The Green Leaves Study Guide

The Green Leaves by Grace Ogot

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Contents

Introduction

Grace Ogot's short story "The Green Leaves," from her 1968 collection of short stories called *Land without Thunder,* was published by the East African Publishing House in Nairobi, Kenya. Many of the stories in this collection are loosely based on tales that her grandmother told her as a young girl growing up in rural western Kenya. More than simply folk tales, Ogot's short stories also reflect, through the traditional genre of the folk tale, a number of recent developments in Kenya's history, in particular its colonial past and subsequent national independence movement, its changing gender roles, and its economic and urban growth. All these developments have contributed to Kenya's passage from a traditional agrarian culture to a modern, urban society. Much of the social turmoil that attends such rapid change is revealed in her stories.

In the Introduction to their book *Challenging Hierarchies: Issues and Themes in Colonial and Postcolonial African Literature,* authors Leonard Podis and Yakubu Saaka have articulated five common features found in African literature. The list is as follows: using proverbs and aphorisms, depicting social customs, incorporating myths, relating politics to social and cultural issues, and writing in a concise style. These criteria are relevant while reading Ogot's work as well as other writers' work produced during the African wars for independence against European colonizers. The cultural disruptions due to British colonialism is a major theme of many works written by postcolonial African writers such as Chenua Achebe, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, Tayeb Salih, and Flora Nwapa.

As a writer coming of age at the time of Kenyan independence in 1963, Ogot turned to the conflicts that occurred between the Luo people and the colonialists as a source for her stories. In particular, the early stories of Ogot, such as "The Green Leaves," reveal the tenuous grasp that many indigenous cultures in Kenya had on their traditional ways of life with the takeover of Kenya's political and economic infrastructure by British colonial forces. This is rendered in the scene in which tension flares between the clan leader Olielo and the white policeman over the "right" way to deal with robbery. The two different systems of justice are brought into conflict with the traditional way, that of murdering the thief, being seen as barbaric and outdated.

Not only does Ogot reflect on the injustices of the colonial system in Kenya, but she also contributes to an aspect of literature that, for the most part, was overlooked by many African writers who at the time were predominantly male: the experiences of being a black African woman. Specifically, her stories often reveal the limitations of men and the inability of women to make a cultural impact due to being dis empowered by patriarchy within both traditional and colonial societies. Thus, Ogot brings a dual perspective to her works that centers on issues of oppression due to gender and complicated by nationality and colonialism.

Author Biography

Writer and politician Grace Ogot was born in 1930 in the Central Nyanza area of Kenya. Trained as a nurse while a young woman, Ogot worked in Uganda and England before returning to Kenya. As a young and upcoming writer, Ogot first entered the Kenyan literary scene in the early 1960s when she began to publish stories in the African journal *Black Orpheus.* Many of these stories, of which "The Green Leaves" is one, later became part of the collection *Land of Thunder,* published in 1968. Her 1966 novel, *The Promised Land,* was the first novel published by a woman by the influential East African Publishing House. Since then, she has published two other novels, *The Graduate,* in 1980, and *The Strange Bride* (1989), which was written in Luo, Ogot's native language, and translated into English and Kiswahili. She has also published two other volumes of short stories in English.

Her most recent literary contributions have been written in her native language and have been received by the Luo people in Kenya with much enthusiasm. Several of these are historical novels that attempt to document the early history of her people, the Luo, and contribute to the growth of vernacular literatures produced by and for specific populations in Africa rather than for an international audience. Her books in Luo continue the storytelling heritage of its people and also provide a version of history that is Afrocentric rather than Eurocentric. As Ogot claims in an interview with Don Burness, "It is my hope that people can have proper respect for their own language and will learn it so that it will not be lost and swallowed up by English and Kiswahili."

Besides her career as a writer, Ogot has been a tutor, a midwife, a flight attendant, a journalist for the BBC, a community development officer, and most notably an assistant minister of the Kenyan government. She has taken an active interest in the cultural and political concerns of Kenya and was the founding chair of the Writer's Association of Kenya.

Plot Summary

Pursuing the Cattle Thieves

In the short story "The Green Leaves," the main character, Nyagar, wakes up from what he thinks is a dream but is actually voices and footsteps approaching. He turns toward his wife, but she is not in bed next to him, so he throws off his blanket and goes to the door. Finding the door unbolted, he wonders where Nyamundhe (his wife) is and is angered by her carelessness. Hearing the voices again, he puts a sheet around him, grabs his spear and club, and goes outside. He opens the gate to his yard and hides by the fence as a small group of people followed by a larger group run past him. One yells out that the small group has stolen his cattle.

Nyagar follows the larger group of villagers, listening to the men speak to each other as they pursue the cattle thieves. The cattle thieves take the wrong turn, missing the bridge that separates the Masala from the Mirogi people. They attempt to cross the river, but the large group gains ground and eventually overcomes them, beating them with their clubs. The cattle thieves cry in pain to no avail.

During this commotion, one of the men sights a thief crawling off behind a bush. Three men pursue him and beat the bush, but there is no sound. The thief has escaped. Another thief knifes one of the villagers in the shoulder blade and then runs into the river, crossing it despite the fast-moving water. Nyagar takes the knife out of Omoro's shoulder and attempts to stop his friend's wound from bleeding.

One thief is lying on the ground, wounded. The villagers come upon him and beat him until the man no longer moves. Seeing that the man is nearly dead, Omoro claims that it is bad luck to witness the thief s death and that they should return to their huts before this happens. The villagers then cover the dying man in green leaves and agree to bury him tomorrow at dawn. The men walk back to the village in the dark. Nyagar helps Omoro, although his shoulder no longer bleeds. Omoro tells Nyagar before he turns in that they should meet early in the morning before the women go down to the river where the dead thief is located.

Nyagar's Death

Nyagar goes back to his hut. The village is quiet, although the women are awake. They will wait until morning to hear what happened. Nyagar takes out a container and scoops some ash from it, placing it in his mouth. He then places some on his palm and blows it toward the gate. He is about to go to bed when he changes his mind. Then he gets up and leaves his hut, closing the door quietly behind him. He looks back to make sure that he has closed the gate.

Nyagar thinks that the thief lying beneath the green leaves must have money on him, and he is determined to get it. Dawn is approaching as he makes his way to where the

thief's body is. Nyagar thinks that someone is following, but it is the echo of his own footsteps. As he gets closer to the body, he thinks that the other thieves may have returned for him but then dismisses the idea. Finally, he sees the bunch of green leaves and is nearly paralyzed with fright, but he continues on.

Everything is exactly as it looked when everyone left a few hours earlier. Looking around him first, Nyagar then approaches the dead body. However, his mind is in turmoil as he considers what he is doing. He does not need the money and has many wives and children as well as cattle. Still, Nyagar is determined to take the money since he has come this far. He bends over the dead man and begins to take off the leaves. Surprisingly, the dead man's body is still warm, but this does not stop Nyagar. He looks through his pockets but finds nothing; then he remembers that cattle traders often carry money around their necks. He finds a bag around the man's neck, and he smiles. As he takes the bag from around the man's neck, a blow hits him straight in the eye. He staggers back and falls to the ground unconscious. The thief had just woken up from his deep sleep and now has killed Nyagar. He then covers Nyagar in the leaves and takes off across the bridge.

The Discovery of Nyagar's Body

At dawn the next day, the clan leader Olielo sounds the funeral drum, and about one hundred people assemble at the *Opok* tree to hear what he has to say. Olielo tells them what had happened the night before. Because it is the dead body of a thief, it is not really a murder because the killer has rid society of an evil person. But due to the white man's presence and his rules that are different in regard to murder, Olielo says that a group of men must go to the white man and tell him that the thief was killed by a group of people. Thus, no one would suffer sole blame for the thief s death. Everyone agrees to this idea, and a group of men leave to tell the white man what has happened.

In the meantime, other people have gathered at the tree, including the wives of Nyagar. Whereas Nyamundhe looks for her husband, her co-wife does not seem to be that interested. The group begins to walk towards the river where the thief is buried. As they walk, Nyamundhe notices how wet the grass is and then comments to the co-wife that a black cat crossed their path earlier. Two trucks show up carrying a European policeman, several African policemen, and the men who had walked from the village. They drive up to the mound of green leaves. The white officer asks for the clan elder and demands to know the story behind the murder of the thief. Olielo explains everything to him through a translator. A discussion ensues between the two leaders about the nature of the crime, with the white officer accusing the clansmen of being savages. Olielo stands by his argument that the village killed the thief and that they should all be arrested.

The police officer goes up to where the body is covered with leaves, and the crowd follows him. Because it is the white man's rule to take the body and do an autopsy to discover the cause of death, the crowd surrounds the mound of leaves to get a look before he is whisked away. The African police officer takes off the leaves and Olielo stares at the body in amazement. The body of his cousin, Nyagar, is lying there with a

stake through his eye. Nyamundhe runs up to her husband's body and weeps over it. She asks the crowd where the thief is. The crowd is stunned by the new development. The women wail, and the men who killed the thief stare at each other in disbelief. Olielo, visibly upset, appeals to the villagers, telling them that, despite the evil spirit that has descended on the village, Nyagar's spirit is among them.

However, Nyamundhe does not take these comforting words to heart; instead, she struggles with the police as they take Nyagar's body to the back of the truck. One officer tries to comfort her, but Nyamundhe tells him that it does not matter because her husband is not alive. She then strips to the waist and raises her hands over her head, weeping and chanting. The story ends with a traditional song of mourning that she sings.

Characters

The European Police Officer

He comes to the village to find out who murdered the thief. His chief function is to reveal the differences in values between European and local justice systems. By enforcing a Western legal system, the European police officer represents a colonial mind-set that views African culture as backwards and Europe as superior. His presence also disrupts the community when he demands that someone take responsibility for the death of the thief.

The Injured Thief

The nameless thief who is first beaten and then buried beneath a pile of green leaves is left for dead. Unfortunately for Nyagar, the thief has only been knocked unconscious and will end up murdering him.

Nyagar

The husband of Nyamundhe, Nyagar decides to go back to rob the supposedly dead thief and ends up getting killed by him. He is already a successful and prosperous man in his clan and does not need the money that the thief who is covered in leaves has around his neck. Thus his motivation for acquiring this unnecessary wealth needs to be contextualized within the history of colonialism. In other words, Nyagar's greed can be seen as an internalization of Western attitudes that crave material wealth. In rejecting the traditional ways of the clan that would have prevented him from taking the thief s money, Nyagar sets himself up for his own murder. His greed results not only in his downfall but also contributes to animosity among the clan members after they discover Nyagar beneath the leaves.

Nyagar's Co-wife

She is the other wife of Nyagar, who does not seem that disturbed by Nyagar's absence the morning after the thief was buried beneath the green leaves. Her appearance makes clear that Nyagar is a wealthy man since certain traditional societies in Africa allow for more than one wife depending on the economic status of the husband.

Nyamundhe

She is the wife of Nyagar who disappears from his side in the middle of the night and forgets to bolt the gate after she leaves his hut. After the thief kills Nyagar, Nyamundhe becomes the focus of the story. In particular, she defies the European system of justice

by calling into question the reasoning behind the European's insistence on taking her husband's body away to be studied and dissected. She also reveals that the clan is not so sure of itself after Nyagar's body is discovered. People eye each other with suspicion and fear that an evil spirit has descended on them. This suspicion weakens their stance against the European police officer and makes the men look foolish. By embracing the traditional rituals for burying the dead, Nyamundhe attempts to salvage the customs of her people and deflect the influence of Western ideologies and beliefs. Her song states quite solemnly and directly what she has lost, and in a grander sense, it reflects on the larger losses that her people have suffered under the strict regulations of colonialism.

Clan Leader Olielo

Olielo is a cousin of Nyagar who metes out justice within the clan and provides a leadership role when the thief is killed. Olielo must confront the European police officer at the end of the story and defend the murder of the thief. By understanding how the European legal system works, Olielo is able to subvert it by claiming that the whole village is responsible for the murder and not one person. By making this claim, Olielo deflects attention from individual motivation to group responsibility, showing the difference in value systems between the Western view of justice that seeks justice for all crimes committed, disregarding the circumstances, and the Luo tradition that views some murder as being justified within a particular context such as endangering the security of the clan.

Omoro

Omoro is Nyagar' s friend who gets stabbed by one of the cattle thieves. Nyagar helps stop Omoro's wound from bleeding and then makes sure that he gets home all right.

Themes

Traditional Life versus Modernization

The major conflict of the story revolves around the traditional ways of Nyagar's clan as represented by the clan leader, Olielo, and by Nyamundhe, both of whom defy the condescending views of the European policeman who epitomizes the rational, modern subject in his need to charge one individual with the murder of the supposed thief and then subsequently, after the discovery of Nyagar under the leaves, to take the body away to do an autopsy rather than respect the death rituals of the clan. The differing rules and regulations that structure Luo and Western societies regarding death and justice result not only in misunderstanding between the clan members and the policeman but also contribute to the attitude of superiority of the European policeman when he claims, "How many times have I told you that you must abandon this savage custom of butchering one another?" This form of cultural superiority contributed to the colonial mentality of dehumanizing Africans as a way of rationalizing their exploitation and oppression.

Ogot does not glorify the old ways but instead brings them to the attention of the reader as a way of revealing how easy it is to dismiss indigenous peoples as barbaric and inferior due to social rules that may appear backwards to those unfamiliar with them. She seems to suggest that these traditional views are significant because they help define the clan as a community. Although some of their superstitious aspects may appear frivolous, such as Nyamundhe's sighting of the black cat as they walk towards the pile of green leaves, others, such as appeasing the clan's ancestral dead through proper burial rites, are indelibly related to how the group perceives its relationship to previous generations. Also, Nyagar's downfall is that he defies the traditional wisdom that forbids him to go back to the body of the thief until morning. His greed for the thief s money despite his fears and lack of want reflects a counter value system that privileges acquiring material possessions over the safety and security of him and his family. (His need to keep checking gates reveals the importance of keeping intruders away from his hut.) Excessive desire is a negative effect of modernization because it overemphasizes material wealth as a reigning mark of success and happiness.

Community versus Individualism

The increasing influence of modernization in colonized countries resulted in the breakdown of social customs and traditional values that bound communities. Throughout the story, there is an emphasis on what the community will do in relation to the cattle thieves and then later to the European police officer. In this respect, Olielo speaks for the community when he declares that they will bury the thief in the morning to prevent a bad spirit from descending on their village. Because Nyagar takes the law into his own hands, he defies the wishes of the clan leader and thus disrupts the social order. By the end of the story, the clan members, particularly Nyamundhe, look at each

other with suspicion, wondering who killed Nyagar. Ironically, this is the exact opposite response that Olielo had foreseen since his plan was that the whole clan would take responsibility for the thief s death and thus undermine the European police officer's attempt to blame one man. In this respect, the power of colonialism is revealed through one of its most effective strategies: to divide and conquer. Thus, by pitting individuals and groups against each other, colonial powers could avert mass organizing and actions against them. This common strategy is understood by Olielo when he remarks to the clan members, "If we stand united, none of us will be killed."

Questioning Traditional Female Roles

The men and women in the story are seen at the beginning of the story as having very specific gender roles. It is the men of the clan who go after the thief and attempt to kill him, whereas the women remain behind. The men of the clan try to protect their women from what has happened by planning on getting up early to deal with the dead thief. The women, on the other hand, remain quiet about the evening's events. In the morning, they gather to ear Olielo address the clan about what has happened and follow the men to the river. However, Ogot focuses on Nyagar's wife, Nyamundhe, at the end of the story, because she represents a traditional way of life that values security and community. Whereas Nyagar has been infected with greed and self-interest, qualities associated with a colonial mentality of acquiring as much material wealth as possible, Nyamundhe clings to the traditional ways, as when she sings a song of mourning over the death of her husband. At the same time, Nyamundhe is not afraid to challenge both the clan members and the European police officer about Nyagar's death. She even questions the Western methods of justice that are based on rational scientific inquiry such as carrying out an autopsy. In this respect, Nyamundhe is similar to Olielo, the clan leader, who also challenges the methods of justice the European police officer attempts to carry out.

Style

Storytelling

First and foremost, Ogot has a direct and precise style that does not lack in dramatic action. Her storytelling abilities are directly influenced by stories her grandmother told her while growing up in western Kenya. Thus, not only does she rely on myths and legends of the Luo people from whom she is descended, but she also uses traditional elements of oral storytelling in her work. One can see this most clearly in her use of direct rather than metaphoric or figurative language. Her rich descriptions bring her stories to life, and her narrative pacing create suspense and excitement. The beginning of the story is most memorable for its ability to get the reader quickly involved in the action surrounding the pursuit of the cattle thieves.

Ogot is also known for incorporating Luo rituals into her stories. For example, in "The Green Leaves," she describes Nyagar taking traditional medicine to calm his nerves after the thief has been left for dead. Other rituals she incorporates are leaving the injured man beneath the leaves so as not to bring evil into the village and ending the story with a song of mourning that Nyamundhe sings after she discovers it is Nyagar beneath the green leaves. She also incorporates a number of superstitions into the story to show how symbols such as a black cat are imbued with specific prophetic powers that may or may not turn out to be true. In this case, the black cat that Nyamundhe sees cross her path foretells the death of Nyagar. Such coincidences help to reinforce the power of such symbols.

Imagery

Although Ogot does not rely heavily on metaphoric or symbolic language, she does use particular images to signify emotions and create suspense. For example, from the very beginning of the story, Nyagar is concerned about locks and bolts on the door of his hut and yard. Although this seems like an insignificant detail, it actually foreshadows the danger that will befall Nyagar. Ironically, even though he appears concerned for his safety, his pursuit of the thief's money shows how his greed overrides these feelings of danger. The attention to gates and locks also reveals that the world he lives in is not safe. This vulnerability can be related on a larger level to the vulnerability of indigenous peoples to the influence and exploitation of British colonial powers. Again, it is ironic that it ends up being Nyagar, a member of the clan, who endangers the other clan members. By stooping to the level of a thief and getting killed for it, Nyagar makes the clan vulnerable and suspicious of each other at the end of the story.

Another image that is referred to frequently is the image of the green leaves that cover the thief and then later Nyagar. Ostensibly, these leaves are meant to hide the thief and keep his spirit from invading the village. However, covering the dying man with freshly torn leaves foreshadows that the thief may not be dead. Only Nyagar will discover this

when he returns to steal the thief's money. The green leaves also signify that traditions such as leaving a thief to die in the middle of the night so as to prevent his spirit from entering the village may not be the most efficacious method of handling criminals. However, this is lost on the members of the clan as they try to cope with Nyagar's death at the end of the story and the "evil hand" that has descended upon them.

Point of View

What is most interesting about "The Green Leaves" is that the story is narrated in a third person omniscient point of view, meaning that it is told from the perspective of an omniscient narrator who sees all that is happening in the story. This point of view allows the narrator to move from Nyagar's point of view to the clan members' and then to Nyagar's wife's viewpoint throughout the story. In this way, Ogot's story reveals multiple perspectives— male, female, individual, and group—that account for the tensions and conflicts erupting in the story. For example, the shift from Nyagar's perspective of gaining more wealth by stealing the thief's purse to that of the clan leader proposing that the whole clan take responsibility for killing the thief reveals the differing values that Nyagar has in relation to his clan. It also prepares the reader for the end of the story, which shows the tension among the clan members over Nyagar's death as being his fault. If he had not desired the thief s money, then the clan could have responded to the European police officer as they had intended to do from the start.

It is also important to consider how Nyamundhe' s song at the end of story reveals her own personal pain and loss over the death of her husband. In the end, it does not matter who killed Nyagar. For Nyamundhe, her husband's death means that she will now be alone. Her song reveals a woman's point of view of the consequences of death for those who are dependent on men for protection and comradeship. This provides another viewpoint from which to consider the effects that Nyagar's irresponsible actions have had on his family and the clan.

Dialogue

Many parts of the story are written in dialogue to convey some of the conflicts and misunderstandings that occur between the clan members and the European police officer. For example, when the European police officer and the clan leader first meet, the police officer claims that he has not believed a word that the clan members have told him. When the clan leader says that he sent them to inform the authorities that the clan had killed a man, the officer keeps saying, "You killed a man?" in his attempts to establish one person's guilt rather than to accept that it had been a communal effort. Cultural misunderstandings occur frequently in the dialogue as a way of revealing ideological beliefs and differences between the clan and the colonial powers.

Historical Context

When discussing the writing of Ogot, it is difficult to separate her work from its historical and cultural contexts, particularly its precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial contexts. At the time of writing "The Green Leaves" in the early 1960s, Kenya had just achieved independence from British colonialism. The road to independence was tortuous and extremely violent. Beginning in the 1920s with the demand for labor and land reform, it carried through to the 1950s, when violence between nationalist groups and white settlers and police became more frequent. As J. Roger Kurtz notes in the historical context to Majorie Oludhe Macgoye's novel *Coming to Birth,* during the State of Emergency that the British enforced in Kenya during the 1950s, nearly 15,000 native Kenyans died in the struggle for independence. Therefore, the significance of these struggles was not lost on the literary generation coming of age in newly formed African nations such as Kenya, Nigeria, Ghana, and Sudan.

Like many other African writers of the 1950s and 1960s, Ogot confronts the tensions occurring between the gradually weakening colonial forces and the persistent indigenous groups who defy them. As part of a literary and cultural trend emerging in newly formed African nations over the last thirty years, Ogot's writing can be seen as a good example of postcolonial literature. Most of this literature written after independence is a response to the colonizing experience from the point of view of the colonized (i.e. indigenous peoples). The colonized mainly speak of the trauma, humiliation, and slave mentality induced in their psyches as a result of having various religious, political, and legal institutions imposed on their own traditions. One of the best-known theorists who has analyzed the psychological conditions that colonized people undergo is Franz Fanon, whose book *Black Skin, White Masks* brought to the public's awareness the denigrating consequences of being a colonized subject. As Gina Wisker notes in *Post-Colonial and African American Women's Writing,* "Fanon's work enables engagement with debates about how ex-colonial subjects develop and seize their own identities and slough off the destructiveness of the colonial experiences which represent them in a negative light." Despite the formation of independent nations from many former colonies, the psychological effects of colonization continue to impede economic, social, and cultural development as well as the formation of national identities. For many postcolonial writers, nation- and culture-building through identification with the indigenous people's conception of their precolonial past becomes a political means intended to restore dignity and cultural pride to Africans.

For many writers, looking to the precolonial era is a way of reclaiming an African history untouched by Europeans. In many of the short stories in *Land without Thunder,* Ogot uses her background as a Luo, the indigenous people who settled around Lake Victoria in western Kenya, to preserve a sense of the past for future generations. In an interview with Lee Nichols in his book *Conversations with African Writers,* Ogot says that by putting the stories she heard as a young girl to paper, she is preserving Luo heritage so that "when our children change beyond recognition they will know what they were in the past." Her interest in using Luo folktales as the basis for some of her writing has led her to abandon writing in English, at times, to focus on writing in Luo. In this way, Luo

people who do not read or write in English can enjoy and appreciate her writing that often mirrors their collective histories and experiences. In *Wanesema: Conversations with African Writers,* Ogot tells author Don Burness that "It is my hope that people have proper respect for their own language and will learn it so that it will not be lost and swallowed up by English and Kiswahili." The movement towards writing in African vernacular languages has political undertones that are most explicitly expressed by another Kenyan writer, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, in *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Writing.*

Lastly, Ogot also focuses on her belief that particular issues concerning the impact of colonialism and patriarchy on women have been disregarded or misrepresented in the works of many male writers, including Achebe and Ngugi. Many of the issues discussed in her novels focus on the means by which women's voices were silenced in precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial eras in Kenyan history. Thus, by using folktales as the basis of her short stories, she can question "the powers of traditional myth and magic, which frequently oppress women," as stated by Gina Wisker in *Post-Colonial and African American Women's Writing.*

Critical Overview

At the time that "The Green Leaves" was published in the early 1960s, not many published African writers were women despite the growing international reputations of African writers such as Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka. The dearth of women writers in Africa has been ascribed to the lack of opportunities for women to be educated during the colonial periods as well as women's traditional roles that often placed them in the home as mothers and homemakers. However others have argued, particularly African women writers and critics, that women writers have been overlooked because they are unworthy of publication and critical study. In her 1987 article in *Women in African Literature Today,* "Feminist Issues in the Fiction of Kenya's Women Writers," Jean F. O' Barr claims that "No major anthologies of African literature include selections of works by female writers and the few that are organized by topic rather than by author make only fleeting references to women writers." Often when women are written about in critical works, they are misread or dismissed as not being interesting enough. Ghanian writer Ama Ata Aidoo reveals in her article "Literature, Feminism, and the African Woman Today" that the many misrepresentations and misreadings by both African male and Anglo feminist critics that occur are due to the lack of understanding of African women's experiences:

they [African women] do not fit the accepted (Western) notion of themselves as mute beasts of burden, and they are definitely not as free and as equal as African men . . . would have us believe.

In an article titled "The Woman Artist in Africa Today: A Critical Commentary," critic and writer Micere Mugo admonishes critics for not taking African women writers seriously enough to write critically about them and then reveals the important dimensions of writing for women, both politically and personally. Despite the discriminations, difficulties, and prohibitions that African women writers undergo, African women have responded increasingly to seeing themselves misrepresented or ignored by picking up the pen themselves and creating a women-centered poetics that explores and highlights the impact of colonialism and its aftermath on race, nationality, and gender. In *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender,* Florence Stratton notes the differences between African men and women writers as being one of accommodating multiple perspectives: "whereas the tendency in male literature is to counter colonial misrepresentations with valorization of indigenous traditions, women writers are as critical of those traditions as of colonialism." The many approaches that African women writers take in their work demand a different lens for reading. As critics Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory Fido in "African Women Writers: Towards a Literary History" remark, "an acceptance of different conceptions of what African writing is and how it should be approached is needed to comprehend some of the experiments that women writers are making."

Although Ogot's work has been denigrated as having an "uninspired, rather pedestrian style" by critic Lloyd W. Brown in his book *Women Writers in Black Africa,* her use of fables and myths of the Luo people contribute to reclaiming a traditional African

women's art form, that of orature, within the short story genre. Ogot's work has been completely overlooked due to her relatively small output (her move into politics as well as writing in her first language has contributed to this slight output) and her location in East Africa, a region that has not gained as much international literary acclaim as West or South Africa. Most of the criticism of her work focuses on her 1966 novel, *The Promised Land,* which critiques both traditional and modern ways of life, two features of contemporary Kenya, through the eyes of the female protagonist, Nayapol. However, in her recent book *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender,* Florence Stratton devotes a chapter to Ogot's work, opening up an important critical space for her work to be discussed among other important African women writers, such as Buchi Emecheta, Ata Ama Aidoo, and Flora Nwapa.

Reading "The Green Leaves" through gender and race, Stratton points to its defining rhetorical strategy as that of "discrediting the male subject . . ., a strategy that complements the tactic of privileging the female subject." Nyagar's death is then viewed as being due to weaknesses in his character, influenced by his excessive desire to accumulate wealth. Compared to other male protagonists in African fiction written by men, his death is not valiant but pathetic and destructive to the clan. Particularly, his death is seen to affect his wife, Nyamundhe. By ending the story with a traditional female song of mourning, Ogot underscores Nyamundhe's pain and sorrow as being one of the most dire aspects of Nyagar' s irresponsible act.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Piano is a Ph.D. candidate in English at Bowling Green University in Ohio. In this essay, Piano analyzes how Ogot reveals the way that British colonialism disrupts indigenous communities by introducing alien concepts and beliefs that conflict with traditional values.

Written in 1968, Grace Ogot's short story "The Green Leaves" takes place over the course of one night and the following morning. Yet within this short time frame, Ogot effectively illustrates the negative effects of colonialism on indigenous people in East Africa. She does this by developing a number of different conflicts that are both internal, as seen in Nyagar's conflicted emotions, and external, as rendered in the verbal exchanges between the European police officer, the clan leader, Olielo, and Nyamundhe, Nyagar's wife. Ogot uses third-person omniscient point of view as a method of revealing the clan's vulnerability to colonization due to deteriorating communal values. What were once beliefs and values that they assumed to share are now in flux. These changes disrupt the clan and create conflicts among them. Ultimately, "The Green Leaves" is an indictment of the British colonial period in Kenya that divided communities and introduced values and customs that conflicted with indigenous ones.

Ogot very cleverly uses third-person omniscient point of view to illustrate the changing attitudes that the clan is undergoing due to the introduction of Western values by colonial powers such as Great Britain. Often these values were imposed on indigenous groups by prohibiting the practice of local customs, including using vernacular languages, legal systems, and non-Christian religious beliefs. In this way, indigenous people were forced to learn colonial customs and habits even though this often generated divisions among them. However, the intentional weakening of traditional communities served to strengthen the colonizing presence, making them less threatening and more easily assimilated into the colonial system. This strategy is acknowledged by the clan leader, Olielo, when he tells the clan members of his plan for all of them to take responsibility for the thief s death because, as he puts it, "If we stand united, none of us will be killed." Throughout the story, Olielo represents the traditional values that the clan has historically organized itself around, such as the primary importance of family relations, clearly demarcated gender roles, and the strong relationship between the individual and the community.

However, the influence of modernization has already begun to affect the clan as can be seen in the actions of Nyagar, who puts his own well-being and that of the clan's in jeopardy to satisfy his desire for money. Although he has some hesitation about whether or not to go after the thief s money, in the end he decides to go ahead and do it. The conflict between traditional and modern values is represented through the inner dialogue he has when he is about to take the supposedly dead thief's money: "He now felt nervous. 'Why should you disturb a dead body?' his inner voice asked him. 'What more do you want?'" Yet the need to have more than anyone in the clan wins out as Nyagar tries to steal the money and consequently ends up dying at the hands of the

thief. The emphasis on the accumulation of personal wealth rather than on personal safety and communal knowledge leads to his downfall. In his article, "The True Fantasies of Grace Ogot, Storyteller," Peter Nazareth claims that the vision emerging from Ogot's work is that "Modern society in Kenya she sees as sick, a world in which people chase after false materialist values instead of pursuing the truth." Therefore, in defying the plans that were made to take care of the thief s body when morning arrived, Nyagar places himself in a position of vulnerability. No one knows where he is or what he is doing. Rather than acting in concert with the clan's values, he is transgressing them.

In the beginning of the story, Ogot provides some interesting details that hint at the changes occurring in the clan. What first comes to the attention of Nyagar at the beginning of the story is not only the shouting outside his hut but also the fact that his wife, Nyamundhe, is not next to him. Her absence and lack of telling him where she is reveals a certain breakdown of gender roles that demand that the wife be submissive to her husband. Also Nyagar is very attentive to locking doors and gates and is dismayed when they are not bolted. This anxiety reveals the clan's vulnerability to external forces such as intruders like the thieves as well as colonial forces that disrupt indigenous cultures. However, despite his anxieties about gates being locked, Nyagar is still impelled to leave the hut and steal the thief's money. So strong is Nyagar's lust for money that it overrides his fears of being intruded upon. His obsession illustrates the powerful influence of Western values that infiltrated colonized populations and corrupted traditional markers of success.

The conflict between modern and traditional ways of life is most vividly seen in the discussion that the clan leader, Olielo, has with clan members the morning after the thief has been killed. Of course, no one yet knows what has happened to Nyagar, but the point of view has shifted from Nyagar to that of the clan members' meeting. Most of this scene is relayed in dialogue between Olielo and the clan members and through significant side comments made by Nyamundhe to the nameless co-wife of Nyagar. In his speech to the clan, Olielo strategizes a way to deal with the European authorities who will want an explanation for what happened the night before. His understanding that the clan and the European colonialists have different ways of dealing with justice allows him to figure out a way to protect the clan members from being victimized by the colonialists. In his speech, Olielo makes it clear that the white man will think his own method of justice is superior: "Because he thinks his laws are superior to ours, we should handle him carefully." Later in the story, his insight proves true as the clan interacts with a European police officer who clearly expresses his abhorrence of the way that the clan deals with justice. However, just as tension mounts between the police and the clan members, it is deflected by the discovery of Nyagar under the green leaves.

The revelation that Nyagar is beneath the green leaves throws the clan into turmoil. His death proves to Nyamundhe that the black cat that crossed her path was an accurate prophecy. At the same time, the European police officer is able to manipulate the clan members because of the confusion that arises. Surprisingly, Nyamundhe becomes a powerful figure as she challenges both the clan members who she thinks are

responsible for Nyagar's death and the European system of justice that intends to take her husband's body to determine the cause of death. Ogot's decision to end the story with Nyamundhe's challenge and her song of mourning shifts the point of view to that of a woman's perspective. Her vocality gives her power in a situation in which many of the clan members are powerless. At the same time, it also reveals Nyamundhe as being caught between the world of tradition and that of modernization.

By shifting the end of the story to Nyamundhe's point of view, Ogot very subtly reveals how Nyagar's actions have affected Nyamundhe's life as well as the clan's. By acting on his own, he puts her safety and that of the clan in jeopardy. The lack of cohesion among the clan members can be seen in her suspicious reaction to the clan members after Nyagar's body is revealed. In part, her suspicion is due to being left out of the decision-making process the night before, in which only the men participated. All of the women of the clan had known something was going on, but they had not been informed of the details. Thus, although Nyamundhe aligns herself with traditional ways as is seen in the way she challenges the European police officer, she is also in conflict with them. Thus, the intersection of colonialism and traditional patriarchy becomes a site of unresolved conflict for African women writers like Ogot and Nwapa.

In *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender,* feminist critic Florence Stratton recognizes this conflict by claiming that "the colonized woman is doubly oppressed, enmeshed in the structures of an indigenous patriarchy and of a foreign masculinist-colonialism." However, Nyamundhe challenges both of these systems by refusing to accept the clan's and the European police officer's methods of dealing with justice. This is seen in her ability to disregard both the clan members' and the European police officer's attempts to appease her by relying on her own ability to comfort herself through singing a traditional mourning song. The story's ending casts doubt on both traditional and modern ways of life in East Africa.

African literary critic Taiwo Oladele perceptively says this of Grace Ogot's short stories: "Her practice is to hit direct on the subject-matter without allowing the beginning of the story to drag, and leave something for the imagination of the reader at the end." In "The Green Leaves," Ogot succeeds in writing a riveting story that is suspenseful and economically worded. Yet, at the same time, she also contends with gender and race issues in the context of the British colonial era in Kenya. Because these social and political issues are ongoing, her stories tend to raise questions rather than answer them. "The Green Leaves" gives the reader feeling of irresolution at the end. Although it ends with the strong image of a woman mourning her dead husband, it also reveals the tragic dimensions that befell indigenous cultures due to the legacy of colonialism.

Source: Doreen Piano, Critical Essay on "The Green Leaves," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

Grady is a student in folklore and African studies. In this essay, Grady considers Ogot's story in relation to the postcolonial experience in Kenya.

Is colonialism dead? Or is it, as "The Green Leaves" relates, merely knocked unconscious, ready to reassert its destructive power through individual Africans acculturated into its values and ideas, willing to act outside the communal norms to seek individual success? Kenyan writer Grace Ogot illustrates this postcolonial dilemma in "The Green Leaves," a story that serves as a cautionary tale to the generation of Kenyan leaders gaining in power after the end of the independence struggle.

Grace Ogot was born into the generation that would struggle for and achieve independence from England, and "The Green Leaves" describes the identity crisis faced by those whose history is shaped by the conflict between African and European values. The nation of Kenya was created by the British colonial administration in the late nineteenth century. It did not exist as a nation before the incursion of Europeans; rather, its borders were determined by the British government in its effort to reach the wealthy land of Uganda to its west. According to Robert Tignor, because the land was populated by a variety of ethnic groups who often had a more communal understanding of land possession, the British were easily able to confiscate Kenyan land for use by the railway, which was needed to move Ugandan wealth to the Indian Ocean coast. In time, the British discovered that Kenyan land was fertile for a number of cash crops, like coffee and tea, and a settlement policy began, moving Europeans onto African land. After a half century of British rule, an effective movement for independence began. This armed struggle lasted for eighteen years, and in 1963 the people of Kenya achieved political independence from Great Britain.

But with this achievement, according to Beth well Ogot, the new nation faced a crisis of identity. The struggle for freedom from colonial rule, called *Uhuru,* resulted in political independence for a land of disparate cultures and languages united mostly by their colonial experience, rather than by a lengthy shared history. Now that independence had been achieved, a lasting national identity had to be created. In addition to the problem of national identity, the legacy of colonialism produced another problem: the cultural life of the nation had to be freed from colonial domination, just as the political life had been. The colonial experience sought to eliminate native forms of expression and replace them with European forms of education and advancement. Educated Kenyans learned English literature and European languages in school, rather than their own traditional practices and neighboring languages. Consequently, the native expressions of Kenya's people had been increasingly alienated from modern forms of education and entertainment as part of the colonial experience. Yet these native expressions were critical to precolonial African identity. In *The Journal of Negro History,* Michael Twitty explains:

Remembrance of the past was seen as a key to instilling civility in future generations. It was not simply time, space, and their accompanying events. History was encoded in a

person's name, the traditions of the clan, the national festivals and holidays, the laws of the group, religious ritual, folklore, and the decorative and visual arts.

By implementing a European system of education, the colonial experience alienated the colonized people from their own history.

Consequently, government and intellectual leaders tied the quest for identity to precolonial forms. Bethwell Ogot relates that they developed and promoted a national dress, a cultural preservation movement, a national culture of song, dance, and literature, and the use of Swahili as a national language. This effort to create a national culture characterized the first decade and a half of independence, during which Grace Ogot wrote this story. This national identity effort was directed from an elite class of government officials and academics, rather than emerging from the common people of Kenya. Grace Ogot and her husband, historian Bethwell Ogot, were part of this generation. Her writing, as well as the resurgence of native song, dance, and literature that followed *Uhuru* was, consequently, also an attempt to decolonize the mind, carving an African future out of the precolonial African past.

Included in these efforts was the promotion of Kenyan authorship and publishing through the government-owned East African Literature Bureau (later the Kenya Literature Bureau), through which was disseminated the traditional history of the Kenyan people. For a people dominated by colonialism, the immediate postcolonial literature was a means to recording their previously unrecorded history and practices. While many Kenyan writers began to produce literary material from their experience, much of their writing was in English and, consequently, available only to a small portion of the Kenyan population. By contrast, the oral traditions of Kenya's ethnic cultures, long neglected as materials of study, became the focus of interest for African scholars in the era following independence. The champions of oral literature, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Owuor Anyumba, Taban lo Liyong, and Okot p'Bitek advocated that students at all levels of Kenyan society be educated in their traditional oral literature as an authentic link to their African past. The old curriculum of English literature was replaced by folk forms, and authors like Grace Ogot, who has published in English, Swahili, and her ethnic language, Luo, incorporated ethnic folklore into their fiction.

This new emphasis was not without internal debate. Some argued that this emphasis on oral tradition would encourage tribalism, promote the study of belief systems and cultural practices that were obsolete, that it was based on race in its exclusion of the Asian and European citizens of contemporary Kenya, and that it would tie future native creativity too closely to their oral literature, rather than freeing writers to create from their own experience. However, the oral literature advocates won the debate, and the immediate postcolonial generation sought to express their experience in native forms.

Written in this context, "The Green Leaves" illustrates the complexity of the cultural situation. Though written in English, the story illustrates a variety of traditional practices common to Luos but previously unrecorded in English fiction. From the opening description of group justice to the final lamentation practice of women described at the end, Ogot writes of a Luo community largely untouched by the colonial experience.

However, the central conflict of the story illustrates the dilemma facing the nation following the colonial experience. Not only did the nation face an identity crisis, but also the individual African, represented by Nyagar, is confronted with the conflict between traditional and modern norms. According to the story, colonialism is not dead; it is merely beaten, buried temporarily under green leaves, but with some power remaining.

At the start, the protagonist, Nyagar, is roused from his sleep to join with his community to catch a thief. This part of the story illustrates the struggle for freedom, in which native Kenyans united across ethnic lines to rid themselves of those who stole their land and wealth. Like the struggle for *Uhuru,* the fight with the thief operates according to the native practice of justice. Ogot illustrates this conformity in the meeting of clansmen the morning after the killing. The group determines that the best way to avoid conflict with the European system of justice is to remain unified, as the men had done in their attempt to stop the thieves. If they remain united behind a common story and no individual breaks that unity, then their system of justice will have the final verdict.

But the conflict between the modern and the traditional has already occurred at the individual level, as Nyagar struggles with his own conscience during the night. His use of traditional medicine brings him only a temporary peace, for Nyagar is tantalized by the stolen wealth still available to him on the unburied corpse. Ultimately, he seeks individual wealth rather than observing the decision of the group who struggled together against the thief. In doing so, he rouses the injured thief and causes his own destruction. The initial battle had not resulted in death, just as *Uhuru* had not completely vanquished the colonial legacy. It lay there, unburied and undead, still able to destroy.

Published five years after independence, the story questions the future of postcolonial Kenya. In *Research in African Literatures,* Elisabeth Mudimbe-Boyi remarks that the modern African literature often relates this encounter between African and Western norms, providing a new picture of "assimilation, alienation, and the notion of identity crisis, which have long been markers of this encounter." In Ogot's story, the encounter is personalized in the internal struggle of Nyagar. As if to emphasize the point, Ogot reiterates that Nyagar's quest is for money, a form of wealth introduced by the colonial power. The original thief, who remains nameless throughout the story, came in search of animal wealth, and endures. The green leaves are not a shroud but a covering. At this critical time in Kenyan nationhood, Ogot illustrates that *Uhuru* may not be a shroud for European domination, as the seeds for African destruction have already been sown in the colonial experience of the individual African.

Though the central story is not complicated, "The Green Leaves" illustrates a complicated cultural situation. Ogot's use of traditional folk forms illustrates a reality that had been underrepresented during the colonial era and was being reclaimed in the effort to build a national future. However, she does not nostalgically relate an easy return to the precolonial way of life, despite the seeming irrelevance to the story of the colonial presence. The African experience is forever changed by European colonialism, and *Uhuru*'s victory may be incomplete.

Source: Sandra Grady, Critical Essay on "The Green Leaves," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2002.

Adaptations

For a comprehensive resource on African literature, history, art, and film, see Dr. Cora Agatucci's "African Timelines" web site at http://www.cocc.edu/cagatucci/classes/hum211/timelines/htimelinetoc.htm.

Topics for Further Study

In the mid-1960s, Grace Ogot was the first woman writer to begin publishing her writing in Kenya. Now nearly forty years later, numerous women write in Kenya about issues that are pertinent to women in contemporary African life. Who are these writers and what are the themes in which they are most deeply engaged? How do their themes relate to issues confronting Kenyan women's lives today? How are they different from Ogot? How are they similar?

After reading Ogot's "The Green Leaves," find other African women writers who were publishing short stories during the period just after independence in the 1960s, such as Flora Nwapa of Nigeria and Ama Ata Aidoo of Ghana. Despite the differences in cultural background and nationality, try to draw comparisons among these women writers in terms of themes they address that are related to gender roles.

The historical period in which "The Green Leaves" takes place in Kenya was full of tumultuous changes, both social and political. Similar to Native Americans in the United States, many of the traditional cultures in Africa were forced to leave their lands, to adopt Western customs and systems, and to forsake traditional ways. Although colonialism wreaked havoc on traditional cultures, it also provided some benefits in medicine and education. Research the colonial era in Kenya that began in the mid-nineteenth century and ended in the mid-twentieth century. In particular, try to find information about the impact of colonialism on the Luo people, about whom Ogot writes. What were the negative effects of colonialism on the Luo? What, if any, were the positive?

Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart,* published in 1958, is one of the most highly acclaimed postcolonial novels about the devastating effects of colonialism on the traditional ways of Africans. Read the novel and then compare and contrast it with the "The Green Leaves." In particular, analyze the different ways that the authors represent their male protagonists. How are the two works critical of traditional African cultures? Of the colonial authorities? How do the two writers approach the theme of gender roles? How is Okonkwo a stronger or weaker hero than Nyagar? Why does Ogot represent Nyagar in a less than flattering way? Afterwards, discuss differences in narrative structure, themes, and literary devices between the texts.

Compare and Contrast

1960s: Kenyan writer Ogot and Nigerian writer Flora Nwapa are the first African women writers to have their works published by major publishing companies such as East African Publishing House and Heinemann African Writers Series.

Today: Dozens of women writers in Africa publish in their own countries as well as abroad and have received critical attention commensurate with male African writers such as Chinua Achebe and Ngugi Wa Thiong'o.

1960s: African writers Achebe, Ogot, and Ngugi write books aimed to create a politicized literature based on the common experiences of colonialism, national independence movements, the movement from traditional to modern forms of society, and the psychological and economic effects of these changes on men and women.

Today: The literature produced by writers living in former colonized nations has become part of a growing body of artistic works called postcolonial literature and is an area of study at many universities worldwide.

1960s: In the years following the independence movements of former colonies in Africa, there is a feeling of optimism and solidarity among both men and women to create nations that are representative of their hopes and dreams for a just and equal society for all African peoples.

Today: Many African citizens have become disillusioned by economic disparity, chronic drought, civil wars, the AIDS epidemic, and the rise of dictatorships that have prevented true economic and political freedom to occur in many African countries.

1960s: Many African writers turn to writing about the precolonial era in an attempt to reclaim and celebrate the many traditional cultures and their customs and rituals that flourished before the influence of colonialism.

Today: Many of the traditional cultures of Africa are celebrated all over North America through the re-enactment of traditional songs, dance, and music by national and international groups and organizations.

What Do I Read Next?

A 1997 anthology, *Under African Skies: Modern African Stories,* edited by Charles Larson, features a wide range of contemporary African writers from the last fifty years working in a variety of narrative traditions.

The novel *The Promised Land* (1966), by Grace Ogot, was one of the first African novels published by a woman. The novel takes place during the colonial era and reveals the difficulties that a couple must undergo when they decide to migrate from their traditional homeland in Kenya to Tanganyika because of economic opportunities there. It is written from the point of view of the wife, Nyapol, highlighting her experience as a new bride and a newcomer in a foreign land.

As a contemporary of Ogot, Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o wrote *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (1981), which makes a powerful argument for African writers to write in their primary rather than their secondary languages as a way of resisting the ideological and cultural forces of colonization.

A powerful and compelling novel written by Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (1958), serves as a contrast to the work of Ogot and other women who responded in their work both to the legacies of colonialism that disempowered African women and to the patriarchy of traditional African societies.

A 1986 novel, *Coming to Birth,* written by Kenyan writer Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye and published in 2000 by Feminist Press, is set in the years of Kenyan independence and focuses on the trials and tribulations of a young woman who journeys from a rural village to Nairobi in the 1950s.

Urban Obsessions, Urban Fears: The Postcolo-nial Kenyan Novel (1998), by J. Roger Kurtz, provides a helpful cultural, economic, and political context to the literature of Kenya, particularly the impact of urban life on Kenyan literature. It includes a comprehensive bibliography of Kenyan writers.

The edited collection *Challenging Hierarchies: Issues and Themes in Colonial and Postcolonial African Literature* (1998) provides recent critical articles by African women writers such as Ama Ata Aidoo and Micere Mugo on feminism, colonialism, and literature.

Further Study

Brown, Lloyd W., *Women Writers in Black Africa,* Greenwood Press, 1981.

This book provides chapters on African women writers such as Bessie Head, Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, and others. One of the first of its kind written solely about African women writers, it purports to write African women writers into the canon of African literature through literary analysis.

Bruner, Charlotte H., *Unwinding Threads: Writing by Women in Africa,* Heinemann, 1994.

This is a collection of short stories by African women from all parts of the continent. Divided by region, the book provides a comprehensive view of the variety and diversity of African women's approaches to imaginative writing. Many well-known and new writers are represented.

Owomoyela, Oyekan, ed., *A History of Twentieth-Century African Literatures,* University of Nebraska Press, 1993.

A range of bibliographic articles covering African literary production in all European languages represented on the continent. Chapters on women's literary production and on East African English-Language fiction are particularly relevant to Ogot's work.

Parekh, Pushpa, ed., *Postcolonial African Writers,* Greenwood Publishing, 1998.

This is a reference book that covers individual authors of postcolonial Africa, including biographical information, a discussion of themes and major works, critical responses to the works, and bibliographies.

Wisker, Gina, *Post-Colonial and African American Women's Writing: A Critical Introduction,* St. Martin's Press, 2000.

This book makes important links between the literature of women from postcolonial regions such as Africa, South Asia, and the Caribbean and that of African Americans, particularly Alice Walker and Toni Morrison, by revealing how gender and ethnicity combine to produce particular identities that are often silenced, oppressed, and marginalized. There are good references, biographies, and bibliographies of particular authors and their works, including a chapter on elements common to African women's writing.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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

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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Short Stories for Students

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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

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