The Hitchhiking Game Study Guide

The Hitchhiking Game by Milan Kundera

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Introduction

"The Hitchhiking Game" was first published as part of a collection of Milan Kundera's stories entitled *Laughable Loves.* The story centers on a young couple on the first day of their vacation together. Driving along in the young man's sports car, they spontaneously engage in a "game" whereby the young woman takes on the pretend "role" of a seductive hitchhiker, and the young man takes on the role of the stranger who has picked her up along the side of the road. But the fantasy element of the "game" bleeds into the reality of the relationship, with dire emotional and psychological consequences for both parties.

"The Hitchhiking Game" picks up on a recurring theme in the work of Milan Kundera, which concerns the ways in which sexual relationships become power struggles between individuals in a political and social climate in which the individual has no power over a repressive socialist state. This story also concerns a common theme in Kundera's work whereby jokes, humor, and games have serious implications. As Philip Roth has characterized the story in his introduction to *Laughable Loves*: "simply by fooling around and indulging their curiosity, the lovers find they have managed to deepen responsibility as well as passion—as if children playing doctor out in the garage were to look up from one another's privates to discover they were administrating a national health program, or being summoned to perform surgery in the Mount Sinai operating room." The meaning and implica tions of the "game" for both the young man and the young woman are also based on the traditional virgin/whore dichotomy, whereby women are categorized according to their sexual behavior as either "good girls" or "bad girls."

Author Biography

Milan Kundera was born in Brno, Czechoslovakia, on April 1, 1929. In addition to studying music, he attended Charles University in Prague. In 1948, he went to study scriptwriting and directing at the Film Faculty at the Academy of Music and Dramatic Arts in Prague. Beginning in 1952, he taught cinematography a the Prague Academy. From 1958 to 1969 he was an assistant professor at the Film Faculty at the Academy of Music and Dramatic Arts. From 1963 to 1969 he was also a member of the central committee of the Czechoslovak Writers Union. Kundera began writing his first novel, *The Joke,* in 1962, but, due to conflict with the national censors, it was not published until 1967. In June, 1967, Kundera gave a speech at the Fourth Czechoslovak Writers Congress, criticizing censorship and encouraging greater freedom of expression for Czech writers. Many writers followed his example in giving similar speeches. As a result, the government increased oppression of those writers who had spoken out. By 1968, however, in a briefly more permissive atmosphere referred to as "Prague Spring," Kundera was one of the most prominent writers of his nation. However, after Russian tanks rolled into Prague in the summer of 1968, initiating a repressive occupation, Kundera's books and plays were banned and removed from libraries and bookstores. He was also fired from his job and forbidden to publish any of his work in Czechoslovakia. In 1975, he was given permission to move to France in order to accept a position as Invited Professor of Comparative Literature at the Universite des Renne II, in Rennes, which he held until 1979. When his novel *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* was published in 1979, his Czechoslovakian citizenship was remanded. Beginning in 1980 he became a Professor in the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, in Paris, France, and in 1981, he became a naturalized French citizen. His novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984), was made into a movie in 1988. *Immortality* (1990) was his first book set in France. *Slowness* (1996) was his first novel originally written in the French language, as was *Identity* (1998).

Plot Summary

The story begins with a young couple, on the first day of their vacation, driving along the road in the young man's sports car. Although they have been together for a year, the young woman is still shy around her boyfriend and is even embarrassed whenever she has to ask him to stop the car so she can go to the bathroom. The young man has had casual sexual relationships with many women, but likes this young woman because she seems to him to be "pure," as compared to other women he's encountered. The young woman wishes she were not so self-conscious about her body, and envies the kind of women who are more comfortable with their sexuality. She is especially jealous of the young man's attentions to other women, because she feels that other women can offer him a type of seductiveness which she is incapable of. She fears that she will one day lose the young man to such a woman.

At a rest stop, she gets out of the car to go to the bathroom, and he makes a point of embarrassing her by asking where she is going. When she comes out, the young man pulls up at the side of the road to let her back in the car. Because the scenario resembles that of a stranger picking up a hitchhiker along the road, they both spontaneously pretend that this is the case. As they ride along, they continue to act out this "game" of role-playing, whereby she pretends to be the hitchhiker who has gotten into the car of a strange man in order to seduce him. By taking on this "role," the young woman begins to behave in overtly sexual ways which are in stark contrast to her usual self-conscious, embarrassed behavior. The young man, in turn, takes on the role of the stranger who has picked up this hitchhiker with the intention of seducing her. This role is easy for him to assume, for he has in fact had many such relations with women.

While it begins lightheartedly, the "game" begins to have an affect on the reality of how the young man and the young woman feel about each other. For the young woman, it is a liberating experience that, under the cover of her "role" as seductive woman, she is able to shed her sexual inhibitions and express her sexuality more freely. She also finds that her jealousy of other women slips away, since she feels that she is finally giving her boyfriend what she had always feared he could only get from other women: "lightheartedness, shamelessness, and dissoluteness." The young man, on the other hand, begins to see the young woman in a different light. When he sees how naturally she seems to be able to take on this role of seductive woman, he begins to think that maybe she is not the "pure" girl he had perceived. He thus becomes jealous at the thought of her behaving seductively toward men other than himself. Furthermore, he begins to lose respect for her, as he imagines that she is just like all of the other women with whom he has had casual sexual relationships.

At a crossroads, the young man spontaneously decides to take a road in another direction than that which they had originally planned. They end up at a hotel, where they check in and have dinner. During dinner, she becomes increasingly engaged in her "role" as seductive woman, thinking that she is at last able to please him the way other women have. He, on the other hand, begins to hate her for behaving like other women, and begins to treat her with disrespect. He even goes so far as to call her a "whore." At

the same time, however, the more he finds himself repulsed by her as a person, the more he finds himself sexually attracted to her. In their hotel room that night, he treats her callously and disrespectfully, refusing to kiss her and speaking to her coldly and heartlessly. By the time she realizes that he now truly sees her, it is too late. She bursts into tears, pleading with him to see her as the same young woman he had loved and treated with respect. But, once having seen her as a sexual woman, he hates her, and dreads the next 13 days of their vacation together.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

A young man and woman are driving along the highway, in danger of running out of gas. The young woman (whose age has been approximated at twenty-two) demonstrates a joking annoyance to her companion of his inability to keep the car's gas tank full. After all, she complains, there have been several times when they actually have run out of gas and when that happens, inevitably, she is always sent to hitchhike. The young man finds amusement in this, not necessarily caring that she often has to use her womanly wiles on the side of the road in order to catch a ride to the nearest gas station.

The two tease one another, joking that she probably enjoys the attention she gets from men while hitchhiking. As he drives, he puts his arm around her and then kisses her on the forehead. He knows she is a jealous woman, but at times he finds it a bit endearing, especially when combined with her charming sense of modesty.

Eventually the couple happens upon a gas station. While they wait to get the car filled up, the girl decides that she needs to take a bathroom break, yet she is too shy to say so. The man (who, as it has been revealed, is twenty-eight years old) thinks to himself how much he enjoys the girl's innocent "purity," which, in his experience, is so unlike the attitudes of other women.

The story then flashes on to the young woman's point of view. She worries about her modesty and knows that it seems ridiculous. In fact, she frequently tries to talk herself out of acting so foolishly, but she cannot seem to break past the walls of anxiety and modesty that she has built around herself. She admits that she is happy being with the man, but is also suspicious of other women entering his life. She has often worried that perhaps he will find someone more attractive, and that he will leave her. Yet, today she has no worries. They are beginning their first long vacation together, a two-week vacation of which she has been looking forward to for nearly a year.

When she emerges from the wooded area that she has used as a restroom, she sees her companion's sports car at the gas station. She hails down the driver, and asks him, "Are you going to Bystrica?" to which he replies, "Yes, please get in." She speaks to him as if he was a stranger and she was a mere hitchhiker, and she gets in the car.

The car speeds off and the man is sure to mention that he feels lucky to have picked up such an attractive woman on the side of the road. He thinks to himself that he is happy that she is in a good mood. She is often overworked in her job, and her mother is sick. She is also a woman who can easily become worrisome and fearful. Therefore, he is glad that she seems to be in good spirits.

The girl responds to his compliment with a surprising amount of jealousy. She feels as if she cannot trust him and thinks aloud that he must frequently lie to women. However,

her jealousy soon subsides and the two of them begin talking with one another again as if they were strangers—she flirts a bit, and he responds with equally seductive answers.

He tests her by asking what she would do if he got out of the car with her at Bystrica. They continue to tease each other with sexual innuendos as she tries to lure outward affection from him, and he tries to appease her jealous nature. She eventually responds to his suave attitude with sharp anger, hatred even. He looks back at her, wishing for her calm, sweet personality to emerge, and whispers into her ear the nickname he created just for her, hoping to stop the game entirely. She responds by delving into her fictional character even more, and the man has no choice but to resign himself into his well-worn role. He is obviously a bit dejected by her attitude.

The girl discovers that she is able to recover from her jealousy and anger quite quickly, but decides to remain firmly entrenched within her fictional character nonetheless. After all, she thinks to herself, it might help spice up this first day of their vacation. Yet, just as she warms up to him, his own anger begins to show. He is frustrated and angered that she will not simply come out of the game and be herself. As a result, he takes out his emotions on the fictional hitchhiker, treating her more brashly than he normally would.

In response, the young woman becomes even more entrenched in the fictional world she has created. She discovers that while in her role she no longer has to be jealous. After all, in this situation he is not her boyfriend; therefore, she does not have to worry about imagined threats to their relationship. She also discovers that when playing out her fantasy, she can act completely without modesty, without worries about haphazard connections between her mind and her body. She herself is even surmised by the ease in which she slips into such a role.

As the couple continues to drive toward their destination, the man wishes that his life were filled with more fun and spontaneity. He is tired of his job, along with the meetings and the work he has to take home with him; he is bitter that the time required for his job competes with his private recreational time. He regrets that everything in his life—including the vacation he is currently on—must be planned to the last, most precise detail; that even a trip to his country's popular mountain destination (Slovakia's alpine mountain range, the Tatras) has to be planned up to six months in advance.

The bitterness begins to overwhelm the man and so he decides to spice things up a bit. He turns to the young woman and asks her what would happen if she, for some reason, did not make it to Bystrica. She explains she has a date and that it would be his fault if she were to miss it. He seems to enjoy himself as he tells her that they are going in the direction of Nove Zamky instead.

She exclaims that she thought he had plans to go to the Tatras, and is obviously shaken that he, this man who is so reliable, has decided to change their plans. He replies that he is a "free man" and is therefore open to do as he wishes.

When the two arrive at Nove Zamky, it is getting late. As they search for a hotel, they must ask for directions, as much of the town seems to be under construction and they

get lost several times. They finally arrive at the hotel, and the man asks the girl to wait in the car as he goes inside.

He exits the car and realizes he is himself again, apart from the character he has been playing in the hitchhiking game. With the realization comes disappointment, because he really did want to be in the Tatras, celebrating a much-needed vacation with the girl. He admits, however, that an unscheduled night in Nove Zamky before traveling on to the Tatras the next day might make for an intriguing kick-off for their vacation. He makes his way through the hotel restaurant and up to the reception desk where he manages to get the key to the last room available.

As the young woman waits in the car, she too starts to feel like herself again. She trusts her companion enough that she does not feel any doubts about being in this new town. She surprises herself by realizing that she no longer feels any jealousy, that she feels like an "irresponsible, indecent other woman, one of those women of whom she was so jealous." With this, she is proud of herself. Somehow, she is now confident that she is more than capable of keeping her man.

The man returns to the car and as he returns, the girl slips back into character. The two go into the hotel's restaurant, where they find a table in the corner. They order their food, and the girl uncharacteristically asks for vodka. He orders for both of them and they are served vodkas and steak dinners.

Looking across the table at her, the man realizes that he is more than a little annoyed with her behavior, with this game that she insists on playing. He thinks he is annoyed because, to her, this is more than a game, that everything about her changes when she is immersed in her fictional world: her body language, expressions, everything. The charm and innocence that originally drew her into his interest has been erased, the void filled with an overbearing, sensual type of woman of whom he knows too well. The reason why he first became intrigued with the girl is gone, and he does not like it one bit.

When the vodkas arrive, the man gives a toast to the girl. She argues, wanting a toast with more imagination. Eventually, after arguing a bit, she decides that he should be toasting a specific part of her. With obvious sexual tension, she insists he toast her belly, then her breasts . . .

In the meantime, the man is becoming disgusted with her behavior. He thinks to himself that if she can so easily slip into the role of the sexually experienced woman than it must be so, and that her innocence outside of the game must be the actual act. He wonders if the game is freeing some side of her. Regardless, he feels himself disliking her more and more, yet the more she repulses him on an intellectual level, the more he becomes aware of the allure of her body. He realizes he has never been so intrigued with her body, having before been so enamored with her mind.

After three drinks, the girl excuses herself from the table. He asks her where she is going, clearly hoping for her typical modest response. Instead, she responds, "To piss, if you'll permit me."

The young woman loves that he was surprised by her response, and is intoxicated by the sexual and bodily freedom she experiences while in the role as the hitchhiker. Normally she is shy about her body, not wishing anyone to notice her hips or her breasts; she thinks such things should be private and sacred to a personal relationship. However, as the hitchhiker, she can outwardly respond to the looks and remarks she receives from ogling men, such as those who catcall her on the way to the restaurant's bathroom. The realization arouses her.

For the man, however, the game has become almost tortuous, the problem being that no matter how well he slips into character, he cannot help but notice the charming, innocent girl he knows underneath all of the hitchhiker's charades. As he sees her acting as this woman with no boundaries, he begins to fill with fury.

When the girl returns to the table, the man accuses her of looking like "a whore." She responds that she does not care, and he continues the argument by telling her that if that is how she truly feels then she should just pick up one of the men in the bar. She, unaware that he is feeling true emotions amidst this game, continues to bait him with her sassy comments, even as she feels the control of the game slipping away from her.

The man tells her that they are leaving. She asks him where they are going and he will not tell her. She gets upset, and he explains that he does not need to treat "whores" with respect.

The couple makes their way up the staircase to their room on the second floor. The young man takes advantage of the low lighting and steps behind the girl, grabbing her breast from behind. Other men in the hallway witness this and start making remarks. The man simply tells the girl to stay still and keep going.

When they get to the room, the man switches on the light, locks the door, and turns to his companion. In her, he sees her dualism, how she can be both innocent and sexual, charming and devilish at the same time, how regardless of how she looks on the outside, she will always have the manipulative capacity of any woman, of all women, of the women whom he has learned to despise. He feels as if he does not even know this girl standing before him. Because of this, he suddenly begins to hate her.

He turns to her and demands that she strip. She does not think it is necessary, but he is desperate to embarrass her, to humiliate her—and this time it is not just the hitchhiker he's targeting but also the girl herself. He wants her to suffer. He has forgotten about the game. She reaches out to kiss him and he refuses, telling her that he only kisses women that he is in love with and that he surely does not love her. He then tells her again to strip.

The young girl removes her clothes, amazed that she has never before stripped in such a manner. Nevertheless, once she is naked, she feels as if the game has stopped. She once again becomes shy, modest, and innocent.

She looks to the man for reassurance that the game has in fact stopped, but there is no such affirmation. He still sees her with hatred, longs to treat her as nothing more than a whore. He has never had a whore before, but he imagines what he has seen in the movies—when a woman in black lingerie gets up on a piano and dances. Having no piano in their room, he asks the girl to get up on the table in the corner.

She pleads with him, but when she sees that he is not about to relent, she tries to get back into the game but she cannot. Fighting back tears, she gets up on the table. Her clear awkwardness and humiliation is pleasing to the man. He calls out sexual obscenities to her, secretly hoping that she will beg him to stop the game. However, she does tentatively respond to his wishes.

The man then has sex with the girl, and she is relieved, thinking that they can now go back to being the loving 'real' couple that she thought they were. However, he will not kiss her; he will not respond to her emotional needs. She cries in response, but he will not even allow her to sob, pressing his body down atop her instead. She tries to give in to her body, but this is what she had been most fearful of for most of her life: sex without love. Yet, some small part of her enjoys the pleasure of losing such innocence, and she is shocked that she has never experienced it before.

When they are done, the man reaches up and turns off the light. He knows that the game is surely over now. Laying beside her, not touching her body and not able to respond when she tries to touch him, he dreads having to face her.

The girl begins to cry, to sob actually, at his blatant rejection. She calls out to him repeatedly that she is no longer playing the game, that she is in fact the girl he knows so well. At first he does not respond, does not move, for fear of having to comfort her. But as the sobbing and pleading continues, he is forced to tap into one final reserve of kindness because, after all, they still have nearly two full weeks of vacation left.

Analysis

From the start, it's clear that the author, Milan Kundera, is a master of innuendo, as he says much in terms of setting up visual imagery of a young couple traveling together, yet chooses not to reveal their names, relationship, or the location of the story. Even the timeframe for the story is unclear, although it could be nearly any time from the latter half of the 20th century forward, based on the references to sports cars, gas stations, and highways. There is no talk of fashion, politics, or other hints as to the exact year, and the precise location—other than, of course, talk of a "highway"—is also purposefully left out of the narrative.

Yet, Kundera has written the story so masterfully that he knows precisely when to drop in bits of information to keep the reader interested. For instance, note that it is not until

nearly halfway through this short story that we are given insight into the setting. Never does Kundera come out and say, "this story is set in Slovakia . . ." but he hints at it, then later drops in the names of Slovakian towns and landmarks (Bystrica, Nove Zamky, the Tatras) so subtly that if one were not familiar with geography, he or she may not even notice. Kundera is seasoned enough to know that this lack of defined information is a good way to draw in the attention of the audience up front; it provides information balanced with just enough intrigue to make the reader want to continue flipping through the pages to, in a sense, solve a mystery.

It is no mistake that Kundera never reveals the names of the young man and woman in the story. By deliberately removing such details, we may easily come to believe that such a tale could indeed happen. After all, this torrent tale of love, jealousy, anger and misunderstanding could certainly happen to many couples. And yet thanks to the story's other telling details—the hotel room setting, the emotions of the characters—even at the end of the story we feel satisfied with the outcome, regardless of whether or not we've learned their names.

In addition to adding a hearty amount of intrigue in terms of characterization (Who are these people? What are their names? Where do they live? Where are they traveling?), Kundera also creates a vast amount of suspense in the plot itself. As we read, we are wondering: What, exactly, is going on? Whose game is this, anyway? Are both parties aware of what is occurring?

These questions start to come to a head in the car on the way to Nove Zamky, when the man first tries to stop the game by whispering her nickname. It is then that we see this is not a game both parties are eager to participate in; no, this is definitely something that the girl has created herself. In addition, the suspense of the story starts to really build at this moment, as we wonder how the man will react. Will the girl realize that he is no longer interested in this fake version of her? Can she not see that he is more in love with the 'real' her than he could ever be with an imagined, more self-assured version of herself? is it not clear that the more she tries to be someone she is not, the more she pushes him away? It is at this moment that we gain a glimpse of what is to come: the game's deception snowballing upon itself until, in the end, it will all inevitably veer wildly out of control.

Thanks to Kundera's insights into each individual character's thoughts, such plot complexities continue throughout the story. For any given situation, we are able to see and fully understand the scenario from his perspective; then, we are able to do the same with her. By lending such personalization and insights into the characters' personal musings, we are able to feel for and relate to each of them, therefore becoming even more entrenched in their "game." We want the game to stop because we know it is disturbing to the man, but at the same time we are urging the game to continue because it's giving the woman a reason to step outside of her carefully constructed social boundaries. We see how much the woman wants the relationship to work, and we hope for that; yet, we also see how the situation is tormenting the man, and so we wish for a breakup. This back-and-forth empathy for each character is, yet

again, a way in which Kundera demonstrates his considerable talent for capturing the reader.

Further, by being given the opportunity to see inside both characters' thoughts, we are also given an incredible gift of foresight, as we can see that which the characters cannot. We are able to see clearly that these two are so completely out of sync, that they operate on so two completely different levels of thought that their relationship is ultimately doomed, even if the game could in fact end.

Our suspicions are confirmed as the story comes to a head. The story's climax, or turning point, occurs in the hotel's restaurant as the man comes to realize that the girl's presence sickens him. His realization that this is much more than a game, and his suspicions that he has been deceived as to the true personality of this girl, leaves him feeling betrayed and dejected. The game thus far—the stop at the service station, the feigned hitchhiking, the sexually-laden discussions in the car—has all been leading up to this moment: the moment when one of them would finally reach their limit. The story after this landmark scene is merely the unraveling of the emotional aftershock.

Ultimately, Milan Kundera's "The Hitchhiking Game" is an in-depth tale about the fragility of humanity. It delves deep into the core of emotions—anger, jealousy, love, lust, fear, modesty, and insecurity—and twists the story's scenario to psychologically explore them. Why, for instance, did two people who were so consumed with jealousy end up reacting in two very different ways? How did their insecurities ultimately destroy them? How would their relationship have been different had they been able to be more upfront with their emotions—both to themselves as well as to each other?

The plot also explores the idea of duality, of having two sides. Are we capable of having a different side? Is there a dark side to the light, a mean side to the kindness? If we could pretend to be somebody else, would we? Why would we? If so, how would that affect our current relationships?

Many of us dream of a different life, of something that we wish was different—whether it has to do with looks, personality, lifestyle, career or relationships. This story gives readers an opportunity to catch a glimpse into what could potentially happen if we did indulge in such a fantasy, even for a day.

A clear message in "The Hitchhiking Game" is that of role playing, of how we as humans can become something truly different if only in our imagination. It's about overcoming insecurities, about building carefully placed barriers in front of our vulnerabilities in order to work through our fears—whether based in rejection, jealousy, or merely in the idea of facing our true selves. It is about how by pretending to be someone else, even if for just a short while, one is able to escape the boredom of everyday life. It is about not fully embracing our true selves; we can end up destroying that which we hold most dear.

Characters

The Girl

The "girl," as she is referred to in the story, is on vacation with her boyfriend, whom she has been with for a year. In the beginning of the story, she is shy and embarrassed about her body, and is full of sexual inhibitions. She is extremely jealous of other women, because she knows that the young man has had many casual sexual relationships with women more overtly sexual than herself, and she fears that she will one day lose him to such a woman. When they begin to pretend that she is a hitchhiker he has picked up along the road, she finds herself slipping easily into the role of seductive woman, and, under the cover of this pretend "role," her sexual inhibitions slip away. She finds this experience liberating, as she feels she is finally able to be the type of sexually free woman she envies. She feels she is finally giving the young man what she was afraid only other women could give him: "lightheartedness, shamelessness, and dissoluteness." When they check in at a hotel and have dinner, she continues in the role, becoming more and more bold. Although she is not aware that he has begun to hate her for this behavior, she perceives, once they are in their hotel room, that he is treating her like a "whore." He becomes completely cold and callous toward her, to the point where she bursts into tears, pleading with him to acknowledge that she is still the same woman he loved.

The Young Man

As the story opens, the young man is driving with his girlfriend in his sports car, on the first day of their vacation. Although he has had casual sexual relationships with many women, the young man likes the young woman because her thinks of her as "pure" in contrast to all of the other women whom he has encountered. When they begin the "hitchhiking game," of pretending she is a hitchhiker he has picked up along the road, he is eager to drop the role playing, and go back to interacting as their usual selves. But the young woman continues to talk and behave in her newfound role as seductress, and so he continues to behave toward her the way he is used to behaving toward all other women except her. When they come to a crossroads, he spontaneously decides to turn in a direction other than that in which they were originally headed. When they check into a hotel and have dinner, his irritation with her newly seductive behavior turns to hatred of her as a person. Nonetheless, he becomes more and more sexually attracted to her in this "role." He begins to treat her more and more crudely, calling her a "whore." In their hotel room, he treats her as nothing more than a "whore," speaking to her in a cold, callous way, and forgoing any signs of intimacy, affection or tenderness. He is deaf to her crying and sobbing, and unresponsive to her pleas that he acknowledge her as the woman he had loved, and treat her with his usual warmth. But it is too late once he has perceived her to be a sexual woman, he hates her and dreads the rest of their vacation together.

Themes

Virgin/Whore Dichotomy

Central to the relationship between the young man and the young woman in "The Hitchhiking Game" is the historical way in which women have been categorized as either "virgins" or "whores." Through art, literature, and other elements of Western or European culture, women have often been judged based on their sexual behavior as either "virgins," and therefore "pure," or "whores," and therefore shameful, dirty, and sinful. In more colloquial terms, this "virgin/whore dichotomy" has been referred to as the "good girl"/"bad girl" split.

Both the young man and the young women view all women in terms of these categories. At the beginning of the story, they both see the young woman as falling into the category of "good girl." Although she is not technically a virgin, her shyness, embarrassment and general sexual repression place her in this category. For the young woman, this is a source of insecurity, as she fears she is not sufficiently sexually exciting to please her boyfriend. For the young man, on the other hand, this characteristic is what draws him to her, as he distinguishes her from all other women he's encountered as "pure." Based on this central theme, "The Hitchhiking Game" explores the consequences for their relationship when the young woman takes on the "role" of "bad girl," in the context of a playful "game." Through this story, Kundera seems to confirm the criticism launched by many feminists that the "virgin/whore" dichotomy is an unfair way to categorized women, with dire consequences for male-female relationships.

Jealousy

Jealousy is a central theme in the relationship between the young man and the young women. As a result of their role-playing "game," however, the role of jealousy in their relationship shifts dramati cally. In the beginning of the story, the young woman is jealous of other women because she knows that her boyfriend has had many casual sexual relationships. She fears that, because she is not as sexually expressive as other women, she cannot offer him the excitement he finds in these women. She fears she will one day lose him to a woman he finds more sexually alluring. For the man, at the beginning of the story, this sexual jealousy is an irritation.

As the "game" progresses, however, the young woman's jealousy slips away, while the young man's increases. Because she is taking on the "role" of a seductive woman looking for a casual sexual encounter, the young woman feels that she can finally give her boyfriend the sexual excitement she thought he could only get from other women. She therefore loses her jealousy of other women. From the young man's perspective, on the other hand, seeing his girlfriend in the role of seductress brings feelings of jealousy he had not had before. He imagines that if she can behave seductively toward

him, she must be capable of doing so with other men. His increasing jealousy at the thought of her seducing a man other than himself in part builds his growing sense of disdain toward her, as the "game" progresses.

Games

A central theme of "The Hitchhiking Game" is the "game" itself. The "hitchhiking game" begins spontaneously when the couple jokingly pretend that she is a hitchhiker he has picked up along the road. Kundera explores the ways in which "games" between people can become expressions of hidden thoughts and feelings that structure a relationship. For the young woman, the "game" allows her to get in touch with her own repressed sexuality by giving her an excuse to behave in seductive ways she would normally find embarrassing and uncomfortable. For the young man, the "game" places him in a role he has often occupied, that of a man seeking out a casual sexual relationship with a woman he does not know, respect or care about. While this role-playing "game" is at first liberating to the young woman, it ultimately reveals the deep hatred the young man feels for female sexuality. When he sees his girlfriend in this new light as a sexually expressive woman, he considers her no better than a "whore" and treats her as such.

Style

Narrative point-of-view

This story is told from a third person limited perspective. This means that the narrator is not a character in the story but is not necessarily omnipotent in its perspective. The point-of-view of the story alternates between the internal thoughts and feelings of the young woman and those of the young man. This alternating perspective is central to the meaning of the story, because it is the discrepancy between the meaning and significance of the "game" to the young woman and to the young man, which has such dire consequences for their relationship. This narrative technique heightens the effect of the story in that the reader is all the more aware of the extent to which the young woman is not aware of the negative affect of her behavior in terms of the young man's opinion of her until it is too late. This narrative perspective makes the ending of the story that much more sad because, while the reader is aware that the young man now hates his girlfriend, and is dreading the remaining days of their vacation, the young woman still has not realized the magnitude of his changed feelings for her. One can only imagine that she is going to spend the next 13 days attempting to win back his affection, unaware that his newfound hatred for her is irrevocable.

Setting

"The Hitchhiking Game" is set in Czechoslovakia in the 1960s, and the story was first published in 1963. During this time, Czechoslovakia, under Communist rule, first enjoyed a period of democratic reform, and then suffered invasion and occupation by Soviet troupes. This setting is important because a central theme of Kundera's stories is about the ways in which an oppressive society affects intimate interpersonal relationships. This context affects the young man's decision to take a different road from that which he had originally planned. Spontaneously choosing to take a turn away from the direction he had planned six months ahead of time represents to the young man a rebellion against "the omnipresent brain that did not cease knowing about him even for an instant." In other words, the societal pressures of the workplace which seemed to leave him with no privacy and no sense of spontaneity or personal freedom. The ugly power play which emerges from the "game" between the young man and woman is thus an expression of the young man's sense of powerlessness in his societal circumstances.

Irony

The concept of the "game," as emphasized by its use in the story's title, creates a strong sense of irony. While a "game" is something that is supposed to be fun, trivial and playful, this "game" turns out to be cruel, significant and devastating for the young couple. In many of Kundera's stories, games and humor often turn out to expose a dark,

evil underbelly, with dire consequences for the lives of his characters. In this story, the "game" ironically turns into something ugly as it exposes deepseated attitudes which structure the relationship between the young man and the young woman.

Metaphor

The "road" in this story functions as a metaphor for one's path in life in the atmosphere of a repressive society. For the young man, his "road" in life seems to be planned, controlled and watched down to the last detail, for "the main road of his life was drawn with implacable precision." Kundera tells us, "He had become reconciled to all this, yet all the same from time to time the terrible thought of the straight road would overcome him—a road along which he was being pursued, where he was visible to everyone, and from which he could not turn aside." It is this metaphor of the road as applied to his life which leads the young man to spontaneously decide at a crossroads to turn in a direction other than what he had planned—for him, taking a different turn symbolizes an act of individual defi- ance against the controlled circumstances of life in a repressive Communist society: "Through an odd and brief conjunction of ideas the figurative road became identified with the real highway along which he was driving—and this led him suddenly to do a crazy thing." While his decision to sponta neously change plans is motivated by the desire to veer from the "straight and narrow" road prescribed to him by society, it results in a decision to change the manner in which he treats his own girlfriend.

Historical Context

History of the Czech Region

The Czech region has undergone many political upheavals throughout the 20th century. Before World War I, the area now known as the Czech Republic was a part of the Austro-Hungarian empire, ruled by the Hapsburg monarchy. In 1918, not long after the War ended, the Czech and Slovak regions declared independence, forming the Republic of Czechoslovakia. This democratic regime lasted until 1938, when Prague suffered occupation by Germany under Adolf Hitler. In 1945, Soviet forces invaded Prague, and, with the defeat of Hitler, a provisional government was established from 1945 to 1948. After the war, a popular Communist movement had arisen, and Czechoslovakia came under Communist rule as a result of both democratic elections and pressure from mass demonstrations by Communist-led workers. Soon after, Czechoslovakia adopted a Soviet-style government, due to pressure from Joseph Stalin in Russia. In this spirit, the 1950s were characterized by purges of politicians accused of bourgeois nationalism. The 1960s, however, enjoyed a period of reform, whereby an attempt was made to show "socialism with a human face."

Prague Spring

Key events of 1968, known as the "Prague Spring," mark a major event in the history of Czechoslovakia. As a result of democratic reforms begun in the early 1960s, citizens expressed a desire for even more rapid reform. A public statement known as the "Two Thousand Words," signed by many citizens, called for further measures toward democracy. This did not sit well with surrounding Communist nations, however, and, two months later, the Soviet Union and several allies invaded and occupied Prague.

The Czech Republic

Popular uprisings, in the form of pro-democracy demonstrations and strikes, eventually lead to the collapse of Communist rule in Czechoslovakia in 1989. The first free elections in 45 years were held in 1990, and in 1991 the last Soviet troupes withdrew from Czechoslovakia. In 1992, Czechoslovakia was dissolved as a nation, leading to the formation of the Czech Republic.

Socialist Realism

With a socialist government running Czechoslovakia, a Marxist literary and artistic standard referred to as "socialist realism" became the standard by which all Czech literature was judged by the state-sponsored censors. "Socialist realism" is essentially an artistic aesthetic that supports a socialist cultural analysis and socialist ideals.

Because of its propagandistic nature, "socialist realism" requires "realistic" representation (in art and literature) in keeping with the values of socialist society.

Socialist realism was the only officially sanctioned aesthetic in the U.S.S.R. from 1932 through the mid-1980s. Thus, the practice of state-sponsored censorship in Czechoslovakia under socialist rule, and under Russian occupation, functioned to repress the work of many writers and artists attempting to break away from the dictates of socialist realism. The works of such great Czech writers as Kundera, Miroslav Holub, Vaclav Havel and even Franz Kafka (who died in the 1920s) were therefore banned from publication, sale or library circulation in their own country until the mid-1980s.

Czech Cinema

Kundera studied script-writing and filmmaking in Prague. Like that of Czech literature, the history of the Czech film industry is largely dictated by state-sponsored censorship. Nonetheless, influenced by the "Polish School" of filmmakers working in the 1950s to 1970s, Czech filmmakers developed a fresh, new cinematic style referred to as the "Czech New Wave" cinema, which briefly flourished during the period of reform from 1962 to 1968. Although widely praised and appreciated by international audiences, however, these filmmakers were considered "subversive" inside their own country, and many of them were suppressed. After the Soviet invasion of 1968, the films created by the Czech New Wave were banned, and many filmmakers sent into exile.

Dissident Czech Writers

Two prominent Czech writers, contemporaries of Kundera, lived through similar experiences of censorship and oppression in their own country. Miroslav Holub (1923-1998) was a celebrated poet who also maintained a profession as clinical pathologist and immunologist, publishing more than 150 research papers in his field. In the 1950s, Holub became associated with other writers who opposed the dictates of "socialist realism" in literary production. Consequently, from 1970 to 1980, Holub's work was banned from publication or circulation in his own country.

Another contemporary of Kundera, Vaclav Havel, experienced similar repression, due to his politics and writing. Havel, a poet and playwright, was politically active during the brief period of reform culminating in the Prague Spring of 1968. With the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia several months later, Havel's plays were banned and his passport was taken away from him. In subsequent years, he was arrested several times and spent four years in prison, from 1979 to 1983. Havel was, nevertheless, a leader in the protests against the Communist regime in Prague in 1989, and was subsequently elected President of the newly formed Czech Republic three times between 1989 and 1993.

Critical Overview

Kundera's writing career has in large part been determined by the political circumstances of Czechoslovakia under which he wrote. Before becoming a novelist, for which he has won international critical acclaim, Kundera was a poet and playwright His first book of poetry, published in 1953, was denounced by the censors. Nonetheless, he published two more books of poetry, in 1955 and 1957. His first play, written in 1962, was staged both in Czechoslovakia and abroad. His first novel, The Joke, was delayed in publication for several years, due to conflict with the state-sponsored censors. As Czechoslovakia was under Communist rule, any literature not conforming to the strict standards of "socialist realism" was suspect. Socialist realism as a literary standard requires that a story or poem support the principles of Marxism within a realistic setting. The Joke questions Communist society, as it centers around a young man who, as a result of a humorous post-card sent to his girlfriend, is denounced as subversive. Nevertheless, during the brief period of democratic reform in Czechoslovakia, from 1962 to 1968, Kundera's novel was finally published in its original form in 1967.

During the period of reform, Kundera was a member of the central committee of the Czechoslovak Writers Union (from 1963 to 1969). In June of 1967, Kundera gave a memorable speech at the Fourth Czechoslovak Writer's Conference, criticizing censorship, and calling for freedom of expression for writers. Many writers followed Kundera's example, echoing similar speeches at this same conference. As a direct result, repressive measures against these outspoken writers, and censorship of their work, became harsher. However, by the winter of 1968, increased efforts at reform were in part attributed to the influence of these same writers. During the "Prague Spring" of 1968, which culminated the height of the reform era, *The Joke* enjoyed enormous popularity.

In 1968, however, after Soviet troupes invaded and occupied the country, the period of reform was followed by a crackdown on writers considered to be dissident. Kundera was among those whose books were banned from publication and removed from bookstores and libraries. In addition, Kundera was fired from his teaching position at the Prague Academy and forbidden to publish any of his work in Czechoslovakia. Similar censure and censorship were imposed upon other prominent writers of his generation, such as Miroslav Holub and Vaclav Havel.

As a consequence of his censure, Kundera was also forbidden to travel in the West, until, in 1975, he was given permission to move to France in order to accept a post as Invited Professor of Comparative Literature at the Universite des Rennes II. When his novel, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting,* was published in 1979, his Czechoslovakian citizenship was revoked. Although a novel, it focuses on a variety of characters whose stories intersect thematically, but not literally. It is set in the context of Communist Czechoslovakia, and the real historical circumstances under which Communist propaganda operated by "forgetting" historical occurrences inimical to its ideology.

The Unbearable Lightness of Being was published in 1984, garnering international praise. Set around the time of the Russian invasion, this novel focuses on two couples and concerns relationship issues such as sex and fidelity in the context of a repressive society. In 1988, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* was made into a movie directed by Phil Kaufman and starring Daniel Day-Lewis, Lena Olan and Juliette Binoche. The film includes a dramatic reenactment of the citizen protests surrounding the invasion of Prague by Soviet forces.

Immortality, Kundera's first novel set in France, is characterized by an authorial voice which breaks from the narrative to comment upon the writing process itself. The central characters of the story form a love triangle. *Slowness,* his first novel originally written in the French language, focuses on three different stories, all of which take place on a single night at a French Chateau (although set in different time periods). The three stories include the narrator (Kundera himself) and his wife on the way to the Chateau; a liason between an eighteenth century couple; and three characters attending a conference at the chateau. His 1997 novel, *Identity*, was also originally written in French. Of his two works of literary criticism, *The Art of the Novel (1986) outlines his theory of the development of the European novel, and Testaments Betrayed* (1993) discusses humor in the novelistic tradition, with particular focus on the great Czech writer Franz Kafka.

Kundera has won many writing awards, and his novels and stories have been internationally lauded. Critics have noted his style of combining fictional characters and storytelling with historical fact. He has been particularly critical of the social and politi cal climate of Czechoslovakia under Communist rule. The structure of his novels tends to be nonlinear, often structured episodically, whereby the stories of different characters are more thematically than narratively linked. Kundera's narrative style is often characterized by authorial intrusions, in which the narrator comments on the process of storytelling. His recurrent themes include a playful eroticism in the context of repressive societal and political circumstances. Humor, games and play, however, have a dangerous edge in his stories, through which his characters act out power struggles in a world in which they feel fundamentally powerless.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4
- Critical Essay #5

Critical Essay #1

Brent has a Ph.D. in American Culture, specializing in cinema studies, from the University of Michigan. She is a freelance writer and teaches courses in American cinema. In the following essay, she discusses the effect of the "hitchhiking game" and the relationship between the two main characters.

In Milan Kundera's short story "The Hitchhiking Game," a young couple, on vacation, spontaneously find themselves engaged in a fantasy "game," in which they pretend that she is a hitchhiker he has picked up along the road. This "game," which begins playfully, turns out to have dire consequences in irrevocably transforming the relationship between the young man and the young woman. The fantasy begins to bleed into reality, leaving both parties feeling completely different about another by the end. But the meaning of the "game," and its ultimate effect on each of them, is very different for the young woman than for the young man. Through this story, Kundera explores the implications of the virgin/whore dichotomy in Western culture for male-female relationships.

Critical Essay #2

In order to understand this story, it is important to see the dynamics between the young man and the young woman in terms of the ways in which women have traditionally been perceived in Western culture. To be more specific, in Western culture, women have often been categorized in two distinct categories, based on their relative sexual behavior. This dichotomy has been referred to as the "virgin/ whore" split. In more colloquial terms, this dichotomy can be referred to as the "good good/bad girl" dichotomy, whereby the "good" girl is one who is perceived as sexually pure and the "bad" girl is perceived as sexually active. In a similar vein, Western culture tends to perceive humans in terms which assume the mind (or soul, or spirit) is a distinct realm from the physical body (especially sexuality). Clearly, the "virgin" woman is thought of as spiritually and morally pure, devoid of all sexuality. The "whore," by the same token, is perceived as sinfull, dirty, earthly and devoid of all spiritual value.

Both the young man and the young woman in "The Hitchhiking Game" perceive women in terms of these two categories. According to this perspective, the young woman, at the beginning of the story, is certainly a "good" girl. Her sense of herself as uncomfortable with her sexuality is expressed through her embarrassment about her own body, and her discomfort with any reference to her bodily functions. For instance, she is overly embarrassed about having to tell her boyfriend when she is going to the bathroom.

The girl really didn't like it when during the trip—she had to ask him to stop for a moment somewhere near a clump of trees. She always got angry when, with feigned surprise, he asked her why he should stop. She knew that her shyness was ridiculous and old-fashioned. Many times at work she had noticed that they laughed at her on account of it and deliberately provoked her—.She often longed to feel free and easy about her body, the way most of the women around her did.

The young man's perception of the young woman as a "good" girl, at the beginning of the story, is also central to his attitude toward her. His relationship with her is based on the distinction he makes in his own mind between her sexual repression and the sexual expressiveness of other women with whom he has had meaningless sexual affairs. "In the girl sitting beside him he valued precisely what, until now, he had met with least in women: purity." It is this perception of her as "pure" which arouses his love and affection for her, and her shyness about having to go to the bathroom is in fact endearing to him: "he had known her for a year now but she would still get shy in front of him. He enjoyed her moments of shyness, partly because they distinguished her from the women he'd met before . . . " In keeping with the virgin/whore dichotomy in Western culture, the young man mentally places her on a pedestal, whereby he expects her to be almost a spiritual being, rising above the material world of sexuality.

Although the young woman is clearly not technically a virgin, her sexual relations with her boyfriend are still characterized by her shyness about her sexuality. She experiences "anxiety even in her relations with the young man, whom she had known for a year . . . " Yet, while the young man seems to value in the young woman her

embarrassment and shyness about her sexuality, she envies those women who are more sexually expressive. She knows that the young man has had many sexual affairs with such women, and so fears that she lacks a certain sexual appeal to him.

For instance, it often occurred to her that the other women (those who weren't anxious) were more attractive and more seductive and that the young man, who did not conceal the fact that he knew this kind of woman well, would someday leave her for a woman like that. She wanted him to be completely hers and she to be completely his, but it often seemed to her that the more she tried to give him everything, the more she denied him something: the very thing that a light and superficial love or a flirtation gives a person.

Critical Essay #3

The "hitchhiking game" begins spontaneously between the young couple when, at a rest stop, after she has gone to the bathroom, he pulls up in his sports car so that she can get back in and they can continue their journey along the road. Because the scenario resembles that of a car stopping to pick up a strange hitchhiker, they both lightheartedly banter as if they were strangers and he had just picked her up by the side of the road. The man pretends that he is trying to seduce this strange woman, a role that comes naturally to him, as he has done it many times with other women, but which is completely contrary to his usual treatment of his girlfriend. The young woman, likewise, takes on the part of a woman who is used to having casual sexual affairs, a role which she has never taken on in real life, and certainly not with her boyfriend. The "game," however, begins to effect the reality of their relationship, at first in subtle ways, and then in very disturbing ways. It becomes "dangerous," as it brings out feelings in each of them which, in the year of their relationship, have never before been expressed. The consequences of the "game" in its effect on the reality of their relationship are devastating to each of them but in very different ways.

For the young woman, the opportunity to take on the "role" of a woman who is comfortable with her sexuality, and comfortable with the idea of casual sex with a stranger, is in some ways liberating. Because it is just a "game," she feels comfortable expressing the repressed elements of her own sexuality. She also takes pleasure in the thought that she is, for once, embodying the type of sexual woman with whom her boyfriend has had affairs. Because she is imagining that she herself is one of these kind of women, she is able to (temporarily) let go of her jealousy and fear of losing him to that type of woman. She imagines that, for the first time, she is giving him the sexual satisfaction she had feared only other women could give him. Furthermore, the young woman is surprised to find that, under the cover of the "game," the role of seductress seems to come naturally to her. It seems that all she needed was this excuse not to be her usual shy self in order to express the repressed sexuality within her, as "the girl could forget herself and give herself up to her role."

Her role? What was her role? It was a role out of trashy literature. The hitchhiker stopped the car not to get a ride, but to seduce the man who was driving the car. She was an artful seductress, cleverly knowing how to use her charms. The girl slipped into this silly, romantic part with an ease that astonished her and held her spellbound.

For the young man, however, the affect of the game on his perceptions of his girlfriend, and his behavior toward her, is more ominous. Because he had loved the young woman based on his perception of her as "pure," once he sees her behaving seductively, he begins to regard her as he does all other women, i.e., as a slut who deserves only his disdain. Whereas he had treated her with respect because she was shy and self-conscious about her sexuality, he now treats her cruelly&ampampmdashas if punishing her for her sexuality.

When the young couple arrive at a hotel for the night, the "game" changes from a trashy romance to a tragedy. It is partly the discrepancy between the young woman's pleasure in her newfound role as sexual being, and the young man's growing disdain for her in this light, which makes it tragic. The young woman, at this point, is completely unaware of the negative feelings her "role" in the game are arousing in her boyfriend. She continues to imagine that she is finally giving him what he wanted from other women, and so she imagines that she no longer needs to be jealous of such women.

"she smiled at the thought of how nice it was that today she was this other woman, this irresponsible, indecent other woman, one of those women of whom she was so jealous. It seemed to her that she was cutting them all out, that she had learned how to use their weapons; how to give the young man what until now she had not known how to give him: lightheartedness, shamelessness, and dissoluteness. A curious feeling of satisfaction filled her, because she alone had the ability to be all women and in this way (she alone) could completely captivate her lover and hold his interest.

As the game continues, however, and the young man sees his girlfriend in this new light, he begins to hate her for it. Because she is now expressing herself sexually, in the "game" of seducing her own boyfriend as if he were a stranger, he begins to imagine her as actually capable of seducing a strange man other than himself. Thus, while her jealousy slips away as she imagines that she is embodying the type of woman whom she envies, he becomes jealous for the first time, imagining her as such a woman seducing another man. Because he can only see women as either "pure" or as "whores," he begins to think that, since this role seems to come to her so easily, she must, deep down in her soul, really be a "whore." He is incapable of imagining that his girlfriend is both the woman he has known all along, and a sexual being. Because of this, he begins to treat her cruelly, with disdain and disrespect, calling her a "whore," and distancing himself from her emotionally. At the same time, as his feeling for her as a human being slips away, he becomes more sexually attracted to her. His limitations make it impossible for him to be either sexually attracted to the woman he loves, or to love the woman to whom he is sexually attracted. Because he has now seen her in this sexual light, he comes to hate her and dread the remaining thirteen days of their vacation together.

When, after it is too late, the young woman perceives that her sexual behavior has caused him to distance himself from her emotionally, she pleads with him to recognize her as the same woman he has loved. When he is unresponsive, she cries repeatedly, "I am me, I am me, I am me," trying to convince him that she is both the woman he has always known and a sexual being, not just the "whore" he has determined her to be.

Kundera in this story explores the negative implications, for male-female relationships, of the ways in which Western culture categorizes women as either sexual, and therefore "bad," or sexually "pure," and therefor "good." The story illustrates the ways in which this dichotomous way of categorizing women according to their sexuality is unfair to women, because it implies that there is something inherently shameful, evil and despicable about female sexuality. The story also suggests that it can be damaging to

men to categorize women as either "pure" or "sexual," because it can cut them off from the possibility of a relationship with a woman that is both loving and sexual.

Source: Liz Brent, for *Short Stories for Students*, Gale, 2000.

Critical Essay #4

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 explicates the text of "The Hitchhiking Game" and then briefly links it to Kundera's philosophies and the political background of Czechoslovakia.

Milan Kundera's international reputation rests on his novels, not the handful of short stories he wrote in the six years leading up to the Prague Spring of 1968, when Czechoslovakia experienced a brief period of independence before being invaded by Soviet tanks. Kundera's short stories, collected in *Laughable Loves*, nevertheless demonstrate some of his important ideas and techniques. Robert A. Morace writes in *Reference Guide to Short Fiction* that the stories "are in style, structure, and substance clearly the work of an already mature writer who conceives of writing as a series of exploration in form and theme." In "The Hitchhiking Game" in particular, Morace finds a "miniature" version of "Kundera's characteristic philosophical playfulness, classically precise anti-Romantic style, and the theme and variation approach. The story is less a conventional short fiction than it is an aesthetic and existential inquiry, a search for a new literary form to understand the human situation in the modern. . . world."

The title "The Hitchhiking Game" boldly connotes to the reader what lies at the core of Milan Kundera's story&ampampmdasha game with a dangerous twist. The anonymous characters in the story, referred to merely as "the young man" and "the girl," play out a drama that masquerades a deeper search for human meaning. The lovers are beginning their two-week vacation. Though the lovers are only at the start of their journey, the games they will play have been defined by previous experiences. As succinctly summed up by Morace: "The game he [the young man] plays is this: he drives until the car runs out of gas and then, hidden, watches as she [the girl] hitches a ride from another man to the nearest petrol station, during which time he fantasizes about what she and driver may be doing. Alternatively, he drives until she, despite her shame, must ask him to stop so that she can urinate."

The girl, however, likes neither of these games, which favor her boyfriend. "She always got angry" when he asked, with "feigned surprise," why he should stop the car, seeing that he relishes her embarrassment. The girl also complains about his allowing the car to run out of gas. Although the young man protests that "whatever he went through with her had the charm of adventure for him," the girl points out that the adventure is "only for her." She must "make ill use of her charms" in order to get a ride to the nearest gas station.

These games are set up right away in Sections 1 and 2 of the story. Section 1 also shows the girl's attempt to play the young man's game. When he asked "whether the drivers who had given her a ride had been unpleasant. . . She replied (with awkward flirtatiousness) that sometimes they had been very pleasant but that it hadn't done her any good as she had been burdened with the can and had had to leave them before

she could get anything going." This exchange shows that the girl undertakes a role that is difficult for her in the hopes of pleasing her boyfriend.

The girl and the young man clearly have an unequal relationship. The young man is older, 28 to her 22. The titles given to the characters, like the title of the story, have deeper symbolic meaning&ampampmdash he is a man but she is only a girl. In fact, in Section 1, the young man acknowledges his belief that "he was old and knew everything that a man could know about women." The girl, for her part, defers to him. Despite being with her boyfriend for a year, she is still uneasy in his company&ampampmdashas the narration notes, "In solitude it was possible for her to get the greatest enjoyment from the presence of the man she loved." She is jealous, shy, and anxious, all traits that show the instability she feels in their relationship.

Along with the history of the game-playing, the characters are established by the end of Section 2, when the direct action of the story begins. The couple stop for gas, the girl gets out and walks to the woods, but instead of returning to the car she walks down the highway. When the car comes down the road, she "began to wave at it like a hitchhiker waving at a stranger's car." The girl gets in the car, and the two begin to role-play.

Almost immediately, however, the young man and the girl begin to confuse their roles&ampampmdashhe as "the tough guy who treats women to the coarser aspects of his masculinity" and she as "the artful seductress"&ampampmdashwith their own identities. The young man flatters her "and at this moment he was once again speaking far more to his own girl than to the figure of the hitchhiker." The girl, however, caught up in her jealousy at seeing how he would react to an attractive stranger, "felt toward him a brief flash of intense hatred" and refuses to acknowledge him. Although at that moment, the young man "longed for her usual, familiar expression" and tries to stop the game, she refuses and rebuffs him as if he were a stranger behaving inappropriately. The young man, in turn, becomes "furious with the girl for not listening to him and refusing to be herself when that was what he wanted." The young man becomes angry both with the girl&ampampmdashwho is defying him&ampampmdashand with the *hitchhiker*&ampampmash; who deserves rough treatment because of her very character.

As the two more fully embrace their roles, this shift brings freedom. For his part, the young man becomes spontaneous, driving to Nove Zamky instead of the Low Tatras, where they have a room reserved. The import of this action is underscored both by the narrator's acknowledgement that in Czechoslovakia it is necessary to book a room months in advance and by the narrative statement that the young man "was moving from himself and from the implacable straight road, from which he had never strayed until now." The girl responds to the new situation by drinking vodka when she normally does not enjoy alcohol, and flirting and talking frivolously. The ultimate symbol of her renunciation of her "girl" self is when she excuses herself to the bathroom. When the young man asks where she is going, she responds, "'To piss.'"

The roles that the young man and the girl play affect them differently. The girl relishes her new persona. Inhabiting the hitchhiker's body brings her self-awareness and

freedom from the usual shame she feels about her body as a sexual object. The young man, however, even though he is aware that he is playing a role, cannot help but see his girl as the hitchhiker. Seeing her revel in her new sexual freedom, he treats her rudely, like a prostitute, and soon he longs to humiliate the girl and not the hitchhiker. He no longer can separate the girl from the hitchhiker.

Inevitably, the game goes too far. "The game merged with life," and there was no getting out of it. As the narration states, "A team cannot flee from the playing field before the end of the match. . . The girl knew that she had to accept whatever form the game might take, just because it was a game." The game leads to the bedroom, where the young man forces her to strip naked and dance for him. The two have sex in their roles of strangers, which initially disturbs the girl but eventually his "furious passion gradually won over her body, which silenced the complaint of her soul." She, who "had scrupulously avoided. . . love-making without emotion or love," feels more pleasure than she ever has before. Through sex, the girl crosses beyond the metaphoric boundaries of the playing field&ampampmdashshe leaves the game. After sex, the young man, too, knew that "it was all over," meaning both the end of the game and the players' perceptions of one another.

Afterwards, the young man and woman return to their own selves, but with greater knowledge and without their previous security in each other. The girl, upset by her ability to view her body as "impersonal," a "ready-made borrowed thing," cries over and over in "pitiful" fashion, "'I am me, I am me, I am me. . .'" Her assertion, however, contains only a "sad emptiness." The young man, in contrast, does not rebel against his new state of mind and actually fears returning to their relationship. He resists the girl and is forced to call the compassion necessary to calm her down "from afar, because it was nowhere near at hand." His motive for helping her is selfish: "[T]here were still thirteen days' vacation before them."

The young man and girl's role-playing, their experimentation with other identities and personas, stems from the repressive nature of communist Czechoslovakia. In such a state, no one is truly "me." Though the political aspects of the country and the story are not directly referenced, the young man and girl's actions are a direct result of it, as many critics have pointed out. The lives of the two protagonists are hardly their own. The girl "had a quite tiresome job in an unpleasant environment, many hours of overtime without compensatory leisure and, at home, a sick mother." The young man has a job that "didn't use up merely eight hours a day, it also infiltrated the remaining time with the compulsory boredom of meetings and home study, and . . . it infiltrated the wretchedly little time he had left for his private life as well," a private life that "never remained secret and sometimes even became the subject of gossip and public discussion." The lovers commence the vacation in an attempt to find freedom in a sports car and the open road, away from prying eyes but "[E]ven two weeks' vacation didn't give him a feeling of liberation and adventure."

Morace writes of the ending, "It ends with the realization that in pursuing freedom the young man and the girl have come to embody the very tyranny they sought to escape, becoming as it were the mirror of the larger political situation." Kundera has said that the

modern world has become one of totalitarian tyranny and absolute skepticism, both of which are part of the hitchhiking game. As such, the story reflects a basic philosophy of Kundera. Writes Roger Rosenblatt in the *New Republic*, "For Kundera massive confusion is the essential human state. . . Stalinism was more dangerous than fascism because [according to Kundera] 'it began as the advocate and gradually converted it into the opposite: love of humanity into cruelty, love of truth into denunciation. . . .'" The actions of the young man and girl, who take their love and twist it into hate and debasement, demonstrate this fundamental belief.

Critical Essay #5

With a background in English/Creative Writing, Hart has taught writing, been a director of a national writers' conference, and an editor of a literary magazine. She discusses the psychological and feminist implications in "The Hitchhiking Game."

Issues of power and identity are recurring themes in most of Milan Kundera's writings. Having been expelled by a communist regime from his homeland, Czechoslovakia, after his novel *The Joke* was published, Kundera often writes about these issues within a political framework. Just as often, Kundera also plays out these themes while exploring the personal and sexual relationships between his main characters. A good example of this occurs in his short story "The Hitchhiking Game ."

The story, much like the road down which the characters travel, twists and turns around questions of authority, sexuality, and self, stopping not at conclusive answers, but rather stopping only out of sheer exhaustion and a need for sleep. It is the questions that are important, Kundera says over and over again in interviews and essays as he attempts to explain his work. In a *New York Times* interview with author Philip Roth, Kundera upholds his right as an author to pose these questions and leave them unanswered. He says that it is the purpose of the writer to teach "the reader to comprehend the world as a question. There is wisdom and tolerance in that attitude." In "The Hitchhiking Game" it is defi- nitely the questions that push the story forward. It is also the questions that both bind and alienate the story's characters as they try on variations of themselves, and play out different roles.

So leave the need for answers at the gas station and climb on board for a wild ride. Take a back seat and observe in silence and with an open mind, as Kundera's hitchhiking couple game their way through equally absurd identity crises. When those questions start banking up on one another, remember that another one of Kundera's aims as stated in his book *Testaments Betrayed* is to teach "the reader to be curious about others and to try to comprehend truths that differ from his own."

Being curious about one another does not seem to be one of the aims of either the boy or the girl (no names are given to these characters) in this short story. Rather they each think they already know one another very well. The boy knows that the girl is insecure, but he forgives her. "Jealousy isn't a pleasant trait," he thinks, "but if it isn't overdone (and if it's combined with modesty), apart from its inconvenience there's even something touching about it." The girl, on the other hand, believes that her modesty is "ridiculous and old-fashioned." She thinks the young man wants a woman who can give him more ". . .light-heartedness, shamelessness and dissoluteness." Their knowledge of one another is limited, and neither foresees the transformations that lurk at the next crossroads.

As they become entrenched in their makebelieve roles in their invented road game, they discover hidden and somewhat contradictory aspects not only of one another, but also of their own personalities. According to Freudian theory, these hidden aspects are called

repressions, or parts of the personality that have been formerly denied. In this story the repressions are related to both sexual and authoritarian drives. The girl, in the guise of anonymity as the hitchhiker, slips easily into a mirror image of her former self&ampampmdasha kind of shadow, as Carl Jung, another psychoanalyst and student of Freud, would say. In Jung's book Man and His Symbols he states, "Sometimes, though not often, an individual feels impelled to live out the worst side of his nature and to repress his better side."

This leads to some of the first questions in Kundera's story: Is this role, this guise that the girl puts on, an enactment of her worst side? The boy definitely believes it is not her better side, but the girl is not so assured. No more than three paragraphs into the story, the girl is already questioning her identity. "Many times at work she had noticed that they laughed at her on account of it [her modesty] and deliberately provoked her. . . . She often longed to feel free and easy about her body, the way most of the women around her did. . . . She was too much at one with her body; that is why she always felt such anxiety about it."

Since she cannot do it for herself, the girl seeks a unity of body and soul through the boy. However the relationship with the boy also causes anxiety because, in her mind, women who are less anxious and more carefree with their bodies are also more attractive. So she is caught in her own trap&ampampmdasha trap that she has obviously been living in for some time. Her self-consciousness makes her react awkwardly. Her awkwardness makes her feel more self-conscious. Like most traps, this one has a release, and it is unexpectedly sprung when the girl puts on the mask of the hitchhiker.

Again from *Man and His Symbols* Jung says there are times when the shadow should not be repressed. "Sometimes the shadow is powerful because the urge of the Self is pointing in the same direction, and so one does not know whether it is the Self or the shadow that is behind the inner pressure. . . . If the shadow figure contains valuable, vital forces, they ought to be assimilated into actual experience and not repressed. It is up to the ego to give up its pride and priggishness and to live out something that seems to be dark, but actually may not be." The girl in Kundera's story decides to follow her shadow. She refers to it as a role "from trashy literature." When she does slip into this role, she is surprised at how easily she does it, and she finds herself becoming "spellbound."

The boy, in the meantime, is dealing with issues of power. He is obviously used to being in the metaphorical driver's seat in this relationship as well as in all his relationships with women. In the beginning of the story, the boy is aware of the girl's shortcomings. He deals with her moodiness, her lack of energy and self-confidence, her fears and her jealousies. When she becomes upset, he soothes her with a "gentle kiss on the forehead." He is, after all, twenty-eight years old and knows "everything that a man could know about women." He loves her in spite of her shortcomings. She is modest and pure. What more in a woman could a man ask for?

Not very long into the game, the boy gets his first hint of trouble. "The young man looked at the girl. Her defiant face appeared to him to be completely convulsed. He felt sorry for her and longed for her usual, familiar expression (which he considered childish and simple). He leaned toward her, put his arm around her shoulders, and softly spoke the nickname he often used and with which he now wanted to stop the game. But the girl released herself and said: "You're going a bit too fast!"

Reading this story with feminist theory in mind, the young man would be said to be playing out the patriarchal, or father role. He wants his girlfriend to reflect the qualities of a child, and is sickened when he witnesses her rebellion. He desires to control her like he controls the car. "He was furious with the girl for not listening to him and refusing to be herself when that was what he wanted." So he retaliates. He decides that he, too, can play the game and takes up his mask of the "coarser aspects of his masculinity: willfulness, sarcasm, self-assurance."

At this point the story takes a literal turn. For the first time in his life the boy does something spontaneous&ampampmdashhe changes the direction of his well thought-out course. When he does this, everything begins to fall apart: the road on which they are driving is torn up; there are long-delaying detours; and when they arrive at the only hotel in this unfamiliar town, every room inside is filled with smoke, noise, dirt and darkness.

Kundera is too intelligent to tell a story that is strictly black and white. He loves ambiguities. It is, of course, from ambiguities that the questions arise. So he has the young man, who at one point is disgusted with the new role that the girl is playing, reflect on the changes that he is witnessing. "The more the girl withdrew from him psychically, the more he longed for her physically; the alienation of her soul drew attention to her body; yes it turned her body into a body; as if until now it had been hidden from the young man within clouds of compassion, tenderness, concern, love, and emotion. . . ." Oh, such sweet reversal! In the beginning the girl is too conscious of her body. As she takes on the game, she frees herself from her body-consciousness. And it is in the freeing of her self that the boy all of a sudden notices her physically. In addition, how absurd it is that all the girl wants is to please her young man, but the more she tries to win his love, the more he pulls away his emotions. What are we to think about this?

The absurdities deepen as the story progresses. The young girl begins to feel trapped once again, this time by the rules of their game. The young man is humiliated and then angered because the girl has become so free and flirtatious. Lashing out, he does his best to humiliate, not the hitchhiker, not the role that the girl is playing, but the girl herself. Thus the shadow part of the boy's personality comes to the front, out into the light, and he finds he likes neither aspect of the girl: neither the angel nor the devil. In his mind they have coalesced into one. "Now he longed only to treat her as a whore. But the young man had never had a whore, and the ideas he had about them came from literature and hearsay."

As the story turns back on itself with the boy taking on a role from literature as the girl had in the beginning, the two characters turn their personalities inside out in what Jung might analyze as a step toward better defining their identity. "When dark figures turn up—and seem to want something—we cannot be sure whether they personify merely a shadowy part of ourselves, or the Self, or both at the same time. Divining in advance whether our dark partner symbolizes a shortcoming that we should overcome or a meaningful bit of life that we should accept&ampampmdashthis is one of the most difficult problems that we encounter on the way to individuation."

The story ends on an inconclusive note, in other words, it ends with unanswered questions. The boy fears a 'return' to their old relationship. The girl feels "horror at the thought that she had never known such (sexual) pleasure." As the girl moans, "I'm me, I'm me," the young man ponders the "sad emptiness of the girl's assertion, in which the unknown was defined by the same unknown." So the characters put clear definitions of their emotions, their relationship and all their shadowy identities on hold. After all, there are still "thirteen days of vacation before them."

Source: Joyce Hart, for *Short Stories for Students*, Gale, 2000.

Adaptations

The Unbearable Lightness of Being was made into a movie released in 1988, and starring Daniel Day-Lewis, Juliette Binoche and Lena Olan.

The Unbearable Lightness of Being was recorded on audiocassette in 1988 by Books on Tape (Newport Beach, CA). It is read by Christopher Hurt.

Identity was recorded on audiocassette in 1998 by Books on Tape (Newport Beach, CA). This unabridged version of the novel is read by Barrett Whitener.

Topics for Further Study

Many of Kundera's stories are set in Czechoslovakia in the second half of the Twentieth Century. Learn more about the political history of Czechoslovakia (now the Czech Republic) since World War II. What major political and social upheavals has the country experienced? How has the country's political climate affected the life and work of Kundera? How are the social, political, and economic conditions of the nation different now from the time in which "The Hitchhiking Game" was first written and published?

The greatest Czech fiction writer of the first half of the Twenthieth Century was Franz Kafka. Learn more about the life and work of Kafka and the social and political climate in which he wrote. Like Kundera, Kafka's work was also banned in his own country—although not until years after his death. Pick one of Kafka's short stories to read. How can his life and work be illuminated by understanding the historical context in which he lived and worked?

Vaclav Havel and Miroslav Holub are both wellknown Czech writers of Kundera's generation. Learn more about the life and work of either Havel or Holub. How were his experiences and choices as a writer in the same political climate as Kundera different from, or similar to, those of Kundera? In what ways did these experiences affect his poetry?

The government-sanctioned style of literature during much of Kundera's lifetime was "socialist realism." What are the basic aesthetic and political principles of the "socialist realist" style in writing? In other art forms? What is the history of the "socialist realist" style?

Read another one of Kundera's stories in the collection *Laughable Loves,* (in which "The Hitchhiking Game" appeared). It what ways does it explore similar themes to those explored in "The Hitchhiking Game"?

Compare and Contrast

1960s: Under Communist rule since 1948, the Czechoslovakian government institutes a period of democratic reform in 1962, culminating in the Prague Spring of 1968. Several months later, however, Soviet troupes invade and occupy Czechoslovakia, instituting a severe crackdown on writers and politicians considered "dissident." **1990s:** In 1989, Communist rule collapses throughout much of Eastern Europe, as characterized by the tearing down of the Berlin Wall. Czechoslovakia becomes the Czech Republic. The first democratic elections were held in 1990, and the last Soviet troupes withdraw from the country in 1991. **1960s:** The Cold War, characterizing the ideological antagonism and the arms race between the United States and the U.S.S.R. since the end of World War II, is in full swing. **1990s:** The fall of Communism in many Eastern European countries in 1989, and the tearing down of the Berlin Wall, signify the end of the Cold War, which had lasted more than 40 years. **1960s:** The conditions under which Czech writers write is characterized by state-sponsored censorship and the idealized "aesthetic" of socialist realism in art and literature. The works of novelists and poets such as Kundera, Vaclav Havel and Miroslav Holub are censored and banned in their own country, and the writers themselves often imprisoned, fired from their jobs, prevented from leaving the country, or sent into exile. **1990s:** With the collapse of Communist rule in 1989, the fate of many writers formerly considered "dissident" changes drastically. Most notably, Vaclav Havel, writer and political leader who had spent four years in prison for his "dissident" activities, is elected leader of the newly formed Czech Republic three times between 1989 and 1993. Books by writers whose work had been banned for decades are finally made available in their native country. **1960s:** Kundera is living in Czechoslovakia, where the publication of his work, is restricted by state-sponsored censorship, and later banned from publication, sale or circulation in his own country. Eventually, in 1979, his citizenship is revoked. Nevertheless, his stories and novels are written in the Czech language, and set in Czechoslovakia **1990s:** Kundera lives in France, where he became a naturalized citizen in 1981. His first novel set in France is published in 1990, and his subsequent novels were originally written in the French language.

What Do I Read Next?

The Joke: The Definitive Version Fully Revised by the Author (1992), Kundera's first novel, was originally published in 1967, after several years' delay by the censors. It concerns a young man who, as a result of a humorous post-card sent to his girlfriend, is chastised by the Communist government for expressing rebellious sentiments. >

The Book of Laughter and Forgetting (1981), by Milan Kundera, concerns fictional characters in the context of real historical events which took place in Czechoslovakia under Russian occupation. Kunera's citizenship as a Czech was taken away from him upon publication of this novel.

The Unbearable Lightness of Being(1984), by Milan Kundera, focuses on two couples in the context of the Russian occupation of Czechoslovakia. It was made into a movie in 1986.

Slowness (1996), by Milan Kundera, was Kundera's first novel originally written in the French language. It focuses on three separate fictional stories which take place in the same Chateau over the course of one night, and concerns a central theme of the speeding up of modern life, as compared to the slowness of premodern culture.

Milan Kundera: A Voice from Central Europe (1981), by R. C. Porter, discusses Kundera's literary career in the historical context of the political circumstances of Central Europe.

Writing At Risk: Interviews in Paris with Uncommon Writers (1991), by Jason Weiss, includes an interview with Kundera, as well as interviews with such writers as Albert Camus, Julio Cortazar, Eugene Ionesco, Carlos Fuentes and others.

Milan Kundera and the Art of Fiction: Critical Essays (1992), edited by Aron Aji, is a diverse collection of essays by different critics, discussing Kundera's literary style.

Milan Kundera and Feminism: Dangerous Intersections (1995), by John O'Brien, explores the feminist implications of Kundera's stories.

The Novel: Language and Narrative from Cervantes to Calvino, by Andre Brink, explores the uses of language and literary style in the development of the novel through history, and includes a chapter on Kundera's *Unbearable Lightness of Being.*

Further Study

Kundera, Milan, *The Art of the Novel*, New York: Grove Press, 1986.

Kundera's non-fiction work exploring his theories of the development of the European novel.

&ampampmdash, *Testaments Betrayed: An Essay in Nine Parts*, New York: HarperCollins, 1995.

Kundera's non-fiction essay critiquing the ways in which the modern novel has been perceived by many critics. Focuses particularly on his view that the humor of the Czech writer Franz Kafka has been overlooked.

Misurella, Fred, *Understanding Milan Kundera: Public Events, Private Affairs*, Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1993.

Explores the recurrent theme in Kundera's work in which political circumstances affect the power dynamics of personal relationships.

Pillai, C. Gopinathan, *The Political Novels of Milan Kundera and O. V. Vijayan: A Comparative Study*, New Delhi: Prestige, 1996.

Compares the political implications of Kundera's novels with those of the Indian writer Vijayan.

Podhoretz, Norman, *The Bloody Crossroads: Where Literature and Politics Meet*, New York: Simon &ampamp Schuster, 1986.

Treats a small selection of writers, such as Camus, Orwell and Henry Adams. Includes a chapter entitled, "An Open Letter to Milan Kundera&ampampmdashthe terrible Question of Aleksadr Solzhenitsyn."

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Morace, Robert A., An overview of "The Hitchhiking Game," in *Reference Guide to Short Fiction*, 1st ed., edited by Noelle Watson, St. James Press, 1994.

Rosenblatt, Roger, A discussion of *Laughable Loves*, in *The New Republic*, September 6, 1975, pp. 29-30.

Roth, Philip, Introduction to *Laughable Loves*, a collection of short stories by Milan Kundera, New York: Penguin Books, 1974, p. xvi.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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

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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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