Greatness Strikes Where It Pleases Study Guide

Greatness Strikes Where It Pleases by Lars Gustafsson

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers".

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

"Greatness Strikes Where It Pleases" by Swedish writer Lars Gustafsson, was first published in Sweden in 1981. Translated into English in 1986, it appeared in *Stories of Happy People* (Norton, 1986; in print). It can also be found in *You've Got to Read This: Contemporary Writers Introduce Stories That Held Them in Awe*, edited by Ron Hansen (New York, 1994).

"Greatness Strikes Where It Pleases" is the story of a severely mentally retarded boy who is sent to an institution for the retarded, where he grows to manhood. The story covers a period from the 1930s to the late 1970s. Although set in Europe (possibly in Sweden, the country of Gustafsson's birth, although no specific country is identified), the story might equally well have been set in the United States. In a few short pages, it reveals a great deal about the inner life of a mentally retarded person and also much about the attitudes taken by society to the mentally retarded. On one level, it is a story of loneliness, isolation, and neglect, but on another level, it affirms the uniqueness and the dignity of the mentally retarded man, who against all odds creates an imaginative life for himself that allows him to feel in harmony with the larger forces at work in nature and the universe.

Author Biography

Novelist, poet, and essayist Lars Gustafsson was born in Västerås, Sweden, on May 17, 1936. He recalls in his notebooks that he felt isolated in his early school years, since he was already thinking about the serious issues in human life and society. He wanted to be a poet from the age of fourteen. Leaving Västerås in 1955, he studied philosophy, aesthetics, sociology, and literature at the University of Uppsala, and in 1957, he received a scholarship to study at Magdalene College of Oxford University. This was also the year in which his first published prose work appeared. This was *Vägvila: Ett mysteriespel på prosa: Till det förflutna och minnet av vindar* (*Rest at the Roadside: A Mystery Play in Prose: To the Past and the Memory of Winds*). His first novel, *Poeten Brumbergs sista dagar och död: En romantisk berättelse* (*The Poet Brumberg's Final Days and Death: A Romantic Story*) followed in 1959. His first poetry collection was published in 1962.

After Gustafsson received his Filosofie Licentiat degree from the University of Uppsala in 1960, he became editor, and from 1965 to 1972 editor-in-chief, of the Swedish literary journal, *Bonniers Litterära Magasin*. In 1962, he married Madeleine Lagerberg, with whom he had two children. During the 1960s he published four collections of poetry, three novels, and five collections of essays. Selections from three of the poetry volumes appeared in translation in *The Stillness of the World before Bach: New Selected Poems* (1988). The critical essays established Gustafsson's reputation in Europe as an intellectual who grappled with political and philosophical issues.

During the 1970s, Gustafsson traveled extensively throughout the world, and he also wrote five novels, which further enhanced his reputation in Sweden. One of these, *Tennisspelarna: En berättelse* (1977) became the first of his novels to be translated into English, as *The Tennis Players* (1983). In 1978, he received a Ph.D. in philosophy from the University of Uppsala.

In 1981, Gustafsson converted to Judaism, having rejected during the 1970s the Lutheranism in which he was raised. In the same year he published the collection of short stories, *Berättelser om lyckliga människor*, in which the story, "Greatness Strikes Where It Pleases" first appeared. The collection was translated by Yvonne L. Sandström and John Weinstock as *Stories of Happy People*, and published by New Directions (New York) in 1986.

Gustafsson emigrated to the United States in 1982 and lived in Austin, Texas, where he became adjunct professor of Germanic Studies at the University of Texas. His first marriage having ended in divorce, he remarried, to Dena Alexandra Chasnoff, and he became an American citizen in 1983.

Two of his novels during the 1980s have been translated into English. These are *Sorgemusik för frimurare* (1983), translated as *Funeral Music for Freemasons* (1987); and *Bernard Foys tredje rockad* (1986), translated as *Bernard Foy's Third Castling*

(1988). The novel *En kakelsättares eftermiddag* (1991) was translated as *A Tiler's Afternoon* (1993).

Gustafsson has as of 2005 written eighteen novels, and his work has been translated into fifteen languages. He has won many awards, including the Prix Européen de l'essai Charles Veillon (1983), the Swedish Academy's Bellman Prize (1990), and the Swedish Pilot Prize (1996).

Plot Summary

"Greatness Strikes Where It Pleases" begins in the 1930s, when the mentally retarded boy is living with his family on a small farm by the woods. He has a brother and sister, older by two and three years respectively. They practice with their tools in the woodshed, making wood cars and boats, but the retarded boy is horrified by tools such as chisels, saws and axes, because he cannot learn how to handle them correctly. He also has difficulty in remembering the names of the tools. There are other tools in the shed, including a mallet that is too heavy to lift and a hanging ice saw that he is forbidden to touch. Sometimes the boy is beaten because his parents are afraid he will badly hurt himself; they want him to keep away from the tools. Sometimes his brother and sister tease him, sending him to the barn to fetch objects that do not exist. He is unsure about what things exist and what do not.

For this boy, better than tools are mushrooms that grow in the woods behind the barn. He enjoys their different shapes and smells and the way they feel when he touches them. But his parents do not allow him to go to the woods where the mushrooms grow.

He starts school in 1939, at the age of seven. World War II has just begun. The teacher at the one-room school is kind and helpful as the boy tries to learn to read. He can tell the letters apart, but he cannot make sense of words. During recess, he walks around by himself, apart from the other children. He does not understand why he is at school, and he remains there for only one week. After this one attempt to educate him, his parents send him away to an institution for retarded boys. At the institution, he misses the life he has known on the farm. He amuses himself by picking a spider "apart, leg by leg," and feeding paper to the fat boy in the bed next to him, whose habit is to eat little paper balls. The retarded boy is comforted by the patterns he observes in the wallpaper. Out of the crisscrossing lines he is able to make shapes like trees.

The following spring, in 1940, he is sent home because the institution is to be used for other purposes. After he has been home for a week, he almost drowns in a brook. He is rescued by his brother and then beaten by his parents for his carelessness.

In the spring of 1945, when he is about thirteen and living again at the institution, he becomes sexually aware and learns how to masturbate. This discovery makes him happy, because he realizes that his body holds secrets that he may be able to discover. It is "the happiest spring of his life."

During this period, he is allowed to observe other boys working in the wood shop. A new teacher is kind to him, allows him "to sort pieces of wood in the lumber room," and gives him other small tasks to perform. He is confused by the boisterousness of the other boys, but the teacher knows how to quiet things down without being abusive toward the boys. The teacher becomes the center of the boy's world.

The boy does not get on so well with the female aides. They tell him he is in the way and cause him some anxiety with their attitudes that veer between disgust and maternal

feelings. There is a high turnover of staff, so the boy never really gets to know any of the aides.

After a couple of years, the wood shop teacher leaves, and many of the boys are moved to a different institution. Only the more severely retarded, including the boy, remain.

In 1952, a truck loaded with wheat overturns on the road near the institution. For weeks the boys find wheat in the ditches and hedges and play with it. They regard it as "a mysterious gift" from outside.

This is the last memorable thing that happens in the boy's life for some while. As he becomes an adult, he lives for mealtimes, and by the age of thirty he has become grotesquely fat. He is allowed to help in the apple orchard across the road, although he is not much use there. In 1956, a motorized cultivator arrives, which frightens him. He rushes back to the home, where he is left alone.

One of his peculiarities that amuses the men who work in the garden is that he is afraid of birds. If a bird such as a sparrow flies up suddenly from a bush or from a new-plowed field, he is terrified. Even as an adult, he runs babbling into the kitchen on such occasions.

At the end of the 1950s, the man's parents die. Nobody tries to explain this to him, and he does not know exactly when or in what order they die. He is just aware that he has not seen them for a few years, and he misses them in a vague kind of way.

In September, 1977, the retarded man sits in the dayroom in the new home, sixty miles from the previous one, which was torn down in 1963. He sits in his favorite spot by the window, looking out onto an asphalt yard with a wilted flowerbed and three parking places. It is a still day. He sits there for hours, moving his chair a few inches every hour so that it always remains in the patch of sunlight. In some mysterious way, he is in harmony with the entire cosmos. In the shadows cast by the leaves against the wall, he sees the mushrooms that he used to love as a child. He lets his imagination roam over those shapes, recreating many mushrooms, each one different from the others, and allowing them all to grow in fantastic and unique ways. He appreciates how mysterious life is and has a sense of its greatness, a greatness which includes himself.

Characters

The Boy

As a young child, the unnamed boy is active and curious. He loves to play in the woods, and he is especially drawn to the mushrooms that grow there. His senses are very much alive, and he discerns the way things and people smell. Although he is teased by his brother and sister, he does not seem to be unhappy. When he is sent to the home for the mentally retarded, he misses the sights and sounds of life with his family on the farm. The boy's difficulty is that he has intellectual disabilities that make it very hard for him to learn. At home, he cannot master how to use the tools in the woodshed and sometimes hurts himself trying. His language skills are also poor. He cannot connect words to things and feels that words belong to other people, not to him. At his first and only week in school, he cannot learn how to read and does not know how to make friends.

At the institution, he is not the most severely disabled of the residents. Although not able to communicate with words, he is able to wash and feed himself. He also still exhibits curiosity, observing the activities in the wood shop and being amused, and sometimes frightened, at the antics of the other boys. He responds well when a new teacher at the home treats him with dignity and keeps him busy with chores. When left to his own devices, he shows he has an active imagination, creating meaningful patterns as he stares at wallpaper, and later, when he is an adult, at the shadows of leaves against the wall.

As an adult, he suffers from institutional neglect. Left alone, without any meaningful activities, he gets fat, and his mind appears to stagnate.

The New Teacher

The new teacher is a young, quiet man who is employed by the institution to teach in the wood shop. He remains patient and calm and knows how to maintain discipline without being harsh. He treats the boys well.

Themes

Loneliness and Neglect

The mentally retarded boy, who is unable to speak and communicate his needs in a normal way, has to endure the loneliness of someone who does not fit into the expectations and norms of society. He is at the mercy of others who order his world for him in a way that suits them, and in a way that leaves him powerless. The people who are in charge of him hold keys that he does not possess□the use of language, for example□and, as he knows, they want things from him. They want him to behave in a certain way, to respond to them in a certain way, but he never does understand what that way might be. Since humans normally organize and make sense of their world through language, he is at an enormous disadvantage, because words are a mystery to him. For this boy, language seems like an arbitrary thing, something invented by the strong, and he knows very well that he is not one of the strong.

As a child, the unnamed boy seems to be a stranger or an outsider even in his own family. His brother and sister fool him into going to look for objects that do not exist and laugh heartily as his expense when he cannot find them. He feels cut off from his siblings because they are allowed to use the tools in the woodshed and he is not. When he first attends school, he is similarly isolated. He does not mix with the other children and does not enjoy the noise they make as they play. He cuts a solitary figure. Things do not change much when he is sent to an institution for the mentally retarded. He is not allowed in the wood shop because he cannot be trusted with the tools, and the other boys sometimes laugh at him. Few people show him any understanding. The exception is the kind teacher who treats him as a human being and looks directly into his eyes as he speaks to him. During this period, when the boy is thirteen, and continuing until he is about eighteen, there seems to be a genuine possibility of what the narrator calls "an awakening." But when the teacher leaves and the wood shop closes, the opportunity for development is lost, and the pattern of the boy's life for the next quarter of a century is set. There is no longer anything in his environment to stimulate his interest. He is fed and clothed at the Home, but no other attempt is made to give him meaningful activity: "His senses were asleep: there was nothing that made enough of a claim on them." Although sometimes he is treated with kindness, as when the aides try to comfort him when he is frightened by birds, he also has to endure humiliation and lack of respect, as when the foreman, who probably means no harm, laughs at his efforts to rake leaves in the apple orchard. Progressively becoming more and more isolated, the boy, who has now grown into a man, is left to while his life away getting fat and sitting around the Home in a chair, gazing out at the yard.

From Disharmony to Harmony

For most of his life, and in most ways, the boy lacks meaningful connection to his environment. He lives in a world that does not make any sense to him. This is partly

because he cannot learn to read or write or communicate verbally, which means that he cannot comprehend why things happen as they do. He is especially uncomfortable with machines, the objects that the human world has manufactured, which operate in unfamiliar ways and have power to injure him. To this boy, the world behaves in unpredictable ways. When a bird flies up suddenly from a bush and terrifies him, it is only "one of the thousand ways in which the world would turn *unreliable*."

However, he is able to enjoy his senses. As a child, he savors the smell and the feel of mushrooms and other plants that grow wild. He feels a kinship with them, even though he has no names for them. This experience of being connected to the world stays with him as the years go by. He frequently reverts to it or tries to recreate it, as a way of imposing order, familiarity, and meaning on an otherwise strange and incomprehensible world. During the only week he ever spends at a normal school, when he tries copying letters, they turn out looking like mushrooms.

Later, when he is sent to the institution, he gazes at the patterns on the wallpaper until the patterns resemble trees. Like mushrooms, trees were things he could respond to even when he was very young. When the wind blew through the big ash trees outside the schoolhouse, he thought to himself, "*The trees are so happy . . . when the wind comes. That gives them something to do*."

When he reaches manhood, he appears to others to be a fat, mentally retarded man with a vacant mind who lounges for hours in a chair by the window doing nothing. But the reality is somewhat different. As he gazes at the shadows cast on the wall by the leaves in the yard, he is once more able to revert to his love of mushrooms and the feeling of friendship that he felt in their presence. Over the years, in his imagination, he creates an almost infinite number of different mushroom shapes from the shadows, each one of which is unique. In his own way he understands the greatness and the mystery of life as it unfolds over long stretches of time. And as he moves his chair every hour to stay in the sun, he unconsciously aligns his own life with the life of the entire cosmos. Out of harmony with the human world, he silently places himself in harmony with something so much greater and more permanent.

Style

The story is told in the third person by a narrator who has insight into how the retarded boy and later man experiences the world. The narrator is a mature and sophisticated adult; when he needs to he uses complex sentence structures (one sentence contains 132 words), and the last six paragraphs are written in a heightened, lyrical style that enables him to convey his vision of the connection between the mentally retarded man and the infinity of the cosmos. This is a reality that the man cannot know for himself, except by some unconscious instinct.

However, although the adult narrator has greater intelligence and verbal range than his subject, he uses several techniques that bring the reader closer to the experience of the retarded individual. First, the story contains no dialogue, which has the effect of conveying the locked-in nature of the boy's experience; he cannot communicate with the rest of the human world. Second, in spite of his more sophisticated consciousness, the narrator's style is predominantly simple, which conveys the childlike nature of the boy's experience. Monosyllabic phrases such as "The House, large, white, behind trees and a fence," and "a wind came through the big ash trees" suggest a child's perceptions, expressed in language a child might use. Third, metaphor (the comparison of one thing to another dissimilar thing in such a way as to bring out a similarity between them) is employed to convey how the boy experiences ordinary things in a special way. The ice axe is "a cruel giant with dragon's teeth"; and the knot he ties his shoelaces with is a "small, evil animal that the lace passed through." Fourth, in order to bring the reader closer to the boy's experience, the narrator sometimes employs the second-person form, as in, "water you inhale deeply has a strange way of stinging," and "the joiner's saws . . . that clattered so merrily when you released the tension." Finally, the boy is unnamed throughout. He is referred to only as "he." This namelessness conveys the way society depersonalizes him. He is a category□a mentally retarded male□rather than a living person with a personality and with likes and dislikes, interests and needs.

Historical Context

Societal attitudes about mental retardation changed considerably over the course of the twentieth century. In the United States in the early part of the century, individuals with mental retardation were generally sent away to schools for the feeble-minded, where standards of care varied widely. These were usually large institutions, each accommodating more than one thousand children and adults. Most of the institutions were in rural areas. They often had gardens and a fully operational farm. The male inmates worked on the farm, operating the heavy machinery and tending to the animals. Females did domestic chores such as laundry. Those who were only mildly retarded cared for the more severe cases and also for the young children. Some inmates returned to their families for holidays.

Social trends in the early twentieth century, however, did not favor enlightened treatment of the mentally retarded. Instead of the retarded being viewed as harmless children who needed to be taken care of, there was a growing perception that they posed a potential threat to society. It was claimed by society opinion-makers that because of their weak powers of reasoning, the mentally retarded were more likely than others to indulge in criminal activity or immoral sexual behavior. In his book *Inventing the Feeble Mind: A History of Mental Retardation in the United States*, James W. Trent Jr. comments on the period 1900—1920, noting "the increasing insistence . . . that mental defectives, in their amorality and fecundity, were not only linked with social vices but indeed were the most prominent and persistent cause of those vices."

Along with the virtual criminalization of mental retardation, came the eugenics movement, which sought to sterilize those considered unfit to have children. The eugenics movement arose out of a scientific interest in heredity and the belief in the necessity of creating superior human stock. Eugenics attracted support from many of the leading minds of the day, including Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Andrew Carnegie, and many other progressive thinkers. The goal was to use knowledge of heredity to prevent the birth of mental defectives. Eugenicists believed that by cultivating good human stock, many problems that had plagued humanity, such as poverty and crime, as well as mental retardation, could be eradicated. Soon the list included vices such as prostitution, venereal disease, illegitimate births, and drunkenness. Particularly targeted were the mildly retarded, known at the time as morons, since unlike "idiots" (those with the lowest intelligence), they could pass for normal in everyday society and were therefore more dangerous. It was also argued that mental retardation was a permanent condition and that retarded persons could not be educated.

In 1907, the state of Indiana passed the first sterilization law in the United States. Although it focused on criminals and rapists, it also included the mentally retarded. By 1917, eleven more states had followed. After World War I, fifteen more states permitted sterilization in some circumstances. In the 1927 case *Buck v. Bell*, Supreme Court justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, in upholding a sterilization law, declared "Three generations of imbeciles are enough."

The eugenics movement flourished not only in the United States but also in Nazi Germany in the 1930s and 1940s, where 400,000 people were sterilized. Involuntary sterilization also took place in Sweden (where "Greatness Strikes Where It Pleases" may be set). Between 1926, when a law permitting sterilization was passed, and continuing until the 1970s, up to 60,000 women were sterilized, for reasons that included mental retardation.

In the United States in the years leading up to World War II, the institutionalization of the mentally retarded increased. Many people were committed involuntarily by court order, and they were committed for life. In 1926, there were 43,000 mentally retarded people at state institutions, and this number increased to 81,000 in 1936.

During this period, and persisting right up to the 1950s and in some cases beyond, mental retardation was regarded as a shameful thing. Few families would want to admit that one of their members suffered from the condition. According to Trent, "To have a defective in the family was to be associated with vice, immorality, failure, bad blood, and stupidity."

After World War II, when the full horrors of the Nazi embrace of eugenics became widely known, support for sterilization in the United States faded. It also became known that many previously institutionalized mentally retarded individuals had served successfully in the U.S. armed forces during the war.

During the 1960s, there were a number of scandals about how the mentally retarded were being treated in institutions. A notorious photo essay in *Look* magazine in 1966 showed neglect, filth, and boredom in state schools for the retarded. In 1967, a visitor to the Sonoma State Hospital in California saw, as reported by Trent, "wards of naked adults sleeping on cement floors often in their own excrement or wandering in open dayrooms." Many were so heavily medicated they were in a daze. In 1972, in another public scandal, two homes for the retarded in New York were the subject of a television expose, which showed conditions, as Trent puts it, "not unlike Nazi death camps."

During this period also, there was a gradual change in public attitudes toward the mentally retarded. People began to realize that such individuals could live outside the institution and lead productive lives. In the 1970s, a public policy of deinstitutionalization led to thousands of retarded people being integrated into their communities, in public schools, and in the workplace. The emphasis was on normalization and inclusion rather than segregation.

Critical Overview

Although Gustafsson's work is not as widely known in the English-speaking world as his admirers might like it to be, the translation of his short story collection *Stories of Happy People* did receive some positive reviews when published in 1986. In *Studies in Short Fiction*, Daniel P. Deneau selected "Greatness Strikes Where It Pleases" as one of the two memorable stories in the collection. He described it as "an absorbing account" of a mentally retarded person, in which, at the end, "in lyrical prose we learn of his feeling of oneness with the universe and his understanding of the great mystery of which mankind is a part." Deneau quotes Gustafsson's statement that "Nobody really knows what a human being is," and comments that in all his stories, including "Greatness Strikes Where It Pleases," "[Gustafsson] quietly illustrates mysteries rather than certainties."

In the September 7, 1986, *New York Times Book Review*, Eric O. Johannesson noted that the book was a collection of "10 delightful and significant narratives." Although he does not mention "Greatness Strikes Where It Pleases" directly, his general comments can be applied to it. According to Johannesson, the book "celebrates possibilities. In their efforts to cope with particular situations, Mr. Gustafsson's characters are generously granted sudden insights, epiphanies or sorts." In a fictional world that "seems inherently valueless, value is conferred by a shift of point of view, of perspective. Thus new possibilities are offered. It is a joyous, life-enhancing philosophy."

Charles Baxter, in his introduction to the story in the anthology, *You've Got to Read This: Contemporary Writers Introduce Stories That Held Them in Awe*, describes it as "something of a miracle: it induces in the reader a bit of a trance, and in this trance it convincingly portrays its subject as mysteriously exceptional, godlike." Baxter also has praise for Gustafsson's "very tricky maneuver," in which the protagonist's manner of perceiving the world "must come to us through words and a literary language that the boy and subsequently the man do not possess." Baxter praises the narrator for not taking pity on the mentally retarded character and for granting him "*nobility*, free from condescension." However, in illustrating how the narrator accomplishes this, Baxter misreads the entire paragraph beginning "In a world that had no center, he reigned like a quiet monarch," which in fact describes the young teacher at the institution rather than the protagonist.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Aubrey holds a Ph.D. in English and has published many articles on contemporary literature. In this essay, Aubrey discusses how Gustafsson gives the mentally retarded man a dignity that belies his intellectual deficiencies and how the story compares with other literary works that include mentally retarded characters.

Gustafsson's "Greatness Strikes Where It Pleases" says a great deal in a short space about mental retardation and how it was regarded in the mid-twentieth century. It deserves a place alongside other short stories of the century, such as Jack London's "Told in the Drooling Ward" (1914) and Eudora Welty's "Lily Daw and the Three Ladies" (1941), both of which treat the subject of mental retardation with humor and understanding.

The boy in Gustafsson's story is recognized by his family as being retarded when he is still very young. He does not learn as quickly as his brother and sister, and his language skills lag behind the norm. But his parents seem to have little idea of what to do with him. They beat him so that he will not go to the woodshed and hurt himself, and they also ban him from the woods behind the barn, which is the only place he feels at home. They no doubt feel protective of his welfare, but like other parents of a mentally retarded child, they must decide what to do with him. This boy is given only a week at a normal school. When he cannot learn anything in that time he is, one presumes, declared impossible to educate□a not uncommon attitude at the time. Not knowing what else to do with him, and perhaps feeling the stigma often attached to those who had a retarded person in the family, his parents send him to an institution. For the better part of the century, institutionalization of the retarded was the norm. It was considered better for the general welfare if they were herded together, isolated from society's embarrassed and disapproving gaze.

The home in the story takes in boys of all levels of mental retardation. Some are severe cases, such as the fat boy who makes little paper balls out of anything he can find and eats them. Some of the boys cannot feed themselves properly; most of them move around slowly, and "some were so deep in their own worlds that nothing could have disturbed them." The protagonist is himself considered one of the "hopeless ones," but that is only after an encouraging period in his life comes to an end. The shining light in this story is the unnamed teacher who arrives at the home when the boy is about thirteen years old. The fact that there is a teacher at all shows that the home does make some effort to educate its residents, unlike some of the worst institutions in Europe and the United States that during the twentieth century had the responsibility of caring of some of society's most vulnerable citizens. In the story, the boys who are only mildly retarded are given practical training in the wood shop, and their new teacher makes every effort to involve the unnamed protagonist, who is more severely retarded, in useful activity. He is allowed to sort pieces of wood, sweep floors, and empty pails of wood shavings. The teacher treats him like a human being, and the boy responds. He is made to feel that he really exists, even though he still lacks language skills, and the other boys laugh at him.

The real tragedy in the boy's life comes after the teacher leaves. No one thereafter takes much notice of him, and as a result of his neglect, he "slip[s] away," into his interior world, isolated from meaningful human contact. As an adult he is allowed to get fat, and apart from his supervised and unrewarding trips to the apple orchard, he appears to spend most of his time, for many years, sitting in a chair in the dayroom gazing out of the window.

It is here that the story takes an almost mystical turn. The arc of the retarded man's life has appeared to be plunging downward. His parents are dead. He has no friends. No one thinks about him. He has nothing to do. As the narrator puts it, he is "quite empty," and this condition has endured for ten years. But then comes the astonishing reversal. The emptiness turns out to be an illusion. Hidden to the undiscerning eye is a fullness in this man's life that belies his apparent isolation. Far from being empty, his mind is in fact intricately at work, constructing meaning and delight for himself in the mushroom patterns he creates from the ever-changing shadows of the leaves on the wall. These images reconnect him to nature, reminding him of the kinship he felt with mushrooms in those long ago days in the woods, before society labeled him as a mental defective and packed him off to an institution. As he sits and watches, and with an ingenuity that no observer would suspect, he allows his self-created mushroom-shapes to grow, to live and to die in a natural cycle that makes him feel in harmony with nature's infinite variety, with the entire stream of time and space, of which he knows himself, all "mysterious and great," to be a part.

No one had ever written about a mentally retarded person in this way before. The stories by London and Welty, although they empathize with the retarded, are more naturalistic in vein. London creates an entertaining adventure around Tom, his first-person narrator, who is a twenty-eight-year-old "feeb," that is, a resident of a home for the feeble-minded, in California. The twist is that Tom, who works as an attendant and helps to feed the more severely retarded (the "droolers" of the title), is a lot smarter than many of the so-called normal people who run the institution. In Welty's story, three respectable ladies in Mississippi, horrified by the emerging sexuality of the mildly retarded Lily Daw, conspire to have her sent to the Ellisville Institute for the Feeble-Minded. The story is a satire which exposes the fear that people had at the time□the story was published in 1941□of the supposed rampant, immoral sexuality of the mentally retarded.

Gustafsson's purpose is quite different. He does not try to pretend that the boy is more intelligent than he appears or poke fun at or criticize those who have charge of his life. Instead, artfully combining images of motion and stillness, and alternating between the vast and the minute□from the galaxy to the unborn fetus□he invests the severely retarded, obese man with a massive dignity, a greatness even, by placing him in harmony with the great rhythms of the cosmos and with its inscrutable mysteries and purposes. By moving his chair, so slowly, so awkwardly, with such difficulty, to ensure that he always stays in the sliver of sunlight that illumines the floor of the dayroom, he becomes, in spite of his big, cumbersome body, a tiny part of the eternal cosmic dance.

Perhaps the only work of literature that comes anywhere near a resemblance to this extraordinary tour de force is William Wordsworth's poem "The Idiot Boy," from his *Lyrical Ballads* (1798). In this ballad, a woman named Betty Foy sends Johnny, her retarded young son, out on a pony at night to fetch the doctor to aid a sick neighbor. Johnny, not grasping what is expected of him, fails to summon the doctor and instead spends the entire night out under the stars, worrying the life out his mother. But the "idiot boy" is the real hero of the poem. In his simplicity, he possesses a spontaneity and oneness with nature that eludes the adults in the poem, who are weighed down by their worries and concerns. Several times Wordsworth uses the word "glory" in association with Johnny, which, like Gustafsson's use of the word "great" in connection with his protagonist, is not a word that most people would immediately associate with the mentally retarded. But in the penultimate stanza of "The Idiot Boy," for example, Betty asks Johnny what he did all night, to which he responds, "The cocks did crow to-whoo, to-whoo, / And the sun did shine so cold." The narrator comments in the following line, "Thus answered Johnny in his glory." Like Johnny, the retarded man in "Greatness Strikes Where It Pleases" has an inner life that cannot be appreciated by those who assess human worth only in terms of narrowly defined notions of intelligence. As he sits alone at his window, he is a part of what Shakespeare, in *The Winter's Tale*, called "great creating nature" (IV, iv, 89), which has a place and a purpose for everything under the sun, including those who, through no fault of their own, are left in isolation to spin their dreams and seek their connection to the great whole.

Source: Bryan Aubrey, Critical Essay on "Greatness Strikes Where It Pleases," in *Short Stories for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Topics for Further Study

Research current definitions of mental retardation. Is the condition solely related to intellectual abilities or are other factors involved? What are some of the causes of the condition? Is there any way of preventing it?

Research the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. What are its main provisions? What type of disabilities does it cover?

From your reading of the story, describe some of the good things about the care the protagonist receives at the institution and some of the bad things. What conclusions do you draw from the story about the needs of the mentally retarded?

Reread the first three pages of the story, which describe the boy's childhood up to the age of seven. Now write a paragraph that describes a few of your own remembered experiences of being a very young child. Try to recapture how you really felt and how you saw things at that time. Are there any similarities between the boy's experience and your own?

Compare and Contrast

1920—1940s: In the United States, people can be confined involuntarily in an institution for the mentally retarded on the basis of a note from a physician or psychologist. In some states, the person concerned has no right to a lawyer or a court hearing. This arrangement results in the commitment to institutions of many who are not retarded but whose behavior is regarded as problematic.

Today: People with mental retardation are guaranteed full civil rights under the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. This act protects access to jobs, transportation, and public places such as movie theaters, restaurants, and stores. Children and adults with mental retardation cannot be denied access to private day care on the basis of their disability.

1961: President John F. Kennedy creates the President's Panel on Mental Retardation. The president calls upon Americans to address the needs of mentally retarded people and their desire to be included in the everyday life of the community.

Today: In 2003, the President's Committee on Mental Retardation is renamed the President's Committee for People with Intellectual Disabilities. In renaming the committee, the terms "mental retardation" and "intellectual disabilities" are considered synonyms. The committee continues to address the needs of the same people as in the past, but under a more acceptable name. The new term attempts to remove negative attitudes and encourage positive images of people with intellectual disabilities.

1968: The first Special Olympic Games is held at Soldier Field, Chicago, Illinois, inspired by Eunice Kennedy Shriver and underwritten by the Kennedy Foundation. The Games feature 1,000 athletes with intellectual disabilities from 26 states and Canada competing in athletics, floor hockey, and aquatics.

Today: The 2003 Special Olympics World Summer Games are held in Dublin, Ireland. These are the first Summer Games ever held outside the United States. It is the world's largest sporting event for 2003, featuring 7,000 athletes from more than 150 countries participating in 21 sports.

1970s: In the United States, the death penalty is reinstated in 1976, and execution of the mentally retarded is permitted.

Today: In 2002, in line with international norms, the Supreme Court rules that the death penalty for mentally retarded persons is "cruel and unusual punishment" and therefore violates the Eighth Amendment to the Constitution. This opinion results in reprieves for many death row inmates, since it is estimated that as many as 10 percent suffer from mental retardation.

What Do I Read Next?

Gustafsson's short novel *Funeral Music for Freemasons* (1983; English translation, 1987) tells the story of what has happened to three people who knew each other at the University of Uppsala in the 1950s. One is a poet who later works as a tour guide in Africa; another tries but fails to establish a career as an opera singer; and the third becomes a successful nuclear physicist at Harvard.

William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), besides being considered one of the most important American novels of the twentieth century, is interesting because of its treatment of Benjy Compson, a severely mentally retarded individual who narrates the opening section. Benjy cannot talk and is eventually sent to an asylum. The novel as a whole traces the decline of an aristocratic Southern family from 1910 to 1928.

John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* (1937) is a somber tale about two laborers, George and Lennie, who dream of creating a better life for themselves as farmers in California. Lennie is mentally retarded. He possesses great physical strength and is devoted to George but, because of his simple mind, he is helpless to exert any influence on the tragic course of events.

The *New York Times Book Review* commented on the similarities between some of Gustafsson's stories and those of the Danish writer, Isak Dinesen. Dinesen's *Winter's Tales* (reissue ed., 1993) contains some of her best work, in which fairy tale and myth coexist with a deep understanding of human nature.

Further Study

Black, Edwin, *War against the Weak: Eugenics and America's Campaign to Create a Master Race*, Four Walls Eight Windows, 2003.

Investigative journalist Black tells the story of America's experiment with eugenics during the twentieth century and how it influenced Hitler and the Third Reich in Germany. Black argues that after World War II, eugenics was reborn as human genetics. He claims that confronting the history of eugenics is essential to understanding the implications of the Human Genome Project and twenty-first-century genetic engineering.

Noll, Steven, and James W. Trent Jr., eds., *Mental Retardation in America: A Historical Reader*, New York University Press, 2004.

Exploring historical issues, as well as current public policy concerns, this book covers various topics that include representations of the mentally disabled as social burdens and social menaces, Freudian inspired ideas of adjustment and adaptation, the relationship between community care and institutional treatment, historical events which upheld the policy of eugenic sterilization, the disability rights movement, and the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990.

Shorter, Edward, *The Kennedy Family and the Story of Mental Retardation*, Temple University Press, 2000.

Using some Kennedy family records that have not previously been seen by historians, Shorter presents the story of how the Kennedy family played a major role in educating Americans about mental retardation.

Zigler, Edward, and Robert M. Hodapp, *Understanding Mental Retardation*, Cambridge University Press, 1986.

This is a guide to current research and theory about mental retardation. Topics addressed include issues of definition, classification, and prevalence; motivation and personality factors; intervention in the lives of retarded persons; the possibility of "miracle cures"; and the problems of institutionalization and mainstreaming.

Bibliography

Baxter, Charles, "Introduction to 'Greatness Strikes Where It Pleases,'" in *You've Got to Read This: Contemporary Writers Introduce Stories That Held Them in Awe*, edited by Ron Hansen, Perennial, 1994, pp. 258—60.

Deneau, Daniel, P., Review of *Stories of Happy People*, in *Studies in Short Fiction*, Vol. 27, No. 3, Summer 1987, pp. 316—18.

Gustafsson, Lars, "Greatness Strikes Where It Pleases," translated by Y. Sandstroem and J. Weinstock, in *Stories of Happy People*, New Directions, 1986, pp. 91—103.

Johannesson, Eric O., Review of *Stories of Happy People*, in *New York Times Book Review*, September 7, 1986, p. 18.

London, Jack, "Told in the Drooling Ward," in *Short Stories of Jack London*, edited by Earle Labor, Robert C. Leitz III, and I. Milo Shepard, Macmillan, 1990, pp. 494—501.

Shakespeare, William, *The Winter's Tale*, edited by J. H. P. Pafford, Arden Edition, Methuen, 1963, p. 93.

Trent, James R., Jr., *Inventing the Feeble Mind: A History of Mental Retardation in the United States*, University of California Press, 1994.

Welty, Eudora, "Lily Daw and the Three Ladies," in *The Collected Stories of Eudora Welty*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980, pp. 3—11.

Wordsworth, William, "The Idiot Boy," in *Lyrical Ballads*, edited with introduction, notes, and appendices by R. L. Brett and A. R. Jones, Methuen, 1971, pp. 86—101.