Imagined Scenes Study Guide

Imagined Scenes by Ann Beattie

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Introduction

"Imagined Scenes" by Ann Beattie first appeared in the *Texas Quarterly* in the summer of 1974 and was later published in Beattie's 1976 collection, *Distortions*. Although the original Doubleday edition was out of print as of 2004, the collection was reissued in 1991 by Vintage.

"Imagined Scenes" is the story of an unnamed young wife who cares for an elderly man at night while her husband studies for his Ph.D. oral examinations. While she is out of the house, her husband appears to be entertaining guests or going out himself without revealing his whereabouts to his wife.

In "Imagined Scenes," Beattie explores the fragmentation of contemporary life. Her narrator's sleep-deprived imaginings, as well as the elderly man's stories, compete with the "reality" of their lives. The story has the style, images, and ambiguous ending that are hallmarks of Beattie's writing. Beattie's flat prose and attention to minutia create a world comprised of detail and of gaps, leaving the reader to puzzle out which of the scenes are the imagined ones.

Author Biography

Ann Beattie was born in Washington, D.C., on September 8, 1947, and grew up in the Washington suburbs. She attended American University in the 1960s where she majored in English, studying writers such as F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, and John Updike. These writers clearly influenced Beattie's writing. She completed a master's degree at the University of Connecticut, and although she began work on a Ph.D., she did not complete the degree once she began having success publishing her stories.

It was while she worked with writer J. D. O'Hara during the early years of the 1970s that Beattie began placing her stories in such prestigious publications as the *Atlantic* and the *Virginia Quarterly*. After rejecting twenty of her stories, the *New Yorker* published "A Platonic Relationship" in 1974, leading Beattie to a long association with the magazine. "Imagined Scenes" was first published in the *Texas Quarterly* in the summer of 1974.

In 1976, Beattie published her first novel, *Chilly Scenes of Winter*, and her first collection of short stories, *Distortions*, which included many of her *New Yorker* stories as well as "Imagined Scenes." Both books received mixed reviews; however, it was clear from the beginning that Beattie's would be a voice to be reckoned with in contemporary fiction.

Since her first books, Beattie has published fifteen books, including *Perfect Recall: New Stories* in 2000 and *The Doctor's House* in 2002. In addition, she was awarded a Guggenhiem Fellowship in 1978; an award in literature by the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1980; and a PEN/Malamud Award for Excellence in Short Fiction in 2000. She has often been referred to as the voice of the generation coming of age in the 1960s, and she continues to chronicle the lives of this group of people. Beattie's work generates heated critical commentary. Increasingly, readers and reviewers alike classify her as one of the major writers of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Plot Summary

In the opening scene of "Imagined Scenes," the wife describes a dream to her husband, David: She is in Greece; the weather is warm, and she is on a beach. She then remembers how they awaken together and arrive home from the store at the same time. In addition, she recalls the many ways he has adjusted his life to hers. Nevertheless, in the first scene, she also mentions that David is not going to work in the fall because he is returning to school to finish his Ph.D.

Next, the wife describes a plant that is having a growth spurt in the middle of winter. David takes care of the plant while she is out. She mentions that she has to work that night, so David continues to read while she goes to bed.

The wife has been hired to stay with an old man. His daughter normally takes care of him but she has gone to Florida on vacation with her husband. The old man's sister stays with him during the day, but the young wife, who is a nurse, takes the night shift. The old man tells her about the winter he spent in Berlin and shows her his postcards and photo album.

When the young wife returns home, she finds evidence that people have been in the house while she has been gone, and her husband's books are strewn around the room. He comes in with the dog and encourages her to get some sleep. He tells her that he's met the couple who live down the hill.

Again at the elderly man's house, the woman realizes she does not have her watch. She calls home, but no one answers the phone. Meanwhile, the snow that began earlier in the story continues to fall.

When she returns home, David is not there again, and the plant is gone. David returns and tells her he gave the plant to the couple he met. The next night, she calls home again at 4:00 A.M. No one answers the phone. In the morning, the old man wants to go for a walk in the snow. She helps him get dressed, and they go outside. Some children are in a fight, and when she goes to break it up, one of the boys runs into the old man, and he falls. David is there and helps right the man. He has come to pick her up because there is so much snow. He says he didn't answer the phone because he was asleep.

On the way home, the woman imagines David with the dog. At home, she goes upstairs to sleep, and she hears David cleaning up dishes again. When the phone rings, it is the old man's sister, saying that his daughter cannot get home from Florida because of the snow. She wants the woman to come back to take care of the old man. The story ends with the old woman's whisper on the phone: "You're so lucky. . . . You can come and go. You don't know what it's like to be caught."

Characters

David

David is the husband in the story. He decides rather abruptly in the opening of the story that he is not going to go to work but will instead go back to school to finish his Ph.D. Over the course of the story, David changes from an attentive husband who falls asleep and awakens with his wife to a man who spends a great deal of time out of the house, walking the dog or visiting with his neighbors. Because the story is told from the young wife's point of view, there are large gaps in the reader's understanding of the husband. For example, when the wife calls home to check on her watch, no one answers, so the reader and the narrator are unable to determine what the husband is doing. Indeed, David is even less defined than the narrator in this story; the reader is an even further distance from this character than from the narrator.

Elderly Man

The young wife cares for the elderly man at night, after his sister has left. The elderly man has a book of photographs, and he tells stories to the young woman. He says, "People get old and they can't improve things . . . so they lie." He tries to make a distinction between the "lies," or romantic stories he might make up, and his real stories; however, it is difficult for both the narrator and the reader to distinguish between the two.

The Sister

The old man has a sister who comes to stay with him during the days while his daughter and her husband are on vacation in Florida. The sister is fifteen years younger than the old man but is still elderly herself. Although she seems to care for her brother, she also visits him daily out of duty. The sister herself seems to feel powerless, both in the snow and in her old age. "You don't know what it's like to be caught," she tells the young wife when she calls, asking the young wife to return for another night.

Young Wife

The unnamed, third-person narrator of "Imagined Scenes" is a young wife, married to David. The story is told entirely from the young wife's point of view. The couple has no children. The woman is a nurse who works taking care of an old man overnight. In the beginning of the story, the woman and husband seem in tune with each other. However, as the story continues, the young woman seems to be losing track of her life with her husband. It is difficult to tell if this is because her husband is deceiving her or if her lack of sleep is causing her to become increasingly fragmented and unable to think clearly. It seems clear, however, that she suspects her husband of something, perhaps an affair,

because she tries to call him in the middle of the night and seems upset when he does not answer the phone. By the end of the story, the young woman seems groggy with lack of sleep and almost unable to gather her thoughts. It is difficult to know much about this character, other than her profession and the actions she takes in the story, because Beattie deliberately does not develop characters in this story. Rather, she lets the reader discern the young wife's inner life and concerns from the external details the wife chooses to notice.

Themes

Dream and Reality

In "Imagined Scenes," it can sometimes be difficult to discern when the narrator is awake or dreaming. The story opens with a description of a dream. The warm Greek beach clearly contrasts with the cold snow falling outside in the "real" world. Likewise, her initial description of her life with her husband has a dreamlike quality to it: They awaken together, he learns to like Roquefort dressing for her, they arrive home from shopping at the same time. The reality of her marriage is much different, however, from this initial glimpse. When the narrator goes to work caring for the old man, David begins absenting himself from their home, and, it begins to seem, from their marriage.

Yet even David's absence is not unproblematic. When the narrator returns home and finds dishes on the table and evidence that someone has been there, it is almost as if she has stepped into a dream. She finds herself trying to interpret the sensory data before her, yet she is unable to come up with a coherent narration of what is going on in her life.

Back at the old man's house, she falls asleep sitting in a chair watching the old man. Again she dreams of the beach in Greece. Increasingly, the narrative takes on a dreamlike quality. At home again, she can't find the plant, and in the steamy bathroom she is unable to see her face in the mirror. These absences, as well as David's absences and the traces of the people who have been visiting in her house, seem to become stranger and stranger. Meanwhile, snow continues to blanket the landscape, changing the physical reality of the setting.

By the end of the story, the narrator seems unable to separate her reality from her dreams. The old man's daughter is grounded in Florida, the snow making it impossible for planes to land. The narrator imagines planes not only from Florida but from Greece as well. The content of her two earlier dreams subsumes the request from the sister that she return to the old man's house, and she imagines that everyone is up in the air on a plane above the snow.

This moment forces readers to return to the story. How much of what has just been narrated is a dream, and how much is reality? How many of the scenes are "real," and how many are imagined scenes? Indeed, the strange intermingling of imaginings and dreams reminds the reader that what he or she has just read is a fiction itself and that any "reality" the story presents is just as illusory as the embedded imagined scenes.

Youth and Age

The narrator and her husband, David, are clearly young. They have no children; David is a graduate student; and the narrator seems to be working temporary jobs. There is also a sense that they have not been married long and that they are still in the process

of learning to live together. Further, David's romping with the dog, as well as his return to school and his failure to clean up the house in the narrator's absence, also suggests that David is attempting to return to a younger age himself. Although he is married and responsible for at least half of the maintenance and upkeep of their house and at least half of the financial support of the couple, he turns away from this responsibility. In fact, he never discusses his decision to return to school with his wife; he merely informs her without any discussion of how the two will make ends meet while he does not work. Likewise, his new companionship with the couple down the hill and the subtle implication that he may be having an affair with another woman suggest that David is turning away not only from his marriage but also from the responsibilities of adulthood. While the narrator must leave the home to care for another person in order to earn money to support David and herself, David entertains guests in their home or stays out all night. This immaturity stands in stark contrast both to the narrator and to the other characters in the story.

At the other end of the chronological spectrum stand the old man and his sister. The old man is unable to care for himself and needs help from his daughter and from his sister. When the daughter takes a much-needed vacation, the narrator steps in as a paid employee to provide care. In the old man, the reader is able to see the future: This is David, grown old, needing care from all of the females in his life. His life is circumscribed by the boundaries of his bed, his stories, and his photographs. Indeed, he is even afraid to have his pictures leave the room. He tells the narrator that "people get old and they can't improve things . . . so they lie all the time." Like David, the old man finds that he must improvise the stories of his life to account for his actions□or for his inability to act. A sign of the old man's immaturity is his insistence on going outside in the snow. Because of his age and frailty, this action endangers his life. Even worse, it places him in a highly vulnerable position: A fall would mean enforced bed rest and perhaps even a nursing home. And, at its worst, the old man's insistence on going outside also creates the potential for him to be an even heavier burden on the women in his life.

Although the old man's sister is twelve years younger than the old man, she is, like the narrator, the more mature of the two. She visits the old man daily. She has boots and an umbrella, she tells the narrator, and she tries to do good things for the old man, but not just out of duty. Her altruistic care giving is not without cost, however; she feels caught in the situation she is in, without help, and without a future herself. Like the narrator, she is the responsible one, the one who will not leave the old man alone without help in his daughter's absence. Thus, while the apparent contrast in this story is between the two young people and the two old people, a more subtle, yet disturbing contrast is between the immature men and the mature women.

Style

Point of View

Point of view is the narrative perspective from which a story is told. Most common points of view include first person and third person. In a first-person story, the narrator is commonly referred to as "I," and she reveals the story from her own perspective and mind. In a third-person narration, the narrative unfolds either from the perspective of an omniscient narrator who can tell the reader everything that is going on with every one of the characters, or from an impersonal voice that merely report events from all perspectives. Beattie, however, in "Imagined Scenes," creates yet another point of view. Although her unnamed narrator is not an "I," the story is limited to her perspective entirely. Indeed, it is this choice that gives the story its distinctive quality. The reader is limited to seeing, hearing, touching, thinking, and feeling what the narrator does. The reader is not able, for example, to see what David does while the narrator is at work. Like the narrator, the reader must observe the sensory data, such as the dirty dishes, and draw conclusions about the evidence for him or herself.

Beattie also makes an additional adjustment to the traditional third-person-limited point of view. She eliminates much of the expected interior monologue through which information is generally given to a reader in this kind of point of view. Thus, while the reader is privy to the narrator's thoughts and observations, the narrator reveals very little about what she is actually thinking. Instead, the reader only has the bare observations on which to base his or her conclusions. Such manipulation of the point of view suggests one of several things: Either the narrator is not a reflective person, someone who does not internalize external data; or the narrator is deliberately not reading the data in order to hide problems with her marriage from herself, or the narrator is so sleep deprived that she goes about her day in a kind of fog. These choices are not the only ones either. Beattie's deliberate narrowing of the narrative perspective provides the reader with ample room to draw his or her own conclusions. For the reader who wants definitive answers, however, the technique can be frustrating and perhaps disturbing.

Symbols

An author will frequently place an object in the story that both suggests or stands for something else without losing its original identity. Beattie often uses an array of physical objects to impart meaning in her stories without specifically naming what that meaning is. "Imagined Scenes" is no exception. Like many of Beattie's other stories, "Imagined Scenes" contains photographs and postcards and a plant. The photographs and postcards belong to the old man. The old man shows the narrator a postcard with the caption "Joseph Jefferson as Rip Van Winkle." The narrator, naturally, believes that someone the old man knows has sent him the card. However, he tells her that it is one that he found in a store. In other words, the old man has bought someone else's story. Further, the old man says that he can make up a "romantic story" to tell the narrator

about the postcard. He distinguishes this from the "real" stories of his photographs. As symbols, the postcards and photographs function not only as themselves in the story, but they also suggest the power of pictures to both preserve and create stories. The postcards suggest to the old man the potential for the creative act, the act of composing a "romantic story." And although the narrator expects the old man to tell the story, he does not. Likewise, the photographs preserve a trace of the "real" stories of the man's life and, again, suggest the potential for another kind of creative act, that of composing a memoir. However, again, although the man says to the narrator that he will tell her some stories, he does not. Thus, both the photographs and the postcards represent both the creation and repression of stories. As such, they serve a similar purpose in the narrator's real and imagined scenes.

The plant, too, functions both as an image in the story, providing texture and sensory detail, and as a symbol, imparting a deeper meaning to the story of the couple's lives together and apart. The plant has suddenly "begun to grow, sending up a narrow shoot." Such imagery suggests Beattie may be using the plant as a phallic symbol. Indeed, writers often use plants and plant imagery as phallic or yonic symbols, representing male or female characteristics through their choices. In this case, the plant may be symbolic of David's sexual growth and, perhaps, his sexual infidelity. When the couple purchased the plant a year earlier, it was "not very pretty then. It was in a small cracked pot, wrapped in plastic. They replanted it. In fact, David must have replanted it again." Whereas a tall, thin object such as the narrow shoot of the plant can generally be considered a phallic symbol, representative of the male, a short, wide, round object may also be considered a yonic symbol, representative of the female. The cracked pot and the covering of the plant in plastic may suggest that David feels trapped by his marriage. Although the couple replanted the plant together once, the narrator now notices that David has replanted it again himself. Such "replanting" is at least suggestive of David's sexual proclivities. Perhaps he has "replanted" himself with another woman.

Tense

Although traditionally stories are told in the past tense, in the decades of the twentieth century, short story writers, in particular, began using the present tense frequently. Beattie chose to use the present tense in "Imagined Scenes" for important narrative effect. In the first place, by choosing to tell the story in the present tense, she lends immediacy to the story itself. It is as if the story is unfolding before the reader's eyes in real time. Unlike stories told in the past tense, where the story, by implication, has already occurred, a present-tense story postpones the conclusion. That is, when a reader begins a present-tense story, he or she has no idea where the story might lead, since the action of the story has not yet been completed in the chronology of the story itself. Thus, by choosing to use present tense, Beattie delays meaning in her story.

Beattie also chose to use present tense as a means of limiting information to the reader, something she also does through her choice of point of view. Because the story is always in the present moment, there are very few instances when Beattie provides any

backstory; nor does Beattie provide a look ahead to the future. Like the very limited point of view, the limited tense creates an almost claustrophobic sense, akin to walking a narrow path in the dark. The reader never knows what might pop up around the bend.

Historical Context

The Nixon Years and Watergate

In 1974, the year Beattie wrote "Imagined Scenes," the United States experienced one of the most disturbing political events of its two-hundred-year history. Two years earlier, in 1972, five men broke into the Democratic National Headquarters, housed at the Watergate Hotel in Washington, D.C. The burglars were caught, tried, and sentenced. No one, however, could have predicted the Pandora's box the break-in would open. By 1973, the scandal had grown to include Richard Nixon, then president of the United States, and most of his staff. In April of 1973, he told the nation in a televised speech that he did not have any foreknowledge of the break-in, nor had he tried in any way to cover up the break-in. He also told the American public that he was worth the sacred trust of the presidency.

There ensued a long investigation that continued to uncover evidence that the president had indeed been involved in both the planning and the cover-up of the Watergate break-in. However, as late as April 1974, Nixon continued to maintain, on television to the public, that the evidence provided from tape recordings made in his office would prove him innocent. He was wrong. By August 1974, it was clear that Nixon would be impeached by the legislature, and it was also clear that there were not enough votes in the Senate to prevent this from happening. On August 8, 1974, Nixon announced to the American public that he would resign his office on August 9 at noon.

The Watergate scandal, as it came to be called, reverberated throughout the entire United States culture. Its web of deception, lies, constructions, fictions, and illusion informed much of the writing of the period. Indeed, the scandal itself caused a deep distrust not only of the government and politicians but also of truth claims themselves. "Imagined Scenes," with its swirling imagined and real scenes and its clear interest in fiction and reality, is a product of this time and this milieu.

Minimalism: Art and Literature

In the late 1950s, a group of artists led by Frank Stella developed a form of abstraction called minimalism. By the mid-1960s, minimalism had become the most prevalent form of abstraction in the New York art world. According to Marilyn Stokstad in her book *Art History* (2002), the minimalists attempted to rid their art of everything unnecessary to the art itself. Stokstad writes, "They banished subjective gestures and personal feelings; negated representation, narrative, and metaphor; and focused exclusively on the art work as a physical fact." As the movement evolved, the artists continued to create nonrepresentational works, but some began to allow some suggestion of narrative or metaphor back into their work. Minimalists often used space as a medium in their work in an attempt to divorce the art from the intent of the artist. The impact of artistic

minimalism on the culture was profound, perhaps nowhere more so than on short fiction.

In literature, the use of space translates to silence. That is, what is not said in a story is at least as important as what is said. For the minimalists, such silences call attention to the story itself through contrast. In the late 1960s, the 1970s, and the 1980s, the impact of artistic minimalism surfaced in the fiction of writers such as Ann Beattie, Raymond Carver, and Mary Robison, among others. There has been considerable critical debate over the quality of minimalist fiction. While many critics find the clean, hard edges of narration and silence to be the stuff of satisfying reading, others rail against what they see as the barrenness and triviality of the prose. Much of this debate has its root in a very old and much deeper philosophical divide: What is it that fiction ought to do? Minimalists seem to suggest that fiction functions as art, not reality, and as such calls attention to its own artificiality through the juxtaposition of surface detail with an absence of interior monologue.

Further, Myles Weber links the rise of minimalist fiction with larger social issues. In his 1999 *Northwest Review* article, "Revisiting Minimalism," he writes that minimalist fiction "was a symptom of the larger social crises out of which the authors worked." He continues, "They faced the problems of the past century now in an inflated and accelerated form (murkier rivers and beaches, more brutally mechanized street crime, more lethal sexually transmitted disease)." For the minimalists, the only response to such a world was disengagement and apathy.

Critical Overview

By the time *Distortions* was published in 1976, Beattie had already established herself as a serious writer of short fiction, regularly placing stories in the influential and prestigious *New Yorker*. The simultaneous publication of both *Distortions* and her first novel, *Chilly Scenes of Winter*, therefore, attracted considerable critical attention.

Beattie's former professor and mentor, the writer J. D. O'Hara, wrote a glowing review of her work in the August 15, 1976, edition of the *New York Times*, calling Beattie "the best new writer to come down that particular pike since Donald Barthelme." Likewise, David Thorburn, writing for the *Yale Review* in 1977, commented that Beattie's prose is "not unlike good Hemingway." Susan Horowitz, on the other hand, was less charitable in a review from the August 7, 1976, *Saturday Review*: "The characters . . . are fleshed out (or, rather, painted by number) in a collection of disjointed details, so that, although they are sometimes intriguingly eccentric, they lack an emotional core. Childhood histories, kinship patterns, recipes, and tastes in pop music do not necessarily add up to anyone we care about or remember."

Although few critics mention "Imagined Scenes" directly, one reviewer who does mention the story is John Romano. Unlike some other critics, he finds "Beattie's writing not tedious; there is instead, something graceful and painstaking about her fidelity to the ordinary." He continues with a discussion of the narrator of "Imagined Scenes," noting that she has "no imagination." However, Romano takes this as a "mark of Beattie's respect for this creation." That is, Beattie loves her character like "some impossible ideal of a loving parent who succeeds in not interfering in her children's lives. To love one's characters . . . is to allow them to be who they are."

More recent criticism of Beattie's work focuses on her place as a writer of experimental short fiction. James C. Robison, for example, writes that Beattie's stories "generally combine the realistic surface of traditional fiction and the bitter outlook typical of experimental work." Furthermore, Joseph Epstein, in his 1983 *Commentary* article, "Ann Beattie and the Hippoisie," writes that "[w]hat her fiction strives to achieve is not development of character, accounts of motivation, or moral resolution□no, what she strives to achieve are states of feeling. What is less clear is why the states of feeling her stories reveal are always those connected with sadness and loss." Likewise, Carolyn Porter, in her chapter "Ann Beattie: The Art of the Missing" from *Contemporary American Writers* (1985), edited by Catherine Rainwater and William J. Scheick, writes that "Beattie's most marked talent is for eliminating discrete chunks of exposition, that laying out of background information which the short story must find a way of minimizing." Clearly, for Porter, Beattie's minimalist approach to literature works well.

It is likely that critical attention to Beattie's work will continue in the twenty-first century with the publication of new work and with some historical distance from the height of the minimalist movement. Her style has modified over the years; yet she still retains the sharp edge in her prose, rendering her a continued force in fiction.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Henningfeld is a professor of literature at Adrian College who writes on literary topics for a variety of publications. In this essay, Henningfeld considers the roles of sleep and snow in Ann Beattie's "Imagined Scenes."

Ann Beattie's 1974 short story, "Imagined Scenes," contains many of the elements of a typical Beattie story: photographs, postcards, and plants. In addition, as in most Beattie stories, the narrator is a woman, the situation is a marriage, and the tense is present. It is likely that these characteristics have caused critics and reviewers alike largely to overlook this story.

Yet even among those critics who choose to treat the story, there seems to be some level of discomfort with just what is going on in the text. Christina Murphy, for example, while applauding the general ambiguity and inconclusivity of Beattie's fiction, nevertheless seems to want to fix the details and meaning of the story. In particular, she zeroes in on the relationship between the narrator and her husband, David. She initially writes that "the adultery in 'Imagined Scenes' is only hinted at." However, rather than allowing the story to remain nebulous, and the supposed adultery a hint, Murphy quickly leaps from the hints to statements about "David's adultery." That she should do so is puzzling, especially given the nature of the body of Beattie's work, work that is noted for its nonlinearity, its fragmentation, and its lack of clear-cut conclusion. In her attempt to make sense of the story, Murphy, as most readers, trusts the perceptions of the narrator to be accurate portrayals of the scenes before her. What Murphy forgets is just what Cynthia Whitney Hallett reminds readers about minimalist fiction in general: "The stories appear as open-ended as life itself, and, as with life, nothing about them should be taken for granted."

Taking the narrator's perceptions for granted creates several problems with the persuasiveness of Murphy's interpretation, however, and there are many hints that the story might be read otherwise. In the first place, the story appears in a collection called *Distortions*, suggesting at least that events within the story may be other than what they appear. Furthermore, the title of the story is "Imagined Scenes," again cluing the reader to the possibility that the narration provided by the young wife might be located within her imagination rather than in the "real" world of the story. Finally, and most tellingly, are the ongoing references throughout the story to dreams, snow, and sleep. Indeed, sleep seems to be Beattie's overriding concern throughout the story.

The story opens directly with the narrator's words as she describes a dream to her husband, David, and it closes with the narrator speaking to the old man's sister in a kind of waking dream. Thus the entire story is framed between these two instances of interrupted sleep. Furthermore, throughout the story itself there are at least nineteen direct references to sleep, or lack of sleep, or need for sleep, or quality of sleep. There are several ways to read these references. A straightforward examination of sleep and the effects of sleep deprivation may provide a deeper understanding of Beattie's thematic purpose in the story itself.

All human beings need sleep. No one is able to function for any length of time without adequate sleep, and sleep studies have demonstrated repeatedly the consequences of both sleep deprivation and interrupted REM (rapid eye movement) sleep. In the twentieth century, electric lights, improved transportation, and the demand for manufactured goods led, for the first time in human history, to the creation of "shift work." In shift work, people work around the clock and often have no control over what shift they will be assigned. This, as well as other fundamental realities of life in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, has led to widespread sleep deprivation among citizens of industrial nations.

Lack of sleep, according to many sleep studies, causes a variety of physiological and psychological effects in the sleep-deprived. Someone not getting enough sleep will suffer from confusion and memory lapses. Moreover, studies and surveys document that inadequate sleep leads not only to depression but that, in its extreme form, it leads to paranoia and disorientation as well. In addition, without adequate REM sleep, humans are also deprived of their dreams. Because the brain seems to need dreams for memory and for health, humans who do not get enough REM sleep will often suffer from hallucinations or waking dreams. People in the business of prisoner interrogation and brainwashing have long known that depriving a prisoner of sleep is a form of torture.

In the case of the narrator of "Imagined Scenes," the reader discovers that the young woman is working nights, caring for an old man. The assumption is that she has taken on this job to support herself and her husband while he is in graduate school. Because he does not go to work during the day, his schedule is likewise not regular. In addition, the narrator is not sleeping very much during the day. After doing the grocery shopping, for example, early in the story she mentions that she has to work that night. Because of this, "[s]he goes upstairs to take a nap and sets the alarm. She rests, but can't fall asleep." At the old man's house that night, she "drinks tea with him, tired because she didn't nap." Likewise, the old man tells her that he does not sleep well.

The next day in the early afternoon, the narrator notices that there is food on the countertop that she does not remember buying. Certainly, this food could be read as a clue that David is carrying on behind the narrator's back. It could just as easily be read as a memory lapse caused by sleep deprivation. The narrator starts for her bedroom to sleep but is interrupted by David's return to the house. "You should be asleep," he tells her. "You can't work at night if you're not going to sleep in the day." A few lines later he says, "You look like you need sleep." And just a few lines after this, he tells the narrator, "Get some rest." Again, it is possible to read this as David's attempt to get the narrator out of the way for whatever it is he is doing with his time. Certainly, if the reader trusts the narrator's perceptions, the reader will begin to experience a slight paranoia: Just what is it that David is up to? However, is it not just as easy to trust *David's* perception? If the narrator has been working all night and not sleeping during the day, then of course she will look like she needs sleep.

Later, the narrator discovers that she cannot find her watch when she goes to work. In the middle of making tea, she goes to search for it, forgetting about the tea she is preparing for the old man. This is clear because she has to reheat the tea when she

returns from searching her car. And not only does the narrator suffer memory lapses concerning the tea, she finds her watch at home in the bathroom where she left it, having forgotten to put it on before work.

Additionally, when the narrator sits with the old man, she is unable to keep herself awake, falling immediately into a dream about Greece, even though she is sitting in a chair by the old man's bed. REM sleep deprivation studies confirm that when a person does not get enough REM sleep, dreams will occur earlier and earlier in the sleep cycle.

In the car on the way home from the old man's house, the narrator nearly falls asleep. At home, "she closes her eyes again. . . . She's very tired." However, even here, her sleep is interrupted: David awakens her to take a call from the old man's sister who wants her to come back. The scene is very strange; the narrator is unable to make sense of what the woman is saying to her, and her conversation becomes mingled with the narrator's dream of Greece. Because all perception is filtered through the narrator, the scene is also strange for the reader, who cannot at this point determine if the narrator is awake or asleep. The story ends in this fugue state of half-waking or half-sleeping, without resolution.

The many references to sleep, of course, could just be part of the background fabric of the story. However, very early in the story Beattie inserts an obvious clue that sleep is not the background of the story but is rather the foreground, something that needs to be accounted for by any reader. When the old man shows the narrator his collection of postcards, there is one that the narrator "looks longer at than the rest: A man in boots and green jacket carrying a rifle is pictured walking down a path through the woods in the moonlight." The caption of the postcard identifies the figure: "Joseph Jefferson as Rip Van Winkle." Rip Van Winkle, of course, is the protagonist of another story in which sleep itself is the subject: Washington Irving's famous story of the man who sleeps for twenty years while the rest of the world goes on without him.

This allusion suggests that Beattie wants the reader to consider all aspects of sleep, both literal and metaphorical. As noted above, sleep deprivation leads to the kinds of distortions of reality experienced by the narrator. One need not posit an actual affair on the part of the husband to understand why the sleep-deprived narrator might read her environment to support such an interpretation. At the metaphoric level, however, sleep plays yet another function: The narrator is not the only character in the story who sleeps or does not sleep; the old man says he has trouble sleeping. David claims that he is sleeping when the narrator calls him on the phone. Like the omnipresent snow (the mention of which nearly always follows mention of sleep), the sleeping state becomes a metaphor for contemporary, fragmented existence. In a world blanketed by snow, the landscape changes and is muffled. Snow and sleep isolate the inhabitants of this story from each other. In need of relationship as much as in need of sleep, the characters stumble through their days and nights, caught, it seems, by their inability to touch each other.

Further, the sleeping state and the snow serve as metaphors for death. James Joyce's "The Dead," from *Dubliners*, closes as the main character, Gabriel, looks out his

window, his wife asleep in the bed bedside him, at snow blanketing the living and the dead. While Beattie's references to sleep and snow may not be a direct allusion to Joyce's famous story, she nonetheless seems to be striving toward a similar association among snow, sleep, and death. The human condition, such that it is, requires not only sleep but also waking; not only work but human companionship. The narrator, David, the old man, his sister, and even the old man's daughter□trapped in an airplane in Florida□all move as if in a dream, not fully awake nor aware of their surroundings nor understanding the need to reach out their arms to each other. Like Rip Van Winkle, they have chosen to sleep their way through their days and their lives.

Source: Diane Andrews Henningfeld, Critical Essay on "Imagined Scenes," in *Short Stories for Students*, Gale, 2005.

Adaptations

"Imagined Scenes" is included in a tape recording of *Distortions*, produced by Books on Tape, Inc., in December of 1979.

Topics for Further Study

Sigmund Freud wrote extensively on the subject of dreams and of their usefulness in analyzing both individuals and literature. Read selections from Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* and consider the narrator's dreams in "Imagined Scenes" from a Freudian perspective. What do her dreams reveal about her? How do her "imagined scenes" serve like dreams in this story?

Many studies have been conducted showing the effect of sleep deprivation and shift work on human beings. What happens when a person's sleep schedule is disrupted? What happens when a person loses REM sleep? How do these studies affect the way a reader approaches "Imagined Scenes?"

Minimalism is a movement that influenced not only literature but also art and architecture. Find a discussion of minimalism in art and/or architecture, and find photographs of minimalist art and/architecture. In what ways does this study further your reading of Beattie's short fiction?

Critics often mention Beattie's study of Ernest Hemingway as influential on her development as a writer of short fiction. Read Hemingway's early collection of short stories *Men without Women*, and consider similarities and differences with Beattie's fiction in *Distortions*.

Beattie is often cited as the spokesperson for the "baby boom" generation, those people born in the years between the end of World War II, in 1945, and about 1965. Research this generation. Why are they of interest demographically? What characterizes this generation, and what has happened to them in the years since the publication of "Imagined Scenes"?

Compare and Contrast

1970s: Richard Nixon becomes involved in the Watergate scandal, a burglary and cover-up that eventually leads to his resignation.

Today: Although Bill Clinton is censured in the 1990s for misconduct, no president since Nixon has been forced to resign from office.

1970s: Worldwide inflation causes dramatic increases in the price of oil, fuel, food, and materials. In the United States, the Dow Jones index drops to 663 in 1974, after a partial recovery from the 1970 recession.

Today: The Dow Jones index reaches the ten-thousand mark for the first time since September 2001, and the United States slowly recovers from recession, in spite of significant loss of manufacturing jobs nationwide.

1970s: Members of the so-called "baby boom" are finishing college, getting married, and starting families. They flood the job market, and in many families both partners work full time.

Today: Baby boomers are starting to retire. The sheer size of their generation and the demands that it will place on health care, pension plans, and social security are issues that confront the government, businesses, and society in general.

What Do I Read Next?

Beattie is often compared with Raymond Carver as a writer of minimalist short stories. Carver's *Where I'm Calling From* (1988) is a collection that illustrates the range of Carver's talent.

Bobbie Ann Mason's *Love Life* (1989) offers a look at short fiction written by one of Beattie's contemporaries. Mason's work also features a close attention to the minutia of the everyday.

Beattie's *Park City: New and Collected Stories* (1998) allows the reader a retrospective look at Beattie's best stories, with representative stories from the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s.

Contemporary American Women Writers (1985), edited by Catherine Rainwater and William J. Scheik and published by the University of Kentucky Press, is a collection of essays and photographs treating ten important women writers, including Beattie, Grace Paley, Annie Dillard, and Toni Morrison, among others. Each chapter also includes a very useful bibliography of writings by each of the writers.

Chilly Scenes of Winter (1976) is Beattie's novel published at the same time as "Imagined Scenes." The novel utilizes many of the same devices and themes found in her short stories.

Further Study

Aldridge, John W., *Talents and Technicians: Literary Chic and the New Assembly-Line Fiction*, Scribner's, 1992.

Aldridge's book is a disparaging critical view of the minimalist fiction of Ann Beattie and Bobbie Ann Mason, among others.

Montresor, Jaye Berman, *The Critical Response to Ann Beattie*, Greenwood Press, 1993, pp. 1—18.

Montresor's book is an essential compilation of criticism on Ann Beattie from 1976 to 1993. She includes not only excerpted criticism but also a complete and well-documented bibliography.

Parini, Jay, "A Writer Comes of Age," in *Horizon*, December 1982, pp. 22—24.

In addition to offering good background information, this article also discusses the stories in *Distortions*.

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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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