In the Cemetery Where Al Jolson Is Buried Study Guide

In the Cemetery Where Al Jolson Is Buried by Amy Hempel

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Introduction

"In the Cemetery Where Al Jolson Is Buried" originally appeared in *TriQuarterly* magazine in 1983 It was reprinted in *Editors' Choice: New American Stories* before being included in Amy Hempel's first published collection of stories, *Reasons to Live*, in 1985. As her most anthologized story to date, "In the Cemetery" reflects Hempel's ability to blend pathos and comedy. In addition, critics praise Hempel for her poetic use of imagery and concise language that creates a short story filled with meaning. Hempel has compressed the narrative until every unnecessary and distracting detail has been squeezed out. This design allows the reader to impose meaning and order on the events rather than having the story control the reader's final response. Critics most often refer to this stylistic technique as "minimalism." For example, the central setting of "In the Cemetery" is presented as if it were a Hollywood movie set—a small detail that takes on great significance. The story was written as an assignment for a fiction workshop Hempel was taking in which she was instructed to write about "the thing you will never live down," she told Jo Sapp of the *Missouri Review*. Hempel's story about betraying a dying friend is dedicated to Jessica Wolfson, a friend who died of a terminal disease.

Author Biography

Born December 14,1951, in Chicago, Illinois, Amy Hempel moved to San Francisco as a teenager and attended several California colleges during an academic career that saw frequent interruptions. Deciding to become a writer, she settled in New York City and attended Columbia University where her creative writing instructor was Gordon Lish, a noted novelist, short story writer, and editor. Hempel credits Lish with having had a special influence on her work. She also names other contemporary short story writers such as Mary Robison and Raymond Carver as having affected her style. Hempel says that these writers "re-invent" the language, tell the truth in "shocking ways," and use "a kind of compression and distillation in their work that gets to the heart of things and that gives the reader credit for being able to keep up without having everything explained."

Although Hempel lives and works in New York City, most of her stories resound with the sounds and images of California. Some dramatic events in HempeFs short stories correspond with several of her own unhappy life experiences, which include traumatic car and motorcycle accidents, her mother's suicide, her father's mental illness, and the death of a close friend. In discussing "In the Cemetery Where Al Jolson Is Buried," for example, -Hempel told Jo Sapp of the *Missouri Review* that although the dialogue of the story was completely fabricated, it is a true story that accurately reflects her relationship with her dying friend. Her stories have been translated into twelve languages and anthologized in the United States and several other countries. Hempel's literary awards include the Silver Medal from the Commonwealth Club of California for *Reasons to Live* and the *Best American Short Stories* Pushcart Prize. Her work regularly appears in such popular magazines as *Vanity Fair, the New York Times Magazine*, and *Vogue*. Hempel is the author of two collections of short stories: *Reasons to Live* which contains her most anthologized short story, "In the Cemetery Where Al Jolson Is Buried," and *At the Gates of the Animal Kingdom*,

Plot Summary

The story opens with the unnamed narrator visiting her friend, who is also unnamed, in a hospital near Hollywood, California, where the friend is dying, presumably of cancer. The friend asks the narrator to "tell me things I won't mind forgetting." The things the narrator tells her friend are funny and light, items of trivia about the first tape recorder in America and the flying patterns of insects, things which may or may not be true. The friend is interested in hearing about the first chimp that was trained to talk until the narrator warns her that the outcome is sad, at which point the friend commands her to stop the story.

When the friend introduces the narrator to her nurse as "the Best Friend," the narrator is sufficiently attuned to language to note that her use of "the" here rather than "my" implies that in some way the friend views her connection with the nurse as actually being the closer bond now. Feeling guilty, the narrator ponders her reasons for waiting two months to come visit.

The doctor enters the hospital room and the friend flirts with him. Like the nurse, he also seems to have a closer relationship with the friend than does the narrator; he is the "Good Doctor" because he makes jokes about death and disease with her and is "a little in love with her." He suggests that the narrator go to the nearby beach so that he can be alone with her.

At the beach the narrator muses on other forms of danger, recalling a time in college when the two of them thought they could forestall an earthquake by repeating "earthquake, earthquake, earthquake" because "it never happens when you're thinking about it." The verbal repetition, however did nothing to prevent an aftershock during a 1972 earthquake the friends witnessed as college roommates. This thought foreshadows the friend's impending death: she will continue with her joking references to death, attempting to ward it off, until she dies.

The narrator returns from watching teenagers displaying "aggressive health" on the beach to find a second bed in the room, a bed, she realizes, put there so that she can spend the night. She rattles off more trivia for her friend and they watch a movie together lying side by side while eating ice cream. They achieve their former closeness for a moment when the narrator feels sleepy from the injection given to the friend. The two drift off to sleep, but the narrator dreams her friend has decorated her house in festive streamers. When she wakes, her fear overpowers her compassion and she tells her friend, "I have to go home."

Though she feels "weak and small and failed," she also feels "exhilarated" by imagining her escape back to her convertible and visiting trendy Malibu restaurants. The friend throws a fit upon realizing the narrator is leaving, yanking off her protective mask and running out of the room.

The next mention of the friend is when she is "moved to the cemetery, the one where Al Jolson is buried." Although not stated directly, it seems likely that the narrator has never been back to visit. Addressing the death in this fashion allows her to avoid acknowledging that her friend has died: instead her use of language lets her focus on and highlight the fact that Al Jolson is buried in the cemetery in question; he is the one she can accept being dead.

The narrator enrolls in a "Fear of Flying" class that same day. She also finishes the story about the chimpanzee that her friend did not want to hear. The chimp used sign language to communicate with its baby. Even after the baby dies, the chimp attempts to communicate with it, "fluent now in the language of grief."

Characters

Dying Friend

This unnamed woman is the friend whom the narrator visits in the hospital. Her request to the narrator to "tell me things I won't mind forgetting," sets the story in motion. The woman was the narrator's best friend, but her feeling of betrayal is revealed when she introduces the narrator to her nurse as "the Best Friend." The woman is making a concerted effort to deal with her mortality, illustrated by her attempt to engage her friend in a conversation about Elisabeth Kubler-Ross's theory of the psychology of death. Like the narrator, she also uses ironic humor to help defuse the tension of their meeting, like when she wraps a telephone cord around her neck and proclaims it "the end o' the line." However, when her wish that her friend spend the night is rebuffed, the woman is so overwhelmed by the act of abandonment that she tears off her protective face mask and stumbles out of the room. Though the main thrust of the story is the narrator's fear of death, this action—an immense strain on the woman's frail and sickly body-underscores her own psychological pain. Nevertheless, like the earthquake the two roommates hoped to forestall but were unable to prevent, the woman is eventually "moved to the cemetery," a euphemistic way of saying that she has died.

Narrator

The main character in "In the Cemetery Where Al Jolson Is Buried" is the unnamed narrator who relates the story in first person. While paying a long-overdue visit to a dying friend in the hospital, the narrator muses about her shame and guilt in neglecting a friend in need. Though the narrator seems aware of her fear of death, her fear prevents her from discussing the topic openly. Instead, she seems fixated on grotesque images, like earthquakes and a man who dies of fright after seeing his mutilated arm. Alternately, the narrator uses humor as a form of denial, like when she reads an item from the newspaper about a man who robs a bank with a chicken. Her fears culminate when she realizes her friend wants her to spend the night, it hits her "like an open coffin.... She wants my life." Even after her friend dies, she refuses to confront the situation. She says only that her friend "was moved to the cemetery." In her attempt to confront her fear, she enrolls in a "fear of flying" class, admitting, in part, that she is a fearful person, but still refusing to confront death. The narrator, in her honesty, admits her superficiality by saying that she remembers "only the useless things I hear___Nothing else seeps through." By the end of the story, however, the narrator returns to the story about a chimpanzee who uses sign language in an attempt to communicate with her dead child. In stating that the animal had become "fluent now in the language of grief," the narrator has confronted a topic that had previously upset her, thereby showing the character's growth. By telling her story anonymously, the narrator is able to relate details that she might otherwise hesitate to reveal. The story is both a confession and a way for her to come to terms with her fear of dying, and the narrator's anonymity allows the reader to identify with her process of catharsis.

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Themes

Fear of Death

Readers never know exactly what illness the sick friend dies of or precisely what her symptoms are; therefore, the major focus of the story is on the women's verbal, behavioral, and psychological responses in confronting their own mortality. The one is dying, the other (the narrator) is observing both her friend's behavior and her own reactions to the phenomenon of death.

The dying woman engages in trivial conversation and ghoulish jokes in dealing with her situation. For example, she loops a phone cord around her neck and exclaims "end o' the line." She also wants something specific from the visiting friend when she has a second bed placed in the room. The expectation of spending the night with her dying friend "hit me like an open coffin.... She wants my life."

Conscious of her situation, the dying woman mentions Swiss psychiatrist Elisabeth Kubler-Ross's five stages of accepting death. She wants to know why Kubler-Ross left out Resurrection; "God knows, I want to do it by the book," she says. The narrator, however, remains silent, in the denial stage herself, even though she knows the other stages; she cannot bring herself to speak to her friend directly about death.

Kubler-Ross found that many dying patients are comforted if someone sits and listens to their openly expressed fears and thoughts. She also observed that many dying patients, after the shock of learning their condition, go through five psychological stages: denial, anger, bargaining, grieving, and acceptance. Patients may be assisted in reaching acceptance by the hospital staffs and family's openly talking about death when the patient so desires. In the denial stage, the patient refuses to recognize reality and acts as if the disease does not exist. The patient may then become angry, resenting others who enjoy good health and blaming doctors and relatives for their inability to help. In the bargaining stage the patient tries to "buy time," often in the form of prayers asking for "one more year," in return for being a better person. This psychological stage, which is usually brief, is followed by the first true recognition of reality, and the patient then enters the stage of grief or depression, mourning the loss of his or her own life. In the final stage of acceptance, the patient may still be fearful and angry but is now prepared to die with peace and dignity. This story appears to chart this process both in the dying woman and in her friend who fears death but appears to accept her fear by the end of the story when she relates the sad ending of the chimpanzee's story.

Friendship

"In the Cemetery" explores the theme of friendship by showing the strain the terminal illness has placed on the women's relationship. The narrator feels guilty when introduced as the generic "Best Friend," a label that indicates the withering of their

closeness. "So how come, I'll bet they're wondering, it took me so long to get to such a glamorous place?... Two months, and how long is the drive?" the narrator asks herself, realizing that her absence is a betrayal of their friendship. The implication is that the fearful narrator took too long coming to the side of her dying friend and, once there, will not stay until the end. In its final form, the story also alludes to the friendship between Amy Hempel and the now deceased Jessica Wolfson, whom Hempel promised to write a story about and to whom the story is dedicated.

Language and Meaning

Inappropriate language is often a symptom of denial. During a time of extreme sadness or danger, people will often tell jokes and talk about trivial things. The dying friend insists on such a dialogue immediately, "Tell me things I won't mind forgetting," she says, in acknowledgment that she will not be around long enough to have to remember anything meaningful. At the end of the story, the narrator's language similarly indicates her denial of her friend's death. Her friend is simply "moved to the cemetery," as if she had simply changed apartments or moved across town. The only fear that she admits to having is a fear of flying. However, her fear of death permeates her actions and thoughts while with her friend. She thinks of a story told to her by a friend who used to work in a mortuary. A man in a car accident was scared to death by the sight of his injured arm. Even though the tale does not pertain directly to her dying friend, it symbolizes how obsessed with death the narrator is.

Style

Narrative Voice

"In the Cemetery Where Al Jolson Is Buried" is told in the first-person point of view by an unidentified female narrator. At times the voice telling this story seems to move into a narrative technique known as stream-of consciousness—the literary attempt to reproduce the pattern of a mind in unchecked thought, simultaneously moving in multiple levels of awareness, issuing an uninterrupted flow of sensations, thoughts, memories, associations, and reflections. This is shown in part by her questions to herself, like "Two months, and how long is the drive."

Setting

Symbolic in the story's Southern California setting is the idea that the narrator's situation is merely a play or a television show in which she is acting. The hospital, which is near Hollywood, is likened to the one on the television series "Marcus Welby, MD," and a camera guards the sick woman's room. Conscious that she is being filmed, the narrator states "I had my audience," in further recognition of the metaphor. Her tales about insignificant things take on the aura of a performance. "Off camera," she says, further painting a portrait of California, "there is a beach across the street."

Black Humor

Black humor is comedy of a situational or conversational nature that concentrates on morose themes. In a black comedy, an author will frequently make fun of things of a serious nature, such as illness, death, or disease. In this story, the narrator uses black humor in an effort to ease her fear of death. And the sick woman, ironically, uses it to put her friend at ease, too, like when she wraps the phone cord around her neck or exclaims, "Oh, you're killing me." A further irony in the story is the metaphor of the hospital as a television set, a place for actors. The narrator and her friend assume the role of actors, yet their situation is real.

Parable

A parable is a story that teaches a lesson. Within "In the Cemetery" is the story about the chimpanzee who learns sign language. In the parable, the mother chimp lies twice when asked "who did it on the desk." This conscious misdirection of language parallels the pattern of distortion found in the trivial dialogue exchanged by the two women. They refuse to confront death, and in effect their idle conversation is a form of "lie" in which they are protecting themselves from pain. At the end of the story, the narrator relates that the chimpanzee's signed request to her dead child is "Baby, come hug, Baby, come

hug." The chimp has become "fluent now in the language of grief." By relating this parable, the narrator has also learned to examine her grief, rather than ignore it.

Catharsis

The process of writing this story and dedicating it to her deceased friend can be said to be a catharsis for the author. In writing about "the thing which you will never live down," Hempel has confronted her feelings of guilt and abandonment at a time when her friend needed her most. The process of expressing such pent-up feelings is known as "catharsis," and is often done to relieve the teller of carrying such a psychological burden.

Historical Context

Hempel's writing, particularly her stories in *Reasons to Live*, evoke a lifestyle that is Californian in nature. Despite the fact that they were written in New York, most of her stories take place on the West coast, including "In the Cemetery Where Al Jolson Is Buried." Hempel frequently uses cultural references as touchstones for her readers, knowing they will understand what a "Marcus Welby" hospital looks like, or that country singer Tammy Wynette recorded a song called "Stand by Your Man." In doing so, she places her writing firmly in a modern, American context. *Marcus Welby, MD*, a television show starring Robert Young, aired from 1969 to 1976, would be remembered by almost anyone who had been in college during the early 1970s, as the narrator and her friend were. This American setting is further reinforced by her references to California beaches, the narrator's convertible, and a Malibu restaurant that serves "papaya and shrimp and watermelon ice." In the works of contemporary authors Bret Easton Ellis, Joan Didion, and others, a similar California landscape is presented, often with the intention of painting a portrait of a culture that is concerned only with outward appearances and only with the moment—two characteristics that many would say are indicative of American culture in the late twentieth century.

Hempel's vignette regarding the chimpanzee who learned sign language evokes the study regarding Koko, a gorilla who learned sign language in the early 1970s at Stanford University. Koko's ability to communicate in American Sign Language with human beings was not only an important scientific breakthrough during that time, but she also became a sort of folk hero, especially for those who had always suspected that animals possessed intelligence. By placing a similar story within "In the Cemetery," Hempel furtherplays upon her readers' familiarity with current events.

Other references made by the narrator in the story serve as a type of shorthand. A reader familiar with Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, whose book *On Death and Dying* was published in 1969, will understand the characters' discussion of her stages of grief. Using such a tactic allows the author to accomplish a great deal with few words, effectively relying on the reader's knowledge of contemporary culture. Lastly, by referring to American jazz singer Al Jolson in the title, Hempel helps establish the story's American context even before it begins. In the United States, and particularly in California, places often come to be identified with their connections to the rich and famous. Thus, the cemetery where the narrator's friend is "moved to" is not notable for its name, but for the fact that a famous person, Al Jolson, is buried there.

Critical Overview

"In the Cemetery Where Al Jolson Is Buried" was frequently cited by critics as one of Hempel's strongest stories in her first collection, *Reasons to Live*. In discussing her sparse, minimalist style, critics often pointed to details in the story like the metaphor of a Hollywood set as the forum for a discussion on death. Discussing the book as a whole, Sybil Steinberg, reviewing the collection for Publishers Weekly, described the stories as "debuting a familiar contemporary hard edge, but a surprisingly sentimental and moving interior." Just two years after *Reasons to Live* was published, "In the Cemetery" was included in the prestigious classroom textbook *The Norton Anthology of Short Fiction*.

Though Hempel prefers to call herself a "miniaturist" rather than a minimalist, many critics continue to categorize her as a minimalist. However, since many critics view the minimalist style as outdated, this has put an unfavorable spin on her work. One such critic, Brad Hooper, sees Hempel's stories as "marked by a brevity of exposition and economy of style that verge on the starved." Usually written in the first person and present tense with few details, leaving much of the story's meaning implied, Hempel's prose is, indeed, minimalist in a strict sense of the word. Yet, setting Hempel apart from other practitioners of the form, such as Ernest Hemingway, is her use of humor. Eleanor Wachtel, a noted Canadian radio-journalist, perceives Hempel's stories as "full of wry scraps of philosophy—more than one-liners, they're ironic twists on one's expectations." Readers who enjoy Hempel's brief stories generally identify her as a frugal writer who manifests a quirky humor and bleak worldview, Most readers see her fictional realm as one of sadness and bittersweet consolation, a world of natural catastrophe, highway accidents, insanity, and death. In 1988, Michael Schumacher began his live interview of Hempel by insisting to his audience that "if you have any intention of understanding the short fiction of Amy Hempel, pain is where you start."

The majority of critical response to Hempel's short fiction appears in the form of book reviews in which the critics praise Hempel's style and stories. Sheila Ballantyne, writing for the *New York Times Book Review*, describes Hempel's fiction as "tough-minded, original and fully felt" with "feelings always contained, never explicit." In a later review for the same publication, Michiko Kakutani notes that Hempel portrays her characters "with charity and understanding." Writing in New *Directions for Women*, Marcia Tager characterizes these brief stories as "snapshots" and "splinters of reality." In effect, critics agree that Hempel's foremost skill is her ability to compress as much into a single sentence as possible.

Criticism

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Critical Essay #1

Judy Sobeloff is a writer and educator who has won several awards for her fiction. In the following essay, she discusses the aspects of minimalism inherent in "In the Cemetery Where Al Jolson Is Buried."

What is most striking about "In the Cemetery Where Al Jolson Is Buried," widely considered one of Amy Hempel's finest and most moving stories, is its compression and its pain. The writing here is terse; much is left out. The parts left out are what give the story its emotional power. This same minimalist style is apparent in the other stories in Hempel's first collection, *Reasons to Live*, and in her second, *At the Gates of the Animal Kingdom*, as well. "In the Cemetery" weighs in as one of the longest stories in either book, some of which are only a page or two in length. The other stories, too, focus predominantly on characters struggling with loss and grief.

Minimalism in American literature can be traced back to the early works of Ernest Hemingway, who believed that what is stated overtly in a story should be just the "tip of the iceberg." In his 1964 book, A *Moveable Feast*, he proposed a "new theory that you could omit anything if you knew that you omitted and the omitted parts would strengthen the story and make people feel something more than they understood." In "In the Cemetery," what is omitted is key: The narrator does not discuss her friend's impending death with her then or ever; in fact, after the narrator leaves the hospital, the next mention of the friend is that she was "moved to the cemetery." Discussion of the friend's death, before and after the fact, is completely omitted from the story.

The credo of the contemporary minimalist movement, according to critic Arthur Saltzman, is delineated best by Raymond Carver in his essay "On Writing": "It's possible, in a poem or short story, to write about commonplace things and objects using commonplace but precise language, and to endow those things—a chair, a window curtain, a fork, a stone, a woman's earring—with immense, even startling power."

Certain objects in "In the Cemetery" do carry enormous weight—the friend's leg "you did not want to see," her mask with the bottom strings hanging loose, the second bed—but the real "immense, even startling power" of "In the Cemetery" comes from its use of commonplace language to talk about—or rather, to not talk about—devastating aspects of human experience.

Carver's essay was published in 1983, at the height of minimalism's popularity, the same year "In the Cemetery" first appeared in *TriQuarterly* magazine. A debate over the merits of minimalism eventually ensued, which, using the words of Saltzman, can be framed thus: is minimalism giving us the essence of human experience, "the richness of a glimpse," or does minimalism so boil down the world that it "loses the broth?" Though the style remains controversial, Hempel's critics praise her precision. "Reading Hempel is like reading a heart-stopping telegram," critic Marcia Tager wrote about *Reasons to Live*.

Just as the narrator of "In the Cemetery" abandons her dying friend, many of the other stories in *Reasons to Live* feature characters struggling to cope, characters whose responses to death also seem odd or somehow misguided. In "Nashville Gone to Ashes," the narrator, who has lost both her husband and her dog, realizes that she feels jealous of her pets, that she had to compete with them for her husband's love. The narrator of "San Francisco," a younger sister who had been the one to discover her mother's dead body, now derives satisfaction from tormenting her older sister who wants the mother's watch. In "Going" the narrator has a car accident on flat, dry road that "knocked two days out of [his] head," and "can't even remember all [he's] forgotten"; only in the last paragraph does the reader learn that his mother has died, that somehow the crash and the death are connected.

In "Beg, SI Tog, Inc, Cont, Rep," the relationship between the two female characters is reminiscent of the relationship between the narrator and her friend in "In the Cemetery," but in "Beg, SI Tog" the circumstances are reversed; this time the narrator, rather than the friend, is the one directly suffering. The narrator, who has had an abortion, ceases all activity except knitting sweaters for the friend, who is pregnant: "an excess of sweaters—a kind of precaution, arehearsal against disaster," The narrator in "Beg, SI Tog" has nightmares, and then accidents—"but the part that hurt was never the part that got hurt." In a sense this narrator seems to be paying penance for the friendship betrayed in "In the Cemetery." Although the immediate situation here (the friend's pregnancy) is ostensibly a joyous one, in this story, too, the narrator fails to support her friend: upon hearing that the friend has given birth, for example, the narrator stops in at the nursery briefly to see that the newborn was there and then "went straight home." Like the narrator in "In the Cemetery" who is able to offer her friend only trivia, this narrator is able to offer her friend only sweaters, many more sweaters than the baby could possibly wear.

Like "In the Cemetery," the other stories in this collection display the classic characteristics of minimalism: plots that play out over a narrow time frame; simple language; short, declarative, present-tense sentences; and first-person narrators. While Hempel's characters are rarely the societal outcasts who populate much of minimalist fiction, their lives do tend to be consistent with another dominant minimalist theme: the rootlessness and shallowness of contemporary American existence. Everyone on the beach in "In the Cemetery" is "tranquilized, numb or asleep"; the narrator wants only to jump in her convertible and drive it "too fast down the coast highway," away from her friend and the site of the pain.

The stories in Hempel's second collection display many of these same minimalist characteristics, and again many of the characters struggle to cope with loss. A difference in this collection, though, is the occasional presence of an authorial intrusion, an attribute generally not associated with minimalism. Every now and then the first person narrator makes a comment that sounds more like a reflection from an author looking in on the story than the thoughts of a character looking out. At the end of "And Lead Us Not Into Penn Station," after reeling off a dozen or so anecdotes about the violence and despair of urban existence, the narrator (who sounds like the author

speaking) stops: "I don't know what to say about this. / am as cut off from meaning and completion as all of these crippled people."

Whether or not the first person narrator in Hempel's second collection is at times Hempel herself, Hempel admits that her work is very autobiographical. What is immediately apparent in comparing "In the Cemetery" to written accounts of Hempel's own life is the distinctive similarities between the two. In an interview with Michael Schumacher, Hempel acknowledges that her best friend died when Hempel was a college student in California; like the narrator in "In the Cemetery," not only did Hempel not attend the-funeral, she "barely made it to the hospital."

In fact, it was after the death of her best friend that Hempel left California for New York, enrolled in a writing class with Gordon Lish, and wrote "In the Cemetery," which later became her first pubushed story, in response to Lish's directive to write about an instance of personal failure.

Despite Hempel's move to New York, California remains the natural choice for the setting of her work. The narrator of "In the Cemetery" worries about earthquakes when she goes to the beach. In California, says Etempel, "it's very easy to have your worst fears made tangible in the form of natural disaster." California works well as a setting for other reasons, too. *New York Times* literary critic Michiko Kakutani compares Hempel to Joan Didion for her use of "the tacky, ahistorical landscape of Southern California, with its parking garages, fake Spanish colonial condominiums and fast-food joints." Note the flamingo pink wrought-iron terraces of the Palm Royale, where the narrator of "In the Cemetery" stops for the newspaper and observes graffiti in the lobby which she later quotes to her friend. Hollywood fiction is a genre in itself that can be traced back to America's movement westward, based on a vision of Hollywood born of "external success and inner failure," according to critic Jonas Spatz. Certainly this applies to the narrator of "In the Cemetery," whose need to make everything look all right on the outside despite deep feelings of inner failure, can be seen toward the end of the story when she muses, "It is just possible I will say I stayed the night. And who is there that can say I did not?"

Before she leaves the hospital the narrator sees how she has let language transform their relationship, referring to herself mockingly as "The Best Friend" when she makes her decision to leave. While she felt slighted by her friend's earlier use of the impersonal article "the, "now she does not even feel worthy of it. When the friend dies, the narrator shields herself from having to acknowledge this reality by saying only that she was "moved to the cemetery."

"In the Cemetery" is ultimately a story about the limits of language. Like the mother chimp who is trained to sign, the narrator and her friend train themselves to speak only in trivia—like signing, an alternate and artificial form of language—to speak only about things that do not matter. The substitution here of trivia for what is real renders the story the ideal minimalist marriage of form and content: one-liners substitute for authentic communication, and what is omitted, to harken back to Hemingway, becomes most important of all. Like the protective mask that the friend ultimately flings off in rage, this

artificial language can shield the characters from—but never prevent—the threat of the friend's imminent death.

Just as the mother chimp continues to sign to her dead baby, the narrator continues her reliance on trivia after the friend dies. This, in fact, becomes all she can do, the only way she can think. She remembers "only the useless things" she hears. After the loss of their loved ones, both the mother chimp and the narrator keep up their ineffectual, meaningless language, unable to stop, "fluent now in the language of gnef."

Source: Judy Sobeloff, for *Short Stories for Students*, Gale Research, 1997

Critical Essay #2

Robert Peltier is an English instructor at Trinity College and has published works of both fiction and nonfiction. In the following essay, he discusses the nature of truth as it is regarded by the characters in this "postmodern" story, ultimately stating that the narrator's belief in her "language of grief' is a lie.

Beneath the wisecracking humor and even beneath the despair and fear in Amy Hempel's "In the Cemetery Where Al Jolson Is Buried," there is a deeper bleakness that is both dangerous and forgiving. In fact, the danger springs from forgiving: forgiving oneself for reprehensible behavior because we live in a postmodern world where nothing much matters anyway. There are no truths, there is no meaning to life, there is only death at the end, so what could possibly matter? The danger that springs from this kind of thinking is obvious in this story and, for that matter, in much of the world it reflects. The danger is that we exist in a world that is precarious in its lack of real compassion and fueled by a fear of all that is not material. The danger manifests itself as a detachment from the world of human connection. The narrator in this story has not been able to bring herself to visit her best friend in the hospital for two months; her fear has been stronger than her sense of decency. Judging from the language they use to "communicate" with each other, there has never been much depth in their friendship, and the sick friend should have, and probably did, expect the narrator's lack of emotions except fear and repulsion. The narrator wants only to get away from this dying person and drive fast and go somewhere where there is palpable life.

"Tell me things I won't mind forgetting," the narrator's sick friend says in the opening lines of the story. "Make it useless stuff or skip it." The friend is dying, of course, so why not make it "useless stuff?" Yet, if we take the broad view, we are all dying. Thus, using the friend's logic, none of us needs more than "useless stuff." The implications of such a philosophy are much bleaker than a superficial reading of the story would lead one to believe. This line of reasoning leaves no room for commitment to another, for instance. There is no reason to think or feel deeply about anything. And there is no need for the "useless stuff" to be true. Was Bing Crosby the first American to own a tape recorder? Do insects get wet? We don't need to look these "facts" up in an encyclopedia, because Hempel's narrator tell us immediately that they do not matter by telling us something obviously untrue: that the moon is shaped like a banana. It is not so much that lies and truths are mixed in our lives, but that there are no real truths at all. One story is as good as another.

But how does this attitude affect human relationships? If everything is "useless," what is the point of forming relationships? If there is only death, what difference does it make what we do in life? Despairing postmodernism rears up in this story and answers: Do not care about things or people or truths or lies, because it is all going to disappear someday and the caring will make it painful.

Hempel's narrator amplifies this theme when she talks about the chimpanzee who lied: "when they asked her who did it on the desk, she signed back the name of the janitor."

By illustrating how nature itself is dishonest, the narrator seems to be rationalizing her own dishonesty. If nature—and by extension, God—is false, then there really is nothing to believe in.

Notice how nervous the narrator gets when she realizes that there is a camera focused on her and her friend. It causes her to stop talking even though there is no microphone to pick up what she is saying. This disturbing intrusion is the one element in the story that suggests that perhaps there is objective truth, that somewhere—even if it is only at the nurse's station—we are held accountable and judged for our actions. But, since the narrator stops only momentarily, the idea is scrapped and the narrator continues telling her "stories." We must assume that the narrator's nervousness is unwarranted, that the camera's observations are as false as any other observer's and worthy of no more consideration.

Even the hospital must somehow be distanced from objective reality, and so the two friends "call this place the Marcus Welby Hospital." Naming it after a television show on which people only pretend to be sick and more rarely only pretend to die, they further distance themselves from the reality of death Further extending the metaphor, the narrator indicates that the hospital is situated across the street from a beach, a juxtaposition unknown to the television audience because it occurs "off camera." More falsehoods, for who would attempt to explain to television viewers that a beach and a hospital can and, in fact, do exist in close proximity?

The narrator alludes to the irony in this, but seems incapable of understanding it. Suntan oil and sand and surgical masks and oxygen tubes exist all in the same world, and part of the maturation process is understanding how this can be so. But the narrator does not deepen her understanding. Instead, she and her friend merge the beach and the hospital into the "make believe" hospital that is more suited to their individual needs and their needs as a couple of friends.

The narrator, who is "the Best Friend," has not visited her friend even though she has been in this hospital for two months, and it is her inability to accept this reality that has kept her away. She tells a story of a story that was told to her—a tale now twice removed from reality—about a man who was frightened to death by the grossness of an injury he received in a car wreck. He looked at his injured arm, slashed to the bone, and died of fright. The narrator does not want "to look any closer" at her friend although she considers that she is now doing just that merely by being in the hospital with her. She avoids the close look by making jokes and reciting odd "facts" that may or may not be true,"and hoping that [she] will live through" the visit. She has stayed away from her friend because she is afraid that looking at a reality she normally pretends does not exist will drag her into the abyss. This pathetic weakness has kept her from comforting a person who is dying, a person who is supposedly her closest friend. Now she has overcome that weakness, but only to the degree that she can joke with her friend; a real meaningful connection between them never takes place. Their communication remains superficial; it would be too dangerous otherwise.

They talk about Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, a doctor who has researched death and dying, but as the sick friend says, Kubler-Ross "left out Resurrection." She immediately laughs, however, and the narrator clings "to the sound [of her laughter] the way someone dangling above a ravine holds fast to the thrown rope." If her friend can laugh at death without the hope of resurrection, then death must not really exist. Or, at least, it must not be so hard to face.

When the "good doctor" comes in, the narrator seems to be justifying her detachment by pointing up the doctor's humor and her friend's humor. "God didn't give epileptics a fair shake," the doctor says. But the doctor is not "the best friend" and thus is not encouraged to develop a close emotional relationship with his patient. In fact, many doctors purposely distance themselves from their patients not because they are callused or cold, but because of the pain such temporary and ultimately tragic relationships can inflict.

Why not keep it light? Why not joke? There is nothing wrong with humor, but when that humor acts as a curtain behind which deeper feelings are hidden and kept from influencing decent behavior, then that humor can be harmful. When the sick friend says "I feel like hell. I'm about to stop having fun," the narrator becomes almost manic in her attempts to talk about anything but the horror of her friend's situation. She quotes from graffiti and from a newspaper trivia column, and the odd mixture is full of half-truths, exaggerations and outright lies. Eskimos do not need refrigerators to keep their food from freezing; it is childish to believe that all Eskimos live in igloos in a permanently frozen wasteland. And the possibility that "the smell of barbecue sauce" led to the capture of a bank robber is slim (and ludicrous). But the stories have, at least for the moment, done their dirty job: they have signaled the sick friend that she is not to speak of "feeling like hell" again and that her true feelings serve only to push her friend if they are articulated.

But this brush with reality has, apparently, been too much for the narrator. She will not stay the night. She wants to leave, to drive fast to a place where she can drink wine and "shimmer with lust, buzz with heat, vibrate with life, and stay up all night." While one can sympathize with such longings—they are not at all uncommon in the face of death—one cannot condone the narrator's abandonment of her friend, especially when that friend is so traumatized by her friend's rejection that she leaves her isolation room and runs to hide in a supply closet. The narrator, the "best friend," can only watch from the doorway as the nurses rub their patient's back, applying the human touch of which the narrator is incapable.

In the end, after the sick friend has been "moved to the cemetery," the narrator wishes only to remember useless things that she hears. As with the useless things that she once told her friend, she makes no distinction between what is true and what is false, because in a postmodern philosophy (one might say that postmodernism is actually a lack of any philosophy) there is no difference and it does not matter. It was not Bob Dylan's mother who invented Wite-Out; it was Monkee Mike Nesmith's mother. The truth of this trivia is not important because truth is merely an irrelevant abstraction in the face of death.

The narrator comforts herself by saying that "it is just possible I will say I stayed the night. And who is there that can say that I did not?" In a world that makes no distinction between truth and lies, she has justified her lack of compassion and decency and—perhaps most disturbing of all—she claims to have gained a knowledge of grief. The most loathsome moment in the story comes at the end when she tells the story of the birth of a baby to that *other* liar, the talking chimp. The baby dies and the mother chimp "signs" to her baby over and over, "fluent now in the language of grief." The parallel between the chimp and the narrator is not just strained, it is entirely false. The narrator has not learned the language of grief and will not until she breaks through the barrier of postmodern detachment.

Source: Robert Peltier, for *Short Stories for Students*, Gale Research, 1997.

Critical Essay #3

In the following interview, which was conducted in cooperation with the American Prose Library on November 6, 1991, Sapp discusses Hempel's approach to writing fiction, especially the story "In the Cemetery Where Al Jolson Is Buried," which was one of the first stories Hempel ever wrote.

[Interviewer]: Many of our readers know your work, but not much about your life. Can you fill us in on your background?

[Hempel]: I was born in Chicago in 1951, and lived in and around the city till third grade, I think. After that I lived in Denver for eight years, then moved to San Francisco for about twelve years, then to New York where I live now. I was happy to leave California because I was traumatized by the earthquakes. On the positive side, I moved to work in publishing

Where did you go to college?

I had a nonlinear college education. I went to five different colleges and universities in California, where I majored in journalism and took many incompletes. My college time was interrupted by accidents and any number of things going on that took precedence over sitting in class. I went from accident to accident, hospital to hospital; I'd walk out of the house in the morning and half look up to see when the Mosler safe was going to fall out of the sky and smash me into the sidewalk. I used to refer to my twenties as "the lost years," and then I realized it was research. During this time I kept journals, as I had for a long time. My impulse was to note and save things that struck me. It wasn't "Today I did this, today I did that." It was a journal of things people said. When I started writing fiction in my early thirties, I found myself cannibalizing the journals from my twenties. My first book, *Reasons to Live*, came from all of that turmoil. It's no secret that pain teaches. It makes you think, "How can I get myself through this? And this. And this."

Did you find the same kind of solution that your characters often do? Did you laugh?

I didn't do a lot of laughing at the time. I looked for small victories. The stories in *Reasons to Live*— my god, what a lofty title—but really, the reasons in many of the stories are pretty small. That's okay. It doesn't have to be any big deal as long as it will pull you through.

Your narrators and central characters have wonderful defense systems. Quite often they're placed in situations where they're either going ot laugh or cry, and end up doing a little of both.

Doctors often have the darkest sense of humor. They have to, don't they? I spent a lot of time in hospitals where I picked some of that up. There's a way in which you can make the readers laugh until suddenly they're crying, and they don't know what hit them. It's a very purposeful kind of manipulation....

Is it true that you wrote all of the stories in Reasons to Live *as part of [a workshop with writer Gordon Lish]?*

I wrote quite a few of them, not all of them, as workshop "assignments." The only real assignment that he ever gave in the Columbia workshop was to write up our most terrible, despicable secret, "The thing you will never live down." I knew instantly what that was. I'd failed my best friend at the moment when I absolutely couldn't fail her, when she was dying. I wrote that story, my first, called "In the Cemetery Where Al Jolson Is Buried," over the thirteen weeks of the class. There is not a word of dialogue in that story that either one of us ever said, yet it's a true story.

Would you say that most of your stories are true, in that sense?

I almost always work from something that actually happened as a point of departure. I resent the notion that observation is something less than imagination, that if you didn't fashion something out of your head it's somehow not art. In this respect, having studied journalism for some time was extremely useful, because I brought that to fiction. The pressure I put on myself from journalistic concerns served my fiction as well; in writing about things that had in fact happened, I reported on them....

A lot of times what's not reported in your work is more important than what actually appears on the page. Frequently the emotional focus of the story is some underlying event that may not be described or even referred to in the story.

I don't have any great interest in the sort of dramatic writing that would be necessary to give you the wreck, the murder, the whatever. I come in when the people are sitting around later with their heads in their hands, just looking around the room, saying "Now what?" One of the nicest comments on that point came from William Kennedy, who told me, "You leave out all the right things." Well, yes, I'm trying to leave out those things What's not there supports what is there.

What are some of the things that you left out of "Inthe Cemetery Where AUolson Is Buried" ?

I left out some of her anger at me. I was convicting myself. I wanted to be the one who had failed, who had done things wrong, not my dying friend. I didn't want her to appear to be the bitch that she sometimes was, because I wanted to really convict the narrator, myself; it made a better story. There's a late story by Raymond Carver called "Intimacy," in which the narrator returns to visit his ex-wife, and for the length of the story he takes all of her abuse-does not refute a thing she says, does not plead his case-just takes it and takes it and takes it. And at the end before he leaves-is it possible he kisses the hem of her dress? Here's this fellow you've heard the most terrible things about, and he's the one you feel for at the end of the story. You're on much firmer ground, I think, if you're willing to take the blame in a story. If you blame somebody else it sounds like whining. It's just not good form. It's not good manners....

You've been linked to the minimalists by several reviewers, including Newsweek, which labeled you a "minimalist tough cookie," while at least one reviewer prefers to call you a miniaturist. Do you think of yourself in those terms?

I much prefer the term miniaturist. There's an enormous backlash against whatever minimalism is or was. A lot of the writers called minimalists had nothing to do with each other. It was a catch-all. These days, when you see the *minimalism* in a review, all it tells you is that the reviewer is lazy. Nobody likes to be tagged, but I don't mind miniaturist. Yes, I work small, concise, precise..,.

Your stories are deceptively easy to read, fun to read, but my suspicion is that they're not easy to write. Can you talk a little bit about the process? Where does a story begin for you?

It has always started with an image or a line, something that I thought could support the weight of a story. There's a moment in "The Laundromat"— a one-act play by Marsha Norman, who also wrote "'Night, Mother"—where a recent widow tells another woman that she opened a door to a closet and saw a beach ball, and realized it was filled with her dead husband's breath. That's what I mean by having an image that will support the weight of a play, of a story. It can be an image, it can be a line. "Tell me things I won't mind forgetting." Why? Because I'm dying....

"In the Cemetery Where Al Jolson Is Buried"; does read like poetry in places. That story, like most of your work, is packed with compelling images, including the chimp who signs her grief over her lost baby at the end Where did that image come from ?

I heard about one of the early ape language experiments years ago, a chimp fluent in sign language. I logged it mentally, because I thought that someday I'd do something with it. Although the story was done as a homage to my best friend, tactically it was an excuse to get to that image. If you know when you start you have something like that waiting at the finish line, it's a real impetus to get there....

How does a collection come together for you? Were all of the stories written as separate entities or did you write some things specifically to fill out the collection?

Reasons to Live certainly had a thematic wholeness. Those stories belong together. They are aligned. I never wrote anything to fit a collection, or to round out a book, but I did notice that every story I write is about loss of one kind or another. Loss of life, of health, of hope, of a job. After writing thirty stories about loss, the question I put to myself to write the last story in the second collection, "The Rest of God," became "What if there were people who hadn't lost anything? What would they be doing?". They don't lose anything, but of course, they have a close call, so I couldn't entirely get away from it. The work that I've done since that story is very different in feel. It's harder in a way, to write about people who are not faced with any threat. There they are, just having their lives. How do you make a story out of that?...

Source: Jo Sapp, "An Interview with Amy Herapel," in The *Missouri Review*, Vol. 16, No. 1,1993, pp. 75-95.

Critical Essay #4

In the following review ofHempeVsfirst collection of short stories, Reasons to Live, Drzal comments that most of HempeVs stories take place in a limbo-like setting possible only in California.

The most basic aim of psychoanalysis, Freud said, is "transforming hysterical misery into common un-happiness." While this formulation may seem harsh and hopeless, the characters in [*Reasons to Live*]... would be more than willing to settle for it.

Most of the stories in *Reasons to Live* open after a crisis to find the narrator standing, shell-shocked, amidst the rubble of her life. Although the tone of Hempel's spare, first person narratives (the exception is the third person "Today Will Be a Quiet Day") varies from the almost Southern Gothic flavor of "Breathing Jesus" to the silly/surreal "Celia is Back" to the full and touching "In the Cemetery Where Al Jolson Is Buried," they share a veneer of detachment. The alternately wise and wise cracking narrators provide ironic commentary, letting us in on the action and on a store of little-known facts: that Bob Dylan's mother invented White-Out, that insects fly between raindrops, that blue-eyed white cats are usually deaf, and cats that can hear will yawn when you run your finger along the teeth of a comb (this doesn't work; I tried it).

This obsessive collection of facts can be seen as a key to Hempel's sensibility. Her narrators are collectors of small, ironic tidbits, and Hempel seems to put forth the theory that the world is just a random assemblage of these trifles—some poignant, some beautiful, some amusing, but none deriving meaning from their arrangement.... Can sanity exist in a senseless world? For Hempel, the answer is obvious.

While it is sometimes witty, the view of the world as absurd deprives the stones of emotional power. Some of them seem merely to be vehicles designed to transport us to the oracular punchline, but fail to lend it resonance along the way. Even at its best, Hempel's prose lacks the neurasthenic charge of Joan Didion's. Didion uses the agglomeration of concrete details to much the same end, but manages to infuse the facts themselves with a simultaneous wonder and irony, to convince the reader that everything she describes, from a hydraulic power plant to a waiter in Zipaquira, Colombia, is a singular phenomenon with its own body of lore.

Hempel's successes come from another direction. In her one fully-realized, moving story, "In the Cemetery Where Al Jolson Is Buried," and to lesser extent in the fine "Beg, SI Tog, Inc, Cont, Rep" (knitting instructions), her disaffected tone works to lend depth to her narrator. In the former story, we suffer along with a woman visiting her best friend, who is dying of cancer, in a California hospital room. Only because we suffer with her can we come to understand and pardon the tactics she uses to avoid feeling pain, but we do come to understand. We believe in her fear, her love of life, and her psychological fragility. The cool monologue is revealed for what it is—noise to drown out pain and fear. The stories are less successful when we have to piece together the events from driblets and hints. The trouble with many of Hempel's aimless heroines

(and occasional heroes) is that they're too strong to let themselves go and too cynical to believe in strength. If, as in "Beg, Sl Tog, Inc, Cont, Rep," an energizing crisis arrives and anomie slips into madness, the heroine just bobs up again into common unhappiness: she has a psychological air bladder that floats her to the surface but no further. Limbo seems like the only honest place to be in these stories. They take place in earthquake and landslide country, where stability is revealed to be a necessary delusion. To her credit, Ms. Hempel continually strives for, and sometimes manages to find, the poetry and raw humor in meaninglessness....

Source: Dawn Ann Drzal, "An Assemblage of Trifles," in *Commonweal* Vol CXII, No. 16, September 20, 1985, pp. 505-7.

BOOKRAGS

Critical Essay #5

In the following review of Reasons to Live, Ballantyne mentions the minimalist nature of Hempel's stories, which is the kind that "robs us of nothing" and seems to contain all the information a reader needs.

Minimalism has its uses, and can achieve surprisingly varied effects: it can allude and expand, as well as leave out and compress. At its most reductive or repetitive, it can induce corresponding states of boredom or trance. There is a kind of writing that masks a lack of substance by itself posing as substance Rushing to fill that void, a reader must project his own meaning, or assume the presence of some meaning that eludes his grasp. At its worst, minimalism is a kind of fraudulent tic that serves to hide a vacuum or defend against feeling. At its best it can, with economy and restraint, amplify perception and force meaning to leap from the page. In most of the stories that make up this first collection [*Reasons to Live*], Amy Hempel has succeeded in revealing both the substance and intelligence beneath the surface of a spare, elliptical prose.

Some of the one-page pieces in *Reasons to Live* are so truncated and incomplete they are interesting only as snapshots. Sometimes a vignette is just a vignette, a sketch a sketch. There are other misses here and there, gags that fall flat. But at their best these stories are tough-minded, original and fully felt. Some—in particular the wrenching "In the Cemetery Where Al Jolson Is Buried," which describes a friend's dying; and the equally haunting "Beg, SI Tog, Inc. Cont, Rep" (which takes its title from the conventions of knitting instructions), have a kind of effortless, unconscious integrity. They can take your breath away, so in tune are their resolutions with everything that has gone before....

It is tempting to think of this collection as a "California book" because many stories seem to spring directly from that soil like native plants: highly colored and direct. The details are perfectly rendered, quintessential California cliches; and yet they are also the truth. They establish the emotional climates in which these characters survive. A peculiarly California kind of drifting is exemplified by the narrator of "Tonight Is a Favor to Holly":

"Four days a week I drive to La Mirada, to the travel agency where I have a job It takes me fifty-five minutes to drive one way, and I wish the commute were longer I like radio personalities, and I like to change lanes And losing yourself on the freeway is like living at the beach—you're not aware of lapsed tune, and suddenly you're there, where it was you were going"

You can almost hear her gum crack as she speaks. Still, small slips betray a vestigial identity, a wish not to blend, but to stand out: of the beach in the morning, she says, "I like my prints to be the first of the day."

True, too, are the details of California overabundance: "Everything there is the size of something else: strawberries are the size of tomatoes, apples are the size of

grapefruits, papayas are the size of watermelons." But alongside the particulars that anchor the stories to a place, there are intimations of a growing homogenization of scene....

A subtle universality of feeling infuses the more fully realized stories, transcending the cliche— or forcing it to underscore and serve a greater truth. Waiting helplessly for her friend to die, the narrator of "In the Cemetery Where Al Jolson Is Buried," in a displacement of hallucinatory intensity, envisions a simple beach ("The beach is standing still today. Everyone on it is tranquilized, numb, or asleep") as the locus of destruction; then transmutes the scene again, observing the way terror can transform itself into desire—the other side of death....

These stories, more than half of which have never been published before, are conspicuously contemporary—both the abbreviated one-page sketches and the more extended pieces of five or six; feeling is always contained, never explicit. Yet this is a kind of minimalism that robs us of nothing, that has room for the largest themes; the best of these stones have a compression that seems to capture it all.

Source: Sheila Ballantyne, "Rancho Libido and Other Hot Spots," in The *New York Times Book Review*, April 28, 1985, p. 9

Topics for Further Study

What narrative function does the beach scene serve in the story? Does it seem out of place? Why?

Why does the narrator refuse to stay with her dying friend? What roles do motivation and plot play in the reader's understanding of the narrator's reluctance?

How does the detail about earthquakes and fear of earthquakes relate to the central concern of the story?

How does the vignette about the chimpanzee serve as a metaphor for the story as a whole?

What Do I Read Next?

At the Gates of the Animal Kingdom, Hempel's second collection of short stories, which includes the well-received story about writing stories, "Harvest."

Less than Zero, Bret Easton Ellis's 1985 novel about youth in California, whose unexamined lives have tragic consequences.

"The Jilting of Granny Weatherall," Katherine Anne Porter's 1929 story about a dying woman troubled by her past; written in first-person, stream-of-consciousness narrative.

Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?, the earliest of Raymond Carver's collection of short stories and the first fiction to which literary critics applied the term "minimalism."

"Hills Like White Elephants," Ernest Hemingway's minimalist short story about a couple at a crossroads in their relationship. Like "In the Cemetery," their strongest feelings go unspoken.

Days, the initial collection of short stories written by Mary Robison, whose early creative writing efforts were directed by Gordon Lish, and who was a classmate of Hempel's.

Coming to Terms with the Short Story, edited by Susan Lohafer. This collection of essays by renowned short story critics is a treasure of information about the short story as a genre and its role as the "stepchild of literature."

Further Study

Aldridge, John *W Talents and Technicians Literary Chic and the New Assembly-Line Fiction*, Scnbner's, 1992. Aldridge evaluates the writing styles and creative work of new writers whose fiction has been produced in college and university creative writing centers.

Hallett, Cynthia J Whitney "Minimalism—The Short Story " Dissertation, University of South Florida, 1996 Contains a full chapter devoted entirely to Hempel in which Hallett addresses Hempel's style and the literary influences that may have contributed to the symptoms of minimalism that pervade the stories.

Hooper, Brad. "Adult Fiction" Booklist Vol. 86, No. 13, March 1,1990, p 1264.

A brief yet solid review of Hempel's second collection of short stories, *At the Gates of the Animal Kingdom*.

Jenks, Tom. "How Writers Live Today " *Esquire*, Vol. 104, August, 1985, pp. 123-127.

A brief statement by Hempel in which she explains the real-life details of her 1979 promise to a dying friend in Los Angles, California, that sparked the totally fictional events and dialogue of "In the Cemetery Where Al Jolson Is Buried."

Wachell, Mark Royden. "What Nothing Means," Joan Didion, edited by Warren French, Twayne, 1980, pp. 121-37 Winchell discusses Hollywood fiction, quoting from Jonas Spatz's Hollywood in Fiction, and demonstrates the importance of the Hollywood theme to Didion's writing

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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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