'If I Forget Thee, O Earth . . . ' Study Guide

'If I Forget Thee, O Earth . . . ' by Arthur C. Clarke

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Introduction

"'If I Forget Thee, O Earth . . . ,'" by Arthur C. Clarke, was first published in *Future* magazine in 1951. However, it received its greatest exposure when it was collected in Clarke's *Expedition to Earth,* which was published in 1953. The story tapped into one of the great fears of the 1950s, the threat of atomic war. The U.S. decision to drop atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of World War II ushered in the atomic age, and many writers, especially science fiction writers, wrote stories depicting an atomic apocalypse. In this story, Marvin, the ten-year-old main character who lives in a lunar colony, gets to see an earthrise for the first time. However, joy turns to despair as he sees the glowing, radioactive earth that has been destroyed by an atomic World War III. He realizes that he is in permanent exile and that only his descendants will be able to return home. Critics and popular readers alike appreciate the cautionary message in this story and note the quality of many of Clarke's short stories in general. However, it is Clarke's novels—most notably *Childhood's End;* the novelization of his screenplay for the movie, *2001: A Space Odyssey;* and *Rendezvous with Rama*—that have made him famous. "'If I Forget Thee, O Earth . . . '" can be found in Clarke's *Tales from Planet Earth,* published by ibooks, inc., in 2001.

Author Biography

Clarke was born on December 16, 1917, in Minehead, Somersetshire, England. Like many children in his generation, Clarke first discovered science fiction through *Amazing Stories,* one of the popular science fiction pulp magazines—so-called because they were printed on cheap, wood-pulp paper. Clarke moved on to reading books by H. G. Wells, Olaf Stapledon, and other British science fiction writers, and he wrote stories for a school magazine as a teenager. In 1936, he could no longer afford his education and dropped out to work as a government auditor. At the same time, he became involved with the British Interplanetary Society, an association formed by fans of science fiction and space science. Here, Clarke met many science fiction editors and writers, who helped him start selling some of his short stories.

In 1941, Clarke enlisted in the Royal Air Force. After teaching himself mathematics and electronics theory, he served as a radar instructor until the end of the war. In 1945, he published his famous article, "Extraterrestrial Relays," in which he introduced the idea of communication satellites. After the war, he returned to school, earning degrees in physics and in pure and applied mathematics from King's College, University of London, in 1948. While working as an assistant editor for a technical journal, *Science Abstracts,* Clarke continued devoting time to both his science writing and his science fiction writing. In 1952, he published *The Exploration of Space,* widely regarded as the first nontechnical overview of space technology. The book was a hit with popular audiences and became the first science book chosen as a Book-of-the-Month Club selection. This success, coupled with the success of his novel *Childhood's End* (1953), gave Clarke the financial means to pursue his writing full time. In 1953, he also published *Expedition to Earth,* which collected many of his earlier magazine stories, including "'If I Forget Thee, O Earth . . . '"

A prolific writer, Clarke published many other science and science fiction books. In both, he earned a solid reputation for his understanding of science and for his ability to illuminate complex scientific concepts. This recognition led to Clarke's placement in several high-profile projects. Among these were the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's Apollo missions, for which Clarke served as a co-anchor with Walter Cronkite from 1968 to 1970. These included the historic Apollo 11 mission, in which Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin became the first men to set foot on the moon on July 20, 1969. In the late 1960s, Clarke also worked with director Stanley Kubrick to write the script for and novelization of *2001: A Space Odyssey.* Both versions, released in 1968, were based on "The Sentinel," one of Clarke's short stories.

Clarke's awards are as impressive as his writing output. He has won every major award given for science fiction works, including the Hugo Award for "The Star" (1956) and Hugo and Nebula awards for *Rendezvous with Rama* (1974) and *The Fountains of Paradise* (1980). In addition, in 1986, the Science Fiction Writers of America named Clarke a Grand Master. Clarke has also received countless awards for his nonfiction writing efforts, which have helped increase public understanding of science. However, perhaps the greatest honor came in 1997, when Clarke was knighted. Clarke continues

to write from his home in Sri Lanka, where he has resided since the late 1960s. His other works include *3001: The Final Odyssey* (1997) and *The Trigger* (1999).

Plot Summary

"'If I Forget Thee, O Earth . . . '" starts off by introducing Marvin, a ten-year-old boy. Marvin and his father walk quickly through a large building, which includes a greenhouse and an observatory, then enter an airlock chamber, where they get into a scout car and drive outside. Before now, Marvin has only seen the outside in photographs and on television. At this point, Clarke has not revealed where they are, but he starts to give clues that they are not on earth as soon as Marvin and his father leave the airlock. The sun is moving across a completely black sky, a sight not possible from earth due to earth's atmosphere. When the sky is black on earth, it is because the sun has set, in which case the moon comes out. Also, Marvin has read about the classic rhyme "Twinkle, twinkle, little star" in one of his father's books and is surprised to see that the stars do not twinkle. When stars are viewed by the unaided human eye from within earth's atmosphere, the turbulence in the higher ranges of the atmosphere causes the stars to look like they are twinkling, an effect known as scintillation. The absence of this effect is one more clue from Clarke that Marvin and his father are not on earth.

They drive at one hundred miles an hour in their car, which has balloon tires. This is different from most cars on earth, which have tires made of rubber. They pass a mine and drive down the steep edge of the plateau that contains their colony. They cross a shadow line, and the sun disappears, plunging them into darkness. Hours later, after driving through mountains and valleys, they pass the remains of a crashed rocket, another sign that they are not on earth. After many more hours, they reach the end of the mountain range and descend into a valley. Since the sun is hidden from the valley, Marvin is surprised to find the valley illuminated by a strange white light. Marvin and his father sit quietly for several minutes, as Marvin adjusts his eyesight to the glare of the planet that is giving off the bright white light.

At this point, the boy can discern through the hazy atmosphere the outlines of continents and the polar ice caps that identify the planet as earth. Marvin mourns the fact that he has never experienced the diverse climate of earth and wonders why this is, since earth looks so peaceful. However, as his eyes continue to adjust, he sees that the shadowed half of the earth, which should be totally dark, is gleaming with a radioactive glow—evidence of the atomic war that has taken place on earth. At this point, Clarke reveals that Marvin and his father are watching from a quarter of a million miles away, which means that they—and their colony—are on the moon, something the reader might already suspect from the earlier clues.

Marvin's father tells Marvin the story of earth's destruction, which he has heard before, but which he has not understood until now. He also tells Marvin how the humans at this moon outpost, most likely the last remnant of human civilization, had to fight to survive. Without the regular supplies sent from earth, they had to adapt to the hostile environment of the moon, their new home in exile. This was not their biggest battle, however. As Marvin's father tells him, the biggest challenge to their survival is to maintain the will to survive, since none of them, including Marvin, will ever be able to

return to earth. It will be centuries before earth has cleansed itself of the radioactivity, so only Marvin's distant descendants will be able to return to earth. Marvin realizes that, someday, he will bring his own child to this spot, as his father has done, to pass the tradition on and keep the dream alive of someday returning home. On the return trip, Marvin is sobered by the sight of the home that he will never see, and he does not look at earth again.

Summary

"If I Forget Thee, Oh Earth..." is Arthur C. Clarke's short story of a ten-year old boy named Marvin who is forced to live in a lunar colony and will never return to Earth, which has been destroyed by an atom bomb.

Marvin feels a sense of anticipation as he accompanies his father upward past several levels of the lunar station in which they live. The pair moves quickly through the Administration and Power section, past the Farmlands where Martin feels an emotional tug to linger and revel in the sights and smells of growing things. Marvin's father pulls him onward though to the entrance of the Observatory, and Martin thrills at the prospect that he will be going Outside for the first time in his life.

Marvin and his father reach the servicing chamber, where they are escorted to a surface vehicle complete with balloon tires and pressurized cabin. Marvin settles into his seat while the air pumps fade and the pressure stabilizes in the vehicle. As the great door to the station opens, Marvin sees the landscape, which he has never before viewed.

Marvin has only seen pictures and television images of the scenery unfolding before him now. The sun creeps slowly against an ebony sky, and in the other direction the stars burn intensely in spite of their small size. Marvin remembers a nursery rhyme from one of his father's book about "Twinkle, twinkle, little star," and he wonders who could not know that stars do not twinkle but burn constantly.

The surface vehicle is speeding along at one hundred miles an hour now, and Marvin realizes that he can no longer see the Colony behind them. The only evidence of human beings that Marvin can see are the structures surrounding a mine opening, a crashed rocket and a stone memorial with a metal cross.

Zooming past the mine, Marvin's father is driving with the exhilarated energy of someone who is trying to escape something. Soon the vehicle reaches the edge of the plateau where their Colony is, and Marvin sees before him an endless vista of craters, mountain ranges and ravines. Martin feels a momentary sense of anxiety but realizes that there is a pathway obviously made by some others at another time.

Night falls abruptly as the sun falls behind the black mountains, and the searchlights on the vehicle cast an eerie glow on the rocks ahead. Marvin and his father drive for many hours this way until they are clear of the mountains. Then they drive down into a shallow valley where Marvin senses that something very strange is happening. The sun went down behind the mountain range a while ago, so the valley ahead should be shrouded in darkness. Instead, it glows with a cool white light. Suddenly, as the vehicle clears the craggy valley, the source of the eerie glow is revealed ahead.

Marvin's father stops the vehicle, and the whisper of the oxygen source is the only noise as father and son sit and watch the nearby planet from which this new light is emanating. When Marvin's eyes adjust to this hazy light, he can see the different

landmasses and polar caps of planet Earth. Marvin wonders about the sunsets, the rain, the snow and the seashore. He wonders about all the other earthly things that he has only heard about.

Soon, Marvin identifies the phosphorescent glow coming from a portion of Earth as a radioactive light and realizes that this is the aftermath of Armageddon. Little Marvin sits a quarter of a million miles away from the still glowing destruction and realizes that it will be hundreds of years before any life forms can return to the planet.

Marvin's father shares with Marvin the story of the planet's destruction and how the lunar colony in which they live was the only place of human survival. After the destruction of Earth, the residents of the lunar colony could no longer depend on supply shipments from home, so they have had to adapt to survival in the bleak environment on the moon. The survivors prevailed but need a purpose, or they will also die out. This is their biggest challenge yet.

Marvin now understands why his father has brought him to this place today. It will be up to Marvin and the few others like him to keep alive the dream of their descendants one day returning to Earth after the winds and the rains have cleared the atmosphere of all the destruction. On that day in the future, the space ships will once again launch and take human beings again to the planet of their heritage. Marvin knows that he will bring his own son to this spot one day and share the dream with him, although Marvin can only dream about the world he never knew and never will.

Analysis

The author uses the third person narrative perspective to tell the story about Marvin and his father. This is especially dramatic in this science fiction story because the reader explores along with Marvin and has no real insight into any emotions or feelings of the main character. Even the setting and the purpose of the father and son trip are revealed to Marvin at the same time that the reader discovers them.

The setting of the story is the moon, although it is not immediately revealed as such. There are indications along the way such as the surface vehicle with its balloon tires and pressurized cabin, the craters and ravines, the chalky dust blown up by the vehicle's tires and the intensity of the sun against a jet-black sky. Finally, at the end of the story when it is revealed that Marvin is a quarter of a million miles away and looking at the destruction of planet Earth, it becomes unquestionable that Marvin is living on the moon.

The story is of the science fiction genre, and although it was written in 1951, its message of world destruction and Armageddon is still a very real topic today. Historically, Clarke drew his content both from the imminent launch of the U.S. space program as well as the devastating aftereffects of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan, in 1945. The potential aftermath of complete world destruction

became the core of Clarke's story in light of these two emerging factors in human advancement and destruction.

Although the content of the story is bleak, the author does provide some encouragement in that Marvin's father wants him to champion hope in the lunar colony so that their descendants may one day return to a safe Earth. It is a testament to the human spirit that in spite of the physical trials of survival on the moon, the instinct and drive to survive and protect the human heritage will supersede the pain of forced alienation and estrangement from home.

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Characters

Marvin

Marvin is the main character, a boy in a moon colony, who sees the post-apocalypse earth for the first time during an earthrise when he is ten. The narrator tells the story through Marvin's eyes, revealing details as Marvin observes them; as a result, readers experience the shock of the ruined earth at the same time as Marvin does. Marvin is excited when he finds out his father is going to take him outside to the moon's surface. When they get into the scout car and start driving, Marvin is even more ecstatic. He has seen the surface of the moon in photographs and on television within the moon colony, but the surface is even more spectacular up close. The same is true for the stars, which Marvin and the others in the moon colony cannot see while they are inside the colony. However, when Marvin sees his first earthrise, his happiness turns to dread. Although the lighted half of earth looks perfectly normal, and Marvin imagines the lush forests and oceans that he has heard about, the half of earth that should be dark is glowing—a sign of the radioactive aftermath of atomic war. Marvin's father tells him how humanity destroyed itself, leaving only the small colony of humans on the moon. Now, they must wait hundreds of years until the radioactivity subsides, preserving the human race in the moon colony, before their descendants can make their way back to earth.

Marvin's Father

Marvin's father, one of the initial members of the colony on the moon, remains silent for most of the story. The narrator tells the story through the eyes of Marvin, who notices at one point during the journey to the dark side of the moon that his father is driving quickly and recklessly, as if he is trying to run from something. When they reach the spot where Marvin and his father observe the earthrise, Marvin sees the radioactive earth and understands why. Marvin's father has lived on earth, so he knows what he is missing by being forced to live in exile in the artificial environment of the moon colony. As they witness the earthrise, Marvin's father tells him the story of the atomic war that left his colony stranded on the moon and the struggle that they had to survive. More importantly, he impresses upon Marvin the importance of surviving and reproducing so that Marvin's descendants will someday be able to return to earth after it is no longer radioactive.

Themes

The Aftermath of Atomic War

When Clarke published his story in 1951, humankind had already witnessed the U.S. wartime detonation of two atomic bombs as well as several atomic tests. As people realized the destructive capabilities of atomic weapons, many science fiction writers envisioned the potential aftermath of atomic war in stories like this one. When Marvin views his first earthrise, he refers to the atomic quality of the destruction. As the narrator says, "the glow of dying atoms was still visible, a perennial reminder of the ruinous past." Because radioactive atoms take a long time to die, they are visible from the moon even when their targets, the humans who fought in the atomic war, are long dead. Clarke was also familiar with the processes by which atomic radiation would eventually be cleansed from earth. Says the narrator, "[t]he winds and the rains would scour the poisons from the burning lands and carry them to the sea." It is in the vastness of the oceans that the radiation poisons will finally be diluted enough so that "they could harm no living things."

Exile

The characters in Clarke's story experience a planetary exile. Marvin has never even stepped foot on earth, having been born in the lunar colony. The narrator notes this fact when describing Marvin's first view of earth: "There in that shining crescent were all the wonders that he had never known." Marvin has only read about earth in books, a thought that makes him feel even more "the anguish of exile." This feeling gets worse as he sees the portion of earth that should be dark, "gleaming faintly with an evil phosphorescence" and remembers the stories of the atomic war that left his parents stranded on the moon. This lunar exile is different from anything that humanity has known thus far. People have often been exiled but sometimes have had the option of coming back. However, the residents of the moon colony do not have the option to return. In the final days of earth's destruction, they learn this fact and realize that "they were alone at last, as no men had ever been alone before, carrying in their hands the future of the race."

Survival

The current residents of the colony will never step foot on earth again. Says Marvin: "It would be centuries yet before that deadly glow died from the rocks and life could return again to fill that silent, empty world." However, following the destruction of earth, the colony members could not think too deeply about the implications of this situation; they were too busy fighting for their own immediate survival. Having grown accustomed to being dependent upon earth for their provisions, it came as a profound shock when "the colony had learned at last that never again would the supply ships come flaming down

through the stars with gifts from home." For several years, the lunar exiles fight to make a sufficient home on the moon using the supplies that they already have, and, eventually, they prevail. As the narrator observes of the colony, "this little oasis of life was safe against the worst that Nature could do."

Once their short-term survival has been secured, the members of the moon colony realize that they must do more. They must transfer their cultural and scientific knowledge—as well as their desire to return to earth—to their children, who must in turn pass this goal to their own children. When his father takes him to view the ruined earth, Marvin understands that this rite of passage is crucial to the survival of the human race, even though he has to live with the fact that he will never get to see the earth himself. "He would never walk beside the rivers of that lost and legendary world. . . . Yet one day . . . his children's children would return to claim their heritage."

Style

Science Fiction

"'If I Forget Thee, O Earth . . . '" takes place in the future, when humanity possesses technology that is greater than that in Clarke's time. Future scenarios are one of the hallmarks of many science fiction works. In some cases, as in this one, science fiction writers create their version of the future by extrapolating current technologies to a logical conclusion. For example, when the story was published in 1951, the United States and the [former] Soviet Union were just beginning to launch their space programs. And the moon, earth's closest neighbor, seemed a likely first target. The apocalyptic tone of the story is another common hallmark of many science fiction works. While some science fiction writers write stories that illustrate how science might make life better for humans in the future, others take a more negative view, offering tales that caution against the potential destructive power of science. As the narrator says of Marvin: "He was looking upon the funeral pyre of a world—upon the radioactive aftermath of Armageddon." The chilling picture that Clarke paints of the potential consequences of atomic war is a clear warning to humanity. When his father is describing the history of earth's atomic war, Marvin cannot understand "the forces that had destroyed it in the end, leaving the colony, preserved by its isolation, as the sole survivor." In the end, Clarke uses Marvin's innocence and horrible realizations in the story to underscore his own view that atomic war is ridiculous and incomprehensible.

Setting

Clarke's moon setting is necessary to achieve the full effect of his message. In order for the story to work, the characters must experience an exile beyond earth, where they can view the aftermath of earth's destruction at a safe distance. Since the moon is earth's closest neighbor, a mere "quarter of a million miles" away, it is the only planetary body from which a human could view the earth with the unaided eye. The moon is also an environment that is not naturally inhabitable, so this setting underscores for these viewers the danger of earth's destruction. Says the narrator of the time immediately following the colony members' exile: "Then had followed the years of despair, and the long-drawn battle for survival in this fierce and hostile world."

Point of View

Clarke uses a third-person narrator to tell his tale. In a third-person narrative, there is an outside narrator who refers to the characters. For example, the first sentence of the story says that Marvin's father took "him" through the colony. In addition, since the narrator tells the story through the eyes of Marvin alone, the third-person narration is also considered a limited point of view. This method is particularly effective in this story, since the reader only learns facts as Marvin does, so that neither finds out what is going

on until the end of the story. The only difference between Marvin's and the reader's knowledge is that, in the beginning, Marvin knows he is on the moon, while the reader does not. Throughout much of the story, facts about the moon setting are revealed selectively to the reader, as Marvin views the outside surface of the moon for the first time. These clues include the description of the land "burning beneath the fierce sun that crawled so slowly across the jet-black sky," the presence of "a jumbled wasteland of craters, mountain ranges, and ravines," and "the skeleton of a crashed rocket." When Marvin and his father reach what should be a dark valley, he is surprised to find it "awash with a cold white radiance," which is soon discovered to be light from the damaged earth—a surprise for both Marvin and Clarke's readers.

Historical Context

The Dawn of the Atomic Age

In August 1945, in an effort to end World War II quickly and decisively, the United States dropped atomic bombs, also known as A-bombs, on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The immediate explosive and long-term destructive forces were unlike anything that humanity had ever seen. These two events, which led to the rapid surrender of Japan and the end of World War II, also served to usher in the atomic age and the threat of further atomic war. During World War II, many countries had been working on their own atomic bombs. After the decimation at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, several countries rushed to complete these bombs. In 1946, the United States, the world's top superpower, again set an example when it began a series of peacetime atomic bomb tests at Bikini Atoll in the western chain of the Marshall Islands, in the central Pacific Ocean. In 1949, the Soviet Union, the other major superpower at the time, tested its first atomic weapon, proving to the United States that it, too, had atomic capabilities. By this point, the Soviet Union and the United States, which were allies at the end of World War II, had already been on unstable terms for several years.

The Soviet-U.S. Rift

In February 1945, as Nazi Germany was getting ready to fall to the Allied powers, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, and Joseph Stalin— the leaders, respectively, of the United States, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union—had an historic meeting at Yalta, a Russian city. Here, they discussed how Europe should be divided after the war. Stalin wanted to impose communist governments in Poland and Germany and wanted Germany, its biggest foe, disbanded as a nation. Churchill and Roosevelt feared the spread of communism, however, and wanted to maintain Germany's status as a nation. They negotiated a compromise, but Stalin did not abide by the agreement. Following the war, Stalin capitalized on the weakness of many Eastern European countries, using the Soviet Union's military prowess to quickly place communist governments in much of Eastern Europe. On March 12, 1947, President Truman decided, in a declaration now known as the Truman Doctrine, to actively stop the spread of communism to other nations. He immediately petitioned Congress for funds to assist countries like Greece and Turkey, which were in danger of being overthrown by Soviet-backed militant groups. The decision to fight communism, which became part of U.S. foreign policy for decades, helped create a rift between the Soviet Union and the United States.

The Cold War Deepens

This rift grew in 1949 with the creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), an alliance among the United States, Canada, and ten Western European nations. The Soviet Union responded with the Warsaw Pact, an alliance of Eastern European

nations. These multiple conflicts— between the United States and the Soviet Union, NATO and the Warsaw Pact, and democracy and communism—were labeled the Cold War, and for good reason. Although much of the period was technically spent in peacetime, the pervasive feeling of suspicion and paranoia that was generated by this clash of superpowers made many feel that they were living through a war. This feeling was underscored even further in 1948, when Congress approved the first peacetime draft into the military, reasoning that it was necessary to maintain a large standing army to combat communism. The United States had several opportunities to deploy this recently expanded military, including the Korean War—officially called a police action—in the early 1950s.

The Beginning of the Arms Race

During the Cold War, the two alliances, led by the United States and the Soviet Union, continued to try to convert the world to democracy and communism, respectively. At the same time, each side increased its supply of atomic bombs. However, in the early 1950s, these weapons of mass destruction were replaced by thermonuclear bombs, known as super bombs, which had an even greater explosive payload than atomic bombs. A-bombs relied on the energy released by the fission—or division—of atoms. On the other hand, thermonuclear bombs, also known as hydrogen bombs or H-bombs, harnessed an atomic explosion and used it as a trigger to ignite a thermonuclear fuel, resulting in the fusion, or combination, of atoms. Fusion, the same process used to power the sun, produces a vastly more destructive force than fission. The United States tested its first thermonuclear device, a behemoth weighing more than eighty tons, in 1952. From this point on, both the United States and the Soviet Union spent a massive amount of resources developing and producing lighter thermonuclear weapons that had greater payloads and that could be attached to missiles. The very existence of this increasing stockpile of nuclear weapons, which include any weapon using a fission or fusion device, was thought to be insurance. Each side knew that if one side launched a nuclear missile, the other side would have no choice but to retaliate by sending its own missiles, which would lead to nuclear war and most likely the end of the world. This insurance was known as mutually assured destruction, with the fitting acronym MAD.

The Public Prepares for World War III

In the United States, the public was well aware that one mistake on either side could inadvertently trigger World War III. As a result, the government formed the federal Civil Defense Administration (CDA) in 1951 to help calm the public. Schoolchildren were told—through their teachers and through movies and newsreels—that in the event of a nuclear attack, they would be safe if they ducked and covered their heads. The most destructive aspects of nuclear war were downplayed, and nuclear weapons were described in favorable terms in an effort to get people to support them. The government encouraged people to construct concrete bomb shelters in their basements or backyards, and even respectable media like Life magazine proclaimed the fiction that these bunkers would protect the majority of people.

The Beginning of Space Flight

While the United States and the Soviet Union were busy stockpiling nuclear weapons, the two superpowers were also engaged in another race: the space race. Each side wanted to demonstrate its prowess by being the first to get a man in space, and, ideally, on the moon. Although philosophers and scientists had studied the moon for thousands of years, only in the mid-twentieth century did humanity possess the technology to leave earth's atmosphere and try to reach it. In the early 1950s, all U.S. space research and missions were carried out through the Army and Air Force, as there was no specific space organization. This was appropriate, since the liquid-fuel propulsion systems used in spaceflight were initially developed for military applications such as missiles.

Critical Overview

"'If I Forget Thee, O Earth . . . '" was published in 1951, when most mainstream and literary critics thought science fiction had little literary value. This view persisted despite the fact that English authors from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, such as H. G. Wells and Jules Verne, had written critically acclaimed science fiction works. Still, science fiction readers were hungry for short stories by their favorite authors, which they often read in science fiction magazines like *Future,* where "'If I Forget Thee, O Earth . . . '" was first published. In fact, science fiction's many pulp magazines helped give science fiction a negative image with critics, even while the cheap magazines attracted popular readers. When the story was collected in Clarke's *Expedition to Earth* in 1953, it did not receive much critical attention.

However, in the second half of the twentieth century, as the science fiction publishing trend started to shift from magazines to books, critical focus shifted as well. This change was initially due to the literary quality of books by science fiction writers such as Clarke, Kurt Vonnegut, and Ray Bradbury. More critics started to review science fiction works, and more teachers started to use science fiction stories in their classrooms. Overall, Clarke has fared well with the critics since this shift, although it is his novels, such as *Childhood's End,* published in the same year as *Expedition to Earth,* which have earned the most critical acclaim.

The few critics who have commented specifically on "'If I Forget Thee, O Earth . . . '" have given the story high marks. In his entry on Clarke for the *Critical Survey of Short Fiction,* David N. Samuelson says that the story is one of Clarke's "best and best-known stories," noting "the haunting rite of passage of a young lunar exile getting his first glimpse of the unapproachably radioactive world of his ancestors." In his entry on Clarke for *Science Fiction Writers,* Samuelson adds that the story is "static," with "little or no plot complications," and "elegiac," meaning that it expresses sadness for something in the past—in this case, the ruined earth. For Samuelson, the static quality is a positive, since it enhances the elegiac effect of the story. Likewise, in his essay "The Cosmic Loneliness of Arthur C. Clarke," Thomas D. Clareson calls Clarke's "'If I Forget Thee, O Earth . . . '" "one of his finest short stories" and notes that it falls into the category of stories that serve as a warning to society.

Clarke's short fiction in general was reviewed in 2001, upon the publication of *The Collected Stories of Arthur C. Clarke.* In her review of the book for *Library Journal,* Jackie Cassada says: "this collection of short fiction by Grandmaster Clarke serves as a definitive example of sf at its best." Cassada also notes that the book "displays the author's fertile imagination and irrepressible enthusiasm for both good storytelling and impeccable science." In his review of the collection for *Booklist,* Roland Green agrees. Says Green: "The stories demonstrate Clarke's dazzling and unique combination of command of the language, scientific and other kinds of erudition, and inimitable wit." Finally, the reviewer for *Kirkus Reviews* notes Clarke's "awesome inventiveness, sure grasp of scientific principle, readability, openness, and utter lack of viciousness or

meanness." For these reasons, the critic is not surprised that Clarke is regarded as "the single most famous and influential non-American SF writer of the post-WW II period."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Poquette has a bachelor's degree in English and specializes in writing about literature. In the following essay, Poquette discusses the techniques that Clarke employs in "'If I Forget Thee, O Earth . . . '" to give his bleak message more impact.

In his entry on Clarke for *Science Fiction Writers,* David. N. Samuelson notes that "some of his early stories were essentially jokes" and that these stories were "whimsical." However, Samuelson notes in his entry that "Clarke could also write stories of a more somber, even melancholy tone—far-future tales in which man's science and technology seemed to lead to a dead end." "'If I Forget Thee, O Earth . . . '" is definitely one of the latter. In the story, Clarke sends a dark message to the world's inhabitants, urging them not to use atomic bombs. By depicting a post-holocaust scenario, in which a group of humans is stranded for centuries on the moon, he offers a vivid example of what could happen if an atomic World War III ever happens. In his essay "The Cosmic Loneliness of Arthur C. Clarke," Thomas D. Clareson notes the cautionary message and calls Clarke's story "one of his finest." However, Clarke does more than show an example. He amplifies the chilling impact of his antiwar message by using specific imagery, emphasizing the idea of silence, and choosing specific words to describe the radioactive aftermath.

The story begins, appropriately enough, with an image of life. Marvin, the ten-year-old main character who has grown up in the lunar colony, is drawn to the vegetation that he observes in the colony's farmlands. "The smell of life was everywhere, awakening inexpressible longings in his heart: no longer was he breathing the dry, cool air of the residential levels." After this brief image of life, however, the rest of the story emphasizes death. During his trip to see the earthrise, Marvin sees only hard, rocky landscapes; there is no vegetation: "Ahead, as far as the eye could reach, was a jumbled wasteland of craters, mountain ranges, and ravines." After viewing the ruined earth, Marvin realizes that the vegetation of the farmlands is the only plant life that he will ever see. Worse, he realizes that he is missing much more by not being able to see the natural lands of earth. "He would never walk beside the rivers of that lost and legendary world, or listen to the thunder raging above its softly rounded hills."

The absence of life is made even worse by the pervasive darkness on the moon. As soon as Marvin leaves the confines of the colony, he sees many examples of darkness. Unlike earth's, the moon's thin atmosphere does not feature blue sky. Instead, the landscape burns "beneath the fierce sun that crawled so slowly across the jet-black sky." Although the moon is lit by sunlight, the sky remains black. This blackness gets even worse when Marvin and his father drive through mountains that block out the sun. Says the narrator, "Night fell with a shocking abruptness as they crossed the shadow line and the sun dropped below the crest of the plateau." Even when the darkness is alleviated, the lighting has negative connotations. Marvin does not know at this point that they are going to view an earthrise, but he does realize that something is strange when they come out of the mountains: "The sun was now low behind the hills on the right; the valley before them should be in total darkness." However, the valley is lit by

the "cold white radiance" of the earth. At this point, Clarke has his narrator use imagery that suggests there is something wrong with earth. As the narrator notes, "no warmth at all came from the silver crescent." Unlike the sun, a bright planetary body that does provide warmth, this bright world does not. As Marvin realizes that earth is dead, his initial assessment of its lack of warmth seems fitting.

Clarke also employs images of isolation to magnify the effect of despair in the story. Not long after they drive away from the airlock, Clarke reveals that Marvin and his father are alone. "There was no sign of the colony: in the few minutes while he had been gazing at the stars, its domes and radio towers had fallen below the horizon." They do see another sign of civilization—"the curiously shaped structures clustering round the head of a mine"— after they have driven for about a mile. However, after this, they travel for a long time without seeing any other signs of humanity: "For hours they drove through valleys and past the feet of mountains whose peaks seemed to comb the stars." In fact, the next sign of civilization is "the skeleton of a crashed rocket." The image of a crashed rocket symbolizes the failure of science. In addition, by using the word, "skeleton" Clarke once again underscores the idea of death. Clarke could have placed the colony anywhere on the moon, even right on the edge of the valley where Marvin views the earthrise. However, by placing it at a distance from the viewing point, he is able to emphasize the isolation of the colony members. He sends Marvin and his father on a long, lonely trip, during which the only sign of civilization outside the colony's plateau is the remains of a long-dead rocket. The ultimate isolation, however, comes when Marvin sees the earth and remembers hearing the stories of how the colony members learned of earth's destruction. As the narrator says, "they were alone at last, as no men had ever been alone before, carrying in their hands the future of the race."

In addition to imagery, Clarke's story is also marked by a conspicuous absence of sound. There is no dialogue in the story; discussions are only referred to. For the most part, the story is narrative description, as Marvin remembers his trip to see the earthrise. However, at one point in the story, the narrator indicates that Marvin's father has spoken, but the reader does not hear Marvin's father's words. Instead, they too, become part of the narration: "And now Father began to speak, telling Marvin the story which until this moment had meant no more to him than the fairy tales he had heard in childhood." Even before this point, few sounds are described in detail. In the beginning, when they are inside the colony, the narrator observes that Marvin's father "started the motor," the "inner door of the lock slid open," and he listened to the "roar of the great air-pumps fade slowly away." During the drive across the desolate landscape, however, the narrator does not describe the sounds that Marvin and his father might be hearing. In fact, the only other sound comes when Marvin's father stops the vehicle so they can view the earth, when Clarke draws attention to the silence: "It was very quiet in the little cabin now that the motors had stopped." The only sounds are "the faint whisper of the oxygen feed" and the occasional noise of the metal walls of the vehicle as it "radiated away their heat." These obvious uses of silence in the story help illustrate a point. The human race has been largely silenced, diminished from billions on earth to only a handful of survivors on the moon.

Samuelson, in the same entry mentioned above, notes these "static" qualities of the story, saying that it has "little or no plot complications." Stories are often defined by the development of their plots. However, in this story, Clarke focuses on imagery and silence and relegates the main plot complications to the backstory—the events that have taken place before the story begins, in this case the destruction of earth's inhabitants and the subsequent stranding of the moon colony. As readers become aware of what is going on, they feel what Samuelson identifies as the "elegiac" effect of the story, and, like Marvin and his father, they are drawn in to mourn for the lost earth.

This tragedy is amplified by the word choice that Clarke uses, particularly when describing the radioactive aftermath. The atomic war that claims the earth's inhabitants and extends the colony exile is viewed as evil and unnecessary. When describing Marvin's first realization that the earth is contaminated, the narrator says that "the portion of the disk that should have been in darkness was gleaming faintly with an evil phosphorescence." The use of the word "evil" is a direct commentary on the nature of atomic weapons. Clarke also chooses words that have destructive associations, such as fire. As Marvin continues to observe earth, he realizes that he is "looking upon the funeral pyre of a world—upon the radioactive aftermath of Armageddon." Poison is another potent word that Clarke uses. Marvin realizes that the earth will eventually clean itself, that the "winds and the rains would scour the poisons from the burning lands and carry them to the sea." It is here, in the oceans, that the radioactive poisons will "waste their venom." Poisonous snakes are another negative image, so by associating the radioactive contamination with them, Clarke is implying in yet another way that atomic weapons are lethal.

In the end, Clarke is demonstrating that nothing is good for the people in this moon colony. Even the good aspects like the vegetation in the farmlands and the light from earth ultimately have negative connotations, since they illustrate what the colony is missing. Clarke also depicts life as a frail entity and saturates his story with references to the death, darkness, isolation, and silence of a post-holocaust world. By building his story with these techniques and by using words with evil connotations to describe the aftermath of atomic war, Clarke gives his antiwar message a greater impact. When the story was published in 1951, this message was particularly important. At the time, the United States government was trying to quell public fears with propaganda that downplayed the consequences of atomic weapons. Clarke, like other science fiction writers, was engaged in a battle of words, trying to appeal to the public to cry out against atomic bombs, even as the government was teaching people to accept and not fear them.

Source: Ryan D. Poquette, Critical Essay on "'If I Forget Thee, O Earth . . . ,'" in *Short Stories for Students,* Gale, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

Dupler has published numerous essays and has taught college English. In this essay, Dupler examines a prevalent theme of science fiction and its relationship to scientific knowledge.

A major theme of science fiction has been the destruction of earth. In addition, the manner in which science fiction writers have approached and developed this theme has evolved. Advances in space-related technology and in general knowledge have been factors leading to this change. Science fiction itself has done more than mirror these advances in technology and knowledge; imaginative stories in this field have helped to change people's perceptions and expectations about the world.

In this story, published in 1951, Clarke uses very few words and only two characters, a ten-yearold boy named Marvin and his unnamed father. The story has a vague and unearthly setting from the start. The setting is described as a "jumbled wasteland of craters, mountain ranges, and ravines," and the night comes with "shocking abruptness." As his father takes him on his first tour of the area "outside" the human dwellings, Marvin realizes "that something very strange was happening in the land ahead." This sense of foreboding adds drama to the realizations that the characters, and the reader, will make later in the story, when it is revealed that earth and the human society upon it have been destroyed and that the characters are living in an isolated moon colony.

The story is permeated with a sense of longing and sadness, because the characters are misplaced and can only look into space at a planet that was their former home. Marvin and his father know that they will never "walk beside the rivers of that lost and legendary world, or listen to the thunder raging above its softly rounded hills." Referring to the story of how they arrived there, the narrator states, "they were alone at last, as no men had ever been alone before, carrying in their hands the future of the race." The story ends with Marvin and his father together in their lunar scout car, looking out upon the distant, unobtainable, and ruined earth. Marvin and his father know that it will be many hundreds of years before earth will be free of its deadly poisons. Together with the other survivors of the colony, they are all that remain of the human race. It is interesting to note that the narrator refers to the "radioactive Armageddon" that has destroyed earth. This science fiction story, taking place in the future, is still dependent upon the ancient biblical story of the apocalypse. However, in Clarke's apocalypse, human beings and their nuclear technology are responsible for the destruction.

Just as Clarke's main character, Marvin, is a child, it can be argued as well that in this story, humanity is still in a sort of childhood. Humans, stranded in an inhospitable place, have not moved farther out into space and are waiting for that future day when earth will be able to support human life again. Clarke's characters are looking backwards, down the gravity well to their past, to their womb, and are unable to move independently from their current place. Clarke's people are yearning only to walk once again upon earth, which they only know through stories and "fairy tales."

At the same time, Clarke's story contains glimmers of hope and hints of changes that may be germinating in people's ideas about space exploration. The adult in the story, Marvin's father, is full of a zest for pushing Marvin beyond his usual boundaries. When Marvin thinks that his father is behaving as though "he were trying to escape from something," the narrator interjects that this is " a strange thought to come into a child's mind." The adult in the story longs for change and freedom, while the child is apprehensive and passive about those changes. For the child, the tales in which he had once believed are now replaced with stark visions of reality.

Clarke was not the only author of his era to write about earth's destruction. *Caves of Steel* (1954) by Isaac Asimov, *The Green Hills of Earth* (1951) by Robert Heinlein, and *A Canticle for Leibovitz* (1959) by Walter M. Miller, Jr., all deal with the same theme of an innocent humankind being nearly overwhelmed by the partial or complete destruction of earth.

Later writers of science fiction have portrayed humankind as having already grown past its childhood and as being no longer dependent upon earth. It is not unusual or exceptional for later science fiction writers and their characters to view earth as a nest that has become used up and boring and a suitable home only for those too timid for the adventure of space. For example, in Charles Sheffield's well-received 1995 novel, *The Ganymede Club,* a woman says, "if you ask me, the war [that destroyed much of earth] was a blessing in disguise. It moved the center of power of the solar system from earth out here to Jupiter, where it rightfully belongs."

Some later science fiction writers, including Sheffield (often touted as the new Arthur Clarke), Spider and Jeanne Robinson, Greg Bear, and Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle, among others, present characters who look outwards toward Mars and Venus, toward the asteroid belt, and to the outer planets with their many moons. For these writers, escaping from the gravity of earth for space, while there are still sufficient resources to do so, is the next adventure and collective goal for humankind and the next theme for science fiction.

Sheffield, in particular, shows how humankind could fill the entire solar system, using the various resources of the asteroid belt as well as those of both the inner and the outer planets. He shows how this would be much simpler and more economical than dragging resources up out of the gravity well of earth. When he recounts, in several of his novels, including *Cold As Ice, Dark As Day,* and *The Ganymede Club,* that much of earth has been destroyed by a war between the people of the asteroid belt and those of earth, the focus isn't upon the tragedy. Instead, the focus is upon the future of the human race, which is living freely and productively in space.

Thus, science fiction has developed different ways of relating to the theme of the destruction of earth. On the one hand, Clarke and other early writers saw it as a disaster for humanity. In Clarke's story, his characters have reached the moon, but with earth destroyed, they have let their "great ships" lie idle rather than use them to explore further. They have decided to save them for the possibility of an eventual return many hundreds of years later to their old home. On the other hand, later writers have shared a

different vision of the human race, which is at home in space and living throughout the solar system and beyond. It is notable that Clarke further developed this theme of earth destruction and the resulting human travel into space. In his novel *Childhood's End,* Clarke again shows the destruction of earth. But this time aliens are involved and are helping humanity grow up and evolve to its next level of existence. When earth is finally destroyed, it is merely a by-product of this evolution.

Why were the early science fiction writers so pessimistic? Why did the characters in Clarke's story stay huddled beneath their domed and underground city and yearn always for earth? Why were they not out in their "great ships" exploring the rest of the solar system? Why, for Clarke, did the human race have to be helped by aliens to grow past its childhood? Why, on the other hand, are Sheffield, Robinson, and other later writers much more optimistic, with characters always looking outward toward the next frontier?

In Clarke's day, human beings had not yet reached space, let alone touched down upon the moon. Aircraft and computers were primitive compared to those of today. Perhaps that is why, in Clarke's story, the technological aspects are left completely vague. There is a moon colony, sheltered beneath a pressurized plastic dome. There are the lunar scout cars. There are the "great ships . . . still waiting here on the silent, dusty plains." However, they are merely mentioned, never described, and are not essential to his story. What does figure prominently in Clarke's story is directly related to the technology of that time period: the nuclear bomb, which has made earth uninhabitable. For Clarke, scientific discovery has ruined the nest but has not yet given humankind the wings to fly to a new home.

Given the state of technology in the early new millennium, human beings are better prepared for venturing out into space than in Clarke's day. Since the late 1940s, there have been major advances in spaceship design and safety and in computers and guidance systems, for example. The space shuttles really work. An international space station is being built. There have been proposals to send humans to Mars. The Hubble telescope and other successful space probes have given new and exciting details of the universe. The moons of Jupiter have attracted interest as sources of water, and asteroids have been proposed as rich sources of water and minerals. Humanity has become more confident in its ability to leap into space. Science fiction has mirrored these changes in technology, creating new stories of space travel and adventures. At the same time, adventurous science fiction stories have spurred people to raise their sights on new possibilities. In the half century since Clarke wrote his wonderful and basic story, science fiction has attracted many writers with inspiring visions of humanity's future in space. These visions often have been coupled with understanding of biology, psychology, physics, astronomy, and other related disciplines.

When Marvin looks up at that "great silver crescent that floated low above the far horizon," he realizes that his father had shown him earth so that he would pass on this yearning for humankind's home to his own sons and daughters. Marvin knows that he will never reach earth himself, but he sees that "yet one day—how far ahead?—his children's children would return to claim their heritage." Marvin understands that unless

this last remnant of humanity barely existing upon the moon had "a goal, a future towards which it could work, the Colony would lose the will to live."

Clarke's story ends as a starting place for other science fiction writers, declaring that it is human nature to have a goal and a vision of the future. Building upon Clarke's vision of the future and connecting that with the ever-increasing body of scientific knowledge, science fiction continues to tell new stories of great adventures into space.

Source: Douglas Dupler, Critical Essay on "'If I Forget Thee, O Earth . . . ,'" in *Short Stories for Students,* Gale, 2003.

Adaptations

Clarke's *Earthlight and Other Stories: The Collected Stories of Arthur C. Clarke* (1950-1951) features an audio adaptation of "'If I Forget Thee, O Earth . . . '" and other classic Clarke stories. This unabridged audio collection, which was produced by Audio Literature in 2001, uses a different reader for each story.

Clarke's 1951 short story "The Sentinel" was adapted by Clarke and director Stanley Kubrick as the film and novelization *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). Clarke has a cameo role in the Academy Award-winning film, which was released in both VHS and DVD formats from Warner Home Video in 2001.

The Best Short Stories of Arthur C. Clarke: The Collected Stories of Arthur C. Clarke includes an audio adaptation of "'If I Forget Thee, O Earth . . . '" as well as other classic and recent Clarke stories. This unabridged audio collection, which was produced by Audio Literature in 2001, is available on ten compact discs.

Topics for Further Study

Research the countries that are currently believed to have nuclear weapons and create a detailed map that locates these countries. Use color coding or some other system to indicate approximately how many nuclear devices are in each of these countries.

Choose two nuclear-capable nations that are currently in conflict with each other or that have experienced conflict with each other in the last two decades, including the allies of each country. Write a step-by-step scenario that describes what might happen in these countries and the rest of the world if nuclear weapons were used in such a conflict.

Clarke is noted for the predictive quality in many of his stories. Review the current research being conducted into space travel and settlement of extraterrestrial environments. Discuss whether you think it will be possible for humans to live on the moon some day.

Like many science fiction tales, this story is a cautionary one about humanity destroying itself. Discuss whether you think peace on earth is really possible, using research to back up your claims. If you believe that peace is ultimately impossible, find three battles from any time in human history that you feel illustrate humanity's tendency towards self-destruction.

In the story, the lunar exiles must instill in their children the desire to go home, a rite of passage that will ensure the future survival of the human race. Pick any native society whose livelihood or cultural identity is dependent upon its own rites of passage. Discuss these customs and explore whether they are in danger of extinction due to technology, the encroachment of other civilizations, or other human factors.

Compare and Contrast

1950s: The United States lives under the constant threat of nuclear warfare.

Today: Following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, in New York and Washington, D.C., the United States enters a new kind of war. The public lives with generalized fear of chemical and biological warfare.

1950s: The United States government releases several propaganda films and newsreels that attempt to calm citizens' fears by saying that radiation from atomic bombs cannot harm them if they take proper precautions. These include building personal bomb shelters that are supposed to be able to withstand a nuclear blast, radiation, and fallout. Even respected media sources perpetuate these myths.

Today: As more incidents of biological and chemical terrorism occur, both the United States government and the media provide frequent updates on the possible destructive effects of these acts in an attempt to prepare citizens.

1950s: The United States and the Soviet Union race to launch the first satellite and get the first spaceship to leave earth's atmosphere. Although space missions are initially based on political factors generated by the Cold War, when the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) is founded in the United States in 1958, the missions become more scientifically motivated.

Today: The United States, Russia, and several other countries contribute components and staff for the International Space Station, which is currently operational and in orbit around earth. The station is set up for a variety of purposes, including scientific research.

What Do I Read Next?

Ray Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles,* a short story collection first published in 1950, made the author famous and was one of the first critically acclaimed science fiction works. The stories concern humans' repeated efforts to colonize Mars and underscore Bradbury's opposition to having too much scientific and technological development at the expense of humanity.

Clarke is best known for his novels, including *Childhood's End* (1953), one of his most popular and critically acclaimed novels. The novel details the appearance of the Overlords, aliens who help end war, poverty, hunger, and other social ills, convincing humanity to give up scientific research and space exploration in the process in order to maintain this utopia.

Clarke's second nonfiction book, *The Exploration of Space* (1952), was the first science book chosen as a Book-of-the-Month Club selection. This highly accessible book translated then current space technology accurately into language that a popular audience could understand. Although the book is out of print and some of the concepts are outdated, it is a good text for understanding the historical context of the 1950s space program.

William Golding is best known for his first novel *Lord of the Flies* (1954), initially rejected by twenty-one publishers. This novel explores the dark side of humanity that can surface when people are separated from civilization. In the novel, a group of schoolboys is stranded on a deserted island. In the absence of civilization or adult supervision, the boys establish a war-like society and exhibit animal instincts.

Further Study

Alling, Abigail, and Mark Nelson, *Life under Glass: The Inside Story of Biosphere 2,* Biosphere Press, 1993.

This book shows what it was like to live for two years inside Biosphere 2, the sealed-environment biodome located outside Tucson, Arizona. In 1991, eight men and women entered the dome, which was set up to be a complete ecosystem. Today, Biosphere 2 is part of a larger complex devoted to ecological research, education, and public outreach.

Beattie, Donald A., *Taking Science to the Moon: Lunar Experiments and the Apollo Program,* Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001.

The Apollo missions were originally intended only to win the space race to get the first man on the moon. However, there were many NASA scientists who fought to expand the scope of the missions by including lunar science activities. Beattie, an engineer who served as a NASA manager from 1963 to 1973, gives a thorough overview of the science activities during the Apollo missions.

Downing, Taylor, and Jeremy Isaacs, *Cold War: An Illustrated History, 1945-1991,* Little Brown & Company, 1998.

This book gives a thorough overview of the Cold War, beginning with its roots in the 1917 Russian Revolution. The book is illustrated with hundreds of photographs and includes special sections on spies, films, and literature.

McAleer, Neil, *Arthur C. Clarke: The Authorized Biography,* Contemporary Books, 1992.

Clarke is highly regarded as one of the greatest science fiction writers and visionaries of the twentieth century. While writing this comprehensive work, McAleer interviewed Clarke, his friends, and his family, as well as publishers, editors, writers, and others who had interacted with the author. The book covers Clarke's life until 1992 and includes in-depth discussion of all of Clarke's major novels and several of his short stories.

Reid, Robin Anne, ed., *Arthur C. Clarke: A Critical Companion,* Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc., 1997.

This collection of critical essays offers both conventional and alternative readings of eight of Clarke's most recent novels and discusses them within the context of Clarke's classic works.

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Sheffield, Charles, *The Ganymede Club,* Tor, 1995, p.164.

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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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