In the Kindergarten Study Guide

In the Kindergarten by Ha Jin

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

"In the Kindergarten" was originally published in a small magazine, *Five Points*, and was reprinted in *The Best American Short Stories of 1999*. It was written by Ha Jin, a writer who first came to the United States in 1985. This story takes place in Jin's native land, China, a country that has remained isolated from the West even in the modern information age. In this tale, a teacher who is unable to afford food for herself and her mother tricks her students, promising them a delicious meal from the plants she has them pick only to take their harvest for herself. One child, Shaona, who has only been in the school for a few weeks, notices how the teacher has taken advantage of her students and takes revenge against her. American readers will be interested in the subtle ways that the Chinese school is different from Western schools, especially in the relationship between the teacher and her pupils. Even so, the most surprising thing for Westerners might be in how similar the Chinese kindergartners are to the children in all other societies.

In 2000, Ha Jin became the first writer ever to win both the National Book Award and the PEN/ Faulkner Award, for his novel *Waiting*. That year, "In the Kindergarten" was included in his collection of stories called *The Bridegroom*. His fiction and his poetry offer quiet, understated insights into what it is like to live in contemporary China, in an ancient society that has been hostile to Western scrutiny and repressive toward its own artists.

Author Biography

Ha Jin was born Jin Xuefei in Liaoning, a province in northeast China, on February 21, 1956. Growing up, he expected to follow a military career like his father. One of the most significant events in China when Jin was growing up was the Cultural Revolution declared by Mao Zedong in the mid-1960s. Because education was considered dangerous to Communist ideology, schools were closed, leaving Jin to piece his education together from whatever few written materials he could obtain. At age fifteen, he entered military service, starting as an artillery gunner and then becoming the operator of a telegraph machine. While he was in the service, stationed at a small town near the Russian border, he began the habit of reading, as books were passed around among the soldiers. In 1974, he left the army and worked as a telegraph operator for the Harbin Railroad Company. Listening to English radio broadcasts, he taught himself the English language.

In 1977, the government allowed the colleges to reopen. Jin attended Heilongjiang University in Harbin, studying American literature and receiving a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1981, the year that he married his wife, now Lisah Bian Jin. He received his master's degree from Shangdong University in 1984. The following year, he came to the United States to study at Brandeis University in Waltham, Massachusetts. His plan had been to go back to China after receiving his Ph.D. from Brandeis, but as the Chinese government became more politically repressive, Jin realized that he would never be able to write honestly if he returned to his home country. Instead, he accepted a position teaching English and creative writing at Emory University in Atlanta after receiving his doctorate in 1992.

In 1996, he published his first book of short stories, *Oceans of Words: Army Stories*. These stories were written while he was a student at Brandeis, and they concerned what life was like in the Chinese army. The book earned Jin the Ernest Hemingway Foundation/PEN award for first fiction in 1997. That year his second short story collection, *Under the Red Flag*, won the Flannery O'Connor Award for Fiction. In early 1999, he published his first novel, *In the Pond*. It received respectable but lackluster reviews. Later that year, though, his second novel, *Waiting*, appeared in print, drawing critical and popular praise. *Waiting* was the first book ever to win both the prestigious National Book Award and the PEN/Faulkner Award, which is the largest annual juried fiction award given in the United States.

"In the Kindergarten" comes from Jin's collection of short stories called The Bridegroom, published in 2000. Though most of his fame is based on his works of fiction, Jin considers himself to be a teacher and poet. His most recent book is Wreckage, a book of poems that was published in 2001. Most of his work so far has been based on his experiences in China, but he foresees that this is likely to change the longer he lives in America.

Plot Summary

The First Day

"In the Kindergarten" begins during naptime at a kindergarten in China. Shaona, who has only been there less than two weeks, is having trouble sleeping. She listens to her teacher on the phone in the next room. The teacher is asking for three more months to pay the money she owes to a Dr. Niu. She explains that she is weak, that she has lost blood "because of the baby," and that she has to provide for her elderly mother at home. Near the end of the conversation, she begs Dr. Niu not to tell anyone that she has had an abortion. Shaona does not understand much of what Teacher Shen is talking about, why she says a baby weakened her, as if it came out of her body: her mother had a baby a week before Shaona was sent off to school, and she was told that it came from a pumpkin patch.

After the nap, Teacher Shen gathers the entire class together and takes them out to the school's turnip field to pick purslanes, which are weeds that grow between the turnips. She shows the children what purslanes are and explains that they are delicious when cooked, promising that they will have some sautéed for dinner that night if they pick enough. The children turn picking them into a competition, while Uncle Chang, the old man who watches the field, warns them to be careful not to hurt the young turnips. A bully named Dabin gets into a fight with a girl, throwing her to the ground and kicking her. When the teacher asks who started it, Shaona points to Dabin, and he is taken inside to be punished by being locked in a closet.

As they are leaving the turnip field, Shaona is surprised to see Teacher Shen give a large portion of the purslanes they have picked to Uncle Chang. She is further surprised that night to find that there are no purslanes served for dinner. She remembers seeing the teacher ride off at the end of the day with a duffel bag on her bicycle that looked like the one they had collected the purslanes in, but she had thought the teacher was taking her laundry home. She comes to understand that the teacher has left with the plants that the children gathered.

Dabin looks at Shaona throughout dinner, and she knows that he is planning his revenge against her for telling on him. She has some peanuts that her father gave her, so she gives some of them to him as a peace offering. He tells her threateningly that she will have to keep coming up with gifts for him.

At night, Shaona cannot sleep because she misses her family. She eats one of the peanuts her father gave her, even though it is against the rules, and places the shell under her pillow.

The Second Day

The next morning on the playground, Shaona walks past the place where Dabin and the other boys play army games. She plays "court" with the girls. They elect her to be queen because she is good-looking, and for a king they assign Dun, who is the only boy willing to play with them. Shaona is disgusted by Dun because he is weak and mousy and would have made a better courtier than king, so she quits.

While they take a nap after lunch, the teacher takes the children's sweaters and skirts to clean off the mud. Shaona finds the three peanuts that she had left missing, as well as the peanut shell that she had hidden under her pillow the night before. The teacher obviously confiscated them and then looked around the bed for more.

They go out into the turnip field again that afternoon to find any purslanes that they might have missed the afternoon before. Uncle Chang is not at his post. The field is being irrigated, making it muddy. The teacher once again promises them purslanes for dinner, explaining that they were too late turning in the ones they picked the day before. The children dutifully tramp through the mud, trying to find any purslanes that might be left.

When Shaona goes to search through some high grass, a wild rabbit jumps out. The rabbit has an injured leg, and it is confused by the children's noise. Even though she had told them to be careful of the turnips the day before, the teacher is excited about the possibility of catching the rabbit. She encourages the children, who are slipping around in the mud and ruining the turnip crop, to keep chasing it.

While everyone is concentrating on the rabbit, Shaona goes to the duffel bag where the purslanes have been collected. She urinates in the bag and then carefully covers the wet plants with dry ones.

After the rabbit runs away, the children talk excitedly with one another, but Teacher Shen quickly gathers them together and rushes them back to the school before Uncle Chang arrives and sees how they have ruined the turnip patch.

That night, there are no purslanes at dinner. Shaona is excited about having sabotaged them: she eats heartily and then later plays "soldier" with the boys, "as though all of a sudden she had become a big girl." She is confident that she will no longer cry for her family when she is lying in her bed at night.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

This well-known short story is set in a rural school in Communist China, where the children live for the term. Our attention is focused on the class of five and six-year-olds beginning the second week of school. Shaona, the young protagonist of the story, is homesick. Her mother gave birth to a baby boy shortly before Shaona was sent to school and she is confused by the sequence of events.

The story opens as the children nap on cots. It has been difficult for Shaona to adjust to sleeping alone, having shared a bed with her entire family for her whole life. Shaona overhears Teacher Shen talking on the telephone. Teacher Shen is trying to get a doctor to wait one more month for payment. The reader learns quickly that Teacher Shen has an elderly mother at home, little money and has recently had an abortion. Shaona is confused by the conversation, lacking the vocabulary and a context in which to understand this personal information about her teacher.

The school is a two-story building with a yard for the children to play in, surrounded by a stone wall topped with shards of broken glass. Beyond the wall lies a field of turnips and purlsanes, a succulent, flowering plant that may be eaten raw or steamed. The weather is very warm. Shaona sees jet fighters in the sky and planes spraying dichlorvos, an chemical used to eliminate insects (particularly mosquitoes and fleas) that has been found to have a negative affect on the nervous system when inhaled or ingested in large quantities.

Teacher Shen leads the class out to the field and instructs them on the difference between the turnip seedlings and the purlsanes. She promises to have the cook prepare them for dinner if the children assist with the harvest, reminding them, "Many hands provide great strength."

Shaona points a finger at Dabin, a rambunctious young boy, as the instigator of a fight. He is punished by being locked in a cabinet in the second-floor kitchen. Before they head back inside, Teacher Shen hands over a sizeable portion of the children's harvest to Uncle Chan, the old man hired to care for the fields and the pump house.

That night at dinner the children are all disappointed by the absence of the purlsanes, though not one mentions it to the teacher. Dabin newly released from punishment, glares at Shaona. She fears his retaliation, so that evening, while playing in the yard, she offers him part of a special treat given to her by her father: two long peanuts, which he swallows quickly before demanding more. She refuses and Dabin warns her to always be nice to him and provide him with special treats in order to spare herself his revenge.

During the night, Shaona is feeling particularly homesick and to comfort herself, eats one of her father's peanuts, hiding the shells under her pillow. The next morning, while the kids are playing in the muddy yard, Shaona occupies herself with a group of girls. She is elected 'queen,' she and discovers that she does not like having to obey the young 'king,' referring to him as 'your majesty'.

When the children return for lunch, Teacher Shen is upset about the muddy clothes. "None of you is a good child." She declares, unhappy about having to clean up after them. Shaona is devastated to find that the peanuts she had hidden in her sweater pocket are missing after being washed. She is equally dismayed to find the shells gone from under her pillow.

The children return to the field to harvest more purlsanes that afternoon. Teacher Shen again promises that they will be served for dinner. A wild rabbit with an injured hind leg becomes the object of a hunt as the class, including Teacher Shen, chases it through the field, destroying the crops in the process. While everyone else is distracted, Shaona squats over the duffel bag of purlsanes and pees a little bit. Then, heart racing, she runs to join the rest of the class. The rabbit manages to escape, and Teacher Shen hurries the children out of the field before they can be scolded by Uncle Chan for destroying the crops.

At dinner, Teacher Shen's promise is once again unfulfilled. Shaona is secretly relieved, her revenge not having backfired, and she eats a good dinner. Feeling like a big girl, she dares to play with the boys after dinner and resolves not to cry anymore at night.

Analysis

Set in China, this story weaves multiple themes and ideologies of Communism throughout its narrative. Most obvious to the Western reader will be the difference in the school itself. Not only do the children live at the school, separated from their parents, but they also take part in the daily functioning of the school. Instead of the numerous administrators that are commonly found in American schools, Teacher Shen is solely responsible for the children. This responsibility is shown to be somewhat a burden in the begrudging way that she addresses the children and their concerns. The reader is aware from the beginning that Shen has an elderly mother at home whom she is obliged to care for. We are also aware that she does not have much money to provide the necessary food and care, and can speculate that this is the reason for her recent abortion and possibly for the hoarding of the purlsanes.

The story takes place in a time of conflict as evidenced by the fighter jets spotted in the sky. They have recently sprayed dichlorvos to get rid of the abundant mosquitoes and fleas. This kind of pesticide use is now considered unsafe because we know that exposure can cause damage to the central nervous system in humans and other animals. It is also a time of conflict for the kindergarten children as they learn how to handle themselves independent from their parents and in a new social setting. Shaona discovers the balance of manipulation and bribery when she exposes Dabin for fighting

and then fears his retaliation. This relationship is mirrored in that of the adults. Teacher Shen bribes Uncle Chang with a large portion of the purlsane harvest, in exchange for his silence and compliance.

Western students will recognize the familiar discourse of the bully on the playground. It is important to realize that people are human regardless of where they live, the language they speak or the color of their skin. Involved in a game of 'court' Shaona also discovers the social inequity of the sexes on the playground when she is elected 'queen' and forced to be subservient to her kindergarten 'king.' Because the game frustrates her, she quits playing.

Shaona's experience of betrayal is felt on many levels: she feels betrayed by her parents who have sent her away to school after bringing home the new baby. She also feels betrayed by Teacher Shen, who not only hoards the promised purlsanes for herself twice, but also confiscates the peanuts from her sweater pocket. In this way, Shaona is stripped of her individuality—not allowed to have special food given to her by her father. Shaona finds this particularly hard to cope with as she already feels isolated by the loss of her family unit and the familiarity of her former life.

As we are reminded by Teacher Shen, one of the basic principals of Communism is that "Many hands provide great strength." This view is contrary to the Western ideology of the individual at the center of society. Many people working together toward a common goal theoretically means more is possible. In order to achieve solidarity, there must be utter equality. While Dabin is punished independently for vagrant misconduct, the entire class is criticized for the muddy clothing. "Not one of you is a good child." With that one line, Teacher Shen brings each child down to the same level of shame. This can be seen as a lashing out in response to her sense of burden of task, but also a projection of the shame she feels herself for having been caught up in the rabbit chase and carelessly destroying the vegetable field.

The crippled rabbit may be seen as symbolic of Shaona and her feeling like she has been 'fed to the wolves' by her parents. The fact that the rabbit escapes, despite its disadvantage, is particularly ironic given that the vegetable field is destroyed in the hunt.

The theme of retaliation or revenge is important on several levels. Shaona learns to fear Dabin's retaliation for her honesty in tattling on him. She attempts to bribe him with the peanuts, but quickly realizes that precedence will be set by giving in to his aggression. Shaona also discovers that her anger at the betrayal she feels (of her parents and her teacher) is quieted by an act of revenge. The passive-aggressive action of peeing on the purlsane harvest empowers Shaona. She realizes that she is able to operate in the big-girl world by getting away with something she knew to be unacceptable behavior, but that also satisfied her need to act out against the forces acting upon her.

Characters

Aili

Aili is a classmate of Shaona. She is first mentioned because her snoring keeps Shaona awake at night. Later, Shaona quits the "court" game that she is playing with the other children, deciding that she does not want to play the queen anymore. When she does, Aili steps in as vice queen to "keep the court from disintegrating."

Uncle Chang

An old, bald man who keeps watch over the turnip field. He allows Teacher Shen to bring her class into the field to pick purslane weeds from between the turnips, but he still keeps a strict eye on the students, making sure that the turnips will not be disturbed. As they leave, Uncle Chang is paid off with a large part of the harvest, almost a third of the purslanes that had been picked. The next day, when the class returns to pick purslanes again, Uncle Chang is absent from his post, and they destroy the turnip crop while chasing after a rabbit.

Dabin

Dabin, described as a "rambunctious" boy, becomes a threat to Shaona during the story. He is competitive, showing off how many purslanes he picked while playing cool about their value: he tells the other children that they taste awful even as the children are excited about picking them. When the teacher catches him fighting with another child, Shaona is the one to point out that Dabin started the fight. He is taken inside and locked in a closet. Later, fearing what he might do to her in revenge, Shaona offers him some of the peanuts that her parents gave her. He takes them and then insists that she will have to continue to be nice to him: "Remember to save lots of goodies for me, got it?" he tells Shaona menacingly. On the playground, she is afraid to go near the merry-go-round that Dabin and another boy, Luwen, are playing on.

Dun

Dun is a weak, "mousy" boy that the girls in the class do not respect. He is, however, the only boy willing to play with them. When they play "court," he has the part of the king and Shaona is the queen, but she soon quits the game because "she felt silly calling him 'Your Majesty' and hated having to obey his orders."

Luwen

One of the boys in the class, Luwen is mentioned a few times in the company of Dabin. He and Dabin play on the merry-go-round, pretending to shoot their toy guns at things. Later, after the children have tried to catch a rabbit, Luwen tops Dabin's claim to have touched the rabbit before it escaped by bragging that he tasted wild rabbit once when his uncle caught two of them.

Dr. Niu

At the beginning of the story, Teacher Shen is on the phone with Dr. Niu, asking for more time to pay her bill and begging the doctor not to let anyone know that she has had an abortion. He does not appear in the story, nor are his words quoted directly.

Shaona

Shaona is the protagonist of this story. She is new to the kindergarten, in her second week there. Three weeks earlier, her parents had a baby boy, but she does not understand the physical process that led to it: Shaona believes what her grandmother told her, that "babies were dug out from pumpkin fields in the countryside." Because she had never tasted the purslane before, Shaona is excited to hear that the children will have sautéed purslanes for dinner once they have collected them from the field, and she plans to pick some for her parents if they are good. This leads to her disappointment when she realizes that the teacher has taken the harvest away and kept it for herself.

Shaona is nervous in the kindergarten. After she gets Dabin in trouble with the teacher by telling on him, she tries to make amends by offering him some of the peanuts that her parents gave her, hoping to avoid more trouble from him. She shies away from the merry-go-round where the boys play, remembering that the one time she'd played on it at length she felt sick for days afterward.

She is good-looking but also strong-headed. After being elected queen while the children are playing court, because she was judged "most handsome" among the girls, she walks away from the game because the boy playing the king is weak, and she cannot stand taking orders from him.

When Teacher Shen takes the children's clothes away to clean them, Shaona finds that her peanuts, which her parents gave to her, have disappeared from her sweater pocket. She feels heartbroken, aware that the teacher must have confiscated the peanuts, but she does not say anything about them. Later, though, when the other children are chasing a rabbit, she urinates into the bag of purslanes that have been collected. It is not just an act of impulse, because she is crafty enough to quit at some point so that there will be enough dry plants to cover over the wet ones. Shaona, who is naïve in the beginning of the story when she is listening to Teacher Shen on the telephone, ends up

being vengeful and sneaky, driven to take action against her teacher but careful to keep her action a secret. As a result of her devious action, she does not feel like a baby anymore: she plays soldier with the boys that evening, and is sure that she will no longer cry at night.

Teacher Shen

The teacher is a complex adult whom the story's protagonist, Shaona, studies, at first with confusion and then later with anger. The teacher is in desperate need of money, and she is willing to use her children and bribe other officials in order to avoid starvation for herself and her elderly mother. She is young, and rumor has it that she is recently divorced from her husband, who was sentenced to thirteen years in jail for embezzlement.

In the story's opening lines, Shaona hears Teacher Shen on the telephone with Dr. Niu. She talks about having an abortion and about being unable to come up with the money that she owes. Shaona does not understand what she is talking about. Later, Teacher Shen takes her class of kindergartners to the school's turnip field. She tries to get them excited about picking the purslane weeds that grow between the turnips, promising them a delicious meal of purslanes that night. Even the children who have had purslanes but have not liked them are competitive about picking them. Shaona sees Teacher Shen giving some of the purslanes to Uncle Chang, not realizing that this is a bribe for letting them into the field to pick them, and she sees the teacher leave that evening with the rest of the purslanes. The teacher is either selling the plants that the students picked, in order to pay the debt she owes, or she is eating them herself because her debt to the doctor has depleted her food money. She betrays the children by not giving them the delicious meal they worked for.

A mark of the teacher's desperation is that she steals peanuts that Shaona's parents have given her.

The following day, she takes the children back to the turnip field when Uncle Chang is not there. The fields are being irrigated, and it is unlikely that he would allow them to endanger the turnip plants if he knew they were there. The teacher loses all concern about the turnips when someone sees a rabbit and there is a chance of catching it: she tells them to catch it, even though it means tramping the turnips into the mud.

Weilan

Weilan is a tough, scrawny girl who fights with Dabin and sticks up for the teacher. When he says that purslanes do not taste good, she says, "Teacher Shen told us it tastes great," which leads to a bout of obscenities that ends with him pushing and kicking her.

Themes

Loneliness and Isolation

"In the Kindergarten" is primarily about the suffering that the story's protagonist, Shaona, feels because she is unable to fit into her new surroundings. She is a young child who has been away from home for just over a week. At home, she has been replaced in the family by a three-week-old baby brother. Shaona misses her parents, and she is not even sure whether they love her as they did before, because of the baby.

At school, she finds that she does not fit in with any of the cliques that are already established. She assumes that the rough and tumble play of the boys by the merry-go-round is too much for her to handle, because after having played on the merry-go-round once before, she felt ill for days afterward. The girls accept her and make her the queen in their make believe court game, but Shaona finds the game too passive for her tastes. Isolated from all factions, she cries through naptime, and in the night she is unable to sleep out of loneliness.

In the end, she becomes socialized by learning a secret behavior that gives her confidence. Spoiling the purslanes that the teacher was counting on rearranges the rules of society in a way that gives Shaona power over her bleak situation, and as a result she no longer fears the aggressive boys on the playground. She steps right into their soldier game and for once feels secure in her bed at night.

Self-Preservation

Teacher Shen behaves in a way that Shaona finds difficult to understand, because the teacher is driven by a knowledge of poverty from which Shaona has been shielded throughout her young life. Shaona expects her teacher to be honest and is shocked to catch her lying, taking home the purslanes that were promised to the students. She does not understand how desperate Teacher Shen's situation is, how her life is threatened by low wages, illness, and the fear that she might lose what little income she has if word of her abortion were made public. Teacher Shen's husband has been sent to prison, and she has to care for her mother, even though she herself is undernourished because of the blood that she lost during the abortion. She does not lie to the students and bribe Uncle Chang because of greed; she does so to save her own life.

Shaona is even more personally affected by the teacher's uncommon behavior when she finds that her peanuts are missing. To Shaona, the peanuts have a sentimental significance because her parents gave them to her. It is a sign of just how starved the teacher is that she would steal from one of her students out of a compulsion to nourish herself.

Teacher Shen tries throughout the story to behave in a responsible manner, even when it is obvious that she is desperate. In the end, the sight of the lame rabbit and the

possibility of actually having meat to eat drives her into such a wild frenzy that she forgets her job and her responsibility to the students. The fact that Uncle Chang is not in the turnip patch on the second day is an indication that the class's presence there is probably inexcusable, and so Teacher Shen is taking a great risk to bring them in to pick purslanes. It is a chance that she is apparently willing to take. If entering the turnip patch is dangerous to her, then destroying it is certainly cause for dismissal, if not imprisonment. Still, she is so hungry that she cannot focus on the obvious consequences, and she encourages the children to catch the rabbit at all costs, regardless of what their childish efforts will mean in the long run.

Gender Roles

The attitudes that the people in this story have toward the different genders are very much like typical American attitudes. The kindergarten teacher caring for children is a woman, whereas the guard of the turnip field is a man, although, because the field is not in much danger, the job is given to an old, retired man. Shaona's father apparently cares about his daughter enough, but he is overjoyed when a boy is born into the family.

In the kindergarten, the traditional gender roles are followed: the boys play soldiers and make pretend guns out of anything they can find, and they aggressively threaten and intimidate the girls; the girls play court, but the strongest and smartest of them is expected to take orders from the weakest, dimmest boy, who plays the king.

There are signs that the traditional expectations are changing in the world of this story. One is the fight between Dabin and Weilan. When Weilan disagrees with Dabin, she stands up for herself, and she matches his obscenities with her own of equal strength. Still, she does not fight against Dabin when the conflict turns physical. At the end of the story, though, Shaona does break the line that separates boys from girls by playing soldier with the boys. It is because she is fulfilled and no longer repressing her aggressive, unladylike side that she is able to sleep comfortably.

Growing Up

As the title of this story indicates, "In the Kindergarten" belongs in the category of stories about young people who learn to develop independent identities, separate from those of their families. In this particular case, readers are not directly shown the family situation that Shaona, the main character, comes from but are only given hints in the scattered memories she has of her mother and father. Still, the importance of her family is clear from the way that she finds herself unable to sleep, distracted by thinking of them. Having been taken from her family and put into the kindergarten means that she must grow up quickly, because she does not have a chance to follow the gradual process of maturation that she might follow if she had stayed at home.

One harsh reality of the world that Shaona is faced with is the fact that her teacher, whom she trusts as a substitute for her parents, is untruthful. Shaona is in a position to understand this like none of the other students. She is the one who hears Teacher Shen

on the phone, begging for time to pay her debt; she is the one who sees the teacher ride away on her bicycle with the bag of purslanes; and she is the one whose peanuts are stolen by the teacher. When she is convinced that Teacher Shen cannot be trusted, Shaona is forced to grow up quickly and to face the ugliness of the world that her parents shielded her from. Deciding to sabotage the purslanes is an immature way to deal with the situation, but it is the fact that she takes action at all that makes it possible for Shaona to think that "all of a sudden she had become a big girl."

Style

Point of View

"In the Kindergarten" is primarily told from Shaona's point of view. The story is told in the third person, which means that the narrative voice refers to Shaona as "she" or "Shaona," rather than saying "I" as it would if Shaona were telling the story to the readers. Still, the information that is given to the reader is mostly limited to information that would have passed through Shaona's mind. For instance, when Teacher Shen is on the telephone at the beginning of the story, readers are given her exact words just as Shaona would have heard them, and the reader is also given the child's interpretation of what Shaona would have thought. The exact reasoning behind the teacher's behavior&mdas;whether she is taking the purslanes for her own consumption, for instance, or is taking them to sell&mdas;is never specifically explained, because Shaona does not have access to what goes on in Teacher Shen's mind. She can only interpret what she sees of the teacher's behavior.

Although most of the story is told from Shaona's point of view, it sometimes slips and gives information that Shaona could not know. Some of the story's information, such as the fact that the teacher used to sing a lot, seems unlikely to be from Shaona's consciousness: she is new to the kindergarten and would not know much about the teacher's former behaviors, although it could be explained as something that she heard from a classmate. Similarly, she could have heard that the teacher divorced her husband when he was sent to prison for embezzlement, but that is a fairly complex idea for kindergartners to be gossiping about. In some cases, the narrative clearly shifts out of Shaona's point of view to that of Teacher Shen. One example is when the readers are told that when Teacher Shen is cleaning the children's clothes, she "was unhappy because she couldn't take a nap." Another example is when she rushes to leave the turnip field at the end because she is "fearful that Uncle Chang [will] call her names." These breaks from Shaona's point of view are extremely rare.

Symbolism

In literary works, symbols are items that have both a specific function in the reality of the story and also refer to a larger, abstract concept. For instance, characters in a story or novel might have to cross a bridge to get from one place to another, but the bridge, in addition to its logical place in the tale, might also be seen as a symbolic "bridge" between the estranged people or hostile cultures that it helps bring together.

"In the Kindergarten" makes much of the purslanes that Teacher Shen has the schoolchildren gather from the turnip field. In reality, purslanes are trailing weeds that are sometimes cooked and eaten, just as they are presented in the story. Symbolically, they tell readers much about the teacher's situation. Turnips are considered lowly roots that are eaten in poor cultures, but the purslanes here are so much lower in status than

turnips that they are seen as an annoying clutter in the turnip patch. In the story, they grow so wildly among the turnips that a significant amount can be found on the second day of looking for them. As a symbol of Teacher Shen's starved desperation, the purslanes show that food can always be found if one lowers one's standards and seeks with enough effort.

Similarly, the wild rabbit can be considered a symbol of the children that Teacher Shen is trying to control. Even though the teacher would like her students to conduct their search for purslanes in an orderly way, disrupting as little of the turnip field as possible, she becomes excited about the rabbit and encourages the children to run around the turnip patch just as recklessly as the rabbit does. The fact that the rabbit is lame is a realistic element, in that this would be the only kind that the kindergarten children would have a chance of catching; it can also be considered symbolic of Teacher Shen's poverty, showing that she is so poor that even her fantasy meal is not anything grand&mdas;just a sick, injured animal.

Setting

The kindergarten setting of this story presents readers with a universal situation for childhood alienation. Children all over the world know that going to school for the first time marks a child's separation from the closed family society that he or she has known since birth. In this particular case, the familiar situation is magnified by the fact that the Chinese kindergarten is a boarding school, so that the children are forced, at the same time that they are socialized during the day, to deal with spending their nights in a strange place. Placing the story in this setting gives Ha Jin an opportunity to explore Shaona's subconscious fears, which she faces while trying to sleep, in addition to exploring the traditional fears of a child thrown into a social setting for the first time.

One other aspect that marks this setting as distinctive is the school's close association with the turnip field. American schools do not mix commerce and education together in the same place, but in rural China the students would learn the value of tending crops at the same time that they learned more academic pursuits. Because the turnip field is part of the school, the children are familiar with Uncle Chang, and they see nothing unusual about being brought to the field to pick weeds. The fact that the school grows its own produce helps convince Western readers of the poverty that affects people in the story, showing this school to be a small, basic, rural one that does not buy all of the food that it serves its students. Set at another type of boarding school, the students' destruction of a field might be seen as a cause for some discipline: in this setting, though, readers are led to believe that the loss of the turnip crop will hurt the school significantly.

Historical Context

Starvation

In general, Americans know little about China. For most of the time since China adopted a Communist form of government in 1949, it has been closed to visitors from the West. Travel in China has been restricted, and information about government workings has not been as accessible to journalists working there. The Chinese government is actively involved in the lives of its citizens, determining such matters as where individuals will work or go to school or how many children a family may have. The government is faced with the imposing task of caring for one and a quarter billion people, with more than a fifth of the world's total population living within China's borders. Three quarters of the country is rural, living in conditions that Americans would consider below the poverty level.

In trying to handle a population of that size, the Chinese government has made some drastic policy decisions that have had traumatic effects. One of the great catastrophes in modern Chinese history was the economic program called the Great Leap Forward. Initiated in the late 1950s, it was intended to quickly increase the country's economic capacity. The Great Leap Forward entailed consolidating small farms into huge labor cooperatives and moving over 100 million citizens into new positions. In the first few years, 1956 and 1957, the program appeared to be an astounding success, far beyond what anyone could have anticipated. Agricultural production increased greatly, in some areas shooting up ten times what the farms had previously been able to produce. Plans for distribution of food were made, and purchases from other countries were cancelled. Only gradually did the sad truth become known: the reported figures were nowhere near the actual production figures. Pressured by the bureaucratic system, local commune leaders had exaggerated reports to their superiors, who had in turn added their own exaggerations to those reports on each level up the chain to the federal government. Additionally, economists and statisticians who would have realized that the reported increases were impossible had been fired from government positions for being critical of the government. Having planned for grain that did not exist, the country plunged into a famine of staggering proportions. Between 1959 and 1962&mdas;a period when Ha Jin, born in 1956, would himself have been in kindergarten&mdas;over 20 million people starved to death in China.

In the early 1980s, the government began to accept the fact that a purely communist economy could not feed all of China's citizens. The agricultural sector was restructured, and the large communes were broken down. Under the new system, each household was responsible for growing and then providing a certain quota of crops; anything that was produced over that quota could be sold on the open market, which "In the Kindergarten" implies Teacher Shen may be doing with the plants that she has her students gather.

Reproductive Policies

Even throughout the periods of food shortage, China's economy grew immensely throughout the last half of the twentieth century. Between 1949, when the Communist government was installed, and 1990, the population grew from 540 million people to more than twice that number. Recognizing that overpopulation was a serious threat, the government instituted a policy in 1971 restricting each family to only one child. In cities, where there is a stronger police element, families have become accustomed to this and tend to follow the law, even though it has never been popular. In rural areas, families depend on having boys, who can work harder in the fields. Because these areas are not as well scrutinized, the "one child" law is frequently ignored. In a 1998 book about her ten-year experience as a foreign journalist in China, Linda Jakobson discussed her surprise at entering a country village and finding it populated with big families:

There seemed to be at least three or four kids in every household. I knew that the so-called one-child policy had, even officially in many rural areas, become a two-child policy. I also knew that, as a result of rising incomes, some families were prepared to pay the heavy fines for having more than the officially sanctioned number of offspring. But I had thought that these were exceptions.

This would explain why, in "In the Kindergarten," Shaona's family is able to have a second child.

Because of the limit on children and the importance of male children for physical labor, there have always been rumors about female babies being abandoned or murdered at birth and mothers being forced to undergo abortions or sterilization. The government denies these rumors, making them difficult to confirm, although the country does have a high rate of infant girls who are put up for adoption annually. One fact that is clear is that abortion in China does not carry the social stigma that it does in the United States, where it is treated as a religious issue. In China, abortion is a practical issue. Having an abortion is treated like any other necessary medical procedure, so the ethics of it is not brought into question. A schoolteacher like the one in this story would not face the questions about her morality and would just have to face the financial burden of paying her doctor's bill.

Critical Overview

Ha Jin has been considered a major American fiction writer ever since the publication of his first book of short stories, *Oceans of Words*, in 1996. His work has won major writing awards, including the PEN/Hemingway prize, the Flannery O'Connor Award for Fiction, the National Book Award, and the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction. His books have been reviewed in academic journals such as *World Literature Today*, and in popular magazines with widespread circulation like *Entertainment Weekly*. In less than a decade, Ha Jin has earned a reputation as one of the most important voices in Sino-American literature.

His most successful book to date has been his second novel, *Waiting*, a love story about a Chinese army doctor who returns to his home village every year for seventeen years to beg for a divorce from his wife so that he can remarry. That book was the first ever to win both the National Book Award and the PEN/Faulkner Award. John McNally, writing in *The Progressive*, noted its combination of literary antecedents and cultural insight when he explained that *Waiting* "appears as if from a time capsule: It's a novel of manners in the tradition of Henry James, except that the backdrop is New China, and the manners are prescribed (and often enforced) by the Chinese government." McNally recognized the weakness of *Waiting* as being that it "sags under the weight of cliché. Letters bring rays of hope; characters' faint smiles play around their lips. The result is a world that can be read about but never fully experienced&mdas;which is a pity, since Jin's world is a complex and fascinating one."

In *World Literature Today*, Jeffrey C. Kinkley saw *Waiting* as a part of the "Ha Jin phenomenon." Kinkley compared it to Jin's one earlier novel, *In the Pond*, noting that it lacked the "irony and bitter humor" of the earlier book and that it was "unpretentious." In the end, Kinkley characterized it positively but unenthusiastically as "a good read."

"In the Kindergarten" was published in the collection *The Bridegroom* in the same year that *Waiting* came to national attention. Reviewers generally commented on the stories' deadpan prose style, a mark of simplicity used to draw attention to the complex lives led by Jin's characters. A review in *Publishers Weekly*, for instance, notes that the stories in *The Bridegroom* "attain their significant cumulative effect through sparse prose penetrated by wit, insight and a fine sense of irony." That review pointed out the way Jin's characters "illustrate the ways in which hardship, lack of living space, inflexible social rules and government quotas thwart happiness."

Nancy Pearl, writing in *Booklist*, noted that *The Bridegroom* would be welcomed by "fans of *Waiting* because the two books present similar styles and themes. Altogether," Pearl concluded, "this is a fine collection, sure to be in demand by fans of literary fiction." A brief review by Bianca Perlman in *Entertainment Weekly* gave *The Bridegroom* a rating of "A," pointing out that "Ha Jin's spare prose, subtle wit, and surprising plot twists make for a read that is both quick and memorable." *Library Journal* reviewer Shirley N. Quan recommended *The Bridegroom* for "most larger public,

academic, and Asian literature collections," noting that "Jin uses this collection to exhibit his strong writing and storytelling skills with his laconic use of words."

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Kelly is an instructor of creative writing and composition. In this essay, Kelly makes the case that the effectiveness of "In the Kindergarten" is diminished by the story's inconsistent point of view.

Ha Jin's short story "In the Kindergarten" gives readers in-depth information about two main characters. One is five-year-old Shaona, who has been sent away to school recently, when she was replaced in her home by the birth of a baby brother. The other is her teacher, Shen, who is recently divorced from her husband and is recovering from an abortion. Both characters are fascinating in their own right, especially to Western readers who want to understand more about everyday life in China. Unfortunately, this story simply is not big enough to carry all of the information that is packed into it. It has one main character, Shaona. It explains her confusion, follows her growth, and ends with her taking control of her situation. The excessive information given about Teacher Shen's life drains power from what readers think of Shaona's predicament, and it diminishes the success of the story overall.

Success is relative, of course, and judging the success of any work of art is linked to understanding what the work is trying to do. The observation that a short story has multiple points of view only becomes a criticism after the question of how many it rightly should have has been settled. In this story, there are at least three distinct perspectives, and possibly more.

The most conspicuous point of view is Shaona's. Readers see most of the story through her eyes, from the first sentence when she is having trouble sleeping to the last when she realizes that sleeping will not be a problem for her anymore. Between these points, the story follows the range of her consciousness. Shaona is confused as she tries to understand what an abortion is; cunning, in offering two peanuts to her nemesis, Dabin, and hiding the rest in her sock; betrayed when she realizes that Teacher Shen has stolen the class's purslanes and, more personally hurtful, Shaona's peanuts; and triumphant when it strikes her that covert destruction gives her power over the kindergarten bureaucrat that took advantage of her. The story tells Shaona's emotions directly to its readers, explaining what she thinks but does not say aloud, such as that she knows Dabin will take revenge and that she misses her parents. There is no indication anywhere in the story that this is meant to be anything other than a chronicle of Shaona's experiences.

By contrast, Teacher Shen's life is revealed with inconsistent vigor, giving readers spurts of her life story and flashes of her thought. Most of the information given about her is out in the open, where it is entirely believable that the facts readers know are ones that Shaona has acquired from her experiences of the teacher. The clearest example of this is in the story's opening segment. Readers find out that Teacher Shen has had an abortion, that she cares for her elderly mother, that she is so poor that she cannot afford eggs, and that she is in a panic about the prospect of word of her abortion leaking out, and it is all conveyed without the narrative having to enter Teacher Shen's mind. This

early part of the story clearly establishes the pattern that makes the story Shaona's, with no need for any other point of view, since the story is willing to let Shaona gain knowledge through overhearing things, even when it is unlikely.

The pattern that is established in the story's first few pages is broken, however, when the narrative gives readers direct access to Teacher Shen's thoughts. The most flagrant example of this is when the children are asleep and the narrative explains that the teacher is unhappy about not being able to take a nap herself: this is not an observation of her behavior; it is a direct statement of what is going on inside of her mind. Another obvious case of entering the teacher's consciousness is when the story says that she was "fearful that Uncle Chang would call her names." There is no reference to anything she has said or done to indicate that Shaona is just guessing that she harbors this fear. It is the story's narrative telling readers that this is how she feels, presenting Teacher Shen's thoughts directly to the reader.

There are a few instances when the story's narrative attempts to explain how Shaona would know what other characters are thinking. For example, she knows how the absence of purslanes affects her classmates because "[e]very one of her classmates *looked* upset" (emphasis added). She knows that Dabin is pleased about the peanuts that she has given him because it is easy to interpret his response: "His eyes glittered and his mouth twitched like a rabbit's." Descriptions like these allow readers to see how Shaona might reasonably know how others feel, but there are other instances when information that comes from beyond Shaona's direct experiences is harder to explain. In one case, the narrator explains that Teacher Shen "used to sing a lot." Since Shaona has only been at the school for a week and a half, readers can only put this information in her mind if they assume that other students would have mentioned it to her. Likewise, readers can only explain a statement like "The sight of the irrigation made their teacher hesitate" if they presume that Shaona put together the irrigation with a certain, unexplained look on the teacher's face, in order to interpret what was going on within her mind.

There is a third point of view in this story, one that makes observations that cannot be attributed to either Shaona or Teacher Shen. It is this unidentified perspective that tells readers, "It was said that [Teacher Shen] had divorced her husband the previous summer because he had been sentenced to thirteen years in prison for embezzlement." No one in the story could be considered to have come up with this thought: Teacher Shen certainly would not have thought it, and it is highly unlikely that any of the kindergartners would include such obscure details as "embezzlement" and "thirteen years" in their gossip. The same adult narrative perspective later tells readers, "Whenever their little skirts or caps were full, they went over to unload the purslanes into the duffel bag from which their teacher was picking out grass." Since Teacher Shen is referred to as "their teacher," it is not her thought, and yet this line apparently comes from an adult perspective that would see the kindergartners' clothes as "little." There are no other adults in the scene: the story has added a new point of view.

There are short stories that work quite well without holding firmly to one narrow point of view. Some are told from an omniscient perspective, which is one that allows the

narrative voice to tell readers anything that happens anywhere at any time, skipping unapologetically from one character's mind into another's, from one locale to another, or even through different time frames. Other stories establish a pattern of changing points of view, focusing first on one character's experience and then shifting to another's. Still others can tell their tales from nonhuman perspectives, viewing the action from the point of view of a building or an abstract concept like a community. These works can all be successful by sticking consistently to one method throughout. "In the Kindergarten" starts out clearly, firmly presenting the world from Shaona's point of view, but through the course of the story it changes. It violates the rules that it establishes for itself, with no deliberate pattern and for no good artistic reason.

The problem with this kind of inconsistency is that it distracts readers from the story's main point and dilutes its effect. The information that the story gives to readers that does not come through Shaona's point of view may be interesting, but, given that this is Shaona's story, it is mainly irrelevant. Teacher Shen's abortion, her husband's jail sentence, and her fear that Uncle Chang might call her names might all be significant points, if this were a different kind of piece. It is a short story, though, and as such its space is limited: some information might be considered interesting but still does not deserve to be covered here. Once this is established as a conflict between Shaona's understanding of the world and the reality that she has found around her, there is an artistic responsibility to stay with that vision. This starts out as a story about Shaona's naïveté, as she tries to make sense of what the teacher says about babies in terms of what she herself knows about them. To bring in other points of view makes the style of those early pages irrelevant. If an artistic piece cannot keep consistent, it needs to show why it should be inconsistent. If not, it just presents readers with a worldview that is not as thoroughly imagined as it could be.

These irregularities of point of view do not make "In the Kindergarten" any less interesting, nor do they detract from its value as a peek into what life is like in communist China, which is probably the aspect that most readers want from it anyway. The extra knowledge about Teacher Shen and comments that come from no discernible source enrich readers' understanding of the facts of the case, even as they weaken the story's artistic purity. The uneven handling of this story's point of view does not ruin the story, and for many readers it will not even be noticeable. Still, the story starts out with an established point of view, and it could have and should have finished what it started.

Source: David Kelly, Critical Essay on "In the Kindergarten," in *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

Wallace is a freelance writer and poet. In this essay, Wallace explores Ha Jin's meditation on what children are taught and what they really learn.

From the time a child is very young, everyone&mdas; parents, teachers, other children&mdas;tries to teach him or her something. The things others say don't always make sense to a child; sometimes the message gets horribly scrambled in translation. Children are further confused when parents, teachers, and other children offer wildly different opinions on the same subject. And then there's a whole other category of information for children to deal with: things that nobody tells a child but that they can't help seeing&mdas; the way people really act despite what they say, the way things really are despite what people claim. In Ha Jin's "In the Kindergarten," originally published in *The Bridegroom* (2002), Jin meditates on what children are taught and what they really learn, through the eyes of his young protagonist, Shaona.

In her second week of kindergarten, Shaona, who has left home for the first time for her schooling, is still an innocent. And she'd like to stay that way, as Jin implies in the first line: "Shaona kept her eyes shut, trying to sleep." Shaona's sleep, and her innocence, is cut short, however, by an abrupt introduction to a very grown-up world. During her restless naptime, she hears her teacher on the phone, begging someone to extend her terms on a loan that she apparently took out in order to have an abortion performed. Still uncomprehending, Shaona is nonetheless jolted entirely out of her child's sleep: "Those words made Shaona fully awake." And once awake, in a pattern that will continue throughout the story, she proves an eager learner as she strives to understand her world, straining "her ears to listen."

In a speech that tragically illustrates the broken continuum of family life, the teacher fully reveals her secret, mentioning her family responsibility to her own mother at home and that she needs to eat eggs (which are also symbols of fertility) to replace the blood that she lost along with the baby. For the first time in the story, what Shaona learns from her teacher comes into conflict with what she learned from her family. Her grandmother has told her that babies come from pumpkin fields. But if so, "Why did her teacher sound as though the baby had come out of her body? Why did she bleed for the baby?"

Teacher Shen then introduces a new word to Shaona's vocabulary: "abortion." Her mind racing, Shaona tries to make sense of this new term within the context of her innocent world. "Is it something that holds a baby?" she wonders. "What does it look like?" But at the same time, she is already drawing conclusions from the information she has to work with, understanding from the rest of the conversation that it "must be very expensive." Her teacher slams the phone down, ending the conversation, but her student, unbeknownst to her, has just learned an incomplete but somehow horrifying lesson, which puts an end to her child's slumber. "Shaona couldn't sleep anymore"&mdas;despite the fact that, yawning "sleepily," she clearly still needs rest. She wishes that she could return to the safety of her parents' home, but even there, she remembers learning another hard lesson&mdas;probably her first&mdas;upon the birth

of her baby brother. Whether she learned it directly or indirectly, Shaona knows that male babies are more highly valued than girls, and she wonders if her parents "would love her the same as before" after her brother's arrival.

After Shaona's sleepless nap, through which the other students slumber peacefully, the children are led outside to pick purslanes, which their teacher tells them they'll enjoy for supper that night. Along the way, Shaona continues to take in and attempt to process the information the world gives her and to bring it into harmony with the information her teachers have given her. Spotting a plane up in the sky, she wonders how "a pilot could fit inside those planes, which looked as small as pigeons."

On the way to the purslane field, however, another category of information surfaces as well: the pieces of information that students exchange among themselves. Watching the teacher, Jin lists Shaona's own observations of her teacher but then adds something Shaona has heard: "It was said that she had divorced her husband" because he had been imprisoned for embezzlement. But the teacher quickly breaks into Shaona's young meditations by introducing some more official information, giving her class a quick biology lesson on how to tell purslanes from turnips. It's a lesson that quickly turns practical: seconds later she has each child assigned a row to harvest.

During this activity, another student, Dabin, takes it upon himself to teach Shaona another lesson. He asks her to compare bundles of purslanes, notes that hers is smaller, and draws an immediate conclusion: "You're no good." It's a personal lesson that he follows up with a more informative lecture to the whole group, asserting that purslanes "taste awful" and backing his claim up with a perhaps fabricated story about being forced by his parents to eat the herb as a cure for diarrhea. Another girl challenges him, calling on the teacher's authority and reminding him that Teacher Shen has told them that purslanes are delicious. At this point, the children are stymied. At this young age, they have no equipment for deciding who is wrong and who is right when authority figures come into conflict. "How can you know?" Dabin asks the girl. "I just know it!" she says. Dabin then proceeds to teach the girl a far more profound lesson than his opinion on Shaona's worth, or purslanes. In the absence of meaningful debate, he descends into personal insult. And when his female classmate returns in kind, he responds with force, pushing her to the ground and winning the argument&mdas;for a moment, until Teacher Shen reasserts control, hustling him off to a punishment room.

But Teacher Shen, although she makes some attempts to fulfill her role as teacher, reminding the children of a traditional proverb about hard work, is about to teach the children some lessons of her own. Shaona gathers several puzzling bits of information from her: as they leave the field, the teacher gives almost a third of the children's hand-picked dinner to grouchy Uncle Chang, without explanation. She then leaves the school with a strangely overstuffed duffel bag. But at dinner, even these aberrations are overshadowed when the children sit down to find no purslanes on their plates. At this moment, the information Shaona has been gathering all day coalesces in her head. "Now she understood," Jin writes. "Their teacher took their harvest home."

The new lesson is a hard one to swallow, and it ruins Shaona's dinner. The extracurricular lessons she's been learning from her teacher have already interrupted her sleep. This one makes it difficult to eat. Furthermore, she's got another problem: Dabin is now out of the punishment room and looking for revenge. Shaona must now do something to deal with him.

Her actions prove how quickly she's picked up on her teacher's lessons. Her teacher had offered Uncle Chang a bribe to avoid his wrath, and Shaona quickly offers Dabin some special peanuts, sent to her by her parents, to fend off Dabin's. This mollifies him but brings up another dangerous question: are their more? Again Shaona pulls forth a new tool, borrowed from her teacher's arsenal: lying; she tells him no.

That evening, Shaona again has difficulty sleeping, and to comfort herself, she makes yet another leap as a pupil, by breaking the rules and eating one of her contraband peanuts. She's not just imitating behavior she's seen at this point, not just following a previously observed script; instead, she's come to her own conclusion: her teacher's authority and the rules she's made are corrupt and don't have to be obeyed. Still, Shaona straddles the two worlds, crying quietly about the loss of her womblike family bed and the safe innocence of nestling against her mother's belly.

The next day, it becomes clear that eating the peanut was only the first step in what becomes a full rebellion for Shaona. She's disobeyed the high authority of her teacher and school, and at recess that day she throws off the rules of her fellow students, creating havoc in a play court by refusing to play queen to a "mousy" king. In this act, she's not only breaking free from peer opinion but is also taking a stand in opposition to the very early lesson she learned at the birth of her brother, that boys are more important than girls. Interestingly, it is perhaps one of the only positive lessons modeled by her teacher, when the teacher unexpectedly punishes Dabin for his violence against his female classmate.

Rebellion is pleasantly exhausting, and for the first time in the story, no longer kept awake by anxiety, Shaona falls asleep at naptime, "the moment her head touched her pillow." When she awakes, she's presented with another mystery: her clothes, which had been dirty when she went to sleep, are now clean. This is delightful, a throwback to her innocent days in her family home. But she's quickly reminded again that those days are over: her peanuts, which she had hidden in a sweater, are missing. Shaona cries like a child over the loss, but she doesn't waste any time with childish wondering about their fate. Immediately, she comes to the adult conclusion that "her teacher must have confiscated the peanuts."

When the students return to pick more purslanes that afternoon, all but Shaona are duped by their teacher's claim that the cook wasn't able to make them in time on the previous evening. Shaona alone is sulky, though Jin adds in a line that is telling, both literally and metaphorically, that "she never stopped searching." But when the rest of the students are distracted by the sighting of a crippled rabbit and run off to chase it, Shaona is given the chance to further rebel against the teacher's system. She needs to use the bathroom, and the place she chooses to relieve herself is the bag of purslanes.

The rebellion isn't complete&mdas;Jin writes that she "dared not empty her bladder altogether," but the act is powerful nonetheless. The other children return, still arguing amongst themselves with unverifiable information as in the previous day, but Shaona has been busy making a completely different set of far more sophisticated calculations&mdas;and acting on them.

Were they correct? Shaona suffers a moment of terrible self-doubt, worrying that, if she was wrong, their dinner will include the soiled purslanes. But when she is proved right, she is delighted&mdas;in contrast to the other students, who are disappointed&mdas; and eats multiple portions of all the offerings. That evening finds her making her stand against the teacher's lessons, her peer's opinion, and even society's roles for men and women, again on the playground. Instead of simply refusing to play in the girls' silly games, Shaona actually rejoins her young society among the boys, playing soldier and carrying a water pistol, "as though all of a sudden she had become a big girl." This line, still in Shaona's voice, is perhaps slightly misleading, since the young child has no vocabulary yet to describe her true transformation. She has not just become like "a big girl"&mdas;she has become adult, on her own terms, within her small society, and she has done it while flouting her society's strict notions of what it means to be a "boy" and what it means to be a "girl." But although Shaona doesn't yet have the words to express her evolution, she knows something has changed. And with her newly adult mind, she forms a concrete and telling conclusion about what the result will be: "From now on, she would not cry like a baby at night again."

Source: Carey Wallace, Critical Essay on "In the Kindergarten," in *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 2003.

Critical Essay #3

Hart has degrees in English literature and creative writing, and she focuses her writing on literary themes. In this essay, Hart examines the layers of deception in Ha Jin's short story.

Ha Jin's short story "In the Kindergarten" is filled with deceit, which is used for several different purposes. Characters manipulate one another for personal gain, to ease sorrow, to avoid social persecution, and in order to seek revenge. Some characters fabricate stories in an attempt to preserve someone else's innocence. Some are subtle in their deception, whereas others carelessly expose their dishonesty in their haste to meet their needs. Even the narrator cannot be fully trusted, as the reader is led to make certain assumptions that upon closer examination turn out to be false. By the end of the story, the reader is left to ponder if Jin's short story is a morality tale or merely a statement of fact: people just tend to lie.

"In the Kindergarten" begins with little Shaona being unable to sleep at naptime. Unlike her fellow classmates in her kindergarten, Shaona's mind is active with thoughts about missing her home and wondering if her parents' love has been withdrawn from her since the recent birth of her baby brother. As she lies awake on her cot, she overhears her teacher talking on the telephone. The voice is fuzzy in the background, however, and Shaona must press her ear to the wall so she can hear better. Teacher Shen is upset, but Shaona is not sure why. Her teacher is using words that Shaona does not understand. The words that Shaona does understand are used in ways that do not make sense to her. For example, Teacher Shen is referring to a loss of blood in connection to having a baby. This conflicts with the image that Shaona has in her head. Shaona's grandmother had told her that babies come from pumpkin patches. Surely, her grandmother would not lie.

When the students finally wake up, they go outside, where the sweet smell of dichlorvos greets them. The potent pesticide will rid the city of flies, fleas, and mosquitoes. Could it be that something with such a pleasant fragrance could be so deadly? Then Shaona sees two jet fighters drawing a long double curve in the sky. Her eyes tell her that the planes are no bigger than pigeons. If this is true, how could a pilot fit inside them? Could her own eyes be deceiving her?

Teacher Shen follows the children outside. She has conceived of a plan. She will treat her students, who trust her completely in their innocence, to a day outside of the isolating walls that surround their school. She will take them to the turnip field behind their kindergarten, where they will learn to recognize and pick purslane, a tasty salad green that grows like a weed in the garden. In order to persuade her students that the work they will be doing in the hot sun is worthwhile, Teacher Shen accentuates the tasty meal of purslane, which she has promised them at the end of their toil, smacking her lips and saying, "It tastes great, different from anything you've ever had. Tell me, do you all want to have purslanes for dinner or not?" Of course they do. Their normal meal is bland and boring. Anything new added to the menu would be exciting, even if they have

to work in the noonday sun to get it, instead of playing during their recess. Teacher Shen would not lie to them.

Teacher Shen herself, however, has also been lied to. She used to be more fun, Shaona reflects. She used to sing and smile. Recently, however, she has become sullen. Rumor has it that she divorced her husband because he was sent to jail for embezzlement. Poor Teacher Shen: she has a liar for a husband.

As the children continue to work in the garden, Uncle Chang reminds the students from time to time, from his reclining position under the broad, shady leaves of a tree, not to step on the young turnip plants as they pull out the purslanes. Uncle Chang is in charge of several gardens in the area. He must be smiling at the children and especially at Teacher Shen, who has figured out a way to weed the garden for him for free. Sneaky Uncle Chang: in the end, not only will he receive a long noontime nap and a weed-free garden but he will, in effect, take home the students' portion of the bounty to enjoy with his dinner meal.

One slightly bright boy, named Dabin, recalls that he once ate purslanes and that they tasted "like crap, more bitter than sweet potato vines." He was forced to eat it for medicinal reasons and would not have done so if his mother had not insisted. His memories can't be true, of course, because the children around him recall that Teacher Shen just told them that it tastes great. The young boy must be a liar. When a fight breaks out between the boy and one of his accusers, Shaona is the final judge of who will be punished. She points to Dabin, who is taken away and put into isolation to mull over his deceitful attitude. Shaona knows that once he is set free, he will seek his revenge on her. She will have to create a scheme to protect herself. However, first she must complete the prodigious task before her, that of filling the large duffle bag with purslanes, a task that will eventually take the children one and a half hours of concentrated work. The exertion is worth it, though, or so they think. To keep them on task, Teacher Shen keeps reminding them (where is her conscience?) of a proverb they had recently learned: "Many hands provide great strength." What Teacher Shen did not reveal to her students was that she had secretly altered the proverb for herself, adding just a small phrase of her own at the end: "Many hands provide great strength *for me.*"

Dabin is released from his solitary confinement and glares at Shaona all through the children's purslane-free evening meal. Shaona, fearing Dabin's nasty revenge, decides to trick the young boy. She offers him two of the six peanuts that her father had given her as a treat the last time she left home. Dabin is impressed. After eating the two peanuts, he requests more. Shaona, in a stance of mock innocence, lowers her eyes and tells Dabin that those were the only peanuts that were left. Dabin searches her clothing but finds nothing in her pockets because she has hidden the other peanuts in her socks. Later that night in bed, to soothe her sorrows, Shaona retrieves one of the peanuts and eats it, though it is against the rules. She carefully hides the shell under the pillow so she will not be caught. Does that mean that Shaona is a liar?

The next day, good Teacher Shen comes to the rescue of the children after they soil their clothes in the mud. After admonishing them for creating extra work for her, Teacher

Shen washes and dries their clothes during their morning nap. Teacher Shen probably believes that her theft of Shaona's remaining peanuts was justified by the extra work that the children had caused her.

Upon awakening from their nap, the kindergarten students are once again ushered toward the turnip garden next door. To raise their spirits, Teacher Shen has the children sing a song as they march toward the fields. The song is about happiness and playing games, things that children should be experiencing. Is Teacher Shen trying to make it appear that the children are playing a fun game while working in the field? Is she trying to make them forget that they did not receive their prized purslanes the night before? Is she hoping that they will fall for her same lies today? "Aunt Chef couldn't cook those [purslanes] we got yesterday because we turned them in too late," Teacher Shen announces, "but she'll cook them for us today. So everybody must be a good child and work hard." Silly, innocent children: they buy Teacher Shen's lies. Even though Shaona does not quite swallow the misinformation that her teacher is feeding them, she nonetheless does not know how not to follow her teacher's instructions. She works, although sullenly.

Upon the sight of a handicapped wild rabbit, Teacher Shen demands that the students chase it. Teacher Shen's mind is working as quickly as a calculator. Her bill owed to Dr. Niu would be nicely decreased if she could just get that rabbit in her hands. Whereas she was very careful to direct her students while Uncle Chang observed her, in Chang's absence she allows the youngsters to trample the young turnip seedlings and destroy the garden in their exuberance to harness the rabbit. Uncle Chang is, after all, nowhere to be seen. How can he prove that it was her students who destroyed his crop? If he asks, well, Teacher Shen will probably tell him a white lie. She wouldn't want Uncle Chang to think that she had taken advantage of him or that she was not grateful for his help.

Teacher Shen is a sly one; but she is not so sly that she has completely fooled Shaona. Shaona can relate. She knows that, in a tough situation, it is all right to lie or sneak or do whatever one has to do to get revenge. Yes, the same sweet little Shaona that the narrator introduced as an innocent babe, so innocent she still believes that babies come from pumpkin patches and that an abortion is something a mother uses in which to carry her baby, this same young girl is peeing into the duffel bag of the collected greens. Can it truly be that that is what she is doing? She keeps her bottom carefully hidden so no one can tell. She also does not completely empty her bladder so that the moisture will not wet the bag. She then delicately places fresh purslane leaves over the dampened ones so the odor will not be readily apparent. Then, after her task is complete, with a kicking heart she runs back to her group to pretend nothing unusual has just happened. The deceit has lifted her previously sullen mood. Her revenge has lightened her spirits. Her heart is throbbing in victory. She has outdone her teacher in deception.

How does this morality tale end? The narrator describes Shaona as if she has successfully completed a rite of passage. It is as if all of a sudden she had become a big girl. She feels that from now on she will not cry like a baby at night. Shaona, through

her deceit, has somehow miraculously grown up. She has learned the ways of the adult world, a world in which deceit usually ends with a reward. Forget the teacher's husband who ended up in jail. Maybe he had lied a little too much. He was a fool. Smarter people know that one must control the size of their untruthfulness if they are to get along in this world. One must judge the situation and manipulate it. One must keep one's eyes open, adjust the ancient proverbs to fit one's own needs, and outsmart one's fellow companions.

Or could it be that this conclusion is a bit misleading?

Source: Joyce Hart, Critical Essay on "In the Kindergarten," in *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 2003.

Adaptations

Jin's short story "After Cowboy Chicken Came to Town," from the same collection as "In the Kindergarten," is read by Patrick Wang on *Best American Short Stories of 2001*, released on audiocassette and compact disk by Houghton Mifflin in 2001. This collection was edited by Barbara Kingsolver.

Jin's novel *Waiting* is available, unabridged, on a six-tape audiocassette set from Brilliance, read by Dick Hill.

Topics for Further Study

Research the songs that would be sung in a Chinese kindergarten. Prepare a tape of them for your class, including translations of the lyrics.

Find purslanes in your local grocery store. Look up a recipe for them, and sample what they taste like.

Research what school life was like in China before the Communist government came to power in 1949, and report on how this story would have been different if it had taken place then.

Assign sides to debate the ethics of what Uncle Chang does in this story. Is it right for him to allow the kindergarten children into the turnip patch to pick purslanes that no one was going to eat anyway, or is it just a case of needlessly endangering the turnips that he is supposed to protect?

Write a short story about the one memory of your early school experience that most closely resembles what happens in this story.

What Do I Read Next?

Jin's most popular work to date is his novel *Waiting* (1999). Like most of his works, this one deals with Chinese citizens trying to reconcile their basic human instincts with the requirements of a powerful government, as a doctor in the Chinese army returns to his village year after year to ask his wife for a divorce so that he can marry the woman he truly loves.

Samplings of works by most major Chinese writers of the twentieth century are included in the *Columbia Anthology of Modern Chinese Literature*, edited by Joseph S. M. Lau and Howard Goldblatt and published by Columbia University Press in 1996.

Lulu Wang's acclaimed novel *The Lily Theater* is about a young girl growing up in China during the Cultural Revolution. The book looks at the class system that the government tried to dismantle and how it endured. The book was published in English translation by Anchor Press in 2001.

Jung Chang's book *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China*, published by Anchor World Views in 1992, traces twentieth-century Chinese history through the lives of Chang, her mother, and her grandmother and shows how they reacted to the political changes from the Boxer Rebellion to the Tiananmen Square Massacre.

Daughter of the River, Hong Ying's autobiographical account of growing up in China in the 1960s through the 1990s, is loved by some readers for its simple honesty and rejected by others for its lack of formal structure. Unlike many memoirs written by intellectuals, Ying is a child of the Chongquing slums, and her book reports a difficult life of poverty. It was published by Grove Press in 2000.

In 1983, Jian Ma quit his job in Beijing and took off traveling to the small outreaches of China that Western visitors rarely see, recording his encounters with a pen and a camera. The book of his journey, *Red Dust: A Path through China*, reminds many American readers of the spirit of Walt Whitman. The first American edition was published by Pantheon in 2001.

Maxine Hong Kingston is a well-respected Asian-American author. Her book *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts*, published by Vintage Books in 1989, is a semiautobiographical work based on the stories her mother told her about how girls and women were treated in China.

Further Study

Jie, Zhang, and Li Xiaobing, eds., *Social Transition in China*, University Press of America, 1998.

This book collects essays from eleven Chinese scholars working in America, offering their assessments of how the country has changed in recent years.

Roberts, J. A. G., *Modern China: An Illustrated History*, Sutton Publishing, 1998.

This British publication provides readers with a comprehensive overview of Chinese history throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Weich, Dave, "Ha Jin Lets It Go," in *Powells.com Interviews: 22 Authors and Artists Talk about Their Books*, iUniverse.com, 2000.

This interview with Jin covers his influences, his artistic views, and his feelings about having left China forever.

Wong, Jan, *Red China Blues*, Doubleday/Anchor Books, 1996.

Wong, a Canadian of Chinese descent, went to China in the 1960s during the Cultural Revolution and then returned in the 1980s as a journalist. In this book, she offers an unparalleled look at the people and the culture.

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Perlman, Bianca, Review of *Bridegroom*, in *Entertainment Weekly*, Issue 562, October 6, 2000, pp. 80f.

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Review of *Bridegroom*, in *Publishers Weekly*, Vol. 247, No. 36, September 4, 2000, p. 81.

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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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