Happy Endings Study Guide

Happy Endings by Margaret Atwood

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The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

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Introduction

Margaret Atwood's "Happy Endings" first appeared in the 1983 Canadian collection, *Murder in the Dark,* and it was published in 1994 for American audiences in *Good Bones and Simple Murders.* Subtitled "Short Fiction and Prose Poems," *Murder in the Dark* featured four types of works: autobiographical sketches, travel notes, experimental pieces addressing the nature of writing, and short pieces dealing with typical Atwood themes, notably the relationship between the sexes. "Happy Endings," which is essentially a self-referential story framework, falls into the third category.

In several thumbnail sketches of different marriages, all of which achieve a traditional "happy ending," Atwood references both the mechanics of writing, most particularly plot, and the effects of gender stereotyping. In earlier works, including the novel *Bodily Harm,* as well as speeches, Atwood discusses the writer's relationship to society. She defined the artist, in part, as "the guardian of the moral and ethical sense of the community." In "Happy Endings," Atwood fulfills this role with a challenge that she throws out to those writers who rely on the stereotypical characterization of men and women and to the reader who accepts such gender typing. At the same time, she challenges other writers to more closely examine typical literary convention.

Author Biography

Margaret Atwood was born on November 18, 1939, in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada. Her childhood was divided between the city and the country. Her family spent the school year in Ottawa and Toronto, where her father taught entomology or worked for government agencies, and summers in northern Quebec and Ontario where her father conducted research. These early experiences away from urban society encouraged Atwood to read and develop her imagination.

As a child, Atwood composed and illustrated poems, which she collected into small books. She wrote prose and poetry for her high school's literary magazine. While attending Victoria College, University of Toronto, from 1957 to 1961, she wrote for the newspaper and the dramatic society. As a young poet, she was an active member of the literary scene, which included giving readings at coffeehouses and contributing reviews, poems, and parodies to the college newspaper.

In the year of her graduation from Victoria College, Atwood won the E. J. Pratt medal for a group of poems. She also won a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship to study English at Radcliffe College, which is part of Harvard University. She received her M. A. from Harvard in 1962 and began to work toward her Ph.D. However, in 1963, she left Harvard and returned to Canada to focus her attention on Canadian literature. She taught English from 1964 to 1965 at the University of British Columbia, then returned to Harvard and eventually completed all the requirements for her doctorate except for the dissertation. From 1967 through 1970, Atwood taught at several different Canadian universities.

In 1966, her poetry volume *The Circle Game* was published, and it won Canada's Governor General's Award the following year. Her poetry helped develop her reputation as an important Canadian writer, but Atwood quickly branched out into other forms of writing.

Since the mid-1960s, Atwood has produced a steady string of publications, including novels, poetry collections, short stories, children's books, and nonfiction. She has also edited several anthologies and been involved with a publishing venture. She has taught several creative writing and literature classes at various American and Canadian universities.

Atwood remains one of Canada's most well-known literary personalities. She has won many awards throughout her long career. Her versatility and her controversiality as a writer, combined with her literary activism, have made her a significant cultural force in Canada.

Plot Summary

At the beginning of "Happy Endings," John and Mary meet. Each of the six versions of the story that follow present a different scenario of what happens to the couple.

Version A is the "happy ending" story. In this version, John and Mary fall in love. They get married, enjoy their jobs, buy a nice home, and start a family. All in all, they live comfortable, fulfilling lives. Eventually they retire and then die.

In version B, Mary and John have an affair. Although Mary loves John, he has no special feelings for her; instead, he uses her to gratify his needs for sexual and ego fulfillment. Twice a week, John goes to Mary's apartment, where she serves him a home-cooked meal. After dinner, John has sex with Mary and then falls asleep while she cleans up the dishes and fixes herself up. She pretends to love having sex with John, not because she actually does, but because she wants John to become so used to it that he will marry her. This strategy does not work, and Mary becomes depressed. Mary's friends counsel her to break up with John, but she insists that a kinder, better John exists and that he will emerge. Instead, John complains about her cooking and takes another woman out on a dinner date where Mary's friends see them. They tell Mary about the date. Mary takes an overdose of aspirins, sleeping pills, and sherry. She leaves a farewell note for John. Her secret hope is that John will discover her, take her to the hospital, repent for his actions, and marry her. However, this doesn't happen, and Mary dies. John weds the other woman, Madge, and the couple live the life described in version A.

In version C, John is married to Madge, and the couple have the life described in version A, but John is unable to enjoy it. Growing older, John finds himself dissatisfied with life. He falls in love with a twenty-two-year-old co-worker named Mary, and they start an affair because Mary feels sorry for him and also enjoys sex with him. Mary is actually in love with James, who is her own age. The free-spirited James spends a lot of time riding around on his motorcycle, but one day he returns from a road trip with some marijuana. He and Mary get stoned and are in bed when John, who has a key to Mary's apartment, comes in. John is overcome with despair, partially because he realizes that he is getting old and bald. He buys a gun, kills Mary and James, and then commits suicide. After some time has passed, Madge marries Fred, and the couple live the life described in version A.

In version D, Fred and Madge's home is threatened by a giant tidal wave, which lowers its real estate value. Fred and Madge escape from the tidal wave, but thousands of other people drown. They are grateful to be alive, and they continue to live the type of happy life John and Mary lived in version A.

In version E, Fred dies because of a weak heart. Madge spends the rest of her life devoted to charity work.

Version F is a more radical version of the story. In it, John is a revolutionary and Mary is a spy. Despite this racy element, John and Mary's life still ends as it does in version A.

After all the versions of the story have been presented, an authorial voice intrudes to tell the reader that the ending of each version is the same; the real ending is this: John and Mary die. The voice points out, however, that the writer has more flexibility in deciding what to include in the beginnings and middles of stories, in other words, the plot.

Summary

"Happy Endings" is Margaret Atwood's short story about two generic people, whom she names John and Mary. In this story, she writes as if speaking to a person who wants to write a story about a man and a woman. This how-to story describes the basic plotline to achieve a happy ending when writing fiction. Atwood provides Options A through F as general plotlines.

Option A takes John and Mary through a picture-perfect life of love together in which everything is joyous and stimulating in their lives. In the end, they both die. Option B has Mary falling in love with John and John treating her very badly. He never takes her anywhere, but rather uses her body as a tool for his sexual pleasure, which he does not even seem very excited about. John ends up with another woman, Madge, and Mary commits suicide from despair. John and Madge marry, and the happy ending follows as in Option A.

Option C has John as a married man falling in love with Mary, who is several years his junior. Mary is in love with James, who is her own age, though not yet ready to settle into a committed relationship. One night as Mary and James indulge in sexual and drug-induced pleasure together, John walks in on them. He buys a gun and kills them before committing suicide. This happy ending comes as Madge, John's wife is this option, later marries a man named Fred, and the two of them follow the plot of Option A.

Option D has Madge and Fred facing a tidal wave that lowers the value of their home and kills thousands of people. However, the two of them are still able to maintain the life of Option A. Option E leads Fred to and early death resulting from a heart condition, and Madge conducts charity work after his death, otherwise continuing as in Option A.

Finally, Option F points out the ultimate ending for all people everywhere. John and Mary die. Atwood notes that every plot is the same when it deals with the question of "What happened?" It is much more interesting to address the questions of "Why and how did this happen?"

Analysis

"Happy Endings" is a short story by Margaret Atwood that can be considered meta-fiction. In other words, it is fiction that deals with the theme of fiction writing. One can imagine the author of this story as a professor giving directions to a class of students learning how to write happy endings for short stories.

This story is written as if it is a multiple-choice task. There are several options, A through F, which will all lead to a happy ending for the story's characters. Ultimately, as Atwood points out, the end matters very little. Readers will be more interested on the middle of the story, the part that addresses the reasons things have occurred, or the causes and the effects that drive the story.

The speaker of this piece of literature provides the beginning of a story, saying "John and Mary meet. What happens next?" She also provides the ending, saying "John and Mary die." Symbolically, John and Mary represent all people. All people live and all people die. Just as story has a beginning and an end, so do lives. Atwood uses the analogy of a plotline to make the statement that it matters very little that all people are born and that all die. What matters is everything in the middle, the occurrences in the span of one's lifetime.

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Characters

Fred

Fred is Madge's second husband. In one version, he survives a tidal wave, but in another version, he dies.

James

James appears in version C as Mary's lover. Only twenty-two years old, James is not ready to settle down. He spends a lot of time riding around on his motorcycle, "being free." James is killed by John after he catches James and Mary in bed together.

John

John is the primary male protagonist who meets the primary female protagonist, Mary. In the first version of the story, version A, John is the ideal husband, marrying and raising a family with Mary, working hard and playing well, retiring, and eventually dying after leading a well-spent life. In version B, John is a selfish man who is having an affair with Mary. While she is in love with him, he uses her to gratify his sexual, egotistical, and culinary appetites. John eventually marries another woman, Madge, and the couple lives happily ever after. In version C, John is a middle-aged, respectable married man. Experiencing a midlife crisis, he falls in love with a younger co-worker, Mary. Though he claims to be committed to his wife and family, he embarks on an affair with Mary. When he surprises her with her younger lover, he falls into despair and kills the two of them and then takes his own life. In version F, John is a revolutionary. At the end of all the versions, John dies.

Madge

Despite his relationship with Mary, version B John begins dating Madge. John and Madge marry and live happily ever after. Madge is also married to the unfaithful John in version C. After John's death, this Madge remarries and lives a happy life with her second husband, Fred. In version D, Madge and her husband Fred survive a tidal wave and then live happily ever after. In version E, Fred dies, and Madge devotes herself to charity work.

Mary

Mary is the primary female protagonist who meets the primary male protagonist, John. In the first version of the story, version A, Mary and John wed and live out a fulfilling life together. She enjoys her family, a good job, and stimulating relationships before her

death at a ripe old age. In version B, Mary is in love with John, but he doesn't love her. Although Mary's friends urge her to break off the relationship, she continues to try and win John's affection. To this end, she cooks for him, cleans up after him, makes herself look attractive, and acts like he is great in bed; she hopes that John will grow so accustomed to sex with her that he will marry her. After she learns he is dating another woman, Mary takes an overdose of pills. She secretly wants him to rescue her, but John, once again, disappoints Mary, and she dies instead. Version C Mary is a twenty-two-year-old woman who starts having an affair with the older, married John even though she loves another man and actually finds John boring. However, Mary feels sorry for John and also finds him to be good in bed. Mary and her other lover are killed by John after he discovers the two of them in bed together. Version F Mary is a spy. At the end of all the versions, Mary dies.

Themes

Middle-Class Values

The "happy" couple in "Happy Endings," whether comprised of John and Mary, John and Madge, or Madge and Fred, enjoys the trappings of middle-class values and represents this element of society. The husband and wife hold professional jobs, earn good money, and make sound investments that afford them some of life's luxuries, such as nice vacations and a relaxing retirement. Even in the more troublesome aspects of these stories, the couples manifest their middle-class values. In version C, John's marital crisis is brought on by the fact that he feels his life is settled and dull. This mid-life angst drives him to attempt to boost his self-esteem through an affair with a much-younger woman.

Despite the middle-class values that permeate the piece, only in version F does Atwood frankly address them. "If you think this is all too bourgeois, make John a revolutionary and Mary a counterespionage spy and see how far that gets you," she challenges the reader. "Remember, this is Canada. You'll still end up with A." With this rhetoric, Atwood reinforces the absurdity of romantic fiction.

Marriage and Romance

The story revolves around the fulfillment that marriage brings. Using material success and ease of life as the criteria to define a successful marriage, John and Mary certainly have built one. Notably, nowhere in the description of this marriage that has a so-called "happy ending" does the word "happy" actually appear.

In each other version of the story, Atwood presents a situation that does not lead directly to marriage, but leads there circuitously. However, the union in version A is bland and uninspired; the adjectives Atwood selects to describe the marriage are "unimaginative" and "vague." She further emphasizes this mediocrity by repeating the words "worthwhile," "challenging," and "stimulating" several times. The marriages in the other versions do present some difficult situations. Some are pedestrian, including infidelity, but some are even dramatic, such as suicide and murder. In each version, however, at least one person involved in the troubled union ends in the stereotypical "happy ending" marriage scenario.

Romance also emerges as an important theme in "Happy Endings." The various versions mimic the trajectory of clichèd romance novels, which end with the hero and the heroine living happily ever after. While version A differs from romantic novels in that it doesn't present the destined couple with a series of problems that must be overcome, the other versions all do so. To reinforce this unstated connection, Atwood parodies some typical plots of romantic novels, which include murder, suicide, infidelity, and disease.

Writing Conventions

The experimentation in "Happy Endings" makes it a work of postmodern fiction. Atwood's text is self-referential as she explicitly refers to events that have happened earlier on, as well as the mechanics and elements of writing. The latter emerges as one of the story's major themes. Both directly and indirectly, Atwood addresses the whole notion of how an author develops a story. First, there is a beginning. In the case of "Happy Endings," the beginning of whatever story is about to be created is the meeting of John and Mary. The bulk of the story—the alternate versions presented— is comprised of various possibilities for what could happen next. This is the plot, which Atwood defines as "a what and a what and a what." She thus simplifies the entire concept of a story; a work of fiction is merely a beginning followed by many author-manufactured events. However, Atwood does not leave the reader with the impression that a writer's job is simple because her final words present a challenge: "Now try How and Why."

Atwood's work also challenges writers to compose authentic works. Although each version she presents ends in version A, according to Atwood, the real ending of any couple's union is not the achievement of a stable, pleasant relationship between them but their deaths. "The only authentic ending is the one provided here," she writes: *"John and Mary die. John and Mary die. John and Mary die.*"

Style

Satire

"Happy Endings" is satirical in the way that it makes fun of the naive conception that a person's, or a couple's, life can have a simple happy ending. In version A, John and Mary build a life based on their nice home, rewarding jobs, beloved children, enjoyable vacations, and post-retirement hobbies. They experience one success after another. No problems or difficulties—major let alone minor— are mentioned; as such, their life is completely unreal.

Such unreality is emphasized by the events of version B. While John and Mary do not achieve this happy ending, John does achieve it—but with Madge. And in yet another version, Madge achieves this happy ending with Fred. Although all the individuals bring to their relationships a unique past and set of experiences, each couple eventually achieves the exact same ending described in version A.

Atwood's satire is twofold. It focuses on the unrealistic situation that she creates, which draws on an understanding that humans still hope for a simple "happy ending," as well as on the romantic genre of fiction that perpetuates this fantasy. Atwood's piece posits that whether a person's life is straightforward and uneventful or fraught with serious difficulties, a happy ending can always be achieved. However, Atwood expects her reader to understand that this is not true and discern her real message—that a happy ending does not exist, and in fact, that every person's real ending is in death. By satirizing romantic fiction, in which a man and a woman find utter fulfillment in the lives they build together, Atwood questions societal values upon which such falsehoods are based and the mechanisms its authors use in creating such stories.

Point of View and Tone

Atwood uses two distinct points of view in "Happy Endings." One point of view is the third-person omniscient point of view (that of an all-knowing narrator). This allows Atwood to comment openly on any character and event in the piece. It also lets her use any of the various characters as a filter for what is taking place. Atwood uses this point of view to describe the different versions of John and Mary's relationship, as well as the relationships involving Madge and Fred. In these sections, the basic events surrounding these relationships and some of the characters' thoughts and motivations are included. For example, the reader learns how the characters feel about each other and why they are involved in relationships with each other.

The other point of view that Atwood employs is a second-person point of view in which she talks directly to the reader. This is the point of view that both introduces the story ("If you want a happy ending, try A.") and ends it. However, by the conclusion of "Happy Endings," the shift in tone is more important than the shift in point of view. Instead of

creating a piece of fiction, Atwood speaks directly to the reader about the process of doing so. She drastically simplifies the act of writing. A plot is simply "one thing after another, a what and a what and a what."

Tense

"Happy Endings" is written in the present tense, which emphasizes the universality of Atwood's message. Literature's striving for a happy ending has long been a goal of writers and will continue to be so, even as authors such as Atwood cynically point out the impossibility of this endeavor for any writer who cares at all about realism. The use of present tense is an effective tool for Atwood's direct addresses to the reader because it makes her message seem more immediate, urgent, and personal.

Historical Context

The Constitution Act

Canada's original constitution was an act of Britain's Parliament, and since the 1930s, Canadian officials and politicians have worked to bring the Constitution under direct Canadian control. Not until 1972 did Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau finally win unanimous agreement for a complex package including a formula for amending the Canadian constitution, a role for the provinces in choosing Supreme Court judges, and a transfer of some other powers to the provinces. When Quebec's premier backed out of the agreement, however, negotiations had to begin again, and the amending and modernization of the Constitution was delayed. In September 1980, federal and provincial leaders met again to work out terms of a new Canadian constitution, but a compromise that satisfied the provincial and federal governments was not negotiated until November 1981. While the provincial governments, for the most part, accepted the proposed constitution, many Canadians—particularly feminists, aboriginals, the disabled, and ethnic minorities—were not satisfied. Many of these groups lobbied for changes, resulting in an "Equality Clause" proclaiming that men, women, and the disabled would be guaranteed complete equality before the law. Canada's new Constitution Act was finally signed on April 17, 1982.

The Canadian Economy and Government

In the early 1980s, Canada experienced a recession, leading many Canadians to call for significant economic reform. After years of supporting the Labour Party, voters elected the Progressive Conservative Party into power in 1984. The new government, headed by Prime Minister Brian Mulroney, attempted to improve the economy through the privatization of different industries, the deregulation of business, and a reform of the tax structure.

Canada has long been divided along language and cultural lines. Both English and French are the official languages of the nation. French is the sole official language of the province of Quebec where a majority of French Canadians live. French Canada has periodically demanded the separation of Quebec from the rest of the country. This platform was supported by the Parti Quebecois, which won control of the province's government in 1976. Four years later, in 1980, Quebec held a referendum on separation, but 60 percent of voters elected to remain a part of the nation. However, French Canadians continued to demand special status for Quebec.

Canadian Literature

Many Canadian writers in the 1980s continued to focus on events and people in Canadian history, as well as on traditional Canadian concerns. In addition to Atwood, other Canadian writers who wrote in English were read by the international community

included novelist Brian Moore, literary critic Northrop Frye, short story writer Alice Munro, and essayist and novelist Robertson Davies. In this same period, French-Canadian authors were trying to establish a unique identity in keeping with their cultural origins. Jacque Godbout's 1982 novel, *Tetes a Papineau,* explored the political tensions of French Quebec, which was torn between its desire for independence and its reliance on English-speaking Canada. The continuing separatist movement produced a new generation of writers in the 1980s and 1990s.

Critical Overview

"Happy Endings" first appears in Atwood's 1983 collection, *Murder in the Dark: Short Fiction and Prose Poems.* As Elspeth Cameron points out in the book *Saturday Night, Murder in the Dark* was "dramatically new [in] . . . its form" because Atwood "dispenses with the plot line that usually provides the skeleton for her fiction." Kathy Mezei, writing in *West Coast Review,* comments that in this collection Atwood is "pointedly *not* writing her usual cryptic poems or ironic novels; she is making notations of experiences, feeling, or the act of writing." K. Chase, however, in *World Literature Today,* finds this "unusual and disturbing" collection to be "characteristic" of Atwood's literary work.

Ildikó de Papp Carrington, writing for *The Women's Review of Books* believes that the collection "can be fully understood only in the context of [Atwood's] previous work." The book is divided into four sections. Both the third (to which "Happy Endings" belongs) and the fourth deal with "some of the major recurrent themes in Atwood's writing: the nature and purpose of fiction, the moral responsibility of the author as witness, and the relationship between the sexes in fiction and in reality."

Despite her favorable review, Cameron understands that the collection would "undoubtedly arouse the anti-Atwoods to redouble their attacks." She is able to pinpoint specific negative commentary that some readers would pose: "What, no plot?. . . Does she think *writing* is all there is to life?" Cameron attempts to answer these rhetorical questions: "To some extent, her critics will be right; the book could have been called *Atwood's Sketch Book* or *Themes and Variations.*" Cameron, however, does not believe this is a drawback. She finds that when the pieces were read together, they resonate with Atwood's larger concerns as a writer and as a woman.

What Mezei finds most interesting in *Murder in the Dark* is Atwood's "comments on the structures and clichés, particularly narrative and plot, of fiction." Carrington notes Atwood's humor, which she uses as "a vehicle for social and literary satire.

Chase singles out "Happy Endings" for its "ruthless insight and pessimism." Carrington notes that it is "ironically titled" in its satirization of the "plots of romances" in which "there *are* no happy endings because all lovers must die." Carrington points out how this brief piece takes on greater meaning: "the fictional narrative suddenly turns into explicit literary criticism."

Murder in the Dark was combined with another volume of Atwood's short pieces, *Good Bones,* and published in the United States in 1994 as *Good Bones and Simple Murders. Good Bones* is primarily a collection of updated, feminist fairy tales, and in review, critics tend to focus more on the analysis of these pieces. However, Donna Seaman points out in *Booklist* that Atwood "continues to question the roots of our assumptions about gender roles, testing our shaky sense of progress toward equality," all while infusing these pieces with her characteristic "anger, shrewdness, sass, and humor."

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Korb has a master's degree in English literature and creative writing and has written for a wide variety of educational publishers. In the following essay, she discusses how "Happy Endings" critiques various elements of contemporary society.

Atwood's "Happy Endings," containing issues and themes that have concerned the author throughout her career, defies easy categorization. Is it a satirical piece criticizing the genre of romantic fiction and the roles it provides its female characters? Is it an oblique challenge to authors who rely too much on traditional and unoriginal writing conventions? Is it a witty demonstration of Atwood's creative imagination? Is it a sly dig at contemporary society? Is it a pessimistic account of the relationship between the sexes? Indeed, despite its brevity, "Happy Endings" contains distinct elements of all of these; Atwood brings these elements together to create a humorous but biting criticism of contemporary society, lazy authors, and gender stereotyping.

"Happy Endings" opens with Atwood setting up a distinct situation, one that is grounded in reality: "John and Mary meet. What happens next?" Atwood then provides the reader with a specific instruction: "If you want a happy ending, try A." Thus, only three lines into the piece, Atwood has piqued the reader's interest with words that show that this story is not a typical story at all. Instead of providing a linear storyline, as most literary works do, Atwood offers readers both a choice of where to proceed next (though most probably will read "Happy Endings" straight through) and alternative endings and scenarios.

Initially, version A seems very different from the versions that follow. Version A is brief and nondescriptive. Atwood, usually a vivid writer, chooses to recycle only a few adjectives. John and Mary have "stimulating and challenging" jobs and hobbies. They have a "stimulating and challenging" sex life. Their friends are "worthwhile," and so are their jobs. Other adjectives that Atwood selects are so bland as to virtually provide no information about John and Mary's life; they go on "fun vacations"; they own a "charming house." Version A reads less like a work of fiction and more like an uninspired outline.

Version B differs radically from version A although it, too, features John and Mary. After their first meeting, Mary (like Mary from version A) falls in love with John, but at that point the similarities end. John does not return Mary's affection but "merely uses her body for selfish pleasure and ego gratification of a tepid kind." Additionally, version B includes evocative details about John and Mary as well as specific language. John "f—" Mary, falls asleep, and when he wakes up, he "doesn't even notice [how Mary looks]." Then he "goes out the door with hardly so much as a goodnight." Thus readers learn what kind of a man John is and how he relates to Mary and women in general. Version B is much richer than version A as readers are provided concrete facts about John and Mary. Readers may thus extend their own analysis beyond the specifics that Atwood provides.

Atwood uses these details to ensure that readers will clearly understand John and Mary's relationship (and in case they do not, Atwood points out the relevancy of these details, as in her aside, "[Y]ou'll notice that he doesn't even consider her worth the price of a dinner out.") As Mary comes to grasp what the relationship means to John, she sinks into depression. The Mary who next emerges is a realistic depiction of a woman stuck in a bad relationship. Her friends attack John—he is "a rat, a pig, a dog, he isn't good enough for her"—and she defends him—"she can't believe it," and a "much nicer" John will appear. Ultimately, her insistence on holding onto a fantasy results in her death by suicide—perhaps the ultimate in melodramatic plot twists, just the type that thrive in romance fiction. Then, "John marries Madge and everything continues as in A."

Version C also features John and Mary, yet in another very different setting. This time, John is the person in the couple who is undergoing a typical life crisis as he approaches middle age and feels stifled and bored by his version A existence. John "settled down long ago: this is what is bothering him." Although his wife, Madge, seems to hold little interest for John, he can't leave her "because a commitment is a commitment." However, he feels no remorse in engaging in an extramarital affair with the twenty-two-year-old Mary. As in version B, drama and theatrics ensue, and once again, they are the kind that romance novels are made of. Mary has another lover, and when John discovers the two of them together, he buys a gun, kills them, and then shoots himself. However, this violent event does little to deter the story from reaching its happy ending. "Madge, after a suitable period of mourning, marries an understanding man called Fred and everything continues as in A, but under different names."

Versions D through F also present alternate endings, increasingly far-fetched, including a killer tidal wave, a fatal illness, and revolutionaries and spies. However, each of these versions end up in version A's plot line. So what point is Atwood trying to make here? She provides one "real" answer to this question: "The only authentic ending is the one provided here: *John and Mary die. John and Mary die. John and Mary die.*" As Ildikó de Papp Carrington writes in *The Women's Review of Books,* "[T]here *are* no happy endings because all lovers must die." Thus, with this new focus that she reveals the end of her work, Atwood shows how she has tricked the reader. Whereas versions A through F seemed to support the idea that an ending depends on the kind of life that a couple lead together, the real ending is simple: It is death. Anyone who tries to tell you differently, Atwood writes, is acting falsely, either "with malicious intent to deceive, or just motivated by excessive optimism if not by downright sentimentality."

However, Atwood also strives toward another point in "Happy Endings": the predictability of the storytelling process and the characters it involves. She directly addresses these issues in versions D through F. Version D, with its tidal wave and Fred and Madge's escape from it, contains very few elements of reality. Atwood even underscores this fairy-tale quality through her language: "Fred and Madge are virtuous and lucky. Finally on high ground they clasp each other, wet and dripping and grateful, and continue as in A." Version E, despite the premature death of Fred, still follows the trajectory of version A. In version F, Atwood's mockery is most readily apparent. "If you think this is all too bourgeois," she challenges the reader, "make John a revolutionary

and Mary a counterespionage agent and see how far that gets you. Remember, this is Canada. You'll still end up with A."

Atwood also uses these extremely short snippets to attack societal conventions, particularly those surrounding the roles of women. Atwood's scenarios show how women fall victim to unfair and sexist mores and morals. Mary in version B not only suffers from low self-esteem, but she becomes an emotionally abused woman. The actions Mary chooses to take to attract John are those of a woman playing out a role proscribed by the larger society. Her relationship with John is based upon her desire to ensnare and marry him, even though it doesn't seem that she even *likes* him. What is more probable is that the single Mary feels pressure to be married. To this end, Mary acts like she loves having sex with him, even though she doesn't even like sex, because "she wants John to think she does because if they do it often enough surely he'll get used to her, he'll come to depend on her and they will get married." Mary further damages herself through this relationship by denying her own sexuality, rendering herself unable to draw any pleasure from this act. At the same time that she encourages readers to feel compassion for Mary and anger at a false society, however, Atwood also denigrates her. "Mary collects all the sleeping pills and aspirins she can find, and takes them and half a bottle of sherry," Atwood writes. "You can see what kind of a woman she is by the fact that it's not even whiskey." Here, Atwood points out that Mary is acting too ladylike— she is imparting the oblique message that Mary is not masculine (read: independent and strong) enough to handle the situation with John.

In version C, Mary is only twenty-two years old. While she feels comfortable embarking on an affair with a married man while being in love with (and making love to) another man, she is still constrained by her gender. Whereas "James is often away on his motorcycle, being free," Mary has to spend her time with John because "freedom isn't the same for girls." Mary's only method for self-expression is through the offering of her body to a man she finds "boring" and who uses her to build up his own self-esteem. Atwood does relent slightly, allowing Mary to have "a fairly good time" with the sex, but, in the end, Mary is punished for her indiscretions when John kills her. (James, of course, dies too, but the most specific detail about him is how he "breezes in on his motorcycle with some top-grade California hybrid." He can be perceived as being punished for his general irresponsibility or even his drug usage, unlike Mary, who is being punished strictly for her sexuality.)

Finally, authors themselves are not safe from Atwood's biting tongue. Plots are easy, Atwood says, they are "just one thing after another, a what and a what and a what." The final sentence of "Happy Endings" poses a far more serious challenge to writers: "Now try How and Why." To come up with a story's motivation and action, an author needs a real understanding of how people think, feel, and react. In essence, the writer needs to construct real people, not the cookie cutter characters that Mary and John and Madge and Fred all become.

Source: Rena Korb, Critical Essay on "Happy Endings," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

Andrews Henningfeld is an associate professor of English literature and composition who has written extensively for educational publishers. In this essay, she considers Margaret Atwood's experimental short story as a work of metafiction, which is fiction that plays with the nature and creation of fiction.

Margaret Atwood's short story "Happy Endings" is a very short story that does not even look like a story. Most short stories have characters, setting, and plot. In addition, short stories generally mimic real life in some way. Atwood instead chooses to use a structure in "Happy Endings" that looks more like the outline of a story than a story itself. The characters she supplies are more like cutout dolls than developed characters, there is no identifiable setting, and she offers six possible plots in about 1500 words. This experimental structure calls attention to the story as a work of fiction that bears little resemblance to the kinds of stories readers are used to encountering.

A metafictional story forces the reader to go beyond the traditional margins of fiction to understand what the story is about. In "Happy Endings," the reader first encounters these lines: *"John and Mary die. John and Mary die. John and Mary die.*"

Atwood then provides six versions, each labeled with a letter. Version A, which she identifies as the "happy ending," tells the reader that John and Mary marry, have a good life, and then die. The scenario, although within the realm of possibility in real life, does not make good fiction. The writing is flat, unvaried, and boring. Moreover, the scenario is only about one hundred words, scarcely enough to develop any reader interest. While the lives described in this short section are the lives that many wish they had, they seem unremarkable because of the lack of specific detail. Therefore, it is possible that Atwood wants the reader to understand that good fiction requires good detail. It is the specifics that allow the reader to imagine the story to somehow have existence outside the margins of the page.

Version B, the longest of the provided scenarios, is filled with detail. However, in this case, while the detail is specific and lurid, the story still misses the mark. The characters are types: Mary is a self-deprecating woman who winds up killing herself while John is a selfish egotist who has an affair with a woman named Madge. Again, Atwood plays with reader expectations. She uses the same names for her characters, suggesting that the characters are interchangeable parts, regardless of the scenario they find themselves in. There is no character development; rather, she tells the reader directly what kind of person each character is. In many ways, Atwood constructs version B like a daytime television drama. Viewers of such dramas know immediately the kind of person a character is supposed to represent by details provided by the scriptwriter. Such stereotyping renders these dramas both predictable and interchangeable although not believable.

Atwood also uses clichéd details about her characters' interactions. For example, Mary's friends tell her that "John is a rat, a pig, a dog, he isn' t good enough for her."

Again, anyone who watches daytime dramas on television will recognize the device: although all of a character's friends warn her about the inappropriateness of her choice of boyfriend, the character still believes that he is really good inside. Viewers, of course, know that the character is deceived. In addition, although the events in version B are probably not much different from the lives that many people find themselves in, when the details are exaggerated and arranged into a sort of a story, they seem just as unreal as version A.

By the end of version B, it seems likely that Atwood wants to expose the nature of fiction here: characters, setting, and plot are the raw materials of fiction, and once a type is developed, it can be inserted into any story to produce predictable results. Throughout written history, people have created particular kinds of characters, settings, and plots that are familiar to their readers and/or listeners. Atwood seems to suggest that using predictable patterns is an unavoidable feature of fiction writing. It is necessary, after all, for a writer to provide characters and plot familiar enough to the reader so that the reader can identify with the situation. If the characters and plots are *too* familiar, the story will be labeled as predictable and stereotypical. If the characters and plots are too far outside the realm of a reader's experience, the story will be labeled as obscure and inaccessible. There is, then, a narrow range of choices for the writer. Thus, the trick for the writer is to make the story *seem* fresh and new while using the same old patterns. By exposing this process, Atwood lays bare the art of storytelling.

Version C is the stuff of television drama and suspense: John, Mary, and her lover James all end up dead, the result of a murder-suicide. Again, the patterns are familiar ones. In version D, characters Fred and Madge find their home endangered by a tidal wave. This scenario follows the pattern of any number of natural disaster books and films. Again, readers are familiar with the construction of such stories. While there may be a great deal of death and destruction, the main characters (in this case Fred and Madge) will persevere and overcome against insurmountable odds, if they are "virtuous and lucky."

Version E follows the pattern of the sick lover story. Atwood is explicit about her metafictional project in this scenario. The first rendition has Fred suffering a bad heart, both characters being "kind and understanding," and Madge devoting herself to charity work after Fred's death. Atwood immediately tells readers that they can substitute Madge for Fred, cancer for heart problems, and bird watching for charity work. By offering these substitutions, Atwood tells the reader yet again that the parts are interchangeable in the overall pattern of the story. Any sick lover story will take on these familiar patterns with different lovers, different illnesses, different responses, and different outcomes for the survivor. Nevertheless, the story itself remains the same.

In each version, however, there comes a point where Atwood refers the reader back to version A, suggesting that all of her stories end up being about two people who fall in love, marry, and die. As she writes,

the endings are the same however you slice it. Don't be deluded by any other endings, they're all fake, either deliberately fake, with malicious intent to deceive, or just

motivated by excessive optimism if not by downright sentimentality. . . . The only authentic ending is the one provided here: *John and Mary die. John and Mary die. John and Mary die.*

Certainly, this is not an ending that readers expect, and certainly not a happy ending. Atwood offers direct instruction to the reader in the imperative voice. Such a shift in tone implies that what follows is absolute. The repetition and the italicization of the words "John and Mary die" hammer home the point that all life ends in death, regardless of the circumstances of that life. What has, up until this point, been a somewhat lighthearted, playful exploration of fiction suddenly turns toward a dark examination of life. Fiction, Atwood seems to suggest, offers "other endings," but these endings are "fake." Readers, however, do not want the ending Atwood provides; most readers want to ignore the death of characters. Readers prefer happy endings, with the boy and the girl together, looking off into the sunset, their love and families keeping them strong. Atwood, however, says that such endings are "fake."

Further, Atwood's insistence that the only "authentic" ending is death pushes the reader beyond the margin of fiction and into the consideration of the reality of life. It underscores the way that people construct the stories of their lives and blurs the distinction between fiction and reality. Thus, although all people know with absolute certainty that they will die, virtually no one is able to face this directly. Consequently, most people construct elaborate fictions about their lives, about their accomplishments, and about their relationships. They fill their lives with details, often extraneous details, in just the same way that a fiction writer shapes character, plot, and setting. These fictions serve to keep the knowledge of death at bay and to provide alternative endings.

Were Atwood to leave her story here, it would be a very bleak moment for the reader indeed. However, Atwood provides yet another playful dig at fiction, at writers, and at those who seek meaning in their lives. She writes, "So much for endings. Beginnings are always more fun. True connoisseurs, however, are known to favor the stretch in between, since it's the hardest to do anything with." Certainly, for the writer, and for the young lover, beginnings are the most fun. The story and the affair are full of possibilities. When a young couple begins a life together, their dreams and thoughts of the future buoy them along, just as the opening paragraph of a story presents a world full of potential. Since, for Atwood, all endings are the same, whether in fiction, a love affair, or life, "the stretch in between" offers the most challenge. The writer must keep her characters alive and her plot believable. While fiction is not real, it must still, at some level, be true. Likewise, as a young couple grows into an older couple, the "stretch in between" becomes all the days of their marriage. The good days, the bad days, the happy days, and the tragic days weave together the fabric of a marriage. The "true connoisseur," then, is the writer who welcomes the challenge of the middle and the person who understands that a life is made up of many individual days.

Atwood closes the story thusly: "That's about all that can be said for plots, which anyway are just one thing after another, a what and a what and a what. Now try How and Why." This is a typically Atwoodian turn: at the last possible moment, she challenges and surprises the reader with a twist. At this moment, she addresses the

writers of fiction who create little worlds in their writing. She also addresses the readers who are in the process of creating their own worlds in their lives. The way a writer of fiction decides to answer the question "How?" largely determines the success or failure of the work. If the writer chooses "hows" that are completely beyond the reader's experience or understanding, the story will not function. Likewise, if the writer of fiction chooses "hows" that are inconsistent with the characters that people the story, the story will not be truthful.

The question "Why?" is often more problematic for the writer. The answer to this question determines the value of the story. In other words, the themes, meanings, and purpose of a short story are tied up in the "why." Writers, after all, create settings and plots and characters for some fundamental "why." They have a purpose in creating the stories they do, whether it is to illustrate some important truth about human nature or to explore the nature of relationships, or merely to entertain their readers. Those writers who are must successful with the "whys" of their writing are the ones who create stories that are both profound and truthful. Writers who cannot manage the "why" of writing create stories that are moralistic, preachy, or without meaning. While all of the parts of the short story exist in such cases, without a good controlling "why" the story remains merely a collection of parts, like Atwood's various versions.

When the reader understands that "Happy Endings" is not only a metafictional story, but also a "meta-life" story, that is, a story about the way individuals create their own lives, the final lines achieve special significance. Atwood uses the imperative voice to command the reader to examine how and why. People who live their lives as a "what and a what and a what" have no moral imperative on which to base their lives. Rather, they live from event to event with little sense that *how* they live their lives will lead to *why* they live their lives. Just as the answer to the "why" in fiction provides the story with meaning, so too does the answer to "why" in life provide meaning and purpose for that life.

As she often does, Atwood uses irony in her final words to bring her story sharply into focus. She creates a story that does not look like a story, a series of scenarios that are no more than "a what and a what and a what." By calling attention to the shortcomings of such stories, and such lives, she calls for writers and readers alike to reexamine how they write, why they write, how they live, and why they live. Through this story, Atwood tells her readers that while they may have no control of the events, or the "whats," or the "authentic end-ing[s]" of their lives, they do have choices about how they meet the challenges of life. More importantly, she tells both writers and readers that they must try to establish meaning and purpose in both their writing and their lives, implying that even in the face of the inevitable ending, both meaning and purpose are possible. And this is, indeed, a happy ending.

Source: Diane Andrews Henningfeld, Critical Essay on "Happy Endings," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #3

Scheiner is a professional writer with a doctorate in law. In this essay, she considers Atwood's story in relation to the impact of a writer's plot development on the reader's satisfaction.

In her short story "Happy Endings," Margaret Atwood challenges the authors that seem to believe that a simple unexplained but happy conclusion is all the reader needs. Her various tales within this short story show how totally different stories can be made similar by ending in the same way. In her short story, Atwood is exposing a problem common to many short stories that are based solely upon plot without character development.

The author continues to enforce the need for a reader to find justice in a story when she relies upon the element of shock in version C. In this situation, the audience is first given the dilemma of trying to decide whether John is a villain or worthy of sympathy. The reader will first ask whether he got what he deserved. Prior to his purchase of a gun, the reader is tempted to see John as someone possibly similar to his/her self and even worthy of his/her sympathy. Whether his adultery will contribute to the reader's opinion of him as a character will once again depend upon the reader's belief system and how he or she relates to John in his or her own life. At first, John is introduced as a weak man, who feels that he needs to boost his ego by sleeping with a woman much younger than he. He appears even weaker when compared to James, the man to whom Mary is actually attracted. Although John is foremost a family man, he is cheating on his wife with Mary. Depending on how the reader feels about the importance of family values will help decide whether the reader feels that John deserved the conclusion that occurred. Even the fact that Mary and James smoked marijuana together may taint the reader's view of the conclusion that occurred, depending on feelings about drug abuse. This indicates just how important the reader's belief system is in interpreting a story.

John's murderous act of passion is extremely important to how the reader interprets the character and his fatality, yet it is barely mentioned in passing in the plot. Once again, Atwood is reminding the reader of how important the "how and why" are to a story. The reader will likely feel betrayed for not being told more. Yet, what happened next is that John's wife moved on to the happy ending of version A. Relating to a character is essential to build a story. For what was expected to be a happy ending, it is important to keep in mind that, once again, John and Mary die.

Version D is the reader's introduction to a story made up of only plot, with no character development or "how and why" at all. Without this information, it is practically impossible to interpret the tale. It is likely that the reader wants to know more about the tidal wave disaster, as well as how Fred and Madge survive the situation. Atwood makes a point of saying, "the rest of the story is about the tidal wave and how they escape it." The reader has been let down. He/She has not been told the story. For a story to work, it is necessary that the reader be able to relate to its characters and know the situation surrounding the plot. Version E tells the readers that the happy ending of version A, and

others like it, is far overused by authors of short stories. Perhaps authors of happy ending stories that do not explain why such an ending should occur should revisit their assumption that their audience does not want to know the details of a story as long as it leads to a happy ending.

It is impossible to base a story solely on plot and expect an audience to be satisfied. Atwood further reinforces her theory with the conclusion to version E, where she says that the only authentic ending is the one in version A. *"John and Mary die. John and Mary die. John and Mary die.*" Replace the names of the characters and the situations and it does not matter. In fact, the reader may not even view the characters that reach a happy ending as worthy of any respect, for it is difficult to respect someone that the reader knows nothing about.

Atwood ties up the entire meaning of the piece when she says that plots are just "a what and a what; Now try How and Why." She is challenging the reader to investigate behind the scenes of the plot and to be wary of tales that are based solely upon plot without character development.

Source: April Scheiner, Critical Essay on "Happy Endings," *in Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2001.

Topics for Further Study

Write a short piece similar to "Happy Endings" that deals with the "how" and "why" of storytelling as opposed to the "what."

Research the literary concepts of metafiction and postmodernism. Do you think "Happy Endings" falls into either or both of these categories? Explain your answer.

Write a version G for the story that differs significantly from any of the versions Atwood wrote but is still thematically and stylistically related.

Imagine that you were conducting an interview with Atwood after reading this piece. What questions would you ask her? What do you think her answers might be?

Write a rebuttal to Atwood's assertion that there are no happy endings because all endings end in death.

Compare and Contrast

1980s: By the middle of the decade, Canada's population stands at about 26 million. Of this, about 18 million Canadians are married.

Today: The population of Canada is about 31 million. Of this, 14.5 million Canadians are married.

1980s: In 1981, 8.2 million Canadians live in private dwellings. The average private household has 2.9 members.

Today: In 1996, 10.8 million Canadians live in private dwellings. The average private household has 2.6 members.

1980s: By the end of the 1980s, female workers earn an average of 59 percent of what male workers earn.

Today: In 1998, female workers earn an average of 64 percent of what male workers earn.

1980s: By the end of the 1980s, among husband-wife families, 62.8 percent are dual-earner families, 22.8 percent are single-earner families, and 14.4 percent of families have neither spouse earning money.

Today: In 1998, among husband-wife families, 60.4 percent are dual-earner families, 22.5 are single-earner families, and 17.1 percent of families have neither spouse earning money.

What Do I Read Next?

Atwood's *Murder in the Dark* (1983), in which "Happy Endings" first appeared, contains short pieces that playfully focus on language, perception, and storytelling.

French-Canadian author Marie Claire Blais has published her journal, *American Notebooks: A Writer's Journey* (1996).

John Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968) is a collection of short experimental pieces in which the author explores the creative process.

Argentian writer Julio Cortazar's *Hopscotch*(1963) questions traditional narrative progress and endings with this open-ended novel set in the expatriate world of Paris.

Carol Anshaw' s *Aquamarine* (1992) opens at the 1968 Summer Olympics as a young swimmer falls in love for the first time. Then the novel shifts to 1990 and shows the three different paths that its heroine could have chosen.

Pale Fire (1962) by Vladmir Nabokov consists of a long poem and commentary on it by an insane intellectual in a parody of literary scholarship.

Further Study

Atwood, Margaret, *Margaret Atwood: Conversations,* edited by Earl G. Ingersoll, Ontario Review Press, 1990.

This volume collects twenty-one interviews with Atwood during the period 1972-1989.

—, "Then and Now: Canada's Premier Woman of Letters Takes a Razor-Sharp Look at the State of Canadian Literature," *in Macleans,* July 1, 1999, p. 54.

In this essay, Atwood discusses Canadian literature.

Morris, Mary, "The Art of Fiction," in *Biblio,* December 1998, p. 24.

In this interview, Atwood discusses criteria for the successful short story, focusing on rhythm and language.

Stein, Karen F., *Margaret Atwood Revisited,* Twayne Publishers, 1999.

This book contains an overview of Atwood's body of work.

Wilson, Sharon R., Thomas B. Friedman, and Shannon Hengen, eds., *Approaches to Teaching Margaret Atwood's "The Handmaid's Tale" and Other Works,* Modern Language Association, 1996.

This volume contains twenty-three essays examining the influences on Atwood's writing career, her primary works, Atwood criticism, and teaching aids.

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Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

Research
Michelle Campbell, Nicodemus Ford, Sarah Genik, Tamara C. Nott, Tracie Richardson

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Imaging and Multimedia
Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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

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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

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Editor, Short Stories for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535