In the Garden of the North American Martyrs Study Guide

In the Garden of the North American Martyrs by Tobias Wolff

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

First published in the journal *Antaeus* in the spring of 1980, "In the Garden of the North American Martyrs" was later revised and became the title story of Tobias Wolff's first collection of short stories, published in 1981. This collection of fiction helped Wolff earn a reputation as one of the most promising writers of his generation. In this and the other stories in the book, Wolff probes the details of everyday life and ordinary characters in an effort to discern the aesthetic and moral patterns beneath the surface. In this story, Mary, a college professor who has carved out a safe career for herself by never risking originality, gets an offer to interview for an opening at a prestigious college. When she realizes that her interview has been arranged "just to satisfy a rule" about considering female candidates, she must choose how to react. Her final performance is a speech in which she finally recovers her power to speak in her true voice.

Author Biography

The widely respected author Tobias Wolff followed an unlikely and meandering path to such a position. As his memoir *This Boy's Life* chronicles, Wolff's childhood and adolescence were unconventional and unpromising. Wolff was born in 1945 in Birmingham, Alabama, the second son of Arthur Wolff, an aeronautical engineer, and his wife, Rosemary. When Wolff was four his parents separated. His brother Geoffrey stayed with his father, and Wolff moved on with his mother.

Wolff and his mother moved from Florida to Utah, to Seattle, before settling in the remote Washington town of Chinook. His adolescence was characterized by loneliness, delinquency, and abuse from his stepfather. Finally fed up with his own dead-end life in high school, Wolff reestablished contact with his brother. Geoffrey Wolff, then a student at Princeton University, encouraged his younger brother to make more of himself and helped him channel his imagination into writing. Not completely reformed, however, Wolff forged both his transcript and letters of recommendation so that he would be admitted to and offered a scholarship by the elite boarding school, the Hill School. Though he was successful in getting in, he was eventually expelled because, as he says in *This Boy's Life,* he "knew nothing."

After his expulsion, Wolff joined the army and served in Vietnam. He then legitimately passed the entrance exams at England's Oxford University where he earned a B.A. degree in 1972. After failing as a journalist, he won one of the coveted fellowships to study creative writing at Stanford University in California. Having at last found his true calling, Wolff published his first story in 1976 and his first collection, *In the Garden of the North American Martyrs,* in 1981. He is a member of the English department at Syracuse University in New York and is the author of two additional volumes of stories, two memoirs, and a novella. According to an article in *Time* magazine in 1993, "a couple of years ago, the Hill School invited him back and, on the unanimous vote of his former classmates, gave him his high school diploma. Michael CatonJones' film version of *This Boy's Life,* starring Leonardo DiCaprio, Ellen Barkin, and Robert De Niro, was released in 1993.

Plot Summary

The story begins with a distant, omniscient narrator describing Mary, the main character. She is a history professor who has made a career of avoiding controversy and expressing only safe, approved views. After fifteen years of teaching at Brandon College she is forced to look for a new job when the college suddenly closes in the wake of an administrator's reckless and disastrous mishandling of its funds. Mary's belief in the rewards of prudence and caution is shaken by the evidence that anyone "could gamble a college."

Mary's mid-career job search yields only one offer: at a "new experimental college in Oregon." The narrator's description of the place makes it seem more like a high school than a college: "Bells rang all the time, lockers lined the hallways, and at every corner stood a buzzing water fountain." Mary dislikes Oregon and continues to look for other positions. After three years she receives an unexpected offer from a former colleague in the history department at Brandon, identified only as Louise. Louise, whose career and work on Benedict Arnold have been more high-profile than Mary's, wants to know if Mary is interested in applying for an opening at "the famous college in upstate New York" where she teaches. The offer surprises Mary, who remembers Louise as self-absorbed and indifferent to other people, but she sends off a resume. Louise calls to tell her she will be interviewed for the job.

Mary researches the area and feels comfortable when she arrives and is picked up at the airport by Louise. On the drive to the college, Louise demands certain responses from Mary— "how do I look?" and "Don't get serious on me." She abruptly tells Mary that she has a lover and complains that her husband and children have not been very understanding about it. Louise offhandedly mentions that Mary will have to give a class lecture as part of her interview. When Mary protests that she does not have anything prepared, Louise offers her a paper of her own on the Marshall Plan. She leaves Mary at the college visitor's center, saying she has to hurry off for a night with her lover.

After only a few hours, Mary is awakened by Louise, "snuffling loudly" and demanding to know if Mary thinks she is "womanly." She paces, cursing an unnamed "son of a bitch" who can be assumed to be her lover Jonathan, and then demanding "Let's suppose someone said I have no sense of humor. Would you agree or disagree?" Mary placates Louise with the compliments and praise she expects. Louise delivers a demeaning remark about Mary's own appearance before settling down to pass the rest of the night chain-smoking on the couch. She leaves at daybreak. Mary has had no further sleep.

Mary spends the morning touring the campus with a student guide named Roger. The campus is an exact duplicate of a college in England, and college-themed movies have been filmed there. Mary notes that the college's motto, "God helps those who help themselves" takes on an entirely new meaning considering how many of the school's "illustrious graduates" had "helped themselves to railroads, mines, armies, states; to empires of finance with outposts all over the world."

Roger is especially reverent when he shows Mary the power plant that runs the college. Mary gets the impression that the machine is the soul of the place. While they are contemplating it, Roger brags that the college has become much more progressive, even letting "girls come here now, and some of the teachers are women." In fact, a new policy requires that at least one woman be interviewed for each opening.

The interview begins badly and gets progressively worse. Arriving twenty minutes after the scheduled time, Louise and her male colleagues do not even pretend to take Mary seriously. They chat inanely about the weather and the other differences between Oregon and upstate New York and then pronounce that they are out of time. When Dr. Howells, the department chair, asks if there is anything she wants to tell them, Mary laughs and says "I think you should give me the job." When nobody else laughs, Mary understands that "they were not really considering her for the position." She confronts Louise about bringing her there on false pretenses, but Louise's characteristically self-centered response is that she thought a visit from Mary might cheer her up. "I deserve some love and friendship but I don't get any."

Mary still has to go through the charade of delivering her lecture. In front of a room full of students and faculty, Mary for once in her professional life does not take the safe path. Rather than reading Louise's article, Mary tells the gruesome story of the capture and torture of French Jesuits by the Iroquois, one of the tribes native to the region. When Dr. Howells tries to stop her, she begins to preach in the guise of recounting one of the priest's last words: "Mend your lives . . . . You have deceived yourselves in the pride of your hearts. . . . Turn from power to love. Be kind. Do justice. Walk humbly." Mary turns off her hearing aid so that she can continue to talk without the distractions of those trying to silence her.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

In the Garden of the North American Martyrs begins by introducing its protagonist, Mary, a professor of History at Brandon College. Mary is a fearful woman who keeps her opinions to herself. At the beginning of her teaching career, she witnessed a brilliant professor lose his job after presenting an idea to the trustees of the college that they found offensive. Since this day Mary has been overly cautious. In the classroom, she carefully prepares lesson plans before she gives lectures. Instead of offering her point of view, she used the arguments and opinions of approved authors. Mary views herself as being on trial as a teacher and as a woman. More than anything, she is afraid of saying something that would be deemed scandalous. Years of keeping quiet make her fear silence. Mary feels she can no longer find the words to express her own opinions and imagines that trying to give her opinion would create silence in the room, because she would stumble over what to say.

At Brandon College Mary keeps to herself. The school's faculty has become broken into cliques. Even though she knows that many of the teachers dislike one another, she pretends not to know this information. To ensure that others do not think she is boring, she allows herself mild, harmless eccentricities. For instance, she memorizes the comedy routines she hears on records and the jokes she reads in books. Although others generally groan in response when they hear her recite these jokes, it does not stop her. Eventually, this response becomes the point of telling the jokes. Over time, Mary has created a version of herself that she presents at the College, a safe and predictable persona. Mary is a representation of the college itself, an institution, like a school mascot. Once in awhile, she questions whether she is being too careful, but nevertheless, she continues in the same way.

While Mary ages, her hearing begins to weaken, and she is forced to wear a hearing aid. She credits this deafness to the fact that she is always trying to catch what everyone is saying, not wanting to offend anyone. During the second half of Mary's fifteenth year at Brandon College, a meeting is called for faculty and students, in which it is announced that the school is bankrupt and will close. Mary discovers that the reason for the bankruptcy is that the school's financial manager made bad investments. Mary is shocked that someone would gamble with the school's money.

Mary applies for positions at a number of colleges but gets only one offer at a new, experimental college in Oregon. The institution is a one building college with a cheap student newspaper, no library books, and with lockers lining the hallway. Mary does admire the beauty of its countryside, but it rains all the time, and dampness causes Mary's hearing aid to short. The Oregon College fills her with dread in its own way. She fears talking to people when it rains, because her hearing aid might stop working. The constant downpours cause Mary's basement to flood and toadstools grow behind her refrigerator. Even worse, the constant rain causes Mary's health to decline, making her

feel as though she is rusting out like an old car. She accepts that everyone will die but imagines that she is dying more quickly than most.

During her three years in Oregon Mary looks for another job but cannot find one until Louise, a co-worker from Brandon College, calls her. Louise has had success with a book she wrote on Louis III and works at a famous college in upstate New York. She tells Mary that one of the professors of History is retiring and asks Mary if she is interested in the position. Mary sends her resume and copies of her two books to the New York school. Louise calls back and tells her that an interview has been scheduled. Mary reads about the college's location and feels a familiarity. On the plane trip there, she feels like she is going home. Louise picks Mary up at the airport and drives her to the college. During the car ride, Mary explains the feeling of déjà vu that she gets from the area. Louise says that déjà vu is not real; it is just a chemical imbalance.

Louise confides in Mary, telling her that things are not working out with her husband and that she has a new lover. Her children are not taking the news well. They refuse to meet her lover, Jonathan. Much to Mary's surprise, Louise tells her that she must give a class tomorrow. Louise meant to tell her earlier but forgot. Mary is terrified. She doesn't have any material planned. Louise tells her to read from an unpublished article that she has written. Mary feels uncomfortable about parroting someone else's words, even though, in a way, she has always done this. Still, Mary agrees to read the article. She feels that this is a better option than freezing up during her lecture and experiencing the silence that she dreads.

The two women pull into the visitor's area. Mary will be staying in one of the visitor's cabins. Louise helps Mary bring in her belongings and offers an apology for not inviting her to her own home, because she will be staying at Jonathan's that night. A few hours after Mary goes to bed she is awakened by Louise. Louise is upset and angry. It seems that her lover has dumped her, causing insecurities to creep to the surface. She asks Mary to give her insight into how others see her. Mary offers kind, reassuring words in return. Louise asks to sleep on the couch, but neither of the women goes to sleep. When morning comes, Louise tells Mary she will send a student to show her around the campus.

Roger, an Earth Science major, arrives to show Mary around the school. Roger explains that the college is the exact replica of a college in England. During his tour he takes Mary to the Founder's building and recites the names of prestigious alumni. Mary is surprised by how seriously they connected the school's name with their graduate's accomplishments. At the college chapel, he shows her a plaque dedicated to former students who have died in wars. He continues his tour, showing Mary the gymnasium, three hockey rinks, and the library. Lastly, he shows her the power plant, containing an enormous machine that was designed by one of the school's professors. Roger comments that people view the school as old fashion. However, he disagrees, defending his point by commenting on the new presence of female students and teachers. He tells Mary that a new statute calls for the presence of at least one female applicant when the board is interviewing for new professors.

After the tour, Mary arrives at her interview promptly, but the room is empty. She notices her books sitting on the table. They are unopened. The binding has not even been cracked. Twenty minutes later, Louise arrives with the rest of the committee. Louise is the only woman among them. Dr. Howell, the department chairman, conducts the interview. He asks Mary about her time at Brandon College and her current job in Oregon. Louise points out that they are running out of time. Howell asks Mary if there is anything she would like to add before they conclude. Mary jokingly says that she thinks they should give her the job. The room is silent and everyone turns away from her. When this happens, Mary realizes they are not really considering her for the job. She had only been interviewed to fulfil the rule that Roger had mentioned to her.

After the interview, Mary asks Louise if she already knows who is being hired and Louise tells her that she does know. Mary asked why Louise brought her to the college. Louise admits that she was down and hoped that a visit from Mary would cheer her up. She also thought Mary might enjoy the trip. Mary tells Louise that she does not want to give the lecture, because it's pointless. Louise cautions her that it is a necessary part of the interview process and must be done. Predictable to Mary's need to meet everyone's expectations, she agrees to give the lecture.

In the lecture room the professors who interviewed Mary sit in the front row, and the rest of the room is filled with students. Louise walks up to the podium and introduces Mary. Mary decides to "wing it" during her lecture. Even though she is a little frightened, she walks to the podium, unsure of what she is going to say. She beings her speech by addressing that the room they are in used to be a Long House for the First Nations of the Iroquois. Two of the professors look at each other. They were told she would be covering a different topic, one based on Louise's article. Mary continues her lecture by describing the Iroquois in terms of their battle style. She says the fact that they had no pity was how they became so powerful. The professors whisper to each other, but Mary ignores this and explains the Iroquois' raids, describing their violence in detail. Howell jumps to his feet and yells, "That's enough!" Mary hesitates for a moment, but then she hears someone whistle in the hall outside, hearing notes that sound like birds. She proceeds with her lecture. Louise waves her arms and shouts, "Mary!" Mary ignores this. She has more to say. She turns off her hearing aid so she will not be interrupted again and finishes her lecture.

Analysis

In the Garden of the North American Martyrs is part of Tobias Wolff's collection of short stories in a book under the same title. It is a story about a woman's self-imposed restrictions and her personal battle to find her own voice. Mary is a History professor who uses the writing of others to mirror her own opinions. Too afraid of what others may think of her, she has shut herself down and trained herself to restrain her own thoughts as a precaution. After years of doing this, Mary is faced with a greater problem. She is so out of practice with giving her opinion, she fears she would not know how to express her thoughts. From this crux comes a dread of silence that might come if she were to draw a blank while speaking. Mary is greatly cautious of what others might think of her.

When she begins to lose her hearing she feels the cause of this is the fact that she is always trying to catch what everyone is saying, because she does not want to offend anyone.

Mary's carefully prepared lectures are a symbol of her fear. Her fears of silence are a symbol of her trepidation for her own voice. Her apprehension about the repercussions of expressing her own opinion has caused her to stop trusting her own voice. Mary's concern with what others think of her is further represented by her fear that people will think she is boring. To remedy this, she memorizes the jokes she hears on records and reads in books. Symbolically, this mirrors the way she quotes other authors in her lectures. Mary's own questioning of this begins when Louise offers material she has previously written for Mary to use in the lecture segment of her interview at a New York college. Mary feels uncomfortable 'parroting' someone else's words, but in a way, this is what she has been doing all along. This point of recognition in Mary foreshadows her later breakthrough.

The different colleges in the story serve as different symbols. When Brandon College announces that it is closing its door due to bankruptcy, Mary cannot believe that someone gambled away the school's money. This is a symbol of Mary's naivety. The college in Oregon is representative of community colleges. The title of 'new, experimental college' cloaks the fact that Mary is downgrading to a lesser school. During her stay in Oregon, the rain causes Mary's hearing aid to short. Symbolically, this lesser school is defeating her in the same way that her need to please others deafened her at Brandon College.

Louise's character is juxtaposed with Mary's. Louise is someone that Mary sees as more successful than herself and more confident. Upon their reunion, Mary comments that Louise always knows how to carry herself. In the car ride from the airport to the New York College Louise tells Mary about her lover. Louise says that the new relationship gives her more energy, greater health, and better concentration. Mary secretly thinks that Louise looks gaunt and overly thin. Foreshadowing lies within these two opposing impressions of Louise. Louise is not letting on that things are not as great as she says they are. The same day Louise expresses her happiness with her lover, her lover dumps her. Later in the story, Louise admits that she invited Mary to the college because she has been depressed and was hoping the visit would cheer her up.

When Mary arrives in upstate New York she feels a sense of familiarity, but in reality, it appears that her déjà vu is really wishful thinking. She is experiencing her repressed desire to be somewhere else. At the same time, perhaps this is a symbol of her destiny that is about to reveal itself. It is in this place that Mary has her breakthrough. In the introduction of the story, Mary is described as feeling like she is on trial, both as a teacher and a woman. The questioning session at the New York college is like a trial and is likely used to symbolize this feeling. The early use of the idea of a trial at the beginning of the story foreshadows the trial that Mary must go through before she finds her voice.

When Roger takes Mary on a tour of the New York campus, he tries to defend the impression others have of the school being old fashion by pointing out a statute that orders one female to be interviewed for each available teaching position. This is not true progress. In the interview, it is clear that the department has no intention of hiring Mary. They are just going through the motions to fulfil the statute. This is foreshadowed early on when Louise calls Mary about the interview. Louise tells Mary not to get her hopes up. After Mary realizes the school has no intention of hiring her, she doesn't want to give her lecture. With some prompting from Louise, Mary does give a lecture after all. For the first time Mary decides to take a chance and make up her lecture as she goes. This is Mary's breakthrough. She finally finds her own voice and even discovers defiance when she continues her speech after the head of the department asks her to stop. She is encouraged to go on when she hears whistling outside the room that sounds like birds to her. Birds are a symbol of freedom; in this case, the brink of liberation is represented by the image of a bird's flight.

It seems that Mary's speech about the Iroquois is really a commentary on the college. When she describes the Iroquois' lack of pity as the cause for their strength, it is evident that she is talking about the school. The deceptive notion that brought her to the school is a form of cruelty to Mary. Mary realizes that she cannot win. With this realization, she finally takes a chance by expressing her own opinions. It is Mary's bleak sense of hopelessness that finally liberates her.

Characters

Dr. Howells

Dr. Howells is the chairman of the department of history at the prestigious college where Louise works and where Mary is led to believe she is a job candidate. He is arrogant, detached, and pretentious. The air of entitlement and superiority with which he presents himself is undermined, however, by his appearance. Mary is able to remember his name in part because he is so strikingly ugly, with a "porous blue nose and terrible teeth."

Jonathan

Louise describes Jonathan as her lover. He never appears in the story. Because Louise barges in on Mary late on a night she said she would be spending with Jonathan, demanding to know if Mary thinks she is "womanly" or has a sense of humor, readers can guess that he has expressed dissatisfaction with her in regard to those qualities.

Louise

Louise, a former colleague of Mary's at Brandon College, is now a professor of history at an unnamed "prestigious college in upstate New York." At first glance she is everything Mary is not: married and outgoing, but self-centered and pretentious. It becomes evident that she is desperately insecure and has no scruples about using other people to fulfill her own needs: she talks incessantly about herself, complains about her husband and children's negative reactions to her having taken a lover, and frankly admits, when confronted, that she knew Mary did not have a chance at the job, but arranged for her interview because she remembered Mary as "funny," saying "I've been unhappy and I thought you might cheer me up."

Mary

Mary, whose last name is not revealed, is the protagonist of the story. She has based her career as an academic on saying, writing, and teaching nothing with which anyone could reasonably disagree. As a result she practically loses the capacity for original thought, and has managed to survive fifteen years on the faculty of Brandon College, teaching and writing the blandest of ideas. When she eventually loses her job due to the closing of the college, she is forced to trade her dull credentials on a fiercely competitive job market. An interview at a prestigious college finally gives her the opportunity to take stock of her life and career. At the conclusion of the story she recovers the voice she had lost in a lifetime of listening too closely to the words of others.

Roger

Roger is the college student whose job it is to show Mary around the campus before her interview and lecture. He is cheerful and shallow as he uncritically points out the emblems of the college's elitism and privilege.

Ted

Ted is Louise's husband and the father of her children. Though he never appears in the story, he is a sympathetic character because readers understand that his intolerance of Louise's behavior is completely reasonable and understandable.

Themes

Moral Corruption

The inclusion of the word *martyr* in the title invites readers to consider the themes of moral corruption and sin. Martyrs are those who are willing to die for their beliefs, usually at the hands of unbelievers or sinners. Because their deaths live on in legend and story, the martyrs serve as examples to others of the ultimate triumph of their purity over corruption, good over evil.

Though no one actually dies in Wolff's short story, the author does ask readers to compare the martyrdom of Mary by Louise and the members of her department to the Jesuit missionaries at the hands of the Iroquois. Mary's experience during her campus visit and interview reveals the total moral corruption of the members of the history department, if not of the entire college, and the culture to which it belongs. They have come to believe that their social and intellectual superiority grants them permission to take advantage of and manipulate other people in order to serve their own ends. Mary herself is prepared to behave in the same morally corrupt fashion when she agrees to present Louise's paper as her own. In the end, though, Mary chooses the martyr's path, sacrificing her personal success and reputation in order to reveal the corruption of her tormentors.

Betrayal

The theme of betrayal dominates the narrative of "In the Garden of the North American Martyrs." Mary's betrayal by Louise and the rest of her department at the upstate New York college is foreshadowed by Mary's own lifetime of betraying herself. Readers learn early in th story that Mary has betrayed her own inner compass by making a habit of suppressing her true feelngs and practising dull, safe scholarship. The costs of this betrayal are physical as well as intellectual. She loses her ability to speak freely and spontaneously, wryly attributes a premature hearing loss to her tendency to hang on the words of others, and contracts a mysterious illness in her lungs.

Louise betrays Mary by luring her to interview for a job she has no chance of getting. Unlike Mary, though, Louise is arrogantly unaware that there are or will be any consequences for her actions. She does not see, for example, as readers do, that her research into famous traitor Benedict Arnold has taught her history lessons of a more practical variety. She betrays her husband and children by taking a lover and then faults them for being unsupportive of her. Although the story ends before we know what the future holds for Louise, her nervousness, heavy smoking, and evidently unsatisfactory experience with her lover give some indication that her world is fraying around the edges.

In all these instances betrayal is a source of pain and confusion, but "In the Garden of the North American Martyrs" challenges readers to consider another definition of the word. In some instances, *betray* can mean to give away, disclose, or unconsciously reveal. So when Roger brags about the college's new recruiting policy for female faculty, he betrays the real reason that Mary has been brought to campus. Dr. Howells and the other committee members betray their true intentions by spending only a few minutes with Mary, chatting inanely about the weather in different parts of the country, clearly not conducting a serious interview for the open position.

Style

Point of View and Narration

"In the Garden of the North American Martyrs" is presented to readers in third-person omniscient narration. The narrator describes Mary's past in order to clarify her present situation. In the first part of the story, the narrator appears to regard Mary indifferently or even negatively. As the narrative progresses, however, Mary is presented more sympathetically and— importantly— Louise and some other characters are shown in a very bad light. Wolff subtly shifts the point of view. He explained in an interview with Jay Woodruff in 1991 that he always intended to let Mary take over the narration, that his "aim was to hand the story over to her." He goes on to say that this shift in point of view was necessary because her voice needs to dominate the narrative by the time she gets to her dramatic concluding speech.

Tone

"In the Garden of the North American Martyrs" contains some significant tone variations that help contribute to the meaning of the story and parallel the shifts in point of view. Tone is the dominant attitude that the reader hears in the story. It can be ironic, genial, or objective, for example. The beginning of the story is characterized by the neutral and objective tone of the narrator, but by the end the tone is prophetic, resembling the language of the Old Testament. The success of the story hinges on this dramatic shift in tone, so that Mary's voice shatters the aura of smug and false objectivity that dominates both the auditorium and the story. Wolff describes Mary's speech in the interview with Jay Woodruff as language that "bursts the bounds of traditional realistic fiction."

Imagery

Careful readers will notice that "In the Garden of the North American Martyrs" begins and ends with images of birds. Mary likens her diminishing capacity for original thought to the sight of "birds flying away." In the final scene, when she delivers her prophecy to her stunned audience, one of the last things Mary hears before she turns off her hearing aid is "someone whistling in the hallway outside, trilling the notes like a bird, like many birds." According to Wolff's explanation in his interview with Jay Woodruff, "Language, especially the language which she speaks at the end, her own language, is freedom, is flight." In an earlier interview with Bonnie Lyons and Bill Oliver, Wolff explains that the sound of the bird in the hallway is "a sign of her own voice coming back to her. An image of the words she has lost, like birds flying away."

Historical Context

The Iroquois and the Jesuits

The Iroquois are the original inhabitants of the land on which the prestigious college now sits. The League of the Iroquois became a powerful force in colonial America because of the military prowess of its member nations, the Mohawk, Cayuga, Oneida, Seneca, and Onandaga. Although they once presided over most of what is now upstate New York, the remaining 11,000 Iroquois now own less than 80,000 acres.

The Iroquois are also remembered for their savage treatment of Jean de Brebeuf and Gabriel Lalemant. The two French Jesuit missionaries were captured near their mission in March of 1649 and tortured before being executed. They are known as the North American Martyrs and were canonized, or declared saints, in the Catholic church in 1930.

Academia

During the 1970s the job market for college and university professors began a steep decline. There were many more highly educated candidates than there were positions available. Following a trend that continues today, hiring departments can make whatever demands they wish on job candidates and have occasionally regarded applicants with disdain and condescension. Furthermore, the increased competition for jobs among recent Ph.D.s has inflated the importance of scholarly production, of books and articles, in other words. For example, Mary has had to produce a second book in order to be considered for other positions, but nobody cares, not even Mary, that it is not very good. During this period, institutions of higher education were also experiencing the effects of the women's movement. Elite colleges saw the economic, if not the ethical, advantages of admitting female students and administrators under pressure to hire female faculty launched initiatives to at least create the appearance of fair hiring practices.

Critical Overview

When the collection of which "In the Garden of the North American Martyrs" is the title story was published in 1981, it received almost universal critical praise. The twelve pieces in this collection included the first story Wolff ever published, "Smokers," which had first appeared in *Atlantic Monthly.* In 1986 Bantam Books reissued six of the twelve stories in a single volume together with Wolff's award-winning novella set on a Georgia Army base during the Vietnam War, *The Barracks Thief.*

Though Wolff published a second volume of short stories, *Back in the World* in 1985, his first volume remains a favorite with critics. Offering backhanded praise for *In the Garden of the North American Martyrs* while criticizing Wolff's newest book, Russell Banks wrote in the *New York Times Book Review* that "this book is a considerable falling off for Mr. Wolff." Writing in *The Nation,* reviewer Brain Kaplan has high praise for Wolff's first collection, singling out the title story as an exceptional example of Wolff's ability to "use words to test lives against accidental and self-selected conditions."

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Piedmont-Marton holds a Ph.D. in English and teaches American literature and administers "In the Garden of the North American Martyrs" belongs to the category, or genre, of literature known as modern realism. Tobias Wolff has often expressed his admiration for the stories of John Cheever and is a particular fan of James Joyce's collection of stories *Dubliners.* Despite his canny eye for detail and his gift for dialog, however, Wolff seems to work against the constraints of realism. "In the Garden of the North American Martyrs" in particular dramatizes the tension between the realistic and symbolic ways of looking at the world. The story, in Wolff's own words, "bursts the bounds of traditional realistic fiction." Reviewer Brian Kaplan writes in the *Nation* that Wolff "scrutinizes the disorders of daily living to find significant order underneath the surface." "In the Garden of the North American Martyrs" suggests that this order, or meaning, may be found on both the symbolic and moral levels.

The symbolic strands that will be woven together at the story's conclusion are introduced at the beginning. The narrator likens Mary's failure to pursue original thought to birds shrinking away to "remote, nervous points, like birds flying away." Mary even takes on some physical characteristics of birds, even cocking her head to one side in an effort to "catch everything everyone said."

Another cluster of images whose symbolic significance unfolds as the story develops is that of the wilderness and that most immutable force of nature, the weather. During the three years she spends at the experimental college in Oregon, Mary feels as if she is being besieged by rain and its consequences. "There was water in Mary's basement. Her walls sweated, and she had found toadstools growing behind the refrigerator. She felt as though she were rusting out, like one of those old cars people thereabouts kept in their front yards, on pieces of wood. Mary knew that everyone was dying, but it seemed to her that she was dying faster than most." She develops a lung disorder and her hearing problem is exacerbated by the dampness, almost as though she were trapped underwater.

The climate and scenery in New York at first seem to invigorate Mary, but soon the landscape takes on more ominous features. Louise prattles on about her love life as she drives Mary to her guest cabin, oblivious to the persistent and vaguely menacing presence of the world outside her window. Mary, however, notices "the forest all around, deep black under a plum colored sky. There were few lights and these made the darkness seem even greater." Though it will not become clear until Mary invokes the spirits of the Iroquois and the martyred Jesuits at the conclusion of the story, the landscape represents the dark and violent history of the place from which, ironically, Louise and her fellow historians are completely disconnected. Mary, whose habit of listening closely serves her well in this instance, is almost able to hear the voices of those who have gone before.

The next day when Mary visits the college she sees that Louise is not alone in her arrogant dismissal of the history of the place. The college, as the student guide Roger

explains, is "an exact copy of a college in England, right down to the gargoyles and stained glass windows." The symbolic heart of the place, as it turns out, is not the library or the chapel, but the power plant, which represents the power that those with wealth and privilege use to grind up those without it. The machine puts its mark on the landscape and appropriates the earth's resources in order to keep itself running. Wolff is suggesting in this image that Louise and her colleagues have become so obsessed with feeding the machine and so deafened by its noise that they cannot recognize *history*— even their own— when they are surrounded by it. Ironically, it is the machine that finally reveals the truth to Mary. While watching it hum, Mary comes to understand that "she had been brought there to satisfy a rule," that the overwhelming mechanisms of power have manipulated her. But the machine also offers her a choice. She can be a smoothly compliant cog, or she can be a stray bolt that brings the whole thing to a grinding halt. Though the machine is a morally neutral object, its symbolic presence offers Mary a moral choice.

Knowing that she has been betrayed by Louise and used by the "machinery" of the prestigious college, Mary must decide whether she should stick to the safe course she has followed all her career, or strike out into the wilderness of the unknown. To do only what is expected— blandly read Louise's lecture on the Marshall Plan— is to give in. When she comes to the podium Mary is "unsure of what she would say; only that she would rather die than read Louise's article." She decides to "wing it," and all the words that had long ago flown away into "remote, nervous points" return to her, giving her the power not just of speech but of prophecy. In the end, she address the group directly, speaking in the tradition of the stern New England preacher, imploring them to mend their ways and "turn from power to love."

In invoking the story of Brebeuf and Lalement's torture and capture by the Iroquois, Mary proves herself the superior historian and defeats the machine reasoning of Louise, Dr. Howells and the rest of the faculty. Her "pronouncements on justice and love disorder the machinery of expectation," as critic Brina Caplan puts it. Her sense of history is so profound that when she looks around the lecture hall it has been almost transformed to the mission where the French priests were held in 1649: "The sun poured through the stained glass onto the people around her, painting their faces. Thick streams of smoke from the young professor's pipe drifted through a circle of red light at Mary's feet, turning crimson and twisting like flames." Like the North American martyrs, Mary regards her "captors," or audience, as savages with painted faces. Also like Brebeuf and Lalement, Mary knows that there is nothing she can do to change their minds or alter the inevitable course of action. Her only choice is to make her final moments morally instructive.

While readers appreciate the dramatic and symbolic effect of the comparison between Mary's ill treatment and that of the North Americans martyred by the Iroquois, and may recognize that Mary's performance is an act of moral courage, the story poses an even larger moral question that lingers long after reading. Readers must ask themselves whether, by any standards of right and wrong, Mary's ordeal is even remotely comparable to the hideous torture and execution of Brebeuf and Lalement. While Mary's speech can be understood as ironic, or even farcical, as Brina Caplan suggests, some

readers may still be left with the troubling sense that the tortures and death that Mary so vividly describes have been trivialized in order to serve Mary's (nonlife-threatening) ends, making her just as morally corrupt as Louise and her colleagues.

Source: Elisabeth Piedmont-Marton, for *Short Stories for Students,* Gale, 1998.

Critical Essay #2

Rouster has a Ph.D. in rhetoric and composition and has published in a number of composition journals. In the following essay he discusses symbolism in "In the Garden of the North American Martyrs."

Tobias Wolff's "In the Garden of the North American Martyrs" was published in his book of short stories, *In the Garden of the North American Martyrs: A Collection of Short Stories* in 1981. As the title indicates, the story deals with images of martyrdom on this continent. Of the literary devices used in this short story, the dominant one is that of symbolism, which refers to the use of people, objects, creatures, places, and events to represent more than just themselves. Symbolism is one of the most widely used and effective literary devices of all, since many authors wish to give their work greater relevance than just the story that is being told. Therefore, Mary in this story symbolizes more than just this one person, Mary, and the university in the East is meant to represent more than that one university. In "In the Garden of the North American Martyrs," nearly all of the characters, events, and places have symbolic significance, and the meaning of the story is to be found therein.

Of the characters presented, the most significant is Mary, no last name given, and we are told the story of her academic career. Mary appears to symbolize those members of the academy, or university system, who lose their identity to the power of that system. Mary, in itself, is a very common name, thus the main character could represent almost anyone, and, indeed, she works very hard to not be someone who stands out from the academic crowd in any important way.

Mary particularly strives to remain anonymous after witnessing the dismissal of an intelligent and insightful colleague who had offended powerful members of their college with his ideas. She writes her history lectures out in total and uses not her own ideas, but only those of others who have been judged by the academy to be non controversial. In doing this she begins to lose her own ideas: "her own thoughts she kept to herself, and the words for them grew faint as time went on; without quite disappearing they shrank to remote nervous points, like birds flying away." To avoid being thought too boring, Mary cultivates an image of eccentricity by committing to memory comedy routines and jokes.

Mostly, Mary listens to others. Her image of herself as a listener comes to her from a reflection that she spots in a window as she is listening to a senior member of her department. "She was leaning toward him and had her head turned so that her right ear was right in front of his moving mouth." This image symbolizes her loss of self to the power of the academy, an academy to which she only listens and does not speak. Eventually, Mary develops hearing problems from, she guesses, listening too much to others.

Fifteen years after Mary's arrival at Brandon University, it closes its doors. She eventually finds work at an experimental college in Oregon where she is most unhappy

in the persistent rain. Mary, however, appears to be rescued from the rust and rain of Oregon when a former colleague, Louise, contacts her to tell her of a job opening at her college in upstate New York, for which Mary applies and gets an interview. She is determined to get this job, mainly by not offending anyone. On the plane trip she begins to feel that she is going home, a feeling which grows stronger during the flight eastward. She describes this feeling to Louise as "deja vu."

What she is going home to is her own martyrdom at the hands of the machine itself. In this story, the machine symbolizes the almighty, unappeasable, unfeeling force of the university system which feeds on people such as Mary. The student showing her around the campus takes her to view the power plant: "They were standing on an iron catwalk above the biggest machine Mary had ever beheld.... Where before he had been gabby Roger now became reverent. It was clear that for him this machine was the soul of the college, that the purpose of the college was to provide outlets for the machine."

The college served the machine and this college is meant to symbolize all colleges: "Roger, the student assigned to show Mary around, explained that it was an exact copy of a college in England, right down to the gargoyles and stained-glass windows. It looked so much like a college that moviemakers sometimes used it as a set." The motto of the college, written above the door of the Founder's Building read "God helps those who help themselves" and listed among the most prominent graduates of the college were men who took a great deal from society in terms of riches, but gave very little in return.

Louise is an interesting example of an individual who takes without giving at this college. She likely represents one of the feeding tentacles of the college machine. Louise is totally self-absorbed, and although she is wreaking havoc on the lives of those around her, she is concerned only with herself. She invites Mary to be sacrificed because Mary cheers her up. She takes a lover in spite of the pain it causes her husband and family because of the positive influence she thinks it has on her: "My concentration has improved, my energy level is up, and I've lost ten pounds. I'm also getting some color in my cheeks." She says about her family's negative reaction: "there is no reasoning with any of them. In fact, they refuse to discuss the matter at all, which is very ironical because over the years I have tried to instill in them a willingness to see things from the other person's point of view." Indeed, Louise is as incapable of feeling for others as the marauding Iroquois had been, and the writer makes it clear that Louise is a modern-day Iroquois: Louise "reminded Mary of a description in the book she'd been reading of how Iroquois warriors gave themselves visions by fasting" because "she had seemed gaunt and pale and intense" at the airport.

It becomes clear throughout the latter half of the story that Mary is to become a North American martyr in this college garden, the sacrificial offering. Fire and smoke play prominently in the story's imagery. Louise, a chain smoker, asks Mary to light her a cigarette soon after Mary arrives. Smoke drifts from two of the cabins in the visitor's quarters and, as soon as Mary and Louise step through the door of Mary's cabin, Louise states "Look . . . . they've laid a fire for you. All you have to do is light it." One of the men interviewing Mary smokes a pipe. As Mary beings to give the lecture part of the

interview, "thick streams of smoke from the young professor's pipe drifted through a circle of red light at Mary's feet, turning crimson and twisting like flames." Mary is being symbolically burned at the stake, by an audience of savages who are painted by the sunlight streaming through the windows.

It is in Mary's lecture that we learn about the North American martyrs and their garden, two Jesuit priests who were tortured and killed by the Iroquois on the site of the college. Originally, Mary is going to read one of Louise's papers, thereby giving her own voice and identity up completely, but when she learns that she has no chance at the position, she decides to do something she never before would have dared— to "wing it" — and quit playing it safe. The place she is giving the speech is in the Long House of the Five Nations of the Iroquois, a pitiless tribe of torturers and murderers who became powerful through their lack of mercy, much as the members and graduates of this college had done to others. Of the two Jesuit martyrs, one was burned to death and the other tortured and eaten alive as he preached to them. The Iroquois ate strips of his skin and cut off his lips and then drank his blood, all while he was still alive. In much the same way the academy has eaten Mary alive: she has almost nothing left of herself, and cannot even speak her own ideas.

Mary continues to speak through the silence of those listening once she runs out of facts about the Iroquois, and rebuffs the professors much as she imagined the dying Jesuit had rebuffed the Iroquois as they were killing him:

Mend your lives, she said. You have deceived yourselves in the pride of your hearts, and the strength of your arms. Though you soar aloft like the eagle, though your nest is set among the stars, thence I will bring you down, says the Lord. Turn from power to love. Be kind. Do justice. Walk humbly.

Mary is not done talking after this, winging it as she goes. She shuts off her hearing aid so that no one can interrupt her and continues talking. At the moment of her martyrdom, Mary has found her own voice.

Source: William Rouster, for *Short Stories for Students,* Gale, 1998.

Critical Essay #3

In the following excerpt from a longer interview, Wolff describes his writing process and how the story "In the Garden of the North American Martyrs" evolved. [*Jay Woodruff*] *How did this story get started? What was its genesis?*

[Tobias Wolff] Well, there are a few things that I can trace it to. One is a job interview I had several years ago which was not, it turned out, a serious interview. That is, I had been brought across the country in order to fulfill a requirement of the college that so many people be interviewed for each position. And when I found this out it really burned me up. I tried writing the story a couple of times from a personal point of view, my own point of view. This never really took. It sounded whiny, "poor me." After all, I live a rarified life, one that's lucky compared to almost everybody else's. This didn't seem to be the stuff of tragedy.

I'd had the experience of watching my mother struggle and have a harder time of it than she would have had if she were a man. It occurred to me that this was the kind of experience women have a lot more often than men. And once I was able to make that leap, get out of my own case and see the whole question of injustice in a larger way, then this story began to take. I began to feel its possibilities. I went back to it and worked on it for several months. And this is what I came up with. I was ransacking my files here, hoping to find some remnants of that original draft. But I couldn't find it, so I must have thrown it away. Anyway, I put it through many different versions. That's the genesis of the story.

How long did you struggle with those first attempts before you put the story aside?

I'm a very slow writer. If people knew how hard it was for me they'd think I was crazy to be a writer. I suppose a couple of months, anyway. It usually takes me that long to give up. I'll usually even finish a bad story and then not send it off rather than not finish it, because I'm terrified of developing the habit of giving up on stories as I write them. I've had trouble with even my best stories along the way, and I've been tempted to quit on them. So I know from experience that if I see it through I might end up with a good story. Then again I might not. But it's the only chance I've got to finish the thing. I did finish a story — it just wasn't a story that I liked, that's all. But that took me a couple, three months to write. And then I went back and worked another three months on the version you're reading now.

Once you'd made that leap and knew this was going to be in the third person with a female point-of-view character, how much at that point did you know about the story?

Well, by no means everything. I was surprised, as I often am in writing a story, by many of the things that came up. For example, the appearance of the Jesuit martyrs in the story was a late thought in the process. You ask, what's the genesis of a story? Almost everything a writer is doing at a given time can be part of the genesis of a story. I was reading Parkman's wonderful book, *The Jesuits in North America,* and I was riveted by

his description of the martyrdom of Brebeuf and Lalement. I dreamt about it a couple of nights. It exerted itself on the story I was writing in a strange way, because it helped me to see that much of what the story was about had to do with power. It illuminated that for me. There are so many forces at play in the writing of a story. Take "The Dead," Joyce's story. Why did he write that story in the first place? Because somebody scolded him about *Dubliners,* told him he'd left out something essential to the people of Dublin, their great sense of hospitality. And he agreed. He went back and he wrote, I think, the greatest thing he ever wrote. Somebody said something that illuminated his own work for him.

When I made the peculiar juxtaposition that allowed the Jesuits to spill into the story, I knew that there was something right and even necessary about it. I wrote this story thirteen or fourteen years ago now, and it's hard to recover all the stages of its evolution because I don't keep rough drafts.

Why don't you keep drafts?

They embarrass me, to tell you the truth. Many writers seem to have a tremendous confidence in their futures and a certain assumption that generations to come are going to be interested in what they've written at every stage. I guess I really don't have that feeling. I only want people to see my work at its very best. I don't even let my wife look at things I'm writing until I'm done with them, or at least until I've brought them as far as I can. I come very slowly to the ends of my stories, and the work I do to get there is rough. It's often very false. It's awkward. It's not interesting to me. It might be interesting, I suppose, to somebody who wanted to see just how dramatic a difference revision can make to a hopeless writer, to give everyone else hope. But I think part of my reluctance is that people would think I was crazy, really, to be a writer, if they could see my early drafts and see how hard it is for me to get from one place to another.

Do you get terribly discouraged?

Less and less so because I know now that it will finally work out. It used to be much harder for me because it seems such a strange way to write. And I knew that other people weren't writing that way. I thought there must be something wrong with me. But now I've learned that this is the way I write. And I can't imagine doing anything else. I love finishing a good story. Or finishing what I think is a good book. No feeling can compare. And then it's all been worth it. But it's hard as it goes, sometimes. Once I get a first draft down, once I really know where I'm going and what the story is about, and what I'm trying to do, then a kind of playfulness enters in to my writing that I absolutely live for. It's getting that first draft out that's very, very hard for me.

Do you ever get a draft out and get stuck with it? Like not know—

How to crack it?

Yeah.

Once in a while that happens to me. It does happen sometimes. And then I just throw the story away. I'll fool with it for a while and then throw it away. Once in a while I'll finish something that I like but don't really think is a serious story. That happened to me last year. I'm going to let the story be published, but I'm probably not going to include it in a collection. I think it's a funny story, and it's an odd story. I like it. But in the end it really doesn't really earn its keep for me, so I probably won't collect it.

So you have a good number of uncollected stories?

Oh yes, I have enough uncollected stories to make a couple of collections, probably. At least one. But I won't collect them. Now and then I'll go back and reread them, wondering if I was just being too hard on myself. And I'll say no, I wasn't.

It must be a difficult position to negotiate. I mean to be at a point in your writing life where you could, I would assume, get a story published just about anywhere you want.

I wish.

Am I completely naive about that? I would assume that most magazines would be very happy to publish your work.

I've been very lucky. But there's a lot of competition. Don't forget, Saul Bellow had won the Nobel Prize before he was ever able to place a story in the *New Yorker.* "The Silver Dish" was the first story he ever had in the *New Yorker.* Magazines are run by editors with tastes of their own. And that's the way it ought to be. What other way could it be? Some editors seem hospitable to my fiction; others don't. It isn't a question, though, of my being able to finish a story and send it out and be sure of selling it, because that really isn't the case. I've got a story right now I really like that I'm sending to quarterlies, because I know I can't place it with large-circulation magazines because of the things that go on in it. Andre Dubus has an essay on being a writer, in which he says that there's a moment when something happens in a story he's writing, something untoward or violent, and he thinks to himself, Well, there goes the *New Yorker.* And the moment he has that thought, a wonderful sense of release and freedom comes over him— that it is no longer even possible to think about responding to some editor's taste. He's beyond the pale already and it gives him freedom. And I think that's exactly where you start becoming interesting as a writer, when you give up trying to second-guess some editor somewhere into taking a story, which you can never count on anyway. It doesn't do to try to figure it out. You just write the best you can and hope that somebody out there is going to hear you. . . .

Getting back to "In the Garden of the North American Martyrs": that was not the first story that you wrote in this collection.

No, by no means. The first published story in there came out in '76. That is the story called "Smokers." Actually, there's another story in here that predates it, called "Face to Face." That was written in '73 or so, though it wasn't actually published until '78.

Do you always have to be sure you've found the right first sentence in order to find the rest of a story?

I simply need a place to begin. Later on, when I revise, I often think of a better first line, especially, of course, if I've decided to change point of view, as I did in this story. Once in a while I'm lucky enough to find the right first sentence in the very beginning. For example, the tone I struck in the first line of "The Poor Are Always with Us" was right and helped me find the rest of the story. I also liked the first sentence I wrote for "The Rich Brother." But that doesn't always happen. I try to be as open to chance as possible when I'm writing. If I have things too firmly in mind I lose a certain fluidity and ability to be surprised, which is very important to me. In this story I realized I needed to begin with the image of this woman making herself a completely accommodated creature.

What particular passages gave you special trouble? Do you recall any in the story?

Her speech, at the end. I didn't know how far to go with it. To some extent it bursts the bounds of traditional realistic fiction. The voice becomes prophetic. In fact, I think some of those passages are from the Psalms and the Prophets. Jeremiah is the source of a couple of lines. They're all jumbled together in my mind, but they came out, I think, coherently. But she's definitely speaking in a heightened voice there. It isn't a realistic story of the kind, say, in *Dubliners.* And the decision whether to allow that to happen in the story was a tough one to make because it then became a different kind of story— a parable, almost, rather than the kind of story I think of myself as writing.

That ending seems to work very well on a realistic level, though. I guess partly that might be because she's at a podium giving a lecture to an audience.

It lends itself to that, it does. I tried to hold it as close as I could to the possible. I didn't want to lose the story's authority by becoming just clever, or facile. . . .

Did you know much about Louise when you started this version of the story?

By the time I got this far along, in this draft, yes, of course I did. But I had to explore her. And the way I explore my characters is by writing them. I'm not very good at sitting down and thinking a whole story out before I write it. I don't seem to have that gift. I really have to sit down and write the story out, and write my way into the story, and just keep going at it again and again and again, sinking farther and farther into it just by spending more time with it. In that way I get to know the characters. The main character was very, very different in different drafts.

In what ways?

Well, in one draft I had her niece living with her, who'd had to leave home because she was pregnant. So there was an additional onus on Mary and a necessity to work. But that felt cluttered. It was another character to develop, another situation. Once I made the decision to allow the prophetic voice to enter the story, I thought it should have the cleanness of line that a parable has, that it shouldn't have those jagged edges and little

tributaries that I'm somehow quite willing and happy to have in a more realistic short story.

There seems to be such a fine line between those slightly tangential moments that add a real texture and verisimilitude, and more unrelated asides that can get you sidetracked. I'm thinking of the moment with the deer, when Mary and Louise are in the car. Aside from its immediate vividness, that moment has clear symbolic resonance. But it's not a moment that would have occurred to everybody to include. You then even emphasize the moment by having Mary say "Deer," which adds the slight irony and humor of the double entendre. Was that something that came to you in an earlier draft or something you added later?

That was something that came to me as I wrote my way into the story. I was imagining myself going along the road, and the sense of the old country asserted itself in the great wilderness that underlies the veneer we live in. That percolated up from a later sense of the story. So that wasn't in an earlier draft, no. I know what you mean. There's a passage in a John Cheever story that I really love, "The Sorrows of Gin," when a man is driving to get his runaway daughter at the railway station, and a flurry of leaves blows across his headlight. Why that breaks my heart, that image, it's hard to say, but it does. And it's not anything you can thematically explain. You could make an argument for it, but really I think it's irreducible. The image works on the nerves more than in the mind. It's a wonderful moment, Cheever at his very best, I think. . . .

There's another moment like that at the very end of your story, when Mary realizes she doesn't know what Brebeuf's last words were. And the silence of her audience is beginning to well up, a silence we already know she equates with water and drowning. At that moment she hears someone "whistling in the hallway outside, trilling the notes like a bird, like many birds." That line recalls the beautiful image at the very beginning, at the end of the second paragraph about her thoughts that she kept to herself: "and the words for them grew faint as time went on; without quite disappearing they shrank to remote nervous points, like birds flying away." That relates both to the wilderness theme and also her struggle to reemerge. Was that something that you were aware of right away?

It's an image. Language, especially the language which she speaks at the end, her own language, is freedom, is flight. It's why I use the image of birds there. It's song too.

Was that something that you wrote and then discovered, the connection with the image at the beginning? Or did you have to work that in later?

I'm not exactly sure which came first, whether the image at the end came and then I went back to the beginning and found a way of preparing for it, or the other way. I have a feeling, though, that the image at the beginning was antecedent to the one at the end. That was a right, natural way to describe someone's language deserting them. Then it was a natural thing to pick it up again at the end.

I wish you could have talked to me when I was writing the final drafts, because then you would know everything about the story. I'd been living with it for four or five months, thinking about it day and night. And I knew literally why every pause was there. I had a reason for it. Now I have to go back and second-guess myself, which is one of the problems with not keeping drafts.

At what point did the ending become clear to you? At what point did you start to get a sense where things might be leading, that there might be this sort of prophetic moment at the end? Did you have a strong sense of direction early on as you were writing it?

That ending became possible through my reading the Parkman book. I wonder if a writer is able to identify the motion in his mind that suddenly delivers up a possibility. I can't do that in retrospect. Because the mind surprises you. I'll bet that Cheever was surprised by the image of those leaves blowing across the headlights of the car when he was writing "The Sorrows of Gin." I'll bet that in the first draft anyway he was taken aback by it. Startled and frightened. I know that when I had the idea of doing what I did in this story, I was surprised by it. Obviously that couldn't have come to me if I had not been reading that book, and even had a couple of dreams about it. But beyond saying that, who knows? The mind works even when we're not aware of it working or thinking of it working. Certainly when I'm up here "writing," what I'm really doing much of the time is walking around. I walk a lot. I don't even know what I'm doing half the time up here. But something is happening. . . .

Those moments of surprise that occur when you're, writing: are those moments the things that really sustain you?

Yes, they are. That's what I live for. They sustain me even if I don't have very many of them. I live with the expectation that I will have more, the faith that I will have more. What I could predict I will do when I sit down to write is not what I want to end up with. I want to end up with what surprises me along the way, what jumps out at me from the potential of my work and not from what I've already realized about it before I've even started. If I'm simply writing down what I already know, it is of no earthly interest to me. And not only that, everyone else will know it anyway. Simply obvious stuff. I'm not subtle. When I sit down to write, I discover things that I have, for one reason or another, not admitted, not seen, not reflected on sufficiently. And those are the things that I live for in other people's fiction as well as my own.

At one point in this story, you offer this description of Louise: "Enthusiasm for other people's causes did not come easily to Louise, who had a way of sucking in her breath when familiar names were mentioned, as though she knew things that friendship kept her from disclosing." This strikes me as a good example of what we're talking about.

That's an important moment for me in the story because in writing that sentence I came to know something about that character. I didn't start off knowing that about Louise. I discovered it by writing that sentence. You know, language leads you to these discoveries. Until you start practicing the language of the story, start hearing the music of the story, you can't learn what the story has to tell you. That's why it's so important for

me to learn from the writing. Writing is not just a process of getting out what I've already thought, what's already in my head. Though it can be for very good writers exactly that. A writer of my acquaintance had a blackboard that ran all around his office, and he would keep detailed notes on the blackboard of everything that was going to happen in the novel he was writing. That worked for him; it wouldn't work for me. . . .

At what point did you know that Louise had to be a scholar, a Benedict Arnold scholar?

That was one of those little flashes. I remember writing it. I was getting on toward the end of the story. I had never mentioned what her scholarship was. And I thought that would be perfect. She would have written the book on Benedict Arnold.

I guess this is an example of what my English teachers would have called foreshadowing, but at its best: you sense it's a fact without realizing its full significance. I only noticed it when I was rereading.

Right. You don't know what's going to happen when you first come across it, so it has no meaning then. It's a neutral fact, except that it can color your sense of her a little bit, without your quite knowing it.

A similar moment occurs when Louise says to Mary on the phone "Now don't get your hopes too *high."*

Exactly. It all means something. You just don't know what it means at the time.

In retrospect, the reader can also appreciate the cumulative significance of Mary's physical problems, too— the hearing aid, the lung disorder, and maybe especially the disappearing eyebrows. Have you ever sensed that any of your academic colleagues have been offended by this story?

Oddly enough they seem to like it. None of them seem to think that this applies to them.

They just know *jerks. . . .*

One particular line in the story captures perfectly a kind of pompous fatuousness— during the interview, when Dr. Howells is ruminating on precipitation and says "But it's a dry *rain."*

Well, that's the kind of thing you only hear in interviews, isn't it?

How come the Marshall Plan?

That was a misstep, I think, because an Arnold Scholar wouldn't have been writing about the Marshall Plan in the first place.

Maybe that's why she didn't do anything with this particular paper— tried something new without success. I like that line, "I can't get enough of the Marshall Plan," because you can't tell for sure whether Dr. Howells is being snide or sincere.

Right. I think that line had a lot to do with it. I think I actually once heard somebody say that, and it went into my bank.

What about the title of the story? Was that from the Parkman book?

No. There's a church up in northern Vermont called the Church of the North American Martyrs. A writer named Roger Weingarten, a poet, had a book of poems called *Ethan Benjamin Bolt* published in the late '70s. And there's a line in there which goes, "Near the garden of the North American Martyrs." I was writing the story at the time and it just lashed out at me, so I asked him if I could use it. There's no way I could quote it as an epigraph because it had nothing to do with what I was writing about. He wasn't writing about any of these things. I asked him if I could use that phrase as the title of the book, and he was pleased to have me do that. . . .

Reading it ["In the Garden of the North American Martyrs"] again the other day, did you see anything else you'd change now?

Not really. The kind of stories I mostly prefer to read these days are not of this kind, to tell you the truth. It has a lot of symbolic machinery, this story. It has an almost mathematical logic. It leads very purposefully to where it's going. It has a very clear ending, almost a triumphal ending. It's a well-made story. It's written with a great deal of irony. And those are all things that I'm not particularly interested in doing myself right now. I prefer to write a story that doesn't have any obvious symbolic machinery, that is essentially unironic. The voice that tells it might be, but the conception is not. And a story in which the ending is not quite so clean and well pronounced as in this story.

Source: Tobias Wolff with Jay Woodruff, in an interview for his *A Piece of Work: Five Writers Discuss Their Revisions,*

University of Iowa Press, 1993, pp. 22-40.

Adaptations

"In the Garden of the North American Martyrs" was recorded on audiotape by Symphony Space Literary publishers with Jane Curtin narrating. The story appears on Volume VII of *Selected Shorts: A Celebration of the Short Story*.

Topics for Further Study

Why would a college have a rule that requires interviewing at least one female candidate for each job opening? What laws or court decisions have helped shape such policies?

Critics often mention Flannery O'Connor when talking about Wolff. How does Wolff's exploration of morality and prophecy differ from O'Connor's as illustrated in her story "A Good Man Is Hard to Find"?

Research the history of the French Jesuits in the Great Lakes region during colonial times. How did their religious views influence their behavior, and what effects did their presence have on the culture?

What are Louise's motivations for using Mary as she does? What theories of psychology might explain her behavior?

What Do I Read Next?

This Boy's Life (1989) by Tobias Wolff is an account of Wolff's adolescence and early adulthood. The memoir is told through the eyes of the boy, leaving the reader free to draw conclusions and make judgements about events the child could not have fully understood at the time.

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is the classic novel about another boy whose coming of age is characterized by a tendency to stretch the truth and who must make difficult decisions without much adult guidance.

Wise Blood, Flannery O'Connor's darkly comic novella about a misguided preacher's search for meaning and moral certainty.

Dubliners is the collection of short stories by Irish author James Joyce that Wolff often mentions as having a major influence on his writing.

Ellen Foster (1989) by Kaye Gibbons is a novel about a female character whose lonely and unparented childhood resembles Huck Finn's and the young Toby Wolff's.

The Duke of Deception (1979) is Geoffrey Wolff's memoir of growing up with his father, a con artist.

the Writing Center at the University of Texas. In this essay she discusses the symbolic and moral dimensions of "In the Garden of the North American Martyrs."

Further Study

Prose, Francine. "The Brothers Wolff" in *New York Times Book Magazine,* February 5, 1989, p. 23.

An interesting interview with both Geoffrey Wolff and Tobias Wolff that covers topics ranging from their childhoods to their current successes as writers.

Parkman, Francis. *The Jesuits in North America in the Seventeenth Century,* University of Nebraska Press, 1997.

A narrative account of the Jesuit experience with the indigenous people of the region.

Bibliography

Banks, Russell. Review in *New York Times Book Review,* October 20, 1985, p. 9.

Current Biography Yearbook 1996, H.W. Wilson Company, 1996, pp. 631-34.

Lyons, Bonnie and Bill Oliver. "An Interview with Tobias Wolff," in *Contemporary Literarure,* Vol. 31, No.1, Spring 1990, pp. 1-16.

Skow, John. "Memory, Too, Is an Actor," in *Time,* April 19, 1993, p. 62.

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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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