In the Middle of the Fields Study Guide

In the Middle of the Fields by Mary Lavin

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

Mary Lavin's □In the Middle of the Fields□ is often referred to as one of the author's □widow stories,□ a group of stories that Lavin wrote in the late 1960s that reflect her own struggles with widowhood. Patricia K. Meszaros, in her article on Lavin for *Critique*, writes that her widowhood □informs□ this work □in her searching and compassionate portrayals of loneliness.□ □In the Middle of the Fields□ is one of the most gripping stories in this group in its focus on the efforts of a recently widowed woman to resist the pull of the past in order to function in the present.

The unnamed woman is determined to run the farm herself after her husband dies. During the day, she demonstrates an independent spirit that suggests she will ultimately succeed in her attempt to establish a new life and identity for herself. Yet in the evening, her fear of being alone makes her more vulnerable to her memories. An encounter one night with Bartley Crossen, a neighboring farmer whom she employs to cut her grass, highlights the tenuous balance she has struck between past and present and the sometimes overwhelming sense of loss she experiences. In this intimate and sensitive story, Lavin reveals the painful consequences of death on those left behind.

Author Biography

Nationality 1: Irish

Nationality 2: American

Birthdate: 1912

Deathdate: 1996

Mary Lavin was born in East Walpole, Massachusetts in 1912 to Thomas and Nora Lavin, who were both Irish immigrants. The family moved back to Ireland in 1922, living first in Athenry, County Galway, and later in Dublin.

In Dublin, Mary attended the Loreto Convent School, and in 1934 she graduated from University College, where she received honors in English. In 1936 she completed a thesis on Jane Austen that earned her a master of arts. She was working toward a Ph.D. and teaching French at the Loreto Convent School when she wrote her first short story, □Miss Holland.□ After many rejections, □Miss Holland□ was finally published by *Dublin* magazine in 1938.

Lavin married William Walsh, an Irish barrister, in 1942 and a year later they had a daughter whom they named Valentine. Also in 1942, Lavin had a collection of her short stories published entitled *Tales from Bective Bridge*. The collection received acclaim in Ireland as well as in the United States and won the James Tait Black Memorial Prize.

In 1944, Lavin's first novel, *Gabriel Galloway* was originally published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in seven consecutive issues. In 1945, the novel was published in its entirety under the title, *The House in Clewe Street*. The following year, after the birth of her second daughter as well as the death of her father, Lavin published her second book, *The Becker Wives and Other Stories*. Although at this point in her career, Lavin realized that the novella was her preferred form, she completed the novel *Mary O'Grady*, published in 1950.

Her husband, William, died soon after the birth of their third child in 1954, forcing Lavin to raise her three daughters and manage their farm by herself. She handled these responsibilities and at the same time earned two Guggenheim Foundation fellowships. In 1961 she was also awarded the Katherine Mansfield Prize and in 1968 the University of Ireland awarded her a Doctor of Letters degree.

In 1967, Lavin published another collection of stories, *In the Middle of the Fields*. Stories she published in the late 1960s are often referred to as her □widow stories.□ Patricia K. Meszarus, in her article on Lavin for *Critique*, writes that Lavin's widowhood □informs most of her middle and later work . . . in her searching and compassionate portrayals of loneliness and sometimes willful isolation.□

Mary Lavin continued writing short stories for magazines such as the *New Yorker* up until the mid-1980s. She died in Dublin in March 1996.

Plot Summary

□In the Middle of the Fields□ begins with a description of a recently widowed, unnamed woman in her house in Ireland. Surrounded by fields, she feels her house is like an island but admits that she is less lonely on the land where she and her husband had lived together. Nonetheless, she often experiences anxiety during the day, and she is always fearful at night. The townspeople have talked about how she must be feeling about her loss, but she insists that they do not know. When they tried to talk to her about their own memories of her husband, she became annoyed since their reminiscences triggered her own.

When the story opens, the widow is concerned about the grass in the fields that needs topping (trimming), and she worries about how much it will cost. Ned, the old farm hand, suggests that Bartley Crossen, a neighboring farmer, could do the job, noting that her husband □knew him well.□ Initially, she cannot recall who Crossen is, but then she declares that she has seen him but never met him. When Ned tells her that he will set up a meeting, she insists he come before dark because she does not like to be downstairs at night. She locks herself and her children in their rooms after dark, dreading a knock at the door. Ned tries to reassure her that no one would pay her a visit at night and insists that she is safe. He makes sure that whenever he needs to come at night to tend to something on her farm, he announces himself as he comes up the walk so that she will not be afraid. When he does come, she is grateful to have someone in the house.

Crossen arrives at the house with Ned before dark while his wife waits outside in the car. As they discuss the job, Crossen looks out over the fields to the riverbank that he claims he knows well. He tells them that when he was young, he courted a girl there, who the woman later discovers became his first wife. Crossen tells her that he can do the job in the morning and that he will be fair with the price. As Crossen leaves, Ned whispers to her, □he's a man you can trust.□

After Crossen departs, Ned tells her about Crossen's first wife, Bridie Logan, who, he claims, was □as wild as a hare□ and □mad with love.□ The two married young, and soon after Bridie got pregnant. Too soon after the baby was born, Bridie decided to help Crossen milk the cows. When he told her that it would be too far for her to walk, she jumped on her bike and pedaled out of the gate. As she got to the bottom of the hill, she turned the bike around and started □pedaling madly up the hill again.□ Half way up the hill, she started to bleed internally, and later that day she died.

Ned notes that the baby was strong and that Crossen's second wife, who had more sons with Crossen, did a fine job of raising it. When the woman asks Ned whether Crossen has forgotten about Bridie, Ned tells her that he has and that it will be the same with her. But she shakes her head □doubtfully.□

At night in her room, the widow wonders if Crossen has really forgotten Bridie. As she brushes her hair, Crossen knocks on the door, which fills her with fear. When Crossen

calls out, she recognizes his voice and comes down the stairs to let him in. He apologizes for disturbing her so late when he sees her with her hair down and in her dressing gown. He tells her he has never seen such □a fine head of hair□ and that it makes her look like a young girl. When she smiles with pleasure at his compliment but sharply exclaims that she does not feel like one, he responds that he can see she is a sensible woman.

They begin to discuss cutting the grass, and Crossen tells her that cutting the tops off costs him as much as cutting hay. He admits that she does not get an immediate return from cutting the grass, but she will in the long run as it will be better for her cows to eat. When she angrily disagrees, he insists that he made □a special price□ for her, especially because she does not now have a man to take care of the farm for her. She declares that she can take care of the farm herself to which he responds, □that's what all women like to think!□

When he tells her that he would like to do the job later in the week rather than the next day, she gets angry, insisting that by the time he gets around to it, her fields will be ruined. He admires her authoritative stance but tries to maintain his position, insisting it will be only a few days. When she stands firm, he gives in. As he prepares to leave, he tells her that he hopes that she does not think he was trying to take advantage of her and that no one in the community thought that she would stay there after her husband died.

He then asks her if she gets lonely at night. When she corrects him with □you mean frightened?□ he says yes, but assures her that she is safe there. She admits that she is □scared to death sometimes,□ which makes her go up to her room so early in the evening. When he responds sympathetically, she asks him to wait until she goes upstairs and then turn off the light as he leaves. He is genuinely troubled about her fears and asks whether anyone could stay with her but then realizes that that would not work out.

As she □somewhat reluctantly□ starts up the stairs, he calls to her, asking how to put out a light. She comes down again saying she will do it. While he blocks the doorway, Crossen grabs her arm and inquires □are you ever lonely□at all?□ and then asks for a kiss. He tries to get a better hold of her, but she wrenches her arm free and escapes out into the lighted hall. As she begins to laugh, he appears □pathetic in his sheepishness,□ which she is surprised to admit touches her. She tells him that he should not feel badly, that she really did not mind, but he is miserable, claiming □I don't know what came over me.□ She tries to make him feel better, but he remains dejected. After an awkward silence, she tells him that she will see him in the morning, but he does not immediately go. He feels the need to talk about the incident, insisting that he did not mean any disrespect. He cannot understand why he did it and wonders what his wife would say if she knew. She tells him not to tell her.

Crossen muses about how good his wife Mona has been, how she took care of his and Bridie's son from the time he was a week old. He admits that he is grateful to her as he remembers Mona taking the baby all day, each day to her house next door, bringing him

back for a while in the evening, and then taking him back to sleep with her. She helped him become □a living man□ again. Eventually he decided that he should marry her, which would make things more convenient. When Crossen insists that he has shamed Mona, the widow argues that what happened has nothing to do with her, adding that it has nothing to do with any of them except Bridie. She demands that he blame her, and with a note of hysteria claims, □you thought you could forget her□ but he could not. After her outburst, Crossen leaves without looking back while exclaiming, □God rest her soul.□ Lavin does not make it clear whether he was referring to Bridie or the widow.

Characters

Bartley Crossen

When the main character first meets Bartley Crossen, a neighboring farmer, she observes □something kindly in his look and in his words.□ Ned, the farmhand, insists that Crossen is decent and □a man you can trust.□ He often is solicitous in his dealings with her, mentioning his wife waiting for him at home, which she understands as □meant to put her at *her* ease.□ When he comes to her house at night, he tries to allay any fear of his motives when he says, □I'm long gone beyond taking any account of what a woman has on her. I'm gone beyond taking notice of women at all.□ This claim proves false, however.

Crossen's relationship with his first wife Bridie suggests that he is a passionate man. Ned notes that he had the same passion for her as she for him. They were both □mad with love . . . she only wanting to draw him on, and he only too willing!□ He tries to suppress his memories and feelings for Bridie, perhaps out of respect for his second wife and also to avoid the pain of the past. The only comment he makes about Bridie is that he □courted a girl□ down by the riverbank. His passionate nature remerges when he visits the main character at night. He reveals his obvious attraction to her when he notices her hair and later when he asks for a kiss.

Before his passion causes him to shame himself, he displays confidence in his business dealings with her, standing □stoutly□ in her hallway. This easy confidence allows him to accept her harsh words. When, after he compliments her, she sharply insists that she does not feel young, her words seem □to delight him and put him wonderfully at ease.□ He responds that she is a sensible woman and tells her to stay the way she is.

Bridie Crossen

Bridie, Crossen's first wife, gets so caught up in her passion for her husband that it clouds her vision and ultimately leads to her death. Ned calls her □wild as a hare□ and □strong as a kid goat.□ She was □mad with love□ for Bartley and did everything she could to please him. Her passion grew after they were married to the point where, Ned claims, □it was . . . as if she was driven on by some kind of a fever.□ Her desire for his praise caused her to scrub the house until there was little left to scrub. Her lack of common sense in her relationship with him became evident when she got on the bike too soon after the birth of their child, an impulsive act triggered by her desire to be with him.

Mona Crossen

Mona, Crossen's second wife, always comes with him when he works on other farms. She stays in the car, sitting rigidly, □the way people sat up in the well of little tub traps

long ago, their knees pressed together, allowing no slump.□ She is a good woman according to Ned and Bartley, who describe how she cared for his child with Bridie. Both insist that she raised the child as if he were her own.

Ned

Ned, the main character's loyal farmhand, initiates the action of the story when he brings Crossen to cut the grass. Ned likes to chat and to gossip about his neighbors, but not in a malicious way. In this sense, he serves as a narrative voice, filling in all the relevant details about the characters. He shows considerable kindness and concern for the main character. Noting her night fears, he tries to assure her that she is safe, that no one would come to the house at night. He always takes care to call out to her when he comes in the evening to tend to the farm. When he realizes that the past is weighing heavily on her, he tries to assure her that □everything passes in time and is forgotten.□

The Woman

The first line shows the duality of the main character, her vulnerability and her strength. She is isolated, □islanded by fields□ but also □like a rock in the sea.□ She feels nameless anxieties and fears as she struggles to take care of the farm after the death of her husband, dreading in particular, a knock after dark, which can paralyze her with fright.

Her practical side emerges as she tries to control her thoughts of her husband, insisting that they are only □dry love and barren longing.□ She recognizes the danger in living in the past and determines to make a new life for herself. Thus, she gets impatient with neighbors who want to reminisce about him, which inevitably triggers her own painful memories. Her common sense and her survival instincts emerge in her dealings with Crossen. She realizes what must be done on the farm to keep it successful. When she feels as sluggish and heavy as her hair, she immediately brushes it so that it and she become energized.

She refuses to allow Crossen to put her in a vulnerable position. Although at first, she appreciates his compliment about her hair, she immediately adopts a stern tone with him, letting him know that he must treat her as an equal. Each time he tries to insist that she is a woman and therefore needs the help of a man, she reasserts her independence and strength. However, her thoughts about Bridie's influence over Crossen remind her of her own fears about the power of the past and her vulnerability emerges. By the end of the story, the main character has made progress toward establishing an independent identity and a new life without her husband, but she remains vulnerable to her fear of being alone and her memories of the past.

Themes

Passion

Passion is clearly evident in Crossen's relationship with Bridie and only suggested in the main character's with her husband, but both appear to share the same intensity and the same difficult consequences. Bridie was □mad with love□ for Crossen, which only strengthened after their marriage. Ned notes that □it was like as if she was driven on by some kind of a fever.□ She did everything she could around the house and the farm to make him proud of her. Immediately after she had her baby, her love for him prompted her to get out of bed and join him in milking. She jumped on her bike and pedaled madly down the road, trying to encourage him to chase her. Yet her passion ended up destroying her when the vigorous exercise caused internal bleeding. Crossen, Ned insists, was mad with love for her as well, which becomes evident when Crossen notes that after she died, he was no longer □a living man.□

Although we never get a glimpse of the relationship that the main character had with her husband, she hints at the intensity of their love for each other when she tries to suppress her memories, which she claims are only □another name for dry love and barren longing.□ She and Crossen have both suffered from the loss of a dearly loved partner; she insists that his grief over Bridie is to blame for Crossen's attempted kiss. By declaring that Bridie still has such a powerful influence on Crossen, the widow suggests that her husband has a similar hold on her.

Sexism

Although Crossen is often sympathetic and solicitous toward the main character, he also displays sexist attitudes in his encounters with her, which ironically helps reinforce her independent spirit. When, for example, as they are haggling over the grass cutting, Crossen insists, □I'm not a man to break my word□above all, to a woman,□ she immediately questions his motives and gets on her guard. This stance helps her remain firm in her insistence that he do the job the next morning.

Crossen's quick change of heart concerning the job suggests his need to gain control over her. He had originally agreed to come the following morning to complete the job, but he immediately changes him mind, insisting that he needs more time. When he comes at night to speak to her about it, he appears much more forceful than he had that morning, arguing with her about the value of topping grass. In an effort to gain the upper hand, he tries to assert his superiority as well as placate her, insisting, □I'm glad to do what I can for you, Ma'am, the more so seeing you have no man to attend to these things for you.□ His suggestion of her weakness only reinforces her strength, though, and she rejoins, □Oh, I'm well able to look after myself!□

Style

Landscape as Symbol

Lavin's evocative descriptions of the landscape reflect the woman's character and situation. At the beginning of the story, Lavin uses natural figures to describe the woman: she appears □like a rock in the sea,□ suggesting both her strength and isolation. Lavin turns the word □island□ into a verb to reinforce this sense of separation when she claims that the woman is □islanded by fields.□ The grass, with its □ugly tufts of tow and scutch,□ give the farm □the look of a sea in storm,□ symbolizing her own struggles with memories of her married life and fears of her lonely future. Maurice Harmon, in his article on Mary Lavin in *Gaéliana*, finds that these descriptions provide a □clear analysis of her own state of mind□ and determines that the detail is □compact, flexible and capable, adjusted to her character.□

Narrative Silence

Lavin conveys a pervasive silence in the story, which sometimes suppresses intense emotions. Her depiction of the characters' silent surface with feelings roiling immediately below it suggests the possibility of an impending explosion. Dialogue between the characters is kept at a minimum, especially when it veers too closely to the unhealed grief and anxiety about present problems. When, for example, Crossen speaks about his first wife, whose memory still haunts and influences him, he provides only a few understated details: □I courted a girl down there when I was a lad.□ He hints, though, at the devastation he experienced after her death when he admits that his second wife, helped □knit□ him back into □a living man,□ but he is unable to express his deep love for Bridie. The main character never gives voice to her □vague, nameless fears□ that could destroy her efforts at establishing a strong sense of self. These suppressed emotions come out unexpectedly when Crossen asks the main character for a kiss, and later when she □hysterically□ insists that Bridie was □the one did it!□

Historical Context

Realism

In last half of the nineteenth century, writers turned away from the earlier romantic style, which idealized nature and rural life. Writers in the late 1800s, who were later called realists, focused more on the actual difficulties of common life and the natural and social forces that determined people's lives. They rejected the celebration of the imagination typical of Romantic literature and instead took a practical look at what shapes personality and what kinds of problems confront people, both in society and in nature. Realists focused on the hardships in the commonplace and how people often succumbed to them. Their depiction of the human condition was not embellished by happy coincidences and providential help, which are central parts of romanticized literature.

Writers who embrace realism use settings and plots that reflect their characters' daily lives and realistic dialogue that replicates natural speech patterns. Literary movements such as naturalism and modernism came in vogue during the early part of the twentieth century, but realist fiction regained popularity during the 1930s and continued to be enjoyed into the early 2000s, especially in the genre of the short story. Doris Lessing, Elizabeth Bowen, and Mary Lavin from the United Kingdom and Eudora Welty, Willa Cather, and Flannery O'Connor from the United States have been recognized as twentieth-century masters of the form.

Changing Roles for Women

During the first few decades of the twentieth century, feminist thinkers on both sides of the Atlantic engaged in a rigorous investigation of female identity as it related to all aspects of a woman's life. Some declared the institution of marriage to be a form of slavery and thus recommended its abolition. Others derided the ideal of the maternal instinct, rejecting the notion that motherhood should be the ultimate goal of all women. The more conservative feminists of this age considered marriage and motherhood acceptable roles only if guidelines were set in order to prevent a woman from assuming an inferior position to her husband in any area of their life together. A woman granted equality in marriage would serve as an exemplary role model for her children by encouraging the development of an independent spirit.

The early feminists in England and the United States, such as Eleanor Rathbone who became a leading figure in England's National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, were able to gain certain rights for women, including the right to vote. They were not able, however, to change the widely held view that a woman's place is in the home. During World War II, American and British women were encouraged to enter the workplace where they enjoyed a measure of independence and responsibility. After the war, however, many were forced to give up their jobs to make room for returning troops.

Roles for women began to change during the 1960s and 1970s. During the decades following World War II, women continued to join and stay in the workforce. They also began to demand reproductive rights. The availability of birth control and the legalization of abortion had the greatest impact on these changing roles. Women now had greater control over their pregnancies and the responsibilities that came with them. Some women started work while raising their children, and many began after. After they became financial contributors to the household, British and American women began to demand childcare and equal pay. During the 1960s, women's groups began to appear throughout Great Britain and the United States that helped raise their participants' awareness of women's issues.

Critical Overview

The critical response to Mary Lavin's short fiction has been overwhelmingly positive. A group of her stories, including □In the Middle of the Fields,□ published in the late 1960s and gathered together in the third volume of *The Stories of Mary Lavin*, has been singled out as among her finest. In his review of this volume, Richard F. Peterson notes that these stories are most often referred to as her □widow stories.□ He writes that they □represent a major phase in Mary Lavin's career in which she added new power and control to her fiction by occasionally dramatizing her painful adjustment to widowhood.□ Peterson cites the □powerful influence of memory on the emotions of Mary Lavin's widows, especially in preserving the pleasure of married life and the pain of loss.□

Reva Brown, in her review of the same volume of Lavin's stories, considers the author to be a □superb storyteller□ who has □the capacity to take an apparently ordinary, even banal, situation and to compress within the few pages of her short story an entirely credible small world.□ Brown praises Lavin's □sensitive insight into the human condition□ in these stories, noting □nothing extraordinary happens to [her characters], but their lives and feelings are portrayed with a clear vision and empathy that transforms these 'ordinary' people into something special.□ She concludes that Lavin's characters are □fully rounded and believable, depicted with a subtle wit and humour that sets up echoes of irony, pathos or recognition in the reader.□

Commenting on the widow stories, Maurice Harmon in his article on Mary Lavin in *Gaéliana* writes that they have □a kind of all-round decency, compassion and common-sense.□ Harmon praises the unity of the stories where □all the elements□characterisation, theme, imagery, structure, style□are brought together in the service of the larger over-view□ and concludes that □the pace of the narrative matches the sense of wisdom and experience embodied in the main character.□

Harmon singles out □In the Middle of the Fields□ for its □narrative ease,□ especially in the opening paragraphs that, he argues, provides important character details. Richard F. Peterson also praises the story in his review, commenting that in it, Lavin □reveals the intense loneliness of the widow immediately after the death of her husband.□

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Perkins is a professor of American and English literature and film. In this essay, Perkins explores the interplay of past and present in the story.

Mary Lavin published several stories in the 1960s that explore the often devastating sense of loss experienced by women after the death of their husbands. The recently widowed, unnamed main character of □In the Middle of the Fields,□ one of the most compelling of these □widow stories,□ struggles to survive the loss of her husband as she takes over the operation of their farm. While she determines to live in the present and establish a sense of continuity for herself,□ she is forced to recognize the strong pull of a past that interferes with her attempts to create an independent, secure sense of self.

Richard F. Peterson notes, in his article on Mary Lavin in *Modern Fiction Studies*, that her widow stories mark □a phase in a long and difficult struggle to understand the relationship between past memories and the emotional pain of the present in finding a new life and identity.□ This struggle appears immediately in the first paragraph of □In the Middle of the Fields.□ The main character's present strength of spirit is suggested by Lavin's likening her to □a rock in the sea,□ yet the sense of loss is pervasive for her, even that of the cattle's □gentle stirrings□ as they move to the woods in the evening. The loss of her husband has created □anxieties by day, and cares, and at night vague, nameless fears.□ Harmon notes that these feelings are □preventing her release, threatening to bury her as well as her husband.□ They spring from the woman's recognition that death is not absolute, that her husband is never fully absent. Her anxieties arise from her fear that her memory of him will pull her into the grave, preventing her from establishing herself in the present.

The main character experiences what Patricia K. Meszaros, in her article on Lavin for *Critique*, calls a sense of □willful isolation.□ She tries to maintain continuity by staying on the farm by herself since □she was less lonely for him here in Meath than elsewhere.□ Her neighbors appear foolish to her when they believe that she □hugged tight every memory she had of him.□ She fights the urge to live in the past, understanding that memories are □but another name for dry love and barren longing.□ And so she becomes annoyed when they visit her farm and talk of her husband, which triggers her own thoughts of him.

In his article on Lavin in *Gaéliana*, Maurice Harmon concludes that the main character in the widow stories □knows what she is doing, has known love and passion, feels a keen sense of loss, but is determined to 'take hold of life.'□ The widow in □In the Middle of the Fields□ forces herself to focus on the present and the upkeep of her farm. □It wasn't him *she* saw when she looked out at the fields□; she saw that the grass needed topping so that the fields would not be ruined. Yet, at night, she cannot avoid the impact of change□the absence of her husband. Her fear of being alone threatens to undermine her emerging independence. This fear causes her to lock herself and her children upstairs every night and to dread a knock after dark. She becomes grateful when Ned,

the farmhand, comes on an errand at night, □relaxed by the thought that there was someone in the house.□

Her sense of self becomes stronger during the day, as when she discusses topping the grass with Bartley Crosson. Harmon argues that she is □practical and capable in dealing with [him] about farming matters, is equally able to deal with him when he tries to kiss her and does so with understanding and sympathy.□ Yet her response to Crossen reveals both her strength and her weakness as she struggles to resist the pull of the past and her fear of the present.

During her first meeting with Crossen, she brings up the issue of price immediately, suggesting that she will not be taken advantage of. Yet, she appears vulnerable after Ned tells her about the death of Crossen's first wife Bridie. When she asks him if he thinks Crossen has forgotten about her, Ned answers in the affirmative and insists, □it will be the same with you, too. . . . Everything passes in time and is forgotten.□ She, however, remains doubtful.

Lavin illustrates the conflict between the past and the present as the main character sits in her room later that night. Initially, as she thinks about Crossen and Bridie, her hair appears □sluggish and hung heavily down□ □like everything else about her lately.□ Yet, it jumps with electricity when she brushes it, and her spirits begin to lift with her hair. Immediately, though, the new life that stirs within her is counteracted by the terror she feels when she hears a knock at the door.

Her responses to Crossen after he enters her home reflect this same duality. At first, still shaken by her response to the knock, she runs downstairs, still in her nightclothes, which makes her appear vulnerable. She regains her composure when she sharply rebuffs Crossen's compliment about her hair, which she had not stopped to pin up. However, she is forced to admit her anxieties about her lights short circuiting.

When the two begin to discuss cutting the grass, she is able to regain her composure and sense of purpose. Crossen tries to persuade her to delay the job by playing on her assumed weakness when he declares, □I'm not a man to break my word□above all, to a woman.□ This places her immediately on her guard as she insists he do the job in the morning. She stands her ground, even when he reminds her that she has □no man to attend to these things□ for her. Angered by his attempts to take advantage of her situation, she speaks to him authoritatively until be throws up his hands and agrees to come in the morning, admitting that he has been □bested.□

Her vulnerability returns when she tells Crossen that she is □scared to death sometimes.□ When he sympathizes with her, she feels divided, part of her wanting to accept his kindness and the other wanting to reject it. Ultimately, she gives in to her fears and asks him to turn off the lights for her after she goes up stairs. Yet his sympathetic response has touched her and makes her hesitate on the stairs.

When Crossen grabs her and asks for a kiss, her strength returns and she rebuffs him. At this point she is able to deal with him practically, touched by his humiliation yet

maintaining a □matter-of-fact□ tone when she insists that nothing serious has occurred. She patiently listens to his story about how his second wife Mona helped raise his and Bridie's child, revealing the depth of his suffering when he admits that Mona helped knit him back □into a living man.□

Perhaps it is this note of suffering that stirs the woman, making her impatient for him to leave. When Crossen insists that he has shamed Mona, she becomes increasingly agitated and declares that what happened had nothing to do with any of them except Bridie. Reaching the point of hysteria, she exclaims, □you thought you could forget her . . . but see what she did to you when she got the chance!□

The woman has concluded that Crossen's momentary passion for her, which threatens the continuity of his present life, was caused by his inability to forget the love he felt for Bridie. Her outburst suggests that she fears that she will never be free from her own memories, that the past will continue to cause problems in the present. When Crossen exclaims, □God rest her soul,□ he is most likely referring to the woman, whom he now knows suffers as much as he has from the pull of the past.

Lavin refuses to resolve the tension between the past and the present in the story, suggesting that the woman will have a difficult time as she searches for a new and satisfying life for herself. Harmon concludes that Lavin clearly has □important things to tell us about ourselves and does so with sophistication, warmth and intelligence.□ Her compassionate study of one woman's struggle with the power of the past in □In the Middle of the Fields□ reveals the painful consequences of loss.

Source: Wendy Perkins, Critical Essay on □In the Middle of the Fields,□ in *Short Stories for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Topics for Further Study

Read two other short stories by Mary Lavin and write an essay comparing and contrasting the main themes.

So much of the emotion in this story remains beneath the surface. How would you film this story, allowing for the suppressed emotions while conveying them? Write a screenplay for the final scenes in the story, beginning with Crossen's arrival at night.

Investigate the emotional stages that one goes through when a loved one dies. Chart these stages in a PowerPoint presentation.

Write a short story about the main character twenty years from the time in which the story is set.

Compare and Contrast

1960s: Abortion is legalized in the mid-sixties in Britain and the United States, yet it is still severely limited in Ireland, a predominantly Catholic country.

Today: Federal and state governments chip away at abortion rights in the United States as anti-abortion groups gain strength. Women in Ireland, led by the Irish Family Planning Association, continue to petition the government there for easier access to abortions, which still remain illegal except in cases in which the mother's health is threatened.

1960s: In 1963, Soviet cosmonaut Valentina Tershkova becomes the first woman in space.

Today: Women continue to travel in space as well as run large corporations. Media mogul Oprah Winfrey is one of the most powerful and wealthiest people in the world.

1960s: In 1963, *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan is published. The book chronicles the growing sense of dissatisfaction women feel about the unequal treatment they receive in the home, the workplace, and in other institutions.

Today: Women make major gains in their fight for equality. While the Equal Rights Amendment is approved by Congress in 1972 but never ratified, women successfully fight discrimination in the United States. The Equal Opportunities Commission in the United Kingdom enables women there to gain equal treatment and opportunities in the workforce.

What Do I Read Next?

Death in the Family (1957), by James Agee, is the tragic tale of the effect of a man's death on his family.

Edna O'Brien's novel *House of Splendid Isolation* (1994) focuses on the relationship between an Irish widow and an escaped Irish Republican Army gunman who has taken refuge in her home.

Lavin's *The House in Clewe Street* (1945) chronicles the coming of age of a young man in Ireland.

□The Demon Lover,□ (1955) one of the most popular stories by the Irish writer Elizabeth Bowen, focuses on a woman whose lover is killed in the war.

Further Study

Church, Margaret, "Social Consciousness in the Works of Elizabeth Bowen, Iris Murdoch, and Mary Lavin," in *College Literature*, Vol. 7, No. 2, Spring 1980, pp. 158-63.

In this comparative study, Church examines Lavin's attacks on habit and social rigidity in her stories. She studies how Lavin's characters rethink social roles in their efforts to forge better relationships with each other.

Dunleavy, Janet Egleson, "Mary Lavin, Elizabeth Bowen, and a New Generation: The Irish Short Story at Midcentury," in *The Irish Short Story: A Critical History*, edited by James Kilroy, Twayne, 1984, pp. 145-68.

Dunleavy explores the Irish context of Lavin's work in political and social terms and compares it to that of other Irish writers.

Gibbons, Luke, *Transformations in Irish Culture*, University of Notre Dame Press, 1996.

In this collection of essays, Gibbons examines the political and cultural influences on Irish life and the tensions that ultimately arise between the establishment of a national and an individual identity.

Shumaker, Jeanette Roberts, "Sacrificial Women in Short Stories by Mary Lavin and Edna O'Brien," in *Studies in Short Fiction*, Vol. 32, No. 2, Spring 1995, pp. 185-97.

This study looks at different forms of female martyrdom and their relationship to sexuality in short stories by Lavin and by O'Brien.

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Brown, Reva, Review of *The Stories of Mary Lavin*, Vol. 3, in *British Book News*, February 1986, pp.110-11.

Harmon, Maurice, □Mary Lavin: Moralist of the Heart,□ in *Gaéliana*, Vol. 5, 1983, pp.113-26.

Lavin, Mary, □In the Middle of the Fields,□ in *A Green and Mortal Sound*, edited by Louise DeSalvo, Kathleen Walsh D'Arcy, and Katherine Hogan, Beacon Press, 1999.

Peterson, Richard F., □The Circle of Truth: The Stories of Katherine Mansfield and Mary Lavin,□ in *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 3, Autumn 1978, pp. 383-94.

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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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