A Great Day Study Guide

A Great Day by Frank Sargeson

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Introduction

"A Great Day," a short story by New Zealand writer Frank Sargeson, was first published in Sargeson's collection of stories *A Man and His Wife* (Christchurch, New Zealand, 1940). It was reprinted in Sargeson's *Collected Stories* in 1964 (reprinted, 1965).

Sargeson is one of New Zealand's best-known writers. Beginning in the 1930s, he was instrumental in creating a genuine New Zealand literature that was not derived from British or American models. He deliberately avoided using literary English, and most of his stories, which are often told in the first person, sound like an ordinary person speaking naturally.

"A Great Day" is one of Sargeson's most admired stories. This short tale of an early morning fishing trip undertaken by two friends culminates in a shocking, and surprising, act of violence and betrayal. The story illustrates the spare, compressed nature of Sargeson's art (almost all his stories are very short), as well as his use of informal, colloquial language and working-class characters. In "A Great Day," Sargeson avoids any overt moralizing and leaves the story to speak for itself, inserting many subtle clues within the text to enable the reader to make sense of the final incident.

Author Biography

Frank Sargeson was born on March 23, 1903, in Hamilton, New Zealand. His father was a storekeeper and later the town clerk, and Frank was the second of his four children. After leaving school, Sargeson worked in a Hamilton law office and studied for his law degree. In 1925, he left home for Auckland, where he lived in a small house owned by his father in Takapuna, and the following year he was admitted as a solicitor. After returning from a long visit to England, he found routine work as a clerk for the New Zealand Public Trust in Wellington, from 1928 to 1929. During his spare time, he wrote several short stories.

Depressed by his job, which did not suit him, Sargeson decided to pursue a career as a writer. In 1929, he went to live with his uncle on a farm in Okahakura, where he wrote a novel but failed to get it published. In 1931, he returned to Takapuna and registered as unemployed. During the depression, Sargeson worked at various manual jobs and continued to write short stories and articles. His first published story appeared in the journal *Tomorrow* in 1935, and in 1936 his first collection of stories, *Conversation with My Uncle and Other Sketches*, was published in Auckland.

Ill health prevented Sargeson from serving in World War II, and he received a government invalidity benefit, which enabled him to continue his writing. His second collection of short stories, which included "A Great Day," was *A Man and His Wife*, published in 1940. One of the stories, "The Making of a New Zealander," won the Centennial Literary Competition Prize, and Sargeson's reputation as a fresh voice in New Zealand literature began to grow.

Sargeson's first novel, *When the Wind Blows*, appeared in 1945 and was followed by another short story collection, *That Summer and Other Stories* (1946), and the novel *I Saw in My Dream* (1949). During the 1950s, despite his comparatively small output, Sargeson was regarded as one of New Zealand's finest and most original writers. The publication of his *Collected Stories* in 1964 cemented his reputation, and the remainder of that decade saw the publication of three more Sargeson novels: *Memoirs of a Peon* (1965), *The Hangover* (1967), and *Joy of the Worm* (1969).

Sargeson also wrote several plays, two of which were published in *Wrestling with the Angel* (1964): *A Time for Sowing*, first produced in Auckland in 1961, and *The Cradle and the Egg*, first produced in Auckland in 1962.

Continuing to write well into his seventies, Sargeson published *Man of England Now* in 1972, which contained the novellas *I for One* and *A Game of Hide and Seek*. He also wrote the novel *Sunset Village* (1976) and two memoirs, *Once Is Enough: A Memoir* (1972) and *More Than Enough: A Memoir* (1975). His last work was *En Route*, which was published in 1979 in the book *Tandem* (which also included *The Chain* by Edith Campion).

Sargeson died on March 1, 1982. His *Conversation in a Train and Other Critical Writing* was published posthumously by Oxford University Press in 1983.

Plot Summary

"A Great Day" begins with two friends, Ken and Fred, getting up just before dawn and preparing for a fishing trip. Ken leaves his "bach" (a small, cabin-style house) and carries their dinghy down to the beach. Fred follows with the rest of the gear. The tide is halfway out and the beach is deserted. As they get in the dinghy and begin rowing, the sun comes up, and it looks as if it is going to be a great day. There is not a cloud in the sky.

They head for an island where they have been before. Ken finds the rowing easy, since he is the bigger and stronger of the two men. During the trip, Fred discusses the hardships of being out of work. Ken is also out of work, but life is easier for him because he has some savings and lives rent-free with his aunt. He also has an education, which makes it easier for him to find work. Fred, on the other hand, is a member of the working class. It is he who does most of the talking, and some of his remarks sound strange. He talks, for example, about how men grow old and die and a man might as well die now as at any other time.

About halfway to the island, less than two miles from the shore, Fred says they have gone far enough. They drop anchor and begin to fish. Fred remarks on the fact that Ken has never learned to swim. But Ken replies that this does not bother him, especially on such a calm, still day. They both get bites on their fishing lines, which are crossed. Ken's catch is a very small fish, and Fred throws it back. They put fresh bait on their hooks and try again, but with no success. Fred persuades Ken that they should head for a submerged reef at the end of the island. On the reef they will be able to stand in water up to their knees and pull up the mussels, which could then be used for much more effective bait.

They start out for the end of the island. A wind comes up and the sea starts to get a little choppy. Fred mentions a girl called Mary, whom he has known for years. It appears that they were great friends, but her family fell on hard times, and she had to take up a position as a domestic help. She now lives with Ken's aunt.

Fred looks back at the shore, which is deserted. There is no one else coming out fishing. He puts cotton wool into his ears, saying that he will suffer from earache if he gets spray in his ears.

They reach the end of the island, which is uninhabited. Fred maneuvers the dinghy, and they find the reef. It is several hundred yards out, with deep water all around it. Fred gets out of the dinghy and stands on the reef. The water comes up to his knees and sometimes higher because of the choppy sea. While Ken holds the dinghy steady, Fred pulls up mussels and throws them into the dinghy. After a while, Ken takes over while Fred holds the dinghy. But then Fred shoves the dinghy off and hops into it. He pulls away from the reef, his eyes shut. With the cotton wool in his ears, it is difficult for him to hear. Halfway back to the shore, he stops for a rest. Then he gathers his strength and capsizes the dinghy. After that he starts on the long swim back to the shore.

Characters

Fred

Fred is Ken's friend and accompanies him on their fishing trip. He is a small, slightly built man, with short legs. He seems to lack self-esteem and refers to himself disparagingly as a "joker." He probably feels that he is a failure in life, and he envies those he perceives to be more successful and attractive than he is. He dresses shabbily, and his old clothes, which he has purchased secondhand, do not fit him properly. Fred is neither strong nor physically fit. When he first rows out from the shore, progress is very slow, and he does not keep the dinghy on course. On the reef, a few minutes' work pulling up mussels leaves him badly out of breath.

A working-class man, Fred lost his job and has been unemployed for some time. He survives on "sustenance," which means a tiny government benefit, which he supplements by selling the fish he catches. But this does little to alleviate his financial anxieties. He lives in a small cabin for which he must pay rent. Fred is uneducated, unlike Ken, with whom he has little in common. Fred is full of envy of the easier, more successful life that he thinks Ken enjoys. He envies Ken's muscular body and his greater success with women. Fred's envy seems to center on a woman named Mary. They used to be the closest of friends, but now Mary is in domestic service at the home of Ken's aunt, where Ken himself lives. Perhaps it is this loss of Mary that provides the final impetus for Fred to plan his spiteful, unprovoked murder. He reveals himself to be a petty, cold, calculating man, who lacks any positive feeling for a man who is supposed to be his friend.

Ken

Ken is Fred's companion on the fishing trip. He is the opposite of Fred in almost every way. About the only thing they have in common is that they both smoke cigarettes. Ken is better educated than Fred. He is also physically superior, being over six feet tall and strongly built. He rows far better than Fred could ever hope to do. Ken also, according to Fred, does well with the ladies. Although Ken, like Fred, is also out of work, his financial situation is not as difficult as Fred's. He regards his time out of work as a holiday. Living with his aunt, he does not have to pay rent, and he also has savings. His one apparent weakness, which Fred ruthlessly exploits, is that he never learned to swim. He says that he has had no need to do so, since he has lived mostly in country towns. Ken regards his companion as somewhat odd, because of some of the remarks Fred makes, but he never for a moment suspects the cold malice with which Fred regards him.

Themes

Envy

Fred is envious of Ken, and it is this that fuels his undeclared hatred of his companion. Fred envies everything Ken has that he does not. This includes physical attributes. Ken, who wears only shorts and a shirt in the boat, is bigger and stronger than the scrawny Fred, who keeps his body covered. "I wish I had your body," Fred says as they are rowing. He refers to Ken's physique more than once, as in "a big hefty bloke like you" and "that big frame of yours." It is as if he is obsessed with Ken's physical superiority.

In his conversation with Ken as they row out to the island, Fred manages to disguise his envy, and Ken appears not to be aware of it. When Fred points out that Ken is better off financially than he—Fred—is and that he has savings and does not have to pay rent, he speaks in an easy, conversational style that does not reveal what must be his true thoughts about the matter. But he cannot get over the fact that Ken has so many advantages in life: "[I]f a man's been to one of those High Schools it makes him different," he says. Although he does not acknowledge to Ken that an educated man is better than one without education, he must secretly feel that this is so. It is clear that the working-class Fred suffers from class envy, since Ken appears to be from the educated middle class.

Vengeance

In addition to the envy that Fred feels, he may also have a specific grievance against Ken. This concerns the woman Mary. Mary appears to have been Fred's best friend, and he feels he has lost her since she went into domestic service with Ken's aunt. Presumably, Fred's access to her is now limited, whereas Ken, since he is living in the same house, may have supplanted Fred in her affections. Little is said explicitly, but Fred repeatedly hints that Ken has more success with women than he does—another source of envy—so possibly, in Fred's mind, Ken may have stolen his woman. Ken indicates that he is fully aware that Fred and Mary were close: "So I've gathered," he says, which may indicate that Fred has pointed it out to him many times before but more likely indicates that Mary herself explained it to him, which does suggest that he and Mary are on at least familiar, if not intimate, terms. This suggestion of sexual jealousy would provide Fred with a direct motivation for his crime, a motivation far more potent than simply a general feeling of envy. Fred's sexual jealousy of Ken would also make sense of Fred's apparent obsession with Ken's superior physique. He feels invalidated by Ken's masculinity and implied sexual vigor, and the sight of his body is a continual goad to the undersized Fred, with his pervasive feelings of inferiority.

Style

Irony and Foreshadowing

Fred's conversation with Ken appears innocuous until he commits his shocking act of betrayal. The reader then realizes that there is a dark significance lying behind almost everything Fred says. His words are ironic in the sense that they have a hidden meaning that Fred is aware of but that is not apparent to Ken. The discussion about the fact that Ken cannot swim, for example, does not sound out of the ordinary. The malice behind Fred's words is not apparent until it becomes clear what he has been planning all along. When Fred raises the subject of death and dying, it seems to develop quite innocently out of the conversation, and his comment "It might as well be now as anytime, mightn't it?" sounds like nothing more than a harmless philosophical observation, but in fact it reeks with malice. Another apparently innocent remark comes when Fred throws the tiny fish back. "But don't you wish you could swim like that?" he says to Ken. His remark, "Wouldn't you like to stay out here for good?" has a similar biting significance, known only to him. This doubling of meaning can also be seen in the title of the story: It is a "great day" for fishing, but also a great day for murder.

The veiled irony in Fred's words suggests an aspect of his character. He appears to be a man who represses his real feelings. He pretends to be a "mate" of Ken's, and he appears on the surface to be amiable and friendly. But underneath that false exterior, Fred seethes with envy, resentment, and hatred. These repressed emotions build up relentlessly until they create the desire to commit murder.

Setting

The setting is described in a way that creates a sense of eeriness, as if the reader were being taken beyond the normal world of people and human relationships into something timeless and strange. In the very early morning, the sea is absolutely calm, and nothing moves except some seagulls. The passage that follows creates the necessary atmosphere in which a violent act that breaks the natural bond between two people can take place: "It was so still it wasn't natural. Except for the seagulls you'd have thought the world had died in the night." Later in the morning, a wind comes up and the sea becomes choppy. The movement from almost surreal calm to rough seas is an appropriate buildup to the violent climax.

Colloquial Language

Sargeson is known for using colloquial language, including slang, in his stories, which was part of what marked his work as a new development in New Zealand literature at the time. Slang expressions include "bloke" (the rough equivalent of "guy" in modern American usage, and a common, usually working-class term in New Zealand today); "bob," which is slang for a shilling, a unit of currency; "tucker," which means food; and

"cobbers," which means pals, as in "Mary and I used to be great cobbers." "Bust your boiler" means roughly "strain yourself without too much effort," and a "spell" means a rest.

Historical Context

The Great Depression

New Zealand was badly affected by the Great Depression. In the early to mid-1930s, unemployment reached 12 percent (including Ken and Fred in "A Great Day"); the national income fell 40 percent from 150 million NZD (New Zealand dollars) to 90 million NZD, and the value of exports also fell by 40 percent. The government was forced to cut pensions, education, health, and public works. Unemployed men were sent to rural camps to work on low-capital, labor-intensive tasks that paid a pittance.

Sargeson's early stories provide vivid insight into what life was like in New Zealand for many during the depression. In "Cow-Pats," for example, a young boy and his siblings work on a farm, but their old boots leak so much that their mother tells them they would be better off if they did not wear them at all. In "An Attempt at an Explanation," a young mother tries to pawn the family Bible in order to get money to feed her son and herself. Unsuccessful, she and her son are reduced to picking at crusts of bread they find in trash containers. In "A Man and His Wife," the narrator describes what some people were reduced to:

During the slump people had to live where they could, and a lot of them lived in sheds and wash-houses in other people's backyards. I lived in an old shed that had once been a stable, and it was all right except for the rats.

In 1935, a new Labour government came to power in New Zealand and created a comprehensive welfare state to mitigate the effects of the depression and to ensure against future economic fluctuations.

New Zealand Literature in the 1930s

Settled by Europeans several generations later than Australia, New Zealand is a comparatively young country. The literature of New Zealand has therefore had less time to develop a distinctive character of its own. Before the 1930s, New Zealand literature in English□that is, not including the literature of the Maori, the indigenous inhabitants□reflected the European origins of white New Zealanders. It was in effect a literature of exile and was not deeply rooted in the writers' experience of New Zealand itself. This was typified in the work of New Zealand's most gifted writer of the early twentieth century, short story writer Katherine Mansfield (1888—1923), who left New Zealand at an early age and wrote of it from her new home in England. It was not until 1930 that the first anthology of short stories written entirely by New Zealanders appeared. However, the book consisted mostly of romances (by the female authors) and adventure stories, old-fashioned yarns, and comic sketches by the male writers.

But in the 1930s, New Zealanders began to create literature that stemmed more directly from their experience of their own land. Some impetus for this new direction came from

the experience of the depression. Many of Sargeson's realistic, depression-era stories originally appeared in the left-wing weekly *Tomorrow*, published in Christchurch, which advocated a Marxist solution to the country's economic and social difficulties. These Sargeson stories represented a major leap in the direction of the creation of a national literature. Another work inspired by the depression was *Children of the Poor* (1934), a novel by John A. Lee, which exposed the plight of children during these catastrophic times.

The poetry of the 1930s was also concerned with issues arising from the depression. Many poets chose to reexamine the foundations on which New Zealand society was based; others explored more deeply than before the implications of what it meant to be a New Zealander.

These works by novelists, short story writers, and poets became the basis for a national literature, the demand for which was neatly expressed in 1936 by a reviewer in New Zealand's *Evening Post*, who called for "stories of New Zealand people by New Zealand people for New Zealand people" (quoted in *The Oxford History of New Zealand Literature*).

By 1938, writer O. N. Gillespie, pointing to the work of novelists Lee, Robin Hyde, Gloria Rawlinson, and Ngaio Marsh, declared that "we are on the eve of a Golden Age in New Zealand literature" (quoted in *The Oxford History of New Zealand Literature*). Critic J. C. Reid was also optimistic. He wrote that in the fiction of the 1930s could be seen "a faithful reproduction of certain aspects of the New Zealand character" (quoted in *The Oxford History of New Zealand Literature*).

In 1953, a group of sixteen New Zealand writers paid tribute to Sargeson's achievement in the 1930s and beyond. In an open letter to Sargeson, published in the New Zealand journal *Landfall* in 1953, the writers declared that his work had "a liberating influence on the literature of this country." They went on to say that Sargeson had "turned over new ground with great care and revealed that our manners and behavior formed just as good a basis for enduring literature as those of any other country."

Critical Overview

"A Great Day" has usually been admired by literary critics, who point out that a number of Sargeson stories, including "Sale Day" and "Old Man's Story," have similarly violent climaxes. David Norton, in "Two Views of Frank Sargeson's Short Stories," has categorized the story as "an elaborated fable without the moral supplied: it can be taken as demonstrating the weakness of strength and the dangers of underestimating the weak." According to Helen Shaw, also in "Two Views of Frank Sargeson's Short Stories," "A Great Day" shows "deep insight into repression. If something deeply desired is repressed and for too long trapped in the hideout of the Unconscious, it may escape." Shaw sees this theme of the repression of desires, with unfortunate or evil consequences, operating in a number of Sargeson's short stories.

Not all critics or reviewers have evaluated "A Great Day" favorably, however. Norman Levine, in an otherwise appreciative review of Sargeson's *Collected Stories* in *Spectator*, declared that when Sargeson tried to write a conventional story such as "A Great Day," which Levine described as "the story with the sting in its tail," he was "not very effective." Critic J. C. Reid had a more wide-ranging complaint against Sargeson's stories, arguing that there was an emphasis "on violence, on mental aberrations, on the sordid, the cruel, the bitter . . . a total effect of cynicism from which health is absent" (quoted in C. K. Stead's *Kin of Place: Essays on 20 New Zealand Writers*).

In an unusual reading of "A Great Day," Joost Daalder, in "Violence in the Stories of Frank Sargeson," argues that Sargeson intended the reader to sympathize with Fred rather than censure him for his murder of Ken: "[T]he whole strategy of the story is aimed at justifying a man who gets his own back on a rival by drowning him." Daalder's point is that Ken destroyed the ideal relationship between Fred and Mary and is therefore to blame for what happens to him.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Aubrey holds a Ph.D. in English and has published many articles on twentieth-century literature. In this essay, Aubrey examines "A Great Day" in light of Sargeson's use of violence in his short stories and his ideal of male friendship.

"A Great Day" is an unusual story. Even its appearance on the page is unusual. Although it has plenty of dialogue, it has no quotation marks. This is a feature of all Sargeson's stories, one that started a trend that many serious writers in New Zealand followed in the 1940s. Perhaps the reason Sargeson adopted this technique was to give his stories a nonliterary, artless quality, a feeling of greater naturalness. He wanted to give the reader the feeling that he or she is eavesdropping on a real conversation, not one filtered through the work of an intermediary, the writer. (This is, of course, an illusion, since the means by which this feeling of naturalness is being attempted is also a literary technique.)

"A Great Day" is also unusual and distinctive for the flatness and evenness of the narrator's tone throughout. This unemotional, detached tone continues even as the story builds to its climax. Fred's actions of leaving Ken behind on the reef, capsizing the dinghy, and swimming to shore—leaving his friend to certain death—are conveyed without any heightening of language or change of pace. Sargeson uses this method of narration to ensure that the violent ending comes across, paradoxically, with shocking, unexpected force. The detached method also well conveys the exceptionally cold, calculating nature of Fred's actions.

It is this violent end that sticks in the mind, just as Sargeson wanted it to. Violent climaxes occur frequently in Sargeson's early stories, and each time, told in that flat, detached manner of his, the climax comes with surprising suddenness and force. In "Sale Day," for example, a young man, irritated by the presence of a tom cat in the kitchen, seizes the cat and dumps it into the fire that is burning under the frying pan, incinerating it. In "How I Lost My Pal," Tom and the narcissistic, sharp-tempered George, both of whom are employed as sheep shearers, fall out with each other. A little while later, Tom is nowhere to be seen. At the end of the story, Tom's friend, the narrator, watches as George strangles a dog that has irritated him with its barking, and in that instant he knows what has happened to Tom. In "A Good Boy," a young man reveals that he has murdered his girlfriend and has no remorse about it; and "Old Man's Story" ends with a suicide. This is what critic C. K. Stead has described as the "dark side" to Sargeson's writing. And Kai Jensen, in *Whole Men: The Masculine Tradition in New Zealand Literature*, has noted that death and violence were a preoccupation of many male writers in New Zealand in the 1930s. It was part of the "masculine emphasis" taken by the literature of the period, which was strongly associated with Sargeson.

In this emerging male literature, there was an emphasis on the working-class man as the ideal embodiment of masculinity. There was also an emphasis on male community and male friendship, what Jensen calls "mateship." This theme can be found in many of Sargeson's stories. "A Pair of Socks," for example, is about the narrator and Fred, his

"cobber" (New Zealand slang for close friend). They have been friends since childhood, but they fall out because the narrator chooses to buy his employer a gift of a pair of socks. This alienates his friend, presumably because he was not consulted or included in the gift. ("Presumably" is the correct term, because Sargeson is rarely explicit about motivation or causation. He likes to encourage the reader to use his imagination and work some things out for himself.)

"Mateship" appears in Sargeson's stories to be the ideal relationship, superior to that between a man and a woman. In "A Man and His Wife," the narrator is cobbers with Ted, who has had difficulties with his wife and spends more time with his male friend, who lives in an old shed. (The story is set in the depression.) Often in these stories, mateship does not last. As in "How I Lost My Pal," something happens to destroy it. Similarly, in "A Man and His Wife," Ted loses his pet canary, and this so upsets him he drifts back to his wife, and the special friendship he had with the narrator is lost. "The Hole that Jack Dug" is another male friendship story in which the bond between the narrator and his friend Jack is much stronger than that between Jack and his wife.

When studied in the light of this concern with "mateship," "A Great Day" occupies a somewhat anomalous position. After all, Fred's deepest bond is not with Ken, his fishing buddy, but with Mary. He even describes their relationship with the word usually used to describe a male friend: "Mary and I used to be great cobbers." And a close reading suggests that Ken is not the stuff of which the male cobber should be made: The story is like an ironic reversal of the ideal of mateship. The key here comes early in the story. As Fred busies himself preparing the dinghy for pushing off, Ken takes it easy and rolls himself a cigarette. He does not offer one to Fred, which would have been an act of mateship. And when Fred rows out, Ken neglects to watch out for the direction in which they are going. The reason? He is rolling his own cigarettes again, thinking only of himself. It is only after they change places, with Ken doing the rowing, that Fred points out Ken's omission, asking him for a smoke. Ken apologizes for not offering. The incident is telling, since in a Sargeson short story, no detail is superfluous. A few paragraphs later, the narrator comments that the only thing these two men have in common is that they both have cigarettes dangling from their mouths. But the way the disposition of the cigarettes has been made suggests that even this small commonality hides a large difference.

It appears that Ken is not an ideal "cobber" in other senses either. The Sargeson ideal was that of the workingman, and in the male literature of this period, as Jensen points out, education was presented as something to be distrusted. In "A Great Day," Ken is more educated than Fred, and the latter, although he does not openly admit it□he is of course going to great lengths to disguise his feelings about everything□despises him for it. Education makes a man "different," he explains. In Fred's mind, education opens up a gulf between one man and another. The pitiful smallness of Fred's mind is seen in the fact that, for him, the advantages of education have nothing to do with knowledge, culture, or even earning potential but lie in his belief that an educated man does better with the girls.

If Fred defines himself as a workingman, it is not apparent what occupation Ken follows, or if he even has one. He appears to have money, and he feels no urgency about finding a new job. He is one of life's fortunates. (Fred, of course, is the opposite.) Ken does possess some aspects of the masculine ideal, however: He has a fine muscular body (like Jack in "The Hole that Jack Dug"), and he also possesses the taciturn, inexpressive quality associated with the New Zealand male in literature of the 1930s and 1940s. Although he is the more educated of the two men, he allows Fred to do almost all the talking.

If Ken fails to meet the test of being a true cobber, Fred obviously fails the test, too. Ken's failings hardly mitigate the gravity of Fred's crime, although they may explain something of why Fred has such feelings of animosity toward his friend. The premeditated nature of Fred's act, the quality of cold calculation he brings to it, and what must be his sadistic anticipation of it (as shown by the double-edged remarks he makes to Ken, secretly gloating over his unsuspecting victim) suggest him to be a psychopath. A psychopath is someone who is incapable of empathizing with the feelings of another person.

But this diagnosis of Fred does not quite fit all the facts. It is noticeable that, as he prepares for his crime, he puts cotton wool in his ears, and then, as he rows away from the reef, he shuts his eyes. He cannot bear to allow any evidence of what he has done to reach his senses. He must not hear any cries or protests that Ken might make; nor must he see the reaction of the stranded, doomed man. Perhaps, after all, he has a conscience and a knowledge of right and wrong. He knows perfectly well what he is doing, and at some level of his mind, his actions shock and appall him. Perhaps, as the psychologically repressed little man, he is secretly frightened of the big man, Ken, and he dreads□like a child scared of a parent's wrath□Ken's anger and rage being directed toward him, even from a distance. Who knows what murky things lurk in the mind of a man who could do what Fred does?

This picture of a man who shuts his ears and eyes to his own evil suggests that, from the moment Fred arrives back at the beach, his twisted psyche will be even more divided and repressed than before. A man who is well practiced at repressing his true feelings has ensured, in one terrifying act of demented vengeance, that there will always be a corner of his psyche into which he dare not go. Demons will lurk there that would consume him if he were to let them out.

Source: Bryan Aubrey, Critical Essay on "A Great Day," in *Short Stories for Students*, Gale, 2005.

Topics for Further Study

Most of Sargeson's stories are told from the first-person point of view, but "A Great Day" has a third-person narrator. Why did Sargeson choose this method? Could the story have been told in the first person? How would that have changed the story?

Compare the way Sargeson uses language in "A Great Day" with a typical story by Ernest Hemingway, such as "The Happy Life of Francis Macomber," "The Killers," or "Hills Like White Elephants." What qualities do these two writers appear to share?

Research the effect on men of long-term unemployment. To what extent do men acquire meaning in their lives, and a sense of identity, from their work? Could Fred's long-term unemployment have contributed to the twisted nature of his mind?

Sargeson's stories are often preoccupied with violence, isolation, squalor, and death. He said that this merely reflected the spiritual impoverishment of New Zealand society. Bearing this in mind, should literature reflect what is in society, or should it try to improve society? Does a violent story like "A Great Day" have a good or bad effect on the person who reads it?

Compare and Contrast

1930s: New Zealand literature in English enters a fruitful period. A distinct New Zealand voice begins to emerge, and poetry, the novel, and the short story forms flourish. Much literary output is stimulated by issues raised by the depression.

Today: New Zealand has a number of world-renowned authors, including novelist and short story writer Janet Frame (1924—2004), the most acclaimed New Zealand author of the twentieth century; and Ngaio Marsh (1899—1982), who is renowned for her crime fiction. There is also an upsurge in the prestige and popularity of Maori literature. Maori novelist Keri Hulme (1947—) wins the prestigious Booker Prize in 1995 for her novel *The Bone People*, and *Whale Rider* (1987) by Witi Ihimaera (1944—) is adapted into the Oscar-nominated film in 2002.

1930s: In 1932, there are riots in Auckland, Wellington, and Dunedin in response to the Great Depression. In the wake of the depression, New Zealand becomes the first country in the world to establish an all-encompassing social welfare system. The system provides aid for the sick, the unemployed, and for families. A wide range of medical care is available free of charge.

Today: Welfare benefits are targeted at those in need. A range of benefits are available to people on low incomes or those unable to support themselves because of unemployment, sickness, widowhood, single parenthood, or disability. Senior citizens over the age of sixty-five receive a retirement income equivalent to 65 percent of the average annual wage.

1930s: The New Zealand economy depends heavily on a long-standing reciprocal trade arrangement with the United Kingdom, selling meat, butter, and wool and importing large quantities of British goods.

Today: New Zealand no longer relies on traditional trading partners. It has diversified its products and is attuned to the demands of the global economy. Its export industries compete vigorously in world markets.

What Do I Read Next?

Frank Sargeson: A Life (1995), by Michael King, is the only full-length biography of Sargeson. It provides invaluable insight into Sargeson's personality and his environment, as well as his creative output.

The fifteen stories in *The Garden Party and Other Stories* (1998 edition), by Katherine Mansfield, are representative of the work of the renowned New Zealand author whose career as a short story writer preceded that of Sargeson. Mansfield died in 1923, a decade before Sargeson began publishing.

The Oxford Book of New Zealand Short Stories (1994), edited by Vincent O'Sullivan, includes stories from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Authors represented include Katherine Mansfield, Sargeson, Dan Davin, Maurice Gee, Janet Frame, and Maurice Duggan. Also included are stories by leading Maori writers, such as Patricia Grace and Witi Ihimaera, and the new generation of writers, including Peter Wells and Keri Hulme.

A History of New Zealand (1988), by Keith Sinclair, was first published in 1959 and quickly became a classic, hailed by general readers as well as scholars. It has continuously been in print since first publication and has gone through several revisions. Sinclair emphasizes the growth of national identity in New Zealand through activities such as politics, war, patterns of speech, and writing.

Further Study

Allen, Walter, *The Short Story in English*, Oxford University Press, 1981, pp. 331—35.

Through his analysis of Sargeson's story "A Man of Good Will," Allen describes the qualities that made Sargeson a liberator for later New Zealand writers.

Copland, R. A., "The Goodly Roof: Some Comments on the Fiction of Frank Sargeson," in *Essays on New Zealand Literature*, edited by Wystan Curnow, Heinemann Educational Books, 1973, pp. 43—53.

Copland discusses point of view in Sargeson, covering Sargeson's extensive use of first-person narrators, but also touching on "A Great Day" as a departure from the norm demanded by the nature of the plot. Copland shows how Sargeson conveys his philosophical and moral vision through the narrow range of sensibilities of his mostly inarticulate working-class characters.

Horsmann, E. A., "The Art of Frank Sargeson," in *LandFall*, Vol. 19, No. 2, June 1965, pp. 129—34.

This is a reassessment of Sargeson's early work in the light of the later. Horsmann argues that the essence of Sargeson's art is the enacting of a process of discovery and that the early stories are more complex than has generally been supposed.

Jones, Joseph, and Johanna Jones, *New Zealand Fiction*, Twayne's World Author Series, No. 643, Twayne Publishers, 1983, pp. 42—43, 81—82.

This is a chronological survey of the main tendencies and writers to be encountered in New Zealand fiction. It includes an annotated bibliography.

McCormick, E. H., *New Zealand Literature: A Survey*, Oxford University Press, 1959, pp. 108—35.

This contains an excellent review of New Zealand poetry and fiction during the 1930s.

Rhodes, H. Winston, *Frank Sargeson*, Twayne, 1969.

Rhodes traces the path Sargeson followed as a writer, the obstacles he had to overcome, and his unique contribution to the development of an authentic New Zealand literature.

Stevens, Joan, *New Zealand Short Stories: A Survey with Notes for Discussion*, Price Milburn, 1968.

Stevens discusses many New Zealand short stories and introduces students to matters of literary technique. She includes a discussion of Sargeson and an analysis of his short story "An Affair of the Heart."

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Jensen, Kai, *Whole Men: The Masculine Tradition in New Zealand Literature*, Auckland University Press, 1996, pp. 19—82.

Levine, Norman, Review of *Collected Stories*, in *Spectator*, April 23, 1965, p. 538.

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Shaw, Helen, and David Norton, "Two Views of Frank Sargeson's Short Stories," in *Critical Essays on the New Zealand Short Story*, edited by Cherry Hankin, Heinemann, 1982, pp. 30—61.

Stead, C. K., *Kin of Place: Essays on 20 New Zealand Writers*, Auckland University Press, pp. 47—64.

Sturm, Terry, ed., *The Oxford History of New Zealand Literature in English*, Oxford University Press, 1991, pp. 222—29.

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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.

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

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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.

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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.

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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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