A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain Study Guide

A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain by Robert Olen Butler

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Introduction

Robert Olen Butler had already published five novels— most of them concerning Vietnam during the war era—when he brought out his collection *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain* in 1992. This volume of short stories—all of which featured unique narrators but were set in Louisiana among Vietnamese immigrants—drew immediate critical applause and won the Pulitzer Prize in 1993.

Reviewers praised many of the fifteen stories, but one, the title story, was also selected for inclusion in *The Best American Short Stories* of 1992. This story, which is told by a man close to a century old, obliquely discusses several of the different types of people affected by the troubles in Vietnam. There are the narrator's son-in-law and grandson, who get involved in the murder of a fellow immigrant who speaks out in favor of cooperating with the present government in Vietnam. There is his daughter, who represents holding on to the traditions that have long been part of the Vietnamese family. There is Ho Chi Minh, the nationalist who led his country to independence and communism. And there is the narrator himself, Dao, who chose the difficult route of remaining uninvolved and peaceful through the long years that Vietnam struggled and fought. Dao's reminiscences and attempts to bring harmony to his own life at the moment he approaches his death lend a definitive closing note to this volume, which one reviewer said "offers tales of heroism not in corporeal battle but in the spiritual struggle for faith and hope in the face of betrayal and impossibility."

Author Biography

Robert Olen Butler was born January 20, 1945, in Granite City, Illinois, and spent the majority of his childhood in a small steel mill town in that state. His father, a retired actor, helped inspire his interest in books, movies, and theater, and his mother's stories about Granite City during the Depression inspired the content for his fifth novel, *Wabash.*

Butler excelled in high school, serving as president of the student body and graduating as covaledictorian. He enrolled at Northwestern University, where he planned to major in theater. In his sophomore year, however, he transferred to oral interpretation, which is an approach to literature through performance. This focus drew Butler increasingly to writing. After graduating *summa cum laude* in 1967, he attended graduate school at the University of Iowa, where he earned an M.F.A. in playwriting.

Believing he would be drafted for the Vietnam War, Butler signed up for a three-year enlistment in return for a guaranteed position in counterintelligence. He spent a year learning Vietnamese from a native speaker, and was then assigned to serve in Vietnam as an administrative assistant and interpreter. His time in Vietnam had a profound effect on Butler, and he would return to this past many times in his writings.

After returning to the United States in the early 1970s, Butler worked alternately as a reporter, a high school teacher, and a freelance writer in Granite City, Illinois; Chicago; and New York City. During the 1970s, Butler continued to pursue his dream to be a writer and worked on his first novel. In 1979, he began to take creative writing courses again.

His first novel, *Alleys of Eden,* was published in 1981 and is one of three novels that make up a loose Vietnam trilogy. Since the early 1980s, Butler has regularly published. His first five books, though widely praised, did not register outstanding sales.

In the 1980s, Butler took a job teaching fiction writing at McNeese State University in Lake Charles, Louisiana. There he became acquainted with Vietnamese immigration to the area, and he began to write stories about the displaced people. The collection *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain* had its inspiration in National Public Radio's request for Butler's contribution to a series on writing. Butler looked at the more than thirty short stories he had previously written and rediscovered an interest in Vietnamese folkways.

With the success of *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain,* Butler became far more wellknown. The book won the Pulitzer Prize in 1993 as well as numerous other national awards. Based on the book's strength, Butler also was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship. Butler continues to work as a writer and a teacher.

Plot Summary

The story takes the form of an old man's memories and final attempts to deal with the past as he nears his own death. Dao, almost 100 years old, is a Vietnamese man living in New Orleans, Louisiana. Believing that his death approaches, Dao summons the important people from past, including the ghost of his old friend Ho Chi Minh, the communist nationalist instrumental in winning Vietnam's independence from France.

In 1917, Dao and Ho Chi Minh, then going by his given name of Nguyen Ai Quoc, were both young men living in London and Paris. In London, Ho worked as a pastry cook, and Dao worked as a dishwasher. Now, when Ho appears before Dao, his hands are covered with sugar because he is trying to make a special glaze. However, he is having trouble remembering how to make it properly.

Dao has reached the point in his life where, as is Vietnamese custom when a person is very old, he takes a "formal leave-taking" of his family and friends, who all come to visit him. It is also Vietnamese tradition to have a close family, but, sitting in his chair in the living room, Dao can see that some of his family have become too Americanized.

He overhears a conversation between his son-in-law Thang and his grandson Loi. Both served in the South Vietnamese army in the war. They think he is asleep while they discuss the murder of a fellow immigrant. The man owned a newspaper and wrote an article expressing that it was time to accept the communist government in Vietnam and to work with its leaders. He was murdered for voicing these opinions, assassinated as he sat in his Chevrolet pickup truck, which Dao sees as a symbol of his Americanization. Thang and Loi seem to be speaking in code as they mention that no murder weapon has been found. Lam, Dao's daughter, who is married to Thang, also seems to be communicating in code as she speaks of how terrible the man's death is. Dao deliberately pretends to be sleeping. He does not want to say anything about what he has heard, for he is a Buddhist and he believes in the value of familial harmony.

During his first visit, Ho asked Dao if he was still a Hoa Hao Buddhist. Dao became a Buddhist when the two men were in Paris in 1918. Dao believes that in Paris he embraced the past□the Buddhism of his ancestors□while Ho embraced his future. He recalls how Ho rented a dark suit and a bowler hat to wear as he paced the halls of Versailles, hoping to speak with Woodrow Wilson. He wanted to speak to the U.S. president, who was in the midst of the peace accords that officially ended World War I, about helping Vietnam get representation in the French Parliament□at the time, Vietnam was a French colony. In returning to the topic of Dao's Buddhism, Ho notices the Chinese characters on Dao's prayer table. They mean "A good scent from a strange mountain." This is the saying of the Hoa Hao Buddhists. The Hoa Haos believe in simplicity, as expressed by this saying.

After Ho leaves that evening, Dao calls his oldest daughter to see if the doorknob that Ho touched is sticky. It is. After his daughter says good night, Dao recalls all the people who were important to him but who are now dead, including his wife and his firstborn

son. In this village square, where the dead congregate, Dao smells a wonderful sweet smell from a strange mountain. Dao tries to explain to his daughter that the doorknob is sticky from Ho's hand, but he is too sleepy.

The next night, Ho returns. The men talk of Ho's attempts to make the pastry glaze, and then Dao asks if he has seen his wife, but Ho has not. Dao asks if Ho is disappointed that Dao did not become involved in Ho's struggle, but Ho absolves Dao of any guilt he might feel. Dao knows that Ho is not at peace, and Ho explains that it is not over his inability to make the glaze. Dao tells him he should be at peace, after all, he won their country back from the French, but Ho replies that there are no countries in the afterlife.

The next day, Thang and Loi continue to talk about the murdered newsman. This makes Dao recall Ho's talk the night before, of how the Vietnamese were fools to trust the Americans, who also fought against the Japanese in World War II. Dao speaks of the need for harmony, and he is reminded of the conversation he overhears between Thang and Loi. They also talk bitterly of foolishly trusting the Americans. It is clear from what they say that they were involved in, if not present at, the murder of the newsman. Listening to their talk, Dao suddenly wishes for death, believing that he has lived too long.

When Ho comes to visit for the third time that night, Dao suggests the two men pace, as they did in Paris, and talk about Marx and the Buddha. The two men walk, and Dao tells Ho of his suspicion that Thang and Loi are involved in the political killing. As he waits for Ho to speak, Dao recalls holding Loi as a baby and being repulsed by the sour smell of milk on his breath. He remembers Thang across the room, wanting Lam to take Loi away from him. Ho reminds Dao that he has never done anything political. Dao asks if there are politics in the afterlife. Ho does not answer. Instead, the sweet smell of the sugar on his hands grows stronger and stronger as Dao feels Ho close to him. He does not see Ho, but he feels as if Ho was passing through his body. Then he hears the door open and close softly. Dao is about to return to bed. He knows that Ho is right: he will never speak to his grandson about what he knows. He also remembers the recipe for the glaze that Ho has been so unsuccessful in making.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

As the story begins, we meet the narrator, a Vietnamese man named Dao. He tells us almost immediately that he is very old and before long, we learn that he now lives in New Orleans. Dao then tells us that Ho Chi Minh, the Vietnamese communist nationalist, had "come to him" the previous night, presumably in a dream. When Ho appears before Dao, his hands are covered in sugar and he tells Dao that he is having trouble remembering how to make a special glaze.

Dao and Ho Chi Minh had originally met many years earlier when both men worked at a hotel in London: Dao as a dishwasher and Ho Chi Minh as a pastry cook. The two men quickly became friends. Now, as Ho appears before Dao, he is trying to remember how to make a special glaze. He slowly begins to recall portions of the recipe, but is having trouble remembering the entire process.

As a man nearly one hundred years of age, Dao has decided that it is time to summon family and friends for one last visit before is death. As Dao sits in a chair in his living room waiting for his visitors, he notices with regret that many of his closest family members have become so Americanized that they seem to have lost touch with their Vietnamese roots.

In the room with Dao are his son-in-law Thang and Thang's son Loi, both of whom had served in the Vietnamese army. Also present is Dao's daughter, Lam, as well as his oldest daughter who is not named. When Thang believes Dao has fallen asleep, he begins to discuss the recent murder of a Vietnamese immigrant that occurred in New Orleans the previous week. The man, a newspaper publisher, was murdered for expressing his belief that it was time for the Vietnamese community to accept the communist government in place within Vietnam.

As Dao explains the circumstances that led to the newspaper publisher's death, he describes how the man died: while sitting in his Chevrolet pickup truck. Dao believes that the fact that this man owned a Chevrolet pickup truck proves that he too had become Americanized before his death.

Dao listens as his son-in-law tells his son that no murder weapon has been found, and he senses that the two men are using some sort of code to convey their true thoughts. Dao feigns sleep so that he does not have to participate in the conversation. He points out that he is a Buddhist and as such, he has an obligation to preserve peace within his family.

Dao then goes back to his visit with Ho Chi Minh. He recalls that Ho had asked him at that time if he was still following the teachings of Buddha. Dao's decision to embrace Buddha many years ago when the two men were living in Paris had hugely disappointed

Ho. Dao describes that period as one in which he returned to the religion of his father and in a sense, returning to the past while his friend was embracing his future. Dao recalls Ho spending weeks in Versailles attempting to meet with Woodrow Wilson who was in France participating in the peace talks that would eventually end World War I. Among the items Ho wanted to request, was Vietnamese representation in the French parliament. The meeting never took place.

Dao motioned to the prayer table in his room, indicating to his friend that he still followed the teachings of Buddha. Four Chinese characters are on the table, symbols of the Hoa Hao Buddhists, a group who believed in simplicity in all things. The four characters on the table mean "A good scent from a strange mountain."

When Ho finally leaves Dao, Dao summons his daughter to see if the doorknob that Ho touched on his way out is sticky from the sugar that had covered his hands. She tells him it is sticky and asks if he would like her to clean it. Dao asks her to clean it in the morning.

As Dao drifts off to sleep, he recalls his now dead wife and many other relatives that have also died. He is overwhelmed with a sweet scent, a scent he describes as being as if a mountain of emerald had found its own scent. He attempts to explain to his daughter that the doorknob is sticky from Ho's sugar covered hand, but he is too tired to talk any longer.

The next night, anticipating that Ho will return, Dao leaves his bedroom light on. Dao falls asleep and Ho who is sitting in a chair next to Dao's bed awakens him. Ho holds his hands, still covered with sugar, up for Dao to see. They discuss the glaze for a few moments before Dao asks Ho if he has seen his wife. Ho responds that he never knew Ho's wife.

Dao then asks Ho if he is disappointed in Dao for not joining his cause. Ho assures him that he is not before telling Dao that he is not at peace. Dao tells Ho that the knowledge that he freed his country from the French should bring him peace, but Ho dismisses this thought, saying there are no countries in the afterlife.

The next morning, Dao's son-in-law and grandson continue to discuss the murdered newspaper publisher. As they speak, it becomes clear to Dao that the two were either present at, or involved in, the publisher's murder. This realization turns Dao's thoughts to his infant son who died shortly after birth and he wonders how his son will look when they meet in the afterlife. Believing he has fully lived his life, Dao wishes for death.

That night, ho visits again and this time, Dao asks that they pace the room, just as they did when they were young men living in Paris. Ho agrees, thinking it will help him remember how to make the glaze.

As they walk the room, Dao tells Ho that he believes his son-in-law and grandson are involved in a political killing. As he waits for Ho's reply, he is reminded of a time when, as he is holding his infant grandson, he becomes sickened by the smell of milk on the baby's breath. Dao asks Ho if there are politics in the afterlife. Ho does not answer, but

instead moves toward Dao. As he moves closer, the smell of the sugar on Ho's hands becomes increasingly stronger and he senses that although he cannot see his friend, he is moving through his body. He then hears the door open and close- a sign that Ho has left the room.

Dao returns to his bed knowing that he will never tell his grandson what he knows. He also looks forward to being with Ho in the afterlife and hopes they can help each other. Finally, he remembers the recipe for the glaze.

Analysis

This story is told from the point of view of Dao, an elderly Vietnamese immigrant now living in New Orleans, Louisiana. We soon learn that Dao feels as if his death will be soon and so he is preparing by holding a leave-taking, an ancient Vietnamese custom.

While we are never told precisely how long Dao has lived in the United States, we are given to believe that it has been for a significant period. This primarily comes from the fact that Dao laments the fact that some members of his family have become too Americanized for his liking. Dao's decision to honor the custom of his ancestors tells us that despite the fact that he has lived in the United States for many years, he is still very loyal to his native country and its customs.

Thus, the central theme of this story is that of loyalty. There are many examples of this. First, Dao honors the Vietnamese tradition of a formal leave-taking even though it is clear to him that most of his immediate family has abandoned most of the customs of their native country. What should be a peaceful time for Dao, however, is instead a period of unrest caused by the knowledge that his son-in-law and grandson are involved in a murder. He younger daughter attempts to maintain some sense of harmony by imploring her husband and son not to speak of the incident in Dao's presence.

Another example can be found near the end of the story when Dao, listening to his son-in-law and grandson discuss the murder with which they were involved, is reminded of a time when, holding his infant grandson, he becomes sickened by the smell of milk on the infant's breath. Because Dao's Buddhist beliefs prevent him from doing anything that might upset his family members, he says nothing. Even so, his son-in-law beckons his wife to take the baby, as if he understood Dao's need to maintain harmony. Now, many years later, as Dao is sickened by the knowledge that his grandson is involved in a horrific crime, he chooses once again to say nothing, and instead puts family peace ahead of his own feelings. This time, however, his daughter attempts to spare his feelings by admonishing her husband and son from talking about the crime in Dao's presence.

Ho's appearance to Dao, then, is most likely a result of Dao's struggle between maintaining family peace and confronting his family members with what he knows. Ho represents Dao's past, a time he describes as unsettling. This was the time Dao

embraced Buddhism, his father's religion, a decision creating a division between Dao and Ho.

Ho, who would eventually become the leader of an independent North Vietnam, also provides an important link between Dao's immigrant status and his Vietnamese roots. Ironically, it is Ho, who himself led a more active political life than Dao, who convinces Dao to let the matter rest. Ho's statement that there are no countries in the afterlife tell us that he has at last recognized that there are more important things than winning political battles and that Dao's attempt to reconcile his past is admirable.

Another theme that is evident throughout the story is the connection between the past and the present. Indeed, Ho Chi Minh's three visits represent Dao's past, present and future. As each visit concludes, Dao becomes increasingly aware of the things he must to do prepare for the afterlife. Again, as we read of Dao's struggle to make peace with the events of his life, we understand just how important achieving and maintaining harmony is to Dao.

The sense of smell also has a significant meaning in this story. Each time Ho visits, Dao speaks of a faint sweet smell that seems to accompany him. Dao assumes the smell is from the sugar that covers his friend's hands. The scent seems to become stronger as the story unfolds, and at one point, Dao speaks of a stronger scent that reminds him of the burial grounds for his family members and ancestors. The words on Dao's prayer table "A good scent from a strange mountain" imply to us that Dao's ability to find peace is directly related to the scent. The "strange mountain" is most likely the afterlife.

While the story does not specifically tell us, we can infer that Dao does indeed die following Ho's last visit. Recall that in the beginning of the story, Dao is mentions that his daughter purposely leaves the window shades open: "My daughter leaves my shades open, I think so that I will not forget that the sun has risen again in the morning." Yet, when he retires after Ho's third visit, Dao pulls the shade closed before going to bed. This simple action tells us that for Dao, the darkness of death has come.

Characters

Dao

Dao is the narrator of the story. Nearly 100 years old, he has lived in many places outside his native Vietnam: London, Paris, and now New Orleans. Dao was in Vietnam during the war, and though it is not explicitly stated, must have fled the country after the fall of South Vietnam to the communists. He is living his final years with his family.

While in Paris many decades ago, Dao became a Hoa Hao Buddhist, and thus he values "harmony among all living things, especially the members of a Vietnamese family." Dao comes to understand that his son-in-law and grandson are involved with the assassination of a fellow immigrant who supported acceptance of the idea of communist rule in Vietnam. Through his discussions with Ho, Dao, who "has never done a political thing," decides to overlook this knowledge to preserve his family. However, the conversations with Ho also serve as a subtext, for Dao is looking for absolution for the fact that he did nothing to help his country win freedom from France. With Ho's help, he finds peace within himself and takes his final steps toward death.

Lam

Lam is Dao's daughter and Thang's wife. She appears to have knowledge of the involvement of her husband and her son in the assassination of Le. In conversation, she subtly reminds them not to allude to the incident in front of her father.

Nguyen Bich Le

Dead before the story opens, Le was a Vietnamese immigrant in New Orleans who published a Vietnamese newspaper. Le embraced his new culture, and he enraged people like Loi and Thang with his paper. Although he maintained he was still a patriot of South Vietnam, he wrote an article in which he stated his belief that it was time to accept the reality of the communist government in Vietnam and to work with them. He was murdered for publicly expressing these beliefs.

Loi

Loi is Thang's son and very like his father. He served in South Vietnam's army as a lieutenant. He is involved with the assassination of a fellow immigrant who supported acceptance of the idea of communist rule in Vietnam. Like his father, he knows where the murder weapon is, and there is the implication that he was present at the murder as well. Loi is bitter about the exile of his people as well as about the role the Americans took in the Vietnam War, and he and his father discuss these topics often.

Ho Chi Minh

The character of Ho (also known as Nguyen Ai Quoc) is based on a real person: Ho Chi Minh, who led the fight for Vietnam's freedom from France in the 1940s and 1950s, and who became the leader of independent North Vietnam. Ho was a learned man, speaking both French and English as well as his native Vietnamese. In the earlier part of the 1900s, he traveled throughout Europe, where he became a nationalist and a Marxist. Ho returned to Vietnam in 1940 to lead the fight against the Japanese invaders.

In the story, Ho appears to Dao as he was at the time of his death, even though Dao did not know him then. The two friends spent time together in Paris and London. When Ho visits Dao, despite his manner of dress, he talks about less-worldly issues that would have concerned him when the two were friends, such as making a pastry glaze. The conversation between the two men reveals deeper meanings, however. Ho's appearance to Dao is a manifestation of Dao's own subconscious, which is looking to find peace with the actions that form his life.

Oldest Daughter

Dao favorably compares his oldest daughter to Lam. He considers her a "good girl," one who understands the importance of harmony within the Vietnamese family. She obeys and helps her father without question.

Nguyen Ai Quoc

See Ho Chi Minh

Thang

Dao's son-in-law is a former colonel in South Vietnam's army. Thang has some involvement with the assassination of a fellow immigrant who supported acceptance of the idea of communist rule in Vietnam; he knows the murderers and may have even been part of the killing. Thang is bitter about the exile of his people. He believes that the South Vietnamese should never have trusted the Americans and should have handled the problems with their government leaders on their own. Dao believes that Thang is "insincere."

Themes

War

The problems of the Indochina War and the Vietnam War are themes in the story, though Dao does not refer to them directly. Dao brings up the Indochina War—the war between the Vietnamese nationalists and the French, which took place from 1946 to 1954—when he asks Ho whether he is disappointed that Dao did not join him in this struggle. Ho further expands upon this topic when he talks of the mutuality of the Vietnamese and the Americans, both of whom wanted to stop the spread of the Japanese empire. Ho's feelings connect him and the people who joined in this first struggle with the Vietnamese who fought in the Vietnam War and their struggle, both in the war and with the division of their country afterward. Ironically, Ho's comments link him directly to Thang and Loi, who fought on the opposing side in the Vietnam War.

Dao, who appears not to have been directly involved in that war, still evokes it in several different ways. Thang and Loi both served in South Vietnam's army as a colonel and a lieutenant, respectively. They remain bitter about their exile from their country after the fall of South Vietnam, and in part, blame the Americans. Dao also recalls how he and his wife lived through the Tet Offensive in 1968 and listened to the bombs falling outside. Such evocations underscore the struggle the Vietnamese have undergone in the latter half of the twentieth century.

Memory and the Past

As he approaches death (though he is not sick, he is almost 100 years old), Dao focuses increasingly on his memories of the past and how they reflect upon his perception of the present. The story begins with the visitation of Ho, whom Dao has not seen for decades. It soon becomes clear that there are many reasons that Dao sees Ho now. Foremost, Dao is experiencing the inner struggle of how to handle the problems within his family. He knows that Thang and Loi are involved in a political murder, yet his religious beliefs and his culture demand that he try and maintain familial harmony. Furthermore, Dao has never, as Ho puts it, "done the political thing." Dao's focus on the past is also manifested in his vision of the village square, populated by those people who have died before him. In this afterlife, Dao hopes to find the people who have meant so much to him: his wife, his firstborn son who died as a baby, the first person to call Ho "monsieur" ("mister"), and the Dakar natives sent to their deaths in shark-infested waters by the French colonial officials. Dao projects his feelings about his upcoming death onto Ho. Dao questions Ho about whom he has met in the afterlife, and Ho evokes the images of those whom Dao does not even think of, such as the young Vietnamese men who wanted their country's respect from the European powers.

Family

The bonds of family play an important part in the Vietnamese culture and in the story. Dao follows Vietnamese tradition, and, as he is now very old, he gathers his family around him to bid them a final farewell. This custom is followed to allow the older person time to tell the "people of your life . . . your feelings, or try at last to understand one another, or simply say goodbye." The members of Dao's family come to pay their final calls over a series of days. His "insincere" son-in-law, Thang, and his grandson Loi, however, mar what should be a time of peaceful leave-taking. He discovers that his family is governed by a web of lies and deceit with the understanding that the two younger men took part, on some level, in the murder of a Vietnamese newsman who spoke of accepting the uni- fied country. Dao's daughter Lam also keeps this secret—she reminds them not to speak in front of her father—signifying her comprehension and perhaps even her acquiescence. Only Dao's oldest daughter, whose name is not revealed, plays out a satisfactory role. She is kind, caring, and dutiful. Despite the inadequacies of some of his family members, Dao still holds onto his belief in the family's importance. His decision at the end to not reveal anything of what he knows about the news man's murder is done in part to maintain harmony in the family.

Style

Point of View

The story is told from the first-person point of view. Dao tells the story so the reader is privy to only his thoughts, feelings, and observations. Because of this point of view, a limited and obscured view of the tumultuous events that have taken place in Vietnam over the past decades is presented—as aptly reflects Dao's limited involvement. A Hoa Hao Buddhist, Dao values harmony, which he seeks to impose on his surroundings. Since returning to the religion of his forefathers as a young man in Paris, Dao has upheld these values, thus, unlike Ho, Thang, and Loi, he has remained uninvolved in Vietnam's political strife. Living through these times, however, Dao has a sharp awareness of the difficulties that beset his country and continue to beset his countrymen, even though they are "in exile," and his musings make constant references to the problems faced. Because of this limited point of view, an understanding of the history of Vietnam in the twentieth century is essential to fully appreciate the story.

Setting

The story takes place in New Orleans, Louisiana. Many South Vietnamese refugees settled in the area after they fled their homeland. As Butler told Sybil Sternberg in an interview with *Publishers Weekly,* as he flew to the area for the first time, he saw below him from the plane window a landscape that looked like the Mekong Delta: "There was the same calligraphy of waterways, the rice paddies, the subtropical climate, the French influence." The many Vietnamese immigrants formed a tight-knit Vietnamese community. In the story, memories and reminders of home surround Dao and the other immigrants. For instance, they read a local Vietnamese- language newspaper, which features items of concern to many, such as the events that have taken place in Vietnam since its reunification in the 1970s. The story also shows the efforts of the older immigrants, such as Dao, to hold fast to their traditions and culture.

Structure

The story shifts between Dao's evenings talking with Ho and his days listening to the conversation of Thang and Loi. The nighttime events and the daytime events reflect upon each other; what happens in the night reminds him of what happens in the day and vice versa. This structure emphasizes the relentless interaction of the past, present, and future. What happened in the past in Vietnam has a very real effect on what is happening right now in Louisiana. For instance, the newsman is murdered because he expresses ideas about how to deal with present-day Vietnam that offend some of the exiles.

Dao, though uninvolved in this event, focuses on it as symbolic of Vietnam's past and his limited role in the struggles. Indeed, at this stage in his life, Dao cannot truly

separate the past and the present. The fluidity of Dao's thoughts, as he moves back and forth between nights with Ho and days with his family, makes it difficult to separate the two periods, which is the point of this style and structure. Dao's fluidity also allows him to slip into the future—the afterlife—showing his movement toward death.

Imagery and Symbolism

Butler makes use of a number of images and symbols in the story. Dao readily explains some of them. The murdered newsman had become Americanized. This is clear to Dao because the man had chosen to purchase a Chevrolet pickup truck; a Chevrolet "is a strongly American thing," and the pickup truck made him "also a man of Louisiana, where there are many pickup trucks." The newsman chose not to "purchase a gun rack for the back window, another sign of this place," which ironically might have saved him by blocking the assassin's bullet. Dao's musings on this topic show the gun's power as both a peacekeeping object and an object of extreme violence, reflecting on its role in the wars of Vietnam.

Clothing also symbolizes different things. When Ho comes to Dao at night, he is dressed in "the dark clothes of a peasant and the rubber sandals, just like in the news pictures." But when Ho tried to get a meeting with the European and American leaders at Versailles, he took on their appearance, renting a dark suit and a bowler. Ho further evokes the image of young Vietnamese nationalists taking on the costume of the Western world in their effort to gain the West's respect and support. In Ho's afterlife are "a million souls . . . the young men of our country, and they are all dressed in black suits and bowler hats."

Historical Context

A Brief History of Twentieth-Century Vietnam

In 1859, France began to make inroads in Southeast Asia, and by the end of the century was the dominant power in the region, which became known as French Indochina—present-day Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. Despite the efforts of Vietnamese nationalist groups, the French maintained control of the region until around the outbreak of World War I.

Ho Chi Minh had become the most important nationalist in Vietnam. In 1930 and 1931, he helped organize strikes, demonstrations, and peasant uprisings against the colonists. The French exiled him to the Soviet Union and China, but after the Japanese invasion in 1940, he returned home to organize a communist resistance movement to fight both the Japanese and the French colonial government. After the defeated Japanese withdrew in 1945, Ho proclaimed independence for Vietnam, but no major government recognized this declaration. France tried to reclaim Indochina the following year and soon had regained much of the land. When France agreed only to make Vietnam a free state within the French empire, fighting broke out between France and Ho's Viet Minh. The Indochina War lasted from 1946 until the Viet Minh's victory in 1954.

The ensuing peace treaty, the Geneva Accord, called for the withdrawal of all French troops and also temporarily divided Vietnam into two zones at the seventeenth parallel. Ho Chi Minh controlled the northern section (which he did until his death in 1969), but an election was set for 1956 that would choose one government for the entire country. While the north embarked on a program of industrializa tion, problems arose in the south, where political chaos, a poor economy, and refugees hampered the new government of Ngo Dinh Diem. Diem managed to return order to South Vietnam only through dictatorial rule. When it came time for the proposed elections, Diem refused to hold them. His government became increasingly repressive, and opposition grew.

In North Vietnam, the Viet Minh formed the communist National Liberation Front (NLF) with the goal of overthrowing Diem and reuniting Vietnam. The NLF supported guerilla activity in the south. As the situation worsened, Diem was assassinated by army officers, who then took over the government in 1963.

The two sides began to engage in war, and by the mid-1960s, the U.S. military had become involved. The Vietnam War was a long and deadly conflict. When it finally ended in 1975, with North Vietnam's victory, it claimed as many as two million Vietnamese casualties and also significantly affected neighboring countries Laos and Cambodia. The country was officially reunited in 1976 under a communist government. More than one million South Vietnamese fled the country, some because they feared punishment by the North Vietnamese, others because of food shortages, but most because they did not want to live under a communist government. Around 725,000 of these immigrants settled in the United States.

America in the 1990s

In the 1990s, the United States strove to develop and maintain better relationships with countries around the world. The United States also worked to promote world peace, often through the United Nations. By 1992, thousands of United Nations forces were working on peacekeeping missions throughout the world.

At home, the United States saw a new wave of immigration. The Immigration Act of 1990 increased the number of immigrants allowed in the United States and doubled the number of skilled workers. In the first part of that decade, more new immigrants came to the United States than in any other decade since 1910. The majority of these immigrants—more than eighty percent—came from Asian, Latin American, and Caribbean countries. Some native-born Americans were alarmed by this increase, but supporters of immigration believed that such movement revitalized urban areas and strengthened the economy.

The World in the 1990s

Overall, the 1990s saw a dramatic rise in democracy throughout the world, as well as the development of increasingly global economies. Many countries—including most in Eastern Europe—overthrew their communist governments. Some governments, however, continued to rule in an authoritarian manner, most notably those of China, Cuba, North Korea, and Vietnam. In these countries, the communist government remained firmly entrenched.

The Vietnam War had taken its toll on the country, and Vietnam struggled economically for years after the war ended. In 1993, Vietnam was ranked among the world's poorest countries. Then the government of Vietnam, like many other communist governments, began to restructure the country's economy, adding some elements of free trade. Under this program, the country experienced an economic revival. Foreign trade expanded, as did foreign investment in Vietnam. Diplomatic relations between Vietnam and democratic countries, such as the United States, also were restored. Vietnam's government loosened certain restrictions, and more visitors were allowed to enter the country, including former Vietnamese residents and American Vietnam veterans.

Critical Overview

Even before publication of *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain,* Butler had already established his reputation as a writer of Vietnam fiction. Such categorization displeased the author, who stated, "Artists get at deeper truths." Some of Butler's earlier works had also drawn criticism because he told the stories from a point of view that was not his own—that is, he took on the role of a Vietnamese person. Several short stories were even rejected by magazines on these grounds.

With the publication of *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain* in 1992, which went on to win the Pulitzer Prize the following year, Butler silenced his critics. In this collection of fourteen short stories and a novella, critics and readers all agree on the power of Butler's prose and his haunting evocation of the Vietnamese voice. Most critics favorably commented on Butler's skillful and caring manipulation of the language. Richard Eder, in his review for the*Los Angeles Times Book Review,* notes that "Butler writes essentially, and in a bewitching translation of voice and sympathy, what it means to lose a country, to remember it, and to have the memory begin to grow old. He writes as if it were his loss too." According to Cynthia McCown in *America,* it is Butler's "familiarity with the Vietnamese language [that] gives this work its narrative conviction as Butler takes on the personas of expatriate Vietnamese from an aging bargirl to an Amerasian teen to a 100-year-old man who dreams of his friend Ho Chi Minh." Jon Anderson, writing in the *Chicago Tribune,* notes further praise for Butler's work: "the stories in his new book . . . are so delicately phrased that they sound as if they had been written in Vietnamese and translated."

The stories take place in Louisiana, where a large immigrant population settled in the post- Vietnam War years. They all feature a Vietnamese exile as the narrator. Butler brings to life North Vietnamese and South Vietnamese, Buddhists and Catholics, men and women, those who succeed in America and those who suffer. His stories span the gamut of topics, drawing on his narrators' experiences in Vietnam and during the war, as well as exploring their current lifestyle in Louisiana and their perception of America. The narrators offer a variety of perspectives on the Vietnamese experience. Some stories take place in Vietnam, while others take place in the United States. The stories demonstrate the difficulties that the immigrants have in the new country and explore reasons for these difficulties, such as the language barrier, which can lead to misinterpretations. Although the stories all stand alone, they also draw power from their collection. As Madison Smartt Bell says in the *Chicago Tribune,* the collection has "a sort of novelistic unity, enhanced by his [Butler's] sharp insight into their [the Vietnamese] ways, their beliefs and their reaction to life among strangers in a strange land."

At the time of the book's publication McCown did voice one concern: "*A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain* is calculated to be positive, even uplifting. It is a Vietnam story unlike any that has been popularized by the dark perception of our own collective American loss. As such, it may reflect too much of the romantic for some tastes. This work celebrates courage and dignity, but not in the face of ultimate defeat. Rather it

expresses the essence of old Dao's main religious tenet: 'The maintenance of our spirits is simple, and the mystery of joy is simple.'"

Readers and critics quickly were drawn to the title story of the collection. "In a collection so delicate and so strong," declares Eder, "the title story stands out as close to magical." The story has been noted for strong images and its unity of recollection. Says McCown, "Ho's sugar-scented hands open the casement of memory for Dao: the Carlton Hotel in London, 1917, Ho as a retoucher of photographs in Paris, and as a political leader, still 'painting the blush into the faces of Westerners.'"

Since publication of this collection, Butler has written several more novels, yet *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain* still stands out as one of his most remarkable works. It is already being studied in college and adult-education classes, and its stories appear in numerous anthologies.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Korb has a master's degree in English literature and creative writing and has written for a wide variety of educational publishers. In the following essay, she explains how Ho Chi Minh's nighttime visits are Dao's attempt to bring harmony to his family before he dies.

"A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain" is the title story from Robert Olen Butler's 1992 collection, which includes fourteen stories and one novella, all told from the points of view of Vietnamese immigrants living in Louisiana. The different narrators created by Butler are also similar in that they are undergoing the process of reconciling their past lives with their present lives. As such, the influence of the tumultuous events that have shook Vietnam in the past several decades make its importance on the Vietnamese psyche clear.

The narrator of the story, Dao, is almost 100 years old, and he feels that he is approaching the end of his life. As is Vietnamese tradition, he calls his family and close friends around him for a "formal leave-taking." At this point, Dao also takes stock of what he has and hasn't done in his life, especially as contemporary circumstances force him to evaluate the choices he has made. Dao's old friend Nguyen Ai Quoc, better known to the world as Ho Chi Minh, comes to visit and say goodbye. Their conversations reflect upon Dao's past, present, and future and help him make the resolutions he needs to move on to the next step in his life: death.

Because so much of the story rests upon events that shook Vietnam in the twentieth century, a basic understanding is necessary to truly appreciate the narrative's power. Ho Chi Minh is Vietnam's most famous nationalist, and his actions were pivotal in winning the country's freedom from France, who had colonized Vietnam since the end of the 1800s. Ho made his first attempts toward obtaining some measure of independence as early as the 1910s, when he was in Paris. Back in Vietnam in the early 1930s, Ho incited demonstrations, protests, and peasant uprisings, and the colonial government banished him from the country. In the upheaval of World War II, however, when Japan invaded French Indochina—present-day Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia— Ho returned to his homeland, organized the Viet Minh, and led the successful fight against the French colonizers. After this victory, Ho took charge of the government of North Vietnam, a position that he held until his death in 1969. The Indochina War left Vietnam divided into north and south sectors. The government in the south resisted efforts to reunite the country, and the Viet Minh began a campaign of guerrilla warfare to achieve this goal. By the mid-1960s, the country was officially at war. After South Vietnam fell to the communist north, many South Vietnamese fled the country. Dao and his family were among the emigrants.

Since the time they spent together in London and Paris, the lives of Dao and Ho have widely diverged. While Ho became a revolutionary leader who condoned acts of violence, Dao became a Buddhist who prized harmony and peace above all else. Ho now inhabits the world of the afterlife. Ho's presence is forewarned by "a sweet smell

about him, very strong in the dark," for Ho has been trying to remember how to make the pastry glaze he learned as a pastry chef under the great Escoffier while Dao and Ho were in London. This smell emerges as a key focus throughout the story. Long ago, in Paris, Ho embraced a sect of Buddhism known as Hoa Hao. Their mantra is "A good scent from a strange mountain"; the basis of their religion is that life should be harmonious and "the maintenance of our spirits is very simple, and the mystery of joy is simple, too."

Dao's family in Louisiana does not follow these same precepts he holds dear. The main thrust of the present-day drama centers on Dao's realization that his son-in-law, Thang, and his grandson, Loi—both of whom served in the army of South Vietnam—are involved in the murder of a fellow Vietnamese immigrant, a newsman. Nguyen Bich Le had recently printed an article in his local Vietnamese newspaper in which he wrote that "it was time to accept the reality of the communist government in Vietnam and begin to talk with them." He believed that they "had to work now with those who controlled our country." Despite these strong words, Mr. Le still considered himself a patriot. "I believed him," thinks Dao. "If anyone had asked an old man's opinion on this whole matter, I would not have been afraid to say the Mr. Le was right." Not everyone in the community agreed, however, and Mr. Le was assassinated.

As Dao comes to realize the role his son-in-law and grandson have played, he wonders if he should let his knowledge affect his desire to achieve harmony within himself, and within his family, before he dies. Further complicating the issue is his understanding that his daughter, Lam, who is Thang's wife, is also cognizant of the same actions. Whenever the two men discuss the affair in Dao's presence (he feigns sleep), it is Lam who reminds them to be careful of what they say. Once she "said in a very loud voice, with her eyes on me, 'That was a terrible thing, the death of Mr. Le,'" to which her husband and son responded in the affirmative. Dao struggles with whether he should reveal his knowledge.

This dilemma seems to be a crucial impetus for Ho's visit, for Ho took the political path and Dao took the peaceful path, paralleling Dao's role in relationship to Thang and Loi's. Dao's conversation with Ho eventually convinces him to let matters be. Ho does not fault him for not doing the "political thing," an absolution that relieves Dao's self-imposed guilt. Dao's consciousness also affirms the importance of things outside of the political. The primary way he resolves this issue is through Ho's inability to remember how to make the pastry glaze. In the afterlife, this problem is what concerns Ho, not the problems of a nation. Dao thinks that Ho wants to accomplish this task for Escoffier, but he is incorrect, which is revealed when Dao asks if Ho is at peace in the afterlife. Dao thinks that Ho's inability to make the glaze—thus Escoffier's displeasure— leads to Ho's disturbed state of mind, but Ho tells Dao, "I have not seen him. This has nothing to do with him, directly." Even Ho doesn't understand what causes him to lack peace. Dao tells him, "You won the country. You know that, don't you?" This response shows that Ho should be satisfied with his life, for he has accomplished something great. Ho, however, is not convinced. "There are no countries here," he says, implying that the act of freeing a country is not all that matters in the grand scheme of things. Perhaps, he seems to

say, living in harmony with one's memories—as Dao is attempting to do—counts for even more.

Richard Eder writes in the *Los Angeles Times Book Review* that Dao "has lived spiritually apart from his country," which causes him confusion. Ho, on the other hand, never learned to make the pastry glaze; doubtless, political concerns and worries took up his mind. Dao, however, did listen to Escoffier's instructions, and he knows why Ho cannot make the glaze correctly. Eder writes, "Butler holds the two failures in equilibrium. To neglect a revolution and to neglect a glaze are two aspects of human limits."

What Dao deems important, in contrast to what Ho finds important, shows the basic tenets of his beliefs. As he concludes the story, "I was only a washer of dishes but I did listen carefully when Monsieur Escoffier spoke. I wanted to understand everything. His kitchen was full of such smells that you knew you had to understand everything or you would be incomplete forever." This hearkens back to Dao's Buddhism. Dao cherishes what is simple and brings harmony—a prayer table, a caring daughter, a pastry glaze. When Dao thinks of the afterlife that he is quickly approaching, he thinks of a village square in Vietnam and a room he shared with his wife in Saigon. "[T]he room was full of a wonderful *scent* [emphasis mine], a sweet smell," which makes him think that "a *mountain* [emphasis mine] of emerald had found its own scent." Dao makes the connection even clearer: "I crossed the room to my wife and we were already old, we had already buried children and grandchildren that we prayed waited for us in that village square at the foot of the *strange mountain* [emphasis mine]." This passage illustrates Dao's intrinsic trust in what is important in life: the ties of family. As he says, "a Vietnamese family is extended as far as the bloodline strings us together, like so many paper lanterns around a village square. And we give off light together. That's the way it has always been in our culture." Many of the immigrants, however, have let the old Vietnamese ways slip, for they "have been in America for a long time." Of the people who surround him, only his oldest daughter, who is a "smart girl," has this understanding "about Vietnamese families."

When Dao confirms his suspicions that Thang and Loi are involved in the murder of the newsman, he does not know how to react. In the past, whenever the two men spoke bitterly of the war and of the foolish trust the South Vietnamese put in the Americans— " We should have taken matters forward . . . and done what needed to be done," they remonstrate— they quickly apologized to Dao. "We're sorry, Grandfather," they would say. "Old times often bring old anger. We are happy our family is living a new life." Dao had always accepted this lie, "glad to have the peace of the family restored." This time, however, Dao cannot deny their true feelings. Loi says to his father, "I would be a coward not to know," most probably referring to knowing the location of the murder weapon, which has been a central topic of their conversation. "Thang laughed and said, 'You have proved yourself no coward.'" This is the point at which Dao embraces the idea of his death. "I wished to fall asleep," he says, "and let go of life somewhere in my dreams and seek my village square."

The night after this event, Ho comes to visit Dao for the third time. Dao gets out of bed to pace with Ho and talk of important ideas and issues, as they did as young men in Paris. Dao confesses his suspicions to Ho. Ho's response to Dao's dilemma about Thang and Loi helps Dao clarify the importance of his obligation to establish harmony in his family, but there is a price Dao must pay for this enforced peace, for he cannot readily live with his knowledge. Suddenly, Ho moves toward Dao and seems to pass through him. "He was very close and the smell was strong and sweet and it was filling my lungs as if from the inside." This shows Dao at the essence of his harmony; he has actually become that treasured "good smell from a strange mountain." He lies down to sleep, prepared for his journey to death. That Dao will die that night is indicated by his pulling down the window shade, one of the story's final actions. This contrasts with one of the story's first actions: "My oldest daughter leaves my shades open, I think so that I will not forget that the sun has risen again in the morning. I am a very old man. She seems to expect that one morning I will simply forget to keep living." Dao states that he "could never die from forgetting." Indeed, Dao's final moments in the story indicate that he can live with his memories of how he has chosen to live his life, but that he cannot live with the knowledge of how his family has chosen to live theirs.

Source: Rena Korb, in an essay for *Short Stories for Students,* Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

Semansky publishes widely in the field of twentieth- century culture and literature. In the following essay, he discusses the different kinds of knowing represented in "A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain."

Robert Olen Butler's story, "A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain," focuses intently on the last phase of an old man's life. In it, we see a character, Dao, tempted away from the Buddhist beliefs that have determined his actions since he was a young man. Butler takes a piece of history—Ho Chi Minh's time working in a hotel in London—and uses it as a conceit in the story, making Dao the friend who went to Europe with him. The story unfolds as a long intermittent dream, with episodes of illusion followed by reciprocal episodes of reality. All the episodes are given equal weight so that, with Dao, the reader must search for as much meaning in the hallucinations as in the waking actions. The story encourages readers to examine the idea that important questions can be approached only through the intellect and its interaction with the tangible world. Through the character of Dao, we see the possibility that deeper meaning resides as much in the symbolic world of dreams as it does in the waking world of concrete things. Most significantly, Dao's sense of smell is used to indicate the presence of truth and beauty, or its absence, as he seeks to understand the final fragments of life left to him.

Dao, who has lived "almost a century," is engaging in the last custom that Vietnamese culture demands of him. It is the custom of taking a week or two to see family and old friends who are still alive so that a formal, final leave-taking can be accomplished before one's death. This ritual presupposes relatively ideal relationships: "A Vietnamese family is extended as far as the bloodline strings us together, like so many paper lanterns around a village square. And we all give off light together." But Dao's real relationships with his daughters, son-in-law, and grandson are problematic. Towards his oldest daughter, with whom he lives in New Orleans, he feels frustration but also gratitude—it is significant that she is the only family member who smells pleasantly of "lavender and fresh bedclothes." Throughout the story, they struggle over the window shades that she insists on keeping open so that the light will be a reminder to him "to keep living." But he bristles at such reminders and retaliates by suggesting she worry more about herself. His younger daughter is more distant, serving primarily to bring her husband and son into Dao's orbit—an orbit that they dramatically threaten by their violent political acts. Specifically, their politics are represented by the Vietnamese Party for the Annihilation of Communism, and Dao becomes convinced that his sonin- law and grandson may be responsible for the murder of a newspaperman whose accepting views of the communist government in Vietnam enraged them. The realization that they might be involved troubles the Buddhist Dao greatly, and he is not happy to have stayed out of the main fray of political conflict for his entire life only to be tempted, at the very end, by an issue of justice that reaches out for him to address.

The anticommunist politics of Dao's immediate family function as counterpoint to the political figure who dominates Dao's hallucinatory nights: Ho Chi Minh. Dao was, or claims to have been, a friend of Ho Chi Minh's in his youth. They went to Europe

together and worked in a London kitchen, Dao as a dishwasher and Ho Chi Minh as an apprentice pastry cook under the great Escoffier. It was there, Dao tells us, that the two of them paced the floors of their rooms together, spoke of Marx and Buddha in equal measure, and saw snow fall for the first time. Ho Chi Minh serves as a foil to Dao in the story; the political against the spiritual, a life of action and intervention against a life of acceptance and peace. Now, as Dao dies in New Orleans, Ho Chi Minh, long dead himself, begins to appear nightly, his hands covered with sugar, his mind distressed over the minutiae of forgotten recipes he once knew perfectly in the days when he worked in Escoffier's kitchen.

His presence can be read as a reference intended to raise the specter of ideological division that comes between Dao and his other male family members. Ho Chi Minh's communist regime marked the return of Vietnamese rule in Vietnam after French colonialism. His rise, and the resulting upheaval, represent the world of human action which Dao's life has eschewed. The life of his senses has always been of primary importance to him, and his son-in-law and grandson, caught up in—and spiritually impaired by—their passionate political beliefs, represent a world that he will not miss. When Dao reminds Ho Chi Minh that he did in fact win the country over, his friend merely shrugs, "There are no countries here," he says, indicating that in death there are no antithetic forces. Nevertheless, the politics of Dao's family and formerly of Ho Chi Minh create a context in which Dao's struggle resounds. Is he right not to become involved? In point of fact, his grandson always smelled wrong to him: "I could smell his mother's milk, sour on his breath . . . the boy sighed on my shoulder and I turned my face away from the smell of him." In this way we see evidence of Dao's repressed political self: he rejects the grandchild who will eventually and vehemently reject the communist political agenda Dao himself witnessed Ho Chi Minh solidifying.

Although Dao hesitates to become involved in the world as a political person, in his final days he is forced to see how political ideology has stripped some of his family members of their humanity. He comes up against the limitations of his spiritual beliefs and engages in elliptical conversations with the ghostly Ho Chi Minh in an attempt to find out if in fact he himself has chosen the wrong path. Ho Chi Minh mirrors his own dismay: Ho is unable to remember the things he once knew effortlessly, caught mid-process with sugar-coated hands and unable to do the next step in the recipe. The Ho Chi Minh that appears to Dao seems to have no understanding of why the political world once intrigued him so utterly. The man who once had "eight simple requests for the Western world concerning Indochina" is helplessly covered in a simple syrup glaze and beseeches Dao to tell him whatever he can remember of the fondant recipe. During these scenes, a powerfully sweet smell never leaves Dao's nostrils; a smell the reader might eventually ascribe to friendship or even love between the two men.

Even before Dao begins to suspect his son-inlaw and grandson of murder, Dao's idea of harmonious family life had been ruptured, in particular by the losses of his wife and a beloved infant son. A village square referred to early in the story as a prayed-for meeting place after death, where families' lights might burn together, is evoked after Ho Chi Minh's first visit to Dao. "I crossed the room to my wife and we were already old, we had already buried children and grandchildren that we prayed waited for us in that

village square at the foot of that strange mountain . . . I want to be with her in that square and with the rest of those we'd buried, the tiny limbs and the sullen eyes and the gray faces of the puzzled children and surprised adults and weary old people who have gone before us, who know the secrets now." The sweet smell that is present to Dao whenever Ho Chi Minh appears, attributable to the sugary glaze on his hands, floods Dao as he remembers a night with his wife. It was a night when they were still in Vietnam, and bombs were falling and the air should have smelled of tar and motorcycle exhaust and cordite, but instead smelled, impossibly, of "a wonderful scent, a sweet smell that made her sit up, for she sensed it too." In this lyrical passage we see Dao's love for his now-dead wife, and their love for their lives, made all the more intense by the threat of bombs falling near them. The presence of death ratchets up the intensity of what they are experiencing, and Dao's wife becomes for him a piece of that fleeting energy as he clings to her. He remembers that the smell "had nothing to do with flowers, but instead reminded us that flowers were always ready to fall into dust."

As a Hoa Hao Buddhist, Dao believes that the mystery of joy is very simple, and can be expressed by four Chinese characters that mean "a good scent from a strange mountain." In some sense, the story is an explanation of these words. Dao's most meaningful, most joyful moments were those he shared simply with the wife he loved, and those he spent in friendship with Ho Chi Minh. His wish now is to be with them, and with others whose actions in his life moved him. In his mind's eye, he gathers them all together in the village square:

[T]he Vietnamese boy from a village near my own who died of a fever in the Indian ocean and the natives in Dakar who were forced by colonial officials to swim out to our ship in shark-infested waters to the moorings and two were killed before our eyes without a French regret. Ho was very moved by this and I want those men in our square and I want the Frenchman too, who called Ho "monsieur" for the first time. In these images we see the four Chinese characters put in terms of relationships. Out of strangeness, out of love for the other, comes beauty. It is not the mountain one knows but the mountain one is not familiar with that strikes at the heart.

In the final scene in the story Ho Chi Minh visits Dao for the last time and Dao reveals his anxiety about the "political killing" he believes his son-in-law and grandson are involved in. Ho reminds Dao that he has never "done the political thing" when choosing to act. A sudden, strong scent of sweetness fills the air, and Ho disappears for the last time. Dao purposefully closes the shade that his daughter has left up and "slipped into bed, quite gracefully, I felt, I was quite wonderfully graceful, and I lie here now waiting for sleep." The permeating sweet scent and the sense of grace tell us that Dao has found that his path is the right one—he will never say a word to anyone about his suspicions about his son-in-law and grandson, and he has, until the end, managed to gracefully elide being involved in things he believes can end only in despair. He recalls Ho's lost fondant recipe in its particulars, and knows that when he joins his friend he will have something for him. As if "a mountain of emerald had found its own scent," Dao is filled with certainty and joy—that very soon he will know whether his lost son, waiting in the village square for him, will come on tottering infant's legs, or as a man, eager to greet him.

Source: Chris Semansky, in an essay for *Short Stories for Students,* Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #3

Hamilton is an English teacher at Cary Academy, an innovative private school in Cary, North Carolina. In this essay she examines how violence and death are subsumed under lyrical beauty in Robert Olen Butler's "A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain."

Robert Olen Butler has asked not to be categorized as a "Vietnam writer." "I'm a Vietnam novelist in the way Monet is a lily-pad painter," he insists. "For me, Vietnam is simply a metaphor in which I'm able to explore the human condition. Whatever Americans' attitudes are about Vietnam, historically or politically, are of no consequence to me or my writing." Certainly, the title story of his collection *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain* seems to contain none of the didactic ghastliness that Americans have come to associate with literature about the Vietnam War. The story alters reality, portraying one of the key players of the Vietnam War, Ho Chi Minh, in a most puzzling and provocative way, as one who returns from the dead to take his old friend Dao to the afterworld. Ho is like Charon of Greek mythology, who ferries the dead across the river Styx—the river of hate—to the afterworld, except Ho has an odd preoccupation with trying to remember a recipe. His obsession begins and ends the story, yet has only a tenuous connection to Dao and his real-life concerns. Nevertheless, as Dao gets into bed and contemplates his passage to the afterlife, he thinks about the recipe:

He and I will be together again and perhaps we can help each other. I know now what it is that he has forgotten. He has used confectioners' sugar for his glaze fondant and he should be using granulated sugar. I was only a washer of dishes but I did listen carefully when Monsieur Escoffier spoke. I wanted to understand everything. His kitchen was full of such smells that you knew you had to understand everything or you would be incomplete forever.

Dao's peaceful Buddhist mind has recalled the details that his violent former friend has forgotten, and both of them have succeeded in putting the Vietnam War behind them. "A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain" is not about the war itself, but about its aftermath, the diaspora of Vietnamese families and their struggle to recover tranquility and harmony, to cross, in effect, the river Styx, and to move beyond hate. The story's art consists in showing that it is possible to bury the horrors of war beneath a patina of lyrical beauty.

Butler's portrayal of Ho Chi Minh stands in stark contrast to the Ho Chi Minh of historical memory. Ho Chi Minh was a ruthless and fearsome leader who sacrificed millions of Vietnamese lives for the sake of a free and unified Vietnam. He began with a war of attrition against France in the 1950s, boasting, "You can kill ten of my men for every one I kill of yours, yet even at those odds, you will lose and I will win." In 1954, he won a decisive battle at Dien Bien Phu, having sustained more than twice as many losses as France suffered. Then, when political measures failed to reunite Vietnam under communism, Ho conducted another war of attrition in which approximately three million North and South Vietnamese soldiers lost their lives. Butler's Ho Chi Minh, however, is a

changed man. Having lost his political fervor, he now recognizes the futility of human strife.

Dao's imminent death lies at the heart of the story. It is a story told with beauty and grace, through the vehicle of Dao's undeclared battle with his daughter Lam over the window shade. His daughter wants it open all night, so that he "will not forget that the sun has risen again in the morning." Lam thinks that he may "simply forget to keep living," so she opens the shade to bring light and life to her aging father. Never in the story does Lam display outright fear or grief about her father's death, though her love and sympathy are obvious when she wordlessly strokes his head as he cries about old memories. They have a traditional Vietnamese family relationship, full of dignity and respect, where every gesture matters and is enacted with grace and care. Because of this attention to gesture, Dao understands the symbolic significance of his daughter's determination to open the shade.

Looking at the shade triggers Dao's memory, taking him back to a time he had held his infant grandson Loi. He remembers having turned his head away from the baby's sour breath, a gesture of rejection. His son-in-law Thang had noticed his averted face and wanted his wife to take their son away from Dao. Now guilt and a rekindling of his Buddhist desire for family harmony cause Dao to realize that he "will never say a word" about his son-in-law and grandson's involvement in Mr. Le's murder, thus resolving a conflict that would have marred Dao's peaceful exit from life as well as perpetuated the disruption in the Vietnamese community.

At the end of the story, Dao closes the shade before slipping into bed, feeling "quite wonderfully graceful" and implicitly ready for death. In shutting out the world, Dao enters the tranquil state of mind necessary to leave his life. Mr. Le's fate slips from his mind as murder and hate take a back seat to repose. Dao's death promises good things—release from sadness, revival of his lost friendship with Ho Chi Minh, and the chance to see his wife and other lost loved ones in "that village square at the foot of the strange mountain." His relatives will accept the passing of a man nearing one hundred years old. When the symbolic shade is drawn indicating Dao's readiness for death, the reader senses relief and acceptance through the medium of Butler's serene language and images that lend beauty and transcendence to death.

The shade may also carry symbolic meaning in the realm of writing and art, since it acts as a medium that filters what is seen. All art is a distortion of reality, projected through the artist's lens. Some critics have disparaged Butler's literary lens as having too soft a focus, ignoring art's role to promote social change. Reviewer Boyd Tonkin writing for *New Statesman & Society* notes that in Butler's collection "a whiff of sentiment drifts like incense through the book," but "precious little bluntness," implying by this that Butler's delicate stories lack the expected intensity, as though the stories miss their point. However, Robert Olen Butler's writings do not espouse a political or social agenda. He comments in an online chat that "The 'point' an artist makes is to articulate a vision of the world not through ideas but through the reshaping of moment-to-moment sensual experience into an organically whole and resonating object that is a novel or story." Although he chooses the tormenting reality of the Vietnamese Diaspora as his subject,

he transforms it into moments of sensual beauty, not a manifesto. The shade that filters vision symbolizes what he has to do to accomplish this.

The conflict over Dao's awareness that his sonin- law and grandson participated in the murder of Mr. Le involves another kind of "covering" that filters vision: the eyelid. In this case, Dao somewhat deceitfully pretends to sleep, his eyes half closed, while actually listening to and observing his family discuss the details of the murder. Dao narrates, "I had stopped listening to the small talk of these people and I had let my eyes half close, though I could still see them clearly and I was very alert." Under the guise of sleeping, Dao hears the minutest inflections of voice and perceives through halfclosed eyelids the subtle facial gestures his family uses to invite each other to "listen beneath" the words for coded messages.

The family would not want him to hear their talk, because they know his sympathies lie with the dead man, who had "recently made the fatal error . . . of writing that it was time to accept the reality of the communist government and begin to talk with them." Dao agrees with this spokesman of the politically divided North and South Vietnamese communities in his Louisiana town. He says, "I would not have been afraid to say that Mr. Le was right." Dao's daughter Lam clearly knows of her father's sympathies, for she tries to cover up her husband and son's discussion of the murder weapon by saying loudly, "that was a terrible thing, the death of Mr. Le." Dao's support of Mr. Le is a huge concession for a Hoa Hao Buddhist, who were militant supporters of a democratic Vietnam. Factions of Hoa Hao Buddhists had participated in guerrilla resistance to France during its long period of colonization in Indochina; and when the communists entered South Vietnam, Hoa Hao Buddhists resisted them as well. This sect of Buddhism espoused patriotic loyalty, and although they tended to concentrate among the agricultural part of the populace and to advocate a socialistic agenda for the poor, Hoa Hao Buddhists opposed communist rule in South Vietnam because of China's dominance in communist Asia. Dao holds fast to his Hoa Hao political leanings, but he also recognizes, with Mr. Le, that to regain a unified Vietnam, it will be necessary to end the hatred against communists and seek harmony through cooperation.

The image of Dao eavesdropping with halfclosed eyes recalls the meditating Buddha, the epitome of tranquility. This image combined with Dao's impassive narration transform the telling of a potentially volatile situation into a graceful scene. Dao exercises a great deal of Buddhist self-control to keep from responding angrily to his own family involvement in killing a man he liked and whose political realism he approved. But Dao narrates the tale in lyrical simplicity, like a fairy tale, adding poignant details about the way the newspaperman had embraced American culture by buying a Chevrolet pickup truck. He defuses the anger of the story and makes his family's culpability the key issue. His decision to remain quiet about it gets portrayed as a triumph of Buddhist harmony. It is as though he can repair his family by overlooking this crime, just as Mr. Le had suggested that the rift in larger Vietnamese family can only be repaired by overlooking the war crimes of Vietnam's recent past. Dao's view through half-closed eyes blocks out the brutality of the murder, drawing the reader's attention instead to the slow dance of family gestures and the importance of maintaining family harmony.

Another time that Dao chose harmony over action occurred when he followed the Buddhist path while Ho followed the path of politics. Now, eighty years later, Ho forgives Dao for parting with him, saying softly, "You felt that you'd taken action. I am no longer in a position to question another soul's choice." When Dao informs Ho (who had died before South Vietnam fell to his forces) that his communist program had "won the country," Ho merely shrugs in response, "There are no countries here." Ho's statement reads like a passive polemic against war, and it affirms Dao's chosen path. The symbol of half-closed eyes that filters out bad things represents a path toward tranquility, just as the closed shade represents a way to transcend worldly cares completely, through death.

Cynthia McCown, reviewing the collected stories of *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain* for *America* in 1993 observes that the stories are "calculated to be positive, even uplifting," and she warns readers that "it may reflect too much of the romantic for some tastes." McCown's tactful criticism suggests that Butler's stories romanticize ugly truth into undue beauty. The hauntingly evocative, almost blithe title story portrays a touching friendship, far removed by the Vietnam War, yet deeply affected by it. The narrator voices its central philosophy when he says, "The Hoa Hao believes that the maintenance of our spirits is very simple, and the mystery of joy is simple, too." Ho Chi Minh seeks to recover joy through remembering the glaze recipe, in an effort to recapture his lost past and the simple joy of making pastry glaze. Dao, with his Buddhist approach to life, eventually remembers details that Ho has forgotten because Dao was alive to the joy even then. Although he was only "a washer of dishes," he listened carefully and now he seems to "understand everything." He follows the dictate of Hoa Hao Buddhists to live the simple life, smelling the "good scent from a strange mountain."

The scent of sugar on Ho symbolically represents the joy of simple pleasures, including the pleasure of creating. Dao's philosophy, to live simply but observe carefully, echoes in the advice Robert Olen Butler recently offered to young writers, "You need to ravenously store up sense impressions and then call them up in a trancelike state of creation, working from the dream space and not the analytical mind." Like Dao, Butler too chose the path of trying to take everything in, to listen, to observe, and to understand.

Robert Olen Butler's story puts esthetic concerns for harmony and grace in direct competition with political loyalty and action, and esthetics wins. Politics, war, anger, death, and murder are subsumed under art, coated in sugar, in effect, like Uncle Ho's hands. Through the images of the shade and half-closed eyes, Butler suggests that art must filter life and obscure or transform what is not harmonious. The symbol of the sugar-coated hands and lost recipe allude to the craft of art, a craft that demands understanding "everything" so that the artist can take ingredients from reality—lily pads or the Vietnam War—and transform them into something sensuously beautiful. Butler's story, "A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain" gently reminds the reader that living with and creating harmony are more necessary than fueling old angers.

Source: Carole Hamilton, in an essay for *Short Stories for Students,* Gale Group, 2001.

Topics for Further Study

Read *The Deuce,* Butler's novel about a half- Asian, half-American boy living in the United States. How does Thanh-Tony's experiences compare with Dao's? How are their perceptions of Vietnam and America alike and different?

Dao's son-in-law and grandson hold very different points of view than Dao, both toward their native land and toward Americanization. Imagine that you are telling the story of the newsman's murder from the point of view of either of these other characters. What would you include in the story? What would this character feel about his actions?

Conduct research to find out more about the Vietnamese immigrant experience in the United States. Investigate how they came here, where they live, what types of communities they form, and how they have adjusted to life here.

Find out more about Ho Chi Minh. What role did he play in his country's history? How do you think the fate of Vietnam would have been different if Ho had not done what he did?

Do you think it is fair of Dao to have refused to take part in the political troubles that embroiled his country for decades? Why or why not? What kinds of difficulties would fighting have presented for a man like Dao? What kinds of problems would he face for remaining uninvolved?

What do you learn about Vietnamese culture and tradition from the story? What would you like to know more about, and why?

Read another story from *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain,* and compare its narrator to Dao.

Find out about the ways that ordinary Vietnamese were affected by the Vietnam War. Choose one segment of society to focus on. Summarize your findings.

What Do I Read Next?

Tim O'Brien is another writer of Butler's generation who served in Vietnam. He has also written a collection of interconnected stories, *The Things They Carried.* These stories focus on a platoon of foot soldiers, recounting their experiences in Vietnam and afterwards.

The author of the screenplays for *Apocalypse Now and Platoon,* Michael Herr covered the Vietnam War for *Esquire* magazine. Many people consider his book *Dispatches* (1991) to be the best account of the Vietnam War.

Henry Roth's 1934 novel *Call It Sleep* tells of the experience of a young Jewish immigrant living in a ghetto in New York. After years of going unnoticed, critics and scholars rediscovered the book in the 1950s, and today it is viewed as a modern classic.

Le Ly Hayslip's *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* (1993) details her experiences during the Vietnam War, describes her journey to the United States, and chronicles her return to her homeland in 1986 to search for her family. Hayslip recounts the terrible ordeal that she underwent during this period and also demonstrates the strength that got her through it.

Sorrow of War (1996) by Bao Ninh is the first novel to tell about the war from a North Vietnamese perspective. This quasi-autobiographical story tells about a North Vietnamese infantryman who is trying to purge his horrible memories through the act of writing.

Le Minh Khue's short stories are collected in *The Stars, the Earth, the River* (1997). These are fourteen stories that center on the Vietnam War. It is the first volume in the *Voices from Vietnam* series.

The Other Side of Heaven: Post-War Fiction by Vietnamese and American Writers (1995), edited by Wayne Karlin et al., gives alternate views of the war and its effect on the Vietnamese and the American societies, residents, and cultures.

Further Study

Haines, David W., ed., *Refugees as Immigrants: Cambodians, Laotians, and Vietnamese in America,* Rowman & Littlefield, 1989.

A collection of pieces on the Indo-Chinese experience in the United States.

Karnow, Stanley, *Vietnam: A History,* 2d ed., Penguin, 1997.

A definitive history of the Vietnam War including personal tales, and political and military events.

Nordgren, Joe, "Robert Olen Butler," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography,* Vol. 173, Gale, 1996.

An essay on Butler's writings.

Thomas, C. David, ed., *As Seen By Both Sides: American and Vietnamese Artists Look at the War,* University of Massachusetts Press, 1991.

This unique book looks at the Vietnam War through artistic renderings.

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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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