Gorilla, My Love Study Guide

Gorilla, My Love by Toni Cade Bambara

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Introduction

"Gorilla, My Love" is the story of Hazel, a young girl who feels that adults do not treat children with respect and honesty. Narrating her own story, she tells of two incidents in which adults demonstrated their untrustworthiness. Hazel comes from the kind of family that the author, Toni Cade Bambara, believed was under-represented in fiction of the 1970s: she is an African American girl living in New York City, in a home with two loving parents who emphasize the values of education and of keeping one's word. Although Bambara herself was a political activist, the story is not primarily political. Hazel's feelings are nearly universal, shared by most adolescents.

"Gorilla, My Love" was first published in the November 1971 issue of *Redbook Magazine* with the title "I Ain't Playin, I'm Hurtin." A year later, it became the title story in Bambara's first short story collection. "Gorilla, My Love" is one of several in the collection that feature strong first-person narrators speaking conversationally, rather than in a standard formal English. On the strength of this story and others, Bambara was widely praised for her ability to capture the authentic sounds of adolescence and of African American voices.

Author Biography

Toni Cade Bambara was born Miltona Mirkin Cade on March 25, 1939, in New York City. She and her brother were raised by a single mother in many different homes in New York, and later in Jersey City, New Jersey. Bambara spoke and wrote often about her mother, Helen Brent Henderson Cade, as an example of strength and integrity. Helen saw to it that her children learned about their African American heritage, and encouraged them to trust their own inner voices. In 1959, Toni Cade earned a bachelor's degree in Theater Arts and English from Queen's College. She had already published her first story, "Sweet Town," in *Vendome* magazine. After graduating, she completed a master's degree while working as a social worker for several community organizations.

In the 1960s, Cade was active in both the Civil Rights movement and the feminist movement. From 1965 to 1969 she taught at City College in New York. She continued to write, but saw teaching and community work as more important. In 1970, having taken the name Bambara, she edited an important anthology called *The Black Woman*, a collection of writings by some of the most well-known African American women of the day. The anthology, intended as a corrective to the views of African American women previously offered by white feminist women and by male academics, gave black women a chance to describe and analyze their own experiences. The short story "Gorilla, My Love," narrated by a young working-class African American girl, was published the following year, as was another anthology, *Tales and Stories for Black Folks*, a collection of stories for high school and college students. In 1972 the short story collection also titled *Gorilla, My Love* was published.

In addition to writing and teaching writing at various colleges, Bambara traveled to Cuba and Vietnam to learn about the political struggles of poor women. Moving to Atlanta in 1974, Bambara founded and directed projects to help writers become effective contributors to political movements. She published relatively little fiction during her career, though several of her stories, including "Gorilla, My Love" and "The Lesson" (1972), have become standard texts for high school and college classes. Her second collection of short stories, *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive*, was published in 1977, and an experimental novel called *The Salt Eaters* was published in 1980. She had come to find a fiction writer's life too solitary, and so in her last years, she focused most of her writing energy on more collaborative projects, including television and film scripts. She also worked on a novel about the Atlanta child murders; it was published as *These Bones Are Not My Child* in 1999, four years after her death. She died of colon cancer on December 9, 1995.

Plot Summary

As "Gorilla, My Love" opens, a first-person narrator says, "That was the year Hunca Bubba changed his name." It soon becomes clear that the speaker is a young person, but not until the story is nearly over is it revealed that she is a girl, and that her name is Hazel. In the opening scene, Hazel is riding in a car with her Granddaddy Vale, her Hunca Bubba (Uncle Bubba) and her younger brother, Baby Jason. They have been on a trip South to bring pecans back home. Granddaddy Vale is driving, Hazel is navigating from the front seat and therefore is called "Scout" during the trip, and Hunca Bubba and Baby Jason are sitting in the back with the buckets of dusty pecans. Hunca Bubba, who has decided that it is time he started using his given name, Jefferson Winston Vale, is in love, and will not stop talking about the woman he loves. He has a photo of her, and the movie theater in the photo's background catches Hazel's attention because she is "a movie freak from way back."

This launches Hazel into a long digression, told in the past tense, that makes up most of the story□almost five of the story's seven and a half pages. In this story-within-the-story, Hazel, Baby Jason, and their brother Big Brood go to the movies on Easter Sunday. Apparently, they go to the movies quite frequently; they know all of the theaters within walking distance of their home in northern New York City, and what each is showing. They have already seen all of the Three Stooges films. The Washington Theater on Amsterdam Avenue is advertising a film called *Gorilla, My Love*, and they decide to see that. They buy bags of potato chips (choosing the brand that makes the loudest noise when the bag is popped) and settle in. However, when the movie starts it is not *Gorilla, My Love* but *King of Kings*, a movie about the life of Jesus.

The children go wild, "Yellin, booin, stompin and carryin on" until Thunderbuns, the sternest of the theater matrons, comes to silence them. Hazel watches quietly for a while, and realizes that the Jesus portrayed in the movie is so passive that he could never hold his own in Hazel's loud and combative family. The last straw for Hazel comes when *King of Kings* is over and a Bugs Bunny cartoon begins□one that they have already seen. Angrily, Hazel storms off to see the manager and get their money back. The manager treats her condescendingly, as adults sometimes do to children, and refuses to give a refund. Hazel leaves the office, taking the matches from the manager's desk, and sets a fire in the lobby. The theater is forced to close for a week.

When Hazel's Daddy learns what she has done, he takes off his belt to punish her. But Hazel tells her side of the story, and argues, "if you say Gorilla, My, Love, you suppose to mean it." She reminds her parents that she has been raised to trust and to be trustworthy, and Daddy puts his belt back on without using it.

Hunca Bubba's announcement about his upcoming marriage and name change seems to Hazel another example of adults being unreliable. Just as the theater did not show the movie it promised to show, Hunca Bubba has broken a promise. Hazel reminds him tearfully that when she was a very young girl he stayed with her for two days while her parents were caught in a snow storm. He told her then that she was "the cutest thing

that ever walked the earth," and that when she grew up he would marry her. Now he intends to marry someone else. Granddaddy and Hunca Bubba laugh, and point out that he had only been teasing, but Hazel will not be consoled. She cries and cries, knowing for certain that children "must stick together or be forever lost" because grown-ups cannot be trusted.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

Jefferson Winston Vale, who for a very long time has been known as Hunca Bubba, decides to once again begin using his given name. This decision doesn't sit particularly well with the narrator, a young girl named Hazel, who has known Jefferson Winston Vale as Hunca Bubba all of her life. Hunca Bubba is Hazel's uncle. She began calling him Hunca Bubba when she was a little girl and couldn't properly say the word "uncle."

One afternoon, while Hazel, her grandfather, Hunca Bubba and her brother Baby Jason are together in the car, Hunca Bubba tells them about the girl he is currently in love with. He has a picture of her, which he passes around for the others to see. Hazel notices that there is a movie theater in the background and because she is a fan of the movies, she asks about it.

Hazel explains that she has enjoyed going to the movies for as long as she can remember. She recalls the previous Easter: Hazel, Baby Jason and Big Brood decide to see a movie. Because most of the theaters are either closed or too far away, they settle on seeing *Gorilla, My Love* at the neighborhood theater. When the movie begins, Hazel is dismayed to learn that it is not about gorillas, but rather about Jesus. Her friends are likewise irritated and so they begin to boo, stomp and be generally disruptive. The usher attempts to settle them down, but this makes the kids all the more loud. Finally Brandy, the one usher that the kids are afraid of, appears and so they settle down and watch the movie.

As Hazel watches the movie, she wonders how her own family would react if Big Brood were on the cross like Jesus. She imagines that her mother would yell at him to stop acting so foolishly while her father would get a ladder and attempt to get him down. Meanwhile, some of the other relatives would offer their opinions, which would cause a family fight that would continue on long after Big Brood was removed from the cross. Meanwhile, Hazel would be in the living room attempting to do her homework.

As her attention returns to the movie, Hazel decides to begin a chant, demanding that she receive her money back. She is soon joined by others in the theater and before long the chorus of demands is so loud that the projectionist turns up the audio volume to drown out the sound of their protests. This makes Hazel even more irritated and so she decides to seek out the theater's manager and ask for a refund. When the manager tries to ignore her, she kicks the office door open, walks in and sits down. When he still doesn't agree to refund her money, she leaves his office, but not without first taking a package of matches that she uses to set fire to the candy stand. The damage caused by the fire is extensive enough to force the theater to close for a week.

When Hazel's father learns from Big Brood that she set the fire, she justifies her actions by saying that the movie advertised wasn't the movie that was actually shown. This,

according to Hazel, isn't much different than deciding to not give her a party on her birthday after having promised to do so, or telling her she can go pecan hauling with her grandfather and then making her stay home because the weather looks as though it may turn bad. Hazel says that if she is expected to keep her word, everyone else should be expected to do the same. Her father agrees with this logic and rather than inflict the beating he had planned as punishment for setting the fire, he puts his belt back on.

Hazel believes that by deciding to change his name, her uncle has gone back on his word. Even though her family has tried to explain that he wants to change his name because he is planning to be married, Hazel still does not agree. While she is in the car with her grandfather and Baby Jason, she asks Hunca Bubba if he is indeed going to marry the girl in the picture. When he answers that he is planning to do so, she reminds him of a time a few years before when he was babysitting her. He told her that she was the cutest thing that ever walked the earth and that he was going to marry her when she got older.

Hunca Bubba is quiet for a few minutes before telling her that he was only teasing her then. In an effort to break the uncomfortable silence that follows, Hazel's grandfather suggests that the person who made that promise - Hunca Bubba - no longer exists. He has been replaced by Jefferson Winston Vale, who intends to marry his girlfriend. This doesn't appease Hazel and she turns around and begins to cry. She is aware that her brother is crying as well and assumes that it is because he knows that they need to stick together, especially if they must endure disappointments like this for the rest of their lives.

Analysis

Toni Cade Bambera's brief short story "Gorilla, My Love" provides a humorous, yet touching, look at a young girl's first experience with unrequited love. One of the first things the reader may notice about the story is that it is told from the point of view of a child, a young girl named Hazel. In order to use this storytelling technique effectively, the author uses a series of seemingly unrelated and random incidents, similar to the way in which a child would speak, to illustrate Hazel's reaction to the news that her uncle is planning to marry.

When readers first meet Hazel, we may find it hard to imagine that by the story's end she will be reduced to tears. While admittedly easily frightened, Hazel seems to be quite self-assured and confident. She has no problem telling us that she is "the smartest kids P.S. 186 ever had in its whole lifetime" or that her grandfather believes that Baby Jason would "follow me into the fiery furnace if I say come on." Given this air of bravado, her emotional reaction to the news that her beloved uncle is marrying someone else is somewhat surprising. However, when we take the time to remember that Hazel is a little girl, we can better understand why she reacts as she does.

The central theme of this story is betrayal. The incidents Hazel recounts are all experiences in her life which have combined to provide the difficult, yet necessary,

lesson that things may not be as they originally appear. The author uses Hazel's visit to the movie theater as a means of introducing this lesson. Her reaction to the movie being a film about Jesus Christ rather than about gorillas, as implied by its title, could be expected of a young child. She is clearly disappointed and angry that she has been betrayed by the theater's management. This is, to a certain extent, understandable. Then, she decides to confront the manager and sets fire to the candy stand when she doesn't get the satisfaction she seeks. Her behavior reinforces the notion that Hazel is still an immature little girl. Near the story's conclusion, when Hazel finally confronts her uncle about her decision to marry, we understand that her anger isn't the result of his decision to change his name. He has, at least in her eyes, reneged on a promise to marry her. This is probably one of the most emotionally painful experiences of Hazel's life thus far and her lack of maturity leaves her unequipped to properly respond to her feelings.

Interestingly, even though Hazel serves as the story's narrator, we do not learn her name, or even her gender, until the story is nearly over. Instead, she uses various family nicknames - Scout, Bad Bird, Miss Muffin - when referring to herself during the narration. Only when she tells us that she earned the nickname of Miss Muffin as a result of refusing to sit down after receiving a shot do we learn for sure that she is a girl. Many of the other characters are also known by their nicknames: Baby Jason, Big Brood, even the movie theater matron is known as Thunderbuns. To Hazel, these nicknames give the various characters their identity.

Similarly, from Hazel's perspective, her uncle's nickname is a large part of his identity. As Hunca Bubba, he is her beloved uncle who, up to this point, seemed to be devoted only to her. As Jefferson Winston Vale, he will belong to someone else. Hazel's immaturity does not permit her to accept this and so she views his decision as yet another betrayal.

Finally, the author's decision to tell this story in the first person is an important one because it allows the reader to better understand Hazel's actions. For example, while her reasoning for setting the candy stand on fire is flawed, it makes perfect sense when seen through the eyes of a child. Similarly, Hunca Bubba's decision to once again use his birth name, while perfectly understandable to the adult reader, is something that young Hazel cannot fully grasp. If this story were presented in the third person, or told from the perspective of one of the adult characters, we would not have the benefit of fully understanding Hazel's point of view, making it much more difficult for the reader to sympathize with her.

Characters

Hunca Bubba

See Jefferson Winston Vale

The Manager

The manager of the Washington cinema does not speak during the story, but hustles Hazel out of his office without giving her the refund she demands.

Thunderbuns

Thunderbuns is the nickname given to the most severe of the matrons at the Washington movie theater. Her job is to help patrons find their seats, and to help keep order in the theater. Thunderbuns comes out only "in case of emergency," that is, when the children are being particularly unruly.

Baby Jason Vale

Baby Jason is Hazel's younger brother, who likes to go wherever Hazel goes. Baby Jason is in the back seat with Hunca Bubba and the pecans on the car ride, and he goes to the movies with Hazel and Big Brood. His usual role in disrupting the theater is to kick the seats in front of him, which he does enthusiastically. When Hazel crumples into tears at the end of the story, Baby Jason cries, too. Hazel knows he is crying "Cause he is my blood brother and understands that we must stick together or be forever lost."

Big Brood Vale

Big Brood is Hazel's brother, probably a few years older than she is but not nearly as daring. At the movie theater, he enjoys the family tradition of causing trouble, but leaves it to Hazel to get it started. When they are accosted by bullies in the park, it is Hazel who fights back on Big Brood's behalf. It is Big Brood's idea that they should demand their money back from the manager, though Hazel is the one who actually does it, and it is Big Brood who later confesses to Daddy what they did at the theater.

Daddy Vale

Daddy is Hazel's father. He has taught Hazel to expect respectful treatment, and Hazel is inspired by this lesson when she confronts the manager. But Daddy does not expect

his children to set fires when they are mistreated, so his first reaction to hearing about the theater incident is to take off his belt to punish Hazel with it. When Hazel explains her side of the story, Daddy listens to her and puts his belt back on.

Granddaddy Vale

Granddaddy Vale is Hazel's grandfather on her father's side. In the beginning and ending scenes of the story, he is driving to the South to get pecans, and Hazel, Baby Jason, and Hunca Bubba have come along. Hazel enjoys these trips with Granddaddy Vale. He lets her sit in the front seat to navigate, and calls her "Scout," "Peaches," and "Precious." Granddaddy is one of the calmer members of the family, supporting the children's and grandchildren's decisions even when the other elders do not; he tries to reason with Hazel in the face of Hunca Bubba's betrayal. His calm, and focus on driving and getting proper directions, only makes Hazel more angry.

Hazel Vale

Hazel is the main character of "Gorilla, My Love," and its first-person narrator. She is an African American girl of about ten or twelve years old, and lives in Harlem, in New York City, with a close, extended family. Riding in the car with her grandfather, uncle and little brother in the story's first scene, she learns that her uncle, called Hunca Bubba, is in love and plans to be married. This angers Hazel, and reminds her of an Easter Sunday when she and her brothers went to the movies.

By her own account, half of the fun of attending movies is throwing popcorn, making noises, and leading the other children in causing disruptions. They all know how much noise they can make, how far they can push the theater matrons before they get into real trouble, and they enjoy seeing the matrons angry. On the Easter Sunday in question, although the theater was advertising a film called *Gorilla, My Love*, it actually showed a religious picture, *King of Kings*, and an old Bugs Bunny cartoon. Hazel stirs the children in the crowd to protest loudly, and marches into the manager's office to demand her money back. When he refuses, she steals a book of matches and lights a fire in the lobby, shutting down the theater for a week. Somehow, Hazel is so fierce in her indignation, and her voice is so strong and feisty, that she seems tough and likeable at the same time. The reader is on her side. Hazel has been raised to speak her mind, and she does. She avoids a whipping from her father by speaking up and explaining that the adults had made a promise□that they would show *Gorilla, My Love*□and broken it. Hazel's rebellion, in her eyes, was a blow for the virtue of keeping one's word. Her father, seeing Hazel's point, puts away his belt.

Now, in the car with Hunca Bubba, Hazel feels again that adults simply cannot be trusted where children are concerned. She reminds her uncle that, years before, he had promised to marry her when she was old enough. Hunca Bubba laughs that he had been teasing, but this only confirms for Hazel that adults, including her favorite uncle, will lie to children whenever they want to, "And don't even say they sorry."

Jefferson Winston Vale

Jefferson Winston Vale, or Hunca Bubba, is Hazel's favorite Uncle. He has been called "Hunca Bubba" by everyone in the family ever since Hazel was a toddler and unable to pronounce "Uncle," and he has been a constant and adored presence in her life. Years before the story takes place, Hunca Bubba took care of Hazel for two days while her parents were away. Affectionately, he told her she was cute, and that he would marry her one day. Although he promptly forgot this routine pleasantry, Hazel has remembered it. Now, Hunca Bubba announces that he has a girlfriend, that he is going to marry her, and that he is going to start using his real name, Jefferson Winston Vale. Throughout the car trip, he talks about the woman he is in love with, and shows off her photograph. He is surprised that Hazel is angry and sad about this; he cannot understand that she took his earlier remark as a promise.

Mama Vale

Mama, Hazel's mother, plays no direct part in the action of the story, but she is Hazel's role model. When Hazel decides to confront the manager, she pictures Mama coming into Hazel's classroom, dressed to intimidate and with her hand on her hip, telling Hazel's teachers to treat their African American students with respect. Mama has shown Hazel that an African American woman need not back down.

Themes

Betrayal

The main theme of "Gorilla, My Love," and the thread that ties the two sections of the story together, is the idea of betrayal. Specifically, Hazel comes to believe that adults, who should have children's best interests at heart, cannot in fact be trusted to tell the truth where children are concerned. In the middle section of the story, which comes first chronologically, Hazel has already learned that "Grownups figure they can treat you just anyhow. Which burns me up." She demands her money back from the theater because "I get so tired grownups messin over kids just cause they little and can't take em to court." But she does not have in mind the adult members of her own family. They have taught her to be truthful and to hold people to their word. As Granddaddy Vale puts it, "if that's what I said, then that's it."

In a world where adults routinely take advantage of children, being able to count on one's family (as gangsters can count on their partners) is important protection. But Hunca Bubba has not only changed his name to Jefferson Winston Vale but decided to marry a woman his own age, and Hazel's family seems to be offering only double-talk in his defense. He is not changing his name, but changing it *back*, they say. The promise to marry Hazel was "just teasin," not a real promise at all. This strikes Hazel as the ultimate betrayal, because now her beloved uncle and Granddaddy show themselves to be no better than the rest of them. Completely unable to understand the adults' point of view, she is frightened and alone, with only Baby Jason on her side "Cause he is my blood brother and understands that we must stick together or be forever lost, what with grownups playin change-up and turnin you round every which way so bad. And don't even say they sorry."

Bambara and the reader, looking over Hazel's shoulder, know that Hunca Bubba and Granddaddy are not evil or unkind. They see complexities in the world that Hazel is too young to understand. But Bambara does not mock Hazel; her pain is real. In an essay called "Salvation Is the Issue," Bambara noted that the heart of "Gorilla, My Love" is a "broken child-adult contract," one of those "observed violations of the Law." Bambara takes Hazel's point of view seriously, and uses her story (and many other stories) to ask, "is it natural (sane, healthy, whole-some, in our interest) to violate the contracts/covenants we have with our ancestors, each other, our children, our selves, and God?" Although "Gorilla, My Love" is humorous, and the protagonist is limited in her understanding, the questions the story raises about betrayal and trust are important and real, especially for Bambara.

Childhood and Adulthood

At the age of ten or twelve, Hazel is a typical combination of strength and weakness, of courage and fear, of adult and child. In some ways, she is tough-minded. She is "the

smartest kid P.S. 186 ever had," and takes that title seriously. Even in her daydreaming about how the extended family would react if Big Brood acted like Jesus, Hazel is working on her arithmetic while the rest of the family is shouting and swinging purses. She reasons with her parents, and sometimes avoids punishment by making good arguments. She defends her brothers on the street and in the park, even to the point of physical fighting against "bad boys." She is the leader of the renegade children, getting them all to shout, "We want our money back." And although Big Brood becomes frightened and disappears before they reach the theater manager's office, Hazel does not hesitate about going in alone. With her Mama as a role model, she finds it in herself to "kick the door open wider and just walk right by him and sit down and tell the man about himself." Hazel is a tough little girl. Even though "Gorilla, My Love" does not end happily for her, the reader knows that in the long run she will be a survivor.

But Hazel the adult is not fully formed yet. Although she can be hard and cynical beyond her years, she is still a child. She is afraid that there might be rats in the buckets of pecans, so she will not sit in the back with them. She is afraid of the dark, although she tells everyone that she leaves the lights on for Baby Jason. She believes what she learns from the movies□even that gangsters tell the truth. Her behavior during the movies can only be called childish: her indignation about being shown the wrong movie aside, Hazel walks into the theater expecting the gorilla movie and buys the Havmore potato chips because they have "the best bags for blowin up and bustin real loud so the matron come trottin down the aisle with her chunky self." Clearly, much of the screaming and popcorn-tossing and seat-kicking is normal behavior, not a reaction to being cheated. In the final scene, back in the car, Hazel cannot maintain her adult pose. She tries to deal with Hunca Bubba adult-to-adult, but she crumbles into tears, as the bewildered Hunca Bubba protests, "for cryin out loud, Hazel, you just a little girl." What makes the story so touching is the combination of childhood and adulthood that Hazel displays. Each facet of her personality is clearly and accurately developed, and the swirl of feelings that results captures perfectly what it feels like to be a pre-teen girl.

Style

Frame Structure

The structure of "Gorilla, My Love" is called a "frame" structure, because the story of Hazel, Granddaddy Vale, Hunca Bubba, and Baby Jason bringing pecans back from the South wraps around the story of the movie theater, as a frame wraps around a picture. The opening scene moves along with no hint that the story is about to move off in another direction. Readers meet the characters through the eyes of the narrator, hear the irritation in her voice, and see the photograph in Hunca Bubba's hand. A movie house in the background of the photo catches the narrator's eye, and she says, "Cause I am a movie freak from way back, even though it do get me in trouble sometime." Even as that line ends, the focus is on the characters in the car.

But the next line begins, "Like when me and Big Brood and Baby Jason was on our own," and the narrator abruptly changes direction to tell the story of the falsely advertised movie. Because the change is so sudden, with no explanation, the reader does not see how the stories are linked in Hazel's mind, other than the coinciding movie theaters. It seems a childish, trivial connection. When Hazel returns to the car trip near the end of the story, with another abrupt line ("So there I am in the navigator seat"), the reader still does not understand how the events are connected. Not until Hazel reminds Hunca Bubba of his earlier promise to wait and marry her is it clear why she is upset, and why the two events seem to her like two examples of the same thing. By framing the movie theater episode with the car trip episode and refusing to explain why the shifts are happening as they happen, Bambara makes the moment of realization more powerful for the reader because it is raw, unfiltered, just as Hazel experiences it.

The frame is a very old structural device, often used to tie several stories together. Examples include Geoffrey Chaucer's fourteenth-century *Canterbury Tales* and the fifteenth-century Persian and Arabian stories known as *A Thousand and One Nights*. Washington Irving's eighteenth-century tale *Rip Van Winkle*, is framed by an accounting of how the narrator found the story among the notes of a dead man. The narrator humorously casts doubt on the story by swearing that it is true.

Point of View

The term "point of view" describes the way an author presents a story to readers. It establishes who the narrator is□i.e., who is telling the story. In "Gorilla, My Love" the point of view is labeled "first person," which means that the story is told by one character within the story, Hazel, who describes the events as she experiences them. Hazel uses the first-person pronoun "I" throughout the story, and she does not have the capacity or the desire to share other characters' feelings or reactions, except as she witnesses them herself. For example, the reader does not overhear what is going through Daddy's mind as Hazel explains what happened at the theater. Hazels says that

Daddy "had the suspect it was me," and after she explains "Daddy put his belt back on." But the reader has direct access only to Hazel's thoughts.

The story sounds as though Hazel were speaking it aloud, almost breathlessly, without a pause, and the listener is not identified. Shifts in direction happen abruptly, as they do happen in the human mind, and the narrator does not stop to explain connections or to censor her thoughts. The photo of Hunca Bubba's girlfriend has a theater in the background, and this reminds Hazel of how much she likes movies, which reminds her of the time she was tricked into watching *King of Kings*, which features a god who seems too weak to survive in Hazel's strong family, and this makes her more angry, which brings her back to Hunca Bubba. Presenting Hazel's raw, unfiltered speech makes the emotional weight of the story greater. Bambara does not intend for the reader to stand outside the story and analyze from an adult's viewpoint whether Hazel's feelings and actions are appropriate. And when Hazel repeats Hunca Bubba's words and says, "I say back just how he said it so he can hear what a terrible thing it is," she does not explain why it is a terrible thing. From Hazel's point of view, it is obvious, and she expects the reader/listener to be on her side. The reader hears the story, not as a detached observer, but as a participant and an ally, listening to a frustrated child who is practically in tears.

Historical Context

Neo-Black Arts Movement

Bambara is often associated with the Neo-Black Arts Movement (also called simply the Black Arts Movement), a movement in art, literature, and literary criticism that grew out of the Black Power Movement and thrived during the 1960s and early 1970s. The Black Power Movement worked to establish a separate black state within the United States after many people came to believe that the mostly nonviolent Civil Rights movement was not achieving its goals. Nonviolent resistance, they believed, depended too much on the generosity of the oppressors, and loving those oppressors demanded too much of the oppressed. Further, they observed that the Civil Rights movement had focused on solving problems of segregation in the South, but had not done much to improve the lives of African Americans in the northern cities. They called for direct political and economic action by the oppressed, and made it clear that they were willing to use violence if necessary to win equality for African Americans.

The Neo-Black Arts Movement created literature with a political awareness, and its critics examined literature through a political lens. Its writers believed that every work of art is political, and that every work of art featuring African Americans either helps or hurts the cause of equality. In their work, they depicted positive and powerful African Americans. They called for self-determination for African Americans, an end to global capitalism, and a new unity among African nations to fight for racial equality around the world. As Bambara explained in the essay "What It Is I Think I'm Doing Anyhow," "Through writing I attempt to celebrate the tradition of resistance, attempt to tap Black potential, and try to join the chorus of voices that argues that exploitation and misery are neither inevitable nor necessary." Bambara took the movement's ideology one step further, and called upon African Americans to examine gender roles within the community. She believed that much of the revolutionary writing by African Americans was weakened by a male supremacist viewpoint, and looked to other countries to find models for men and women working together more equitably.

Bambara identified the writer John Oliver Killens as the "spiritual father" of the Neo-Black Arts Movement. Killens had founded the Harlem Writers Guild in the 1950s, and with Civil Rights leader Malcolm X, he co-founded the Organization for Afro-American Unity in 1964. Many writers associated with the Neo-Black Arts Movement, including Paule Marshal, Audrey Lorde, and Ossie Davis, had passed through the Harlem Writers Guild, and admired Killen's celebratory 1954 novel *Youngblood*. Bambara followed Killen's example as she tried in her own work to portray African Americans as strong and dignified, to take pride in black culture, and to demonstrate the evils of racism and classism.

The movement believed that black art was essentially different from art created by white people, and that only black people, using black criteria, could evaluate and appreciate black art. Of course, not all African American writers of the 1960s were part of the Neo-

Black Arts Movement, or of any political movement. Not all writers agree that art is necessarily political. Influential Black Arts theorists including Amiri Baraka publicly criticized African Americans whose work was not "valid" black writing, accusing these writers of collaborating with or being deceived by their capitalist oppressors. Bambara's criticism did not challenge other African American writers to follow her lead, but in "Salvation Is the Issue," she did celebrate for herself what her "colleagues in the Neo-Black Arts Movement . . . had been teaching for years□that writing is a legitimate way, an important way, to participate in the empowerment of the community that names me."

Vernacular Black English

Most Americans who speak with whites and African Americans in informal settings can hear general differences in their speech. The label applied in the 1970s to a dialect of English widely learned at home and spoken by African Americans was "Vernacular Black English" or VBE. It is a true dialect, governed by its own set of rules for syntax, pronunciation, and grammar. Beginning in the 1970s, educators studying Vernacular Black English began to discuss and honor it as a true language, rather than rejecting it as simply "bad grammar" or "sloppy pronunciation." (The term in the 1960s had been "Nonstandard Negro English.") While they continued to believe that African American students should learn to speak what was called "Standard English" in order to succeed in a larger world that would expect it, many educators gradually came to see being able to speak both "Standard English" and VBE was as enriching as being able to speak, for example, English and French. Bambara and other writers, during the period when these issues were first reaching the general public, added to the respect given the dialect by showing its functionality and power in such stories as "Gorilla, My Love."

Arguments about Black English have continued since the 1970s. In the 1980s, the term "African American Vernacular English" (AAVE) replaced VBE. In the 1990s, the term "Ebonics" was created to describe what some consider a separate African language, not related to English, spoken by African Americans. Although the terms have changed, and additional ethnic groups have entered the discussion, the central questions remain concerning who should speak vernacular dialects and in what contexts.

Critical Overview

"Gorilla, My Love," the title story of Bambara's first short story collection, has been universally singled out for praise since the volume, which has never been out of print, was published in 1972. Critics have appreciated Bambara's ear for the urban African American speech of her female protagonist/narrators□a voice that only infrequently had been captured so accurately. Nancy Hargrove, in an essay in *The Southern Quarterly*, writes that "one is immediately struck by . . . her faithful reproduction of black dialect. Her first-person narrators speak conversationally and authentically." A decade later, Ruth Elizabeth Burks explored the author's language in an essay called "From Baptism to Resurrection: Toni Cade Bambara and the Incongruity of Language." She heard Bambara's protagonists speaking in a "narrative voice reminiscent of the Negro spirituals with their strongly marked rhythms and highly graphic descriptions. Standard English is not so much put aside as displaced by constant repetition." For Burks, Bambara succeeds in "perpetuat[ing] the struggle of her people by literally recording it in their voices." In 1992, Klaus Ensslen described the author's ear for language as "an easy mastership with the fully embodied vernacular voice."

Critics have also admired Bambara's ability to portray authentically the feelings of the pre-adolescent Hazel. C. D. B. Bryan, in the *New York Times Book Review*, observed that writing about children is difficult, but that Bambara manages to avoid "sentimentality and cuteness." In 1972, a short unsigned review of the collection in the *Saturday Review* called the stories "among the best portraits of black life to have appeared in some time," and said of Bambara's stories about children that they "manage to incorporate the virtues of such stories□zest and charm□yet avoid most of the sentimental pratfalls." Hargrove noted the author's "ability to portray with sensitivity and compassion the experiences of children from their point of view." Several readers have observed that there are many stories about young men□especially young white men□coming of age, but that in the early 1970s stories by women writers about young women growing up were rare.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Bily teaches English at Adrian College in Adrian, Michigan. In this essay, Bily looks at autobiographical elements in Bambara's "Gorilla, My Love" and the broad critical questions they raise.

Toni Cade Bambara, like all writers of important literature, wrote "Gorilla, My Love" with several purposes in mind. Bambara hoped that her work would help lift up her African American readers, by presenting a positive story of a strong African American character. She hoped her white readers would profit from seeing African American characters in that light. She hoped adults would think about their relationships with young people, and she hoped young people would find courage to stand up to whatever needed standing up to. Bambara loved laughter, and because she hoped readers would find Hazel's bravado funny, she tossed out most of her first draft to give the story a more humorous tone. Bambara did not set out to write a story that would be studied in classrooms, or picked about by literary theorists. But "Gorilla, My Love" serves well as a backdrop for considering several essential questions that succeeding waves of critical theorists have asked about literature over the last century.

In several ways, Toni Cade Bambara was an unusual fiction writer. She did not think of writing as her primary calling, as she explained in "How She Came by Her Name": "I never thought of myself as a writer. I always thought of myself as a community person who writes and does a few other things." She preferred writing short stories to novels, although novels tend to be easier to sell and promote, in part because writing short stories gave her more time for community political work. She was always reluctant to speak about her personal life, turning interviewers' questions aside to focus on political issues, or giving the same few vague details about her mother, Speakers' Corner in Harlem, and the public library. And she is unusual in having left a rather large body of interviews and essays describing her writing practice, her philosophy of art, and her sense of how art and politics must work together to achieve social change. Bambara believed that her task was "to produce stories that save our lives," as she wrote in "Salvation Is the Issue"; the seriousness and the complexity of this responsibility led her constantly to think through and attempt to describe her intentions and her process.

In the "Sort of Preface" to her first volume of short stories, *Gorilla, My Love*, Bambara explains in a lighthearted way her attitude toward writing autobiographically: "It does no good to write autobiographical fiction because the minute the book hits the stand here comes your mama screamin [sic] how could you. . . . And it's no use using bits and snatches even of real events and real people, even if you do cover, guise, switch-around and change-up. . . . So I deal in straight-up fiction myself, cause I value my family and friends, and mostly cause I lie a lot anyway." In more serious interviews throughout her career, Bambara repeatedly insisted that she did not create her stories out of events and characters from her own life. For a writer to do so, to exploit friends and relatives who had not given permission to be represented in fiction, would not only be simply rude. It would make a friend feel that the writer had "plundered her soul and walked off with a piece of her flesh."

Given Bambara's strong feelings, it is interesting to discover how many of the small details in "Gorilla, My Love" sprang out of her own life. In "How She Came by Her Name," an interview conducted a short time before Bambara's death and published after she died, she spoke more openly about her childhood than she had previously□at least, on the record. Although she does not refer specifically to Hazel in the interview, the parallels that emerge between young Toni's life and Hazel's are striking.

For a time, Bambara attended P.S. 186 on 145th Street and Broadway in Harlem, the same public school Hazel attends, and like Hazel she was the smartest kid in the class. Hazel comments that her teachers "don't like me cause I won't sing them Southern songs." Bambara remembers that her mother was alert for racism in her children's classrooms, and "At school we were not to sing 'Old Black Joe'" (a song by nineteenth-century American songwriter Stephen Foster, with lyrics in an exaggerated black dialect). Hazel's mother has been known to come to school to speak to the teachers when they are disrespectful to their African American students, and on these occasions she dresses to impress: "She stalk in with her hat pulled down bad and that Persian lamb coat draped back over one hip." Bambara remembers that her mother "had a turning-the-school outfit. She had a serious Joan Crawford hat and a Persian lamb coat." And, just as Hazel's mother "got pull with the Board and bad by her own self anyhow," Bambara's mother "was a substitute teacher, and she had pull with the Board of Education, she knew everybody, so 'your ass is mine.'" Hazel's mother is an inspiration to her, the one who taught her not to back down, and Bambara's mother filled the same role for the author.

Perhaps, then, it is no surprise to learn that Bambara loved the movies throughout her life. She says in the interview, "I go to movies constantly because I am a film nut," reminiscent of Hazel who is "a movie freak from way back." As a child, Bambara visited the same five movie houses that Hazel visits: the Dorset, on Broadway, for "Boston Blackie and the Three Stooges" (Hazel and her brothers reject the Dorset on that fateful Easter Sunday because they had "seen all the Three Stooges they was"); the RKO Hamilton for first-run movies and vaudeville shows;. the Sunset and the Regal (Hazel calls it the "Regun") which are, Hazel says, "too far, less we had grownups with us which we didn't," and which Bambara explains were on 125th Street, more than twenty blocks away; and the Washington Theater on Amsterdam Avenue for "sepia movies and second-string things" like the low-budget horror movie *Gorilla, My Love*. In all of these theaters, Bambara recalls,

If you were in the movies, you were in the children's section, roped off with that lady in the white dress with the flashlight to hit you with and keep you all in check. The rest of the movie house was for the grown-ups.

But Hazel and young Toni are not the same person. Bambara never had uncles or cousins (no Hunca Bubba), though she desperately wanted one. She did not make trips South as some of the other children did, though she would have liked to. Her father did not use a belt on his children, and Bambara thinks with some horror about those parents who did. Bambara did not disrupt the movies she attended, but would "sit there and rewrite them" because she thought they were "stupid." The autobiographical details

in "Gorilla, My Love" are interesting, but do they matter? Do they mean anything? The answer to that question has varied over the last one hundred years.

In the early part of the twentieth century, literary scholars were fascinated by the biographical and historical sources of a text, and their work came to be called historical criticism. They wanted to know all about an author and the times he (it was almost always "he") lived in. Given a story like "Gorilla, My Love," a historical critic would work to establish who wrote it and when and where, what Bambara's intention was in writing the story, and how she went about writing it with this information, the critic would attempt to explain to readers what meaning the story had in its own time. How would readers in 1972, at the end of the Civil Rights movement, the end of the Vietnam War, and the beginning of the feminist movement, have read the story? What about her upbringing and her time made Bambara write the story she wrote? These critics would have learned everything they could about Bambara's life to see how that life informed the writing. They would have looked carefully at the many places where Bambara explained her own theories about writing, and compared her theory against her practice.

In the middle of the century, many felt that the historical critics had lost sight of the works themselves in their hunt for context. Scholars calling themselves the New Critics questioned whether a scholar□or even an author herself□could ever know an author's intentions, and they looked for ways to bring the focus back to the literature itself. Ultimately, they rejected the significance of any information outside the text, and insisted that the only way to approach a given text was to look only at the words on the page. New critics approaching "Gorilla, My Love" would not consider Bambara's race, or gender, or politics, or the time in which she wrote. They would not consider Bambara's essays and interviews. New critics would look closely at the story only (performing an activity called "close reading") in an attempt to establish its inherent form. They would look at Hazel's diction, or at repeated motifs in the story (perhaps the mentioning of names and naming), or at relationships between the characters, or at the framing structure, and ask: How do these devices contribute to the story as a whole? Objectively speaking, what is the story's artistic value?

By the last third of the twentieth century, critical theory had swung again. Many critics now began to reject the idea of an objective evaluation of artistic merit, in part because many rejected the ability of middle-aged, middle-class white men (who had made up the largest portion of important critics) to be objective, not to mention wise, about literature by women, by African Americans and members of other ethnic groups, by gay and lesbian writers, by working-class writers, and so on. At the same time, readers began making new demands on literature, and asking new questions. Who speaks for me? Can a man write a true and important story about women? Can white writers create "valid" literature about people of color? Does it matter that Bambara is African American? Would the very same story, if it had been written by a white man, have the same value? Are the criteria for good literature the same for every body of literature? The biographies of authors became important again. For critics at the end of the century (calling themselves New Historicists, or Cultural Critics, or a variety of other names), literature was seen as an expression of a community, and it was important to uncover the social and cultural forces acting on authors□and critics□that might affect their work.

A critic during the end of the century, when Bambara created her fiction, would have asked a new set of questions: How does Hazel's way of speaking bring to light a new kind of authentic narrative voice? How does Hazel's story shed light on the oppression of women, or of African Americans? How could "Gorilla, My Love" empower African American readers, or challenge white readers? How does a critic's own biases affect her reading of the story?

As the twenty-first century gets underway, critics want to know how Bambara came to understand Hazel's life; they want to know what knowledge and bias she brings to her telling of the story. They also want to know that the writer of *this* essay is white, female, middle-class, straight, educated, liberal, from the middle of the United States, so they know what biases the essay writer might bring to her analysis. In another thirty years, the issues may be entirely different ones. What makes a story like "Gorilla, My Love" great is not that it provides an answer, but that it raises so many interesting questions.

Source: Cynthia Bily, Critical Essay on "Gorilla, My Love," in *Short Stories for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2005.

Adaptations

"Gorilla, My Love" was recorded by Listening Library and is available on at least two Listening Library short story collections. *Selected Shorts from Symphony Space*, produced in 1989, has six stories on two cassette tapes. *Selected Shorts, Volume XVI, Fictions for Our Time*, produced in 2002, has fourteen stories on three compact disks.

Topics for Further Study

What is the role of race in "Gorilla, My Love?" How would Hazel's story be different if she were set in another place, another time, or in a family of a different background?

How might you film this story? Would it be difficult to capture the energy and excitement of the children disrupting the movie and still keep the audience on their side?

What age group does "Gorilla, My Love" seem to be written for? What aspects of Bambara's writing lead you to this conclusion? How might children of Hazel's age (about ten to twelve years old) see the story differently from the way an older teen would, or from the way an adult would?

Much of Hazel's understanding of the world seems to come from the movies she watches. Are these movies a good guide? If people believed what they saw in today's movies, what understandings or misunderstandings might they hold about the world?

Why does Hazel's mother come down to her school? Is she a typical mother? How involved are students' parents in the elementary schools you know about?

Hazel lives with both of her biological parents and her two brothers; her Granddaddy and various aunts and uncles live either with them or nearby. How common are extended families like this in your neighborhood? What might account for the fact that more families today are split up by divorce and by geography than in the early 1970s?

Compare and Contrast

1970: Movies are primarily watched in large movie theaters, which change their offerings frequently. Still, there is relatively little choice on any given day.

Today: With video cassettes and DVDs, a movie watcher has literally thousands of choices available for little cost. Movie theaters still show big-budget movies, but studios make most of their money from the sale and rental of videos and DVDs.

1970: Most movie theaters are independently owned and operated, choosing what to show and when to show it. Managers are relatively free to show the latest big attractions from Hollywood or low-budget reruns.

Today: Most movie theaters across the country show the same movies at the same time. Small-budget and independent movies and theaters showing movies that are not new are rare.

1970: No African American has won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction or the Nobel Prize in literature.

Today: Excellent literature by African American writers is being recognized and celebrated. African American Pulitzer Prize—winning authors of fiction include James Alan McPherson (1979), Alice Walker (1983), Edward Jones (2004), and Bambara's editor Toni Morrison, who has won both the Pulitzer (1988) and the Nobel Prize (1993).

1970: The Great Migration of African Americans that brought over two million people from the rural South to big cities in the North peaked during the 1930s. However, many families in New York and other large cities in the North still have ties to the South and make routine trips back.

Today: The Great Migration is over, and reversing. The overall trend is for middle-class people looking for job opportunities to leave northern cities for large cities in the South. Those who remain in Harlem and other northern enclaves have been there for generations, and their familial ties to the South are weakened.

What Do I Read Next?

In "The Lesson," another story from the collection *Gorilla, My Love*, a community worker from Harlem gives the children in her neighborhood a harsh lesson in inequality by taking them on an outing to the expensive F.A.O. Schwarz toy store in midtown Manhattan.

Paule Marshall's novel *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959) is about a girl's growth into young womanhood in a Brooklyn, New York, neighborhood populated by immigrants from Barbados.

Sherley A. Williams gives a critical analysis of heroes in African American fiction from the nineteenth century through the 1960s, focusing on what she calls "neo-black literature," in *Give Birth to Brightness: A Thematic Study in Neo-Black Literature* (1972).

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1884), a novel by Mark Twain, is an American classic about a white boy and a runaway slave who escape together down the Mississippi. Huck, like Hazel, narrates his own story, learns about family, friendship, trust, and human dignity.

Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone (1997), by J. K. Rowling, is an exciting and humorous novel about an eleven-year-old boy who learns that he is a wizard, and that he is expected to battle with forces of magic.

Further Study

Bambara, Toni Cade, *Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions: Fiction, Essays, and Conversations*, edited by Toni Morrison, Pantheon, 1996.

Toni Morrison, Bambara's editor at Random House, assembled this collection of six previously unpublished stories and six essays after Bambara's death. In "How She Came by Her Name," an interview with Louis Massiah, Bambara discusses her childhood, her early political life, and how *Gorilla, My Love* came to be published.

Butler-Evans, Elliott, *Race, Gender, and Desire: Narrative Strategies in the Fiction of Toni Cade Bambara, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker*, Temple University Press, 1989.

Butler-Evans examines two aesthetics in the works of these writers: an African American nationalism and African American feminism. He finds that in Bambara's fiction from the 1970s these currents are at odds with each other, but that she resolves some of the tension in her work from the 1980s.

Moraga, Cherríe, and Gloria Anzaldúa, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983.

Bambara contributed a foreword to this anthology of personal essays, criticism, and poetry by women of color in the United States. Much of the writing comes out of a desire for a unified Third World feminist movement that is not focused on the needs of men, or of white women.

Muther, Elizabeth, "Bambara's Feisty Girls: Resistance Narratives in *Gorilla, My Love*," in *African American Review*, Vol. 36, No. 3, Fall 2002, pp. 447—59.

Muther discusses Senator Daniel P. Moynihan's 1965 report *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* as a landmark of white liberal guilt, and "Gorilla, My Love" as a story of African American empowerment that resists Moynihan's analysis.

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Bryan, C. D. B., Review of *Gorilla, My Love*, in *New York Times Book Review*, October 15, 1972, p. 31.

Burks, Ruth Elizabeth, "From Baptism to Resurrection: Toni Cade Bambara and the Incongruity of Language," in *Black Women Writers (1950—1980): A Critical Evaluation*, edited by Mari Evans, Anchor Books, 1984, pp. 48—49.

Ensslen, Klaus, "Toni Cade Bambara: *Gorilla, My Love*," in *The African American Short Story, 1970 to 1990: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Wolfgang Karrer and Barbara Puschmann-Nalenz, Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 1993, pp. 41-44.

Hargrove, Nancy D., "Youth in Toni Cade Bambara's *Gorilla, My Love*," in the *Southern Quarterly*, Vol. 22, No. 1, Fall 1983, pp. 81—83.

Review of *Gorilla, My Love*, in *Saturday Review*, Vol. 55, No. 47, November 18, 1972, p. 97.

BOOKRAGS

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Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

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

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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

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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Short Stories for Students

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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

Editor, Short Stories for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535