Last Courtesies Study Guide

Last Courtesies by Ella Leffland

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Ella Leffland's short story “Last Courtesies” is surprisingly violent. But the violence is, at least at the beginning, more suggested than explicit. In the foreground, the protagonist Lillian suppresses violent urges, while she is described as “too polite.” Throughout most of this story, Lillian is filled with fear and remorse, but she is determined to keep her emotions in check. She does go out of her way to not return rudeness expressed toward her. There are, however, moments when doing so is impossible, just as there are moments when the background violence of this story leaks through. This story is a psychological study of eccentrics. The violence erupts in ever mounting stages as the eccentricities of the characters collide, culminating in the brutality at the end.

“Last Courtesies” was first published in 1976 in *Harper's Magazine*. It was then chosen for the O. Henry Award for best short story the following year. Four years later, the story was selected as the title piece for Leffland's collection *Last Courtesies*. In a *New York Times* review of this collection, John Romano referred to Leffland as one of the “poets of alienation” but distinguished her from others “in being essentially moral as well as psychological.” Romano also praised Leffland for the sympathy that she arouses for her characters without judging them.

Author Biography

Nationality 1: American

Birthdate: 1931

Ella Leffland was born on November 25, 1931, in Martinez, California. She attended San Jose State College, where she earned a bachelor's degree in 1953. Leffland has stated that she began writing around the age of ten, but she was twenty-eight before she had her first short story published. After that, she wrote five novels and a collection of short stories.

Leffland worked as a city hall reporter for a few years upon obtaining her college degree. Then for three years she was a copyeditor for San Francisco's *Sun Reporter*. She also worked variously as a typist, a sales clerk, a researcher, and as a kitchen helper on a Norwegian tramp steamer. While holding these jobs, she returned to writing repeatedly.

Leffland's writing is psychological in emphasis. She probes her characters' psyches, pushing them to reveal how their minds work. Her first novel, *Mrs. Munck* (1970), relates the story of a woman struggling for her independence. This story was later produced as a made-for-television movie of the same title. Diane Ladd directed the play and starred in its leading role. Leffland's *Love out of Season* was published next in 1974. Then came *Rumors of Peace* (1979), a coming-of-age story. The protagonist is a young girl living in San Francisco during World War II. In 1980, Leffland put together her collection of short stories, *Last Courtesies*.

Leffland has stated that she likes to travel, and in 1979, she went to Germany to conduct research for a new book, a study of Hermann Goering (1893-1947), who was the highest ranking military officer in the Third Reich and Adolf Hitler's designated successor. In preparation for writing her 1990 book *The Knight, Death, and the Devil*, Leffland met with many people who had known Goering.

Leffland has spent most of her life in California, and as of 2005 she lived in San Francisco.

Summary and Analysis

Ella Leffland's *Last Courtesies* begins with a comment about the protagonist Lillian. Vladimir, the Russian piano tuner, tells her she is “too polite.” Lillian disagrees. Lillian does not push people in the bus line, but she does “fire off censorious glares.” Thus, according to Lillian, she is far from being too polite. She is merely “civilized.”

Only four months have passed since her aunt Bedelia's death, and Lillian misses her very much. She thinks of her aunt as an elegant woman, who can engage in intellectual discussions about Bach, Russian novelists, her well-kept garden, and topics of nature. Her aunt was also a pianist, and that was how their acquaintance with Vladimir came about. Wearing overalls that make him look like a mechanic, Vladimir has tuned their Steinway grand piano. He used obscenities whenever Bedelia was not present. He spoke his mind and was known to insult his clients for not taking better care of their pianos. Rumor has it that he poured buckets of urine on dog-walkers who allowed their pets to defecate underneath his windows, and it is said that he had several times been institutionalized. But Aunt Bedelia enjoyed him.

One night, Lillian told her aunt that “Vladimir was brilliant but unsound.” Bedelia asked how her niece came to this conclusion. But every detail that Lillian offered, Bedelia turned around to Vladimir's advantage. That was Bedelia's manner, to see the best in people. Lillian felt inadequate, as though she lived in Bedelia's shadow. She felt left out of the friendship between Bedelia and Vladimir, but no matter how long Lillian lives (her aunt has died at age ninety-one), Lillian suspects she will never gain the grace her aunt possessed. Bedelia was the “last survivor of a fair, legendary breed.”

Before she died, Aunt Bedelia invited Vladimir over for dinner. She prepared the meal herself, picked flowers from the garden for a centerpiece, and donned jewelry that she usually wore only for special holidays. None of this was wasted on Vladimir. He noted and admired everything. Bedelia and Vladimir spent the evening talking about lofty subjects, covering their travels to exotic places and the finer points of music theory as it related to classical masters. Then Vladimir “flung himself into Bach” on the grand piano. With Bedelia, Vladimir was a cosmopolitan gentleman. But with Lillian alone, he was vulgar, even aggressive.

Although Lillian doubted it, Bedelia thought that Vladimir might be enamored of Lillian. After Bedelia's death, Vladimir spends a lot of time at the apartment. Lillian consoles him, and Vladimir, in turn, tries to counsel Lillian regarding her future. Vladimir tells Lillian that if the butcher gives her a bad cut of meat, she should “give them the finger.” He also tells her she should get married, not out of desire but rather for protection.

Lillian swears she does not need protection, that she can take care of herself. She uses the example of how she has complained about her new upstairs neighbor. There is a lot of noise all times of the day and night coming from that apartment—everything from music, laughter, and loud shrieks, to squeaky bedsprings in the night. On the front steps one day Lillian happens to bump into the young woman, Jody, and manages to politely

request that she turn down her music after 10:00 p.m. It is a rule, Lillian informs her. The girl promises to comply, but she does not really alter her lifestyle. When Vladimir comes to visit, Lillian tells him about her annoyance with Jody. Vladimir begins to curse at the girl upstairs, but Lillian asks him to stop. He is acting too judgmentally, she informs him. His tactics are too brash; Bedelia would never have encouraged him to act in this way, Lillian reminds him. But Vladimir says that he is only doing what everyone does. He suggests that Lillian thinks he is demented. He tells her: “I am one of the many! I am in the swim!” In other words, it is Lillian who is out of sync. He then relates a news story about a woman found murdered and her body cut to bits in an alley not far away, reminding Lillian of dangers that face a woman who lives alone.

Lillian worries about Vladimir. She asks a co-worker who knows of him what she thinks. The co-worker believes that Vladimir is on the verge of being committed again. At home, Lillian is frightened, and she misses the comfort of her aunt's presence. Later Jody phones Lillian to ask her to go upstairs to see if the gas stove is turned off. Lillian sees a mess in Jody's apartment, but the stove burners are off. Lillian snoops a little through Jody's apartment, noticing notes left for “Jamie” and is surprised to find books written by “Dostoevsky, Dickens, Balzac, Melville.” Lillian thinks to herself how odd it is “that the girl had this taste in literature, yet could not spell the simplest word and had never heard of a comma.” As Lillian is about to leave, she is caught off guard by the unexpected appearance of the young man, Jamie. He invites Lillian to have a cup of coffee. She refuses. He tries to start a conversation, during which Lillian watches him spear a cockroach and then squash another one with a butter knife.

Lillian gradually loses her civility. She almost walks off her job; on the way home from work, she is tempted to smack an old man for stepping on her foot and to smile at the news of a motorist being killed by a sniper. She takes a hot bath, hoping it will restore her good nature. But she continues to have trouble sleeping because of the noise from Jody's apartment and is newly troubled when another woman in the neighborhood is gruesomely murdered. Lillian begins taking sleeping pills.

Lillian sometimes watches Jody and Jamie, when they are in the garden, sunning themselves. Sometimes she sees Jamie by himself. She thinks Jamie is in love with Jody and depressed because Jody often leaves him alone.

Vladimir comes over one night and again curses the noisy neighbor; he tells Lillian that he has found her a prospective husband. He says Jody is a prostitute, which Lillian does not believe. She thinks Vladimir is crazy. She tells Vladimir, “You exaggerate everything, I'm afraid.” Vladimir, in turn, believes that Lillian is blind. He is worried for her. But Lillian responds: “To live each moment as if you were in danger—is demeaning.” Vladimir tries to shake Lillian out of what he thinks is blind denial. But in doing so, he frightens her. She screams at him, and he eventually leaves. Lillian locks the door behind him. She goes to the hallway to phone for help, the police, her doctor, a friend, anyone. She then hears a knock on the door. The knocking stops, and Lillian stumbles over Vladimir's jacket that is lying on the floor. She hears him try to start his car. She feels his wallet in the pocket of his jacket. Then she hears more knocking on her door. She knows that without his wallet he does not have money to call for help, but

she cannot manage enough courage to open the door. Then she thinks about the Vladimir that her aunt knew, the gentleman. She thinks about how Vladimir sits in his car outside her apartment, keeping an eye on her. She wonders how he will get home. Then the knocking stops, and she goes to the front window to see him walking away.

She stands there stunned for a long time when she finally realizes that someone is again knocking on the door. She turns on the porch light and unlocks the door. It is Jamie. She begins to panic when she notices Jamie's unusual stare, but she talks herself out of it, believing that her nerves are just jangled. And in that moment of hesitation, Jamie lunges at her. She feels a “painless blow, followed by dullness, a stillness deep inside her.” And as colors first fill the room and then slowly fade, Jamie wrenches the knife from Lillian's body.

Characters

Aunt Bedelia

Bedelia, aunt of the protagonist Lillian, has already died when the story begins, but there are flashback scenes in which the narrator describes the elderly woman with whom she lived. Intelligent, gracious, and refined in an old-fashioned way, Bedelia is well-educated in the arts and well-traveled. She brings out the best in people, such as the piano tuner Vladimir, whom she befriends. Whereas Lillian believes that Vladimir is crass and belligerent, Bedelia emphasizes his knowledge and interests. When Vladimir is with Bedelia, he strives to be a gentleman, and he and Bedelia enjoy each other. Bedelia is a role model for Lillian. However, Lillian does not have the confidence to aspire to her aunt's social grace and civility. After Bedelia's death at age ninety-one, Lillian's life slowly disintegrates.

Jamie

The psychopath Jamie hangs around Jody's apartment and is thought to be her boyfriend. Lillian first meets Jamie when she goes to Jody's apartment to make sure Jody's stove is turned off. He startles Lillian, coming upon her quietly without announcing himself. He invites her to sit down and talk to him, but Lillian is reluctant. While she stands there, however, she watches Jamie use a butter knife to kill two cockroaches. Jamie is a morose figure, often seen standing in the rain. He is, in fact, the so-called “rain man,” who has murdered two women in Lillian's neighborhood and mutilated their bodies.

Jody

Jody lives in the apartment over Lillian's. She is young, outgoing, and unaware of how much she disturbs Lillian with all her noise. Jody's apartment is a mess, which Lillian notes when she enters it to check on the stove. But in the midst of the mess, Lillian sees books that suggest Jody is well educated. Jody, who has one or more sexual partners visit her at night, explores yoga and classical literature. Jody also appears to have a relationship with Jamie, who hangs around her apartment even when she is not there.

Lillian

Lillian, the protagonist, is a plain middle-aged woman, now widowed. However, she feels like a spinster. Vladimir tells her she is too polite, an attribute that she denies. She avoids confrontation, a habit that she describes as being civilized. She misses Aunt Bedelia but denies that her aunt protected her. Vladimir suggests that Lillian get married in order to have in a new husband the protection that Bedelia once provided. Lillian suspects that Vladimir is attracted to her and is often frightened by him. She is actually

frightened by a lot of things and has trouble sleeping because of her fear as well as the noise from her upstairs neighbor Jody. Lillian has a certain innocence or naivety. Her instincts, possibly dulled by her lack of self-confidence, turn her in the wrong directions. She stores up her anger, directing it toward unsuspecting people, such as her wanting to slap a stranger in a bus line for stepping on her toes, when in fact she is angry at Jody for all the noise she makes.

Rain Man

See *Jamie*

Vladimir

Vladimir, a White Russian who fled war-torn Prague with his parents in 1917 and eventually immigrated to the United States, is educated in the classics and plays the piano. He works as a piano tuner, and that is how he meets Bedelia. She owns a piano and shares her knowledge with him whenever he appears in her apartment. Vladimir is probably the most outwardly peculiar of the eccentric characters that fill this short story. He is physically unkempt, can be vulgar in his actions and speech, and has himself committed to a mental institution from time to time. But at the level of his heart, he is all love. He is fascinated with Aunt Bedelia because of her charm and cultivation and because she connects with him in positive ways. When she dies, he continues to go to the apartment to mourn her and on her behalf to watch out for her niece. Vladimir suggests that Lillian get married after Aunt Bedelia dies, but he takes himself out of the running, stating that he does not like women. At one point, Vladimir even suggests that he has found a man for Lillian to marry, but nothing comes of this.

Vladimir spends the latter part of this story worrying about Lillian. It is not clear if he watches over her for her own sake or out of respect for his feelings for Aunt Bedelia. But at night, he sits in his car and watches Lillian's apartment. He wants to protect her from the murderer who lurks in the neighborhood. However, when he tries to warn Lillian of the danger, he becomes so irrational that Lillian fears Vladimir more than she fears the unknown murderer. Vladimir's warnings and his attempts to save Lillian are in vain, and in his last appearance in the story, he knocks on the door, which Lillian refuses to answer.

Themes

Alienation

In one way or another, all of the characters in Leffland's short story “Last Courtesies” live isolated lives. The least alienated may be Jody, even though she is described as having many male suitors come to her apartment each night (and Vladimir calls her as a prostitute). On one level, Jody appears to be the most social, but her emotions, in order to handle her way of life, must be guarded. She thus isolates herself from those feelings. If she is indeed a prostitute, then Jody also removes herself from acceptable social practices and a committed relationship. If Lillian is the most socially aware of the characters, then Jody's lack of concern for Lillian's comfort, demonstrated by playing loud music at night, can be seen as symbolic of how alienated she feels. Jody separates herself from Lillian's humanity, not thinking of Lillian as a person who needs sleep. Jody is the only person who really matters and in this sense she does not connect with others.

Jamie is a rather morose figure, often seen alone, waiting for Jody to reappear. He stands outside her apartment, often in the rain, just staring. The secret revealed at the ending is that Jamie is a serial killer. Intensely alienated, Jamie is in fact a sociopath, capable of gruesome acts.

Vladimir experiences an immigrant's alienation, trying to live in a foreign culture, trying to communicate in a second language. He acts out his frustration and anger is socially unacceptable ways, but he is in truth a cultivated individual who can connect to others through shared appreciation of the arts. Aunt Bedelia sees the best in Vladimir, and this view of him encourages him to communicate. Others, however, are put off by his eccentricities; therefore, Vladimir withdraws from them.

Lillian assumes she has the best social skills of all the characters. But she may be the most isolated. She knows how to act as if she is part of the social group, but she has little or no connections with others. She lives alone, and her attempts at socializing fail. She does not know how to carry on a conversation. She is unable to assert herself with Jody. She feels roughly treated by others and harbors hostility. Lingering grief over her aunt's death and the loss of the social insulation Bedelia provided, Lillian feels exposed and powerless.

Eccentricities

Eccentricities abound in this short story. Of all the characters, Vladimir is the most explicitly eccentric. He does not care about his odd clothes, his shocking language, what social conventions he breaks. Vladimir does what he wants. He is not ignorant of common practices but rather chooses to ignore them. Aunt Bedelia is eccentric in another way. She is a woman of times-gone-by. Her formal education sets her apart

from most people. She is excessively particular and refined. Lillian, on the other hand, is eccentric in a more monotonous way. She is plain, soft-spoken, and submissive. Her eccentricities are those of boredom gone to an extreme. She does very little for herself in her dress, her attitude, her respect for herself. Her routine is based on sameness and dullness. But underneath this mask is a fanatic, who smiles, sometimes, at the pain of others. Eccentricities in these characters make them appear unique and, in many ways, fascinating because they are not one-dimensional or stereotypical figures.

Violence

From the actions of Jamie, squashing cockroaches, to the thread of murders that runs through this story, violence is an underlying current. Violence is suggested, as in news stories that are mentioned and in some of Lillian's thoughts when she grows tired of being so passive. Violence is present in the anecdotes told about Vladimir, who takes out his anger on strangers. Actual violence explodes in several scenes, for instance when Vladimir and Lillian try to make sense of one another toward the end of the story and in their anger slap one another. Then there is the final act of violence when Jamie kills Lillian. Although this strain of violence runs through the story, however, very little of it is detailed. Thus the violence is felt under the surface rather than being fully displayed. Readers sense it rather than witness it.

Fear

Although Vladimir is fearful for Lillian, it is Lillian herself who manifests the most fear in this story. She claims she is not too shy, but she is definitely easily intimidated. She tries to confront Jody in an attempt to get her upstairs neighbor to turn down her music, but the confrontation brings little result. Lillian leaves it like that. Her fear in this instance is based on her understanding of social grace. She does not want to “make a scene.” When Vladimir comes over for a visit and hears all the racquet, he becomes inflamed. But Lillian tries to quiet him. She does not want him to confront her neighbor. Lillian would rather suffer through the noise.

Lillian is also afraid of Vladimir. She has heard rumors of his having been institutionalized and fears his irrationality. Lillian is a straightforward kind of woman, hoping always to present herself in a simple and uncomplicated way. Vladimir is just the opposite. He acts out his emotions immediately without giving them much reflection. In contrast, Lillian, who is afraid of her own emotions, holds her feelings in, controlling every one of her actions no matter how she feels. In the end, her fear blinds her. Instead of trusting Vladimir who is trying to protect her, she is afraid of him and does not allow him back into her house. Instead, she opens the door to Jamie, the only character in this story she should have feared.

Style

Style

Suspense

Suspense in this short story is created out of fear of others. Vladimir is so eccentric he is hard to understand. His emotions are unstable and some of his actions are unsociable. He is as likely to explode as he is to read poetry or play a piano composition by Bach. So when the story focuses on the unpredictable Vladimir, readers feel a sense of the unknown, which contributes to the suspense.

The initially peripheral neighborhood murders also cause suspense. Two women are killed and their bodies mutilated. The reader wonders if Jody or Lillian will be next. The reader wonders who is the murderer. As the suspense builds, readers may suspect Vladimir is the criminal. He admits not liking women, and he is the most obviously irrational person in the story. So his visiting Lillian engenders concern for her safety. When Lillian opens the door, the brief relief that it is not Vladimir standing there is followed by the discovery that Jamie is the “rain man.” He shoves Lillian to the floor, and the third murder occurs.

Foreshadowing

Foreshadowing consists of details that hint at the outcome; other hints about the outcome can deliberately mislead a reader in order to extend the suspense. Vladimir warns Lillian about taking precautions to protect herself. But the unpredictable and explosive Vladimir appears not to be trusted; his anger is threatening. While Vladimir commands reader attention, however, Leffland points to the real murderer. That occurs in the scene in which Jamie uses a knife to spear and then squash two cockroaches. Lillian is disgusted by this act, but she does not consider its potential meaning, and at the last moment when she possibly could save her life, she opens the door to Jamie.

Anti-hero

The anti-hero is a main character who has traits quite opposite to a conventional hero. The anti-hero is inept, clumsy, perhaps dishonest. He fails to solve the problem, is unable to master the situation. Though Vladimir is not the protagonist, he has some traits of the anti-hero. Vladimir tries to save Lillian (which is heroic in its intention) but he fails to do so. His short stature, his dress, demeanor, actions, all are contrary to what a stereotypical hero is. He is sloppy, crass, worrisome, and ineffectual. He tries to help Lillian, but he just makes her circumstances worse. He yells at Jody but is ignored. He tells Lillian all the wrong things: she is too shy; she is not a beauty; she looks like a prostitute when she puts on makeup. When she fails to comprehend him, he slaps her.

He sits in his car, watching over Lillian with devotion. But on the night when he should have been there, he leaves just as the perpetrator arrives.

Historical Context

1970s in the United States

During the 1970s, a new generation of young adults examined, criticized, and in some cases totally discarded the former generation's ways. Established concepts about friendship, sexuality, marriage, race relations and ethnicity, war, and women's rights were challenged and transformed. The ongoing Vietnam War (1959-1975), which was ultimately lost by the United States, caused disillusionment and anger among men who were eligible for the draft. It was a time of experimentation and protest, which were expressed in literature, lifestyles, and in political resistance. There were divisions between the younger generation and the older one, as well as between the more radical and more conservative members of the youth movements. Because of this upheaval, young people particularly felt a new alienation from their government and their political leaders. Those who wanted change opposed those who wanted no change. Authority was questioned, laws challenged or ignored.

The culture shifted in various ways during the 1970s. On an environmental level, the 1970s saw the removal of lead from gasoline because of the recently recognized effects of lead poisoning in children. The first Earth Day was held, calling attention to environmental pollution. President Nixon signed the first Clean Air Act, and the dangers of second-hand smoke were revealed. The Environmental Protection Agency was created. On the social level, streaking (running naked at a popular event or in a public space) became a fad and so did drinking bottled water. Disco music was in and Elvis Presley died. The Beatles produced their last album as a group, and Janis Joplin and Jimi Hendrix died from drug overdoses. The first international network for the general public was created, and Sony's Walkman came on the market.

Public cynicism regarding elected officials grew as people learned of the Watergate break-ins. President Nixon subsequently resigned under threat of impeachment. Four students were shot at Kent State University as National Guard troops tried to quell a student demonstration against the Vietnam War. Then governor of Alabama, George Wallace led a demonstration against racial integration of his state's schools. The Chicago 7, a group of protest organizers who met in Chicago during the Democratic National Convention, were found innocent of inciting riots. President Carter pardoned all draft dodgers, who had left the country to avoid serving in the military. The Supreme Court reinstated the death penalty, and in *Roe v. Wade* made abortion legal.

White Russians

The Russian Civil War (1918-1921) involved various militant groups, including the Bolsheviks (the Marxists under Lenin), the Green Army (the anarchists), the Red Army (communists), and the White Army, which opposed the other three. The White Army was a loose, unorganized group of Russians who supported the czar. Some of those

associated with the White Army (also called White Russians) leaned toward democracy and were backed by European nations as well as Japan and the United States. People from Ukraine, Siberia, and Crimea provided additional troops and supplies for the Whites, but the army was never able to unify and did not pose sufficient force to make much difference in Russia. Many White Russians fled the country, regrouping in places such as Paris, Berlin, and Shanghai. Networks among these groups developed and were maintained until World War II. After that, many so-called White Russians immigrated to the United States.

Critical Overview

“Last Courtesies” won the O. Henry Award in 1977, shortly after the short story's first appearance in print, in a 1976 *Harper's Magazine*. When the collection *Last Courtesies* was published in 1980, John Romano, for the *New York Times*, described the collection as a series of “sad tales” which contain characters who are “profoundly alone,” are suffering, and “cannot make [themselves] understood.” However, Romano modified his statement by asserting that even though Leffland's characters suffer these problems, readers are not, at first, fully aware of the characters' anguish because, according to Romano, “the narrator is always there with them.” Romano further explained that the reader is not completely taken into the characters' pain because Leffland's “authorial presence is distinctly caring,” and her “imagination is always bound up with sympathy.”

In a 2003 article, written for the *Kenyon Review*, Henry Alley completes a comprehensive overview of the various winners of the O. Henry Award, comparing them to the times in which they were written. In reference to Leffland's short story, Alley states that “Last Courtesies” “belongs distinctly to the seventies, because the complex protagonist Lillian cannot locate, exactly, where the crack in the world is.” Leffland's story reflects the fact that the decade was one of cultural revolution, a time of fast changes and discordances.

In the early 2000s, the collection has not received much critical attention. But Leffland's writing in general has. She was described as a “really good” novelist, for instance, in Carolyn See's *Washington Post* review of another Leffland work. Also, Sybil S. Steinberg, writing for *Publishers Weekly*, asserted that Leffland's writings demonstrated the “breadth and seriousness” of the author's imagination. Finally, critic Donna Seaman, writing for *Booklist*, commenting on Leffland's *Breath and Shadows*, found that Leffland “writes with a grandeur and an omnipotence reminiscent of nineteenth-century fiction.” Seaman also found that this particular book was a “wise and poetic novel as enchanting and resonant as a fairy tale.”

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Hart is the author of several books. In the following essay, Hart looks at the relationship between the protagonist Lillian and the piano tuner Vladimir in Leffland's short story.

In the short story “Last Courtesies,” author Ella Leffland has created characters that stand diametrically opposed to one another. Sharp differences are most exaggerated in the contrast between the protagonist Lillian and the piano tuner Vladimir. Only the relationship between Lillian and Vladimir spans the entire story. As a matter of fact, the continual back-and-forth dialogues, confrontations, and contradictions between them hold this story together, create the tension, and make “Last Courtesies” what many reviewers refer to as a psychological study.

Pointing out the significance of these two characters and their contrary relationship, Leffland begins her story with one of the couple's many disagreements. Vladimir sums up Lillian's personality and the reason why she has so many difficulties. “Lillian, you're too polite,” he says. Lillian immediately contradicts him. But even more telling than this is the way, right from the beginning, that Leffland presents this information. She gives Vladimir's comment as a direct quotation, but for Lillian's response, Leffland has the narrator describe the protagonist's thoughts. Lillian, in other words, keeps them to herself. She does not agree with Vladimir but for some common courtesy, some social restraint that Lillian has imposed upon herself, she does not believe it is correct to express to Vladimir how she feels. Or maybe she is just not confident in her own assessment of herself. Whatever the reason, Vladimir displays an aspect of his personality, saying what is on his mind no matter how unacceptable it may be, and Lillian supresses hers, keeping her feelings concealed.

Social courtesies are important to Lillian. She believes, according to the narrator, that “the world owed itself,” in the least, human courtesies. Without these social amenities, Lillian thinks, the world would collapse. In her mind, she obeys what she believes are proper social graces. Courtesies come before all else.

Not so for Vladimir. This man has a reputation for doing the socially unacceptable. He uses foul language; curses piano owners who do not take care of their musical instruments; and it is said that he even once knocked down a relative in the course of a discussion about the German composer Richard Wagner (an anti-Semite whose music was a favorite among the Nazis). Vladimir also scares off mothers and their young children, and, at his worst, is reported to have thrown buckets of urine on dog owners who make the mistake of stopping under Vladimir's windows to allow their pets to relieve themselves. But according to others the worst of all Vladimir's social disgraces is the fact that he has been “institutionalized several times.” Even though he admits himself to mental facilities voluntarily, this part of his past terrifies Lillian. She wants to fit in, and to her, Vladimir's giving himself over to medication, a strictly controlled environment, and subsequent loss of freedom proves that he knows he does not fit in and that he may cause harm to himself or to others. Lillian could be correct in feeling

this way. But another possible reason that Vladimir turns himself in is that he becomes, at certain times, so fed up with society he needs a sabbatical from it.

Ironically, Vladimir believes that he fits quite well in society, at least most of the time. He thinks that he is just like most people—aggressive, vile, loud, and outspoken. Vladimir tells Lillian that it is she who is really out of step, despite the fact that she strives every day to fit in. Of course, Lillian disagrees with this point, too.

About midway through the story, Vladimir tells Lillian that she is too soft. He describes himself in contrast as “an armored tank.” This is his way of taking care of himself in an uncaring, deceitful society that will take advantage of those who are weak. Lillian's softness makes her vulnerable, Vladimir believes, so he advises her to get married. “I have no desire to marry,” Lillian tells him. But Vladimir scoffs at her reply. This world is not for desires, he informs her, and she had better stop living through her heart and start living through her head. “Think of your scalp!” he warns her. But Lillian really does not live through her heart. If she did, she might be better off than she is. Lillian lives neither through her heart nor her head. She lives through her imagination. Lillian imagines that there is some universal audience that is viewing her everyday performance. This audience is extremely judgmental, and if she does not pass their tests, she will be disgraced. She cannot always put her finger on who this audience is or what their rules are, but she has some vague ideas. When she transgresses (such as the time she wants to slap a stranger in the bus for stepping on her foot), she is remorseful.

Vladimir is right: Lillian is too soft. No matter how much she tries to deny this, her actions confirm Vladimir's observations. She plays the victim role quite well. For instance, she allows Jody, her upstairs neighbor, to nearly drive her crazy with loud noises both day and night. Yes, Lillian does complain to Jody but to no avail. Lillian might know how to ask for changes in her neighbor's behavior, but she does not know how to insist. She does not know how to do more than complain, how to take a problem and stick with it until she comes up with a solution. Lillian's idea of solving a problem is to wish it away and then hide or suffer while it persists. When Vladimir steps in, trying to help, Lillian is anything but thankful. Vladimir attempts to fill the gaps in Lillian's personality. He is loud and demanding. But this embarrasses Lillian. She is humiliated by his social transgressions. If Lillian had allowed Vladimir full rein, if she had stepped back or even encouraged him, she might have finally enjoyed a good night's sleep without resorting to sleeping pills. But instead, she now has Vladimir to worry about.

There is another area in which these two characters contrast. That is in their instincts. Lillian's instincts are as off-the-mark as Vladimir's are on. She refuses to judge Jody and Jody's companion Jamie in an unfavorable light. “They're people, Vladimir,” Lillian tells him. “Human beings like ourselves.” Of course, Vladimir has fun with that statement. He says Jody and Jamie are people from the sewers: “The sewers are vomiting them up by the thousands to mix with us.” They are “weak, no vision, no guts.” Then Vladimir states that Jody and Jamie represent “the madness of our times.” Intriguingly Vladimir describes Jody and Jamie, in part, the same way he does Lillian—weak and no guts. Moreover, he uses the term madness, one that others use to describe him.

So is there any reasonableness in either Lillian or Vladimir? Is it found in Lillian who suppresses all her emotions, denying herself the pleasure of expression and driving her into the role of victim? Or is it found in Vladimir, who makes a lot of noise but pushes people away from him because of it? These characters both appear to be searching for something. Lillian is caught between wanting Vladimir, for example, and being reviled by him. She invites him for dinner not because she wants to see him (or at least not because she can admit to herself that she wants him) but because “it would be too rude” not to. And yet, at the moment that Vladimir mentions that he senses “sex boiling” around her, Lillian silently hopes that Vladimir's “hands would leap on her.” And then there is Vladimir, who sincerely cares about Lillian. He sits in his car all night worrying about her and yells at her and shakes her, trying to wake her up to the potential danger that he feels is nearby. He is constantly advising her on how to act, how to dress. But then he adds: “I have always regretted . . . that you resemble the wrong side of your family.” This man is definitely not a romantic. When he tries to demonstrate his emotions for her, he fiercely grabs her wrists and slaps them together in a tight grip that causes her pain, and then he slams his two open hands against her cheeks. This, of course, frightens Lillian, who absolutely—both figuratively and physically—slams the door on him.

Had Lillian and Vladimir worked out their differences, they might have enjoyed themselves as a couple. Vladimir might have saved Lillian's life, and for her part, Lillian might have made Vladimir a little more socially tame. But then if that had happened, it would have been a different story.

Source: Joyce Hart, Critical Essay on “Last Courtesies,” in *Short Stories for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Critical Essay #2

Aubrey holds a Ph.D. in English and has published many articles on contemporary literature. In this essay, Aubrey discusses characterization and narrative technique in "Last Courtesies."

"Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world," wrote W. B. Yeats in "The Second Coming," and these lines might serve as an epigraph for Leffland's story, "Last Courtesies." The story is at once a lament for a vanishing world of civility and an intriguing character study. It is also a carefully crafted story, with well disguised ironies, that reaches a climax worthy of a suspense thriller.

Conflict between the older and the younger generations is hardly a new theme in literature or in life. The world is always changing, and change can be disturbing to those who have become set in their ways. The physical energy of the young, their unwillingness to accept limitations, and their natural impatience with established ways of doing things will always sit ill with those who have learned by experience the need to compromise, to accept authority, to live in a way that respects the rights of others. The young are always, in their own eyes, the center of the universe; the old are not permitted such a privilege. The new, uncouth world in which they suddenly find themselves, that mocks everything they have learned to value and respect, leaves them with few options, since time will not travel backwards, and the turning wheel of life (a notable image in the story) will not stand still. They can retreat into splendid, dignified isolation, like Aunt Bedelia; they can indulge in impotent rages, like Vladimir, or suffer largely in silence, like Lillian, but whatever they choose to do it will not affect the young, who will continue to be noisy, indulge in uninhibited sex, and generally act in ways that make their elders believe the world they loved has gone to the dogs, and they are powerless to change it.

In "Last Courtesies," it is ancient Aunt Bedelia who is least affected by the decay of the civilization around her. She has "sealed herself off in a lofty, gracious world" rooted in the past. Her serene detachment acts as a foil for Lillian's neurotic, lonely desperation. By her ability to rise above all pettiness and spite and maintain an "immense calm," Bedelia mocks the struggles of her floundering niece. Aunt Bedelia is a woman of intelligence, education, and high culture, the "last survivor of a fair, legendary breed" (as Lillian sees her). Through some miracle, attained perhaps by a combination of strong will and a naturally optimistic temperament, Aunt Bedelia has managed to preserve her ability to experience the spontaneous joy of life despite her physical ailments and frailty. It is this quality that enables her to win and retain the devotion of the rough diamond, Vladimir. She also achieves that most blessed of all human experiences—a good death. This is also a wonderfully comic moment in the story. Aunt Bedelia dies splendidly on cue, as Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, which is playing on the phonograph, reaches its climax. There cannot be many people who have been ushered into heaven to the strains of "Freude, schöner Götterfunken" ("Joy, lovely divine spark") but Aunt Bedelia is one of them, thereon to haunt the remainder of the story as a silent, saintly reproach to

the inadequacies of the other actors in this unnamed metropolitan hell that bears a distinct resemblance to New York City.

One advantage that Aunt Bedelia has is economic means. Whether it is through her own savings or inherited wealth, or because the steady, wage-earning Lillian supports her, she appears to be free of monetary pressures. She is, in a sense, free to be free. As a “sheltered soul” (Lillian's description of her) she can afford to freeze time at the point that suits her and continue to live in a world she understands and which nourishes her spirit. Poor Lillian has no such luxury. She must work to survive in a boring but nonetheless demanding job (“Italian and German required”), she must walk the dirty streets, get shoved in bus queues and deal with the sullen trades people. She cannot disengage herself from what she knows is the “world's madness—its rudeness, its litter, its murders.” Lillian's dismay at what city life has become in the 1970s means that in her mind she can live anywhere but the present, which no longer has any room or place for her. In one sense, with her boxy suits and her “tight 1950s hairdo,” she is already twenty years out of date. She was a youngish widow then but she refused to move on. She still regards television as a “philistine invention” and refuses to buy one. But while she has stood still, the world has not. And now her mind, recoiling from the desolation of the present, keeps taking her back even further. As she wanders through the desert of the great metropolis, images of her personal lost paradise—her marriage to George, which ended tragically when he was killed during World War II—drift into her mind, reminding her with horrible finality of the love and the pleasure that can never return. She is filled with

an intolerable longing for the past . . . for the face of her young husband . . . odd, but it never seemed to rain in her youth, the green campus filled the air with dizzying sweetness, she remembered running across the lawns for no reason but that she was twenty and the sun would shine forever.

Now she is fifty-seven and it seems that the sun does not shine at all.

After Aunt Bedelia dies, Lillian is faced with a direct assault on her privacy and her civilized values by her good-natured but inconsiderate neighbor Jody—a creature who is so different from Lillian that they may as well have come from different planets. Lillian's encounters with Jody and her waif-like boyfriend Jamie test to the full the tolerance and courtesy on which Lillian prides herself. She emerges from the test with her honor intact. In her complaints about the noise from the apartment above, she is the very model of decorum and quiet good manners. Even though she comes under increasing strain and has to take sleeping pills to get through the night, her principles of decency stand firm. The only time she is close to letting herself down comes one day when, after a sleepless night, she almost walks out on her job and almost slaps a man who inadvertently steps on her foot in the bus queue. She soon recovers her poise, with the help of that old standby for troubled souls, the hot bath.

The author uses this period of maximum stress in Lillian's life to carefully remind the reader that there is a serial killer on the prowl in the neighborhood. A second woman has been slashed to death by the man the newspapers dub “rain man,” and Lillian,

alarmed, even takes to shining a flashlight under her bed at night before saying the Lord's Prayer. (This is another of the delightful touches of humor that Leffland manages to introduce into what is in the end a tragic tale.)

From that point on, the narrative is perfectly controlled to produce the surprising yet inevitable climax. The scene in which the excited and almost deranged Vladimir visits Lillian on a dark and rainy night is masterful, building quickly in menace and horror, and full of irony that only becomes apparent at the end.

Vladimir presents an ugly picture; his emotions are at boiling point and he seems about to lose control. A deep-seated hatred of women seems to be forcing itself to the surface of his psyche, and the scene simmers with repressed sexuality and violence. When he points at Lillian she notices his outstretched hand and wonders, “what if it reached farther, touched her?” The ominous signs then multiply rapidly. Vladimir says he knew that the rain man would claim a second victim; he “smells blood on the wind!” (how? the reader may wonder, startled at the lurid image). Then Vladimir reveals that every night he has been sitting outside in his car, watching her apartment, which sets off alarm bells in the reader's mind, if not yet in Lillian's. After that, Vladimir appears to calm down but then he scrutinizes Lillian with his “small glittering eyes”—in context, another disturbing image. He abuses her for wearing makeup (“You've got [f——]ing gunk on! Rouge!”); she sees hatred in his eyes, and he repeats his censure of her, referring to her “stinking whore-rouge.” When she denies she has any desire for a man, and he responds that he “senses sex boiling around” in her, her blush and her conviction that “his hand would leap on her” create a moment of startling eroticism combined with an undercurrent of violence.

What seems to unhinge Vladimir completely is the moment Lillian stands up for herself and repudiates his extreme views about the degenerate nature of society and the danger Lillian is in. She responds by saying that she refuses to live each moment as if she were in danger. There is a double irony here, since Lillian is in danger but does not realize it, but she is not in danger from Vladimir, in spite of the fact that at this moment he suddenly seems to present a mortal threat to her. When he grabs her wrists and goes into demented lyric ecstasy about the fountains of blood that spurt up from the helpless victims of the rain man, Lillian and the reader suddenly realize, in one moment of horror, the awful truth (or so it seems): Vladimir is the rain man. Now it all makes sense. Of course. There have been enough warning signs. Vladimir was characterized as insane all along, as Lillian acknowledges before this moment of crisis is upon her (“what was Vladimir, after all? Insane”). He has been committed, or committed himself, to mental institutions on several occasions in the past. Earlier in the story, Lillian worried about “the violence of Vladimir's emotions”; and he admitted then that he loathed women (“Full of rubbishy talk!”), which seemed innocuous enough at the time but in light of later events takes on an ominous note.

But of course, understandable though Lillian's reaction is in this moment of panic and fear, Vladimir is not the rain man. She, and the reader as well, have been well fooled. As far as murder is concerned, Vladimir is a red herring, and the author, like any good writer of a mystery or a suspense thriller, has meticulously prepared readers to take the

bait, and in doing so they have forgotten not only Bedelia's judgment of Vladimir as a “man of integrity” (and Bedelia, that wise old soul, is never wrong) but also Jamie, the seemingly ineffectual, innocuous, rather pathetic figure—until he emerges from the rain and the shadows to make the fatal knife thrust.

All good stories reward a second reading, and it is on re-reading “Last Courtesies” that we are likely to notice how much we missed, or failed to evaluate correctly, regarding Jamie. His first appearance occurs when he appears seemingly out of nowhere as Lillian is about to leave Jody's apartment. Lillian suddenly sees a man standing in the doorway, and she screams. But the tension is immediately undercut by the description of him as a “boy,” even quite a wholesome one, with his “butter-yellow locks flow[ing] in profusion.” But there is one detail here that, in light of the story's climax, chills the blood: this boy *comes in from the rain*. Everything—his clothes, his hat, his hair—is “dripping with rain.” *Enter the rain man*. Only now do we remember also that in the last scene, it is also raining, and Lillian spies Jamie from her window standing around in the rain, apparently masturbating under his coat. Then he sits still on a tree stump, for no apparent reason, getting soaked. This is so strange and unusual that Lillian remarks on it: “It was beyond her, why anyone would sit still in a downpour.” Not so strange, apparently, for the rain man.

The author plants another clue in the scene mentioned above, in which Jamie invites Lillian to have coffee in Jody's apartment. Jamie is carefully presented in a way that makes him seem harmless: he is “a slight youth with neat little features” who speaks with a “childlike spontaneity” and looks lonely and forlorn. Certainly not the stuff of which serial killers are made. He even seems friendly towards Lillian. And yet—note how he deals with the cockroaches that scamper around the apartment: “Fumbling with a bread knife, he picked it up and languidly, distantly, speared a cockroach with the point. Then with the side of the knife, he slowly, methodically, squashed the other one.” After he has done this, he slowly mashes the bugs to pulp. On first reading, this appears to be no more than childish—disgusting perhaps, but not alarming. But in light of what happens later, it becomes a gruesome foreshadowing, enacted in front of Lillian's own eyes, of what this seemingly unthreatening boy will eventually do to her. In similar fashion, the fact that Lillian, on the fateful day, spots Jamie in the garden wearing a black cloak seems at first no more than a self-conscious attempt at bohemianism on his part, but Lillian's characterization of him as “this little would-be Dracula” carries more menace than she realizes.

The crowning irony of Jamie's quiet lurking in this story is that Vladimir practically tells Lillian who she should be afraid of: “Probably he [Jamie] pops pills and lives off his washerwoman mother, if he hasn't slit her throat in a fit of irritation! It's the type, Lillian! Weak, no vision, no guts!” But Lillian takes no notice, and neither does the reader, caught up in Vladimir's increasingly wild rant.

Having worked in her subtle, easily overlooked clues, and with her red herring firmly in place, the author is now free to spring the surprise that in retrospect seems inevitable. She also has time to emphasize the most biting irony of all, that also sums up the theme of the story. Lillian's “courtesies,” that she preserves to the last in the hope of keeping

herself above the decadence that swims all around her, are what finally lead to her death: she refuses to slam the door on the intruder without a few polite words of regret, thus giving him the few seconds he needs to do his work. In this dark new world, politeness is the kiss of death.

Source: Bryan Aubrey, Critical Essay on “Last Courtesies,” in *Short Stories for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Critical Essay #3

Ullmann is a freelance writer and editor. In the following essay, Ullmann examines the theme of courtesy as exhibited and understood by the characters of Leffland's short story "Last Courtesies."

Leffland's short story "Last Courtesies" explores themes of civility and rudeness through four of the major characters: Aunt Bedelia, her niece Lillian, their friend Vladimir, and a neighbor's boyfriend named Jamie. Bedelia is a consummate judge of character. Vladimir is also a good judge; however, Lillian is trying too hard to be courteous and looking for courtesy from others to pay attention to a person's true nature. To her, Vladimir is vulgar and overly impassioned whereas Jamie is a morose, vaguely rude "pretty boy." Even while she comes to trust Vladimir because of his connection to her aunt, she cannot see Jamie, with all his strangeness as well as his brief courtesies, as a serial killer. The common courteousness of an age which has passed serves now only to permit the trampling of the undiscerning individual by modern society.

Aunt Bedelia is the eldest character in Leffland's short story. In the story line she is recently deceased and therefore present only in memory and flashback. She is drawn as a person of exquisite opinion by both her niece Lillian and her good friend Vladimir: "'Your aunt was a genius at judging people.'"

Although she is old-fashioned by the time of her death, Bedelia's personal bearing and insight into the nature of individuals makes her stand out as singularly capable. "[A]unt had sealed herself off in a lofty, gracious world; she lived for it, she would have died for it if it came to that." She does not directly contrast with the modern world so much as stand calm in the midst of a frenetically changing world, neither apparently noticing the other.

Bedelia is the undeclared model of civility in this short story. She is refined in her tastes, particularly in regards to classical music. She is never driven to passion by anyone's behavior, maintaining an unruffled, peaceful demeanor. This is especially apparent when Lillian (who is not an unbiased point-of-view character) is faced with what she considers to be an unlikely but deep friendship between Bedelia and Vladimir. Lillian is puzzled by their relationship because of her prejudice against Vladimir based on his rude language, which she sees as a strong contrast to her aunt's refinement, almost entirely missing the ways in which the two complement each other well. Their friendship is nevertheless maintained for the remainder of Bedelia's life. Lillian ultimately feels she can trust Vladimir because she has such consummate belief in her aunt's assessment of character, which is perhaps one of the few things on which Lillian and Vladimir can implicitly agree.

Lillian, Bedelia's middle-aged niece, relies on her aunt a great deal as a buffer against the modern world. She clings to the memory her aunt's peacefulness but regards the modern world as decaying: "[S]he thought she could hear the world's madness—its

rudeness, its litter, its murderers—beat against the house with the rain.” In this way she departs from her aunt's perfect composure of mind.

The narrator describes Lillian's repressed incivilities this way: “She had almost walked off her job, almost struck an old man, almost smiled at murder. A feeling of panic shot through her; what were values if they could collapse at the touch of a sleepless night?” Despite her fear over the potential loss of values, shortly thereafter she has morbid and unrepentant thoughts about her frustration regarding her neighbor: “Perhaps the girl's insanely late hours were boomeranging, and would soon mash her down in a heap of deathlike stillness (would that Lillian could implement this vision).” Lillian need not guard herself against stuffiness so much as insincerity.

Lillian is civil to a fault but clearly lacks her aunt's facility for judging character. She seems only to be able to look at the surface, at manners and social behavior, which is evident in her private thoughts about Jody, Jamie, and Vladimir. Lillian, for example, is astonished, annoyed, and even disgusted by Jody but does not believe her to be a prostitute when Vladimir declares she is. Lillian's excuses on Jody's behalf are based on what she has perceived as civilized qualities in Jody's character—taking classes, reading Dostoevsky, having a boyfriend—as if being civilized and having sex for money is an impossible combination.

Jamie shows Lillian some surface warmth—smiles and offers an invitation for coffee—and at the same time is so turned inward that he can hardly see her, interact with her. Despite his faults, in Jamie Lillian sees his youth, his attempts at courtesy, and never perceives the deadly, troubled soul barely contained therein. Lillian, appalled by her appalling neighbors, tries to pull back and see things as her aunt might have:

[S]he wondered what Bedelia would have thought of Jody and Jamie. And she remembered how unkempt and disconcerting Vladimir had been, yet how her aunt had quickly penetrated to the valuable core while she, Lillian, fussed on about his bad language. . . .[I]t was hard to tell with Bedelia, which facet she might consider the significant one . . . she often surprised you . . . it had to do with largeness of spirit.

Lillian respects Bedelia's insight even if she does not understand how she comes by it. Even as her aunt carries on an intense friendship with Vladimir, Lillian focuses negatively on his vulgar language, passionate outbursts, and spotty reputation. She cannot, until the very end of the story, reconcile his appearance and behavior with the good, discerning, protective soul beneath the surface; however, her breakthrough in understanding Vladimir for herself is not enough to save Lillian. She declares to Vladimir, “'To live each moment as it you were in danger—it's demeaning. I will not creep around snarling like some four-legged beast. I am a civilized human being.'”

The story opens with Vladimir's admonishment: “'Lillian, you're too polite.'” To this he also adds: “'You need a protector, now Bedelia's gone!'” He repeats these sentiments every time he speaks with Lillian. Vladimir, though of a kind with Bedelia, is living in and aware of the modern world. Rather than react to the changing world with indifference (as Bedelia seems to do), or bitterness (as Lillian does), Vladimir fights back. It is the

way he knows to survive—and survival is how he perceives life to be. He respects and loves the courtesy of the bygone era, in which he and Bedelia indulge in their friendship, but keeps one foot in reality, and, consequently, is vulgar and rude.

Vladimir is the most interesting character in this story because of the author's slow revelation of his full personality. If the reader trusts Bedelia from the beginning, as Lillian does, then one is assured of Vladimir's good intent toward Bedelia and Lillian. But the deceased Bedelia's opinions are peppered by Lillian's second-guesses. Early on, the reader is left to wonder whether Vladimir's character has been fully comprehended.

When the story opens, Bedelia is dead and Vladimir is visiting Lillian. They are not really friends—more like quarreling relatives who reluctantly care for each other—sharing only the common bond of her aunt. Lillian tolerates his visits out of her own overpowering sense of civility, as well as duty to her aunt's memory. Vladimir's motives are less clear, although being in or near Bedelia's home appears to help him mourn and feel close to his dead friend.

Over the course of the story, Vladimir pushes Lillian to remarry although she has lived most of her life as a widow. She cannot understand what he's really trying to say, although he says it plainly enough—that she needs a protector. Lillian even believes at times that he is suggesting himself as her partner. Vladimir is impatient with her and her civility, urging Lillian time and again to stand up for herself and discard courtesy in favor of a show of strength. He fears for her safety. Why, is never clearly delineated. Perhaps, like Bedelia, Vladimir has that old-fashioned insight and understands that a woman with Lillian's innocence is unsafe unless she has someone with whom to live who can look after her.

Vladimir's admonishments to Lillian to stand up for herself, to protect herself, foreshadow Lillian's violent death. She thinks he is overreacting—she declares that she is civilized and will not live in such a paranoid state—but misses the discerning insight of Vladimir's own character by being caught up in prejudice toward his rougher aspects.

While arguing about Jody and Jamie, Vladimir dismisses Lillian's judgment as bearing no resemblance to her aunt's:

“The difference between instinct and application. Between a state of grace and a condition of effort. Dear friend Lillian, tolerance is dangerous without insight. . . . It is fatal to try to carry on a dead art—the world has no use for it! The world will trample you down! Don't think of the past, think of your scalp!”

This turns out to be Vladimir's penultimate passionate plea for Lillian to guard herself. *He* has been protecting her, watching her apartment nightly from the street, but frustration and perhaps a little madness break through and he is driven away into the rainy night, leaving Lillian unguarded. Ultimately, Vladimir and Lillian's failure to connect and understand each other means that his entreaties are lost on her. Soon thereafter she opens her front door to Jamie and, despite her own visceral feeling that something is wrong, she refuses her instinct, suppressing exhaustion and panic long enough to

make a polite excuse—which is long enough for the deranged young man to leap to the attack.

Jamie's arrival in the story is ominous. He appears without a sound in Jody's apartment in the middle of the night while Lillian is there alone. Lillian is frightened but she fights her intuition concerning this young man almost from the first, employing both courtesy and an acceptance meant to mimic Bedelia's judgment of character. “And he looked, all at once, so lonely, so forlorn, that even though she was very tired, she felt she must stay a moment longer.”

His strange mixture of youth and sloth, beauty and moroseness, does not disturb Lillian, even as he casually disembowels a cockroach with a butter knife at the kitchen table. His small gestures of warmth override, for Lillian, all else, so rare a commodity these small gestures seem to be in young man. She sees his “pretty boy” looks and his alternately sad visage as a sign of his humanity, neglecting her own instincts that something deeper is wrong.

Lillian focuses her efforts of understanding instead on Jamie's girlfriend, Jody, who is a noisy, thoughtless neighbor. Lillian is so stressed over Jody's behavior and Vladimir's intensity that she is unaware of how Jamie's strangeness is beyond the pale even within a modern context. In part Lillian wants to be insightful as Bedelia was, but she lacks the ability to discern, swinging so far toward acceptance that she cannot see any danger.

In the final scene of the story, Jamie stands out in the rain, dressed in a black cape, mournfully watching his girlfriend's windows as she entertains a customer. Lillian spies him out in the garden and feels sad for him but also more than a little unsettled. Even Vladimir's superior character insight does not pick out Jamie as the serial killer “rain man” or he would presumably have warned Lillian more specifically or at least not left her building that night, having seen “'that pea-brained boyfriend . . . in his secondhand ghoul costume'” haunting the premises.

Lillian fails her final opportunity to tap into her intuition, to leave courtesy behind, even momentarily; however, this failure does not lead to a bruised insole or wet newspaper:

[T]he rain muffled his voice; though she caught an eerie, unnatural tone she now sensed was reflected in the luminous stare. With a sudden feeling of panic she started to slam the door in his face. But she braked herself, knowing that she was overwrought; it was unseemly to use such brusqueness on this lost creature because of her jangled nerves.

In that moment of blind courtesy, Lillian is finally trampled by the modern world.

Source: Carol Ullmann, Critical Essay on “Last Courtesies,” in *Short Stories for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Topics for Further Study

Choose a neighborhood in San Francisco (such as Haight-Ashbury, Mission District, North Beach, Pacific Heights, or even the sister-city Oakland) and research what the chosen district was like in the 1970s and how it has since changed. Have there been major renovations? Have buildings been added? How has the population changed? How do the 1970 prices of homes in this area compare to prices in early 2005?

Create a diary, writing it as if you were the protagonist Lillian. Have the diary begin with the death of Lillian's aunt and proceed through about six months to the night just before Lillian's murder. What are her private reactions to her aunt's passing? What are her thoughts about Vladimir? How does she express her anger and frustration about Jody? And what does she think about Jamie?

Choose a piece of music by one of the composers mentioned in this short story (Bach, Wagner, Scarlatti, etc.). Collect information about the chosen piece, noting when it was composed, what the life circumstances of the composer were at the time the piece was written, how the music was received by critics and audiences, and any theoretical discussion of it that you find meaningful. Next present the music to your class, providing as much interesting background information as you can find to help captivate your audience. The more colorful anecdotes you provide, the better.

Read Ken Kesey's *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1973). How does the protagonist Randle Patrick McMurphy compare to Vladimir in Leffland's “Last Courtesies?” Do McMurphy and Vladimir have similar personality traits? Do they socialize in similar or different ways? What are their views of women? How do they react to things they do not like? Compare their styles of dress and behavior. Compare their levels of intelligence. How does each character help the author convey the story's main point?

Compare and Contrast

1970s: Russia is part of the Soviet Union, which invades Afghanistan.

Today: After the breakup of the Soviet Union, Russia becomes an independent country, which watches as the United States invades Afghanistan.

1970s: San Francisco Opera begins its presentation of annual free concerts in Golden Gate Park. These concerts feature artists from the Opera's season-opening weekend. The event draws some 20,000 listeners.

Today: The San Francisco Opera opens its eighty-third summer season with Russian composer Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's *Queen of Spades*, a suspenseful, psychological thriller.

1970s: People in the United States are divided by the Vietnam War. More than 58,000 U.S. soldiers have been killed. Protestors march in the streets by the thousands.

Today: The country is divided over the economy, politics, and the U.S. invasion of Iraq. As of late 2006, nearly three thousand U.S. soldiers have been killed in Iraq and tens of thousands of Iraqis have been killed. Casualties have numbered in the tens of thousands on both sides. Protestors demonstrate worldwide against the war, but the number of protestors in the United States are fewer than those in Europe who protest the war.

1970s: The Haight-Ashbury section of San Francisco is the West Coast headquarters of the counter-culture movement, a place where hippies don flowers in their hair and musicians such as the Grateful Dead play.

Today: Haight-Ashbury (also called the Upper Haight) is a tourist attraction, with vintage clothes stores, alternative music stores, used book stalls, and inexpensive places to eat.

What Do I Read Next?

Before publishing the collection of short stories *Last Courtesies* (1980), Leffland wrote *Rumors of Peace* (1979), a coming-of-age novel for which Leffland is well known. Leffland tells the story of Susie, a teenaged girl living in San Francisco during World War II who copes with her own personal maturation and the terror of war. The protagonist is a bright person, whom her teachers have labeled a troublemaker.

Shiloh and Other Stories (1982) was written by Bobbie Ann Mason, a contemporary of Leffland and a well-known American short story writer. This respected collection of short stories won the PEN-Hemingway Award. In this collection, Mason creates characters placed in a familiar setting for her—western Kentucky, where she grew up. The characters face challenges as their community is modernized.

For an overview of short story authors and their work, a good place to start is *The Best American Short Stories of the Century* (2000), edited by John Updike. The collection includes stories by Willa Cather, Katherine Anne Porter, Annie Proulx, Ann Beatie, and Susan Sontag, among others.

Joyce Carol Oates edited *Telling Stories: An Anthology for Writers* (1998), which presents works of such writers as Anton Chekov, Gish Jen, Thom Jones, Stephen King, and Ovid, along with comments by Oates on matters of style and teaching literature.

For Further Reading

Eidam, Klaus, *The True Life of Johann Sebastian Bach*, Basic Books, 2001.

Leffland's short story refers to music and includes discussions about the great classical composers. Eidam's biography of Bach has been described as a revitalized account of the composer's life. The author's meticulous research separates the truth from the myth of Bach's life.

Fiedler, Johanna, *Molto Agitato: The Mayhem behind the Music at the Metropolitan Opera*, Anchor, 2003.

The protagonist in Leffland's short story works for the Opera House and mentions the chaos she encounters on her job. Here is a true-life experience of behind the scenes at another opera house. Fiedler (daughter of famed conductor Arthur Fiedler) worked as the press representative of the Met in New York.

Freeborn, Richard, *Dostoevsky: Life and Times*, Haus Publishing, 2003.

Dialogues between Leffland's characters include discussions of Russian writers. One of the more important of these writers is Fyodor Dostoevsky, author of such novels as *The Brothers Karamazov*, *Crime and Punishment*, and *Notes from the Underground*. This is the story of this great Russian author's life.

Ilyin, Olga, *White Road: A Russian Odyssey, 1919-1923*, Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1984.

This is one family's account of living through the Bolshevik revolution in Russia. This book might provide readers a better understanding of Leffland's character Vladimir, given what many white Russians experienced before they came to the United States.

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Romano, John, Review of *Last Courtesies*, in *New York Times*, October 5, 1980.

Schiller, Johann von, “Ode to Joy,” quoted in Grout, Donald Hay, and Claude V. Palisca, *A History of Western Music*, 5th ed., W. W. Norton, 1996, p. 559.

Seaman, Donna, Review of *Breath and Shadows*, in *Booklist*, Vol. 95, No. 15, April 1, 1999, p. 1386.

See, Carolyn, “A Look into Life's Myths, Reality and Why We Live the Way We Do,” in *Washington Post*, April 9, 1999, p. C2.

Steinberg, Sybil S., Review of *Breath and Shadows*, in *Publishers Weekly*, Vol. 246, No. 3, January 18, 1999, p. 325.

Yeats, W. B., “The Second Coming,” in *W. B. Yeats: Selected Poetry*, edited by A. Norman Jeffares, Macmillan, 1972, p. 99.

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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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