounds. When Louise goes home for Christmas vacation, her mother cannot believe how much weight she has lost.

Louise returns home to Louisiana after college. Her mother takes her shopping for clothes to fit her new, slender body. She meets a young lawyer, Richard, who works at her father's firm; they get married the following spring. As a housewife, Lou ise fixes heavy meals for her husband, but she does not eat them herself.

Richard and Louise enjoy many material advantages: they have a nice house; a boat; and they take several lavish vacations. Despite all these comforts, Louise sometimes feels as if her life is out of balance.

In the fifth year of their marriage, Louise gets pregnant. However, she is afraid of getting fat again. She tells Richard of her childhood and adolescence as a fat girl, but he dismisses her fears. Louise feels alienated from him and the life she has made for herself.

While pregnant, Louise begins to snack at parties and eat sweets and the dinners that she prepares for Richard. Even more telling, she begins to hide candy from her husband. After her baby is born, Louise continues to eat. Richard criticizes her weight gain and loses sexual interest in her. One night after Richard cruelly ridicules her, Louise weighs herself at 162 pounds.

That summer, Louise stops going on boat rides with Richard and their friends. Instead she spends her time with her young son. Every day, she and Richard quarrel. Richard believes they are arguing about her weight, but Louise feels they are arguing about much more serious issues.

One night Richard is angry. He pleads with her to go on a diet and even claims that he will eat the same foods as she does in order to help her lose weight. Yet Louise realizes that he has no real compassion for her; he just doesn't want to be embarrassed by her weight gain anymore.

She puts the baby to bed and gets a candy bar, which she plans to eat in front of Richard. She knows that he will leave her soon. When she comes back downstairs, she is surprised to find that Richard is still there.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

As this story begins, we meet Louise. We immediately learn that a boy kissed her at the age of sixteen, and that her father kisses her often as well.

We then learn that at the age of nine, Louise's mother began admonishing her to watch what she ate. Her mother is described as a slim, pretty woman who eats very little. Despite her mother's warnings that boys are not interested in fat girls, Louise sneaks extra food to supplement the sparse meals she was served. Louise's father, on the other hand, feels as though Louise should be able to eat whatever she pleases.

Louise often goes to the movies with her two friends, Joan and Marjorie, and wonders why the fat actresses are fat. She wonders if they failed at dieting or if they simply chose to be fat. In the end, she believes that the actresses choose to be fat, and that, unlike her, they do not eat secretly.

Louise's friends Joan and Marjorie are both described as thin. While Joan is also described as being pretty, there are other far prettier girls in their school and so, boys are not usually interested in her. Marjorie is intelligent, and she will go on to earn a Ph.D. in philosophy. As a teenager, however, her intelligence seems to intimidate the boys and so she finds herself in the company of Joan and Louise. Despite this, all three girls will eventually marry.

Many years later, as Joan and Marjorie attempt to describe their friendship with Louise to their respective spouses, both will remark that even though Louise never seemed to eat during their teenaged years, she was not able to shed the excess weight that she carried. Marjorie even recalls one particular evening when she laments the difficulties she has in keeping the fact that she smokes from her parents. Obviously, she does not realize that Louise has the same difficulties in keeping her secret eating from her parents.

When Louise leaves for college, she believes that she will be able to overcome her eating problems. For the first two weeks, she finds that she does not have the urge to binge. Before long, however, she began to feel more comfortable in her new surroundings and returned to her old habits. This time, however, because her parents are not nearby, she does not feel the need to hide her food.

In attempt to fit in at the all girl college, Louise buys overalls – a popular clothing item – and wears them in place of the more conservative dresses she was accustomed to wearing.

Louise has one friend at college, a young girl named Carrie. We learn that Carrie comes from an unhappy home. Soon after they meet, Carrie and Louise become roommates. Shortly after Carrie moves in, she tells Louise that she smells chocolate at night and

knows that Louise is eating in bed. She tells Louise that she wishes Louise could eat in front of her.

Louise and Carrie remain roommates throughout their entire four years of college. They both return home each summer; Louise to the disapproving looks of her mother and Carrie to her bickering parents. They write to each other during the summer and happily reunite each September.

During the summer before their senior year, Carrie writes that she has fallen in love. Although Louise is concerned that this development may have a negative effect on their friendship, she is relieved to find when they return to school that nothing has changed. Carries does, however, spend nearly every weekend in Boston with her boyfriend.

After returning from a weekend away, Carrie confides to Louise that she is concerned about what will become of Louise after they graduate from college. She asks Louise if she would consider going on a diet and promises to help.

Louise agrees to try dieting and under Carries guidance, she begins. When Louise begins the diet, she weights 184 lbs. Carries cooks Louise's meals in their dormitory room. After Louise has finished eating, Carrie goes to the dining room for her meal while Louise goes for a walk.

The diet makes Louise irritable and she complains of always being hungry. To help stave off the hunger, she begins smoking. Even so, she sticks with it and by Thanksgiving is down to 162 lbs. Afraid that Louise will return to her old habits over the Thanksgiving holiday, Carrie convinces her to spend the holiday with her family.

By the time Louise returns home for Christmas, she is down to 155 lbs. Her mother and father are pleased. However, her father notices that she is now smoking. Despite the approval and words of kindness she received while at home, as she returns to school, Louise begins to feel that she had somehow lost her spirit during the course of the diet.

Nonetheless, she presses on, even through an 8-day period when her weight does not budge. By Easter Sunday, she is down to 120 lbs and by the time she graduates in May, she weighs 113 lbs, three pounds less than the goal she and Carrie had set when the diet began.

Louise returns to her parents' home after graduation and finds herself falling into her mother's routine of daily weigh-ins and paltry meals. Her relationship with her mother seems to improve and the two spend many afternoons shopping for clothes.

Before long, Louise meets Richard, a young lawyer from her father's firm. The two date and by the following spring, are married. Carrie comes to be Louise's maid of honor.

Richard and Louise buy a house on a lake and spend the next five years traveling and entertaining friends. Richard is an active man with a big appetite, and so Louise cooks lavish meals for him while continuing to watch her diet carefully.

Despite the fact that things seem to be going well, Louise continues to be nagged by a feeling that she has somehow lost her true self. She shares her thoughts with Richard who has trouble imagining Louise as a fat person.

In their fifth year of marriage, Louise becomes pregnant. Although she is fearful of gaining weight, before long, she begins eating more than normal. Before long, all of the discipline she worked so hard to develop disappears. Richard begins to notice her weight gain, and rather than being supportive, admonishes her to eat less, telling her that summertime is coming and she will want to be able to wear her bathing suit.

Louise continues to eat, and even falls into her old habit of hiding food. This continues even after the baby is born. Richard becomes increasingly frustrated and angry and their relationship deteriorates.

One night, Louise steps on the scale and learns that her weight has climbed to 162 lbs. She stops spending time on the boat with Richard and his friends and opts instead to spend time with their baby.

Richard and Louise continue to fight; however, Louise is convinced that issues other than her weight bother Richard. After one particularly loud argument, Richard pleads with Louise to diet, claiming that he will help her and that he will even eat what she eats. Louise feels that Richard's offers of help are insincere and are based solely on his desire to have her return to her former, more acceptable self. She recalls that now long ago day in college when Carrie made the same offer and how sincere it was.

Louise leaves the room to put their child to bed. She is sure that Richard will leave her soon, a thought that does not seem to bother her. In fact, before returning to the living room, she gets a candy bar and decides to eat it in front of Richard. As she decides this, she is filled with thoughts of how much happier she will be when he is gone. Louise is so consumed with these thoughts that she is startled to find that Richard is still downstairs waiting for her.

Analysis

Andre Dubus's short story, "The Fat Girl" explores the themes of identity and relationships.

The story is told in the third person and focuses primarily on Louise's thoughts and feelings. It covers a span of seventeen years, beginning when Louise is a girl of nine and ending when she is a young mother at age 26.

Very early in the story, we learn that Louise's mother is concerned about her daughter's weight. It begins when Louise is nine years old as her mother admonishes her to watch what she eats so that she does not get fat. It is obvious that her mother feels strongly that physical characteristics are far more important than inner peace. It is also her mother's belief that Louise will be judged solely on her physical appearance rather than on the type of person she is.

Despite her mother's attempts to monitor her diet, Louise eats secretly and continues to gain weight. In high school, she becomes fascinated with fat actresses and wonders if they, like her, ate secretly.

In addition, while Louise seemed to enjoy eating in secret – she is described as anticipating her late night rendezvous with the candy and other sweets stored in her room with a sense of lust – she also identifies herself as a fat person. In fact, she says she chose her three closest friends, Joan, Marjorie and Carrie, because they were thin: "I was always thinking about what people saw when they looked at me and I didn't want them to see two fat girls."

Despite this apparent self-loathing, Louise concedes that there are parts of her body that she likes. Interestingly, these parts are all physical characteristics – her eyes, lips, nose and chin and hair – giving some indication that Louise herself also believes that others will judge her solely based on her physical appearance.

When Louise finally does lose weight, she feels that she has also lost her identity in the process. Returning to college following a trip home for Christmas, Louise laments that she suddenly feels as though her life has taken a turn down an unfamiliar path. These feelings remain with Louise for years. Following her marriage to Richard, she is described as enduring periods in which she feels as if she is not supposed to be living the type of life she is. Although she is now thin, Louise still considers herself a fat person. She attempts to share her feelings with her husband, but he is unable to accept the fact that Louise had once been fat.

As Louise continues to gain weight following the birth of their son, Richard becomes increasingly frustrated and distant. Louise seems to be unaffected and even accepting of his rejection, providing further support of her apparent comfort with her physical appearance.

It seems that Louise is only at peace with herself when she is fat. She finds peace in food and appears to be more comfortable in her fat body than in the more slender version. In fact, at the end of the story, she finally recognizes that the time she spent dieting and maintaining her weight were among the worst years of her life. In Louise's case, being fat is a vital component of who she is; the skinnier version was an attempt at being what others wanted her to be.

Louise's weight also affects her relationship with many people in her life. When Louise is fat as a teenager, her mother attempts to get her to watch her diet. When this fails, she emotionally distances herself from Louise. However, when Louise finally does lose weight, her mother takes her shopping for new clothes and their relationship seems to improve. When Louise does not lose weight following the birth of her baby, her mother once again becomes tense and disapproving.

Similarly, Richard cannot accept Louise as a fat person. In many ways, Richard is similar to Louise's mother; because he met Louise following her dramatic weight loss,

her weight gain is not something he is comfortable with. When Louise refuses to diet, he appears to shut her out and they frequently argue.

Yet, there is one significant difference between Richard and Louise's mother: Richard, despite his unhappiness with Louise's physical appearance, does not abandon Louise. At the end of the story, when Louise is sure he is about to leave, she returns from putting the baby to bed to find him still in the living room. Whether or not Richard ultimately leaves is unknown, but the implication is that he has finally given up on his hope that Louise will return to her formerly slender self and begins the process of accepting her for who she is.

The only two people who accept Louise the way she is are her father and her college friend, Carrie. Her father is described as a loving man who never mentions Louise's weight. Moreover, even though it is Carrie who convinces Louise that she should diet, it is out of concern for Louise's future happiness.

It is only after Louise finally accepts herself for who she is that she is able to refuse everyone's pleas to lose weight. Louise gathers her strength from her self-acceptance and finally finds inner peace and happiness.

Characters

Carrie

Carrie is Louise's college friend and roommate. She has an unhappy home life—her parents fight and will likely divorce—and she is prone to fits of depression. Carrie urges Louise to go on a diet, and she does everything in her power to help Louise. She proves to be a compassionate and understanding friend.

Joan

Joan is one of Louise's high school friends.

Louise

Louise is the protagonist of the story. As a young girl, she gains weight and remains overweight until college. Under pressure from her mother, Louise soon develops the habit of eating secretly, a habit that she considers to be "insular and destructive."

At college, Louise becomes good friends with her roommate, Carrie. With Carrie's support, Louise sheds seventy pounds in her senior year in college. Yet with the weight loss, Louise feels like she is shedding more than fat—she is losing part of who she is.

Louise maintains her new body for several years, long enough to marry a young lawyer and have a baby. The emptiness of her life prompts Louise to overeat again. This time, however, she does not eat in secret. She accepts—and wants Richard to accept—that she is a fat girl. Soon, she has regained much of the weight she lost years ago. Even though this means she may lose Richard, she feels she has regained her identity.

Louise's Father

Louise's father is an affectionate, tolerant man. He accepts her for who she is. He defends Louise and argues with her mother about what she should be allowed to eat.

Louise's Mother

Louise's mother is the first person who warns Louise about her weight. She believes that her daughter needs to eat less than her brother and father in order to stay thin. A slender, attractive woman, Louise's mother puts a lot of emphasis on physical appearance. When Louise finally loses all the weight, she calls her daughter beautiful.

Marjorie

Marjorie is one of Louise's high school friends.

Richard

Richard is Louise's husband. He is a young, energetic lawyer who works in Louise's father's firm. He wants the finer things in life: a big house, a boat, vacations abroad, and a beautiful wife.

Richard is unaware of his wife's past struggles with her weight. When she tries to share her fears with him, he is unable to empathize with her; he only sees what he wants to see. As Louise gains weight, he criticizes her and loses sexual interest. He volunteers to go on a diet with her, but Louise doesn't feel that he truly loves her. At the end of the story, Louise is certain that Richard will soon leave her.

Themes

Identity

The theme of identity is perhaps the most important aspect of "The Fat Girl." Since the age of nine, when Louise began to overeat, people identify her by her weight. Her mother unsuccessfully tried to reinforce in Louise the idea that other people—particularly boys—would respond to her physical presence, not the girl inside.

Louise's most defining characteristic seems to be her habit of eating food secretly. She deems it a "ritual of deceit and pleasure," yet at the same time she realizes it was a "vice that was insular and destructive." Louise's self-perception demonstrates that by the time she is in high school, she identifies herself by what she eats and how much she weighs.

At times, Louise tries to forge an identity for herself that is not based on her weight. She acknowledges that she likes other parts of her body— her eyes, lips, nose, chin, and hair. Louise's list alludes to her "tender soul" and her "good heart," but does not actually enumerate these as among her positive characteristics. This demonstrates that by the time she is in college, when she makes this list, Louise believes that her identity is intrinsically linked to her physical appearance.

Louise also equates the loss of seventy pounds with losing her identity. "She felt that somehow she had lost more than pounds of fat; that some time during her dieting she had lost herself too." At this point, Louise's seems spiritually lost, noting that "her soul . . . was in some rootless flight."

Despite her inner doubts, Louise embraces her new lifestyle, for it opens up new possibilities— such as marriage. Indeed, when she returns home after college, she meets and marries a young lawyer named Richard.

However, Louise has not lost the sense of her "fat self." She tries to communicate with Richard, to make him understand what her life was like before she lost all the weight. However, he cannot understand.

By the end of the story, when Louise begins to gain weight, she feels herself couched within "layers of flesh and spirit." She reverts to what she perceives to be her true identity—the fat girl.

Change and Transformation

Change and transformation are important themes in the story. When Louise goes to college, she goes on a diet and loses seventy pounds with the help of her friend Carrie. Carrie's acceptance of Louise establishes a solid friendship between the women.

With the tremendous weight loss comes a dramatic change in how people perceive her. Louise's mother calls the new, thin Louise "so *beaut*iful," while family and friends congratulate her. Yet there is also change in Louise's attitude and demeanor. She becomes cranky and ill-tempered, even snapping at Carrie.

However, Louise's weight loss also leads to a greater life change—her marriage to Richard. When she becomes pregnant, however, she loses the hardearned control she gained during college. Soon, she has started to transform back into "the fat girl."

With this transformation Louise realizes that her husband will leave her, because he is embarrassed, frustrated, and alienated by her weight gain. Yet this realization does not seem to bother her; instead, she seems to welcome the change because she believes being fat will return her sense of identity and security.

Friendship

The friendship between Carrie and Louise is essential to the story. They forge a close bond, one based on mutual loneliness and dissatisfaction. The girls live together for four years at college, writing letters over the summer and joyfully reuniting in the fall. It is Carrie's support and compassion that enables Louise to undergo the arduous process of losing weight.

Carrie wants Louise to lose weight because she worries about what her friend's life will be like after graduation, not because she finds anything intrinsically wrong with Louise's weight. Carrie doesn't want her friend's weight to hinder her happiness in life.

The importance of this friendship is made clear after Louise begins to get fat again. As she grows larger, her friends do not support her and make her feel uncomfortable. More importantly, she sees none of Carrie's love and compassion in Richard's face, which makes her realize that her marriage is based on superficiality, not on true love.

Style

Narration

"The Fat Girl" is told chronologically and covers a period of seventeen years, which is unusual for a short story. However, Dubus deftly handles this span of time and gives readers a full sense of Louise's life.

Steve Yarborough considers "The Fat Girl" a "compressed novel"—or a story in which years or even decades are compressed into one paragraph. Dubus alternates between summary sections—still filled with vivid details—and scene sections. The summary sections allow Dubus to give the reader all the necessary information, while the shorter scenes hone in on key points in Louise's life.

Point of View

The point of view of *"The Fat Girl"* is the third-person omniscient perspective. This means that the narration relates what Louise, as well as some of the other characters, think and feel. The primary focus, however, is on Louise.

The story never explicitly expresses a great deal of Louise's inner life. The reader must infer much of why Louise takes certain actions, such as going on the diet or allowing herself to regain the weight. Though Louise's reflections are few, they are important, and they relate her overwhelming sense of loss of self. By the end of the story, the focus on Louise makes it clear that she believes she should be loved for herself, not for what she looks like.

Ending

"The Fat Girl" is not an experimental story, yet at its end, the tense abruptly switches to the present tense from the past tense. This shift makes the story more vivid, grounding it in Louise's pres ent reality. Instead of remaining simply a story about something that has already happened, the reader realizes that the conflict—between Louise and society—is still going on and that Louise is currently in the process of regaining her own identity.

Setting

The setting of the "The Fat Girl" is a small Louisiana town. This town guarantees that Louise will not escape the scrutiny of her community. When Louise is fat, their eyes register disappointment; "their eyes would tell her she was still fat Louise, who had been fat as long as they could remember, who had gone to college and returned as fat as ever."

After Louise slims down, however, they look at her with pride and give her a true sense of belonging. Louise becomes friends with some of her former childhood acquaintances, but none of them seem to remember her when she was fat. Such a detail demonstrates their constant judgment of Louise. The people from home embrace her because she is thin, not because she is Louise.

Historical Context

The Carter Years

Jimmy Carter was elected to the presidency in 1976. His administration faced immediate challenges: the American economy was in flirting with recession and the country was on the brink of an energy crisis. Despite Carter's efforts, inflation and unemployment increased and the economy further stagnated. The energy crisis, which led to a sharp rise in the price of imported oil, only deepened the country's economic problems.

In foreign affairs, Carter called for a new commitment to human rights, using diplomatic and economic pressure on countries that violated the rights of their citizens. Some American diplomats opposed Carter's policy, warning that U.S. interference in other country's domestic affairs might lead to international tensions.

Carter's biggest victory in international affairs was his assistance in negotiating the Camp David Accords, a peace treaty between Egypt and Israel. Carter's greatest failure was his inability to free fifty-three American hostages who had been seized by Iranian militants in Tehran, the capital of Iran. These hostages were held for 444 days before their eventual release in 1981.

The Women's Movement

In the 1970s, the women's movement made significant progress. The National Organization for Women, a women's rights group, was formed in 1966. Throughout the 1970s, more and more women joined the organization to gain equal rights for women.

The National Women's Political Caucus, founded in 1971 with the help of feminist Gloria Steinem, encouraged women to run for political office. It was believed that women in public office would support women's issues, such as equal pay for equal work, domestic abuse legislation, sexual harassment law, and pro-choice protections. Steinem also founded a new magazine for women, *Ms.*.

In 1972, Congress passed the Education Amendments Act, which outlawed sexual discrimination in higher education. Many all-male educational institutions began to allow women to enroll, and many universities established women's studies courses.

One great failure of the women's right movement was the inability to pass the Equal Rights Amendment, or ERA, a constitutional amendment barring discrimination on the basis of sex. Although Congress passed the ERA in 1972, not enough states ratified the bill, therefore it never became a law.

While many women supported the women's movement, some middle-class women felt that it devalued the family and condemned women who chose to be homemakers.

These women also believed the women's movement threatened traditional family life. Other women who felt alienated by the women's movement included working-class women and women of color. These women felt that the leaders of the women's movement addressed issues more important to privileged white women.

A Changing American Population

American society experienced significant changes in the 1970s: the birthrate was dropping sharply to an average of two births per woman; the divorce rate continued to rise; and Americans moved around more than they had in the past. Throughout the 1970s, a growing number of Americans moved from the North and the East to the South and the West. Population grew in states such as California, Texas, and Florida.

Critical Overview

"The Fat Girl" was published in 1977 as part of Dubus's short story collection *Adultery, and Other Choices*. It has become one of Dubus's bestknown works.

Throughout Dubus's career, critics have praised his writing for his sensitive treatment of topical issues, such as abortion, infidelity, drugs, racism, and eating disorders. In fact, his stories have included characters like single mothers, divorced husbands, and abused wives.

Many of Dubus's stories focus on the turbulence of male-female relationships. Edith Milton, writing for the *New Republic,* viewed *Adultery, and Other Choices* as an exploration of the relationships between men and women. "I can think of no one," she writes, "who has drawn a more precise map of that no-man's land between the sexes than he has in this collection."

Other reviewers lauded the collection for its deft portrayals of the individual's search for identi ty. For example, J. N. Baker of *Newsweek* asserted that Dubus examined this familiar theme with "fresh perception and style."

Mary Soete, writing for *Library Journal,* also noted Dubus's knack for picking significant moments in the lives of his characters. "He presents moments of necessity and choice," she wrote, "in the inner lives of his men and women with precision, truth, and love."

Frances Taliaferro, who called Dubus a "skillful and temperate writer," acknowledged that *Adultery, and Other Choices* "takes some getting used to," but that "Dubus invites us into a world of quiet melodies. Gradually the ear learns to hear them." Taliaferro particularly liked Dubus's depiction of small-town America.

With his story entitled "The Fat Girl," Dubus raised complex issues of body image and identity. Critics generally praised the story. Milton asserts that Louise emerges "triumphantly human" in her understanding that anyone who truly loved her would find her true self underneath her layers of fat.

Baker also deemed the story as "the collections' exquisite prize." This reviewer saw Louise's actions at the end as an example of her "rebellious resolution" against the "charade of her existence."

Anatole Broyard, writing for the *New York Times,* also considered "The Fat Girl" to be the most successful story in the collection. He alludes to Louise's loss of identity when he writes that when thin, Louise is "only a mannequin of other people's expectations."

Steve Yarborough, writing in *Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction,* further discussed the story in terms of its narrative style, not its emotional content. Yarborough maintains that "The Fat Girl" was one of the "notable stories" in Dubus's "compressed novels." He writes,

The compressed novel seems to be the ideal form for Dubus. . . . It allows him to probe . . . deeply into the characters . . . and . . . forge a dramatic narrative, something the shorter, 'formless' stories do not do.

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Korb has a master's degree in English literature and creative writing and has written for a wide variety of educational publishers. In the following essay, she discusses Louise's search for her identity.

In 1986 Andre Dubus, who for the past decade had so perceptively wrote of the "moment of truth" in the lives of ordinary Americans, was himself caught in just such a pivotal moment. Dubus, who had been driving on a Massachusetts highway, stopped to help a distressed car. While in the road, he was struck by an oncoming car, and his subsequent injuries led to the loss of one leg and his con- finement to a wheelchair.

He came to view the accident, in the words of scholar James E. Devlin, "as a transcendent experience that has allowed him to understand more deeply the nature of human suffering, forgiveness, and love."

Certainly Dubus's "philosophy" seemed to be present in his later writing; for instance, the deeply moving "A Father's Story" chronicles the story of a man who helps his daughter flee the scene of a hitand- run and his subsequent attempts to find comfort through religious ritual.

Readers and critics of his pre-accident body of work, however, still find these same qualities; in fact, they seem to be intrinsic to Dubus. In his depiction of common Americans, Dubus realistically evokes their problems, pain, and efforts to find peace. He delves into the core of humanity and emerges with a key kernel of truth.

"The Fat Girl," first published in 1977 and one of Dubus's most well-known pieces of short fiction, demonstrates what Devlin has called Dubus's attempt to "impose order on chaos." The protagonist, Louise, is one such character trying to impose such order on her life. In "The Fat Girl," Louise is unable to find societal acceptance until she loses more than seventy pounds.

However, her attempt to change her life does not last; some five years after her marriage to a handsome, ambitious lawyer, Louise's food cravings return. As she piles on the pounds, she pushes her husband further and further away.

Though Louise is successful in severing her relationship with a man who seems too intent on physical appearances, she fails overall. Instead of finding a new meaning for her life, she reverts to the one that sustained her throughout her childhood— the solitary pleasures of food, which she herself once called "a vice that was insular and destructive."

Louise's odyssey begins when she is only a little girl. Her mother, warning that "in five years you'll be in high school and if you're fat the boys won't like you," won't let Louise eat potato chips and deserts. Louise compensates for this denial through secret bingeing.

From a young age, Louise defines herself through her weight and the food she eats. The girlfriends she chooses are always thin, because she didn't want anyone looking at herself and a friend "'to see two fat girls.'"

At college, she doesn't eat much in the cafeteria because not eating in public "had become as habitual as good manners." She attends a school for girls back East so she won't have to "contend with" boys. Yet Louise understands it is not only boys who judge her based on her appearance. She knows that at her new school "she would get not attention" from her teachers and fellow students. By the time she is a young adult, Louise too readily understands the way people look right through her.

Carrie is the first person who perceives Louise's weight as an obstacle that will keep her from enjoying life. Carrie's acceptance of Louise for who she is, not what she looks like, is demonstrated when she asks Louise to eat in front of her instead of secretly. Even when she urges Louise to diet, it is not because she has a problem with Louise's weight; rather, she worries for Louise's future.

For Louise, however, losing seventy pounds seems to change her personality too. She finds that she becomes irritable when "all her life she had never been afflicted by ill temper." After losing close to forty pounds, she still "did not feel strong, she did not feel she was committed to and within reach of achieving a valuable goal." Instead, she felt she "had lost more than pounds of fat; that some time during her dieting she had lost herself too."

With her new habits and eating routines, Louise gives up every vestige of her former life. She eats sparse meals—dinner is a piece of meat and lettuce and breakfast is an egg and black coffee—instead of candy bars and other sweets. She no longer eats secretly; instead, Carrie monitors every piece of food that goes in Louise's mouth.

In fact, Louise's body—one which "she liked most when she was unaware of it"—becomes common property. It is shared with Carrie, who charts Louise's progress via the scale. Everyone she knows comments on it: her parents, friends, and acquaintances. They all seem to be more comfortable and accepting of the new Louise. After she returns home from college, she becomes friends with people she knew as a child "and even they did not seem to remember her when she was fat." The overarching message is that Louise, the fat girl, is a person unworthy of knowing and loving; but Louise, the slender young woman, is acceptable.

Louise's relationship with Carrie is also affected by the diet. Since Carrie is monitoring the diet, Carrie is not only Louise's friend but also her enemy. Louise speaks sharply to Carrie, and she snaps at her about lettuce. In this way their relationship becomes permeated with talk of food. Louise later recalls her final year in college, the diet year, as "the worst year of her life."

The diet year is underscored by her feeling that "she was going to another country or becoming a citizen of a new one." This country seems to be populated by Louise's relatives and acquaintances, and at first Louise loves "the applause in their eyes."

Her transformation is officially established by her marriage to Richard. At times during her marriage, Louise tries to embrace her new identity. On the plane returning from Europe, "she thought of the accumulated warmth and pelt of her marriage, and how by slimming her body she had bought into the pleasures of the nation." At this point, Louise is equating her slenderness with her ability to fit into society and thus partake of all it has to offer—a large lakefront house, expensive vacations, a boat.

Yet these are only possessions, and Louise's "moments of triumph were sparse." Sometimes she "was suddenly assaulted by the feeling that she had taken the wrong train and arrived at a place where no one knew her, and where she ought not to be." This sentence is immediately followed up by a scene between Louise and Richard, in bed, where she talks to him about having been fat. Such positioning seems to indicate that part of the feeling of being in the wrong place stems from her relationship with Richard—perhaps he is the wrong man for her.

Indeed, the narration states:

she knew the story meant very little to him . . . She felt as though she was trying to tell a foreign lover about her life in the United States, and if only she could command the language he would know and love all of her and she would feel complete.

Louise's desire for completeness and for reconnecting with her own soul, which had gotten lost "in some rootless flight" during her diet years, leads her to regain the weight she so arduously took off. Part of Louise's transformation back into a "fat girl" may stem from the fact that she has become a mother. During her childhood, Louise's mother made her daughter feel unworthy and unattractive because of her weight.

When Louise becomes a mother, she is grati- fied that her son responds to her despite "the folds of fat at her waist." Perhaps Louise sees an opportunity to find someone who will love her for what she is and what she looks like. Louise also may feel that she doesn't want her own child to grow up as she did: judged and criticized.

As Louise derives pleasure from eating and she regains the weight, she also retreats back to her solitary world. She knows that her weight gain and her refusal to try and lose weight will make Richard leave her. The words, "[i]t has been in his eyes all summer," implies that Louise not only expects his rejection, but will be relieved by it. In this way, she will discover his true feelings for her.

All her life, no one really has *seen* Louise except for Carrie. Although her father's eyes were filled with "the lights of love," they were also filled with "pity." His attempts to defend Louise to her mother are ineffectual and contribute to Louise's secret bingeing.

To her mother, Louise has been a constant source of disappointment. The only time her mother approves of Louise is after she has dieted to a slender 113 pounds. Her mother "cried and hugged her and said again and again: You're *beaut*iful."

Richard seems to care little about the woman inside and only covets her slender exterior. "'Have you *looked* at yourself?'" he asks Louise after she has gained back fifty

pounds. Louise finds none of Carrie's "compassion and determination and love" in her husband, even after he volunteers to diet with her.

Readers have grappled with why Louise regains weight. Anatole Broyard, in the *New York Times,* says that Louise "has dieted away her appetite for life, that, in some way, her fatness was part of her essence and now she is only a mannequin of other people's expectations."

Edith Milton contends in the *New Republic* that "fat is what she is, and . . . any love worth the name can find her under the blubber."

J. N. Baker for *Newsweek* calls out the "charade of her existence," which "inspires a rebellious resolution."

Whether or not she regains weight for any of these reasons—whether she is simply meant to be fat, or is gluttonous, or wants to drive Richard away, or even wants to find her own self—the fact remains that in giving herself up to food, Louise finds peace again.

"She knows Richard is waiting," the story ends, "but she feels his departure so happily that, when she enters the living room, unwrapping the candy, she is surprised to see him standing there." So order for Louise comes with a tall price—the retreat back into the world of childhood, where food could satisfy all her basic needs. It is up to the reader to decide, then, if Louise is a success or a failure.

Source: Rena Korb, for *Short Stories for Students,* Gale, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

Brent has a Ph.D. in American Culture, specializing in film studies, from the University of Michigan. She is a freelance writer and teaches courses in the history of American cinema. In the following essay, Brent discusses themes of identity and spirituality in Dubus's story.

Dubus's short story "The Fat Girl" is about a young woman, Louise, who, from the age of nine, is seen by everyone around her as a "fat girl." In order to get around her mother's insistence that she diet, Louise develops the habit of sneaking food which she secretly eats in her bedroom or in the bathroom.

When Louise is in college, her best (and only) friend Carrie puts her on a strict diet, as a result of which she loses some seventy pounds over the course of a year. When she was considered a "fat girl," Louise felt she could never even dream of being asked out by a man; but once she has lost weight she dates and marries Richard, a young man who works in her father's business.

However, when Louise becomes pregnant, she begins to revert back to her old eating habits and quickly gains weight. After the baby is born, she continues to overeat. Her husband becomes increasingly angered by her weight gain until, at the end of the story, she defiantly eats a piece of pie and then a candy bar in front of him, almost relieved with his inevitable departure from her life.

Louise's struggle with being a "fat girl" is characterized by her struggles with her sense of identity. Early in life, Louise is convinced that it is her God-ordained fate, or destiny, to be a "fat girl." Fate being a concept born of religious conviction, Louise believes that "God had made her that way." She imagines that her two high school friends, both of them thin, would always remember her as "a girl whose hapless body was destined to be fat."

As Louise's sense of herself includes the firm belief that it is her God-ordained destiny to be a "fat girl," the practice of eating takes on religious implications. Eating for Louise is repeatedly referred to as a "ritual"—a term normally used to describe a sacred spiritual practice; for instance, "her creeping to the kitchen when she was nine became, in high school, a ritual of deceit and pleasure."

When Carrie puts her on a diet, this new regimen of eating replaces her old "ritual": "That was her ritual and her diet for the rest of the year, Carrie alternating fish and chicken breasts with the steaks for dinner, and every day was nearly as bad as the first."

Nonetheless, Louise's old eating "ritual" battles for prominence over her new "ritual" of eating: ". . . those first weeks of the diet . . . she was the pawn of an irascibility which still, conditioned to her ritual as she was, could at any moment take command of her."

Louis's struggle with her eating "ritual" and her identity as a "fat girl" are further expressed in spiritual terms, through reference to her "soul," and her "spirit," as well as to demons and morality. When Carrie first puts Louise on a diet, her struggle with hunger is described as a battle for her soul:

In all her life she had never been afflicted by ill temper and she looked upon it now as a demon which, along with hunger, was taking possession of her soul.

However, Louise also considers the diet as inherently "immoral." At one point, Louise lashes out at Carrie, complaining of her hatred of lettuce; Louise concludes that, "'We shouldn't even buy it, it's immoral.'" This again suggests that Louise's accustomed "ritual" of eating takes on spiritual, religious implications—as if it were a veritable sacrament for her to eat as she always has.

Flying back to school after the Christmas vacation of her first year dieting, Louise is struck by the sense that, in the course of the diet, her very "soul" has been lost, her "spirit collapsed," and she likens the loss of her old eating habits to "lost virtues." From the airplane,

She looked down at the earth far below, and it seemed to her that her soul, like her body aboard the plane, was in some rootless flight. She neither knew its destination nor where it had departed from; it was on some passage she could not even define.

For Louise, the struggle with eating and not eating, gaining and losing weight, is also a struggle with her sense of identity. From the age of nine, she identifies herself as a "fat girl." When she loses the weight, she loses part of herself.

The day before embarking on her college diet, Louise is told to spend one day eating "as though it were the last day of her life." In some sense, Louise does experience this as the last day of her life; the loss of self begins immediately the next day with the loss of her eating "ritual."

When, after months of dieting, her weight plateaus, she is quick to suggest that maybe that weight is *who she is*—not just some arbitrary number that can be changed at will:

During the next few weeks she lost weight more slowly and once for eight days Carrie's daily recording stayed at a hundred and thirty-six. Louise woke in the morning thinking of one hundred and thirty-six and then she stood on the scales and they echoed her. She became obsessed with that number, and there wasn't a day when she didn't say it aloud, and through the days and nights the number stayed in her mind, and if a teacher had spoken those digits in a classroom she would have opened her mouth to speak. *What if that's me,* she said to Carrie. I mean what if a hundred and thirty-six is my real weight and I just can't lose anymore. Walking hand-in-hand with her despair was a longing for this to be true, and that longing angered her and wearied her, and every day she was gloomy (emphasis mine).

While everyone around her views body weight as a fluid and malleable thing that may be altered at will, Louise struggles for a stable sense of identity, which includes a stable weight.

Louise's struggle for a stable sense of identity is also conceptualized in terms of national identity. When, after her first year of dieting, Louise's mother buys her new clothes and hires a photographer to document Louise's weight loss, Louise expresses her sense of alienation in terms of feeling like a foreigner in a foreign country: "The new clothes and the photographer made her feel she was going to another country or becoming a citizen of a new one."

When she meets Richard, Louise once again expresses herself in terms that suggest that only by losing weight is she able to become a legitimate citizen of her own country: ". . . she thought of the accumulated warmth and pelf of her marriage, and how by slimming her body she had bought into the pleasures of the nation."

At the same time, Louise still feels out of place in the world, as if being thin were not her desired, or legitimate, "destination" in life:

But there were times, with her friends, or with Richard, or alone in the house, when she was suddenly assaulted by the feeling that she had taken the wrong train and arrived at a place where no one knew her, and where she ought not to be.

In trying to explain to her husband what it was like to be a "fat girl," Louise again expresses her frustration in failing to adequately communicate her experience in terms of national identity, as she feels like a foreigner in her own body and her own life: "She felt as though she were trying to tell a foreign lover about her life in the United States, and if only she could command the language he would know and love all of her and she would feel complete."

After having her baby, Louise returns to her old "rituals" of eating; her return to these rituals feels like a return of her "spirit." As her husband criticizes her weight gain, Louise "remained calm within layers of flesh and spirit, and watched his frustration, his impotence." It is as if "flesh" and "spirit" are one and the same for Louise, as if gaining weight were, for her, equivalent to feeding her spirit, just as losing weight feels to her like draining her spirit.

In the final moments of the story, Louise becomes resigned to the knowledge that Richard will soon leave her because of her weight gain. In holding the baby to her body, Louise again equates her body with her soul, as she "carries the boy to his crib, feels him against her large breasts, feels that his sleeping body touches her soul."

Source: Liz Brent, for *Short Stories for Students,* Gale, 2000.

Critical Essay #3

Madsen Hardy has a doctorate in English literature and is a freelance writer and editor. In the following essay, she discusses Louise's evolving attitude toward her weight in the context of 'fat acceptance.'

"Her name was Louise." So opens Andre Dubus's short story "The Fat Girl." But before readers even learn the protagonist's name, they have already learned the most important aspect of her identity from the story's title. The frank adjective "fat" is a powerful label. The story outlines how Louise negotiates this identity, focusing on her relationships with her parents, female friends, and men. Louise sees herself as a fat person in a double way—in terms of her own, private self-image, which includes self-love and pleasure, and in terms of how others see her, which centers on pity, worry, and disgust. Even when she succeeds in losing weight, fatness remains a dominant part of how she sees herself. Louise's struggle to come to terms with her identity as a fat girl reflects a larger cultural debate about the way obesity should be understood and dealt with.

As a nation, Americans are obsessed with weight and are chronically fat. According to medical researchers at the 1998 annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), "obesity is a public health epidemic and should be treated like one" reports Maggie Fox, who covered the conference for Reuters. Medical experts see obesity as an illness rather than a personal issue, attributing to it a host of health risks running from diabetes to heart disease. Despite evidence that obesity is largely attributable to genetics, research has shown that most Americans associate thinness not only with beauty, but with character and virtue as well. Fat people are often perceived as unattractive and asexual. Furthermore, they are often held responsible for their condition and labeled as undisciplined, lazy, even stupid. American culture stigmatizes fat people to the point that obesity often has stronger detrimental effects on their social and emotional lives than it does on their physical health.

According to fat-acceptance advocacy groups such as the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (NAAFA), in light of such discriminatory attitudes, obesity should be seen primarily as a human rights issue, not a medical one. They advocate for fat people who are routinely subjected to discrimination in employment, housing, and other arenas. They oppose weight-loss diet programs (which, NAAFA claims, have a collective 95-98 percent failure rate over a three-year period), speaking out against a diet industry that funds obesity research and exploits fat peoples' psyches and pocketbooks. Fat-acceptance advocates claim that it is years of off-and-on dieting, not obesity in itself, that leads to health problems among the fat.

Perhaps the most important part of NAAFA's mission, however, is to offer social and emotional support for fat people, many of whom are depressed and isolated. Because the mainstream culture looks so unfavorably on obesity, they strive to create a subculture where it's okay to be fat, offering fatfriendly social events, pen pals, and dating services. One recent internet search retrieved over seventy fat-acceptance

groups, as well as a range of online magazines such as *Abundance Magazine, BBTeen E-zine, Fat?So!, Big Times* and *Fat and Fabulous,* which address issues including health, fashion, romance, and sex in the fat person's life. Such forums help foster self-acceptance and social ties among the obese.

In "The Fat Girl" Louise vacillates between a mainstream perspective—seeing her weight as a weakness and the source of her problems—and an accepting one—seeing it as no more than an incidental aspect of who she is. From a young age she seems to understand that "she was fat because she was Louise. Because God had made her that way." But she is the only fat person in the story (at one point she explains, "I was always thinking what people saw when they looked at me and I didn't want them seeing two fat girls") so she also internalizes the ideas about fatness that thin people tend to have. Describing this double perspective on her weight, Louise says, "When I was alone I didn't mind being fat, but then I'd have to leave the house again and then I didn't want to look like me."

The thin people in the story—with the notable exception of Louise's father—cannot imagine simply accepting her for who she is. They assume that Louise's weight is preventing her from leading a happy, fulfilled life. From a young age Louise is encouraged to lose weight for the specific purpose of attracting the opposite sex. "If you're fat the boys won't like you; they won't ask you out," Louise's mother tells her bluntly. But Louise does not find this very powerful incentive. Her single sexual experience, being kissed by a drunk boy, is not pleasurable or affirming: "He jammed his tongue into her mouth." By contrast, she takes such great pleasure in eating that Dubus describes it in sexual terms. Likening the chocolate that Louise keeps hidden in her drawer to "lewd photographs," he describes how Louise "thought of the waiting candy with near lust." The candy seems to offer her the solace of love that is otherwise missing from her life. According to this way of thinking, Louise would stop lusting for candy when she finally found a fulfilling love relationship, which would therefore make it possible for her to give up food and be forever thin.

This is, indeed, what her friend Carrie seems to believe when she encourages Louise to go on a diet. Thin, chronically depressed Carrie has recently fallen in love for the first time. As she rides the bus from her boyfriend's place back to the dorm room she shares with Louise, she starts worrying about Louise's prospects for the future. "I was thinking about when we graduate. What you're going to do. What's to become of you. I want you to be loved the way I love you. Louise, if I help you, *really* help you, will you go on a diet?" The context of Carrie's concern suggests that she believes that Louise will be alone—without friends and also without the chance to find romantic love—if she doesn't lose weight.

While Carrie's response to Louise's weight is based on concern and sympathy, and her mother's response is more judgmental and hostile, both of them tie happiness and love—and, significantly, the love of men—to being thin. But, as the narrative unfolds, it becomes clear that what makes Louise unhappy, angry, and resentful is being *hungry,* not being fat. When, with Carrie's help, Louise sheds enough weight to no longer be seen as a fat girl by those around her (including her new husband, Richard), her new

attractiveness and social acceptance do not bring her real happiness. "She felt that somehow she had lost more than pounds of fat; that some time during her dieting she had lost herself too." She later reflects on the year of dieting as "the worst year of her life."

As a thin, beautiful woman Louise must live in denial of her physical and emotional appetites, suffering a dislocated sense that those around her do not know who she really is. She occasionally feels "cunning" and "triumphant," but "there were times, with her friends, or with Richard, or alone in the house, when she was suddenly assaulted by the feeling that she had taken the wrong train and arrived at a place where no one knew her, and where she ought not be." It is not until she gains weight back and loses Richard's love that she begins to see others' intolerance toward her weight as *their* problem or weakness rather than hers. She has feelings of happiness and fulfillment when she is eating and nurturing her infant son. She is not heartbroken to lose Richard, whom she understands as crippled in his incapacity to love her truly, as herself, the way God made her.

Since Louise has never had a social network to support her in accepting her size, where does this emerging sense of self-esteem and self-acceptance come from? Throughout the story, Dubus describes Louise's father as somewhat weak but loving. He offers her love unconditionally and "kissed her often." He is the only character in the story that encourages her to eat and the only one to express ambivalence when she eventually loses weight, commenting, "But now there's less of you to love." Though he too pities her, he is the one figure from whom she receives a message that she is lovable just as she is, as a fat girl.

Another origin of Louise's eventual self-acceptance is the fat actresses with whom she was fascinated as a teenager. These women, who had "broad and profound faces," reflect for Louise an alternative affirmative vision of herself and her future—one that doesn't involve dieting, self-denial, and transformation. She imagines that "they were fat because they chose to be." In our thinworshipping culture, this is a radical idea. "And she was certain of something else too: she could see it in their faces—they did not eat secretly." They are not ashamed of who they are. By the end of the story, Louise, too, is finally able to eat openly and without shame, despite her mother's silent disapproval and her husband's resentful rejection. "She is remained calm within layers of flesh and spirit," Dubus writes, suggesting that Louise's body and soul are at last in harmony. She is free to feed her hungers and this—rather than the approval of the thin mainstream—is what brings her true happiness and peace.

Source: Sarah Madsen Hardy for *Short Stories for Students,* Gale, 2000.

Topics for Further Study

By the time Dubus wrote "The Fat Girl," the concept of the ideal American family was changing. Increasing numbers of women exerted their independence by working outside of the home. In response to the women's liberation movement, however, some women urged a return to more traditional family values. Do you think that Louise accurately represents a woman of her generation and time period? Why or why not?

Does the Louisiana setting of the story matter? Why or why not? Do you think the fact that Louise goes to Massachusetts for college has any significance? Why or why not?

Find out more about binge eating. How prevalent is this practice and how is it linked with other disorders, especially bulimia? What does the prevalence of eating disorders in the United States say about contemporary society?

Conduct research to find out why the number of overweight Americans is on the rise. What health risks do overweight people have?

Dubus abruptly shifts to the present tense for his presentation of the story's final scene. What affect does this shift have on you? Rewrite the scene in the past tense and compare the two versions. Which is the more effective? Why?

Compare and Contrast

1970s: In 1978, there are 1,130,000 divorces among the American population—or 5.2 divorces for every 1,000 Americans. This number reflects an increasing divorce rate from past eras.

Today: In 1990 there were 4.7 divorces for every 1,000 Americans—or 1,182,000 total divorces among the American population. If this trend continues, younger Americans marrying for the first time have a 40-50 percent chance of divorcing in their lifetime. By the mid-1990s, around eighteen million Americans have gone through a divorce.

1970s: Around five percent of all children and adolescents are overweight. Approximately 25% of American adults, and 27% of all American women, are overweight.

Today: Studies show that one of three American adults aged twenty through seventy-four (fiftyeight million people) are overweight. This number has increased over the past decade. Eleven percent of all children and adolescents (4.7 million children) are overweight.

1970s: The diet industry earns ten billion dollars in 1970.

1990s: By the mid-1990s, the diet industry generates revenue of $33 billion. Two-thirds of all high school students claim to be on a diet, but only twenty percent of these teenagers are actually overweight. Fifty percent of all American women are on a diet at any one time.

1970s: In 1978, there are thirty-eight million working women in America. Of these women, twenty-one million are married with a spouse present.

Today: In the early part of the decade, just over forty-six million women are employed, out of a total workforce of 130 million. Seventy-one percent of married women hold jobs outside of the home.

1970s: In 1976, approximately one percent of female high school and college students suffer or have suffered from the eating disorders anorexia and bulimia.

Today: Anorexia nervosa afflicts approximately three percent of all teenagers. The number of bulimics, however, has increased faster than the number of anorexics; between three percent and ten percent of all women in college suffer from bulimia at some time during their college career. Only ten percent of teenagers with eating disorders are boys.

What Do I Read Next?

Andre Dubus's "A Father's Story" (1983) chronicles the story of a man who helps his daughter escape from the scene of a hit-and-run accident.

Dubus's work has often been compared to the stories of Raymond Carver, another realistic contemporary writer. In "Where I'm Calling From" (1981), Carver tells the story of a man searching for meaning in life.

"In the Garden of the North American Martyrs" (1981), by Tobias Wolff, depicts a professor's attempts to regain her identity and her independence.

Ernest Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants" (1927) is considered a classic short story. It focuses on the relationship of an American couple waiting for a train in Spain.

Life Size (1992), a novel by Jenefer Shute, narrates the story of a young woman who has been hospitalized for anorexia. The novel switches between the past and the present, detailing the woman's recovery while showing the factors that led to her eating disorder.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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