A Girl like Phyl Study Guide

A Girl like Phyl by Patricia Highsmith

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Several reviewers cite Patricia Highsmith's "A Girl like Phyl" as one of the best stories in her collection, *Nothing That Meets the Eye: The Uncollected Stories of Patricia Highsmith* (2002). They applaud its taut construction and fascinating portrait of the troubled main character, forty-year-old engineer Jeff Cormack. Highsmith's documented interest in existentialism becomes apparent in this story of a man who struggles to find a clear sense of himself and a purpose for his life when confronted by the meaninglessness of the modern world. The story contains some of Highsmith's trademarks: the shock of the extraordinary in a seemingly ordinary world and the violence that lurks just beneath a calm surface. Here Highsmith explores the devastating consequences of shattered dreams and recognition of painful realities.

Author Biography

Patricia Highsmith was born Mary Patricia Plangman in Fort Worth, Texas, on January 19, 1921. Her parents, both commercial artists, separated before she was born, and she did not meet her father until she was twelve. She later took her stepfather's surname. Highsmith was raised by her maternal grandmother for several years until her mother remarried. Her relationship with her mother, who admitted to trying to abort her by swallowing turpentine, remained troubled, and she ended her relationship with her father after he tried to seduce her during their first meeting. The tensions she experienced in her family during her childhood were recreated in many of her stories and novels. Highsmith's grandmother taught her to read when she was two, and by the age of eight, Highsmith was interested in Karl Menninger's *The Human Mind*, especially the parts that focused on mental disorders, such as pyromania and schizophrenia. In her teenaged years, she began writing short stories and showed a talent for painting and sculpture.

After she graduated from Columbia in 1942, Highsmith settled in New York City and began writing text for comic books, which included profiles of Einstein, Galileo, Oliver Cromwell, and Sir Isaac Newton, and the script for the Captain America character, among others. Her first novel, *Strangers on a Train*, published in 1950, focuses on two men who meet on a train and plan to swap murders. While the novel did not gain much attention, a year later Alfred Hitchcock directed a film version, which became a commercial and critical success and sparked interest in Highsmith's works.

Highsmith had a long, successful literary career, authoring several volumes of short stories in the fantasy, horror, and comedy genres, including *Nothing That Meets the Eye: The Uncollected Stories of Patricia Highsmith*, published posthumously in 2002, which includes "A Girl like Phyl." She also wrote several novels, the most famous of which center on her series character, Tom Ripley, who has inspired several films, most notably Anthony Minghella's version of *The Talented Mr. Ripley* in 1999.

Highsmith's personal life, however, was not as successful. She struggled with alcoholism during most of her life and never was able to establish lasting relationships. She had several lesbian relationships and formed short-term relationships with the novelist Marc Brandel in 1949 and in 1959 with Marijane Meaker, who wrote under the pseudonym M. E. Kerr. Many acquaintances considered Highsmith to be misanthropic and often cruel although others insisted that her shyness made her appear withdrawn. Highsmith did admit, however, that she preferred the company of animals to humans and spent most of her life as a recluse. In 1963, she moved to Europe, living in England, France, and Switzerland where she died of leukemia on February 4, 1995.

Her awards include the O. Henry Award for best first story for "The Heroine" in *Harper's Bazaar* in 1946; the Edgar Allan Poe Award for best novel in 1951 for *Strangers on a Train* and in 1956 for *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, which also won the French Grand Prix de Litterature Policiere in 1957; the British Crime Writers Association Award in 1964; and the Grand Master Award by the Swedish Academy of Detection in 1979.

Plot Summary

As “A Girl like Phyl” opens, Jeff Cormack, a forty-year-old American engineer, is waiting to board a plane at Kennedy Airport to take him to Paris. The fog has caused several delays. As he waits at the gate, he sees a woman who makes him “stop and stay motionless for a few seconds.” He thinks it is Phyl, but then he immediately insists that it could not be her since the woman looks so young. He notes though that the resemblance to the woman he knows as Phyl is remarkable. When he finally looks away, his hands tremble and he feels “shattered.” He tells himself that he cannot look at her again or try to find her if she is on the same flight. As he walks to the airport bar, he thinks about how late he will be arriving in Paris and that he will still try to reach Semyon Kyrogin that night to work on a deal with Jeff’s oil rig company, Ander-Mack. Jeff is not sure, however, where the man will be staying.

The young woman’s face takes him back twenty years to the time he had met Phyl, whom he has thought of repeatedly. For a few years after they broke up, Jeff thought about her constantly, a time he called the “Awful Years.” After that, he pushed her out of his mind by working hard at his career and soon met and married Betty and had a son, Bernard, now a teenager.

Seeing a woman who looks so much like Phyl dazes him to the point that he does not realize that he has ordered coffee. As he looks around the bar, Jeff spots the young woman sitting at one of the tables. He realizes that she might be Phyl’s daughter, remembering “with painful accuracy” that Phyl had gotten married nineteen years ago. He acknowledges that he is still in love with her, a fact he has had to live with for all these years and hopes he will not be seated next to the young woman on the plane.

Once the plane takes off, Jeff tries to relax and think about the upcoming meeting with Kyrogin. He wonders if there is anyone from a rival company on the flight preparing to meet with the man. Just as he is about to doze off, however, he hears Phyl’s voice saying, “*You haven’t any time for me anymore*.” He thinks about how he lost her, that he was so consumed with making money and becoming successful that he did not spend enough time with her and so she drifted away from him.

After the plane lands, Jeff stands in the passport line and watches the young woman, who is just ahead of him, drop a stuffed panda. When Jeff hands it to her, he notices that she has Phyl’s teeth. When he gets to his hotel, he tries to phone Kyrogin but has no luck. Later, he runs into the young woman downstairs at the bar. A mistake in her reservation has left her without a room, and she complains to Jeff that she has nowhere to stay for the night.

After Jeff confirms with the desk clerk that there are no more rooms, he suggests that the woman share his suite. While she freshens up in the bathroom, Jeff tries unsuccessfully to get hold of Kyrogin and imagines that some competitor got to him first. The woman tells him that her name is Eileen, and he offers her some scotch. The two

chat about his business proposition to Kyrogin. When she tells him that he is “a very serious man,” he notes that her voice is like Phyl’s.

Eileen tells Jeff that she is in Paris to get married and that her mother will arrive the next day. In a few days, after her fiancé arrives, they will all go to Venice where the ceremony will be held. She admits though that she is not sure that her mother will come with them, insisting that “she’s funny.” Eileen then tells Jeff that she is not sure that she wants to get married since she is only eighteen and does not want to get tied down.

As she takes a shower, Jeff decides that Eileen’s wanting to stop the marriage is a result of her need for rebellion, the same urge that caused Phyl to leave her fiancé for Jeff and then return to him a year later. The idea that she came to him only because of her need to rebel is “a horrible thought for him.” Then he laughs when he notes that the only thing on his mind is breakfast, not the attractive young woman in his shower.

When Eileen comes out of the bathroom, she tells Jeff that her father, as well as her mother, Phyl, wants her to get married. The confirmation that Phyl is her mother stuns Jeff. Noticing his pale color, Eileen tries to comfort him, praising him for being “a man of the world.” When she puts her arms around him, he holds her for a minute and then steps back. Eileen tells him that she wants to go to bed with him, insisting that she would not tell anyone. For a moment, Jeff considers her proposition, imagining what Phyl would think if she found out, but he decides that he does not feel vindictive.

He also decides that while he desires her, he does not want to lose his memory of Phyl as she had been when they were together, and Eileen would interfere with that memory. Jeff then becomes angry at Eileen, thinking that if she had the opportunity, she would cause him to fall in love with her and lead him “into misery” as Phyl had done.

A call from Kyrogin breaks the tension. Jeff makes arrangements to call him later that morning at ten a.m. When Eileen looks at him with admiration after his productive phone call, Jeff remembers how Phyl had encouraged him and helped him become successful. For a moment, he looks at Eileen with desire, but the feeling passes, and he decides to get some sleep after gaining a promise from her that she would not mention him to her mother.

After a few hours sleep, Jeff says goodbye to Eileen, wishing her luck, and leaves for his meeting with Kyrogin. Jeff seals the deal with him in less than half an hour and thinks again of Phyl and of how he would come home to her after clinching a similarly important deal.

When Jeff returns to the hotel to pick up his suitcase, he sees Eileen and Phyl in the lobby. As he watches Phyl scold Eileen, Jeff watches her, noting the face that had gotten fatter and her oddly colored hair. What upsets him, however, is her “ugliness of spirit” as she yells at Eileen, he assumes, for spending a night with a man in his hotel room. He sees her conventionality and her hypocrisy, railing against her daughter for doing the same thing she had done with him years ago. He also concludes that if he had married Phyl, she may have betrayed him just as she had her fiancé.

The recognition of Phyl's true character devastates Jeff as he picks up his suitcase and walks out of the hotel, feeling as if he has "been living on a dream" of Phyl and of his relationship with her. He reminds himself of his success with Kyrogin but then realizes that the deal does not matter to him, that nothing matters, not his business or his family or his life. At that moment, he looks up and, realizing that he is at a busy crossroads, he throws himself in front of a speeding truck.

Characters

Jeff Cormack

Jeff is a forty-year-old engineer who seems to have made a successful life for himself and his family. He is part owner in an oil rig company and clinches an important deal during his trip to Paris. His confident exterior, however, hides his obsessive, tenuous vision of Phyl and their relationship. This vision has enabled him up to this point to have a clear sense of himself as a man of determination and purpose. He appears tireless in his pursuit of the deal that brings him to Paris, staying up most of the night in order to track Kyrogin down and get the man to agree to an early morning meeting. Jeff calls Kyrogin's hotel every fifteen minutes hoping to catch him as he arrives from the airport but before he goes up to his room. His tenacity with Kyrogin ensures that he will be the first to pitch a deal to the man and so get a jump on any competitors.

Jeff's ambition appears to have been triggered by Phyl who gave him enough confidence to strike out on his own in the business world. When his vision of her is shattered, his identity fades to the point where nothing has any meaning for him. Lacking the strength to face this emotional abyss, he kills himself.

Eileen

Eileen is Phyl's eighteen-year-old daughter who has come to Paris to get married. She is sexually confident, which she proves by her repeated attempts to seduce Jeff. Jeff suggests that these attempts reveal her rebelliousness. They could also suggest her shallowness. She is easily impressed by Jeff's initial attempts to complete his business deal, which suggests her lack of worldliness. She is also too trusting of a man she has just met, agreeing to spend the night in his hotel room. She does appear to show some strength of character when she stands her ground as her mother verbally attacks her in public.

Phyl

When Jeff sees Phyl in the hotel lobby, she is middle-aged and coldly berating her daughter. He accuses her of being a hypocrite and prudish, but these qualities cannot be proven since he can only assume what she is saying. Readers never get a chance to observe any other actions or hear her speak. She is present in the story as part of Jeff's comforting vision until the end when she represents his sense of betrayal and meaninglessness.

Themes

The Ordinary and the Extraordinary

Highsmith is known for her ability to juxtapose the ordinary with the extraordinary as she chronicles the uneventful lives of her seemingly average characters. Often the extraordinary elements that suddenly appear in those lives suggest a shocking unpredictability as well as a darkness and the danger of violence just beneath the surface. On the surface Jeff appears to be an ordinary business man arriving in Paris to complete a deal for his company. That morning he had said goodbye to his wife and teenaged son, assuming that he would return to them in three days. An extraordinary event occurs, however, that shakes up his seemingly normal world.

Only after he meets Elaine are readers given his vision of Phyl, her mother, who has been a consuming obsession for Jeff and will eventually destroy him when it is shattered. Jeff realizes that “if he only hadn’t seen her this morning,” he would have been able to continue living his ordinary life, secure in believing the sense of himself that his relationship with her had provided him. When he is forced to realize Phyl’s true character, however, when he sees her berate her daughter in the hotel lobby, he self-destructs. Unable to face his loss of purpose and therefore his sense of self, he commits suicide. It is this collision of the ordinary and the extraordinary in Jeff’s life that makes the story so suspenseful and disturbing to readers who are forced to realize that the world can be more dangerous than they have suspected.

Betrayal

One of the triggers for the destruction of Jeff’s vision of Phyl and his relationship with her is his sense of betrayal. He slowly comes to realize Phyl’s true character as he spends the evening with Eileen, who exhibits striking similarities to her mother. Initially, he feels flattered that Eileen wants to have sex with him, but then he realizes that she is betraying her fiancé in the same way that Phyl had betrayed Guy when she left him for Jeff. He recognizes that if he and Phyl had married, she might have eventually treated him the same way. This sense of her capacity for betrayal, coupled with the coldness, conventionality, and hypocrisy he sees in her behavior toward Eileen, destroys his vision of her and his concept of the world.

Style

Selective Omniscience

Selective omniscience is a type of third-person narration. Stories told from this point of view come from a nonparticipant in the action who focuses on the thoughts of one of the characters. Highsmith employs this device in “A Girl like Phyl” to help provide insight into Jeff’s troubled psyche. The narrator does not need to spend time digging into Eileen’s or Phyl’s thoughts since the focus of the story is on the fictive world that Jeff has created and the devastating consequences when that world is shattered. This point of view also encourages readers to sympathize and identify with Jeff, which adds to the tension of the story.

Title

The title of the story works on two levels: first, it relates to the main story line that involves Jeff meeting and spending time with Phyl’s daughter who looks remarkably like her mother and reminds him in her actions and voice of her mother at that age; and second, it suggests the illusory nature of Jeff’s vision of Phyl. Jeff has constructed his own version of Phyl, based on his memories of her as she was twenty years before. When he finally sees her again, she is an older woman and not much like the girl he remembers. The change in her leads to his grappling with a sudden revision of the world as he understands it, and this sudden change destroys him.

Historical Context

The Me Decade

By the end of the 1970s, Americans had become pessimistic. The disastrous losses and outcome of the Vietnam War and the criminal activities during the Watergate scandal had shaken their confidence in the U.S. government, and a distrust of human nature had grown after the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, and Martin Luther King Jr. Many Americans tried to relieve their pessimism through the acquisition of material goods.

In the 1980s, the government's political and economic agenda, with its championing of U.S. capitalism, triggered a surge in self-interest to such a degree that the age has been tagged, the "Me Decade." This period, which actually began in the late 1970s, was sanctioned and promoted by the election of Ronald Reagan as president. The presidential inauguration in 1981 cost eleven million dollars. Soon after, the First Lady continued the spending spree with expensive renovations at the White House, which included a new set of china that cost over two hundred thousand dollars. Initially, the Reagans' lavish spending was criticized, but soon, the entire country became caught up in the attraction of wealth.

The philosophy behind Reaganomics was that the encouragement of the free-market system, which depends on the individual pursuit of wealth, would strengthen the economy. This vision included the theory of trickle-down economics: As businesses were freed from governmental regulation, their profits would eventually trickle down through the creation of jobs and raises to ordinary middle-class Americans. Americans would then be able to spend more money, which would further strengthen the economy.

Republicans argued that the welfare programs implemented in the 1960s had turned many citizens into government dependents and that only the reality of poverty would inspire lower-class Americans to develop an independent spirit for free enterprise. This championing of the free market system focused the country's attention on the amassing of wealth and material possessions, fostering a dramatic escalation in consumerism and a new zeitgeist for the age.

As the gap between rich and poor Americans widened, those who did not enjoy the luxuries that wealth affords felt especially discontented. Unable to cash in on the promise of trickle-down economics, blue-collar workers resented their inability to attain the American dream, and as a result, they became increasingly frustrated with their lot.

Consumerism

In the late 1970s and through the 1980s, American goods were more plentiful than ever, and Americans began to feel that they had the right to acquire them. This age of self-interest was promoted by the media through periodicals such as *Money* magazine that

taught Americans how to dramatically increase their earnings and through the glorification of entrepreneurs such as Steven Jobs, the founder of Apple Computers, and real-estate tycoon, Donald Trump. One of the most popular television shows of the time was *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*, which brought viewers into the lavish homes of the super-rich.

Shopping became Americans' favorite pastime during this period. The time spent in malls was surpassed only by time spent at work, school, and home. Consumers could also satisfy their shopping urges by accessing the mall from home. With the advent of the shopping television network, QVC, and catalogues and telemarketing from a wide range of mail-order companies, such as L. L. Bean and Lands End, consumers could purchase a variety of goods over the phone.

Critical Overview

Most of the reviews for *Nothing That Meets the Eye* praise Highsmith's characterizations and originality of plot. A reviewer for the *Virginia Quarterly Review* insists that "the psychological complexity of these stories will satisfy Highsmith fans, as well as those discovering her for the first time," while Charlotte Innes in the *Los Angeles Times* describes them as "classic Highsmith fare." James Lasdun, in his review for *The Washington Post*, finds that "one of the exhilarating effects of reading Highsmith's stories . . . is the greatly enlarged sense of her range and energy as a writer" as she creates an "astounding" variety of characters. He argues, "Equally prodigious is her capacity for coming up with the wildly inventive plots that set these creatures in motion."

Some reviewers, however, found fault with Highsmith's plot construction in the collection. The *Virginia Quarterly Review* claims that "although these stories brilliantly dissect the darkest side of human nature, they are not as meticulously and masterfully crafted" as her other works, "and thus [are] less compelling from the point of view of plot." Also commenting on plot, Lasdun concludes that the stories' "machinery can clunk at times . . . especially as they accelerate toward their sometimes strained dramatic climaxes, but they are seldom less than entertaining, and often wonderful." He adds that "they lack perhaps the singularity of tone and atmosphere that her best novels possess, but in their surehandedness, their amazing breadth and abundance, as well as the dark delight they convey in their own making, they compel attention, and they add significantly to her already formidable presence."

Innes claims that "not all of [the stories] succeed. Some of the narrative tricks are too obviously manipulative, and there are just too many stories that end abruptly and unconvincingly in suicide." She determines, however, that "whatever their flaws, they all have the Highsmith magical narrative pull" and often contain "a nugget of bitter truth." Innes concludes, "there's no doubt that this new collection, however uneven, reminds us that Highsmith was a literary artist who was so accomplished she could seduce the reader even with work that was less than her best."

Several reviewers cite "A Girl like Phyl" as one of the collection's best stories. Innes praises its characterizations while a reviewer for *Kirkus Reviews* concludes that the story crams "a life's worth of devastation into a few pages." James Campbell, in the *New York Times Book Review*, insists that its "nuances of desire and repulsion are expertly controlled." He adds that "almost every piece . . . contains touches that reveal what a subtle writer Highsmith was."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Perkins is a professor of American and British literature and film. In the following essay, she examines existential themes in the story.

Scholars have noted Patricia Highsmith's appreciation of John-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, especially their exploration of existentialism, a philosophical movement that had its beginnings in the writings of nineteenth-century, Danish theologian Søren Kierkegaard. In the twentieth century, existentialism evolved into an influential movement through the work of Sartre (*Nausea*, 1938) and Camus (*The Stranger*, 1942). Existentialist philosophy, according to *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms*, defines human freedom "in terms of individual responsibility and authenticity." This dictionary explains the philosophy's main premise as the belief that "human beings have no given essence or nature but must forge [their] own values and meanings in an inherently meaningless or absurd world of existence." Russell Harrison notes in his biography of Highsmith (1997) that much of Highsmith's fiction contains existential elements. This observation is proved in her short story "A Girl like Phyl" in its exploration of the devastating consequences that result from one man's struggle to create inauthentic values in order to survive in a meaningless world.

When his new life did not give him a sense of purpose or meaning, he returned to his obsession with Phyl, creating a vision of her that sustained him.

Jeff Cormack, a forty-year-old engineer, found himself living an absurd existence twenty years earlier when Phyl, the woman he loves, left him. The years following the breakup were "Awful Years" for him as he struggled to find a sense of identity without her. He notes that Phyl had brought him luck; she had "launched him like a rocket . . . and had given him all the confidence in the world and all the happiness." She had given him the courage to quit his job and start a new company. He wanted to be a success, "to prove himself, in the way he thought would count with Phyl, by making money, solid, big money." Yet ironically, this prevented him from spending enough time with her and so she left.

After the breakup, he struggled to fill the emptiness in his life by working harder and by marrying and having a son. During this three to four year break, he had not thought of her with the same intensity. Yet his new life provided only the "outer trappings" of happiness, "solid, tangible . . . as a bullet that might penetrate his forehead and kill him." Jeff insists, though, that "a man didn't commit suicide, didn't ruin his career, just because he was in love with a girl he couldn't have." When his new life did not give him a sense of purpose or meaning, he returned to his obsession with Phyl, creating a vision of her that sustained him. He admits that he has learned to live with his love for her by being with her "in bed, out of bed, just existing with her" in his mind.

Unable to confront the anguish of living without Phyl, he returns to the same patterns he followed while he was with her. He puts all of his energy into becoming a financial success, staying up through the night in Paris so that he can seal an important deal for his company. His relives with Eileen, Phyl's daughter, the sense of accomplishment he felt when he gained similar successes when he was with Phyl. Since Eileen looks so much like her mother, he is able to perpetuate and intensify his vision of Phyl. He responds to "the girl's zest and pleasure in his success . . . as he had felt Phyl's in the old days," and so he feels toward Eileen the same stirrings of desire. Eileen strokes his ego as Phyl had done, telling him how much she admires him for "being a man of the world," for "doing something important." When he seals the deal with Kyrogin, Jeff understands that the time he has spent with Eileen has brought Phyl even closer to him, "Phyl with the twinkle in her eyes, her pride in his victory that was like a whole football stadium cheering." Jeff, however, cannot allow himself to be seduced by Eileen because "he didn't want to lose his memory of Phyl, Phyl as she had been with him."

During his night with Eileen in his hotel room, reality begins to encroach on the world that he has constructed in order to establish a sense of meaning and purpose. When Eileen tells him that she is not sure that she wants to get married, he understands that she is rebelling against convention and realizes for the first time that Phyl had acted in the same way when she left her fiancé for him. The thought that Phyl rebelled just for the sake of rebelling is "horrible" to Jeff because it interferes with his vision of their perfect time together. Later, when Eileen redoubles her efforts to seduce him, Jeff becomes angry, determining that she "would lead him on . . . exactly as Phyl had . . . into misery."

When he sees Phyl confronting Eileen in the lobby of the hotel, his dream crumbles. As he watches her scolding Eileen, most likely for spending the night with a strange man in his hotel room, the "prudishness, the conventionality, the phoniness . . . the hypocrisy" that he sees in her tirade against her daughter stuns him as he wonders, "Was *this* what he'd been in love with all this time?" He recognizes that "there was nothing lasting for girls like Phyl" who had a "certain coldness at the heart." This understanding of Phyl's true character shatters his vision of her and along with it the only thing that has sustained him, and so Jeff feels "about to die." Although he appears in a daze, he knows "that somehow nothing mattered any longer, where he went, what he did, where he was, even who he was." When Jeff thinks now of his future, of returning to his office where he will finish the deal with Kyrogin and to his family with its "phony outward appearance of a decent marriage," he realizes that his life no longer means anything to him. Not being able to think anymore, Jeff acts, by stepping in front of a speeding truck.

Twice Jeff has faced with a fading sense of identity in a world that has become meaningless to him. The first time, after Phyl left him, he coped with the angst he felt by creating an inauthentic vision of her and their time together in order to sustain him and provide him with purpose. However, when reality destroys his vision of her and along with it his sense of worth, he cannot find the strength to forge a new direction for himself. In her compelling portrait of Jeff in "A Girl like Phyl," Highsmith explores the existential emptiness of modern life and the difficulties inherent in the struggle to find meaning.

Source: Wendy Perkins, Critical Essay on “A Girl like Phyl,” in *Short Stories for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Critical Essay #2

Kelly is an instructor of creative writing and English literature. In the following essay, he looks at Highsmith's limitations as a writer and finds that she uses her shortcomings to her advantage.

Throughout her long writing career, Patricia Highsmith garnered a legion of fans, a base that continued to grow after her death in 1995. Those who appreciate her work, however, frequently find themselves embittered about how limited her literary reputation is; many feel that Highsmith has been unfairly dismissed as a minor talent, dismissed as a mere genre writer. Some explain this slight with the belief that she was a victim of the prejudices of an unenlightened society, an audience that could not deal with the fact that Highsmith, a woman, wrote so often about the seamier aspects of modern life. Her supporters point to other writers who crossed over from the small category of mystery writer and gained a wider audience, from Georges Simenon to Raymond Chandler to Elmore Leonard, and note the absence of females on the list, which they attribute to narrow-minded assumptions about what was and was not considered proper subjects for female authors. Another common theory for Highsmith's long critical neglect is based on her sexual orientation, as fans presume that only a strong heterosexual bias on the part of the literary establishment could explain why her books and stories were relegated to the ghetto of genre fiction for so long.

In what amounts to an almost comical reversal of the traditional mystery, the protagonist is *not* victimized by a mysterious, malicious force: he is not even a victim of the oppressive weight of everyday life.

There is something to each of these theories, of course: Highsmith was a woman, and she was gay, and each of these facts may have had some effect on the critics who read her. But there is a much easier explanation. Highsmith was in truth a genre writer with limited scope. Her characters are mostly two-dimensional, seldom motivated by anything more subtle than the extremes of anger, shame, or lust. The situations in which they find themselves often dramatize the programmatic dilemma of kill or be killed: such dramas are not instructive about coping with daily existence. Highsmith's characters inhabit their own world, which has its own set of rules. Readers who understand and accept those limits are her likely audience, but a wider audience may be less able to meet her on her own terms.

In itself, calling her work generic should not rankle Highsmith's fans, since it makes no claim about her overall effectiveness. Her novels and short stories are indeed highly effective, for the very reason that they are chiseled from a reality that only slightly resembles common life. More often than not, she keeps readers well aware of the differences between her world and theirs, and she is astute enough to use that awareness to make her point.

Take, for example, the story “A Girl like Phyl,” a story based on stereotypes and propped up by the insinuation of a case of international espionage, with a surprise twist in the last line that seems to derive only from the paragraph that comes before it. Judging by its basic components, the story should be not only a failure, but a failure of the most miserable kind: one that makes implicit promises to its reader that are not fulfilled. But “A Girl like Phyl” is a success because Highsmith works within her limitations and makes the most of what she knows to be her audience’s expectations.

The main character of “A Girl like Phyl” is Jeff Cormack, a man who is as average as his name. He is a middle-aged Caucasian, an executive with an oil company who, as the story begins, is embarking on a business trip. He does not want adventure; he does not want romance. He simply wants business to go well—to be victorious, in a modestly aggressive business sense—so that he can return home to his wife, Betty, and his fifteen-year-old son, Bernard. Highsmith gives few details about the family. Readers are told that Bernard is going to Groton and that he does not know what he wants to do yet, and the very fact that the boy’s indecision passes through Jeff’s mind indicates that he disapproves of uncertainty. Nothing substantial is said about Betty. Jeff Cormack presumably is a standard corporation man of the postwar period, a functionary who knows and cares much about his business while being only marginally aware of the quality of his own life. He is a standard, familiar character, common in the literature, both high and low, of the late twentieth century.

But Highsmith adorns Jeff’s story with two exciting, though unlikely, possibilities that serve to keep her audience’s attention. For one thing, the business meeting is steeped in exoticism and the potential for international intrigue. He is flying to Paris to hunt down a Russian, Kyrogin, who is described as “an important man but not a Communist deputy.” At the time, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union operated under such a blanket of secrecy that it would have been impossible to fully understand its involvement or intent. Readers can expect the unexpected under such circumstances, where there is serious money to be made or lost by trusting an operative from a foreign government. This is not a circumstance that most businessmen would encounter when traveling to a meeting, and Highsmith uses the situation’s unfamiliarity and the uncertainty of the motives of all parties to raise the story’s tension. Each unanswered telephone call hints that Kyrogin has abandoned Jeff or plans an even worse treachery. Fans of international intrigue read this story with their senses alert to the possibility that Jeff’s trip could go terribly awry, sending his physical or financial health plummeting without a moment’s notice.

But that is only one device. The other, more central to the story’s plot, is Jeff’s involvement with Eileen—the “girl like Phyl” of the story’s title. It starts when he notices her at the airport in the story’s third paragraph and is thunderstruck by how much she resembles Phyl, his lover of twenty years earlier. She is more than just a reminder of the most romantic episode of his life, however. As the story progresses, it turns out that she is staying at Jeff’s hotel. Or, rather, she is supposed to, but her reservation is lost, which gives him the opportunity to come to her aid and offer her his room, where she can freshen up and have a drink. Coincidentally, this girl who triggers his memories and is

with him from Kennedy Airport to the lobby of his hotel actually *is* the daughter of Phyl. The odds against such a thing happening in the real world are considerable.

As with Jeff's urgent, middle-of-the-night business with the Russian, the relationship with Eileen is implicitly fraught with danger. The fact that such things simply do not happen in the real world is used, in this sleepless night of Jeff Cormack's life, to indicate that there is some unseen hand pulling the strings. Readers have to wonder what is really behind these events that Jeff naively accepts as coincidence. A coincidence would be if the girl he noticed in New York ended up at his hotel, or if the girl he talked to at Orly Airport was stranded without a room when he went to the hotel bar or even, by some stretch of the imagination, if the girl who reminded him of Phyl actually turned out to be the daughter of Phyl. As presented, this situation implies that someone is keeping something back. If one of the characters asks readers to believe that these events happen this way, then they know that there is certainly a sinister plot against Jeff. The other option, though, is that Highsmith wants readers to believe in the possibility of such unlikely events.

A true mystery story would unravel the hidden elements of the plot. The mysterious Russian might show up offering the hand of friendship, but he would do so only to string Jeff along, to swindle him, to turn the tables. Or Eileen might turn out to have arranged their meeting from the start. A compact story would bring the two strands of the plot together, showing a relationship between Kyrogin and Eileen that Jeff was too distracted by greed and nostalgia to notice. Such a story would reach its climax with Jeff realizing that each thing that seemed to fall into place for him was actually arranged to give him a false sense of security.

But Highsmith drives this story in a different direction. In what amounts to an almost comical reversal of the traditional mystery, the protagonist is *not* victimized by a mysterious, malicious force: he is not even a victim of the oppressive weight of everyday life. Jeff Cormack, faced with potential disasters throughout the story, waltzes easily through them and comes out triumphant.

How he eventually finds Kyrogin and consummates the deal is handled by Highsmith in a way that defies any expectation of impending danger. The Russian turns out to have no ulterior motive; his chummy offer of a cigar and vodka is not a ruse to make Jeff lower his guard. It is even Kyrogin's idea for Jeff to phone New York and share the good news with his partner, a suggestion that, in a story about betrayal, would be used as a distraction. The deal that Jeff comes to Paris to pursue is resolved with unexpected good will.

Similarly, the relationship with Eileen, which could have turned sour at any point along the way, never does. She accepts Jeff's offer to come to his room and freshen up and then turns out to be sexually attracted to him, but she is willing to accept his rebuff with no hard feelings. Phyl does show up but never finds out that Jeff is in Paris or that he and her daughter came close to intimacy. In all, a situation that seemed to be ripe for turning terrible at each step actually turns out to be ideal for Jeff, as he has been given

another chance with his lost love through her closest surrogate, her daughter, and has been able to walk away from it, this time on his own terms.

It is not until the end of the story, in its final paragraphs, that Highsmith reveals what this story has really been about all along. Jeff sees that his swoon for Phyl's image and the sense of impending danger in the high-stakes business deal only mask the terrible reality that there is no romance or danger in his life. His ultimate response to life's lack of drama is to throw himself in front of a truck, which is perhaps the most unnecessarily dramatic thing he could do. The reader is left in the end with a sense that his existential revelation must have been a powerful one to drive Jeff to such an extreme, but also with the feeling that his behavior in his moment of truth is, fittingly, the kind of decisive action that the story has promised all along.

It is an effective ending, but it would not be so if Highsmith were any more complex or subtle in her handling of her characters. The inherent drama of the situations in this story creates a sense that something harsh and unexpected is going to happen; then the situations all resolve themselves to Jeff Cormack's benefit. With his final realization that his mind has been driven throughout his adult life by a memory that has grown into a delusion, Jeff creates the powerful moment for himself. It is the sort of ending for his life that readers familiar with the twists of the mystery story expect the author to throw at him. This story would not work if the reader's appetite for the destruction of this oil company executive had not been whetted by the promise of startling revelations, or if Highsmith did not have the confidence to ignore those promises. Readers expect things of a genre story, and they recognize this to be a genre story, and so they expect the end to present a surprise. But the surprise they expect is in Jeff's circumstances: they do not anticipate the collapse of his world view.

It is no insult to Patricia Highsmith to say that she was a writer of limitations. It would, of course, be bad for her if she had lofty ambitions that she was too limited to reach, but a story such as "A Girl like Phyl" proves that she knew how to arrange her characters for maximum effect. Jeff Cormack is not an insightful person, and his revelation, at the end, that his life has been a meaningless sham does not make him any more insightful. Even so, Highsmith makes his experience a moving one by having him go through the situations of a mystery plot and come out of them unscathed. The events of this story might make Jeff realize that his life has been a delusion, but readers who have see the falseness of Jeff's character all along share his realization that life is made interesting by the anticipation of the double-cross, the unexpected romance, or the revelation of buried news. It takes a mystery writer like Patricia Highsmith to bring that truth to light.

Source: David Kelly, Critical Essay on "A Girl Like Phyl," in *Short Stories for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Topics for Further Study

• Read Sartre's *Nausea* and write a compare and contrast essay on the hero of the Sartre novel and Jeff. Analyze each character's behavior and motivations and how each displays existential angst.

• Imagine what would happen if Jeff had survived the accident. What would it take for him to find the courage to live? What kind of life do you think he would have ten years after the story ends? Add a few pages to the end of the story, describing Jeff ten years later.

• Patricia Highsmith had a very troubled life, as documented in the biography, *Beautiful Shadow: A Life of Patricia Highsmith*. Read the biography and present a PowerPoint demonstration that traces the influences that her life had on her work.

• Investigate the causes of suicide and the treatment of suicidal tendencies and be ready to lead a class discussion on these topics.

Compare and Contrast

- **Late 1970s and Early 1980s:** The phrase, Me Generation, comes to represent this period, an age when self-interests are encouraged above all else.

- **Today:** The phrase, family values, has become the popular buzzword in an age when many Americans try to promote traditional social mores.

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- **Late 1970s and Early 1980s:** The dominant economic philosophy proposes that tax breaks for the wealthy eventually strengthen the economy.

- **Today:** President Bush provides tax breaks and cuts for the wealthiest in the United States. While the stock market hits record highs in 2006, middle-class Americans do not see significant increases in their wages.

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- **Late 1970s and Early 1980s:** Political analysts conclude that democrat Jimmy Carter is elected president in 1977 because of a backlash against Republicans after the Watergate fiasco.

- **Today:** Democrats regain control of Congress in 2006 because of public disapproval of President Bush's Iraq policies as well as incidents of Republican corruption.

What Do I Read Next?

- *The Stranger* (1942), by Albert Camus, presents the author's absurdist view of the nature of existence as it focuses on Meursault, an amoral young man who is tried for murder. The existentialist theme of the novel suggests that one must find personal dignity in an indifferent world.

- In *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1955), Highsmith draws her readers into the world of seemingly ordinary Tom Ripley, who turns out to be a charming sociopath. The novel was made into a hit film in 1999.

- *Strangers on a Train*, Highsmith's 1950 thriller, focuses on another sociopath who passes as an ordinary man. This one tries to convince another man to exchange murders with him.

- *Nausea* (1938), by Jean-Paul Sartre, is an important existentialist text. The story chronicles the experience of Antoine Roquentin, a French writer who catalogues in his diary his responses to his world and his struggle to comprehend and exist within it.

Further Study

Durkheim, Emile, and John Al Spaulding, *Suicide*, Free Press, 1997.

The authors present the subject from a sociological perspective, offering a statistical analysis of the types of people who commit suicide.

Jamison, Kay Redfield, *Night Falls: Understanding Suicide*, Vintage, 2000.

Redfield, a Johns Hopkins psychiatry professor, focuses on the reasons for and the methods used in committing suicide and the treatment of suicidal tendencies.

Marino, Gordon, ed., *Basic Writings of Existentialism*, Modern Library, 2004.

Marino collected instructive essays on the subject from the most important philosophers, including Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Dostoevsky, Sartre, and Camus.

Wilson, Andrew, *Beautiful Shadow: A Life of Patricia Highsmith*, Bloomsbury, 2003.

Wilson draws from Highsmith's journals and letters as well as interviews with those who knew her in his account of her complex personality and her life.

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Campbell, James, “Murder, She (Usually) Wrote,” in *New York Times Book Review*, October 27, 2002, p. 30.

Highsmith, Patricia, “A Girl like Phyl,” in *Nothing That Meets the Eye: The Uncollected Stories of Patricia Highsmith*, Norton, 2002, pp. 359–80.

Innes, Charlotte, “When the Milk of Human Kindness Sours; *Nothing That Meets the Eye: The Uncollected Stories of Patricia Highsmith*, in *Los Angeles Times*, December 1, 2002, p. R4.

Lasdun, James, “Little Terrors,” in *Washington Post*, October 13, 2002, p. T13.

Review of *Nothing That Meets the Eye: The Uncollected Stories of Patricia Highsmith*, in *Kirkus Reviews*, Vol. 70, No. 17, September 1, 2002, http://web.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.umuc.edu/ehost/delivery?vid=36&hid=120&sid=51ad4 (accessed September 12, 2006).

Review of *Nothing That Meets the Eye: The Uncollected Stories of Patricia Highsmith*, in *Virginia Quarterly Review*, Vol. 79, No. 3, Summer 2003, p. 92.

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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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