The Half-Skinned Steer Study Guide

The Half-Skinned Steer by E. Annie Proulx

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

E. Annie Proulx's "The Half-Skinned Steer" was first published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in November 1997. It was originally written at the invitation of the Nature Conservancy, which asked Proulx to visit one of its preserves and then contribute a story, inspired by her visit, to *Off the Beaten Path* (1998), an anthology of short fiction. This assignment also inspired Proulx to write *Close Range: Wyoming Stories* (1999), in which the story was included. By the time it was published, Proulx was already famous for another collection of short stories and three novels, including *The Shipping News* (1993), which won both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award. Like many of Proulx's works, "The Half-Skinned Steer" features gritty realism in a harsh, natural setting.

"The Half-Skinned Steer" concerns Mero, an eighty-three-year-old man who left his family's ranch sixty years earlier and who must face his past when he is called back to attend his brother's funeral. The story examines human mortality, the power of memory to affect one's life, and the inevitability of fate.

The particularly graphic cattle-slaughter scenes in the story recall the brutality of Chicago's stockyards in Upton Sinclair's 1906 novel, *The Jungle.* Proulx's story was written in the mid-to late 1990s, when the prospect of diseased beef led to fear of the so-called mad cow disease in the United States, as well as to a lawsuit involving popular talk-show host Oprah Winfrey. The 1990s were also a decade in which the government, nutritionists, and even individual consumers reexamined the long-held belief that meat is an essential part of one's diet. "The Half-Skinned Steer" was included in the *The Best American Short Stories 1998* and *The Best American Short Stories of the Century,* which were published by Houghton Mifflin in paperback in 1998 and 2000, respectively.

Author Biography

E. Annie Proulx was born on August 22, 1935, in Norwich, Connecticut, into a family of farmers, mill workers, inventors, and artists whose ancestors had lived there for three centuries. Proulx's mother, a painter and amateur naturalist, instilled in Proulx an appreciation for nature and the details of life. Because of her father's career in textiles, Proulx's family constantly moved, so she lived in several states, including North Carolina, Vermont, Maine, and Rhode Island. She earned a bachelor's degree in history from the University of Vermont in 1969 and then went on to graduate school at Sir George Williams University (now Concordia University) in Montreal. In 1973, she earned her master's degree in history, and in 1975, she passed her doctoral oral examinations. However, she did not finish her dissertation because there were few teaching jobs in history at the time. Instead, Proulx turned to freelance journalism. While living with a friend in a rural shack on the Canadian border in northern Vermont, Proulx wrote a variety of articles, book reviews, and on-assignment nonfiction books. She also founded and edited *Behind the Times,* a rural Vermont newspaper (1984-1986). Through all of this, she struggled to make enough money to support her three sons.

At the same time, she began to write fiction. She published several short stories in magazines, and in 1988, the stories were collected in *Heart Songs and Other Stories.* As they would continue to do, the critics praised Proulx's narrative gifts, harsh landscapes, and tough but compelling stories. In 1989, Proulx began writing fiction fulltime. In 1992, she published her first novel, *Postcards,* which won the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction in 1993. Proulx was the first woman to win this prestigious award. However, it was her next novel, 1993's *The Shipping News,* which made Proulx a household name. The book was a popular success, it won the National Book Award for fiction (1993) and the Pulitzer Prize for fiction (1994), and it was adapted into a feature film (2001). In 1999, she published *Close Range: Wyoming Stories,* which includes "The Half-Skinned Steer." This story was also included in *The Best American Short Stories 1998* and The *Best American Short Stories of the Century.* Proulx currently lives and works in Wyoming, a setting that allows her to pursue her many outside interests, which include hunting, fishing, canoeing, and bicycling. Her novel That Old Ace in the Hole was published in December 2002.

Plot Summary

"The Half-Skinned Steer" begins with a short summary of Mero Corn's life, from the day he left his family's dilapidated Wyoming ranch to his life as a successful retiree in Massachusetts sixty years later. One morning, he gets a call from his nephew's wife, Louise, who tells Mero that his brother, Rollo, has been clawed to death by an emu. Despite Louise's misgivings, Mero says that he will drive from Massachusetts to the funeral in Wyoming. As Mero packs for the trip, the story reverts to one of the many flashbacks of Mero's life on the ranch. Mero remembers his father, his brother, and his father's girlfriend at the time. Mero imagines the girlfriend as a horse, given her characteristics, which he comments on throughout the story. In his memory, the girlfriend tells a gruesome story about Tin Head, a hapless rancher, and a half-skinned steer. The night following her storytelling, Mero has a disturbing dream, and he flees the ranch the next morning. Back in the present, Mero struggles with road construction and a speeding ticket. In the next flashback, Mero continues to examine his flight from the ranch and thinks that he left because of the love triangle between his father, his father's girlfriend, and Rollo.

Back in the present, Mero gets confused and causes an accident, wrecking his Cadillac in the process and using his wealth to buy a replacement. That night, he has a nightmare about his family's ranch. The next day, Mero reaches Wyoming. In another flashback, his father's girlfriend continues her story about Tin Head, who half-skins a steer that he presumes is dead. In the present, the bad weather and mountain altitude cause Mero to get fatigued while driving. He gets close to the ranch and starts looking for the entrance. In another flashback, the girlfriend continues her story about Tin Head, who goes out to finish skinning the steer. However, the steer is gone. Back in the present, Mero cannot find the entrance to his family's ranch and then gets stuck in the snow. He tries to free the car. In another flashback, the girlfriend finishes her story, explaining that the half-skinned steer escaped onto the open range and that as soon as Tin Head saw the mutilated animal's hate-filled gaze, he knew that he and his family were cursed. Back in the present, Mero breaks a window and kills the car's engine while trying to free the car. Half-frozen and feeling extremely weak, Mero realizes that he is doomed. He sees some cattle in the field next to him, and in his dying delusion, he thinks one of them is the halfskinned steer from the story and that the animal has come to get him.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

Half-Skinned Steer is about a man in his eighties, Mero, who struggles with his past when he is forced to revisit his childhood home in Wyoming after his brother passes away. The story's narration moves between past and present. The protagonist compares his present life to a story he remembers hearing from his father's girlfriend while he lived on the ranch. He describes himself in his youth as a hustler. Mero grew up on a ranch on the south hinge of Big Horns. He left the ranch in 1936, went to war and married three times after retuning from war got. He made money in boilers, by cleaning air ducts and through smart investments. When he retired, Mero went into local politics and managed to run his term and exit without scandal. He never returned to Wyoming to visit his father or his brother Rollo. He knew they were bankrupt and ruined and had no urgency to see this for himself.

One day, when Mero still lived on the ranch, his father decided that Wyoming was too tough to run cows. The countryside carried the burden of mountain lions, sinkholes, high winds and soil that wouldn't grow hay. Mero's father opted out of this work and took a job delivering mail. He looked guilty when he put bills into neighbours mailboxes and wasn't well suited to this either. Their father's mail job left Mero and Rollo to take care of the ranch. Their breeding herd was down in numbers and the price of a cow had decreased but the two brothers kept on. They hoped that their father would move to the nearby city, Ten Sleep, with his girlfriend, leaving them the ranch and an opportunity to turn things around.

Sixty years after leaving the ranch, Mero lives as a vegetarian in Woolfoot, Massachusetts. One morning, Mero gets a phone call from a woman named Louise. She explains that she is Tick Corn's wife. Tick is Rollo's son. The woman tells Mero that Rollo has passed away. An angry Emu killed him, although he was already ill from colon cancer. She tells Mero that Rollo still owned the half the ranch, and she and Tick had been running it for the past ten years. She tells him that Rollo sold the ranch to the Girl Scouts years ago, but after a mountain lion dragged off one of the scouts, the Scouts sold the ranch to the neighbouring Banner Ranch. The Banner Ranch sold it to an Australian businessman who renamed it "Wyoming Down Under" and set it up as a tourist ranch. However, living away from the ranch and having bad luck with managers caused problems for the businessman, and he sold half the ranch back to Rollo. She tells Mero that Rollo had wanted to call his brother but never got around to it. When he died, Tick looked up Mero's number on the computer. Mero tells Louise he will come to the ranch for the funeral. He doesn't like to fly and will drive. It's a four-day drive through the winter weather, and he will arrive on Saturday. Louise is surprised at this because of his age. Mero is older than Rollo. Mero intends to drive his Cadillac. He always drives a Cadillac.

In the story' first flashback, Mero recalls his ill-tempered, drunk father and his father's trashy girlfriend. He cannot remember the girlfriend's name, but he recalls her bulging horse-like eyes, wiry neck veins, and bloody fingers from her nail-biting habit. She was a heavy smoker and a storyteller. Her tales were always about hardships and mayhem. Mero's brother Rollo ogled her, likely because no other women were around. Mero partly left to find a woman of his own. He recalls a story that she had told them just before Mero left the ranch when he was twenty-three and Rollo was twenty. Mero recalls his father this day, with his gangster face, his crushed rodeo nose, stub ear, scar-crossed eyebrows and his curled hat brim. His father has been dead fifty years. He had been buried in his mailman sweater. The day that the girlfriend shares the story of "Tin Head," Mero's father sits at the table, getting drunk on Everclear with a peeled willow stick in it to add bitterness. The girlfriend begins her story. Tin Head lived near Dubious on a small ranch with some horses and cows when her father was a young boy. He had a wife and children. The odd thing about him was that he had a metal plate in his head from an incident when he fell down cement stairs. Things always went wrong on Tin Head's ranch. His chickens changed colour to an odd blue shade. The cows were born with three legs. His kids were born piebald. His wife always cried for blue dishes. Tin Head was a lazy man. He never finished what he started.

The narrator reveals the flashback piece by piece. In present day, as Mero drives toward the funeral on the interstate, he recalls having nightmares the night that he heard the "Tin Head" story. He woke up in a sweat the morning after hearing the tale. He was thinking about how their bad luck with the cows on the ranch could go on forever. He wondered what his chances might be in another state. That morning, Mero decided to leave the ranch for good. As the years passed, Mero always wondered whether Rollo stole his father's girlfriend. Mero is making good time on the highway, but a cop pulls him over and gives him a speeding ticket.

Mero recalls that his interest in women began at age eleven or twelve, a few days after he showed an archaeologist around the Wyoming mountains where the rocks had red and black native drawings. The archaeologist pointed out different images in the drawings to young Mero, including bison skulls, mountain sheep, a dragonfly and a vulva. Mero didn't know what a vulva is. He looked it up in a dictionary at school and was embarrassed when he read the description. The image was burned in him, peaking a new interest in the opposite sex.

By Thursday night, Mero's travels place him on the outskirts of Des Moines. He stays the night in a cinder block motel room. Mero sets the alarm, but his own breathing wakes him at 5:15 a.m. It's a cold morning. Light slants down into the room as Mero makes instant coffee in the bathroom. He gets into his Cadillac and leaves, but he misses the westbound ramp. He thinks that he spots the motel he just came from, but it's a different motel with a similar sign. He veers for another interstate ramp and collides with a truck. A stretch limo hits him from behind, and the limo is rear-ended by another vehicle. At the point of impact, Mero's airbag hits him in the face, causing tiny drops of blood to spot his shirt. He watches his car be towed away after the accident,. Mero takes a taxi to a car dealership and buys a black Cadillac similar to his but a few years

older. Mero buys cars like cigarettes. He doesn't care that the used car is inferior. He would buy another on the trip home.

A full moon rises a half hour past Kearney, Nebraska. Mero feels his swollen nose and tender chin from the accident. Mero pulls into a motel. He drinks whiskey with hot tap water before bed to help him sleep. He hadn't eaten all day. He hates road food. Mero dreamt of the ranch house that night. In his dream, all the furniture had been removed. Troops in dirty white uniforms fight in the yard. Guns break the window glass and force the floorboards apart. Below the floor he sees galvanized tubs filled with dark, coagulated fluid. Mero wakes the next morning. It's Saturday, and he has four hundred miles left to go. He eats the road food he despises. He crosses the state line and heads for Cheyenne for the first time in sixty years. He knows the place well despite all the changes. He travels through a familiar railroad town, parks in front of a phone booth and calls Louise to say he is running late. Mero is calm at his age. He has lost his young man's anger. He had always told his wives how hard it was to leave the ranch the day he hit the road. Now, thirty miles outside of Cheyenne, Mero sees the first sign for the "Down Under Ranch." The sign warns that the ranch will not be reopened until May 31.

In the story's next flashback, Rollo asks his father's girlfriend to continue explaining what happened to Tin Head. His drunk father leaves the room. Tension breaks when he leaves a room. The sons become ordinary people to whom nothing ever happened. The girlfriend washes a dish in the sink, waiting for Rollo and Mero's father to return before she continues her story. The father comes back and sits down, and she picks up the story where she left off. Every year, Tin Head butchered one of his steers and the family would live off the steer all winter. One day out by the barn, Tin Head hit one of his steers with an axe, tied its back legs and hoisted the steer up. He put a tub under the steer to catch the blood and began to bleed out the steer. Once he felt that it had bled out enough, he started skinning, beginning with the head. Tin Head didn't cut off the steer's head, but he did cut out the tongue. He continued skinning, peeling the hide back. When it was time to start siding, which was the tougher part, Tin Head started thinking about dinner. Tin Head left the half-skinned steer on the ground and went inside to eat dinner. He ate chicken and dumplings made from one of his blue chickens.

In the present, Mero is driving through a winter storm, barely able to see out his car window. He knows the ranch is near. He remembers the shape of the ranch and how it looked. He recalls how he and Rollo shot two mountain lions the winter before Mero left. As night arrives, the snow causes Mero to drive with caution. He has not forgotten how to drive in the mountains in winter, but he begins to sweat anxiously as the wind rocks his car. The altitude makes him dizzy. He has twelve miles before he will reach Ten Sleep. Twenty miles away from the ranch, Mero sees another sign for the Wyoming Down Under. Everything beyond his headlights is blurred, but the road seems familiar to him. It has the same shape and sentinel rocks as it did in his youth. The place possesses an eerie, dream-like quality.

Mero, driving on an unmarked road through the darkness, spots the gate to the neighbouring Banner Ranch. The gate is undamaged by the weather. He doesn't see a turnoff to the ranch. He watches for familiar spots. Mero backtracks, but he can't see the

Banner Ranch gate. His tire rolls over a boulder and sinks into a hole. He spins his tires but is stuck. He decides to sit there until light, and then he will walk to the Banner place and ask for coffee. He figures he is about three miles from the gate, and it's another ten miles from the gate to the ranch house. It will be a difficult walk in the winter cold. Mero will be patient. He decides to run the car in intervals to keep warm. He falls asleep for half an hour and wakes up shivering and cramped. He turns on the car lights and gets out. He examines the tire and sees he needs three flat rocks to hoist up the car. He walks through the snow to find the rocks.

The tale of Tin Head is resolved in the story's final flashback. After dinner, Tin Head took a nap and then went outside to finish skinning the steer, but the steer was gone. Only the tongue and tub of blood remained on the ground. He first thought that someone stole the steer. He looked around for footprints but there were none. He saw something walking stiffly and slowly in the distance. He saw that it was the half raw steer walking with the bunched hide dangling from its body. The steer made no sound as it stopped and looked at Tin Head. Red eyes glared at Tin Head with pure hate. Tin Head knew that he would pay for this. His family and generations after would all pay for his deed. He imagined that even his house would blow away or burn up in payment for his evil.

In the present, Mero tries to find his way around. He knows he is on the ranch. He can feel it. He thinks he may be at a lower ranch entrance. He finds the rocks he seeks and sees something moving beyond the barbwire in the distance. He grasps at the door handle to his car but it's locked. He sees his keys inside the ignition. He picks up a rock, smashes the window and reaches for the keys. After, he notices that the passenger side was not locked and wonders why he struggled to reach for the keys instead of unlocking the driver side door. Mero is dizzy from thirst and hunger. He has eaten only once in the past two days. He puts his car into reverse and slowly turns on the gas. The car steadies into the track, but the tires slip and spin in the deep snow. Mero spins the tires until they smoke. The rear wheel of the car spins sideways into a two-foot ditch and the engine dies. Mero thinks that maybe he can make the walk to the Banner Ranch. Perhaps another driver will see him walking. He is hopeful.

Mero's tire track show a faint pattern in the snow on the main road. He looks out over the county under the moonlight. He sees the cliffs, the snow rising off the prairies, the glittering sagebrushes and a tangle of black willows at the creek that bunch like dead hair. He walks past the cattle field beside the road. His shoes are filled with snow, and he is walking against the wind. Mero's eyes begin to tear. He notices one of the cows from the herd inside the fence is keeping pace with him. Mero walks slower, and the animal slows down. Mero stops, and the animal stops and looks at him. In the wintry light Mero looks at the cow in disbelief. It seems that the half-skinned steer's red eye had been watching him all this time.

Analysis

Half-Skinned Steer by Annie Proulx is a well renowned short fiction piece. Proulx explains that the story is based on an Icelandic folktale called "Porgeir's Bull." This

folktale accounts for the foundation of the Tin Head story. The author adapts the setting and present-day characters to reflect the history of the Wyoming region where she currently resides. The story mixes the present-day setting with a series of flashbacks that reveal a turning point in Mero the protagonist's life and foreshadow Mero's final epiphany about his family connection to the fable of "Tin Head." The story of the cursed man reflects his family's hardships and the fate of his self and his brother.

In the Tin Head story, a man's laziness leads to evil. Tin Head begins to skin a steer without properly killing it. When he leaves the steer behind to have his dinner, the steer awakens and leaves. When Tin Head finds the steer, the animal looks at him with vengeance in its eyes. Tin Head knows that he and his family will pay for his mistake. To the surprise of Mero and Rollo, the storyteller ends the tale here, leaving them to wonder what happens later. This story frames Mero's decision to leave the family ranch. The lack of closure to the Tin Head story foreshadows that the steer's revenge will find its way to Mero's family. Mero's sense that he will pay for abandoning the ranch strengthens this notion.

Mero finds out that his brother Rollo was killed by Emu, the first evidence that the curse is among them. This ties the Corn family to the fable early in the story and foreshadows Mero's similar fate with his confrontation with the steer. The fact that Rollo wanted to reach his brother but hadn't done so yet implies that his death was unexpected. As Mero anticipates his brother's funeral, the author writes that he will see his brother lowered into a red Wyoming hole. This is the colour of the soil in this region, but it also serves as a symbol for Rollo's violent death.

Like Mero, Rollo also wants to abandon the ranch. He sells it, but, it ends up with Rollo again after it switches through different hands. Mero, who left the ranch at twenty-three, meets a similar fate in Wyoming when he returns for his brother's funeral. It seems as though a mystical force pulled the two brothers back. Before Mero suggests death in the cold, he suspects that he is on his family's ranch, but he can't tell exactly where he is in the darkness. Mero's strong feeling that he is on his family's property suggests that both brothers die on the ranch.

The reader gets a look into Mero's persona throughout the story. The Cadillac, and his ability to buy one carelessly, symbolizes wealth. Also, Mero did not want to return to the ranch to see his father and brother's bankruptcy, extending the notion of abandonment.

Interesting occurrences of foreshadowing appear when Mero is on the road. Mero recalls a rest stop where he had eaten before and was disgusted with an undercooked steak. He sees his disgust as turning him into a "cattleman gone wrong," yet another symbol of Mero's abandonment. In this case, the true meaning behind the title Mero gives himself alludes to the fact that he left the ranch to pursue wealth and women. Another use of foreshadowing appears the day of the accident. A full moon, an allusion to the strange and mystical, appears that night. As Mero approaches the ranch, he feels something eerie about the place. These two ideas symbolize the curse's force that pulls Mero back to the ranch to die.

Mero dreams of the ranch house while on the road, but in his dream all the furniture had been removed from the house and troops fight in the yard. The floorboards are broken apart and he sees galvanized tubs filled with "dark, coagulated fluid" below the floor. His dream echoes symbols of violence. The tub in his dream is similar to the tub that Tin Head used to drain the steer's blood. The dream foreshadows Mero's connection to the fable and suggests that Mero has envisioned his fate.

During one of the flashbacks, the narrator explains that tension breaks when Mero's father leaves a room. The author says that the Mero and Rollo became ordinary people to whom nothing ever happened, suggesting that the curse the legacy of their father. As part of his family, the curse is undoubtedly upon them. The son abandons the ranch, as Tin Head's abandons the steer, and the curse is never broken.

As the story ends, several symbols signify that Mero's death is imminent. Mero backs the car up when his car becomes stuck in the snow, revealing the red glare of his car lights. This red glare symbolizes the red eyes of the steer in the Tin Head story. As Mero walks through the snow, he looks over the countryside and notes a tangle of black willows at the creek that bunch like dead hair. This reflects Tin Head's steer that walked across the prairie with its half-skinned hide dangling over its hindquarters. As Mero sees the glow of the cow's eyes right before the story ends, he notes that it had been watching him all along. Mero thought he could escape his life on the ranch, but the curse found its way back to him.

Characters

Anthropologist

The anthropologist introduces a young Mero to sex by showing him Native-American stone drawings of female genitalia.

Louise Corn

Louise calls Mero to let him know about his brother's death. She expresses concern over Mero's choice to drive from Massachusetts to Wyoming, instead of flying.

Mero Corn

Mero Corn is an old man haunted by his ranching past, which he must face when he drives to his brother's funeral—a journey that ultimately kills him. Sixty years before the story begins, at the age of twenty-three, Mero fled his family's Wyoming ranch and has never thought about going back until he hears that his brother is dead. Mero has tried many ways of escaping his past, including becoming a vegetarian, serving in World War II, and getting rich through investments. However, during the journey, he is plagued by painful memories that chip away at the calm, confidence, and mental awareness that he has built up since leaving the ranch. Most of these memories concern his father's girlfriend, a woman whom Mero describes as having horse like characteristics. In a nightmare, Mero associates horse breeding with the act of slaughtering cattle, a disturbing image that helps him decide to leave the ranch for good the next morning. He also leaves because he has witnessed Rollo's desire for the girlfriend, and Mero wants to have a woman of his own. The journey back to the funeral does not go as planned. Mero gets a traffic ticket, has his first car accident, and eats food that does not agree with him. By the time he reaches Wyoming, the long journey and the painful memories have left Mero weak, hungry, and confused. As a result, he is unable to find his family's ranch and ends up getting stuck in the snow when he makes a wrong turn. He mistakenly tries to get the car back on the main road, breaking the car's window and killing the engine in the process. At the end, frozen and delusional, Mero realizes that he is dying and envisions death as the half-skinned steer from one of the girlfriend's stories.

Rollo Corn

Rollo Corn is Mero's brother, who is killed by an emu on the family ranch, which has been turned into an Australian-themed attraction. The news of Rollo's death prompts Mero to take his cross country road trip to attend his brother's funeral. This journey prompts bad memories of his ranch experiences, including Rollo's attraction to his

father's girlfriend, and these memories make Mero weak and susceptible to his tragic fate.

Mero's Father

Mero's father is an old man who lets the family ranch deteriorate, while he gets a postal job and spends his free time in an alcoholic haze. Mero and his brother, Rollo, wish that their father, who is often referred to as the old man, would move in with his girlfriend so that Mero and Rollo could reclaim the ranch. Instead, the old man's girlfriend stays with the Corn men, where she openly flirts with Mero and Rollo. Mero's father does not notice or does not care, and this attitude helps inspire Mero to leave the ranch—and Wyoming—to find his own woman.

Mero's Father's Girlfriend

Mero's father's girlfriend, sometimes referred to in the story as simply the girlfriend, influences Mero's decision to leave the ranch at twenty-three. The woman, whom Mero describes in horse-like terms, creates tension among the Corn men, since she is officially Mero's father's girlfriend but flirts with Rollo and Mero, too. However, Rollo is the only one who expresses interest, since Mero wants a woman of his own. The girlfriend tells many stories about Tin Head, a poor rancher with a defective metal plate in his head, which affects his brain functions. One story in particular, the tale about the half-skinned steer, prompts Mero to have a nightmare, and he leaves the ranch the next morning.

Tin Head

Tin Head is a character in Mero's father's girlfriend's story; he believes that he is cursed when a half-skinned steer escapes and the mutilated animal fixes him with a hateful stare. Tin Head has a galvanized metal plate in his head, which affects his brain functions.

Themes

Memory

From the time that Mero leaves his family's ranch in 1936, he is determined to put the past behind him, and he chooses not to return "to see the old man and Rollo, bankrupt and ruined, because he knew they were." He makes many attempts to forget his past, beginning with his eating habits. In the train station on his way out of town in 1936, he cannot eat a steak. He cuts into it and sees "the blood spread across the white plate." He equates the bloody meat with "the beast, mouth agape in mute bawling," an image of the cattle he used to slaughter. As a result, he becomes a vegetarian. He also moves to Massachusetts, serves in World War II, gets married several times, makes many successful investments, and becomes a local politician. Ultimately, however, these attempts to bury the past do not succeed. When he begins driving west to his brother's funeral, the physical journey quickly becomes a psychological journey into Mero's insecure past. When he gets to Wyoming, the land looks exactly as he remembers it, a fact that disturbs him since he has worked so hard to change himself. "He felt himself slip back; the calm of eighty-three years sheeted off him like water." However, not everything is the way that he remembers it. He is surprised when he does not find the entrance to the ranch, since it is "so clear and sharp in his mind." After pulling into the wrong entrance and getting stuck, he realizes he has made a mistake. His faith in his memory starts to fade, and he starts to notice the harsh landscape: "The remembered gates collapsed, fences wavered, while the badland features swelled into massive prominence."

Mortality

Death is inevitable for all mortals, but those who think themselves invincible sometimes die earlier than they might have. This is the case with Mero, whose cockiness leads him into a fatal situation. Mero's overconfidence is a side effect of his attempts to bury the past. He has worked hard, lived a healthy life, and reached a point where he feels that his money and lifestyle have made him nearly invincible. When he first gets the call from Louise, he tells her he will drive from Massachusetts to Wyoming. She is concerned that Mero, at eighty three, might not be able to make the trip. His response is confident: "Four days; he would be there by Saturday afternoon." However, on the trip, Mero begins to exhibit signs of his age. He gets confused in traffic and ends up causing a car accident. He is unconcerned and just buys a new car, relishing the thought that he is able to do whatever he wants: "He could do that if he liked, buy cars like packs of cigarettes and smoke them up." He cannot find the kind of food he likes to eat and goes hungry instead, thinking he is strong enough to handle it. When he is unable to find the entrance to the ranch, he briefly considers finding shelter then rules out this possibility, unwilling to give up. Mero looks for the entrance one more time and thinks that he has found it. "He turned in, feeling a little triumph." When he gets stuck, he realizes he was mistaken. He realizes that his old car, which he carelessly tossed away after the

accident, contains all of his emergency road supplies like food, water, and car phone. Instead of staying in his new car all night and using its heater to keep himself warm, he tries to free the vehicle. In the process, he mistakenly thinks that he has locked himself out of the car and breaks one of the windows. This ruins his only shelter, bringing about a freezing death that might have been avoided if Mero had not forgotten his mortality.

Sexual Confusion

Although Mero successfully buries most aspects of his Wyoming life for sixty years, his past still haunts him in his love life. At one point, Mero is congratulating himself on all of the women he has had in his life: "How many women were out there! He had married three of them and sampled plenty." However, the truth is, Mero has a hard time sustaining a romantic relationship as a result of his confused sexual beliefs. His first exposure to sex came as a child, when his father told him to take an anthropologist to see some Native-American rock drawings. The anthropologist points out the stone carvings of female genitalia, an image that becomes fixed in his mind. From that point on, "no fleshly examples ever conquered his belief in the subterranean stony structure of female genitalia." The only woman he ever imagined differently was his father's girlfriend, whom he associates with a horse: "If you admired horses, you'd go for her with her arched neck and horsy buttocks, so high and haunchy you'd want to clap her on the rear." After the woman tells them the story of the half-skinned steer, Mero dreams "of horse breeding or hoarse breathing, whether the act of sex or bloody, cutthroat gasps he didn't know." Sex, horses, and his sense of revulsion over the cattle slaughtering that he has done in his life become fused in his mind with the image of this woman. He also notices the developing relationship between the woman and Rollo, which further encourages him to leave. Even this decision is described in animalistic terms. The narrator notes that Mero had "learned from television nature programs that it had been time for him to find his own territory and his own woman." Even when he is making the journey back to Wyoming, sixty years later, Mero wonders "if Rollo had got the girlfriend away from the old man, thrown a saddle on her, and ridden off into the sunset."

Style

Setting

"The Half-Skinned Steer" takes place in Wyoming, a setting that is crucial to the story's plot. Mero spends his life running away from his past, which he associates with Wyoming and the hardness of ranching life. However, Mero's physical journey from Massachusetts to Wyoming also prompts him to remember his past. As he gets closer to Wyoming and the ranch where he grew up, the setting affects him. He tries to beat the harsh weather and his lack of luck, using the calmness and confidence that he has built up during his sixty years away from Wyoming. However, he is unable to do so and dies in the process. As he is dying, the story about Tin Head and the half-skinned steer, told by his father's girlfriend, comes back to haunt him; he sees some cattle and hallucinates about one steer in particular: "It tossed its head, and in the howling, wintry light he saw he'd been wrong again, that the half-skinned steer's red eye had been watching for him all this time." Mero associates his troubled Wyoming past with the steer from the woman's story. As a result, he imagines death as the halfskinned steer.

Imagery

Proulx is known for her striking imagery, and this story does not fail in this regard. The vivid images in this story come in many forms, and they collectively evoke a sense of harshness, decay, and violence. The Wyoming setting is depicted as an unforgiving land, where cattle die in many horrible ways and where "the wind packed enough sand to scour windshields opaque." When Mero takes the anthropologist to see the Native-American drawings, they travel along cliffs "ridged with ledges darkened by millennia of raptor feces." People are also depicted with gritty, unflattering imagery. Mero's father has a "gangstery face," with a "crushed rodeo nose and scar-crossed eyebrows" and a "stub ear." When Mero gets pulled over, the traffic officer is described as "a pimpled, mustached specimen with mismatched eyes." Finally, many events are described with expressive, often violent, imagery. When Louise tells Mero how his brother was clawed to death by an emu, she says that he "tried to fight it off with his cane, but it laid him open from belly to breakfast." This pathetic image of a feeble old man being ripped apart by a wild animal underscores the savage quality of the story. However, the most savage descriptions are those of cattle slaughter: "He ties up the back legs, hoists it up and sticks it, shoves the tub under to catch the blood. When it's bled out pretty good, he lets it down and starts skinning it." Proulx continues, going into excruciatingly vivid detail about how a steer is skinned. She maximizes the shock value of this image when she describes what the half-skinned steer looks like after it escapes: "It looks raw and it's got something bunchy and wet hanging down over its hindquarters."

Foreshadowing

Proulx includes several clues that foreshadow, or predict, the death of Mero. These clues often come in the form of events that go wrong. From the beginning, Mero is depicted as a strong, confident person who expects that everything will go his way and who feels that he can control any situation. However, events do not go as planned, and Mero steadily loses control over everything. Road construction affects his schedule, and he speeds to make up the time, getting a ticket in the process. The strain of his memories starts to affect him on the journey, making his mind feel "withered and punky." His lack of mental awareness causes him to get into an accident. This is a particularly significant clue for the reader that the story may have a tragic ending, since Mero told Louise in the beginning that he has "never had an accident in his life." His mental condition continues to deteriorate as he is unable to find the healthy food he usually eats. As a result of his famished and weary condition, he breaks one window in his car, his only shelter.

Proulx also foreshadows Mero's death with explicit references to death and misfortune. In the beginning, Mero gets the news that his brother has been clawed to death by an emu, a fate that Mero thinks he could avoid in similar circumstances: "He flexed his muscular arms, bent his knees, thought he could dodge an emu." Also, in the flashback to the story about the half-skinned steer, Mero's father's girlfriend explains that Tin Head is cursed for life after he botches the skinning of the steer. The placement of this particular flashback is important, since it happens right before Mero breaks the window of his car, thus sealing his tragic fate.

Historical Context

Nutritional Awarness in the 1990s

In the 1990s In 1990, the United States Congress passed the monumental Nutrition Labeling and Education Act, which required most foods to include a standardized information label. As a testament to the public interest in this issue, the United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA), one of two government organizations charged with implementing the act, received an unprecedented forty thousand comments from various individuals and groups. Still, nutritionists and many industry groups supported the new labels. By 1993, the regulations had been finalized, and over the next year, various manufacturers changed their labels. The new labels, entitled Nutrition Facts, listed a variety of information about a package of food, including standardized, realistic serving sizes and information on how the food fit into an overall daily diet. Raw meat and poultry products were one of the exceptions that did not require these packaging labels. In 1997, the Clinton administration acknowledged the success and consumer friendliness of the food label by awarding it a Presidential Design Achievement Award.

In the 1990s, the government also revised the four food groups model of nutrition that it had used to educate the public for decades. While many nutritionists were in favor of the new model, it met with resistance from groups like the meat and dairy industries, which stood to lose business. In the four food groups model, emphasis was placed on the consumption of meat and dairy products. However, the new Food Guide Pyramid, which was eventually adopted in 1992 by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), diminished the importance of meats and dairy products in one's diet. In this new model, the original four food groups were expanded into six new categories, then arranged on a hierarchical pyramid. Meats and dairy products were located near the top, or least recommended, part of the pyramid.

The Fear of Diseased Beef

Besides the controversy over the nutritional value of meat, the meat industry and the general public had to deal with the serious prospect of diseased beef. In the 1980s in England, an epidemic of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), a brain disorder commonly known as mad cow disease, killed more than 140,000 cows. Little is known about this class of diseases, which includes Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (CJD), a rare disorder that occurs in humans. However, enough was suspected about CJD and its link to BSE to cause a widespread panic in 1996. When several humans in England died of a new variant of CJD known as nvCJD, many people assumed that the disease was being transmitted through an English beef supply infected with BSE. As a result, the European Union banned the export of British beef from 1996 to 1999. Scientists proposed ideas about ways the bovine disease could get passed to humans, and one possibility became the dominant theory. The British cattle industry, like other countries, had long used a high-protein cattle feed made, in part, from the ground-up carcasses of

other cows. If only one of these source animals had BSE, its disease could be transmitted to any cow that ate the feed.

The issue came to a head in the United States on April 16, 1996, when popular talk-show host Oprah Winfrey had invited Howard Lyman, an ex-rancher, onto her show. Lyman spoke about the possibility of a mad cow disease outbreak in U.S. cattle, since American ranchers were using similar protein feeds with their cattle. Winfrey was shocked to find out that naturally vegetarian animals like cows were being turned into meat-eaters and cannibals and said that she would never eat another hamburger. A year later, a group of Texas cattlemen claimed that Winfrey's remarks were responsible for a sharp drop in revenue following the 1996 broadcast and filed a multimillion-dollar defamation suit against the talk show host, the show's production and distribution companies, and Lyman. Jurors ruled in Winfrey's favor, saying that she did not maliciously hurt the beef industry with her comments. As a result of the increased exposure of this issue, however, the FDA issued new rules that banned most protein feeds made from ground-up animals. To this date, no case of mad cow disease or nvCJD has been reported in the United States.

Critical Overview

E. Annie Proulx's "The Half-Skinned Steer" and *Close Range: Wyoming Stories* have received mostly good reviews from critics. The reviewer for *Kirkus Reviews* notes that the story is one of two in the collection that particularly displays "Proulx's trademark whipsaw wit and raw, lusty language." Likewise, in his article for *Progressive,* Dean Bakopoulos calls the story "one of the highlights of this wellcrafted collection" and says that the tale "sets up all the themes that dominate this volume: The struggle of hope against nature, mortality, and despair." In her book, *Understanding Annie Proulx,* Karen Rood notes that "Mero's trek evokes the traditional, mythic associations of the westward journey toward death, as he makes his solitary pilgrimage back in time as well as distance toward his boyhood home." Rood also notes that while this "powerful" story is "about an ending, it is also about returning to one's beginning, where, stripped bare of all defenses, one faces the harsh realities of life."

Not everybody gives the story or story collection total praise, however. In his essay for *Michigan Quarterly Review,* Michael Kowalewski says that, in the book, almost "all the men, young and old, seem capable of only a crude sexuality" and cites Mero's bestial sexual fantasies as an example. In a review for *Christian Science Monitor,* Merle Rubin says the story is not his favorite in the collection: "It's a bit portentous and heavy-handed in its symbolism, and parts drag, as Proulx piles on detail." Critics tend to either love or hate Proulx's attention to detail in the collection. The *Publishers Weekly* reviewer says that there is "stringent authority in her meticulous descriptions." Likewise, Bakopoulos is surprised that Proulx is able "to give each story the plot, depth of character, sense of setting, and thematic weight of an entire novel." However, Bakopoulos also notes that Proulx's "talent is sometimes a flaw. On occasion, she packs in too much detail, particularly at the openings. . . . While impressive, this background information often slows the stories down."

The overwhelming majority of critics discuss Proulx's unique writing style. In his *English Journal* article, John Noell Moore says that he was not prepared for "the exquisite beauty of the language, the shaping of metaphor and symbol, the poetry in Proulx's pages." Likewise, in the *Georgia Review,* Erin McGraw cites Proulx's skill as a novelist but says that she is even more powerful in her short fiction, a form that "distills her strength of characterization and description." In fact, the effect of the tightly packed stories was powerful enough to make McGraw "have to close the book for a little while and recover from the shock." *Kirkus Reviews* gives the book a star, its designation for "books of unusual merit." In addition, the reviewer notes: "Nobody else writes like this, and Proulx has never written better." In fact, critics love Proulx's writing style so much that they are often inspired to create their own unique ways of describing it. In her *Booklist* review, Donna Seaman talks about Proulx's "booted and spurred sentences." McGraw says that "Proulx uses language like a glass-cutting tool to etch out her dark world."

Close Range: Wyoming Stories has also added to Proulx's enormous popular success. In fact, as Charlotte Glover notes in her *Library Journal* review, "Proulx's idiosyncratic

writing style and offbeat characters are not for everyone, but her legions of fans will insure that this collection finds a home in every library."

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Poquette has a bachelor's degree in English and specializes in writing about literature. In the following essay, Poquette discusses Proulx's use of bestial and violent images to underscore the inevitability of Mero's death.

Like most of Proulx's works, "The Half-Skinned Steer" draws readers into a tough world—in this case, the harsh ranching life and landscape of Wyoming. Mero tries to escape this world as a young man by moving far away. As he drives back to his family's ranch sixty years later for his brother's funeral, he immerses himself in this uncaring world once again, first through his memories, then in person. However, like before, he does not understand how to survive in this world, so all of his misguided attempts to get to the funeral ultimately lead to his tragic end. By examining Proulx's extensive use of bestial and violent images, one can see that Mero's death is inevitable.

Mero is haunted by his past life on the ranch, which he imagines and describes in animal terms. Most of this imagery is expressed in figurative language, which means using one or more figures of speech to embellish a description, as opposed to straight description without comparison. Writers use figurative language when they want to add meaning or create an effect. In this case, Proulx uses various types of figurative language, such as metaphors, to make life in Wyoming appear beastly and vicious. A metaphor is a comparison between dissimilar things in order to describe one of them in an unusual way. One obvious example of an animal metaphor in the story pertains to Mero's father's girlfriend. When Mero first introduces her, he describes her as if she were a horse: "If you admired horses, you'd go for her with her arched neck and horsy buttocks." A few sentences later, he talks about her "glossy eyes," another characteristic of horses. Mero also notes that she acts like a horse. She has the habit of biting her fingernails until they bleed, and Mero imagines her "nipping" her nails. At one point, after the woman has proven her ability to handle her liquor, Mero says that he "expected her to neigh."

The story includes figurative references to other animals, too. When Mero gets the call from his nephew's wife, Louise, Mero does not even know he has a nephew, much less one named "Tick," which makes Mero think of the insect: "He recalled the bloated gray insects pulled off the dogs. This tick probably thought he was going to get the whole damn ranch and bloat up on it." Once again, through the use of metaphor, Tick the human is compared to the insect in Mero's mind. When the young Mero observes the anthropologist pointing to various stone drawings, he uses a simile, another type of figurative language that differs slightly from a metaphor. Similes do not indicate that something is something else but that something is like something else. For this reason, similes are usually marked by the use of the word "like" or "as." Mero notes that the anthropologist is "pointing at an archery target, ramming his pencil into the air as though tapping gnats." In this simile, Mero compares the anthropologist's motion to the act of tapping gnats.

In addition to figurative language, the story has striking imagery. Imagery is description that draws images or verbal pictures with vivid, specific words. For example, the girlfriend vividly describes how Tin Head half-skinned a steer. But in this vicious world, animals also attack humans. Rollo is ripped apart by an emu. On the phone with Mero, Louise describes the emu's attack in slaughter terms: "it laid him open from belly to breakfast." This is the savage world of nature, especially in rural Wyoming.

The climate and landscape of this savage world are also expressed through animal imagery. When Mero drives through a Wyoming snowstorm, he notes the "snow snakes writhing across the asphalt." When he breaks the window of his car, he notes that the "snow roared through the broken window," as if the snow were some wild beast. Shortly after this incident, when he is walking along the main road, he notices the beastly appearance of the harsh landscape. "Then the violent country showed itself, the cliffs rearing at the moon." A horse rears when it stands up on its hind legs, something that it does naturally when it is fighting. Since the cliffs are so high that they appear to be fighting with the moon, they provide a powerful image of nature's dominance on Earth. The same section of description also notes "the white flank of the ranch slashed with fence cuts." An animal's flank is its side, the meaty part between the ribs and the hip. By describing a ranch in terms of an animal flank that is being "slashed," and by placing this image in close proximity to the description of the towering cliffs, Proulx is evoking an image of human struggle with an overpowering nature.

As Erin McGraw notes in her *Georgia Review* article, "Proulx sees in the wild land a cosmic will to destroy. Her Wyoming, with its terrible summers and worse winters, grinds people down to their mean, bitter essentials." To survive in this raw world, people must be able to live raw, meeting their basic needs like animals do. In addition, they must not focus on anything that can take away from their ability to fulfill these needs or they will threaten their survival. However, Mero is unable to live in this way. Although he slaughters cattle, a necessary task for his survival, he feels guilty about it. After he flees the ranch, he orders a steak but is unable to eat it once he cuts into it and sees "the blood spread across the white plate." He envisions "the beast, mouth agape in mute bawling," an image of the cattle he has slaughtered.

The blood references in the story are a clear symbol for violence. A symbol is another type of figurative language. Symbols are physical objects, actions, or gestures that also represent an abstract concept, without losing their original identity. Blood is a literal, but blood has symbolical connotations as well, for example, of violence and savagery. Other references to blood in the story include the visual effect of Mero's taillights, which "lit the snow beneath the rear of the car like a fresh bloodstain." In addition, Proulx makes references to other fluids that evoke the image of blood in the way that they are depicted. After the car accident, Mero "watched his crumpled car, pouring dark fluids onto the highway, towed away behind a wrecker." Dark fluids in a car usually refer to oil and other lubricants, but in the context of this story, the image suggests that the car is dying, pouring its lifeblood onto the highway as it is towed away to its scrapyard grave.

Humans and animals have sexual drives. Proulx's descriptions of sexual matters are animalistic, especially when it comes to the horselike girlfriend, who inspires sexual

desires in both Rollo and Mero. Rollo, who is as raw as the land in which he lives, welcomes these animal impulses. When he hears the story of Tin Head and the half-skinned steer, the brutality of the story only increases his passion for the girlfriend. On the other hand, Mero is attracted to the woman but not to her savage story. This contrast torments him, and subconsciously he links the two images: "Mero had thrashed all that ancient night, dreamed of horse breeding or hoarse breathing, whether the act of sex or bloody, cutthroat gasps he didn't know." This link does not go away. Says Karen Rood in her book *Understanding Annie Proulx,* "the alluring sexuality of his father's girlfriend and her gruesome story have become permanently linked in his mind, creating a simultaneous attraction and aversion to the opposite sex." Mero is unable to live like an animal, and so he cannot just give in to his sexual desires like Rollo does, especially when they are linked in his mind with a revolting image of slaughter.

Although Mero is not in touch with his animal side like the others in this story, he does not shun the animal world altogether. At one point, when trying to figure out the reasons why he left the ranch, Mero refers to the fact that he did not want to share his father's girlfriend. He had "learned from television nature programs that it had been time for him to find his own territory and his own woman." Watching nature programs, which Mero still does sixty years later, is as close to the animal world as Mero would like to get. Although he never realizes it, this is the essence of Mero's need to leave the ranch; he does not belong in the raw, animalistic world of rural Wyoming. His subconscious knows this, so it produces Mero's dream, which makes him feel an urgent, unexplainable need to move several states away. Like a secondary male wolf in a pack, Mero seeks his own territory in which he can be dominant and claim his own female.

Sixty years later, Mero thinks that he left his Wyoming life because of the love triangle with his father's girlfriend. He does not understand that he really left as a young man because he was not cut out for Wyoming life; thus, his death is inevitable once he decides to go back as an old man. He feels he is up for the challenge of the physical and psychological journey because he has become fit and healthy through an active, vegetarian lifestyle and because he has attained wealth. In fact, he becomes overconfident and makes bad decisions that are based on this false sense of security. However, while these aspects serve him well in Massachusetts, they are useless in the raw, uncivilized world of rural Wyoming. As Rood notes, "he discovers that all his efforts to stave off death through a healthy vegetarian diet and vigorous exercise are of no avail against the powerful forces of nature." While he is making the trip to Wyoming, Mero's subconscious tries to warn him through another dream, in which the ranch house is blown apart by a violent war and Mero sees tubs full of "dark, coagulated fluid," or blood, beneath the floors. The fact that the dream ranch house is built on blood is an effective metaphor about the violence inherent in the ranching life and Wyoming. However, Mero does not heed this warning, as he did sixty years earlier when he left after his other dream, and continues on his journey. He also deliberately ignores advice from Wyoming locals like Louise, who are concerned that he might not make it in the winter weather.

This is a valid concern, as Mero does get stuck in the snow when he tries to get to the ranch. As he is freezing to death, Mero sees that a steer is keeping pace with him while

he is walking: "It tossed its head, and in the howling, wintry light he saw he'd been wrong again, that the half-skinned steer's red eye had been watching for him all this time." Says Rood, the steer "clearly symbolizes the death he has worked so hard to avoid." For Mero, a civilized man born into a harsh world in which he could not survive and from which he could never quite escape, even his inevitable death appears in the image of an animal.

Source: Ryan D. Poquette, Critical Essay on "The Half-Skinned Steer," in *Short Stories for Students,* Gale, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

In the following excerpt from her book on Proulx, Rood provides an overview of "The Half-Skinned Steer" and comments on the meaning of the vulnerability of the story's characters.

In her acknowledgments Proulx writes that the idea for writing a collection of stories set in Wyoming came from an invitation by the Nature Conservancy to contribute a story inspired by a visit to one of its preserves to an anthology of short fiction titled *Off the Beaten Path* (1998). The result of Proulx's visit to the Ten Sleep Preserve on the south slope of the Big Horn Mountains in Wyoming was "The Half-Skinned Steer," first published in the November 1997 issue of the *Atlantic Monthly* and later selected by Garrison Keillor for inclusion in *The Best American Short Stories of 1998* and by John Updike for the best-selling *The Best American Short Stories of the Century* (1999). In his introduction to that anthology Updike describes Proulx's story as revisiting "the West that has seemed to this country the essence of itself." He adds, "I would have liked to finish this volume with a choice less dark, with an image less cruel and baleful than that of a halfskinned steer, but the American experience, story after story insisted, has been brutal and hard."

"The Half-Skinned Steer" follows the journey of Mero, a well-to-do man in his eighties, who makes an ill-advised cross-country journey from his home in Massachusetts to Wyoming for the funeral of his brother, Rollo, whom he has not seen in sixty years. He sets out to return to the family ranch he left in 1936. It is now a successful tourist attraction: Down Under Wyoming, where Rollo has been killed by the sharp claws of an emu, a nonindigenous bird brought there by the Australian co-owners of the park.

Mero's trek evokes the traditional, mythic associations of the westward journey toward death, as he makes his solitary pilgrimage back in time as well as distance toward his boyhood home. Overestimating his diminished capacities as a driver, he causes an accident near Des Moines, totaling his Cadillac. He buys another and drives resolutely onward, only to become lost and stuck during a snowstorm just miles from his destination, where he discovers that all his efforts to stave off death through a healthy vegetarian diet and vigorous exercise are of no avail against the powerful forces of nature.

As he travels, Mero remembers the situation that precipitated his leaving home at twenty-three: the sexual longing aroused in him by his father's girlfriend and her telling of a grisly tall tale about a botched slaughter of a steer. In her story—which, according to Proulx is based on an Icelandic folktale called "Porgeir's Bull"—a hard-luck rancher, called Tin Head because of the metal plate in his head, sets out a butcher a steer, hitting it on the head with an axe and stunning instead of killing it. Thinking the animal dead, he hangs it up to bleed out for a while and then begins to skin it, starting with the head. Halfway through the job, he stops for dinner, after cutting out the steer's tongue so his wife can cook his favorite dish.

When he returns to finish the job, the halfskinned steer is gone. As he scans the horizon, "in the west on the side of the mountain he sees something moving stiff and slow" with "something bunchy and wet hanging down over its hindquarters." As the mute steer turns and looks back at him, Tin Head sees "the empty mouth without no tongue open wide and its red eyes glaring at him, pure teetotal hatred like arrows coming at him, and he knows he is done for and all of his kids is done for, and that his wife is done for"—and, the girlfriend explains, his intuition proves true.

This powerful story, with its pathetic and grotesque image of the death that comes for every living being, has turned Mero into a vegetarian, but it has also had another, greater impact on his life, as it has become associated with the sexual longings evoked in him by its teller. After hearing her tale, Mero "dreamed of horse breeding or hoarse breathing, whether the act of sex or bloody cut-throat gasps he didn't know." Years later he is still troubled by his dream, from which he awoke with the conviction that it was time to leave home. For a long time he believed that he had no "hard reason" for going off on his own, but at eighty-three he favors the straightforward explanation "that it had been time for him to find his own territory and his own woman," and he congratulates himself on having "married three or four of them and sampled plenty." Yet the alluring sexuality of his father's girlfriend and her gruesome story have become permanently linked in his mind, creating a simultaneous attraction and aversion to the opposite sex. As he travels into the country of his boyhood, he is still haunted by memories of the woman who "could make you smell the smoke from an unlit fire" and the image of the half-skinned steer, which clearly symbolizes the death he has worked so hard to avoid.

As he reaches the vicinity of the ranch at nightfall, falling snow and the absence of longremembered landmarks confuse Mero. He turns on a narrow track that may or may not lead to the ranch, and his car becomes stuck in the snow. Ignoring his first impulse to wait in the car until morning, he exerts himself in an unsuccessful attempt to free the car. Then he begins walking through the snowstorm in the direction where he thinks he will find neighboring ranch about ten miles away—if the house is still there and if he is correct in his intuition of his present location.

As he walks through "the violent country," feeling vulnerable in the wind and cold, he notices that one animal in a herd of cattle on the other side of a fence is walking with him. As he turns to look at it, he realizes that "he'd been wrong again, that the half-skinned steer's red eye had been watching him all this time." Coming face to face with his own mortality, Mero learns that neither money nor healthy living can insulate him from the traumas of his past or the inevitability of death. As he takes his final walk, "feeling as easy to tear as a man cut from paper," he has become like the half-skinned steer, robbed of all defenses against the forces of nature and stumbling mute and vulnerable toward death.

Though "The Half-Skinned Steer" is a story about an ending, it is also about returning to one's beginning, where, stripped bare of all defenses, one faces the harsh realities of life. As such, the story is a fitting introduction to a collection of short stories in which character after character faces an unforgiving environment, feeling as vulnerable as "a man cut from paper."

Source: Karen L. Rood, "*Close Range: Wyoming Stories,*" in *Understanding Annie Proulx,* University of South Carolina Press, 2001, pp. 153-91.

Critical Essay #3

In the following review, Moore praises Proulx for her "complex plotting" and interweaving of the "two tales" in "The Half-Skinned Steer."

I discovered Annie Proulx's latest collection of short stories on the list of contenders for *The New Yorker* Book Award for best fiction of 1999. I resolved to read it because years ago I had purchased her Pulitzer Prize winning novel *The Shipping News,* and (need I say this?) I had never gotten around to reading it. The stories in *Close Range* grabbed me "like a claw in the gut," a simile I borrow from one of the stories: "This wild country—indigo jags of mountain, grassy plain everlasting, tumbled stones like fallen cities, the flaring roll of sky—provokes a spiritual shudder. It is like a deep note that cannot be heard but is felt, it is like a claw in the gut" ("People in Hell Just Want a Drink of Water"). I was not prepared for the "spiritual shudder" that came in the brutality of some of the trails, their terrifying imagery, their graphic sexual scenes. I was also not prepared for the exquisite beauty of the language, the shaping of metaphor and symbol, the poetry in Proulx's pages. Her title is literal and metaphoric. She startles us with her close-ups of life on the range; her characters move in landscapes that are unforgiving of their flaws, impervious to their tiny triumphs. Her vision is metaphoric: She studies her people and their land at close range, too, in detail that opens them up to our wonder and amazement, to our disgust, and, in some cases, to our admiration.

For the epigraph to these stories Proulx chooses a quotation from Jack Hitt's article "Where the Deer and the Zillionaire's Play" in the October 1997 edition of *Outside.* A retired Wyoming rancher explains, "Reality's never been of much use out here." In her acknowledgments, Proulx elaborates on his words and gives us a hint about how we might read her world: "The elements of unreality, the fantastic and improbable, color all of these stories as they color real life. In Wyoming not the least fantastic situation is the determination to make a living ranching in this tough and unforgiving place." The eleven stories in *Close Range* vary in length from the very short ones (2-7 pages) to a number of stories that are 35 or so pages long. Proulx juxtaposes tales about a story heard in youth that comes back to haunt a dying man ("The Half-Skinned Steer"), a young bull rider following the rodeo circuit to avoid the pain of family life ("The Mud Below"), a mixture of fairy tale and romance ("The Bunchgrass Edge of the World"), and the deep and unspoken bond between two men ("Brokeback Mountain").

Proulx's stories are about love and loss, about suffering and endurance. The last lines of "The Bunchgrass Edge of the World" speak a recurring theme: "The main thing in life was staying power." In "The Governors of Wyoming" a rancher voices a similar world view: "The main thing about ranchin," he says, is "last as long as you can, make things come out so it's still your ranch when it's time to get buried. That's my take on it." Proulx explores the distance between where lives begin and end and the ways in which her characters negotiate the terrain in between. The last sentence of the last story makes a pronouncement on the way Proulx's characters read their world: "There was some open space between what he knew and what he tried to believe, but nothing could be done

about it, and if you can't fix it, you've got to stand it." Many of the stories are about just that: standing, enduring the way things work out.

"The Half-Skinned Steer," the first story in the collection, serves as a good introduction to this major theme of negotiating distance and to the complex plotting that we encounter in subsequent stories. It is a story about acts of storytelling, about fact and fantasy. in the first sentence we meet the aging Mero:

In the long unfurling of his life, from tight-wound kid hustler in a wool suit riding the train out of Cheyenne to geriatric limper in this spooled-out year, Mero had kicked down thought of the place where he began, a so-called ranch on the strange ground at the south hinge of the Big Horns.

The story is about Mero's memory and his journey back to that beginning place.

The story opens as Mero learns of his brother Rollo's death and determines to drive the long distance to the funeral. Moving in and out of the past, Proulx weaves together his story and a fantastic tale he remembers from his youth. A map of these intertwined narrative threads illustrates her complex plotting:

Mero 1 Present: News of Rollo's death; the decision to travel

Storyteller 1 Past: Introduces Mero's father's girlfriend, a "teller of tales of hard deeds and mayhem"

Tin Head 1 Past: The girlfriend's story about a man named Tin Head begins

Mero 2 Present: Mero's fitful sleep and bad dreams before the journey

Tin Head 2 Past: How "things went wrong" on Tin Head's ranch

Mero 3 Past: An anthropologist gives Mero a lesson in human sexuality.

Mero 4 Present. Travelling, near Des Moines, Mero wrecks the car, buys another. Approaches the ranch: "Nothing had changed . . . the empty pale place and its rearing wind, the distant antelope as tiny as mice, landforms shaped true to the present."

Tin Head 3 Girlfriend continues her story of a steer, half-skinned and left while Tin Head eats supper. "She was a total liar," Mero thinks.

Mero 5 Traveling toward home

Mero 6 Memories of the past

Mero 7 Nearing the ranch, he senses "an eerie dream quality" about it. Mero runs "on the unmarked road through great darkness."

Tin Head 4 When Tin Head returns, the steer has disappeared.

Mero 8 Misses turnoff to the ranch, backs car into hole.

Tin Head 5 Tin Head finds steer, interprets it as a sign of fate.

Mero 9 No hope of getting the car out, Mero senses doom: "It was almost a relief to have reached this point where the celestial fingernails were poised to nip his thread."

Mero 10 The ending

I will not ruin the story by revealing how it ends, but I will say that the way in which Proulx weaves together the two tales offers us that sense of having come to a moment in a story where what happens seems to be just right.

In "People in Hell Just Want a Drink of Water." Proulx plots similarly, weaving together the stories of two families, the Dunmires and the Tinsleys. Their alternating stories pull us rapidly forward, but it all ends by challenging our belief in what we have just witnessed: "That was all sixty years ago . . . We are in a new millennium and such desperate things no longer happen." The final sentence teases us: "If you believe that you'll believe anything." Similarly, "The Governors of Wyoming" presents two sets of characters Who have opposite views about the value of cattle ranching. Wade Walls who "seemed to come from nowhere and belong to no one" believes that cows are "world-destroying," that the "domestication of livestock was the single most terrible act the human species ever perpetuated. It dooms everything living." He envisions a paradise where native grasses and wildflowers cover the earth, where antelope, elk, and bison roam: "If I ran the world, I'd . . . leave the winds and the grasses to the hands of the gods. Let it be the empty place." The story unfolds as Wade's determination to act against cattle ranchers escalates into a revenge plot with a surprising twist in its final scene.

"Job History," a tight little story told in the present tense, although it begins in 1947 with the birth of its central figure Leeland Lee, happens quickly and cuts through the imagination sharply. It is a perfect example of an idea about how a story happens, taken from *The God of Small Things:* "Little events, ordinary things, smashed and reconstituted. Imbued with new meaning. Suddenly they become the bleached bones of a story." "Job History" is seven pages long; its characters never speak. Their lives are stripped to the bone in Proulx's portrayal of the inexorable rush of time.

When I read "The Bunchgrass Edge of the World," the story of the Touheys—Old Red; his Vietnam veteran son, Aladdin, and his wife, Wauneta; and their three children Tyler, Shah, and Ottaline, "the family embarrassment," I found myself singing and remembering fairy tales. In a set of short stories filled with dashed hopes, violent and unrequited love, more miser' than we can take, this story offers a brief respite and even some humor. We follow the longings of Ottaline, the oldest daughter "distinguished by a physique approaching the size of a hundred-gallon propane tank." She despairs of ever escaping the ranch as her siblings have done, but she maintains a thread of hope: "Someone had to come for her." In the repetition of this idea in the story I found myself singing "Someday My Prince Will Come" from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs.*

Because she "craved to know something of the world" Ottaline listens to her scanner where she often only hears couples arguing.

Her story takes a wonderful turn when one of her father's discarded tractors strikes up a conversation with her one day as she walks though the family gravel pit: "'Hello, sweetheart. Come here, come here.' It was the 4030, Aladdin's old green tractor." Of course! This tractor is the frog prince of the fairy tale. Ottaline lives, after all, in a fantastic world; when your father's name is Aladdin, anything can happen. When she complains to the tractor that she is fat, it replies "What I like." The tractor explains that what tractors want is a human connection, and Ottaline sets out to repair the green machine. If you remember the fairy tale, you may be able to predict the ending of this story. Remember, though, this is a Wyoming story, and Proulx has made it clear that we live here in a fantastic unreality.

Each of these stories profoundly engages me as a reader. "A Lonely Coast" warns that "it's easier than you think to yield up to the dark impulse." The two shirts in "Brokeback Mountain" etch this tale of "the grieving plain" into my memory as they hang in the closet, a heartbreaking symbol of a love not tolerated at close range, "the pair like two skins, one inside the other, two in one." "The Mud Below" tells the sad story of Diamond Felt's hunger to know who his father is while he destroys his future and his body rodeoing. He learns that life "was all a hard, fast ride that ended in the mud." And I get the sense in "The Blood Bay" that, even though someone always has to pay the cost, some things do add up at close range: "The arithmetic stood comfortable." These are stories to savor, to read slowly, to read again.

Nowhere in *Close Range* does Proulx give me a better context for inviting you to read her stories than in the dosing scenes of "A Lonely Coast." We're driving toward the town of Casper, and our arrival becomes a metaphor for making meaning:

You come down a grade and all at once the shining town lies below you, slung out like all western towns, and with the curved milk of mountains behind it. The lights trail away to the east in a brief and stubby duster of yellow that butts hard against the dark. And if you've ever been to the lonely coast you've seen how the shore rock drops off into the black water and how the light on the point is final.

At the shore, the narrator tells us, we see the "old rollers coming in for millions of years," and here, on the range at night, the wind rolls, reminding us that "the sea covered this place hundreds of millions of years ago, the slow evaporation, the mud turned to stone." Proulx wraps up the scene with an idea that seems to capture how I feel after reading this book: "There's nothing calm in these thoughts. It isn't finished, it can still tear apart. Nothing is finished. You take your chances."

I invite you to take your chances, to drive through Proulx's shining towns. Prepare to be deeply moved, angry, shocked. Keep driving, though. The journey is worth the effort.

Source: John Noell Moore, "The Landscape of Fiction," in *English Journal,* Vol. 80, No. 1, September 2000, pp. 146-48.

Adaptations

The Shipping News was adapted as a feature film by Miramax Films and released in 2001. The film was directed by Lasse Hallström and featured an all-star cast, including Kevin Spacey, Julianne Moore, Judi Dench, Cate Blanchett, and Scott Glenn. It is available on VHS and DVD from Buena Vista Home Video.

The Shipping News was also adapted as an abridged audiobook in 1995 and is available on four audiocassettes. The audiobook was re-released in 2001 in a special compact-disc format that coincided with the film's release. Both versions are produced by Simon & Schuster Audio and are read by Robert Joy.

Topics for Further Study

Research how many family-owned ranches there were in the United States in 1936 and how many family-owned ranches are in the United States today. Look up the geographic concentrations of these ranches in both time periods and plot them both on separate maps of the United States. Compare the two maps and discuss any related trends in ranching, the economy, or society that have affected the number of family-owned ranches.

Research the methods used in modern cattle slaughter. Compare these methods to the method that Tin Head uses on the half-skinned steer in the story.

Investigate the current research in the ongoing debate over whether meat is an essential part of a person's diet. Create a nutrition chart that compares the advantages and disadvantages of a meat-eater's diet, then do the same for a vegetarian's diet, using your research to support your claims.

Research the psychology behind human memory. Create a diagram of the brain that indicates where memory functions reside and how they work.

Find one other case from any point in history where a person died as a result of underestimating his or her susceptibility to death in a dangerous situation. Write a short biography of this person, including a description about the event that led to this person's death.

What Do I Read Next?

In Ranch of Dreams: The Heartwarming Story of America's Most Unusual Sanctuary (1997), Cleveland Amory describes his many adventures for the Fund for Animals, which attempts to rescue endangered and abused animals. Many of these animals have been transferred to Amory's Black Beauty Ranch in East Texas. Amory has acquired a host of mistreated animals, including circus elephants, burros from the Grand Canyon, and even common farm animals like pigs.

In Breaking Clean (2002), Judy Blunt recounts her experiences growing up as an independent tomboy on a Montana cattle ranch in the 1950s and 1960s. However, the gender roles for adult women were very narrow in this rural culture and did not allow her to be anything other than a wife and mother. For twelve years, Blunt suppressed her other desires, before breaking free from her past and leaving the ranch to pursue a new life.

In Heart Songs and Other Stories (1988), Proulx's first collection of short stories, the author depicts the traditions and rituals of small-town life in her native New England.

In her Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, The Shipping News (1993), Proulx depicts life in the harsh northern climate of Newfoundland, a maritime province of Canada. In the story, R. G. Quoyle, a journalist, returns to this land to start his life over after a failed marriage. In the process, Quoyle experiences a spiritual and psychological renewal.

When Upton Sinclair's novel The Jungle was first published in 1906, it shocked readers with its graphic depictions of American capitalism, particularly life in Chicago's meat industry. In the story, Jurgis Rudkus, a Lithuanian immigrant, arrives in Chicago prepared to achieve the American Dream. Instead, he and his family are burdened by hardship and work under inhumane conditions in meatpacking plants, where they witness corruption such as the sale of spoiled or adulterated meat.

In a collection of essays entitled Where Rivers Change Direction (1999), Mark Spragg recounts his life growing up on a ranch in rural Wyoming, a tough existence that forced him to become a man at age eleven. The author worked his family's land and escorted curious tourists—one of his few interactions with modern life—on camping trips into the Wyoming wilderness. As he grows up, Spragg realizes that he has a profound fear of death, which drives him to distraction.0

Further Study

Barnard, Neal, *Food for Life: How the New Four Food Groups Can Save Your Life,* 1993, reprint, Crown, 1994.

In the story, Mero thinks that his vegetarian diet will help him postpone his death. Dr. Barnard also thinks that vegetarianism can increase life expectancy and advocates selecting foods from four food groups: grains, legumes, vegetables, and fruits. This system mimics the structure of the four food groups model endorsed by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) prior to 1992, but changes the actual groups (eliminating meat).

Carlson, Laurie Winn, *Cattle: An Informal Social History,* Ivan R. Dee, 2001.

This engaging and informative book examines the history of cattle in various eras and cultures, offering many anecdotes in the process. In addition to a study of the animal itself, Carlson also discusses the beef and dairy industries and the current controversies over safe methods of food production.

Lyman, Howard F., *Mad Cowboy: Plain Truth from the Cattle Rancher Who Won't Eat Meat,* Scribner, 1998.

Lyman's 1996 comments on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* about shocking, unsafe practices in the meat industry drew fire from a group of Texas cattlemen, resulting in a high-profile lawsuit. In his book, Lyman, a former cattle rancher, chronicles his journey from carnivore to vegetarian, gives an inside view of the meat and dairy industries, and discusses the potential for an epidemic of mad cow disease in American cattle.

Pflughoft, Fred, *Wyoming: Wild and Beautiful,* American World Geographic, 1999.

In her story, Proulx describes Wyoming's landscapes in striking detail. In his book, Fred Pflughoft, a western photographer, depicts the state's landscapes with more than 120 full-color images from all four seasons. Pflughoft's photos include a variety of famous and obscure locations, including national parks, deserts, rock formations, canyons, lakes, rivers, and streams.

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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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