Greyhound People Study Guide

Greyhound People by Alice Adams

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Introduction

"Greyhound People," which many critics refer to as one of Alice Adams's most popular stories, was inspired by the author's experiences on Greyhound buses, which she rode to get from her home to the University of California at Davis, where she taught for a brief period of time. This short story, originally published in the *New Yorker* in 1981, was recently published in the highly acclaimed *The Stories of Alice Adams* (2002), with "Greyhound People" being singled out as one of the best stories in the collection. (Note that this story may have been previously published but the exact date could not be found or confirmed.)

The long commute from home to work and the bits of conversations that the author heard during the ride must have stirred Adams's imagination. The story begins with a simple question, but one with possible complex consequences: What would happen if one day the protagonist got on the wrong bus? Where would she end up? What would she learn? And how might the experience change her? Greyhound buses, after all, are but distant cousins of city buses that rarely drive over city limit speeds, stop every two or three blocks, and never cross the somewhat barren lands that lie between two metropolitan areas. To get on the wrong Greyhound bus could have dire consequences; or, in the least, significant complications. And this is what Adams explores. In the process, the protagonist learns to loosen her grip on the stale routine that has become her life and to enjoy herself.

In a review of *The Stories of Alice Adams*, Michael Frank of the *Los Angeles Times* classified "Greyhound People" as falling into the category of "snapshot" stories—a sort of picture of life or as Frank put it, a kind of "collage." This reviewer found that rather than building suspense in many of her stories, Adams tended to create sketches. In specific reference to "Greyhound People," Frank wrote, "You come away from the story feeling that you have been taken somewhere—not enlightened so much, not shaken up—merely shown." Then Frank adds: "Adams is a great shower of people, of place, of social moments and moments of intimacy." In other words, "Greyhound People," is a great vehicle for taking an enjoyable ride.

Author Biography

Alice Adams, award-wining author of hundreds of short stories and several novels, had to overcome continual challenges to her writing career until she finally published her first novel at the age of forty. Born on August 14, 1926, to southern parents, Nicholson and Agatha Adams, in the then-small town of Fredericksburg, Virginia, Adams soon discovered that in her generation, women, like children, were to be seen but not heard. Despite the fact that she managed to be accepted at the prestigious Radcliffe College at the age of sixteen, she was advised by school professionals to give up her attempts to become a writer and instead focus on getting married. Adams followed this advice rather halfheartedly and ended up unhappily wedded to Mark Linenthal Jr. one year after she graduated from Radcliffe with a bachelor of arts degree. The marriage was unsuccessful, as were Adams's attempts to get published during those years. The marriage did, however, produce the couple's only child, Peter, born in 1951. But it would not be until after her divorce in 1958 that Adams would finally achieve her dream of becoming a published writer.

After struggling through a difficult marriage and divorce, Adams's life did not get much easier. She was a single mother who had to find a way of paying the bills and putting food on the table. Although she continued to write, she could not support herself and her child without taking on menial jobs. While working as a secretary taxed her energies, the low-grade jobs she held provided her with interesting material for future stories. Adams gained first-hand knowledge about the hardships and prejudices that women faced in the years before, and during, women's fight for equality. It was during these years that Adams almost gave up writing. She second-guessed her abilities because of the many rejections she received. At one point, she was so depressed she sought the advice of a psychiatrist who suggested that she forget about ever publishing another word. But then, in the late 1960s, Adams's long hours at her writing desk were finally compensated. The publishing world, in particular the *New Yorker*, began paying attention to her work. In the years that followed, Adams's writing, especially her short stories, began appearing everywhere.

Although she would go on to write several novels, it was Adams's short stories that drew the most attention. She would later admit that the short story form was her favorite; and this affinity of hers would shine through her work. She received so many O. Henry Awards for her short stories that in 1982 she was granted the O. Henry Special Award for Continuing Achievement, a feat only two other authors have accomplished. Her work also appeared in the publication the *Best American Short Stories* several times. In 1992, a few years before her death, Adams was presented with the Academy and Institute Award in Literature.

At the age of seventy-two, after a long history of publishing, Adams died in her sleep on May 27, 1999, in San Francisco. The posthumously published and highly acclaimed collection, *The Stories of Alice Adams* (2002), included the short story "Greyhound People," which has been singled out as one of the best stories in the collection.

Plot Summary

Adams begins her story "Greyhound People" as she typically begins most of her stories□by immediately stating the problem or the challenge that the protagonist is facing. In the first sentence of the story, the narrator relates: "As soon as I got on the bus, in the Greyhound station in Sacramento, I had a frightened sense of being in the wrong place." With this fear looming over her, she takes the closest seat to the driver that she can find. Unfortunately, as soon as she settles into it, a man angrily claims the seat as his own. The narrator relinquishes the seat to him and steps back a few paces to find a substitute.

Once settled, the narrator focuses on the people and the conversations around her. She notices that the anger of the man who made her change seats has subsided. He talks to two women across the aisle from him as if he were a friend of theirs, happy to see them. Meanwhile the narrator sits alone. She wonders, again, if she has taken the wrong bus but does not take any action to find out. Rather, she watches the bus driver enter the bus and take his seat. Instead of questioning him, she wonders why he does not collect tickets.

As the bus pulls out of the station, a child with a very loud voice begins asking a lot of nonsensical questions. "Mom is that a river we're crossing? Mom do you see that tree?" The questions are not only loud, they are non-stop. And eventually a black woman in the front of the bus becomes irritated by them. She tells the little boy to be quiet. The boy has a startled look on his face when he starts to add new questions to his repertoire. "Mom does she mean me? Mom who is that?" The narrator admits that she silently applauded the woman who told the boy to be quiet. Then a white woman walks down the aisle and confronts the black woman, telling her that her son was "retarded" and his constant questioning was the way "he tests reality." The mother then adds: "You mustn't make fun of him like that." When the mother returns to her son, his questions begin again.

The narrator, although somewhat embarrassed by her lack of sensitivity about the boy, found the taunting by the black woman to be a bit appealing. She liked the sound of defiance in the black woman's voice. This is when the narrator turns around to observe the people on the bus and notices that she, a white woman, was in a definite minority. Most of the passengers were black, which surprises her.

In the next section of the story, the narrator provides a glimpse of the scenery that is passing her by through the window. She describes the rolling hills and farmland and a view of the distant bay of water. In the middle of her description, the bus turns off the freeway, making the narrator fully realize that her fears were true. She was not on the San Francisco express bus. The bus would be making three stops: Vallejo, Oakland, and lastly San Francisco. The narrator sighs. At least the bus was going to San Francisco. The worst of her mistake was that she would be late. Her roommate, Hortense, who had volunteered to pick her up, would probably be worried about her. But that could be easily mended.

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When the bus pulls into the station in Vallejo, the seat partner of the black woman who told the young boy with all the questions to be quiet stands up and turns to the back. "And you, you just shut up!" she tells the boy. Many people in the bus applaud her. But the narrator does not, even though she admits that she would have liked to."

The narrator provides a small amount of information about herself: she lives in San Francisco and works in a government office there but has been temporarily assigned to duty in a Sacramento office. That is why she is commuting between the two cities. He husband has just recently told her that he was in love with a woman of Japanese descent who works as a nurse. The narrator allowed her husband to keep their apartment because she does not like to argue.

As new passengers board the bus in Vallejo, the narrator notices an extremely large woman walking down the aisle. The woman is big enough to fill two seats, the narrator states, but there are no double seats vacant. The narrator assumes that the woman heads her way because she is very thin and does not therefore take up much room. The woman apologizes for her size and the amount of room she takes up when she sits next to the narrator. They strike up a conversation, one of the few in the whole story.

The bus finally arrives in San Francisco; and as she imagined, the narrator must face her very worried roommate, Hortense. Hortense has insisted on picking up the narrator because the bus station is located in a very seamy part of the city. But she has been waiting for a long time for her late partner. Feelings amended, the two women go home to a lackluster dinner□a chef salad□because Hortense is trying to lose weight.

One morning, the narrator shares a seat with a young woman who is going to Sacramento to work. The narrator suspects that that the woman is from upstate New York, the birthplace of the narrator. When the young woman confirms that this is indeed where she is from, the narrator does not share with the girl that the narrator herself is from the same place. She also hopes that the girl does not provide any more personal information about herself. The narrator would rather keep the relationship on the surface.

Once she arrives in Sacramento, the narrator describes the bus station there. Since it is in Sacramento and many people catch buses to Reno, the narrator comments on the people waiting for the Reno bus, what she refers to as "lines of gamblers."

When she catches the wrong bus for a second time, the narrator knows that Hortense will never believe it was a mistake. The narrator starts to make up excuses to ease Hortense's potential anger but realizes how childish that was. At this moment, the narrator senses the consequences of being so dependent on Hortense. We are both "grown up," she thinks, suggesting that she is beginning to gain some confidence.

As she travels, the narrator notices a young man sleeping across the aisle from her. He stirs her memories of her husband. She then recounts how her marriage fell apart, the signs of which she is just now recognizing. When her bus finally arrives in San

Francisco, Hortense is furious and does not allow the narrator to soothe her in any way. When they arrive home, the narrator refers to herself and Hortense as "the odd couple."

The narrator bumps into the young girl from upstate New York again. The girl tells the narrator about a bus pass that she can buy that would allow her not only to go from San Francisco to Sacramento but to anywhere in California. The narrator decides to buy the ticket, which according to her made California seem "limitless." Then the narrator admits that she really does understand how the Greyhound bus station worked. In other words, she knew where she had to go in order to catch the bus she intended to catch, and if she got on the wrong bus at that point, it would be on purpose. She is tempted to go into a restaurant and order a milkshake. However, since Hortense has put both of them on a diet, the narrator feels a bit guilty about having the ice cream drink. The narrator realizes that her feelings are ridiculous, since she does not need to lose weight and can actually afford to gain some. So she orders the milkshake. While she is drinking it, the black man, who had ordered her (rather gruffly) to vacate his seat on the bus at the beginning of the story, walks up to her table and asks how she is doing. With these three events (buying the All-California bus pass, drinking the milkshake, and being recognized by a man), the narrator says "something remarkable" has happened. She is beginning to think for herself, understand her emotions, and open up to the people around her.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

The narrator of the story boards a bus in Sacramento, California and immediately senses that she is on the wrong bus. While she had taken the time to confirm with at least a half dozen people at the station if the bus she was about to board was the express to San Francisco, she still feels that she had made a terrible mistake. Despite her fears, she boards the bus and chooses a seat near the driver, thinking it to be the safest place. Almost immediately after she sits down, a tall black man boards the bus, grows angry and tells her that she is occupying his seat.

The woman is startled by his reaction, mutters a brief apology for taking his spot and chooses another seat two rows back. As she settles into her new seat, she observes that the man is happily engaged in a conversation with the two women sitting across the aisle. Before long, the driver boards the bus and they are on their way.

As the bus heads toward San Francisco, the narrator becomes aware of a young child seated behind her who is loudly asking his mother a string of questions. One of the women seated next to the black man shouts at the boy, telling him that he is the loudest traveler she has ever heard. This does not quiet the boy, but rather makes his questions more incessant, which in turn angers the woman more. The exchange continues until a white woman, apparently the boy's mother, makes her way to the front of the bus and explains that her son is retarded and cannot help the constant questioning. She returns to her seat and the boy continues his questions. The black woman, in an effort to get in the last word, says that her daughter wears a hearing aid. As the narrator listens to this exchange between the young child and the older black woman, she notices that most of the other passengers on the bus are black, a fact she finds puzzling.

The narrator finds herself captivated by the scenery as the bus continues its journey. As she watches the trees, farms and houses pass by, she becomes aware that the boy is talking again, but this time to people across the aisle. She also notices that the bus has left the freeway. The driver announces that they will soon be stopping in Vallejo before going on to Oakland and San Francisco. The narrator realizes that her intuition was correct. She is on the wrong bus, but she is somewhat appeased to know that she will eventually arrive in San Francisco, albeit a half hour late.

After the bus parks, the black woman in front hastily rises from her seat and, looking directly at the young boy, says "And you, you just shut up" before making her way off the bus with her seatmate and the man who had forced the narrator from her seat. Several people applaud as they leave the bus, but the narrator does not.

The narrator explains that she works as a statistician for a company located in San Francisco, but she has been assigned to an office in Sacramento for ten weeks. She lives with a woman named Hortense who graciously took her in after her husband left

her for another woman. Hortense is older than the narrator and is quite protective of her. She meets her at the bus station each night because she thinks the neighborhood where the station is located is dangerous. The narrator thinks others may assume that she and Hortense are a lesbian couple.

Many people exit the bus in Vallejo, including the woman with her retarded son. As the narrator watches them leave, she feels sorry for the boy. She feels bad that she had silently taken the black woman's side during their dispute, but she also tells herself that given the choice, she would rather travel with the black woman.

More people board the bus and the narrator pulls her briefcase closer to make room for someone to sit. She looks up and sees the biggest woman she has ever seen making her way toward the empty seat next to her. The woman squeezes into the seat and apologizes to the narrator for making her uncomfortable. The two women talk, and soon the narrator learns that her seatmate lives and works in Oakland but takes a course in the care of special children in Vallejo. This prompts the narrator to tell her about the loud young boy. Her seatmate replies that there is no reason why the boy couldn't have been quieter. A disability does not give a person the right to disturb others. This makes the narrator feel better about her own reaction to the boy. Before long, the bus reaches Oakland and the two women part ways.

When the bus finally reaches San Francisco, the narrator finds Hortense frantically pacing and visibly upset. The narrator explains that there are three busses that leave Sacramento for San Francisco at around the same time, and it is easy to choose the wrong one. Although Hortense tells her that she will probably catch on after a few weeks, the narrator doubts that her friend actually believes this.

The two women make their way through the station, a place every bit as sinister and threatening as Hortense believes it to be, to Hortense's car. They return to their apartment where a dinner of chef salad awaits.

The narrator finds that the station is less threatening in the morning, and she does not feel the least bit uncomfortable making her way to her bus alone. There is only one bus that leaves San Francisco in the morning, an express that leaves once each hour, and there is no danger of her taking the wrong one. Most mornings, the bus is not very crowded and she sits alone, but on this particular morning a young girl asks if she can sit next to her.

The two women begin to talk, but the conversation is guarded. The narrator can tell from the girl's accent that she, like the narrator, is from upstate New York. As they talk, the young girl tells her that she works in Sacramento and soon, the narrator learns that the girl works in the building next to hers. The narrator is somewhat startled by this and wonders what the chances are that she would meet a person from her home state who works in the next building nearly 3000 miles from home. The narrator does not care for the young girl and chooses not to share many personal details with her. The narrator meets the young girl from New York several more times in the coming weeks, always on

the 5:30 express to San Francisco. Their conversation is generally bland, superficial and boring.

The narrator and the girl reach the Sacramento station, a place the narrator describes as "weird." It serves as a departure area for busses bound for the gambling destinations of South Lake Tahoe and Reno, and there is more activity than would be expected for the early morning hour.

A few nights later, the narrator again finds herself on the wrong bus, and this time it is the local that makes several stops before reaching San Francisco. When she realizes this, she knows that Hortense will be furious and begins to concoct a story to explain her mistake. She soon decides that the fact that Hortense is waiting for her at the station is even more ridiculous than her having to create a story.

The narrator looks at her fellow passengers and notices that most of them are black. She also realizes that none of the people who were on her first "wrong" trip are passengers on this bus. She senses a sort of camaraderie among these passengers which she finds to be interesting. She also enjoys observing her surroundings despite the trip's length and her worries about Hortense.

As the narrator continues to look around, she notices a young man who is sleeping. She describes him as "the most beautiful young man I had ever seen." As she continues to look at him, she begins to recall the events that led to the demise of her marriage and the many hints that she did not pick up on until it was too late.

When the bus finally reaches San Francisco, Hortense is, as expected, quite angry. The narrator tries to apologize but her friend won't listen. The narrator finally tells Hortense that it is obvious that she has a problem finding the right bus and perhaps Hortense shouldn't meet her anymore. The two women drive home in silence and share a chef's salad for dinner.

The next day, as the narrator waits in line to purchase another commuter ticket, she meets the young girl from New York again. The two exchange pleasantries before the young girl tells the narrator that she should consider buying a ticket known as a California Pass, which will entitle her to travel anywhere in the state. Intrigued by the possibility of traveling, the narrator takes the girl's advice and buys the California Pass. They board the bus, and explaining to the young girl that she has some work to do, the narrator settles into her seat and begins to contemplate moving into her own place.

As the story ends, the narrator explains that she has always been aware of how the busses departing for San Francisco worked. The Express leaves from Gate 5, the bus that stops in Vallejo and Oakland before reaching San Francisco departs from Gate 6 and the all-stop local leaves from Gate 8. The narrator says that the bus that departs from Gate 6 is her favorite. Arriving at the station well ahead of the bus's scheduled departure, she realizes that she is hungry and goes into the station restaurant to order a milkshake. As she drinks her milkshake, she sees the black man who had so angrily ejected her from her seat. He greets her with a friendly smile, and she wonders if he

remembered how rude he was to her that day, or if he was just being polite. The narrator decides that whatever his reason, she feels good about the possibilities that lay before her.

Analysis

This story is told in the first person by an unnamed female narrator who describes her journey toward independence following the demise of her marriage.

The fact that the nearly the entire story takes place on board a commuter bus between San Francisco and Sacramento is representative of the woman's emotional journey as she slowly realizes that she is on her own. When we first meet the narrator, we are given to believe that she is somewhat scattered and anxious. Although she doesn't say so, her apparent unease and questions regarding the collection of her commuter ticket imply that this is her first trip from Sacramento to San Francisco and perhaps her first trip on a commuter bus. Her encounter with the tall black man further suggests that this is her first experience on this particular bus and underscores her inexperience and timidity.

We can tell almost immediately that the narrator is a non-confrontational individual. The description offered by the author is that of a person who is intimidated by her surroundings. Rather than telling the man that she has every right to remain in that seat if she so chooses, she meekly moves to another spot on the bus while muttering an apology. Later, when describing the circumstances that have led her to live with her friend Hortense, she tells us that she is not "good at arguing" and had left rather than assert her right to remain in the apartment she had shared with her husband. She also endures the repetitive dinners of Hortense's chef's salads rather than voice her opinion about what she would like for dinner, even though she has no reason to watch her diet.

Despite all of this, we see that the narrator enjoys "people watching" and has a natural curiosity about others' lives. She wonders where they work, where they're from and where they're going. Given this curiosity, it is ironic that she did not allow herself to see the trouble that was brewing in her own marriage. In one paragraph, she describes the decline and eventual end of her marriage, telling us that "even then I had caught on, without thinking too specifically about what he must have been doing, which I could not have stood." This tells us that she had been content with the routine of her life, and had achieved a sense of comfort that she was reluctant to relinquish. However, following the demise of her marriage, she is faced with the reality that she is alone and needs to expand her world.

Even so, we see that the narrator is reluctant. She lives with Hortense, a woman who has assumed a mother-like role in the narrator's life and provides her with the basic necessities of foods, shelter and companionship. While the narrator worries that some may mistake her relationship with Hortense as a lesbian affair, she admits that it is her need to depend on someone that causes her to stay. However, the narrator offers early hints that she is beginning to feel stifled by Hortense. She describes the nightly dinners

of chef's salad as "cold" and "punishment" and begins to think that she and her friend are "getting to be like some bad sitcom joke." Indeed, when the narrator returns home one evening after taking the wrong bus again, she is so frustrated by Hortense's anger that she tells her friend that she no longer needs to meet her at the station. It is at this point that we begin to realize that the narrator is on her way toward independence.

Perhaps this is the reason why the narrator seems to be uncomfortable around the young girl she assumes to be from her home state. She sees familiarity in the girl, and while we might think that the narrator might derive comfort from this, she instead seems to maintain an emotional and physical distance. The girl represents the narrator's past, and the narrator knows that if she allows herself to form a relationship with the girl, she will never be able to leave her past completely behind her. It is ironic that this girl opens the narrator's eyes to the possibilities around her and provides us with another indication that the narrator is beginning to leaving her past behind.

We begin to realize that the narrator is using the experience gained by purposely taking the wrong bus as a test of her ability to live on her own. While she does not indicate how long she had been married, we can tell that her marriage, at least in its early stages, provided her with the security she needed to feel comfortable. Her direct transition from the protective confines of her marriage to the protectiveness and security offered by Hortense provides further support of the notion that the narrator probably fears independence. However, as she continues her daily round-trip journeys to Sacramento, we see her confidence grow.

The milkshake that the narrator enjoys as the end of the story and her declaration that her the Gate 6 bus is her favorite are symbolic of her decision to live her life on her own terms. She realizes, perhaps for the first time in her life, that she is capable of living on her own and taking care of herself. Armed with this newfound sense of independence and confidence, she is ready to begin exploring the world around her.

Characters

Handsome Black Man

The handsome black man enters the story at the very beginning. He arrives on the bus just after the narrator and demands that she get out of his seat. The narrator feels this man is rude but obeys his orders nonetheless. She had sat in that particular bus seat because she felt more secure sitting close to the bus driver, but she gives up her security in order to avoid confronting this man. The handsome black man represents all men in this story, at least from the point of view of the narrator. She gives in to men, ignoring her own needs. She later watches this man as he demonstrates his softer side; but this side is not for the narrator's benefit but rather for two other women. This man reappears at the end of the story, after the narrator has made up her mind to change her life. Having done this, the man enters the restaurant as the narrator is drinking her milkshake. He walks over to her table and asks how she is doing. With this greeting, the narrator feels flattered. This man remembered her. Not only did he recognize her, in the narrator's mind, he is also, in his own way, apologizing for having been so rude to her in the beginning of the story. He represents the narrator's revised opinion of herself and her relationship to men.

Hortense

Hortense is the narrator's roommate. When the narrator is divorced, Hortense invites the narrator to live with her. Hortense is an overweight, nurturing woman, who worries about the narrator. She insists on picking her up from the bus station because the station is located in a bad section of the city. But she has little patience when the narrator keeps coming in late. She becomes so nervous about the situation that she is short with the narrator, brushing off the narrator's attempts to soothe her. She is also overly protective of the narrator's health, confusing her own excessive eating habits with the narrator's. The narrator is very thin and yet Hortense insists that the narrator eat only a salad for dinner, for example. Although the narrator appreciates the assistance that Hortense offers her, she realizes that she can only stay with Hortense on a temporary basis.

Narrator

The narrator never gives her name, only using the pronoun "I" throughout the narrative of this short story. She works in San Francisco as a statistician in a government office that deals with unemployment; but she has been temporarily sent to Sacramento for ten weeks. This is why she commutes between the two cities and why she is on a Greyhound bus every workday. She is recently divorced and temporarily living with Hortense, a woman who fusses over her. The narrator admits that she stays with Hortense because of her "sheer dependency."

The narrator appears to be a woman who allows circumstances to navigate her through life without her making definitive choices. She questions events, such as when a bus driver appears to take two tickets from her instead of just one, but she keeps her questions to herself. She admits that she does not like confrontation. That is also why she allowed her husband to keep their apartment. She did not have it in her to fight for it. She is an observer of life. And that is the role that she plays out in this story. She observes the people around her, connecting with them almost entirely inside her head, seldom actually saying anything to anyone. When someone does open up to her, she makes a point of not asking questions that might be too personal and certainly not answering any questions with enough information to give away anything personal about herself.

By the end of the story, however, the narrator experiences the beginnings of a dramatic change. She is letting down the walls that have isolated her and opening up her horizons. Tired of her tendency to be dependent, she begins to reach out to strangers, to think for herself, to take chances, and to dream.

New York State Girl

The New York State girl is a young woman who shares a seat with the narrator on the bus. They meet accidentally a few times, sharing information with one another but not to any great extent. The young girl is from New York, as is the narrator. She also works in a similarly styled office building in Sacramento as does the narrator. They both carry valises on the bus. They are, in some ways, mirror images of one another except that the girl is a younger version of the narrator. The New York State girl also is a little more wise, more worldly. She explains things to the narrator, such as the bus pass that the narrator has almost misused. She also tells the narrator about a different kind of bus pass, one that allows a person to travel all over California. This opens a door of experience for the narrator who decides to follow the girl's suggestion. Despite her help, however, the narrator refuses to deepen their relationship in any way.

Themes

Isolation

In the beginning of "Greyhound People," the narrator isolates herself from the people around her in several different ways. First, she places her briefcase on the seat next to her. She does not do this to purposefully keep other people from sitting next to her; however, she does comment that in doing so, no one will sit next to her. On a subconscious level, her briefcase acts as a barrier. Later in the story, she consciously removes her briefcase so someone might sit next to her, signaling a slight opening in the barricade that she has built to protect herself.

The narrator also isolates herself through her silence. Although she reacts emotionally to different circumstances, she keeps her feelings to herself. For example, she emotionally applauds the woman who tells the young boy to be quiet. Even though other people express their emotions by clapping their hands and cheering, the narrator remains still. She wants to applaud, but she does not want anyone to know how she feels. She has the emotions but she is afraid of them. She does not know for sure if they are appropriate and therefore does not want to expose them. In doing this, she further removes herself not only from the people around her but from her own expressions.

When she does finally have a conversation with the young girl from New York, she does not share with the girl the fact that they are both from the same region. Not only does she not open up to the girl, she is uncomfortable when the girl opens up to her. The narrator slowly opens up by the end of the story, by listening to this young girl's advice. This stimulates other reactions, ones in which the narrator begins to ease the barricades that have isolated her from her surroundings as well as from herself.

Dependency

The narrator admits that she is staying with Hortense out of a feeling of dire dependency. She has just come through a painful breakup of her marriage and a divorce from her husband and is feeling much like a child who has been forced out of her home. She leans on Hortense, not only because she needs a place to stay but because she is too emotional to make any decisions on her own. She allows her new roommate to tell her what to eat, when to come home, and how to get from the bus station to the house. Although the narrator is silently complaining of the stifling affect this is having on her, she is still struggling to stand up on her own two feet and feels she must rely on someone else to help her. In the beginning of the story, she accepts her circumstances without making any attempts to change them. She shows this through the way she reacts to the bus driver, whom she believes has taken two tickets from her instead of one. She thinks this is wrong, but does not ask for an explanation. Even when she thinks she has gotten on the wrong bus and is frightened about the circumstances of her action, she does not stand up and ask anyone, not even the bus driver, if she is

indeed on the wrong bus. She just sits there and waits to be taken to wherever the bus is going. Also, when a man tells her to get out of "his" seat, she acquiesces without even a little whimper. Similarly, she has given up her apartment, not so much because she did not want to stay there but rather because she did not want to argue with her husband. She allows these things to happen to her as if she had no say in the matter.

Coming-of-Age

Although this is not a typical coming-of-age story, which usually involves a teenager moving into the ranks of adulthood, "Greyhound People" does fit into this category in many ways. The narrator is an older woman who has been married for several years, but emotionally she is still immature. Her marriage provided her with a shelter similar to the one that a young person's family home provides. Decisions were more than likely taken care of by the narrator's husband. So when the narrator is pushed out of the house, she finds that she must make all kinds of decisions on her own. At first her situation is frightening. She is fearful that she has taken the wrong bus, for instance. She is also afraid of asking anyone how to get out of the situation, and like a scared child, she sits stiffly in her seat, waiting to see what will happen next instead of standing like an adult and taking the situation into her own hands.

The narrator grows, emotionally, from the beginning of the story to the end, however. Although she is fearful in the beginning, by the end of the story she is ready to confront her overbearing roommate Hortense, for instance. Or at least, she is ready to do this obliquely. Instead of staying on the strict diet Hortense has put her on, the narrator goes into the restaurant and orders a milkshake, something Hortense would have looked down upon, if not completely forbidden. The narrator also tells Hortense that she does not have to pick her up at the bus station, thus allowing the narrator more freedom of choice as to what bus she rides and at what hour she comes home. And, whereas in the beginning of the story, the narrator took the bus only for the routine ride between Sacramento and San Francisco, by the end of the story she has bought a special pass that will allow her to travel all over California, thus opening up her horizons and eliminating at least some of the boundaries that she has set up between herself and the outside world. By the end of the story, it is as if the narrator has finally unfurled her wings and is ready to fly. Her emotions have matured, and she has come of age on a psychological level.

Style

First-Person Point of View

This short story is told in the first-person point of view with little dialogue presented throughout. The narration comes mostly from inside the head of the protagonist, which is referred to as interior monologue. First-person narration limits the story in some ways, but also provides a more intimate relationship with the storyteller. The reader is given the opportunity to hear the thoughts of the narrator, understand the emotions the narrator is going through, and then juxtapose these elements on the actions that the narrator does or does not take in response to them. The circumstances of the story are all interpreted through the emotions of the narrator, thus giving a narrow point of view of other characters in the story. The reader can only guess at other character's reactions to the same circumstances that the narrator faces. For example, the picture of Hortense that the narrator provides is obviously one-sided. The only version of her is given through the narrator's experience. Whether Hortense is really overbearing and over-protective will never be known. All that is known is that the narrator sees Hortense in this way. It could be that the narrator is feeling overwhelmed emotionally because of her divorce and that she wants to break free of Hortense's need to nurture her. Hortense is never allowed to speak for herself because the point of view is the narrator's.

Symbolism

The story "Greyhound People" is filled with subtle symbolism. The bus the narrator travels on represents a sort of outer shell, much like the emotional shell that the narrator has built around herself to protect her emotions. She does not want to become emotionally involved with anyone around her because her emotions are still very raw from the divorce she has recently gone through. Like the bus, she travels through her day without connecting to anything around her. She moves routinely from one place to another without becoming involved.

The man on the bus who insists that the narrator is sitting in his seat represents the narrator's husband, who has insisted that she give up their apartment and their marriage. This man is very curt with her and, although she is offended, the narrator acquiesces because she does not like confrontations. This is exactly how she interacted with her husband. Then, in contrast, the narrator watches this man put on a friendly demeanor with women who sit across the aisle from him. This could represent the many affairs the narrator's husband had with other women. The narrator comments on how emotionally removed her husband had become with her, and yet he was emotionally involved with other women at the same time. At the end of the story, when this man from the bus recognizes the narrator in the restaurant and asks how she is doing, she imagines that he is actually offering her an apology for his previous behavior. This could be her wishful thinking that her husband could at some time in the future also apologize for the way he has treated her.

Hortense, the narrator's new roommate, represents the narrator's opposite self. Where the narrator is thin, Hortense is fat. Where the narrator is quiet and yielding, Hortense is aggressive and demanding. Hortense symbolizes what the narrator does not want to become. However, Hortense is also the stimulus that motivates the narrator to change. The narrator admits that she is temporarily dependent on Hortense, but she fights Hortense's attempts to dominate her life. In doing so, she learns to test her environment and her circumstances instead of giving in to the mundane daily routine of her life.

The young girl from New York might symbolize the narrator's younger self□an alternative view of herself. She and the young girl are both from the same region. They both work in Sacramento and commute from San Francisco. They both spend most of their day in similar office buildings located next door to one another. The author would not have created all these similarities if she had not intended something symbolic. It is this girl, to whom the narrator is at first afraid to open up to, who inspires the narrator to buy the bus pass that will take the her out of her routine. The young girl, although living under similar circumstances as the narrator, is more willing to talk about herself. She is also more excited about exploring new environments. She ultimately inspires the narrator to consider doing the same.

Setting

The setting of this piece is very constrictive in the beginning. The narrator sits inside a Greyhound bus for much of the action. Although she describes the countryside of California in small doses, little is said about her environment outside of the bus and the bus stations she encounters. This confining setting provides the reader with a physical example of how confined the narrator is feeling. She is closed in emotionally. She is traveling but she has little to do with her fellow companions or with the environment through which she is moving. She is moving through a land that does not touch her, nor does she touch it. She is also, for the most part, always surrounded by strangers. Although this setting does not change throughout the story, there are hints toward the end that the setting will change slightly. The narrator has bought a bus pass that will allow her to travel all over the state. She will remain inside a bus, but at least the scenery outside the bus will change. In this way, the narrator is at least expanding her experiences and seeing new things.

Historical Context

Special Education

It was not until the 1960s that groups sought federal assistance that would provide free services in the public schools for children with special needs. Under pressure from these groups, in 1966 Congress established the Bureau for Education of the Handicapped. As programs began to be developed through this bureau, the Education of the Handicapped Act was passed four years later. These actions, however, did not provide full services for all children with special needs. It would take five more years and a lot of pressure from parents of children with disabilities, as well as a few court cases that ruled in their favor, before more federal support for the education of these children would become law. Today, all children with special needs, from first grade through college, are entitled to free and appropriate public education that also provides specific services for their needs. The law ensures that these children's rights are protected and that the federal government will assist local states in providing the education that these children require.

A Brief History of Vallejo

Vallejo is a medium-sized city located in the California foothills where the Carquinez Straits meet San Pablo Bay in northern California. The city was named for Mexican general Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo in 1844. Six years later when California became a state, General Vallejo offered a large tract of land, as well as financial assistance, to help in establishing the capitol of California on his land. The state congress agreed, and the city of Vallejo was adopted as the state capitol. Although the state congress did actually convene in Vallejo in the 1850s, the buildings that General Vallejo had promised to build were nowhere to be seen. The congress met in dilapidated buildings that leaked in the rain and eventually voted to move the capitol, in 1853, to another city.

The U.S. Navy, however, found the San Pablo Bay to their liking and built the first permanent U.S. naval station on the west coast in Vallejo in 1854. When the railroad was established there, Vallejo experienced an economic and population boom. Mare Island Naval Station remained a busy installation, providing employment to many of Vallejo's population until it was closed in 1994. Although the navy is gone, Vallejo remains an ideal hub for commercial shipping, industry, oil companies, and ferry transportation in the San Francisco Bay area. Today, thousands of passengers on Vallejo's three high-speed catamaran ferries travel to and from San Francisco for work and recreation.

A Brief History of Sacramento

Sacramento, located on a major California river (the Sacramento River) was a hub of transportation too, especially during the Gold Rush. The rush began when gold was

found on Captain John Augustus Sutter's land, the builder and commander of one of the first U.S. Army forts in that area. The fort was built to help ensure the bid for the control of the land that would soon become the state of California. Sutter, a man who would make a lot of money in his lifetime but would die bankrupt, is credited, along with his son, as being the founder of Sacramento.

At the height of the Gold Rush in 1849□a time during which the population of the city grew to 10,000 people in seven months□the Sacramento city government was established. Five years later, Sacramento was made the permanent capitol of the new state of California. Many historic events originated in Sacramento. One such event occurred in 1860, when the Pony Express, the first long-distance mail delivery system, began its first run from Sacrament to St. Louis, Missouri□a run that was completed in ten days.

Over time, the Sacramento Valley has become one of the most productive agricultural areas in the United States, helping to build the economy of its major city, Sacramento. Today, almost one-half million people live there. The city is located about ninety miles northeast of San Francisco and about twenty-five miles northeast of Vallejo.

A Brief History of San Francisco

San Francisco is the fourth-largest city in the United States and is located in northern California along the Pacific Coast. Although the first white settlers from Mexico and Spain began a community in this area in the eighteenth century, it was not until the Gold Rush years that a population boom occurred. In one year, from 1848 to 1849, the population of San Francisco expanded from 1,000 to 25,000 people.

The city has had at least three different names. Around 1780, Sir Francis Drake dubbed it Nova Albion; in 1846, Captain John B. Montgomery changed its name to Yerba Buena (after a wild plant of the same name); and then a year later, taking a cue from the Spanish settlers, it was finally named San Francisco, after the Roman Catholic Saint Francis of Assisi, a lover of animals.

A devastating earthquake (modern scientists estimate it must have reached 8.5 on the Richter scale) destroyed much of San Francisco in 1906. What was not destroyed by the earthquake was destroyed by subsequent fires. But by 1915, proud to show off its new face of complete restoration, San Francisco hosted the Panama-Pacific Exposition, a world's fair. Other great architectural accomplishments include the building of the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge in 1936 and the Golden Gate Bridge in 1937.

Often referred to as the city of countercultural movements, many from the Beat generation, as well as those from the so-called hippie generation made San Francisco the hub of much of their activity. The Black Panthers (an African American political group in the 1960s) was headquartered just outside of San Francisco in the city of Oakland.

At the end of the twentieth century, San Francisco became the center of many of the dot.com businesses. As young computer-savvy entrepreneurs moved in, the city's

rundown districts saw economic improvement as older neighborhoods became "gentrified." Today, San Francisco is the banking and financial center of the West Coast, the home of the Pacific Exchange (regional stock exchange) and a major branch of the U.S. Mint (where money is printed).

A Brief History of Oakland

Oakland was founded two years after California became a state. It is located on the east side of San Francisco Bay and to the west of San Francisco. One of Oakland's main points of interest is its port, which is one of the three most important on the West Coast.

The population of Oakland was slow to grow. After the 1906 earthquake in San Francisco, many people crossed the bay in order to make Oakland their new home. During World War II, the naval facilities in Oakland attracted large numbers of workers, who helped to build the naval force of that war. But the economic boom that occurred during the war came to a screeching halt after the war, leaving thousands of people unemployed. Those who could afford to leave moved to the suburbs. The rest struggled to make a living as they watched their city deteriorate.

In the latter part of the twentieth century, Oakland was hit with two disasters. First there was the damage caused by the 1989 earthquake that destroyed a major part of the Oakland-San Francisco Bridge; and then there was the huge wildfire in 1991 that devastated thousands of homes. Today, Oakland is enjoying a renaissance as businesses and individuals, who have grown tired of the high cost of housing in San Francisco, move in and renovate large sections of this town.

Today, Oakland's 400,000 citizens are ranked eighth in the United States in overall educational achievement, with almost one-third of its population in possession of a college degree. Major publications such as *Forbes* and the *Wall Street Journal* list Oakland as one the United States' best cities for businesses.

Critical Overview

"Greyhound People" has been referred to as one of Adams's most popular short stories, as well as the best story in the 2002 collection, *The Stories of Alice Adams*. "Greyhound People" appeared in Adams's sixth collection, which speaks for itself in terms of how many short stories she wrote in her lifetime. Most critics agree that the short story form was Adams's strong point; they often compare her style of writing to F. Scott Fitzgerald, Flannery O'Connor, and Katherine Mansfield—all great storytellers.

In his article for the *Los Angeles Times*, Michael Frank called Adams "a writer who has a natural, almost innate gentility, an ease of being with language, character, landscape, atmosphere and emotion that is both authentic and modest." Another critic who highly praised Adams was Ann H. Fisher, writing for the *Library Journal*, who described Adams as a "master fiction writer," one who creates "multidimensional" characters. Besides such critical praise, another marker of Adams's ability to write very good short prose was how often her stories appeared in the *New Yorker*, the ultimate goal of most contemporary authors. Adams's editor at the *New Yorker*, Fran Kiernan, told the *New York Times* critic Peter Applebome, that "No one wrote better about the tangled relations of men and women or about the enduring romance of friendship." Kiernan then added: "As a writer, she [Adams] was unfailingly wise."

In her review of Adams's 1999 short story collection, Rita D. Jacobs, writing for *World Literature Today* described Adams in this way: "There are certain writers whose short stories exemplify the kind of perfection that theorists and critics extol. Alice Adams's stories frequently achieve the deftly limned but fully realized character, the complication quickly described, and the denouement which offers insight or a catch in the throat." Her writing is filled with insights, Jacobs continued, an observation that other critics have also made. Furthermore, in drawing her conclusion about Adams's work, Jacobs stated that not only did she find Adams's short stories "affecting," she also described them as "models of the art."

Another reviewer, Beth E. Andersen, writing for the *Library Journal*, was saddened by the announcement of Adams's death in 1999. Andersen, in her critique of *The Stories of Alice Adams* reflected not only on Adams's death but also on the author's ability to write. After Adams's death, Andersen wrote, "her gift for creating the familiar landscapes of interior life with pitch-perfect diction was forever silenced."

And finally, in a review of Adams's last short story collection, a *Publishers Weekly* writer predicted that *The Stories of Alice Adams*, which was published posthumously, would be well received by all—those who have read her before and those who will read her for the first time—because of "the seemingly offhand openings that carry the reader deep into the story, the swift characterizations, the effortless shifts in point of view and, of course, the almost casual but dazzling sentences."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Hart is a freelance writer and author of several books. In the following essay, Hart searches for the source of the narrator's fear in Adams's story.

Adams's narrator in "Greyhound People" goes through some trying experiences in this tale and comes out a renewed spirit; but in the process, she exposes a lot of her fears. She tries to name them, but one has to wonder if she is being honest with herself. Her reactions to her fears do not fit the names she attempts to put on them. Does she offer clues to what her real fears might be? And if so, are readers privilege to them? With a closer examination of the narration, can readers at least speculate what these underlying fears might be?

Adams begins her story with the narrator confessing that she "had a frightened sense of being in the wrong place." Readers assume that this means that the narrator is on the wrong bus, since she is talking about catching a Greyhound bus from Sacramento to her home in San Francisco. She asks people in the bus station (fellow riders) if she is in the right line; but then she admits that these people more than likely did not really understand what she was asking. Note that she does not ask any one who works at the bus station for directions but rather climbs aboard a bus, which she senses is the wrong one. Because of her "anxiety and fear," she sits as closely as she can to the bus driver. Now it seems that a normal person would have asked more questions. She or he would not have gotten on a long-distance bus without knowing where it was going. If, out of awkwardness, the narrator had decided to take a chance on a particular bus, it seems reasonable to believe that she should have at least asked the passengers sitting around her on the bus, the people one could assume might be more aware of where this bus was going. But the narrator does not do this. She just sits there and hopes she has made the correct decision. Even when the bus driver enters the bus, she does not make the effort to find out the destination of this bus. So what is she really afraid of? Is she concerned the bus will not take her home? If she is, she does not mention this fact right away. Instead she makes observations about things that are happening around her. She mentions that a stranger asks her to give up her seat, and she explains her reaction to him. She also discusses the woman who insults a child with learning disabilities. Then the narrator goes through another whole range of emotions over this incident. It is not until the bus turns off the freeway and the bus driver announces that they are heading for the city of Vallejo that the narrator makes any comment at all about her destination. After the bus driver states that the next stops are Oakland and San Francisco, the narrator is relieved.

So what is the real fear in this incident. Is it a fear of getting lost? Of not being taken home? If it was, how could the narrator have gotten so casually involved in the people around her. She also has time to reflect on an incident that happened to her earlier that morning when a bus driver appeared to take two tickets from her instead of just one. During this same time, she also checks out the scenery, not necessarily looking to see where the bus is going but rather to enjoy the "very beautiful" hills, "a bright white farmhouse," and "the dark shapes of live oaks." She is describing a pleasing, relaxing

pastoral scene□one of peace and tranquility. There was no mention of threatening black clouds on the horizon or gnarled, twisted branches, things that would suggest how the narrator was feeling if she was truly scared.

Rather it seems that the "frightened sense of being in the wrong place" that the narrator mentions at the beginning of the story is not a real fear□the kind of fear one might have when one's life is threatened. What it really sounds like is excitement. She is in a "wrong place" in the sense that it is not the usual place that she finds herself in, day in and day out. It is a new place, one that is offering her new experiences. And one cannot help wondering if the narrator, in fact, put herself in that position on purpose. What else would explain how easily distracted she becomes with what is going on around her. Why else would she want "to concentrate" on the sweetness of the countryside outside her window? Maybe what she is feeling has nothing to do with being threatened but everything to do with coming alive. She gives a hint of this when she describes her "large briefcase," which is taking up the seat next to her. She describes it as being "stiff and forbidding-looking," blaming it for no one wanting to sit next to her. Could it be that she herself feels "stiff and forbidding-looking?" Does she scare people away? And does she subconsciously want to change this?

The narrator quietly applauds the woman who stands up to the noisy child at the back of the bus. The woman speaks her mind when she tells the boy: "You the noisiest traveler I ever heard." The narrator shared this opinion, but would not, and probably could not, have expressed her feelings out loud. She applauds the woman not just for what she says but for the fact that she said it. The narrator obviously has trouble saying what she feels. Remember, she did not ask the right people the question she wanted answered about the bus; she did not ask the bus driver why he took two tickets instead of one; and she did not say anything in her defense when a fellow passenger insisted that she was sitting in his seat and demanded that she vacate it. She should have not only applauded the woman who told the young boy to be quiet, she should have really praised the boy himself. At least he had the guts to ask the questions that were inside of his head. And the reader should also notice that the woman whom the narrator did applaud also told the boy: "in fact you ain't a traveler, you an observer." In other words, she summed up exactly what the narrator is. She too is an observer. She watches everything. In saying that the young boy is not a traveler meant that the boy was not really involved in his surroundings and circumstances but rather just someone who stands back and watches. A traveler experiences things. Events pass through them. They react and are changed by them. The narrator, in contrast, is physically present but she has placed so many barriers between herself and the world that she is not really in attendance.

Things are made a little clearer when the narrator meets the young girl from New York. The bus is unusually crowded, so the narrator takes down her psychological walls just a bit and takes her "stiff and forbidding-looking" briefcase off the seat next to her so the young girl can sit down. "We started up one of those guarded and desultory conversations that travel dictates," the narrator relates. The conversation conveys facts about the girl that the narrator relates to, but she does not tell the girl much about herself. As a matter of fact, what the girl did tell the narrator made her feel ill at ease. It

seemed "ominous" to the narrator (here's the fear again) that she and the girl should share so many similarities. But why would this make her fearful? One hint comes from a statement she makes: "Of course I did not ask the girl where she was from—too personal." There are those walls again. The narrator does not want anyone to get inside of her. Her fear seems not to be of talking to strangers, or getting lost, or making a mistake. Rather it seems that her greatest concern is that someone will find out exactly what she is feeling. If they knew what her emotions were they would know her better; and then what? Maybe she fears they wouldn't like her.

The narrator is scarred by these thoughts because of her recent past. She has just gone through a very emotional divorce and breakup of her marriage. Her husband has left her for another woman. And that might explain why, at the end of the story, she refers to "something remarkable" having happened to her. What she calls "something remarkable" was really just a simple act of kindness; but for the narrator, it was an outstanding event. The man who had insisted that she give up her bus seat for him notices her in the restaurant. He greets her, asking with a "friendly smile," as he passes by, how she is doing. He barely pauses at her table, and yet the narrator is left "a little out of breath." She wonders if he remembered her. "Was it possible that something about me had struck him in just the right way, making him want to say hello?" she asks. This is a woman who needs attention and yet at the same time hides from it. She is torn between her needs and her fears. She feels soft and too tender inside. Her real fear is that if she opens up, someone might hurt her again. So for the majority of the story she remains closed. She observes life from a distance. But by the end of the story, as witnessed by her reaction to this man and her anticipation of her upcoming travels throughout California, she is beginning to open up. She is starting to find hope and to recognize that the fear she is experiencing is not based on outside things, but rather it comes from inside of her; and the only way to get rid of it is to let it go.

Source: Joyce Hart, Critical Essay on "Greyhound People," in *Short Stories for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2005.

Critical Essay #2

Remy is a freelance writer in Pensacola, Florida. In the following essay, Remy examines Adams's use of contrary elements to emphasize the narrator's search for self-acceptance.

The narrator in Alice Adams's story "Greyhound People" is a displaced person, a lonely woman caught between a world she no longer knows and another which she has yet to explore. She is a nameless character, one who embodies the yearning and doubt all humans suffer. Though she navigates quotidian complexities with a willing acceptance that borders on naïveté, she remains far from comfortable. Adams presents her narrator/protagonist in a series of situations that underscore the contrary elements in her life, opposites that seem to repel rather than attract as each event resonates with a sense of loss and displacement. Thus, by focusing on aspects of geography, personal relationships, and race that confront the narrator, Adams emphasizes her protagonist's search for balance and harmony in the world.

One of the first contrasts the narrator of "Greyhound People" must confront is that of geography. Transplanted from upstate New York to San Francisco, California, on the opposite coast and away from where she was raised, the narrator inhabits a region of the country that is markedly different from the one she left behind. On the west coast of the United States, Americans are, generally speaking, much more relaxed in their attitudes and more willing to travel at a pace dictated by the individual rather than by society. Adams allows this attitude to pervade the story: each of the passengers regards the bus trip differently. For them, a bus ride can be something other than a commute. It can become an opportunity to relax and socialize. The narrator seems to have adjusted well to this philosophy, for the more than hour-long commute to and from work seems nothing more than a minor inconvenience to her□provided, of course, she boards the right bus.

However, when the narrator meets a girl from upstate New York on the bus and encounters her three times during the course of subsequent journeys, the narrator seems irritated, as though the girl's preoccupation with romance, work, and office politics serves as a grim reminder of the life she once knew. The narrator believes, perhaps erroneously, that she has put her life in New York behind her, but the girl's accent, which the narrator identifies with astonishing ease, reminds her of something "ominous," as though the lives of the two women are "heading in the same direction," en route to a common fate. The girl from upstate New York may reside in California, but everything about her is redolent of life back east, making her differences even more apparent. In short, she sticks out like a sore thumb. The narrator, who hails from the same part of the country, worries that she does too.

Furthermore, the narrator must travel from her temporary home in San Francisco to Sacramento five days a week because she has been assigned to study unemployment statistics in the state capital. This assignment forces the narrator out of her daily routine into yet another new environment. In Sacramento, the office she works in may be

"interchangeable" with the one in San Francisco, but otherwise everything about the two cities is different, from the oleanders (assumed to be poisonous) that line the medians to the hordes of gamblers waiting at the bus station to board the next Reno express. This geographical displacement is compounded when the narrator takes the wrong bus. Instead of traveling directly to San Francisco, she must first stop in Vallejo and Oakland. What had at first seemed a "straight shot" filled with the usual highway scenery becomes a detour rich with roadside attractions. Though at first apprehensive, the narrator delights in discovering a new life onboard the bus. A mere ride becomes a journey, one she embarks upon with mounting anticipation.

Personal relationships are yet another means by which Adams highlights, through the use of opposites, her protagonist's isolation and need for change. Many of these changes come about unexpectedly, however. For example, because her husband leaves her for another woman, the narrator is forced to share an apartment with her friend Hortense. The narrator's husband, who works in advertising, drops hints about her taking a lover and their joining wife-swap parties. "A pretty girl like you, you'd do okay," her husband would tell her, though he only has his best interest at heart. When he finally declares his love for another woman, the narrator is "worse than surprised" to learn that she has been replaced by a "beautiful Japanese nurse," a woman whose exotic appeal cannot be matched, regardless of how attractive the narrator may be. Thus begins for the narrator what proves to be a "long and painful year."

As Adams makes clear throughout the story, all types of human relationships offer a contrasting perspective on the narrator's life, especially those that are of a personal or intimate nature. In particular, the narrator's relationship with Hortense presents a comic view of two people who are opposites in practically every way. For example, Hortense is fat whereas the narrator has kept her slim figure (though at one point in the story she wonders if adding twenty pounds to her frame would make a difference in the way the world sees her). Hortense is punctual while the narrator, alas, is not. Furthermore, she prefers drinking thick chocolate milkshakes to the fish and cold salads her roommate prepares. As the narrator observes, "We were getting to be like some bad sitcom joke: Hortense and me, the odd couple." On a more somber note, the narrator deduces that Hortense is probably not poor; in contrast, the narrator, despite having a secure government position, regards herself as poor because she has known poverty, both the financial and the spiritual kind, and that badge of identity has remained with her throughout her life. These many differences between Hortense and the narrator eventually force the latter to contemplate ways in which she can garner her independence, such as taking a taxi home from the San Francisco bus station and finding an apartment of her own.

Perhaps the most obvious contrast in "Greyhound People" is that of the characters' racial backgrounds. The narrator, who is, the reader assumes, white, rides bus routes with a majority of patrons who are black. It is this obvious difference that makes her suspect that something is wrong. "And, as I dared for a moment to look around the bus, I saw that most of the passengers were black: a puzzle." Indeed, the stark contrast between the racial backgrounds of the narrator and the other patrons on the bus confirms the fact that she has boarded the wrong bus. Apparently, the narrator is

unaccustomed to the company of blacks because, without being quite sure why, she sits up front near the driver, filled with a "frightened sense of being in the wrong place." She describes one fellow passenger as "a big black man," one who is "angry and very handsome." Adams has her protagonist come close to using a negative stereotype in describing her encounter; nevertheless, the narrator's description of the man emphasizes differences in race, gender, and custom (the man insists that she is sitting in his seat even though no possession of his marks the spot) that force the narrator to view herself from a fresh perspective.

Later, the narrator sits beside a large black woman who remains friendly and agreeable throughout their conversation. She is honest and self-deprecating about her size because she knows that, by sitting beside a thin woman like the narrator, she may make her emotionally and physically uncomfortable. The woman is wise enough to know that opposites, here exemplified by her size and race, more often repel than attract. She does not, however, appear excessively apologetic or obsequious. Her acceptance of herself serves as a model for the narrator to follow with regard to her own self-image, and she soon finds herself looking forward to their next encounter, for the narrator knows that, regardless of the obvious differences between them, she and the large black lady regard each other as equals. This awareness opens the narrator to the possibility of future meetings, ones that she invites with a newfound confidence. So emboldened is the narrator by these encounters with her fellow patrons that she thinks about them during the course of her subsequent journeys, and she wonders if, indeed, they are thinking about her.

This doubt is put to rest when she meets the handsome black man while she waits for the bus leaving for Vallejo and Oakland. He recognizes her and greets her with a warm hello, his demeanor contrasting sharply from their first encounter when he appeared angry and territorial. At first the narrator believes that this is the man's way of apologizing for his previous behavior, but then she realizes that such a gesture, however well intended, is simply not part of his character. "He was not at all like that, I was sure," concludes the narrator. "Even smiling he had a proud, fierce look." Nevertheless, the narrator realizes that the man's greeting was genuine, for it awakens within her an act of acceptance, an epiphany, that provides the story's climax: "Was it possible that something about me had just struck him in just the right way, making him want to say hello?" This encounter with the handsome black man, like the one she has with the black lady who sits beside her on the bus, leaves the narrator with an improved self-image, one realized as a result of confronting opposites that, by story's end, come together to form a whole, for now the narrator is ready to meet "anyone at all."

By having the protagonist of "Greyhound People" confront opposites in her everyday life, contrasts that are pronounced because of geography, interpersonal relationships, and race, Adams addresses many of the worries and fears that are common to the human condition. The narrator, though nameless, represents an individual's struggle to overcome unexpected changes and gather enough courage to venture into the unknown. As Adams makes abundantly clear by the story's end, the journey, though occasionally filled with wrong turns, can itself be its own reward.

Source: David Remy, Critical Essay on "Greyhound People," in *Short Stories for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2005.

Topics for Further Study

Imagine that you could buy a bus pass and travel to any city or place in California. Where would you go? Choose at least four places and research the history, the cultural makeup and any annual events in your chosen place. Write a travel magazine article for each destination, trying to entice other people to visit the places you have chosen.

Take several rides on buses that cross your town. Listen and record conversations and events that happen during your trip. Then write a story about your adventures. What new things did you learn about your town? What did you find out about the people who live in your town? What did you learn about yourself in reference to how you reacted to your fellow passengers?

Compose a statistical report on divorce in the United States during the twentieth century. Then write a report on the changes that have occurred over the years. How have certain events, such as World Wars I and II and the Vietnam War, affected the divorce rate? What were the peak years for divorce rates? What age groups are most affected by divorce? Are there any differences in divorce rates depending on one's cultural background? Does belonging to particular religions make any difference? Compare different regions of the United States, such as the South, the West, the Northeast, and so forth.

There are many good books that have been published on how to write an effective short story. Read some of these books and report back to your class the various components that are involved in a short story. Explain how a short story differs from a novel (more than just its length). Refer to some of the best American short story writers and provide your classmates with a list of some of these authors' best works.

What Do I Read Next?

Adams was often compared to the writer F. Scott Fitzgerald, who was more famous for his novels than his short stories, even though he was an excellent writer of both genres. A collection of his short stories called *Short Stories of F. Scott Fitzgerald: A New Collection* was published in 1995 and is a good place to find many of Fitzgerald's highly prized stories previously published in popular magazines of his time. Fitzgerald, although he wrote about a completely different generation than Adams, captured the nuances of personal relationships in a similar style.

One collection of Katherine Mansfield's short stories (another writer to whom Adams was often compared) is the 1991 publication *Stories*. Mansfield was considered a master of the short story; she was a writer who transformed the writing style of her day. Some of her best stories include "The Fly," "At the Bay," and "The Singing Lesson."

Critics cannot seem to say enough good things about Flannery O'Connor, a prolific writer of short stories and a woman who is often held up as the icon of the short story genre. O'Connor's *The Complete Stories* (1971) contains two of O'Connor's most popular works, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" and "Everything that Rises Must Converge." A southern writer with a sense of humor, O'Connor is entertaining in many different ways.

Although there is no doubt that any of Adams's collections of short stories is sure to please, she was also well received as a novelist. One of her more popular novels is *Superior Women* (1984), a story about four young women as they enter college at Radcliffe and the ensuing decades that follow as their relationships to one another develop.

Further Study

Burroway, Janet, and Susan Weinberg, *Writing Fiction*, Longman, 2003.

If after reading Adams's work you find yourself interested in attempting fiction writing, this is one of the best books to invest in. This is the book that many writing teachers use to help explain elements of the story such as point of view, setting, plot, and so forth.

Charters, Ann, *The Story and Its Writer: An Introduction to Short Fiction*, Bedford Books, 1999.

There are 124 different short stories from around the world in this collection, offering the reader an excellent sampling of contemporary as well as classic selections. Also included are short biographies of the writers and commentary on their work.

De Angelis, Barbara, *Confidence: Finding It and Keeping It*, Hay House, 1998.

De Angelis seems to have a knack for helping people speak out for themselves. Her books are all bestsellers. So, if one is curious about what it might feel like to lack confidence or is wondering how to overcome it oneself, this book might inspire one to spread one's wings and fly, just as Adams's main character did.

Updike, John, ed., *The Best American Short Stories of the Century*, Houghton Mifflin, 1999.

Three of Adams's short stories are contained in this national bestseller, as are a wide range of excellent authors' works. This popular book has been called one of the richest collections of short stories of the twentieth century.

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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". © 1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

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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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