# Han's Crime Study Guide

## Han's Crime by Shiga Naoya

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# Introduction

Shiga Naoya's story "Han's Crime" first appeared in 1913 in *Shirakaba* (*White Birch*), a literary magazine founded by Shiga and a group of wealthy university students. "Han's Crime" was well-received when it was first published; several critics considered it an almost perfect short story, saying it exemplified Shiga's sparse, psychologically probing style. Told almost entirely through dialogue, the story attempts to unravel the truth behind the violent death of Han's wife, a young circus performer. It seems clear that Han has killed his wife in the midst of a knife-throwing act; he and his colleagues are called in before the judge to testify. The judge's duty is to determine whether Han's crime was premeditated (murder) or accidental (manslaughter). As the story progresses, however, what at first seems clear becomes more difficult to pin down. In his confession, Han reveals that he himself does not know whether he committed murder or was simply involved in a tragic accident. If Han does not know his own motivations, he suggests, they must remain unknown to those who would judge him. After listening to Han's testimony, the judge reaches his verdict, finding Han "innocent."

Primarily known as a writer of short fiction, Shiga occupies a central position in modern Japanese literary history, even though he did not publish very many works. During his lifetime, critics went so far as to call him a "god of literature." One contemporary even asserted that Shiga was the only living writer whose works had a classical quality that revealed something new each time they were read. Shiga and his fellow *Shirakaba* authors developed a form of literature called *shishosetsu*, or "I-Novel," which resembles Western confessional literature to some extent, but also, according to Edward Fowler, seeks "to transcribe the world" as the author experienced it and "to authorize a self . . . in a society unwilling to acknowledge the individual as a viable social unit." Critics note "Han's Crime" in particular for its psychological acuity and intellectual honesty.

# Author Biography

Shiga Naoya was born on February 20, 1883, in the town of Ishimaki on Honshu, Japan's largest island. Although his family belonged to the prestigious samurai class, his father became a successful businessman and moved the family to Tokyo when Shiga was three. In Tokyo, they lived with Shiga's grandparents, who were largely responsible for raising the young writer. Shiga's mother died when he was thirteen, and his father remarried not long after. Fortunately, Shiga had a good relationship with his new stepmother, which he wrote about in the story "Haha no hi to atarashii haha" ("My Mother's Death and the Coming of My New Mother"). Shiga's relationship with his father, however, was often strained. In 1900, at the age of seventeen, Shiga began to study Christianity under the evangelist Uchimura Kanzo and subsequently became aware of social causes. In 1901, he became estranged from his father when his father forbade him from participating in a protest against the Ashio Copper Mine, which was polluting a local river and poisoning the townspeople. Unbeknownst to Shiga, his grandfather had once been an investor in the mine, and Shiga's father wanted to spare the family embarrassment. Relations with his father continued to be strained when Shiga had an affair with a family servant and declared his intention to live with her. In addition, he was a mediocre student who graduated from high school with much difficulty; once enrolled at Tokyo Imperial University, he became very involved with the founding of the literary magazine *Shirakaba,* but neglected to attend class. In 1910, at age 27, Shiga finally dropped out of college and devoted himself full time to his writing career. Between 1910 and 1920, Shiga produced the bulk of his literary work, a series of short stories and novellas. The 1912 publication of "Otsu Junkichi," based on his affair with the family servant, sparked family tensions once again. In 1913, his first collection of short stories, including "Han's Crime," was published. He then began work on his long novel, *Journey Through Dark Night,* although he would not finish it until 1937.

In 1914, Shiga married a widow who had a child from another marriage and renounced his inheritance. When his second child was born (the first died), Shiga and his father reconciled, which he celebrated in the 1917 publication of his novella *Wakai* (*Reconciliation*). In 1923, Shiga had an affair with a young waitress, which resulted both in the publication of the Yashima stories and his wife's unhappiness. After the publication of *Journey through Dark Night* in 1937, Shiga all but ceased to write. Despite his relatively small literary output, he was very influential among Japanese writers; in 1947 he was nominated president of the Japan P.E.N. Club, a prestigious writers' association. He died in 1971 of pneumonia.

# Plot Summary

The story begins with an account of the crime: In the midst of a performance, Han, a young Chinese juggler, severs his wife's carotid artery with one of his knives. The young woman dies instantly, and Han is arrested.

The body of the story consists of the judge's questioning the owner-manager of the circus troupe, the Chinese stagehand, and finally Han himself. In questioning the three men, the judge attempts to decide whether Han's wife's death was premeditated murder or manslaughter.

The owner-manager tells the judge that Han's act is very difficult and requires steady nerves and complete concentration as well as intuition. He does not know whether the killing was intentional or accidental.

The Chinese stagehand testifies that Han and his wife were kind and gentle people who treated friends and acquaintances well and never argued with others. Han had become a Christian the previous year and spent much of his spare time reading Christian literature. The stagehand recollects, however, that Han and his wife did not get along, especially since the death of their infant son soon after his birth. Han never hit his wife, but he would stare at her angrily. He once told the stagehand that his love for her had died but that he would not consider a divorce. Han's wife was not in a position to leave the marriage either because, having spent four years on the road with a circus performer, no one respectable would marry her. The stagehand believes that Han read the Bible and sermons to repent his angry feelings for his wife. The stagehand acknowledges that when he witnessed her death, his first thought had been, "He's murdered her," but now he cannot be so certain. The stagehand suspects that his knowledge of Han's hatred for his wife probably influenced his thinking. He tells the judge that Han dropped to his knees and prayed in silence after the incident.

The bulk of the story concerns Han's testimony. Han tells the judge he stopped loving his wife once the child was born because he knew he was not the father. The child had died smothered by its mother's breasts, and Han does not know whether this was deliberate, although his wife told him it was an accident. Han tells the judge that his wife never really loved him, and once the baby died, she "simply observed, with cruel eyes, the gradual destruction of my life."

Han never considered leaving his wife, he continues, because he was preoccupied with what he calls "various ideas": he did not want to be in the wrong. The judge asks him if he had ever thought of killing his wife, and Han admits that he had often thought "that it would be good if she were dead." The night prior to the incident, he again thought of killing her, but never quite reached the point of conscious decision. He and his wife had argued about supper; that night he could not sleep because he was overcome with nightmares. The idea of killing his wife gradually faded, and Han was overcome by "a feeling of loneliness," realizing that he was too weak to take action of any kind to change his life.

The next day he was exhausted, Han tells the judge, but no longer thinking of killing his wife. As he prepared for that evening's performance, he realized that he was edgier than usual. Although he and his wife had other acts, Han says that he chose the knife-throwing for that evening without having any ulterior motive. The first two knives were only slightly off the mark; his wife seemed the same as always. The third knife, however, struck his wife in the throat. At that instant, Han thought he'd murdered his wife on purpose. He knelt down to pray in front of the audience to convince everyone it had been an accident.

Han tells the judge that later he began to doubt that he had done it on purpose. He reasoned that he had only thought he had acted purposefully because of his homicidal thoughts the night before. The more he thinks, the less certain he becomes about his guilt or innocence. He realizes that his best defense is the truth; since even he does not know whether he is guilty or innocent, no one else can know. When the judge asks Han if he feels any sorrow for his wife's death, Han confesses that he does not and that he had never imagined he'd "be able to talk so cheerfully about her death." After this testimony, the judge finds Han innocent of the crime.

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# Summary

"Han's Crime" is Shiga Naoya's short story of a circus performer named Han who kills his wife during a knife act on stage. The question of his guilt or innocence rests on nuances of psychological interpretation of Han's true motives.

Han has killed his wife by severing her carotid artery during a knife throwing performance. The young woman dies immediately on the stage, and Han is taken into custody. The managers and other performers in the troupe are uncertain whether Han deliberately killed his wife or whether it was a horrible accident.

The judge on the case questions the circus manager, a stagehand and then Han himself in order to determine whether the woman's death is murder or unpremeditated manslaughter. The circus owner tells the judge that the act performed by Han and his wife on the fateful night is not a particularly difficult one for an experienced performer, which Han is. In fact, the owner would not allow the act in the circus had he not been sure of Han's skills.

The judge learns more personal information about Han and his wife from the stagehand, who knew the couple more intimately than the owner of the circus did. The stagehand confirms that although Han and his wife were kind and amiable with other people, they seemed to be especially cruel to each other. The premature death of their child seemed to have altered the nature of their relationship in a negative way, and the animosity was almost palpable.

At one time, Han revealed to the stagehand that he no longer loved his wife but could not bring himself to the point of divorcing her. Leaving Han had not been an option for Han's wife, either, because her family had disintegrated. The prospect of another marriage was negligible, as no self-respecting man would ever marry a woman who had worked in the circus.

The stagehand tells the judge that Han converted to Christianity and read the Bible in attempts to inject some tranquility into his life. Han's religious beliefs make him drop to his knees and pray at the moment of his wife's death, according to the stagehand's observations.

At the time of the death, the stagehand thought that Han had finally figured out a way to kill his wife, but now he is not so clear about his position on it. The stagehand second-guesses his opinion because he knows too much personal information on the volatile relationship between Han and his wife.

Finally, the judge interviews Han, who admits that he loved his wife up until the day she had a baby that was fathered by another man, probably his wife's cousin. Han deceived the others in the circus by saying that the child was premature, but in actuality, Han's wife was pregnant when he married her, although Han had not been aware of that fact. The baby died by choking at the breast. Han's wife claimed it was an accident, but Han

could not be sure. Han thinks that the child's death was a sign of judgment about his wife's illicit behavior, and the couple was forced to live with the pain of it every day, which ultimately brought the destruction of their relationship.

Han echoes his position on divorce as stated earlier by the stagehand and admits that he did think periodically that it would be good if she were dead. Han reveals that he lived in a constant state of agitation. The night before the murder, Han was especially upset because his wife took too long in preparing dinner. After going to bed, Han could not calm down, thinking about the limitations his wife had placed on his life with their loveless marriage.

Han could feel his own life ebbing away as he lived daily with the poisoning of a relationship that drained him of all energy and hope. Han even considered the idea of killing his wife and weighed the consequences. He determined that a life in jail would not be any worse than what he was experiencing. Finally, the thoughts of murder gave way to feelings of loneliness, despite his wife lying next to him in the bed.

The sleepless night created edginess in Han that made him unfit to perform that fateful night, but he tried to calm himself between knife throws. Han's aim on the first four throws was slightly off, the last one coming very close to the left side of his wife's throat. In this moment, Han's eyes met those of his wife, and he read a terror there. He wondered if she had a premonition that the next throw would be fatal.

Han admits that his composure was less than steady, and he threw the knife almost as if he were throwing in the dark. With this fatal throw, Han remembers thinking that at last he had killed his wife. He reveals to the judge that he felt at the time that he had done it intentionally. Han's kneeling on the stage was not done in prayer, but rather to give himself time to collect his thoughts and determine his behavior.

Han feels that any perceptive person could have seen through his performance and determined his guilt despite the show of grief and shock. Han later reasoned that he would have to be found innocent of the murder charge because there was no evidence or proof of the crime in spite of the volatile relationship shared with his wife.

As Han continues to examine the murder and the events leading up to it, he cannot convincingly say that he committed the crime intentionally. He thinks that perhaps it was actually just a horrible accident after all. Han's perspective of the murder is buoyed by the fact that the event and his motives for his actions are unclear.

The absolute truth is that Han is not sure what happened. He feels no remorse about her death and never imagined that he could ever speak so cheerfully about the loss of his wife. The judge dismisses Han, feels an unnamed excitement building up in himself and quickly writes a verdict of "innocent."

# Analysis

The story is told from the third person perspective by an unnamed narrator, which means that the reader is provided with facts and details of the plot but no inner feelings or emotions of the characters. The story is also told in the past tense. Details are recalled from the memories of the circus owner, the stagehand, and Han himself. The narrative technique is particularly effective in this story because of its interrogative nature and courtroom setting. The plot and the characters are all revealed through dialogue with no supplemental information. There are no clues provided about geographic location or time period, only that the characters are Japanese.

Some aspects of Japanese culture are included, such as Han's wife's inability to divorce because no other man would want her, given her time spent as a performer. It is also noted that the wife has extremely tiny feet and wears a gaudy Chinese costume, which could mean that she was actually Chinese herself trying to assimilate into Han's Japanese world.

The theme of guilt or innocence is the most important one in the story, and amazingly, the judge rules that Hans is innocent of the crime of killing his wife. This is due in part to the superior role of men over women in Japanese culture as well as the ambiguous state of Han's mind during the time of the actual murder. The judge cannot find that Han premeditated the murder, although he thought about it beforehand, nor can he substantiate that Han was especially agitated during the fatal performance. Given the choices of murder, manslaughter or innocence, the judge is compelled to rule for innocence.

The judge's sense of excitement about the verdict of innocence is interesting. It could be that the judge appreciates being able to rule on such a delicate psychological case, or maybe he can personally relate to the wish to eliminate a loveless mate. Perhaps the judge thrills just a little bit in helping a man get away with murder.

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# Characters

## The baby

The baby is the source of Han's antagonism toward his wife. Supposedly born prematurely, Han says that his wife was in fact pregnant when he married her and that the child is not his. The baby died when it choked at its mother's breasts. Han's wife says the baby's death was an accident; Han himself cannot be so certain.

## Chinese stagehand

The Chinese stagehand seems closer to Han than anyone else in the story, perhaps because they are both Chinese and foreigners in Japan's tightly knit society. The stagehand has had the opportunity to watch Han closely; he observes that Han seems to be a Christian and that he and his wife are kind to other people though cruel to each other. He knows that Han has thought about a divorce but does not want one. The stagehand witnesses the incident and confesses to the judge that he initially thought Han had murdered his wife deliberately, though he later wonders whether that thought was influenced by his knowledge of Han's unhappiness in the marriage.

## Han

Han is a young Chinese juggler who performs with a travelling circus troupe and kills his wife during a knife-throwing act. The judge thinks he is "intelligent-looking," though clearly suffering from nervous exhaustion. Although he does a knife-throwing act, he performs other acts as well. He has been married for three years, and has been unhappy since his wife's baby died. He loved his wife, he says, from the day they married until the day the baby died. He does not think his wife ever loved him; he thinks that she has been watching the gradual deterioration of his life with cruel eyes. He has taken to reading the Bible and Christian sermons as a way of controlling his anger toward his wife. He has acknowledged that he does not love her, but states that he will not seek a divorce because he wants to be on high moral ground; he does not want to be held responsible for being in the wrong.

Han seems well-liked by the owner-manager of the troupe and the stagehand. They say he is a "good" man who neither gambles, drinks or has affairs with women. Han is rather passive and has difficulty taking decisive action; despite his unhappiness with his wife, he does nothing consciously to resolve the situation. Instead he suffers from nightmares and is entertained by thoughts that life would be better if his wife were dead. When he kills his wife by throwing a knife in her throat, he thinks his behavior was premeditated. When he kneels before the audience and prays silently, he is aware of putting on a show and attempting to convince the audience that his wife's death is an accident. However, as Han thinks about his deed in the days that follow, he becomes less certain of either his guilt or innocence.

Han is both exceedingly honest and remarkably self-absorbed. He believes that because he cannot say for certain whether his action was premeditated, no one else can judge his responsibility in the matter of his wife's death. Although he can neither take responsibility for his wife's murder or rest easy in the knowledge of his innocence, he is remarkably "cheerful" about it. After Han confesses his story to the judge, he is found "innocent."

## Han's wife

Han's wife was a young woman who was married to Han for close to three years. After she married Han, she traveled with him and the performing troupe. Her older brother had many debts, and her family back home has since broken up and disappeared, so she has nowhere to go if she leaves Han. It is unknown whether or not she ever loved Han, and Han tells the judge that she had had a sexual relationship with another man, her cousin, before she married Han. Han believes that her cousin, who was a close friend of his, was the father of her child.

Han was often impatient with her; for example, the evening before the incident, they quarreled because he felt she was too slow in preparing his dinner. Han says that she looked no different than usual in her Chinese costume the night of their performance, except that as she sees the knife hurtle toward her throat "a strange look came over her face," which Han thinks must have been fear. Han believes that she had a premonition and that she threw her fear back at him "with the same force as the knife."

## Han's wife's cousin

Han's wife's cousin was a close friend of Han's. He introduced Han to Han's wife and suggested that they get married. Han believes that the cousin was the father of his wife's child.

## The judge

The judge's task is to determine whether Han is guilty of premeditated murder, guilty of manslaughter or innocent. He questions first the owner-manager of the theatrical troupe, next the stage manager, and finally Han himself. Most of the judge's questions concern Han's character, behavior and motivations, though he also solicits the opinions of all three men. When he has finished questioning the three men, he pronounces Han innocent.

## Owner-Manager

The owner-manager of the circus troupe does not know Han well, but says that the knife-throwing performance is not particularly difficult for an experienced performer if the performer has an alert, healthy mind. The owner-manager has faith in Han's abilities

and does not think the incident was deliberate. Although he had never thought anything like the incident could happen, he does not think that it would be fair for the judge to hold him responsible.

# Themes

## Guilt and Innocence

One of the most important themes of "Han's Crime" concerns guilt and innocence; specifically, the question of what constitutes guilt. In the story, Han is guilty of many things: hating his wife, quarreling with her over how quickly she prepares his supper, even thinking life would be better for him if she were dead. He acknowledges being able to speak of his wife's death "cheerfully," and admits to having had murderous thoughts; he is not sorry that she is dead. He confesses that he threw the knife that severed his wife's carotid artery and yet, startlingly, the judge pronounces Han "innocent" after listening to Han's reflection of his crime, even though Han neither repents nor expresses any remorse for what has happened to his wife.

How can the judge find Han "innocent" after listening to his confession? The narrator says that the judge's duty is to ascertain whether Han is guilty of premeditated murder or manslaughter. In order to determine what crime Han has committed, the judge must determine Han's *intention.* If Han planned the crime, then he has committed murder; if Han acted in anger, spontaneously and without forethought, then he has committed manslaughter. Although Han confesses that he had murderous thoughts he insists, however, that "between my thinking about such a thing and actually deciding to kill her, there was still a wide gap." At first, due to his murderous thoughts the night before, Han assumes he acted intentionally and is therefore guilty of murder. He then plans to deceive people into thinking it was an accident: "In the end, I thought, I would be acquitted for lack of evidence." Soon thereafter, however, Han begins to doubt that he intentionally killed his wife. Although he is unsure that her death was an accident, he is equally uncertain that it was premeditated. If Han cannot say for certain what his intentions or motivations were, the story suggests, the judge will be unable to find him guilty of either murder or manslaughter. The extent of Han's guilt rests in his motivation.

Toward the end of his confession, Han tells the judge, "Being found innocent meant everything to me now." Feeling "an excitement" similar to the one Han feels when he is finally certain of his uncertainty, the judge pronounces Han "innocent" of all charges, finding him guilty neither of premeditated murder nor of manslaughter beyond a reasonable doubt. "Han's Crime" suggests that honest self-reflection of one's motivations, with no false note and no false remorse, are more important than the actions one takes and can exonerate one from society's punishment. In proclaiming Han "innocent," the judge rewards Han for his honesty and his willingness to take responsibility for his true feelings.

## Choices and Consequences

In "Han's Crime," Han makes important choices which affect his life greatly. Although he is unhappy with his marriage and hates his wife, he chooses not to divorce her. He tells

the stage manager that "even if his wife had reasons to seek a divorce, he himself had none." He tells the judge that "I often thought I'd like a divorce," but "I was weak." Han's wife told him that if he divorced her, she "would not survive" because her father's family had broken up and her reputation had been sullied by four years on the road with the circus. The consequences of his decision to stay with his wife are brutal: his further unhappiness, violent thoughts, and the death of his wife.

Confronted with choices, Han often chooses *not* to act. He does not seem to recognize that conscious inaction is just as much a choice as a conscious act. Having chosen not to leave his wife, Han thinks "that it would be good if she were dead," and when he goes to sleep that night, after quarreling with his wife, he sees himself "suspended in midair . . . always hesitating, without the courage to want what I wanted, without the courage to get rid of what was unbearable." He feels as though his paralysis is "all due to my relationship with [his] wife." In his dream, he tells the judge, he contemplates the consequences of murder and is untroubled by them. Upon waking, he chooses again not to leave his wife. The judge even questions Han as to why Han did not leave after such frightening, murderous thoughts. Han informs the judge that although it seemed that leaving his wife would have the same desired result of freedom from her and the obligations of marriage, for him "there [was] a great difference" between leaving his wife and killing her, though he does not specify what that difference is or why leaving would not be a preferable alternative to killing her. In any event, Han chose several times to stay with his wife rather than leave her.

The evening after his murderous thought, Han chose to perform the knife-throwing act although "we had many other acts." As a consequence of choosing that act so soon after suffering murderous thoughts, he finds that his aim is unsteady. As a consequence of his unsteady aim, he throws a knife into his wife's throat, severing her carotid artery. As a result of her injury, she dies.

Han also chooses to confess to the judge not only his crime but the motivations and feelings surrounding it. As a consequence of confessing his actions and analyzing his doubts, the judge grants him what he wants more than anything—his freedom.

## Consciousness and the Unconscious

Much of the tension and power of "Han's Crime" comes from the question of how responsible people are for their own antisocial thoughts and feelings if they do not *consciously* act on them. Han tells the judge that "between my thinking such a thing and actually deciding to kill her, there was still a wide gap." He repeatedly tells the judge that once his murderous thoughts were over he "no longer thought of killing her." Han is guilty of murder if he *consciously* plots murder and he is guilty of manslaughter if he acts without premeditated thought.

In Freud's theory of the unconscious, the personality consists of three components: the id, which is unconscious and is the source of all our urges; the superego, which is the voice of society that tells us what is socially acceptable behavior; and the ego, which

mediates between the id's urges and the superego's restrictions. It is generally understood that people have thoughts, feelings and urges that are repressed or censored by the conscious mind because they are not socially acceptable. According to Freud's theory, our unconscious urges come to us, as they did to Han, in dreams. For the most part, though, unconscious urges are not recognized by the conscious mind, and they only surface indirectly, in unexpected ways. During the knife-throwing act, Han becomes aware of consciously trying to control his unconscious urges: "I could feel in my arm the constraint that comes from a thing's having become conscious." Before throwing the final, fatal knife, Han sees a "premonition" of "violent fear" come over his wife's face. He describes a battle between his conscious and unconscious minds in which "dizziness" strikes him and he throws his knife "almost without a target, as though aiming in the dark." The question his description raises is whether, then, he consciously and intentionally threw the knife at his wife. On the one hand, his description makes him sound "out of control" and "beside himself" as though he were not the agent of his actions; on the other hand, his awareness of throwing the knife suggests that his conscious mind was active as well.

Han later questions whether he initially thought "I killed her at last" because he *had* just intentionally murdered her or because he was influenced by the murderous thoughts of the previous night. Han suggests to the judge that it was his unconscious urge that killed his wife; he is uncertain how consciously he was involved in the murder. Although Han cannot be sure of the extent of his conscious participation in what he calls "the incident," at the time he felt he had acted intentionally, and he consciously tried to deceive his audience by pretending to pray. He "knew everyone thought [he] seriously believed in Christianity," and was already thinking he would need to defend himself by arguing that the incident was an accident.

The role of conscious decision-making versus unconscious, uncontrollable urges lies at the center of "Han's Crime." It also lies at the center of the judge's verdict. As Han finishes his confession, the judge becomes aware of "an excitement" to which "he could not put a name." In declaring Han "innocent" of all charges, the judge himself is responding to a deep, unarticulated feeling that "surge[s] up in him," over which he has no control.

## Doubt and Ambiguity

The narrative of "Han's Crime" is riddled with doubt and ambiguity. Doubt is first introduced to the story by the owner-manager, who tells the judge that the knife-throwing act is not particularly difficult for an experienced performer in an alert, healthy state of mind. He says, "the performance requires experience, instinctive skill and nothing else. But one cannot say that it will always come off with such machinelike precision." At the same time, however, the manager says "it's a fact" that management had "never thought that something like this would happen." Flustered at having said, on the one hand, that management had never considered the possibility of an incident such as Han's crime and that, on the other hand, management had of course recognized the possibility, he tells the judge, "I do not think it fair, now that it *has* happened, to say that

we had considered the possibility and hold it against us." The owner-manager cannot say for certain whether or not the incident was deliberate or not. The Chinese stagehand, too, tells the judge that although his first thought had been "he's murdered her," he immediately questioned whether he'd had that thought because he really believed Han murdered his wife or simply because he knew of their relationship woes. Han's intentions are ambiguous, or unclear, to both his manager and his stagehand.

Doubt and ambiguity plague Han's relationship with his wife. He doubts that the child is his, and he doubts, too, that the child's death at its mother's breast was an accident, even though his wife swears it was. He doubts that his wife loves him and that she sympathizes at all with him. He doubts she can survive without him should he choose to leave her.

But, most importantly, Han begins to doubt his own intentions concerning his wife's death. Initially, he assumes he committed murder because of his previous murderous thoughts, and he plans to present his case as though her death had been a terrible accident. Amidst these plans, however, "a doubt rose up" in him as to whether he himself believed it was murder. Unsure as to whether he had committed murder or had simply been involved in a tragic accident, Han's doubt is ultimately liberating, both in terms of his sense of self and the judge's sentence. Because "it was completely unclear, even to [himself], which it had been," Han realizes that he has changed the very terms of the trial: "come what may it was no longer a question of a confession of guilt." Doubt inhabits the "gap" between Han's "thinking" and "actually deciding to kill her." Han's self-doubt informs the judge's verdict: if Han himself has doubts, the judge cannot find him guilty of either manslaughter or murder.

# Style

## Setting

The action of "Han's Crime" takes place in a courtroom. The courtroom is not described in any detail; the setting is indicated by a single sentence: "The judge commenced by interrogating the owner-manager." The characters' dialogue recounts action that took place on the road with a traveling circus, and the death of Han's wife occurred on the circus stage in front of a large audience.

What is most striking about the setting in "Han's Crime," however, is its absence. The setting provides no clues about historical period (is it modern day? medieval?) or place (is it Japan? urban? rural?) or about any larger social context (what socioeconomic class are Han and his wife? What is the prevailing social opinion on divorce, infanticide, or wife-murdering?). The lack of many explicit details in setting the story allows an allegorical reading in which Han represents a sort of "everyman" who is held up to be judged by some legal power. The removal of Han and his court appearance from any kind of social or historical markers puts the story on an abstract or theoretical level, so that "Han's Crime" seems to be more about the *idea* of crime and guilt or innocence than about Han's particular story.

## Point of View and Narration

"Han's Crime" is a third-person narrative told by a narrator who is not a character in the story. This narrator is omniscient, but is unobtrusive or impersonal to the extreme, so that the narrator only shares information that is reported by the characters and does not reveal anyone's inner thoughts or give his own opinion of Han's predicament or the judge's response. The narrator provides access to the thoughts and feelings of the characters primarily through dialogue; the judge questions each character thoroughly, and each character answers at great length.

## Structure

"Han's Crime" is structured as a series of dialogues between the judge and Han's coworkers, and the judge and Han. Recounted by each character in the present moment, the principal actions of the story are revealed in flashback. The owner-manager, Chinese stagehand, and Han all recount their individual recollections and interpretations of the incident that resulted in the death of Han's wife, and Han recalls the introspective process by which he becomes certain only of his own uncertainty.

The story is also constructed as a confession, which results in *catharsis* (the purifying of emotions or the relieving of emotional tensions, especially by art). Ironically, for Han the catharsis results in the realization that he is certain neither of his guilt nor his innocence: "I was so happy because come what may it was no longer a question of confession of

guilt." Shiga and his fellow *Shirakaba* writers linked strongly the moral quality of a particular work of art—in this case, confessional elements—to the structure of that work.

## Symbols and Imagery

Just as "Han's Crime" has minimal setting, it also has minimal imagery. Shiga and his generation of writers wanted to be as "factual" and as close to "real life" as possible, and hence avoided the kind of literary symbolism and imagery found in Japanese poetry or Western writing of the early twentieth century. There are a few details in the story, however, that seem to serve symbolic purposes. Most of the symbols in "Han's Crime" are concrete details that represent larger abstractions. The death of the baby of Han's wife, for example, renders concretely the death of Han's love for his wife. Han's Chinese nationality in a closely-knit Japanese society that shuns outsiders materially represents Han's alienation and isolation from the larger society around him. The judge, with his careful questioning and his authority to render a verdict, represents not only the law but the moral judgment of the larger society to which Han must submit.

The key symbol in the story is the wife of Han. She is far more a symbol than a character, and the key symbolic event is her death. Although she plays a pivotal role in the story, neither Han, the owner-manager, nor the Chinese stagehand can describe her with much detail. She seems kind to everyone except Han; she is pretty; and her small feet suggest that she, like Han and the stagehand, is Chinese. She also represents a life of captivity and hypocrisy to Han; he feels that he was tricked into marrying her when she was pregnant with another man's child.

It is hard to understand why Han bears so much hatred for his wife. One explanation is what she represents to him: the absence of freedom. Several times in the story, Han mentions his freedom to pursue his "true life." It is unclear how his wife prevents him from leading his "true life" (just as it remains vague what his "true life" is and what he will do with the freedom the judge offers him). Han tells the judge he felt "poisoned" by the relationship and that he felt his wife watched "the gradual destruction of my life" with "cruel eyes." To Han, his wife represented all that was holding him back in life; he felt his paralysis and weaknesses were "all due to my relationship with my wife." Her death is the key symbolic event in the story because through it and the self-reflection that follows it, Han gains his freedom.

## Allegory

The absence of historical context and detailed description of place or of the larger society that Han inhabits have lead some critics to remark on the story's allegorical qualities. If "Han's Crime" is an allegory, it is an *allegory of ideas,* in which the characters represent abstract concepts, and the plot communicates a doctrine or thesis. That only Han is named and that all the other characters are merely represented by their titles—the judge, the owner-manager, the Chinese stagehand, Han's wife—suggests that the characters are not important for who they are but for what they

represent. Told primarily in dialogue between Han and his judge, the narrative of "Han's Crime" strongly suggests that a certain quality of authenticity or sincerity, an abstract idea personified by Han in his agonized soul-searching, is to be valued above the laws of society. If Han, who is so thoroughly honest in his self-reflection, cannot determine his own guilt or innocence, the story suggests, how then can legal institutions presume to determine it? "Han's Crime" argues for the primacy of feelings, going as far to imply that feelings about "the incident" are more important than the incident itself.

# Historical Context

## Political Context

Shiga Naoya began his career and wrote his most representative works during the Taisho period in Japan (1912-1926). According to Peter Duus in his article, "Liberal Intellectuals and Social Conflict in Taisho Japan," the Taisho period in Japan resembled the 1960s in America in that it was politically volatile as it moved from an extremely class-conscious and hierarchical society toward industrialization and democratization. Following the Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895), Japanese society became more industrialized. The industrialization accelerated after the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905) and World War I (1914-1918), increasing the population of the urban working class and laying the groundwork for the democracy movements for which the Taisho period is known. Signs of social unrest began with the anti-treaty riots of 1905 and gained momentum in the 1910s as women, students and workers in both the cities and rural areas took to the streets to demand access to the vote and better working conditions. Duus observes that the episodes of social conflict that dominated the Taisho period stem from the accelerated growth of the economy, less acceptance of social differentiation, and a decline in confidence in the emperor and national leadership as well from a response to changes in the outside world. He writes: "By the early 1910s . . . easy optimism about the stability and justness of Japanese society began to erode...."

## The Shirakaba School

The *Shirakaba* School, of which Shiga was a founding member, was very much a product of the Taisho period. In Kyoto, Japan, in 1910, a group of young men who had been students at the Peers' School founded a journal they called *Shirakaba,* or White Birch. These students were all members of the upper classes: either members of the aristocracy, as was Shiga, whose ancestors were samurai; or the sons of important government officials. In *Dawn to the West,* Donald Keene explains

An independence of mind so strong that the members of the group felt free to run counter to the opinions of the vast majority of Japanese was typical of these young aristocrats, who never lost their awareness of belonging to an elite class. Unlike the Naturalist writers, who tended to portray themselves with mingled pity and contempt, the *Shirakaba* members were proud of themselves and their chosen professions. They were absolutely confident in their tastes and did not hesitate to affirm them.

These young men were well-read in Western classics, and their literary emphasis was on humanism and the individual personality rather than the celebration of nature favored by their literary predecessors, the Naturalists. Because of its emphasis on the individual personality, and a narrative style that made it difficult to separate characters from author, the fiction produced by the *Shirakaba* group has been given the name "I-novel."

The philosophies of the *Shirakaba* group are most clearly understood in the context of the Taisho period. According to Suzuki in *Narrating the Self: Fictions of Japanese Modernity*: "The emergence of the I-novel was closely related to the social-liberal movement of the late 1910s and early 1920s known as Taisho Democracy, which sought to expand the vote." Yoshino Sakuzo, one of the leaders of the democratization of the vote movement, advocated "development of the individual personality" for the working classes and "humanistic consideration and reflection" for the upper classes. Other pro-Democracy leaders espoused Personalism, which they defined as the development and achievement of the individual self as the basis for all social reform. The *Shirakaba* group advocated Humanism, the pursuit and development of the individual self as the ultimate goal of life. As Keene points out, because "the members of the group throughout their careers remained aloof from, or even hostile to, serious consideration of public issues," the *Shirakaba* writers focused on an idea of "the self" which was isolated from its larger social context. Both the more politicized Personalism—which insisted that social reform benefit the individual self—and the introspective, psychological Humanism of the *Shirakaba* school formed the intellectual ground for the Taisho Democracy.

# Critical Overview

Although he only wrote one novel, three novellas and a few dozen short stories, Shiga Naoya has had a significant impact on twentieth-century Japanese literature. He occupies a dominant place in modern Japanese fiction. As Donald Keene writes, "No modern writer was more idolized than Shiga Naoya. A half-dozen writers were recognized as his disciples, and innumerable others were so greatly influenced by his writings as to recall Shiga on every page." Such prominent writers as Akutagawa Ryunosuke, who wrote the story *Rashoman,* have admired Shiga's writings. Among his contemporaries, he has been called "the god of literature." Even when critics question the value and significance of his work, they concede that he remains an important figure in Japanese literary history, not only for his contributions to the development of the I-novel, but for his precise, compressed, and carefully controlled writing style, which has been praised for its ability to convey complex psychological states through suggestion, implication and allusion.

Aside from his novel *A Dark Night's Passing* and a few short stories, Shiga's work has not been translated into English. In *Shiga Naoya,* Francis Mathy rightly points out that Shiga's literary reputation must be considered in both Eastern and Western traditions. In the Eastern tradition, perfection of art is linked to perfection of life; traditional Japanese literature is not mimetic (i.e., does not try to represent the world "realistically" in the way that some Western novels do). Mathy writes:

Without a philosophy of history, without a notion of a meaningful whole of human experience to which each individual part of it is related and from which it can derive a meaning, Japanese tradition could form no

concept of the individual human personality (upon which characterization is based) or of the significance of any segment of human life (upon which plot is based) or of the wide causal reverberations of human decisions and actions (upon which the development of the action in a literary work is based).

What Japanese writers and critics value is the attempt to capture as much of the reality or life of the passing moment as possible. Japanese literature tends to emphasize the present moment, isolated from the past or the future, complete and whole unto itself. The present moment is meaningful unto itself, without reference to either the past or the future.

Japanese fiction, then, emphasizes the intuition and sudden understanding of the "heart" of things in a way the Western literary tradition does not. When Shiga published "Han's Crime" and his other works, Japanese critics responded to what Nakamura Mitsuo called *kokoro no fukasa,* or "depth of heart." According to Mathy, Mitsuo wrote: "When we consider Shiga's works in the context of all the other literature that surrounds it, it seems so simple that it gives the impression of being the expression of a man that is always on the verge of silence. But who can mistake the depth of reality that is

depicted there?" For Japanese critics, Shiga is a "pure" writer who is completely true to himself and rejects everything false and impure. It is this purity and depth of heart that inspired his Japanese readers.

This relationship of art to life has led many Japanese critics to respond to Shiga's work as a facet of his own personality. In *Narrating the Self,* Tomi Suzuki notes that responses to Shiga's work have also been responses to him as a personality. Of his contemporaries, for example, she observes that Akutagawa Ryunosuke has described Shiga as "a sensitive, moral soul," but that Kobayashi Hideo labeled him an "ultra-egotist" and "a man of action." Inoue Yoshio called Shiga "a primitive man," Tanigawa Tetsuzo found him to be "a man of moods," and Ito Sei and Hirano Ken celebrated him as "a man of harmony." Just as Shiga's *Shirakaba* group in the Taisho generation were critical of the Naturalists from the generation before, after World War II, Japanese readers became critical of the isolation of the self from society that they found in Shiga's fiction.

In the West, Shiga has not been widely read, so it is difficult to place him within a context. Several Western critics and translators have noted that Shiga's precise language and subjective representations of the individual at a specific moment in time are difficult to translate from the Japanese. According to Mathy, one translator bemoaned, "try as I might, the English that emerged was but a pallid reflection of the original.... It was as if Shiga's style was such a rare and subtle perfume that it evaporated as I transferred it from one bottle to another."

Of the few Western critics who have written about "Han's Crime," all find it a fascinating piece for both its ambiguity and psychological acuity. For Suzuki, the story explores "the relationship between imagination and action, the connection between motives and interpretations, and the interrelated questions of spontaneity, moral effort and freedom." For William Sibley, author of *The Shiga Hero,* "Han's Crime" is striking in its presentation of the "hero's private morality: the proposition that when one commits what the world calls a crime out of deep-rooted and largely unconscious motives, there can be no guilt and should be no crime." Reviewing a recent translation of Shiga's stories in the *New York Times,* Hiroaki Sato calls "Han's Crime" a "psychological drama that is extraordinary in the simplicity of its narrative structure and the depth of its intellectual honesty."

# Criticism


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# Critical Essay #1

*Yoonmee Chang is a Ph.D. candidate in the English department at the University of Pennsylva-nia. In the following essay, she uncovers the latent feminist expressions in Shiga Naoya's "Han's Crime," focusing on the "subtext" or the story-within-the-story that can antagonize or disrupt the author's apparent intentions.*

Shiga Naoya has hardly been considered a "feminist" writer. After all, Han's dissatisfaction with his wife in "Han's Crime" (1913) reaches a violent breaking point because she does not cook dinner fast enough for his liking. In its day, the *Shirakaba* group, or "I-novelists," that Shiga helped to found was radical in its often oppositional attitudes to social conventions that hindered the development of the individual self. But these writers were deeply conservative in that their conceptions of the "true" self were based on traditional, masculinist notions. While they proposed that the self should have the right to transgress social mores and ethics in pursuit of its "true nature," this self was implicitly male, and women were often represented as hindrances to this pursuit. In accordance with the Shirakaba aesthetic, Han, the protagonist of "Han's Crime," is exonerated from the murder of his wife because her death, as he proposes, is necessary to finding his "true nature." Han tells the judge:

"A desire to seek the light [to enter upon a journey of self-exploration] was burning inside me. Or, if it was not, it was trying to catch fire. But my relationship with my wife would not let it . . . I was being poisoned . . . It would be good if she died . . ."

The troubling implication of Han's reasoning, and the judge's support of it, is that because women can disrupt and derail the masculinist privilege of self-exploration, they must be physically and psychologically evacuated. In short, they can be justifiably murdered.

Despite these central masculinist and misogynist assumptions, "Han's Crime" can be interpreted in a way that, ironically, empowers women. To understand such interpretations that seem counter-logical or contradictory to the author's purposes, the reader must resist the common practice of interpreting a story through the author's *intentions.* Twentieth-century literary critics W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley discuss the problems of interpreting literature in this way in a well-known essay entitled "The Intentional Fallacy." They write:

the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success [and meaning] of a work of literary art . . .

The meaning of literature is not best fathomed by considering *what the author means* as that "intention" is difficult to pinpoint even by the author herself.

A similar understanding of literature, though formed in a disparate context, is Russian literary theorist M. M. Bakhtin's idea of "dialogism." According to Bakhtin, language does not exist in a vacuum. No word, phrase, or sentence, as well as the most complicated

and structured utterances, like political treatises and literary texts, ever mean exactly the same thing to all readers. He imagines meaning as a ray of light that travels from the object to the eye. Before the light reaches the eye and the eye can see the object, the light is *refracted* at varying angles, depending on the physical composition of the object and the space between the object and the eye. Similarly, before the meaning of the word or utterance moves from the text to the reader's understanding, it travels through an environment of personal experience, opinion, education background etc., that influences how the reader understands that text. In addition, the *historical context* of the author, reader and distance between the two affects an utterance's meaning. For example, an account of slavery would ring differently in the ears of someone in antebellum America than in the ears of a modern-day audience.

Bakhtin does not deny that the author has *intentions* and may try to express those intentions in her work. His point is that in the complex process of understanding the meaning of a text, such intentions may become diminished, blurred, or even completely lost to the reader. As a result, any given literary text can be interpreted in infinitely different ways; literature is *polyphonic*, or speaks with *many voices.* Woven within the "main" story, or that which follows the author's apparent intentions, are various other stories or *subtexts,* meanings produced beyond the author's control and which frequently speak louder than the author's intentions. Highlighting *subtexts* is a critical strategy that allows ethically questionable texts (for example, openly racist, classist or masculinist texts) to be re-imagined for the groups such texts seek to oppress. In simple and cynical terms, the apparent message of "Han's Crime" is that it is acceptable for a man to kill his wife if she stands in the way of his "true" self's development. But by turning one of the dominant messages of the story back upon itself, a subtext emerges that challenges this and more generally misogynistic ways of thinking.

"Han's Crime" is a story about storytelling. It examines the forces at work in relating a story to a reader or hearer and points out that the process can be arbitrary and biased. The text also warns against taking the *implications* of certain "facts" at face value. When placed in certain *contexts,* objective facts can take on specific implications, but these implications do not necessarily represent the truth. Depending on what implications are accepted as "true" and how the "facts" are presented and assembled, the resulting story can lean towards certain biases and points of view. In the case of Han's wife's death, the owner-manager of the performing troupe, a Chinese stagehand, and Han himself are called upon to provide objective and relevant bits of information. It is the job of the judge to arrange these bits to reconstruct the story of Han's wife's death. Han's guilt or innocence depends on how the judge puts these pieces of information together and what implications he consciously or subconsciously accepts as truth. The reader is put in the position of judge. Both rely on second-hand information—the testimony of the characters—to construct a logical picture of the events.

To construct a "true story" is a rather difficult task, as it is a common temptation to accept the implications of certain "facts" as truth. For example, that Han did not get along with his wife is on the one hand a simple piece of descriptive information. In the context of everyday life, this information takes on no sinister meaning. But when followed by the information that a knife from Han's hand killed his wife, this factoid takes

on new importance and damning connotations. It can be interpreted as a partial motivation for murder and increases the possibility of Han's guilt. The stagehand is aware of the powerful implication in this context, but also knows that he should be careful of too easily accepting implication as truth. He tells the judge: "I thought that my thinking he'd murdered her might . . . simply have been because I knew a good deal about their relationship." Had he not known about the couple's unhappy marriage, the stagehand might not have personally suspected Han of murder. Though the fact of couple's bad marriage implies a murder is possible, it does not prove it. Han himself argues along these lines:

"Everyone knew we'd been on bad terms, of course, so there was bound to be a suspicion of murder.... That we'd gotten along badly might make people conjecture, but it was no proof."

Han's admission that his marriage was miserable, and that he even wished his wife were dead, certainly *implies* that Han may likely have killed her, but it is not definitive proof.

In this way, Han's guilt or innocence depends in part on which implications are accepted or rejected. In addition, the verdict is influenced by the arrangement of "facts" and the implications of the *procession of events.* Because of the suspicious procession of events, Han himself believes, at first, that he is indeed guilty. But that events happen in a certain order does not necessarily mean that one event was caused by another. Han reconstructs the incident: he had an unusually heated argument with his wife the night before; unable to sleep he passed the night thinking upon his wife's hindrance of his "true nature" and thought "It would be good if she died"; the next day he felt "insanely keyed up," perhaps from a lack of sleep; and during the performance he doubted his steadiness. Presented in this order, the information constructs a causal, *teleological* (facts arranged to move towards some conclusionary endpoint) narrative that likely incriminates Han: because of A (his fight with his wife), B happened (he wished she were dead), and ultimately resulted in C (the murder). But before Han convinces himself and the judge that he is definitively guilty, he points out that just because the events transpired in the order that they did, it does not mean that one event caused the following one. Han explains: "The night before, I had thought about killing her, but was that alone a reason for deciding, myself, that it was murder?" and "between my thinking about such a thing and actually deciding to kill her, there was still a wide gap...." In other words, there is no necessarily causal relationship linking the events preceding the murder. Though the order of events certainly implies causality and seems to incriminate Han, that they happened in that order and at the times that they did was random and arbitrary, a matter of chance. Han could have wished his wife were dead all his life without harming her as well as he could have easily planned to kill her without thinking upon it the night before. The judge apparently agrees with Han, as well as the stagehand, and declares him "innocent."

Along these lines, "Han's Crime" makes a comment about constructing a story. By arranging scattered pieces of information together and giving weight to various implications, different narratives can emerge. These resulting stories can have powerful

effects, as in Han's case, determining whether he spends the rest of his life in jail. But this is not to say that these stories represent the "truth." The judge's verdict of "innocent" indicates that he recognizes the questionable "truth" of a story especially when based on random bits of information arranged in a certain order and taken for their obvious implications. But at the same time "Han's Crime" offers this challenge to "truth" based on reconstructed, implication-based narratives, the text is guilty of its own unfair storytelling, namely in regard to Han's wife.

Though her murder is central to the text, Han's wife—her personality, her desires, her opinions—are barely discussed. The details revealed about her are scant, but in a masculinist fashion focus on her sexual behavior. As in the testimony provided in the trial, each bit of biographical information about Han's wife has its implications and connotations. For instance, Han believes that his wife remained in the miserable marriage because: "she knew that no respectable man would marry a woman who'd been the wife of a road-player." There are at least two assumptions in this statement. First, that road-performers, especially women, are sexually promiscuous, or at least popularly considered to be so, and second, that in the case of a divorce, Han's wife would need to remarry; that is, she would be unable to support herself as an independent woman. These misogynistic assumptions are supported by the stage-hand's similar statement: "Even if she had left Han and gone back [to her family], nobody would have trusted a woman who'd been on the road four years enough to marry her." Han also reveals that his wife had conceived another man's baby before their marriage and tells the judge that this is his primary source of hatred. He even feels that the baby's death was a "just" punishment for her sexual transgression:

"I felt that the baby's death was a judgement on her for what she'd done . . . [But m]y feeling remained that the baby's death wasn't enough of a judgement. At times, when I thought about it by myself, I could be rather forgiving . . . [But a]s I looked at her, at her body, I could not keep down my displeasure."

Slowly, a picture of Han's wife emerges from the information provided by Han and the stagehand. This picture is not a favorable one as the men's descriptions construct her as an insensitive, dependent, and sexually promiscuous woman that deserves punishment for expressing her sexuality outside of marriage. Clearly this image of Han's wife is one-sided, but the judge seems to give it credence by never questioning this biased representation. Han argued that though thinking about murder may imply that he carried out the murder, there was still a "wide gap" between these two events. But Han's dead wife never has the chance to similarly argue against the implication of certain facts; for instance, the assumption that because she had a relationship with another man *before her marriage to Han* she was sexually promiscuous. In fact, the circumstances of that relationship are never discussed. Its implications are merely taken at face value.

Furthermore, the judge's verdict of "innocent" seems to partially rely on his implicit condemnation of Han's wife for her "scandalous" sexual behavior. Rather than asserting his innocence, Han's testimony is inordinately concerned with describing and disparaging his wife's pre-martial sexual liaison and the pregnancy that resulted. The

judge's patient listening to Han's sexual defamation of his wife, which also forces the reader to hear this evidence, implies that her so-called "promiscuity" is indeed a weighty matter and is perhaps a reasonable excuse for murder. In these moments, it seems that Han's wife rather than Han is the one on trial, namely for her so-called sexual promiscuity.

But considering the dominant message of the story—that information, implications and narrative construction are arbitrary and suspect—the attentive reader is equipped with a powerful tool to refute and overturn the misogynist strains of "Han's Crime," and to re-imagine the story from a feminist angle. As discussed, the confusion regarding the "facts" or evidence in the murder case, as well as the judge's verdict, encourages the reader to question or challenge stories constructed from an assemblage of "facts" that tend to rely on implications. In this light, the text requests that the reader reconsider Han's guilt, as the facts of the incident are only provided through patchy, second-hand information hastily arranged to form a narrative whole. As the truth of Han's story can never be known, the text warns the reader of easily accepting such artificially assembled, teleological narratives. The same can be said for Han's wife's "story." Her sexually degraded characterization is similarly conveyed through scattered bits of information that, because they are arranged in a specific way, create a negative picture of her. There is much information left out, and among the details included, the implications are taken for face value. For instance, the assumption that if a woman is a road performer, she is automatically promiscuous; or that her sexual liaison with the unnamed man was an act of wantonness. If the reader is warned not to believe constructed accounts like Han's story (A does not necessarily lead to B and C), she can also be equally wary of the "truth" of Han's wife's characterization: having a baby with a man one is not married to does not have to render a woman sexually degraded, and her relationship with the unnamed man is a much more complicated situation, not an automatic indicator of her sexual immorality. Though the men in the text cooperate in describing her as weak, dependent, and promiscuous, the general lesson of the text empowers the reader to recognize such characterizations as artificial, biased, and constructed.

By focusing on the subtext, misogynist, racist, classist, and other oppressive forms of literature can be re-imagined. Rather than turn away in disgust and reject such texts, the careful reader can interpret them in empowering ways often by using such texts' terms against themselves. As a misogynistic story, "Han's Crime" undoes itself, providing the reader with the very tools to dismantle such messages, denoting perhaps the untenability of such oppressing structures of thought. Whether or not the authors would agree with such antagonist interpretations of their stories is irrelevant. Because they are mediated through "dialogic" language, words once separated from their authors immediately become transformed and reinvented in the hands of their thoughtful and diverse readers. In a way, all literary texts are like testimonies provided in court cases—information arranged to assert a specific point of view with an aim to convince its audience of something. Noting that authors have various personal interests, it is the very powerful position of the reader to choose what to believe.

**Source:** Yoonmee Chang, "An Overview of 'Han's Crime'," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 1999.

# Critical Essay #2

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Several years after publishing the story, "Han's Crime," Shiga Naoya became seized with the desire to "write of the wife, dead and quiet in her grave, from the wife's point of view," according to Edward Fowler in *The Rhetoric of Confession.* Shiga wrote in his journal, "I would call the story 'The Murdered Wife of Han.' I never did write it, but the urge was there." Shiga's journal entry reveals that although the character Han questioned his own motives, and the judge in the story exonerated him of any crime, Shiga himself believes his hero to be guilty of murder. Shiga's comment is especially striking given that while the death of Han's wife is clearly central to the story, as a character, she is all but absent.

The story concerns Han's realization that, through living with his wife, he has become alienated from his "true identity." In the story, Han believes that he can only achieve his "true self" through the death of his wife. He even tells the judge that for him "there was a great difference" between leaving his wife and killing her, and that leaving her did not have the same "desired result." But what can it mean that the realization of Han's "true life" comes at the expense of his wife's death? Or that in recognizing his true self, Han violates the laws of society and the judge seems to reward him for doing so? In order to answer these questions, we must first address the philosophy of the self that Shiga espoused.

The *Shirakaba* group, of which Shiga was a founding member, wholeheartedly embraced the development of one's individual personality as the overarching purpose of art. As supporters of Humanism, the *Shirakaba* group reacted strongly against the aspect of Japanese society that valued social harmony over the development of the individual personality. Indeed, the writings of the *Shirakaba* school focus on the life of the individual almost exclusively. In 1911, Mushakoji Saneatsu, one of Shiga's fellow group members, wrote the following manifesto in *Shirakaba* magazine: "The value of one's existence is acquired only by giving life to one's individual personality." Furthermore, Mushakoji contended that "Those who commit themselves to work that cannot make the best of their individual personality are insulting their own selves." In order to understand how Han can feel no remorse about murdering his wife, then, we need to recognize that in addition to personal honesty and psychological acuity, one of the primary tenets of the "I-novels" and fiction of the *Shirakaba* group was the idea of *allegiance to one's self above all*. The only person to whom Han is responsible, given the ideas of the *Shirakaba* group, is himself.

For the writers of the *Shirakaba* group, art is a means of "developing and realizing their 'true selves'," explains Tomi Suzuki in *Narrating the Self: Fictions of Japanese*

*Modernity.* Shiga himself wrote, in a diary entry dated May 27, 1911, "The mission of art is to achieve a deeper understanding of nature's beauty." But for Shiga and the members of the *Shirakaba* group, nature meant "human nature," unconstrained by society, rather than the celebration of the natural world of flora and fauna exemplified by haiku of earlier generations. Literary critic Makoto Ueda explains that for Shiga, "A person who behaved 'naturally' was not a mere eccentric who pays little attention to conventional norms; he was a person who, having awakened to his innermost nature, was trying to return to it." To be true to nature, then, is to be true to one's inner self. The *Shirakaba* sense of "the self" seems to resemble the id in Freudian psychology, in which the id represents our most primal urges and needs. In the Freudian model, the id is held firmly in check by the superego (internalized rules of society), and it is our ego—or conscious self—that negotiates the demands of the id versus the restraints of society. In "Han's Crime," Shiga represents the self as pure id, certain only of what it wants, unable to analyze its motivations.

What was it about this young woman that her death gives birth to Han's "true self"? For what has she given her life? Shiga does not reveal much about this mysterious young woman, not even her name or her nationality, though the fact that she wears a "gaudy Chinese costume" suggests that, like her husband, she is Chinese. Since marrying Han and going on the road with him as a circus performer, her family has broken up and disappeared, so she has nowhere to go if Han leaves her. The owner-manager and the stage manager of the circus speak highly of her ("she was a good person, too"), except to note that Han and his wife, "who were so kind, gentle and self-effacing with others, when it came to their own relationship, were surprisingly cruel to each other." However, by the stage manager's estimation, the unhappiness in the marriage came about only after the death of her child, of whom Han suspected he was not the father.

A foreigner in Japan, unhappily married to an unforgiving husband, Han's wife finds she can never please her husband, who is always off reading Christian literature and expressing dissatisfaction with everything she does, such as preparing the evening meal. She tells her husband that if he "divorced her she could not survive" because "she knew that no respectable man would marry a woman who'd been the wife of a road-player. And her feet were too small for ordinary work." Although she does not love her husband, she attempts to be a good wife to him; he tells the judge that their sexual relations were "probably not much different than those of an average couple." By Han's own account, then, Han's wife is a beautiful, impoverished young woman with no family, dependent on her husband for her livelihood and safety, who committed the "crime" of loving another man before she married her husband.

Han's biggest complaint against her is that she feels no sympathy for him: "My wife simply observed, with cruel eyes, the gradual destruction of my life . . . without the slightest wish to help." But Han does not seem to recognize that he feels little compassion for her, though "for my wife living with me was an extraordinary hardship" that she endured with a patience "beyond what one would have thought possible even for a man." Unable to feel compassion or forgiveness, Han needs to punish his wife for the failure of the relationship, the death of their romantic love: "My feeling remained," he tells the judge, "that the baby's death wasn't enough of a judgment." His hatred for her

consumes him, and in order to be free of it, he begins to think "that it would be good if she were dead."

For a Western, feminist reader, what remains most frustrating about "Han's Crime" are Han's claims that divorcing his wife does not produce the same "desired result" as murdering her and that through her death, he becomes liberated to "live [his] own life." Certainly, in granting Han his innocence, the judge literally liberates Han to lead a new life. But just as for Han "a wide gap" exists between thinking about murder and actually doing it, so too a gap exists between exactly how it is that the annihilation of one person's life results in another's development of his "true self." On one level, "Han's Crime" is a story of domestic violence, in which the woman gets punished for her transgression (sleeping with another man prior to her marriage to Han), but Han gets rewarded for his.

Shiga's endorsement of supreme selfishness makes "Han's Crime" all the more shocking, for what kind of natural self does Han celebrate? For Han, murder is a means of developing and realizing his "true self." In "Han's Crime," this celebration of self seems anti-social and violent in the extreme. Like Raskalnikov in Dostoevski's *Crime and Punishment*, who murders an old woman for her gold, or Mersault in Camus's *The Stranger*, who has murdered his own mother, Han finds a perverse freedom in transgressing society's laws. But unlike those European novels, society in "Han's Crime" does not exact a punishment. instead it acknowledges, in the person of the judge, that it too has had these fleeting feelings of "excitement" that one "could not put a name to," and condones Han for having acted on the impulses most members of society never consciously acknowledge.

And what, if anything, does "Han's Crime" reveal about the id, the true nature of Han? Although "Han's Crime" is an unsavory and unsettling examination of how to get away with murder, Shiga does not elaborate on what exactly Han's "true self" might be. The story suggests that Han was a passive person who was in an unhappy marriage. The external character of Han is quite passive. At several points in the story he describes himself as "weak," "suspended in midair" and unable to take any kind of action. Although he thinks his wife is pregnant by another man, he does nothing. He is unhappy in the marriage, but does not wish to leave. When the judge asks him why, if he was so unhappy in his marriage, he was "unable to take a more assertive, resolute attitude," Han answers only that he "wanted to act in such a way as to leave no room for error." Although he blames his indecisiveness and lack of courage on his relationship with his wife, to the judge's inquiry, "Why didn't you think of leaving your wife?" Han has no answer except that in his mind there is a great difference between leaving one's wife and wishing her dead. As a character, Han is so alienated from himself that he cannot be certain he consciously murdered his own wife. He seems to suggest that the only way he can take action is through his unconscious.

Much of the tension and power of "Han's Crime" comes from the question of how responsible people are for their own antisocial thoughts and feelings if they do not *consciously* act on them. Han tells the judge that "between my thinking such a thing and actually deciding to kill her, there was still a wide gap." He repeatedly tells the judge that

once his murderous thoughts were over he "no longer thought of killing her." Han is guilty of murder if he *consciously* plots murder and of manslaughter if he acts without premeditated thought. During the knife-throwing act, Han becomes aware of consciously trying to control his unconscious urges: "I could feel in my arm the constraint that comes from a thing's having become conscious." Before throwing the final, fatal knife, Han sees a "premonition" of "violent fear" come over his wife's face. He describes a battle between his conscious and unconscious minds in which "dizziness" strikes him and he throws his knife "almost without a target, as though aiming in the dark." On the one hand, his description makes him sound "out of control" and "beside himself" as though he were not the agent of his actions; on the other hand, his awareness of throwing the knife suggests that his conscious mind was an active participant as well. In the final analysis, in terms of realizing his "true self," it seems that Han is still perhaps not being as honest with himself as he might be. What Shiga's story fails to answer is the question of whether the self can exist outside of society.

**Source:** Jean Leverich, "An Overview of 'Han's Crime'," in *Short Stories for Students,*The Gale Group, 1999.

BOOKRAGS

# Critical Essay #3

*In the following excerpt from his book-length study of Shiga, Mathy provides an overview of "Han's Crime."* ["Han's Crime"] begins with a succinct account of the crime:

It was a very strange incident. A young Chinese juggler by the name of Han in the course of a performance severed his wife's carotid artery with one of his knives. The young woman died on the spot and Han was immediately arrested.

The body of the story consists of the examining judge's interrogation of the director of the theater, of Han's assistant in his juggling act, and finally of Han himself. The question is to decide whether the killing was deliberate murder or merely manslaughter.

The director testifies that Han's act is very difficult and requires steady nerves, complete concentration, and even a certain kind of intuitive sense. He cannot say whether the killing was intended or not.

The assistant tells the judge what he knows about Han and his wife. Han's behavior was always correct. He had become a Christian the previous year and always seemed to be reading Christian literature. Both Han and his wife were kind and gentle, very good to their friends and acquaintances, and never quarreled with others. Between themselves, however, it was another matter. They could be very cruel to each other. They had had a child, born prematurely, that had died soon after his birth. Since its death their relationship had become strained. Han never raised his hand against his wife, but he always looked at her with angry eyes. He had confided to the assistant that his love for her had died but that he had no real grounds for a divorce. The assistant thinks that it was to overcome his hatred for her that Han had taken to reading the Bible and collections of Christian sermons. The wife could not leave Han because she would never have been able to find anyone else to marry her and she would have been unable to make her own living. The assistant admits that at the moment of the accident the thought had flashed through his mind, "he's gone and killed her," but now he is not so certain. It may have been because of his knowledge of Han's hatred for her that this thought had entered his head. He concludes his testimony by stating that after the incident Han had dropped to his knees and prayed for some time in silence.

Interrogated next by the judge, Han admits that he had stopped loving his wife when the child was born, since he knew it was not his. The child had died smothered by its mother's breasts and Han does not know whether this was accidental or not, though his wife had told him it was. Han thinks that she never really loved him. After the child's death she would observe him "with a cold, cruel look in her eyes" as he gradually went to pieces. "She never showed a flicker of sympathy as she saw me struggling in agony to escape into a better, truer sort of existence."

Han never considered leaving his wife because of his ideals: he wanted to behave in such a way as not to be in the wrong. When asked if he had ever thought of killing her, he admits that at first he often used to think how nice it would be if she were dead.

Then, the night before the incident, the thought of killing her had occurred to him but never reached the point of decision. They had had a quarrel because supper was not ready when it should have been. He spent a sleepless night, visited by many nightmarish thoughts, but the idea of killing his wife gradually faded and he "was overcome by the sad, empty feeling that follows a nightmare." He realized that he was too weakhearted to achieve a better life than the one he had.

The next day he was physically exhausted, but the idea of killing no longer occurred to him. He did not even think of that evening's performance. But when the time came to take up his knives to begin his act, he found himself without his usual control. The first two knives did not miss their mark by far, but the third knife lodged itself in his wife's throat. At that moment Han felt that he had done it on purpose. To deceive the witnesses of the scene, he made a pretense of being grief-stricken and fell to his knees in prayer. He was certain that he could make others believe it was an accident.

But then he began to doubt that he had done it on purpose. Perhaps he had only thought he had done so because of his reflections of the previous night. The more he thought about it, the less certain he was about the actuality. It was at this point that he realized that his best defense would be admission of the truth. Since he himself did not know whether he was guilty or innocent, no one else could possibly know either. When the judge asks him if he feels any sorrow for her death, Han admits candidly that he does not, that he never imagined that her death would bring him such a sense of happiness. After this testimony the judge hands down a verdict of not guilty.

"Han's Crime," like "Seibei's Gourds" [another short story by Shiga], is a skillful objectification of Shiga's state of mind at the time of its writing. The story was written in the brief period between his release from the hospital after his accident and his departure for Kinosaki. Leisurely reflection at Kinosaki upon the implications of his encounter with death was to drastically change his attitude toward life and to mark a turning point in his work—away from the posture of confrontation and self-assertion to one of harmony and reconciliation. It is therefore ironic that in the person of Han, Shiga should have sung his most triumphant song of self.

Han suffers greatly from the hypocrisy forced upon him in having to live with a wife he despises. He is a man of unusual intelligence, great sensitivity, and an "overwhelming desire to enter into a truer sort of life." His feelings the night before the event are certainly those of Shiga himself at the time when he was determined to "mine" what was in him.

. . . I was more worked up than I had ever been. Of late I had come to realize with anger and grief that I had no real life of my own. At night when I went to bed, I could not get to sleep but lay there in an excited state with all kinds of things passing through my mind. I was aware of living in a kind of daze, powerless to reach out with firm determination to the objects of my longing and equally powerless to drive away from me the sources of my displeasure. I came to see that this life of suspension and indecision was all owing to my relationship with my wife. I could see no light in my future, though the longing for light was still aflame. It would never die out but would continue smoldering pitifully. I was

in danger of dying of the poison of this displeasure and suffering. When the poison reached a certain concentration I would die. I would become a corpse among the living. I was nearing that point now. Still, I was doing my best not to succumb. Then the thought came: if only she would die! That filthy, unpleasant thought kept running through my mind, "In fact, why don't you kill her? Don't worry about what happens after that. You'll probably be sent to prison. But life would be immeasurably better than the life you are leading now. Besides, that will be another day. When that day comes, you'll be able to break through somehow. You may have to throw yourself again and again against the obstacles and with no success. But then your true life will be to continue hurling yourself against whatever is in your way until you finally die of the effort."

Kobayashi Hideo, in an early essay on Shiga Naoya (1929), cites the latter portion of the above passage as an excellent statement of

the basic form of Shiga's thought, or, more accurately, the norm of his action. He is never aware of the gap separating thought and action. Or else, if he does occasionally seem to take cognizance of it, it is only when his thought has not yet come ripe, and even then passion unfailingly jumps in to bridge the gap. For Shiga, to think is already to act, and to act is to think. To such a nature doubt and regret are equally absurd.

At the end of Han's confession, the judge asks him "aren't you the least bit grieved at your wife's death?" and Han replies frankly: "Not the least. Even in moments when I hated her most, I never imagined it would be so pleasant to speak of her death." Whether by chance or design, Han has triumphed and entered into what he feels is "a truer sort of life." This note of personal triumph was never again to be sounded so loudly and clearly in Shiga's work....

But if "Han's Crime," is an excellent expression of Shiga's state of mind at the time of its writing, it is not for this reason that it is one of the finest stories of modern Japanese literature. The excellence of "Han's Crime," is due rather to the abundant life and individuality Shiga was able to give to the characters of Han and his wife, to the interest and tight unity of the plot, and to the masterful use of language.

**Source:** Francis Mathy, "A Golden Ten" and "The Achievement of Shiga Naoya," in *Shiga Naoya*, Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1974, pp. 105-36; 165-75.

# Topics for Further Study

Do you agree with the judge's verdict of "innocent" in the story? Why or why not? Explain.

Do you agree with Han that his relationship with his wife is responsible for all his problems? From what has her death has "freed" him? Explain.

Read "In A Grove," a short story that concerns the law by Shiga's contemporary and rival, Akutagawa Ryunosuke. Like "Han's Crime," "In A Grove" clearly demonstrates the problems of discovering the truth. Compare the reliability of the narrators in "In A Grove" to Han's reliability in "Han's Crime." Who do you believe more? Why?

Read "The Tell-Tale Heart" by Edgar Allan Poe. Compare the role of the unconscious in "The Tell-Tale Heart" to the unconscious in "Han's Crime."

Do some research on when the United States first introduced the insanity defense. What does it mean to be "not guilty by reason of insanity"? Do you think that Han is not guilty by reason of insanity?

Compare Han's "confession" with President Clinton's "confession" about his involvement in the Monica Lewinsky "incident." Do you think that Han accepted adequate responsibility for his role in his wife's death? Or that Clinton accepted adequate responsibility for his behavior? Listen to Clinton's speech. Compare the effectiveness of each as a confession. What do we expect from a confession?

# Compare and Contrast

**1915:** The U.S. National Center for Health Statistics reports 3,633 homicides and suicides in the United States. Of that number, 483 are inflicted by "cutting and piercing instruments."

**1932:** There are 975 reported homicides in Japan.

**1995:** According to the U.S. Census Bureau, there are 20,220 murders in the United States this year. *Datapedia of the U.S., 1790-2000* reports that in 1990, "accident" is the fourth leading cause of death in the United States, following heart disease, cancer and stroke.

**1997:** The *Wall Street Journal* ranks Tokyo, Japan, the safest city in the world in regard to "violent crime," including assault and murder; Kabul, Afghanistan is the least safe.

**1921:** The first year for which the *Japan Statistical Yearbook* has any data, there are 53 divorces per every 1,000 people in Japan, a rate of 0.94. In 1921, the total population of Japanese is 55,963,053.

**1920:** There are 1.6 divorces for every 1,000 people in the United States. The total population of the United States in 1920 is 106,461,000.

**1989:** According to the *Japan Statistical Year-book*, there are 158 divorces per 1,000 people in Japan in 1989, a rate of 1.29. The total population of Japan is 123,254,671.

**1997:** *Statistical Abstracts of the United States, 1997,* reports that there are 1,169,000 divorces in the U.S. in 1995, a rate of 4.4. The total population of the United States is 265,284,000.

# What Do I Read Next?

*Shiga Naoya* (1974) by Francis Mathy. The most complete and readable biography of Shiga Naoya available in English.

*A Dark Night's Passing* (1976) by Shiga Naoya, the author of "Han's Crime." An English translation by Edwin McClellan of Shiga Naoya's 1937 full-length novel, which is a deeply autobiographical exploration of a Japanese writer's life and psyche.

*The Paper Door and Other Stories* (1987) by Shiga Naoya. An English translation by Lane Dunlop of a collection of short stories, including "Han's Crime," by Shiga Naoya.

"In A Grove" (1952) by Akutagawa Ryunosuke, Shiga Naoya's contemporary and rival. An English translation by Takashi Kojima of Akutagawa's 1917 short story which features unreliable narrators attempting to arrive at the truth behind a crime. Akutagawa also wrote *Rashoman,* which Akira Kurosawa made into a classic film.

*Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930) by Sigmund Freud. An in-depth exploration from the pioneer of psychoanalysis of how the unconscious mind negotiates repressive social rules.

*The Stranger* (1942) by Albert Camus, a French novelist whose writings were often deemed "existentialist." *The Stranger* is a confession of an "innocent murderer" named Mersault.

*The Metamorphosis* (1946) by Franz Kafka, an Austrian Jew who was born in the same year as Shiga Naoya, 1883. In *The Metamorphosis,* Gregor Samsa awakens one morning to find himself transformed into a giant cockroach. The novella asks us to consider what is "really" happening to Gregor and what is his unconscious dreaming mind.

*An Artist of the Floating World* (1986) by Kazuo Ishiguro, a British novelist of Japanese ancestry. This novel received the Whitbread Book of the Year prize for 1986, and concerns a topic near to Shiga Naoya's heart: the ability or inability of an artist to alter the past or influence the presence through his work.

# Further Study

Keene, Donald. *Dawn to the West: Japanese Literature of the Modern Era,* New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1984.

A lively and engaging treatment of the history of Japanese literature from the sixteenth century to the present.

Najita, Tetsuo and J. Victor Koschmann, editors. *Conflict in Modern Japanese History: The Neglected Tradition,* Prince-ton: Princeton University Press, 1982.

A thoughtful discussion of some important social and political issues in twentieth century Japan.

Sibley, William. *The Shiga Hero,* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979.

One of the first full-length works on Shiga Naoya, and a thorough introduction to his works.

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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 memberseducational 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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