Janus Study Guide

Janus by Ann Beattie

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

"Janus" first appeared in the May 27, 1985, issue of the *New Yorker* magazine. It later appeared in the 1986 collection *Where You'll Find Me*, and has often been singled out as one of Beattie's best stories.

"Janus" is the story of a successful, yet unhappy real estate agent named Andrea. She grows attached to a cream-colored bowl, often placing the bowl in the homes of her clients when she shows the home to potential buyers. By the end of the story, readers discover that the bowl was a gift from Andrea's lover.

In "Janus," Beattie explores the emptiness of contemporary life. She is often regarded as the spokesperson of her generation, reflecting the lives of middle- and upper-middle class men and women. Beattie is often linked with other minimalist writers such as Bobbie Ann Mason and Raymond Carver.

Author Biography

In 1947 Ann Beattie was born in Washington, D.C. She grew up in a middle-class suburb and graduated near the bottom of her class in 1965. She attributed her poor academic record to a lack of interest; in an interview with Gene Lyons, she stated that she believes she was clinically depressed during her high school years.

She attended American University, where she earned a degree in English in just three years. In 1970 she received a M.A. in English from the University of Connecticut. Although she began work on a Ph.D. at the University of Connecticut, she did not complete it, dropping out after a few of her stories were published.

In 1973 Beattie published her first major short story, "Victor Blue," in *Atlantic Monthly*. In 1974 the *New Yorker* published the story "A Platonic Relationship." Beattie became a regular contributor to the *New Yorker*.

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Plot Summary

"Janus" opens with the line: "The bowl was perfect." In the second paragraph, Beattie introduces the protagonist of the story, Andrea, a successful real-estate agent and owner of the bowl described in the first paragraph. The story is told completely from Andrea's point of view with little dialogue or action.

When she shows homes to a prospective buyer, Andrea places the bowl in a prominent place. She believes that the bowl is particularly "wonderful" because "it was both noticeable and subtle." The bowl is cream colored with a glowing glaze. Scattered across its surface are small flecks of color.

Andrea reports, "There were a few bits of color in it—tiny geometric flashes—and some of these were tinged with flecks of silver. They were as mysterious as cells seen under a microscope; it was difficult not to study them, because they shimmered, flashing for a split second, and then resumed their shape. Something about the colors and their random placement suggested motion."

At times, people who see the bowl call Andrea and want to know where the owners purchased it. She always pretends not to have noticed the bowl. Only Andrea's husband seems unimpressed with it.

Andrea becomes convinced that the bowl is responsible for her success as a real estate agent. One day she forgets the bowl, and nearly panics in her attempt to retrieve it. She becomes obsessed and even dreams about the bowl.

Over time Andrea realizes that she is relating to the bowl as if it is a person. She knows that this is not entirely sane, yet she finds she has a deeper relationship with the bowl than with her husband.

As Andrea relates that "[s]he had first seen the bowl several years earlier, at a crafts fair she had visited half in secret, with her lover." This is the first mention that Andrea had at one point had a lover. Shortly after, he asked Andrea to make a decision: her husband or him. Andrea is unable to make such a decision, however, and her lover left her.

The story ends with Andrea gazing at the bowl's surface at night. In a line that brings the reader back to the beginning of the story, Beattie closes the story, "In its way, it was perfect: the world cut in half, deep and smoothly empty. Near the rim, even in dim light, the eye moved toward one small flash of blue, a vanishing point on the horizon."

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

Set in the 1980s, "Janus" tells the story of a successful real estate agent named Andrea. Every real estate agent, the narrator says, has a trick for making houses seem special to buyers, and Andrea is no exception. Sometimes, she brings her dog to play in the kitchen of a house she's showing, so the place will feel more like a home. Always, she brings her ceramic bowl and places it somewhere in the house where a prospective buyer will see it.

Like Janus, the Roman god of beginnings and endings, the bowl has two faces. It is not attractive, yet is has presence. It seems at first to be glazed in a plain cream color, but when seen from different angles, the bowl shows bits of geometric color and bits of silver. Buyers are drawn to inspect the bowl more closely, but then fail to find words when they try to comment on it. Andrea's life has two faces, too. It seems at first to be perfect, but this story's closer look shows it to be more complex.

To Andrea, the bowl is perfect. She enjoys watching peoples' responses to it. Once, a woman had wanted to know where she could get a bowl like that. Andrea pretended to take a few days to ask. Then, she called the woman back and lied, saying that the owners couldn't remember where they got it.

Andrea does not let her husband drop his keys into the bowl. When he first saw the bowl sitting on their coffee table, he smiled briefly and called it pretty. He did not examine it closely. Now that he and Andrea are both out of graduate school, they buy themselves lots of pretty things to make up for all the years that money was tight. Yet the pleasure in things has quickly worn off, and Andrea's husband is no more interested in her bowl than she is in his trendy new Leica camera.

Andrea and her husband are both quiet, reflective people. They are slow to make decisions, but once they do, they don't change their course. Sometimes, Andrea wants to talk to him about the bowl, but she does not, and that makes her feel guilty. She has even stopped discussing her real estate strategies with him, because now all her strategies involve this bowl. Andrea sometimes wonders if it is possible to live with someone you don't really have a relationship with, but she tries not to think too much about that.

Although interest rates are very high in the 1980s, Andrea is having a big year in real estate. She even has more clients than is comfortable for her. She wishes she could repay the bowl for her good luck. She wonders if it's possible to have a relationship with an inanimate object like a bowl, but she tries not to think about that, either.

Andrea is sure the bowl will not last forever. She constantly wonders how it will end, but it never occurs to her that she could be the one to break it. When she carries it back and

forth from house to house, she is not especially careful with it, yet she is sure damage is inevitable.

Right as the story ends, the reader learns that Andrea's lover had bought her the bowl at a crafts fair before their relationship ended. He left soon afterwards, when she would not end her marriage to be with him. He couldn't understand why she would rather be two-faced and carry on two relationships, rather than end one and begin the other. Now, she sits up at night alone, watching the bowl sit perfect and safe on the table. She is fascinated by a flash of blue that sits near the rim, "a vanishing point on the horizon."

Analysis

In just four short pages, the author of this story has explored four major themes. The theme introduced by the title is transition. The god Janus was depicted by the Romans with two faces, one looking backward, and one looking forward. Artists presented these faces in profile, so that the viewer saw the face viewing back, the face viewing forward, and the space in between. This very short story depicts an in-between time in Andrea's life. Her affair with a lover has ended, but Andrea's attachment to it is not yet over. This is symbolized by her relationship to the bowl he gave her.

The theme introduced by the first sentence is aesthetics, or beauty. The bowl seems at first glance to be nothing special, and yet comes to contain all of Andrea's ideals. There is also the suggestion that Andrea is not noticeably attractive, but that her lover saw something special in her.

This story itself is constructed in the spirit of minimalism. Minimalism is a style of art in which objects are stripped down to their elemental forms and presented in an impersonal manner. Ann Beattie, the author of Janus, has used a similar technique to explore the character and life of Andrea. None of the other characters are given names. The reader just knows Andrea, her lover, and her husband. By having a narrator tell the story from a distance, rather than having Andrea tell it, Beattie keeps an impersonal tone to an emotionally charged story.

Thirdly, this story is about deception. Even before the story began, Andrea and her husband had been deceived into believing that they would be happier with more money to buy more things. Also, Andrea had probably believed marriage would bring her happiness. Now, the fun has worn off of buying new things, the marriage is lifeless, and Andrea feels she is living in a world of tricks. Andrea herself relies on tricks as a real estate agent and as a wife. She deceives to make things seem more or less than they are. She uses her dog and her bowl to make houses seem more special to buyers. She uses silence, with her husband, to make the bowl seem less important to her than it really is.

As the story continues, Andrea experiences guilt, because her relationship with the bowl has become a secret that she does not share with her husband. The bowl is the tangible evidence of her affair. The one time she accidentally left it in another house, she felt as

if she had forgotten a child. The bowl has become a metaphor for the affair, and so of course it has become a guilty secret from her husband.

Finally, the most deceived person of all is Andrea, who perhaps thought she would save her marriage by not leaving her husband for her lover. The end of her empty marriage seems inevitable. She does not know how it will end. She can't imagine being the one to take the action to end it, but she's sure it will end, just as her affair ended. Her treatment of the bowl symbolizes this sense of the inevitable. Andrea is not careful with the bowl. For example, she does not wrap it in paper when she transports it from house to house. It is as if she thinks there's no way her good luck can last, so there's no point in being careful. No matter what she does, she will lose the bowl, anyway. Though she seems to dread its end, she takes no responsibility to prevent it.

Emptiness is the fourth important theme explored in Janus. One of the author's techniques for conveying the emptiness is the frequent repetition of the word bowl. The word echoes through the story like a drum in an empty room. Andrea, who at first glance seems to have everything, faces the emptiness of materialism and emptiness in her marriage. Her relationship with herself is the most empty of all. She may feel tricked by the emptiness in her life, but she does not yet see that her deceit and secrecy creates the emptiness. Her lover once remarked that it takes her a long time to know what she really wants.

It may be, however, that what Andrea wants is the smooth perfection of emptiness, rather than the messiness of rich human relationships. Andrea chose, by not making a conscious choice, to let her affair end. Perhaps she felt that she would eventually become as disappointed and disillusioned by her lover as by her husband. Therefore, she let her affair end, while that relationship was still perfect. She let it be cut in half and smoothly empty, like the bowl, rather than face the risk and mess of strong feelings.

At the story's end, Andrea sits in the dark, meaning she is none the wiser. She is focused on something at the edge of the bowl, like a still point on the horizon. The horizon is an illusion. Andrea is still looking for a perfection that does not exist.

Characters

Andrea

Andrea, the protagonist of the story, is the only character with a name. She is a successful real estate agent. Although married, Andrea appears to have little passion for either her husband or her life.

Indeed, the only thing she seems to have passion for is a cream-colored bowl; she places the bowl in a prominent place in the homes of her clients when she shows the homes to prospective buyers. Andrea begins to obsess about the bowl and credits her success in business to the bowl itself.

As time goes by, she worries about the bowl getting damaged—she even begins to dream about it. Andrea spends a good deal of time contemplating the bowl and her own relationship to it. Beattie writes in the final paragraph, "Alone in the living room at night, she often looked at the bowl sitting on the table, still and safe, unilluminated."

Andrea's Husband

Andrea's husband remains unnamed throughout the story. He is a stockbroker who considers himself "fortunate to be married to a woman who had such a fine aesthetic sense and yet could also function in the real world." Andrea describes him as quiet and reflective, a man who does not like ironies or ambiguities.

Andrea's Lover

Andrea's lover does not appear until the closing paragraphs of the story. He buys the bowl for Andrea and then tells her that she needs to choose between him and her husband. He leaves her after Andrea refuses to make the choice.

Themes

Aesthetics

Although it might not be apparent on first reading, "Janus" can be perceived as Beattie's philosophy of aesthetics. Aesthetics is a branch of philosophy having to do with the nature of beauty, art, and taste as well as with the creation of art.

As a minimalist, Beattie has been derided by critics who find her prose to be flat and lacking in beauty. However, her supporters maintain that the gaps she leaves in her stories allow the reader to participate in the creation of art. In "Janus," Beattie's fictional bowl bears uncanny resemblance to her own theory of the short story.

For example, in her opening lines Beattie writes: "The bowl was perfect. Perhaps it was not what you'd select if you faced a shelf of bowls, and not the sort of thing that would inevitably attract a lot of attention at a crafts fair, yet it had real presence." The stories that Beattie writes are much like this, well-crafted but not flashy, the kind of stories that stay with the reader long after reading.

Like the bowl, Beattie's stories are "subtle but noticeable—a paradox of a bowl." As Susan Jaret McKinstry argues in "The Speaking Silence of Ann Beattie's Voice," Beattie's stories "tell two stories at once: the open story of the objective detailed present is juxtaposed with a closed story of the subjective past, a story the speaker tries hard not tell." It is within this paradox that readers find the point of Beattie's story.

Beattie also layers detail in her story; in fact, some critics contend that her stories are nothing but detail. While the details may seem randomly placed, each is layered so as to propel the story forward. As T. Coraghessan Boyle notes in *The New York Times Book Review,* "her stories are propelled not so much by event as by the accumulation of the details that build a life as surely as the tumble and drift of sediment builds shale or sandstone. Pay attention to the small things, she tells us."

Finally, Beattie's stories—like the bowl—present a smooth surface. Beattie's critics at times seem unable to penetrate the surface of the stories. However, if one examines the stories in just the right light, one finds a marked similarity to the bowl: "Near the rim, even in dim light, the eye moved toward the one small flash of blue, a vanishing point on the horizon." That is, when one looks at Beattie's stories obliquely, one is likely to find a flash, or a small epiphany, located just on the edge of the story.

In "Janus" Beattie seems to be answering her critics, asserting that her stories should be appreciated in the same way that readers appreciate the bowl—aesthetically pure and clean.

Love and Passion

While "Janus" is not a classic love story, it nonetheless is a story about love and passion. The protagonist, Andrea, shares her life with a husband, a lover, a dog, and a bowl. The dog drops out of the story early on, and it seems clear that Andrea does not have a passionate relationship with her husband.

Just as the reader questions Andrea's relationship to the bowl, Andrea herself wonders, "Could it be that she had some deeper connection with the bowl—a relationship of some kind? She corrected her thinking; how could she imagine such a thing, when she was a human being and it was a bowl. It was ridiculous. Just think of how people lived together and loved each other. . .But was that always so clear, always a relationship?"

This thought reveals that although she lives with her husband, she is not sure that she has a relationship with him. Moreover, her relationship to her lover is over. What does Andrea feel for anyone or anything other than her bowl? It is a mystery. In the end, Andrea sits alone with her bowl. Like the Roman god Janus, the two-face guardian of doors and of beginnings and endings, the bowl marks both the beginning and the ending of the story. It may also mark the beginning and ending of Andrea's ability to feel love or passion.

Style

Symbols and Imagery

The bowl in "Janus" serves as both the primary image and symbol of the story. Indeed, the story seems to be more about the bowl than about the main character; Beattie takes great care to present the bowl in a variety of settings and light. Such careful attention to the detail of the bowl suggests that Beattie places the weight of the story on this image.

It is possible to view the bowl as a symbol for Andrea: smooth, perfect, empty. It is also possible to read the bowl as a symbol for the world that people of Andrea's (and Beattie's) generation find themselves in: "the world cut in half, deep and smoothly empty." In such a world, filled with materialism rather than spiritual wealth, people find themselves alone without close or intimate relationships. Certainly, it seems apparent that the bowl becomes the receptacle for and focus of Andrea's longings.

Finally, it is possible to view the bowl as a reminder of the lover who has passed out of Andrea's life. He has become the "vanishing point on the horizon," the small flash on the margins of her life. Perhaps what draws Andrea to the bowl is the statement her lover left her with: "Her lover had said that she was always too slow to know what she really loved." Now that her lover is gone, all that remains is the bowl.

Narration

Beattie tells her stories from a limited thirdperson perspective. Readers are told only what the main character is thinking or doing; all information is provided by the narrator. Generally, Beattie tells her stories in the present tense, giving the reader the sense that the events of the story are unfolding now.

Yet "Janus" is told in the past tense and the events of the story take place over several years. This is an important stylistic decision on Beattie's part, because the story takes on a quality that her other stories do not generally have.

Andrea does not reveal everything to the reader. It is with some surprise that the reader learns that the bowl was given to her by her former lover. This seemingly important detail is withheld from the reader until nearly the last page of the story. By holding this information until the end, Beattie forces the reader to rethink the significance of the bowl for the story and for the main character.

At the end of the story, the reader is left wondering what has happened in the intervening years. It is implied that Andrea's world has continued to shrink, until the bowl itself becomes her world, "cut in half, deep and smoothly empty."

Historical Context

Children of the 1960s

Born in 1947, Beattie reached adulthood during the 1960s. Although her stories are not set in the 1960s, her characters are children of the decade and therefore impacted by the cultural and historical contexts of the Vietnam War era.

Many things happened during that tumultuous time: large numbers of young people protested the Vietnam War; many experimented with drugs and free love; and the Civil Rights struggle raged in the American South.

By the 1980s many people of that generation had entered the job market and started families. Certainly, the characters of Beattie's stories were generally white, educated people. As Thomas R. Edwards summarized in a October 12, 1986, book review from *The New York Times Book Review*:

[Ms. Beattie's] people suffer emotional and moral disconnection in a world that has yet been rather generous to them in material ways. They live comfortably enough in New York, the suburbs, the country; they work at business, finance, editing, modeling, writing, the law,; they have been to college and sometimes graduate school, and now, as they approach 40, they miss what they remember as the innocence and intimacy of student community. . . .

In short, the young liberals growing up in the 1960s became middle-aged conservatives in the 1980s. For many, this shift resulted in alienation from their past.

The Minimalist Moment

In the 1970s and 1980s, an artistic movement called minimalism emerged. As Christina Murphy reports in her book *Ann Beattie* (1986): "Minimalism originated as a concept to designate a movement in the contemporary plastic arts that emphasized the use of small spaces as integers with the thematics of painting and sculpture." In minimalist art and architecture, the artist focused on "the use of space itself as a counterpoint to line. . . ." As used to describe art, the term "minimalism" was a positive term.

In literature, certain writers focused on what a story did not say as much as what it did say. Like the plastic artists, writers found themselves paring away all non-essential material in a story. They focused on the details of everyday life, rather than on large moral or ethical issues.

For some reason, minimalism came to be considered a pejorative term when applied to literature. Much of the negative criticism of minimalism resulted from a philosophical conflict over the role of literature. What should a story do and be? For supporters of the

"mimetic tradition"—that is, those critics who believed that fiction should reflect reality—minimalist stories were nothing more than surface details.

Critical Overview

Reviews of Beattie's work are often mixed; it seems as if critics either love or hate her work. Although her 1989 novel, *Picturing Will*, was both a popular and critical success, her short story collection *Where You'll Find Me*—the collection which includes "Janus"—met with mixed reviews.

For example, Thomas Edwards, in an otherwise fairly negative review appearing in *The New York Times Book Review,* singled out "Janus" as being "sufficiently open and worked out to give convenient access to the materials from which they are all made." He found the rest of the stories "terse" and less "ample in scale and mood" than her earlier stories.

On the other hand, Michiko Kakutani deemed the story "a highly crafted, almost surreal meditation on the intrusion of time past into time present and on the perils of everyday life."

A good deal of the controversy surrounding Beattie's work deals with her reputation as a minimalist writer. According to Christina Murphy in her book *Ann Beattie,* "[T]here is a persistent focus upon cutting away from fiction all that need not be there to 'tell' the story." Many critics find the bare, lean prose of minimalist writers to be flat and uninteresting. Further, those critics who take issue with minimalism argue that by reducing the exposition, minimalist writers produce limited stories without moral import.

In a famous article appearing in the *New Criterion,* Joshua Gilder attacks minimalist writers such as Beattie, Raymond Carver, Tobias Wolff, and Alice Munro, stating that writers like these "seem intent on proving the proposition that less is, indeed, less."

However, other commentators contend that these writers are the best of their generation. Minimalism requires active involvement on the part of the reader; they must read what is not said as well as what is. Readers such as Margaret Atwood, herself a noted novelist, short story writer, poet, and critic, admire Beattie's stories and novels precisely for their terse and understated style.

Although Beattie's stories have generated much critical controversy among reviewers, there are few recent scholarly studies of her work. Indeed, although "Janus" continues to be anthologized as one of Beattie's best stories, few scholars have examined the story closely.

In *The Explicator,* Philip Miller links the bowl to the Roman god Janus. According to Roman mythology, Janus is responsible for guarding both entrances and exits. The story, Miller asserts, is about beginnings and endings, and thus the title is particularly apt.

Other critics, such as Carolyn Porter in *Contemporary American Women Writers: Narrative Strategies* (1985) and Susan Jaret McKinstry in *Studies in Short Fiction* focus

on the gaps Beattie inserts into her stories. These two studies, while not about "Janus" directly, help readers better understand Beattie's narrative approach.

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Henningfeld is an associate professor at Adrian College who writes extensively for educational publishers. In the following essay, she discusses the use of the bowl as a symbol of the main character's sexuality in "Janus."

Ann Beattie's short story, "Janus," first appeared in 1985 in the *New Yorker*. Included in her 1986 short fiction collection, *Where You'll Find Me*, the story is widely anthologized and frequently cited as one of Beattie's best works.

At first glance, the story seems much like Beattie's other stories. It is limited in character, plot, and scope, focusing on the small details of life. The prose is lean and spare, and there are empty spaces, or gaps, in what Beattie tells the reader. Such gaps require active participation on the part of the reader, who must "read" what is missing in the story.

Yet there are some very important ways that this story is different from her other stories. In the first place, "Janus" is told in past tense, rather than present. The past tense creates a sense of recollection and meditation in the story, as the narrator recalls the history of the bowl.

There are many reference to the passing of time in the story. Unlike other Beattie stories, told in the present tense and happening in the moment, "Janus" unfolds over a period of years; this is an unusual framework, given the brevity of the story.

Another difference is the emphasis placed on one object: the bowl. Images are generally important in Beattie's short stories; one riveting image can replace in just a few words what might take pages of exposition to accomplish. Nevertheless, Beattie rarely indulges in the kind of symbolic significance the bowl in this story seems to take on. As Jonathan Penner in *Book World—The Washington Post* points out, "The beloved bowl becomes a psychoanalytical symbol, odd as an archaeopteryx in Beattie's post-Freudian world."

Penner's observation paves the way for a reading that requires some understanding of the theories of Sigmund Freud, widely regarded as the father of modern psychotherapy. Although his theories have been questioned and even discredited as the basis for psychiatric treatment, they still provide an interesting and informative way to examine literature.

Literary scholars who use Freud's ideas are often called psychoanalytic critics; they are interested in examining the imagery and symbolism in a story to find ways of explaining the actions of the characters. These critics approach a story the same way a psychiatrist might approach a dream—by analyzing images for symbolic content, both the critic and the psychiatrist learn something about the character or the patient.

In many cases, the images present in stories or dreams can be called "phallic." Phallic symbols are everyday objects in a story that stand for male or female sexual organs and often represent the repressed sexual desires or fears of the characters. Analyzing the significance of phallic symbols can reveal important insights into both the characters and the meaning of the story.

Generally, objects such as towers or rockets, or any item that is taller than it is wide, often serve as male phallic symbols. Lakes, swimming pools, tunnels, and other rounded structures with openings are often used as female phallic symbols.

Another Freudian concept is that of the "fetish." In anthropological terms, "fetish" refers to an object that the bearer regards with reverence and trust. The bearer believes that the object has magical powers that both protect its owner and lead the owner to success.

In psychology, the word fetish means, according to *The American Heritage Dictionary:* "an object or body part whose real or fantasized presence is psychologically necessary for sexual gratifi- cation and that is an object of fixation to the extent that it may interfere with complete sexual expression."

Using this background information, the reader can view "Janus" as a psychoanalytical exploration into the sexuality of the main character. The dominant image in "Janus" is the bowl, and Andrea's attachment to the bowl suggests that it has more than passing importance for the story.

As the story moves forward, the bowl fulfills the function of a fetish for Andrea, at least in the anthropological sense. She credits it with almost magical power and believes that it is responsible for her financial success. When one considers the bowl as a psychological fetish, however, the story grows in depth and complexity.

It is possible to read the bowl as a symbol for the female womb. In literature, the womb is often seen as a mysterious, hidden entity, and is the primary difference between men and women. When a woman is not pregnant, the womb remains small and flat, hidden in the woman's body. However, when a woman is pregnant, her womb swells to house the growing fetus and gives the woman's midsection a bowl-shaped appearance.

Thus, when Beattie describes the bowl as "both subtle and noticeable—a paradox of a bowl," it can be interpreted that she is commenting on the dual nature of the womb: small and hidden in its nonpregnant state, and rounded and noticeable in its pregnant state. In addition, Beattie tells the reader that although people are drawn to the bowl, "they always faltered when they tried to say something."

Over the course of the story, the bowl takes on increasing significance to Andrea. She "asked her husband to please not drop his house key in it. It was meant to be empty." Such a statement at least suggests Andrea's desire to remain without child. Indeed, for a woman to be successful in a career often requires a choice between having children and remaining childless. Andrea's connection of the bowl with her own success as a real-estate agent may reflect this.

Furthermore, Beattie is explicit about the husband's response to the bowl. "When her husband first noticed the bowl, he had peered into it and smiled briefly. . . . I n recent years, both of them had acquired many things to make up for all the lean years when they were graduate students, but now that they had been comfortable for quite a while, the pleasure of new possessions dwindled."

The husband also "turned away" from the bowl. Such disinterest suggests that the husband is content to ignore the bowl; like his wife, he seems to have no need for children.

Andrea's lover—the man who purchased the bowl for her—asks her to change her life, perhaps implying a fertile and productive relationship. "Why be two-faced, he asked her." Again, the comment calls attention to the dual nature of the womb.

If Andrea looks toward her husband with one face, she is looking toward a financially secure, yet essentially sterile relationship. By looking at her lover, however, Andrea opens the possibility of a different kind of life, one that includes a potentially fertile relationship.

Phillip Miller explains the significance of the title of the story by exploring the connection between the Roman deity Janus and the bowl. According to Miller, Janus is a "two-faced household god," who is also the god of beginnings and endings. Furthermore, Janus "guarded Roman entrances and exits."

Miller's point is pertinent; certainly Beattie's choice of title is deliberate. It is also possible, however, to connect the entrances and exits brought into play by the title with a woman's womb. The womb is both a place of entrance for the male sperm, and a port of exit for the about-to-beborn baby.

Andrea refuses her lover's offer but keeps the bowl, choosing a life for herself that is much like the description of the bowl in the last paragraph of the story:

Alone in the living room at night, she often looked at the bowl sitting on the table, still and safe, unilluminated. In its way, it was perfect: the world cut in half, deep and smoothly empty. Near the rim, even in the dim light, the eye moved toward one small flash of blue, a vanishing point on the horizon.

Significantly, Andrea is "alone." The bowl is "unilluminated"—that is, without light, or life. Like her womb, the bowl remains "deep and smoothly empty." Yet the bowl only represents half a world, like a womb fulfilling only one part of its dual nature. The "vanishing point on the horizon," for Andrea, is the loss of a potential new life, both for herself with her lover, and for the child she does not bear.

By choosing to keep her womb empty and unilluminated, Andrea chooses a path without progeny. The tragedy of the story, however, is not only the loss of potential life, but also Andrea's failure to recognize the choice. As Thomas R. Edwards asserts in *The New York Times Book Review :* "Andrea is not allowed fully to recognize how aptly the bowl reflects her own condition."

Without noticing, Andrea has displaced her own sexuality onto the bowl. By so doing, she can keep it perfect and undamaged. Furthermore, the displacement allows her to relate to both her husband and her lover from a distance, unencumbered by emotional or physical attachment. Thus, the bowl—a symbol for her own displaced sexuality—operates in the story as a fetish, an object she regards with increasing fascination and obsession.

As the story ends, Andrea is alone with her bowl—living in half a world, a world without emotional or physical intimacy. Beattie seems to making a comment here on the ability (or lack of ability) of people of her generation to form lasting human connections. Rather they seem better able to form relationships with things and objects, choosing a sterile path.

Source: Diane Andrews Henningfeld, for *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

Brent has a Ph.D. in American Culture with a specialization in cinema studies from The University of Michigan. She is a freelance writer and teaches courses in American cinema. In the following essay, she discusses the significance of the bowl as fetish object in "Janus."

In Anne Beattie's short story, "Janus," the bowl functions as a *fetish* object for Andrea, the story's main character. The term "fetish" refers to small stone carvings of animals that are found in some cultures and are thought to have spiritual powers. *Merriam Webster Online* defines "fetish" as "an object believed to have magical power to protect or aid its owner."

More generally, *Webster* defines fetish as "a material object regarded with superstitious or extravagant trust or reverence." A fetish can also be defined as "an object of irrational reverence or obsessive devotion." (The term *fetish* also has *sexual* connotations in Freudian psychoanalytic theory, which will not be discussed here.)

Andrea's treatment of the bowl as a *fetish* is indicative of the emotional and spiritual emptiness of her life. While Andrea endows the bowl with spiritual and emotional significance and regards it with fetishistic reverence and devotion, it is, in fact, an empty vessel. The bowl's emptiness is suggestive of the overwhelming meaninglessness of Andrea's life.

While it is just an ordinary bowl that Andrea found at a flea market, it eventually takes on the role of afetish as she regards it with "a superstitious or extravagant trust or reverence." Andrea's "extravagant" reverence for the bowl as an object of devotion is indicated by the first line of the story: "The bowl was perfect." Its spiritual or mystical properties for Andrea are suggested in part by her sense that it emits its own light, or glow: "Its glaze was the color of cream and seemed to glow no matter what light it was placed in."

The bowl for Andrea takes on an otherworldly quality: "The bowl was a mystery, even to her." Its mystery is connected to a sense of wonder in relation to the forces of life: "There were a few bits of color in it—tiny geometric flashes—and some of these were tinged with flecks of silver. They were as mysterious as cells seen under a microscope."

The mystical or spiritual significance of the bowl for Andrea is further suggested by the fact that it enters into her half-waking dreams, almost as a vision or sign from a spiritual source: "In time, she dreamed of the bowl. Twice, in a waking dream— early in the morning, between sleep and a last nap before rising—she had a clear vision of it. It came into sharp focus and startled her for a moment—the same bowl she looked at every day."

As with a *fetish*, Andrea believes the bowl to have "magical power to protect and aid its owner." Andrea views the bowl as a powerful good luck charm: "She was sure that the

bowl brought her luck." The bowl seems to her to be a benevolent godlike force, responsible for all of her good fortune.

As many people feel a gratitude toward God for their blessings in life, Andrea feels a gratitude toward the bowl: "She had the foolish thought that if only the bowl were an animate object she could thank it." Yet she has no method of prayer by which to show her gratitude: "It was frustrating because her involvement with the bowl contained a steady sense of unrequited good fortune."

As many people feel an obligation to God, Andrea wishes for a means by which to carry out some kind of duty in service to the bowl: "it would have been easier to respond if some sort of demand were made in return." Andrea even equates the bowl with some kind of fairy godmother, or another supernatural force, which could assign her some task in return for her good fortune: "But that only happened in fairy tales."

Out of her reverence for and devotion to the bowl, Andrea develops a fear that something bad might happen to it. Andrea therefore treats the bowl like a *fetish*, an object that possesses strong spiritual powers, but that could cause bad luck or disaster if not treated with the proper reverence. "It was clear that she would not be the one who would do anything to the bowl. The bowl was only handled by her, set safely on one surface or another; it was not very likely that anyone would break it."

Her fears of what forces could potentially destroy the bowl suggest an irrational fear of godlike retribution, in the form of lightning: "A bowl was a poor conductor of electricity: it would not be hit by lightning." Since lightning is, in Greek mythology, the means by which the god Zeus expresses his wrath, Andrea's fear that lightning may strike the bowl suggests a sense of guilt or anxiety that she may be punished by some godlike force.

Thus, Andrea regards the bowl as the source of all meaning in her life, without that her life would be unimaginable: "Yet the idea of damage persisted. She did not think beyond that—to what her life would be without the bowl. She only continued to fear that some accident would happen."

Andrea's "obsessive devotion" to it takes on an air of secrecy and deception. Originally purchased by her lover during a secret rendezvous, the bowl comes to represent not only Andrea's secret love affair, but an entire inner life—spiritual as well as emotional—which she does not share with him: "There was something within her, something real, that she never talked about."

While she occasionally feels the urge to share this part of herself with her husband, she does not do so. "There were times when she wanted to talk to her husband about the bowl. But she never talked to him about the bowl." Yet she continues to harbor a desire to share with her husband the reverence in which she holds the bowl: "she was often tempted to come right out and say that she thought that the bowl in the living room, the cream-colored bowl, was responsible for her success. But she didn't say it. She couldn't begin to explain it."

In her secrecy, Andrea harbors feelings of guilt: "Sometimes in the morning, she would look at him and feel guilty that she had such a constant secret."

While the bowl takes on many properties associated with a religious *fetish*, it also represents a pure form of "love" for Andrea—in terms of human relationships as well as spiritual yearnings: "The bowl was just a bowl. But she did not believe that for a second. What she believed was that it was something she loved."

When she accidentally leaves the bowl behind at someone's house, she compares it to losing a friend, or even a child. "All the way home, Andrea wondered how she could have left the bowl behind. It was like leaving a friend at an outing—just walking off. Sometimes there were stories in the paper about families forgetting a child somewhere and driving to the next city. Andrea had only gone a mile down the road before she remembered."

Andrea even entertains the idea that her relationship with and love for the bowl has taken on the quality of a relationship to another human being: "Could it be that she had some deeper connection with the bowl—a relationship of some kind? She corrected her thinking: how could she imagine such a thing, when she was a human being and it was a bowl? It was ridiculous."

Andrea begins to wonder if her relationship to her husband may be no more meaningful than a relationship to an inanimate object: "Just think of how people lived together and loved each other. But was that always so clear, always a relationship? She was confused by these thoughts, but they remained in her mind."

Indeed, her fear of losing the bowl becomes equated with the fear of losing a lover: "She wondered how the situation would end. As with a lover, there was no exact scenario of how matters would come to a close. Anxiety became the operative force. It would be irrelevant if the lover rushed into someone else's arms, or wrote her a note and departed to another city."

Andrea's love for the bowl takes on the status of the *only* source of love in her life, and she comes to fear that she could not live without it: "The horror was the possibility of the disappearance. That was what mattered."

It is significant that the bowl is a *consumer* object. Andrea and her husband are financially successful. In fact, their relationship seems to be based largely on their mutual appreciation for indulging themselves in the purchase of consumer luxuries: "When her husband first noticed the bowl, he had peered into it and smiled briefly. He always urged her to buy things she liked. In recent years, both of them had acquired many things to make up for all the lean years when they were graduate students."

Her husband's appreciation for her seems to be largely based on her ability to both earn money and spend money: "He was a stockbroker, and sometimes told people that he was fortunate to be married to a woman who had such fine aesthetic sense and yet could also function in the real world." And Andrea herself understands the relationship in such terms: "They were a lot alike, really—they had agreed on that."

However, this relationship lacks any lasting meaning or remnant of human love: "But now that they had been comfortable for quite a while, the pleasure of new possessions dwindled."

Andrea's fetishistic attachment to the bowl reflects the total lack of meaning in her life. Her relationships to other people become equated with her relationship to a consumer object—spiritually and emotionally empty, and devoid of all meaning. She sees the bowl as "the world cut in half," but what she finds inside the world, as inside herself, is a complete absence of meaning, "deep and smoothly empty."

While she lives in fear of losing the bowl, Andrea neglects her attachments to other human beings, such as her lover and her husband. The final image is of utter loneliness, emptiness and meaninglessness; a woman with nothing in the world but an empty bowl purchased at a flea market by a lover long gone: "Time passed. Alone in the living room at night, she often looked at the bowl sitting on the table, still and safe, unilluminated." What she sees in the bowl is a "flash" of blue light, "a vanishing point on the horizon."

Ultimately, all the bowl has to offer her is an illusive vision that vanishes into nothingness. Like most of Beattie's stories, "Janus" offers no hope for redemption. We are left in a world of material luxury, where love and the spirit are devoid of all meaning, and human beings surround themselves with consumer objects.

Source: Liz Brent, Overview of "Janus" for *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2000.

Critical Essay #3

Madsen Hardy has a doctorate in English literature and is a freelance writer and editor. In the following essay, she analyzes how Beattie's writing technique reflects the themes of emptiness and deception in "Janus."

Ann Beattie's "Janus" tells the story of one woman's powerful feelings for a ceramic bowl, exploring what the protagonist describes in the most personal terms as her "relationship" with the object. "The bowl was just a bowl. She did not believe that for one second. What she believed was that it was something she loved," Beattie writes of Andrea, the discontented real-estate agent who is the story's central character. Andrea sees the bowl as a lucky charm, a secret passion, and a bulwark against the emptiness and loss in her life. She invests the bowl with imagined powers and reaches a point where she can't imagine life without it.

Readers are unlikely to have a hard time identifying the bowl as the story's most important literary symbol. Clearly the bowl is more than just a bowl. By focusing the story exclusively on an inanimate object, Beattie makes this fairly obvious. However, because Beattie reveals so little *other* than Andrea's strange and furtive feelings for the bowl, interpreting the symbolism becomes somewhat bewildering.

It is important to note that when approaching *any* piece of literature, readers must participate in making connections between characters, actions, symbols, and ideas. Yet in the case of a minimalist story like "Janus," active participation is paramount, since gaps in the story are in some ways just as relevant as the words on the page. It is up to readers to do the work that Andrea is unwilling or unable to do in interpreting the connections between the significance of the bowl and the most important and troubling aspects of Andrea's life. Though Janus, for whom the story is named, is the Roman god of beginnings and endings, nothing notable begins or ends within the action of the story.

As the story closes, Beattie notes that time has passed. Andrea is still married, still using the bowl to sell real estate, and still—like the bowl— "unilluminated." That is, she feels the power of the bowl's hold on her but she does not understand what it symbolizes or why, which is part of the reason that she is unable to take action to change her unsatisfying life. "The bowl was a mystery, even to her."

The superficial simplicity and smoothness of Beattie's prose is deceptive, belying its difficulty. Her narration is rich in detail, but information about the situation is doled out extremely selectively, and the interpretive guidance offered by the narrator is sparse. This quality has won Beattie as many detractors as fans.

In her article "The Art of Missing," Carolyn Porter comments on Beattie's unpopularity among scholars, pointing out that many have suggested that something is *missing* in Beattie's stories. Some focus on her subject matter—the homogeneity of her white, upper-middle-class characters. These characters' problems exist only within a narrow range of experience.

Others find fault with her style—the pareddown quality that leaves it up to the reader to make all of the missing connections and figure out all of the "whys" behind the characters and their actions. Porter argues that in Beattie's most successful stories, her technique is appropriate to her subject, reflecting "the peculiar quality of [Beattie's] fictive yet familiar world—the sense that something has been lost, although no one can quite remember what."

Porter does not deny that there is something missing in Beattie's narration, but argues that the gaps and omissions that riddle her fiction express something true and painful about the rootless, valueless, and materialistic aspects of contemporary society. "Beattie's techniques," Porter writes, "even while producing results that often seem highly artificial, are informed by a clean aim at the real, the here and now." In other words, the form of Beattie's stories suits their content. Absence, emptiness, and loss, as well as deception and withheld information, shape Andrea's life as well as the form of the story.

Although there are hints that the bowl is somehow intimately involved in aspects of Andrea's relationships, the only concrete thing that readers learn is of Andrea's use of it as a prop for her realestate business. It is in this capacity that we learn most about the bowl's powers.

Andrea secretly places the ordinary-yet-extraordinary looking bowl in property up for sale in order to inspire a positive feeling about the house, a "trick used to convince the buyer that the house is quite special." Though Andrea has used many different tricks in the past, the bowl is especially effective, and she attributes her success to it. The houses up for sale, trading hands as commodities through the anonymous intervention of a realtor, have been stripped of their status as centers of individual and family identity.

Andrea compares the bowl to a friend, a child, a husband, and a lover. When she places the bowl in a house, it subtly evokes a longed-for human touch, standing in for what has been lost to the househunters, who are, like Andrea, part of a class and generation that moves frequently. Andrea believes that the bowl helps her sell houses by making a house that is up for sale—emptied of its human life, if not its physical contents—feel like a home.

Andrea moves the bowl to various properties she is selling and then brings it back home—a place as lacking as a source of intimacy and identity as the houses Andrea sells. And the bowl serves a similar purpose in Andrea's private life as it does in her real-estate business. Just as a realtor might bring any number of homey "props" to cover up the coldness of the sales transaction, Andrea and her husband fill their home of any number of beautiful and valuable possessions to cover up the underlying dissatisfaction of their life together.

There is emptiness and secrecy in Andrea's marriage, which the bowl comes to both represent and compensate for. Her husband has encouraged Andrea to buy "things she liked" to "make up for all the lean years when they were graduate students," and

appreciates her good taste. Yet he does not understand the allure of the bowl or Andrea's attachment to it. He deems it pretty, but expresses no further interest in it.

To Andrea, the bowl is more than a source of aesthetic or consumerist pleasure. She has come to see the bowl as different from all of her other possessions, reflecting a part of her private self that her husband does not recognize, "something within her now, something real, that she never talked about." How inauthentic the rest of Andrea's life must be, if a ceramic bowl is the closest thing to what is real in her innermost self.

As Andrea becomes more obsessed with the bowl—more grateful to it for her success and more anxious about some harm befalling it—she begins to see the her relationship to the bowl as something to feel guilty about, a "constant secret." Very near the end of the story—almost as an afterthought— the narrator reveals that the bowl was a gift from an ex-lover. This seems to explain a lot of the "whys" behind Andrea's fixation. The lover is now absent, and the bowl remains as a token of what is lost and a symbol of what is longed for. The bowl is a presence in Andrea's marriage, representing her secret and reminding her of what is missing.

Before leaving her, the lover accuses Andrea of being "two-faced"—Beattie's only direct reference the story's title. Janus, the Roman god of doorways, boundaries, and beginnings, faces both east and west and is represented by an icon of two faces.

"Two-faced" also implies deceptiveness—not being what one appears to be. The lover was referring to Andrea's inability to reveal their relationship and leave her husband for him, accusing her of being "too slow to know what she really loved." By having a covert intimate relationship with the bowl that is a token of the lover's affection as well as a symbol of his absence, Andrea can maintain her passivity and continue, Janus-like, to "have it both ways."

Ultimately, then, Andrea may feel such a deep connection to the bowl less because it represents the lost lover than because it reflects her own empty, passive condition. It is Andrea's own mental trick in an insecure, frightening "world full of tricks." Like Andrea, the bowl has it "both ways" and is "two-faced."

The language that Beattie uses to describe the physical qualities of the bowl reflects the bowl's simultaneous association with fulfillment and its absence. It is "a paradox of a bowl," representing the opposite qualities of emptiness and completion at once. "In its way, it was perfect, the world cut in half, deep and smoothly empty." Beattie goes on to compare it to the horizon, which, in keeping with the bowl's perfection, suggests that the bowl is complete unto itself, a whole world.

Yet it is "a world cut in half," evoking lack and loss. The outside of a bowl is smooth and round, circular, suggesting the first set of qualities—completeness, fullness, perfection—while the inside is an empty space for something that is not there. This is, after all, the purpose of a bowl, and Andrea insists that "it was meant to be empty." The same might be said of Beattie's narrative technique.

Source: Sarah Madsen Hardy, for *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2000.

Topics for Further Study

Ann Beattie, Raymond Carver, and Bobbie Ann Mason are often classified as "K-Mart realists." Read several stories by each writer and a few definitions of realism. Do you think the label "K-mart realist" fits each of these writers? Why or why not?

Ann Beattie is often called a "minimalist." Find a definition of minimalism and read it carefully. Does the description fit Beattie's work? How is minimalism expressed in art and architecture, as well as literature? Collect pictures of minimalist art and home interiors to illustrate your answers.

Freudian literary criticism often studies the use of phallic symbols in literature. Read a brief description of Freudian criticism and a definition of phallic symbols. What are some ways that a Freudian critic might "read" the bowl in the story?

Janus is an allusion to a mythological character. Using a classical dictionary and/or encyclopedia, find out all you can about the Roman god Janus. Why do you think Beattie chose this title? What is the connection between the story and Janus?

Compare and Contrast

1980s: In 1981 the divorce rate peaks at 5.3 divorces for every 1000 people, before falling off slightly in the next few years.

Today: While the divorce rate drops slightly, it is still generally believed that one out of every two marriages ends in divorce. Cohabitation is a growing trend. The marriage rate continues to drop throughout the 1990s.

1980s: Home mortgages reach double digits, slowing the housing market and making it very difficult for first time home owners to buy a house.

Today: Home mortgages decline to post-World War II record low rates. Financing a house is relatively easy.

1980s: Unemployment peaks at 10.8 percent in 1982, the highest since the Great Depression of the 1930s. Inflation remains high, but businesses are making a slow recovery.

Today: The last half of the decade sees low unemployment rates, low inflation, and a booming economy. In some sectors, notably technology, worker shortages cause problems.

1980s: Members of the "baby boom" generation reach adulthood and flood the job market. Seeking financial security, many families become two-wage families with both the mother and father employed.

Today: Older members of the "baby boom" generation near retirement; as a result, worries about pensions and the social security system escalate.

What Do I Read Next?

Park City: New and Selected Stories (1998) is a collection of some of Beattie's best stories. The collection allows the reader to compare and contrast earlier stories with later ones.

Where I'm Calling From: New and Selected Stories, (1988) is the last collection published by the late Raymond Carver.

Bobbie Ann Mason's collection of short stories, *Shiloh and Other Stories* (1982), features tales that reflect on the materialistic and empty nature of contemporary society. Mason, like Beattie, has been labeled a "K-mart realist" by a number of critics.

The American Short Story: Short Stories from the Rea Award (1993), edited by Michael Rea, provides students with a broad range of short stories and minimalist prose. Rea has selected stories by Anne Beattie, Charles Baxter, Raymond Carver, and Grace Paley, among others.

New Women and New Fiction: Short Stories Since the Sixties is a collection of stories by contemporary women writers such as Cynthia Ozick, Toni Cade Bambara, Anne Tyler, Fay Weldon and Anne Beattie.

Further Study

Aldridge, John A. *Talents and Technicians: Literary Chic and the New Assembly Line Fiction,* New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1992, pp.56-70.

A highly critical view of minimalist fiction.

Montresor, Jaye Berman, ed. *The Critical Response to Ann Beattie,* Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1993.

A collection of critical essays on Beattie's work.

Murphy, Christina. *Ann Beattie,* New York: Twayne, 1986.

A book-length study of Beattie's work. Although it does not contain a discussion of the stories from *Where You'll Find Me,* the book nonetheless provides an excellent introduction to Beattie and provides literary and cultural contexts for her work.

Rainwater, Catherine, and William J. Scheick, eds. *Contemporary American Women Writers,* Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1985.

A collection of essays, photographs, and bibliographies on important contemporary women writers including Annie Dillart, Cynthia Ozick, Anne Tyler, and Toni Morrison. Also includes Carolyn Porter's essay on Ann Beattie, "The Art of the Missing."

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Virginia Quarterly Review, Vol. 63, Spring, 1987, p. 59.

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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.

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