Last Night Study Guide

Last Night by James Salter

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

James Salter's "Last Night" was first published in the *New Yorker* magazine in November 2002; it was reprinted in 2005 as the final story in a collection of the same name. Salter has been widely recognized for his treatment of the physical and spiritual conditions of people living in a culture that is increasingly adrift of traditional standards of faith, personal integrity, and civil behavior. Within the condensed recounting of the presumed last night of one woman's life, Salter manages to explore a number of volatile social issues, including the legalities and ethics of assisted suicide, the disintegration of a marriage under the pressures of an extramarital affair, and the general malaise of a certain kind of culture. Walter Such is a representative of masculinity and integrity for the new world of the late twentieth century, a man notable for his frayed moral fiber and for the double betrayal of the one woman he claims to have loved.

Author Biography

James Salter was born James Horowitz on June 10, 1925, in Passaic, New Jersey, but he was raised in New York City. Educated at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point (B.S., 1945) and later at Georgetown University (M.A., international affairs, 1950), Salter was a member of the U.S. Air Force (1945–1957), attaining the rank of lieutenant colonel during the Korean War. Given that he flew more than one hundred combat missions, it seems natural that Salter's first two novels would draw on his air force years, specifically on his adventures as a fighter pilot. Both the much-acclaimed *The Hunters* (1957; revised as *Counterpoint* in 1999) and the forgettable *The Arm of Flesh* (1961; revised as *Cassada* in 2001) explore the coded politics and personal pains that define modern war experiences. *The Hunters* was adapted for film in 1958, with Robert Mitchum starring as fighter pilot Major Cleve Saville.

After leaving the air force, Salter expanded his writing repertoire to include screenplays for film and television. His short documentary film about college football, entitled *Team, Team, Team,* won a first prize at the 1962 Venice Film Festival. Salter followed this early success with more than a dozen television documentaries (including a ten-part series on circus life) as well as a handful of film screenplays, most notably *Downhill Racer* (1969), which starred Robert Redford and won Salter a Writers' Guild of America nomination for best screenplay; *Three* (1969), an adaptation of an Irwin Shaw story that Salter also directed; and the sci-fi drama, *Threshold* (1981). In an interesting twist on the traditional relationship between film and literature, Salter converted one of his rejected screenplays (for a movie about mountain climbing) into his 1979 novel, *Solo Faces*, which acquired cult status worldwide among climbers.

While his television and film work flourished, so too did Salter's literary career. His early novels revealed his eye for detail and nuance and his ongoing interest in the frustrations and struggles of lives defined by marriage and career breakdowns, debilitating addictions, and failed dreams. Salter's characters are trapped in a kind of earthly purgatory and weakened spiritually. In his 1975 novel, *Light Years*, for instance, he traces the decay and dissolution of a suburban marriage.

In 1997, Salter published *Burning the Days: Recollections*, a book ten years in the writing and noted for its intimate portrayal of the pilot's life and its reflections on the writer's life. His 1988 collection, *Dusk and Other Stories*, was awarded the PEN/Faulkner Award, and Salter was a finalist for the same award in 2006 for *Last Night*. Salter was honored as New York State Author from 1998 to 2000. As of 2006, Salter was married to the playwright Kay Eldredge. He continued to write as both a vocation and an inspiration to explore the world.

Plot Summary

“Last Night” is a compact story that focuses on the presumed last night of Marit Such, who is dying from metastasized uterine cancer. Rather than suffer a slow and debilitating death, Marit solicits the assistance of her husband, Walter, in taking her life by an overdose of her prescription painkiller. As Marit arranges herself and her affairs in preparation for her last night, she invites a young and beautiful family friend, Susanna, to join the couple for Marit’s “farewell dinner” and to support Walter as he struggles to deal with the repercussions of the events of the evening.

As Marit organizes her personal possessions, she thinks often about the changes in her body and about how she must look to others as the cancer strips away her physical vitality and her forceful spirit. She laments quietly to her husband that having “no energy” is “the most terrible part” of her condition. “It’s gone,” she explains. “It doesn’t come back,” and she is no longer able “to get up and walk around.” In these moments, too, she drifts gently into memories of being a girl, of the home that she has built with Walter, and of the time before the cancer.

Knowing that she has a syringe and vial of morphine sitting securely in the refrigerator, Marit turns her attention to dinner and conversation with the twenty-nine-year-old Susanna. Interrupted only momentarily when they change rooms in the hotel restaurant in order to avoid a “talkative couple” whom Walter and Marit know, the dinner is a quiet affair highlighted by two bottles of very expensive wine. Softening the emotions of the evening, the wine brings to Marit’s spirit a gentle melancholy, a mood that continues to hold her during the car ride home.

Upon the group’s return from dinner, Walter becomes increasingly nervous as he considers again his role in the plan that is drawing ominously nearer. With a translator’s eye for subtleties and minutiae, he imagines, though “trie[s] not to dwell on,” the details of the arrangement: how the refrigerator light will come on when the door is opened, the angle of the stainless-steel point of the syringe, and the vein into which he will insert the point. Breaking Walter’s momentary reverie, Marit recalls her own mother’s final stories about the various sexual affairs that had shocked the previous generation. Almost abruptly, her storytelling ends, and she declares herself ready to go upstairs, taking the steps to prepare herself for the final stages of the last night. Left alone with Susanna, Walter pleads with the younger woman to stay in the house, to be in the lighted room when he comes downstairs after administering the injection to his wife. Susanna’s hesitation to become more deeply involved in the evening is obvious, and their conversation is stilted before collapsing into silence.

In the kitchen, Walter nervously prepares the syringe of morphine, lingering momentarily in the memories of past summers when he and Marit had made strawberry preserves in the old-fashioned kitchen. With the final arrangements made, Walter feels less and less attached to the reality of the moment, becoming in his own mind as “light as a sheet of paper, devoid of strength.” In the bedroom upstairs, Marit has taken great care in preparing herself, making up her eyes and selecting “an ivory satin nightgown, low in

back” as the “gown she would be wearing in the next world.” As weariness settles into Marit’s body, so too does a deep nervousness, which, despite the wine of the evening, seems to also be taking a toll on Walter, who rushes back downstairs to pour and quickly drink a glass of vodka that he hopes will steel his nerves.

Returning to the bedroom, Walter and Marit declare their love for each other and reminisce briefly about when they first met and began dating. As he injects his wife with the lethal dosage of morphine, Walter is overwhelmed by the silence of the house and by the ambiguous balance of “enormous relief and sadness.”

Returning slowly downstairs, Walter seeks out Susanna, who has been waiting in her car, unable to leave but also unable to stay in the house. Re-entering the house, the two continue to drink and talk, revealing that their friendship has been, in fact, much more intimate than they had been letting on. Susanna wonders aloud if Marit might have known of their supposedly clandestine affair before inviting her to dinner, but Walter reassures her that his wife had no idea and no ulterior motive to her invitation. Their conversation gives way inevitably to a passionate night of lovemaking; having put the body of his wife to rest, Walter finds comfort and pleasure in the body of the younger lover whom he has been hiding, or so he believes, from his wife.

As the morning breaks, Walter thinks about the calls that need to be made following Marit’s death and the memories of his first sight of Susanna. Surprised from his daydream by a sound behind him, he turns to see Marit descending the stairs from the upstairs bedroom, still alive due to Walter’s ineptitude with the syringe. Her remark is direct and tragic in its appeal: “I thought you were going to help me.” Walter’s final words of apology echo pathetically, as he pleads with her before running out of words totally: “‘I’m sorry,’ he said. ‘I’m so sorry.’ He could think of nothing more to say.’” At Marit’s re-entry into his world, Walter is speechless, unable to respond to her questions about what went wrong and unable to console her in her most intense suffering, as she realizes the double betrayal of her husband. The story ends hauntingly though anticlimactically, with no direct reference to Marit’s fate and a brief reference to the inevitable end of the relationship between Walter and Susanna.

Characters

Marit Such

Marit Such, wife of Walter, is a once-beautiful woman who is dying from metastasized uterine cancer. Her skin, once luminescent, is now “pallid,” and seems to “emanate a darkness,” a corporeal reminder that she has become a physical and emotional shadow of the young woman she once was. Still a woman of strong resolve, however, she has decided to end her life with an overdose of her prescription morphine, assisted by her husband, after an evening of fine food and even finer wine. As the preparations for her last night continue, Marit comes to recognize both the joys and the difficulties that have accumulated over her lifetime. It is a realization that leaves her frightened, searching for a certainty from which she might gain strength for what lay ahead. Reflecting upon what she remembers as happy days, for instance, she allows “a frightening smile” to cross her face, one that “seemed to mean just the opposite” of what it appears to signal. During dinner, she comments, for instance, that she never had a child and that her friendships, though plentiful, have never reached a depth of intimacy that has sustained her fully or completely. She is a woman of surfaces and of an inner peace that is more illusion than reality.

On the eve of her own death, Marit orchestrates a dinner that includes a mutual friend, the young and beautiful Susanna, whom she intuits is having an affair with her husband. Their conversation is stilted and elliptical, hinting at issues of mutual concern but never addressing directly the implications of their decisions and indecisions. As the evening progresses, Marit drinks to numb the physical and emotional pain yet she holds onto a belief in the beauty of the world and the inevitability of her own role in it. Following an elaborate and almost ritualized preparation, the lethal dose of morphine is injected, and Marit finds a momentary peacefulness in the belief that “she would live again, be young again as she once had been.” When the assisted suicide goes wrong, however, and Marit lives to see another morning, she awakens into the same old world and a new understanding of the meaninglessness of her own life, of her husband’s very visible weaknesses, and of the illusions that had sustained her marriage.

Walter Such

Walter Such is a translator, primarily of Russian and German, and is a “sometimes prickly man,” susceptible to an overblown sense of his own intellectual prowess, moral and emotional strength, and the broad-mindedness of his attitudes towards such issues as sex, marriage, and art. “In good health,” with a “roundish scholarly stomach” and “hands and nails well cared for,” he has remained detached from the passions of life, living through the words and ideas of others rather than bringing a creative spirit to the world himself.

Having agreed to assist his wife in her suicide, he finds himself hesitant and unsure as the preparations progress, gradually coming to recognize his weak resolve and his fear at the thought of being alone in the world. Bracing himself with alcohol, he finds himself overwhelmed in the moments after the supposedly fatal injection by a telling blend of "enormous relief and sadness."

It is a depth of feeling, however, that lasts only briefly, as the narcissistic Walter gives in to his sexual desire for Susanna, with whom he has been having an affair as his wife struggled with cancer. In the end, he proves himself a man who understands the world as a reflection of his own needs and desires. When he awakens into a morning that is defined in his own mind by the presence of a new lover rather than by the absence of his late wife, Walter is peaceful, calm, and at ease. It is only when forced to confront the fact that he has botched the injection that Walter faces the a new world in which neither wife nor lover has faith in him. All he can manage to say, in the end, is "I am sorry . . . I am so sorry."

Susanna

Susanna is twenty-nine years old, unmarried by choice, and exuding a blend of physical beauty and liberal attitudes. With a casual seductiveness and an appearance that reminds those who see her of "the daughter of a professor or banker, slightly errant," Susanna is both a healthy, youthful counterpoint to Marit and a physical reminder of the illusions of depth and harmony that have been erected around the marriage. Fueled by the wine she consumes over the course of the evening as well as by her sense that she is a source of salvation for the older man, she gives in to Walter's ill-timed and shockingly disrespectful sexual advances, only to find herself positioned as witness to Marit's unplanned survival. Following the debacle of the last night, Susanna returns to the sexual relationship with Walter a few more times, before walking away without any lingering sense of responsibility or guilt. Susanna is the embodiment of a moral and spiritual decay that, like Marit's cancer, cannot be excised from the world.

Themes

The Illusions of a Good Death

“Last Night” explores the morality and ethics of euthanasia, a word derived from the Greek terms for *eu* (good) and *thanatos* (death). Marit wants to die with dignity. Exhausted by advanced cancer, she moves in her final arrangements towards a deeper engagement with the world. As she prepares herself for the evening, she recalls with fondness the gentle moments and quiet beauty in the everyday world in which she has lived. She remembers, for instance, the wonders of watching “the swirling storms of long-ago winters” and of “the lamplight in which her mother was holding out a wrist, trying to fasten a bracelet.” As her last night unfolds, Marit begins, too, to recognize similar small wonders in a world that she has until now taken for granted; she comes to appreciate deeply, for instance, the taste of the fine red wine and the beauty of the night sky and the “brilliant blue clouds, shining as if in daylight.” In planning and scheduling her own good death, Marit comes to see clearly the small things that gather, over the course of a lifetime, to make a “beautiful life.”

At the same time, however, “Last Night” works to undercut the apparent dignity of Marit’s decision, revealing a culture that is driven more by vanity and self-centeredness than by compassion. Marit’s world-weariness is symptomatic of a chronic malaise in the world of the story that makes a good death unlikely. Marit lives in a world of idle chatter, seemingly casual affairs, and spirits weakened by alcohol and years of intellectual stagnation. In short, her world is lacking in the strength of spirit and conviction that such a dramatic and morally conflicted act as euthanasia demands.

Nowhere is this subversion of the good death more evident than in the actions and attitudes of Walter, who has agreed to assist his wife during the course of her last night. Weak in mind and body, he botches the injection and then has sex with his mistress shortly after injecting his wife. Walter shows himself to be wholly “devoid of strength” and unable to assist in any way in the realization of his wife’s good death. Rather than reinforcing the connection between husband and wife, and more generally between human beings, Marit’s decision to arrange her own death leaves all the people involved in the evening feeling more isolated, more distanced from their own humanity, and more detached from the wonders of life and its passing. As the narrator observes in one of the final sentences of the story, the failure of the last night leaves all involved knowing that “whatever holds people together was gone.”

Life in an Age of Disbelief

“Last Night” presents a bleak picture of people whose lives have lost moral focus. Caught up in a culture of accumulation, the characters fill their days with interests that appear intellectually and spiritually stimulating but over time prove empty of stabilizing certainties. Surrounded by literature, art, natural beauty, fine foods and wine, these men

and women are unable or unwilling to engage these offerings in meaningful ways. A professional translator, Walter, for instance, approaches the great literature of the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926) with the passion and sensitivity of “a mechanical device.” Always willing to point out the beauty of Rilke’s poetry by way of proving his intellectual superiority, he remains unable to recognize the resonances of the poetry in his own life and how the lines speak volumes about his own emotional, intellectual, and spiritual withdrawal from the world and from his marriage. Similarly, Marit, a woman of apparently fine taste, allows her appreciation of the finer things to settle quietly into an accumulation of “jewelry, bracelets and necklaces, and a lacquer box” full of rings. Living in a house full of “books on Surrealism, landscape design, or country houses,” Marit is left, at the end of her life, to admit that her collection remains unread and unappreciated. As the narrator observes of Marit’s final perusal of the bookshelves and the beautiful furniture that she has collected: “She looked at it all as if she were somehow noting it, when in fact it all meant nothing.”

For Walter and Marit, the dulling effects of alcohol, and to a lesser degree sex, have overwhelmed the poetry and art that surrounds them. They drink rather than read or talk or engage with the world in a thoughtful way. They drink as a means of escaping the emptiness of their cluttered lives, which, however full of books and talkative friends it might appear, is proven on the last night to be void of any deep and lasting connections. Their lives, both individually and collectively, are defined by surfaces and veneers of caring and compassion rather than the dignity that Marit seems determined to embody with her final act.

Style

Point of View

The story is told in the third person by a narrator who remains independent of the actions that are taking place during Marit's last night but who at the same time has a subtly articulated opinion about the people, the decisions, and the general condition of the depicted culture. When Marit tries to remember her past as a happy time, for instance, the narrator recognizes in her "frightened smile" a flash of emotion that "seemed to mean just the opposite." The implications of this observation are clear: despite her best attempts to present to herself and to others an image of her life as happy and full, she is painfully aware of the illusion in surface harmonies and the inevitability of decay.

Chronology

Another important element in the construction of the story is the use of flashbacks, a strategy by which a character recollects, and often comments on, events or actions that occurred before the beginning of the story or in the historical past of the story. The flashbacks pull the story of Marit and Walter in two directions within the story. On those occasions when Walter or Marit remember earlier moments in their lives or their marriage, Salter imbues the story with a gentle nostalgia and with the sense of a couple that shares a quiet history of caring and respectful love. But when Walter later remembers his first vision of Susanna, "shapely and tall," readers are shown another side of this marriage, a darker, less respectful side that has remained hidden for years. It is this underside of the marriage that makes its appearance dramatically at the close of the story, when Marit walks in on Walter, thinking not of her absence from his world but of "mornings to come" with his lover Susanna.

Foreshadowing

Salter uses subtle foreshadowing in "Last Night," introducing episodes or images that allow for a fuller understanding of events that unfold later. When Marit recalls the "things" that her own mother wanted to tell her before she died, the story she recounts is of Rae Mahin and Anne Herring, two married women who had slept with the unmarried advertising man Teddy Hudner. Marit's story foreshadows the reader's later recognition that Marit possibly knew that her husband had begun an affair with Susanna, despite Walter's belief that "she didn't know a thing."

Irony

As the title of "Last Night" underscores, this is a story thick with irony, a term that comes from the Greek word *eironeia*, which originally referred to a strategy of dissimulation

through understatement. The title of the story is proven ironic with Marit's appearance in the kitchen the morning after what was supposed to be her last night alive. The last night shows itself to be an evening of failure at so many levels, from the failed imagining of a good and dignified death and the inability of the intoxicated Walter to inject the morphine effectively to the failure of Walter to put his own appetites aside even temporarily.

Moreover, the arrogance of the characters in the story, and their seemingly blatant disregard for conventional morals, is proven to be a shadow of what Marit, Walter, and Susanna believe to be true about themselves. In this sense, Salter's story is a satire of the pretentiousness of an entire generation as it plods aimlessly forward, lacking the guidance of tradition and the appreciation of beauty in its moral as well as aesthetic form. As Marit descends the stairs, the image of Walter's self-proclaimed commitment to his wife and to their relationship is revealed for what it is, a thin covering over a hollowness of spirit and intellect. The sad irony of the story becomes the inability of these three people to see beyond their own grand illusions and their pseudo-liberal pretensions of superiority and open-mindedness.

Historical Context

Legalization of Euthanasia in the United States

With the development of medical science in the latter half of the nineteenth century, human experiences of pain and death were gradually disconnected from the spiritual meanings given to them in previous generations. The moment of death, once considered the transition from the corporeal to the spiritual realm of what Marit Such refers to as “an afterworld,” became reconceptualized within the English-speaking world as a moment of loss, a literal and metaphoric stripping away of defining human characteristics. As early as 1887, such physicians as William Munk (*Euthanasia, or Medical Treatment in Aid of an Easy Death*, 1887) were writing in support of the value in assisted death in the cases of some terminally ill patients.

It was during this period, too, that the first proposals to legalize euthanasia in the United States appeared. Of particular concern to these early advocates was the means by which they might integrate a new openness toward even the idea of assisted suicide into a medical tradition that had long held at its philosophic and ethical core the first rule to do no harm. Often uttered in the same breath were concerns about the potential for abuse by both the medical community and the patient’s family. These concerns remained at the forefront of the euthanasia debate as it evolved through the twentieth century, moving in and out of the public consciousness and intersecting regularly with related but distinct debates over such issues as eugenics and biomedical technologies.

A galvanizing moment in the history of this debate came in 1994 when the state of Oregon held a referendum that eventually introduced into law the first fully realized legalization of euthanasia in the United States. After various legal efforts had been made to reverse the decision, a second referendum was held in 1997, during which state voters strongly endorsed their initial decision. What has come to be known as the Death with Dignity Act took effect on October 27, 1997, making provisions by which terminally ill patients whose conditions will lead to death within six months can request and receive a prescription for a lethal dosage of medication. These patients can then administer the medications to themselves if and when they choose. (The Oregon law does not permit a physician or any other person to administer the lethal dose.) The formal screening process also guaranteed that the patient must be recognized as capable of making and communicating decisions about his or her health care, and the patient must make one written and two oral requests. There are also substantive safeguards in place to address such potentially contentious questions as the confirmation of the diagnosis and prognosis, the determination that the patient’s judgment is not impaired by depression or other disorders, and the assurance that the patient has been fully informed of alternatives.

Despite predictions of widespread use, only a small number of people have actually taken the necessary steps to receive prescriptions for lethal doses of medication. Statistical reports in the *New England Journal of Medicine* indicate that from 1998

through 2001, for instance, only one hundred and forty patients received such prescriptions, and of those only ninety-one actually ingested the medications. Tellingly, most of the patients who have chosen to end their lives under the terms and conditions of the Death with Dignity Act have, like Marit Such, suffered from metastatic cancer. Still, the debate over euthanasia continues in both public and private forums around the world, making Salter's imagined case relevant.

Family Values and Shifting Attitudes

Given that it is possible to date Salter's story as post-1990 (the wine that Walter orders with dinner is marked clearly as a 1989 vintage), "Last Night" can be read as commentary on shifting attitudes toward a wide range of family issues, most notably those associated with questions surrounding individual autonomy within marriage, pre- or extramarital sex, the politics of remaining single, and choosing to remain childless.

Shifts in attitudes toward family and personal relationships were particularly dramatic in the second half of the twentieth century. Women's employment in the public sphere increased dramatically and expanded to include mothers of young children. The marriage and baby booms that erupted after World War II were followed by steady and substantial declines, which makes Marit and Walter Such's childless marriage not as unusual as it would have been two or three generations earlier. Divorce rates accelerated in the post-1960 era, as did premarital sexual activity (fueled, in part, by the availability of the birth control pill), non-marital cohabitation, and out-of-wedlock childbirth. Put simply, the traditional institutions of family and marriage were being reconsidered and redefined within North American culture.

Although it might be expected that such shifting attitudes toward sex and marriage would be accompanied by greater tolerance toward extramarital affairs of the nature detailed in Salter's story, the inverse is, in fact, the case. If anything, the 1980s and 1990s saw an increased disapproval of extramarital affairs among both men and women. A *National Survey of Americans on Values*, undertaken by the Kaiser Family Foundation in 1998, for instance, reinforced a gathering body of statistical evidence that suggested by the late 1990s almost 90 percent of American men and women said that they believed extramarital sex was almost always wrong. Nearly 75 percent of the respondents also reported feeling that an affair while married was not only unacceptable but should not be tolerated by the other partner within the marriage.

Critical Overview

Salter's collection *Last Night: Stories* was well-received by reviewers and served to reinforce his already-impressive reputation as a writer's writer with an uncanny eye for the undertones and subtleties of the world of manners and cultured people. Dinitia Smith writes of Salter's fiction generally in the *New York Times* (1997):

In the universe of James Salter's novels, men are men and women don't have jobs. The characters drink Chateau Margaux and Kirs and Calvados. The women give the men long, narrow looks and say wry things, and when they make love, the earth does not just move. It quakes.

Such observations apply well to the stories collected in *Last Night: Stories*, as does the assessment of another *New York Times* writer, Adam Begley, who describes Salter's fictions as "a dazzling display of polished surfaces."

Reviewing the collection for *Booklist*, Brad Hooper wonders if "perhaps this collection of Salter's artful yet definitely embraceable short stories will shake him free of the impositions of his reputation as a writer's writer." Celebrating Salter's prose as "subtle but not abstruse," Hooper marks Salter's keen eye in dealing with human relationships and his ability to find "corners of peculiarity to illuminate, even though outward appearances may seem so ordinary." Hooper's most singular praise is reserved for the title story of the collection, calling it "a tour de force about assisted suicide gone wrong—for several reasons. Salter's genius," he continues, "is most apparent in the effectiveness of this short and direct dialogue, which he uses not only to reflect real people talking but also to distill character to sheer essence."

Focusing on similar qualities, the reviewer for *Publishers Weekly* praises the "reserved, elegiac nature of Salter's prose" as the foundation of "stirring stories" that reveal themselves as "worthy additions to an admirable body of work." The same reviewer marks the title story as "especially impressive" in its movement toward "the haunting conclusion" that illuminates Walter's betrayal of his wife. As this reviewer notes, this is a powerful collection of "compact, unsettling stories" of "teetering marriages, collapsing relationships and other calamites of the heart."

Criticism

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Critical Essay #1

Dyer holds a Ph.D. in English literature and has published extensively on fiction, poetry, film, and television. He is also a freelance university teacher, writer, and educational consultant. In the following essay, he explores the failure of Walter and Marit Such to engage in a meaningful way the attitudes and philosophies of a Lost Generation that they so clearly resemble.

When Ernest Hemingway (1899–1961) drew upon one of poet Gertrude Stein's (1874–1946) apocryphal sayings as the basis for his now-famous epigraph for his novel *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), it is doubtful that he was aware that the statement "You are all a lost generation" would come to define a whole generation and would continue to resonate with near-mythic power in American culture for decades to come. Referring to the generation that came of age in the United States during and following World War I, Hemingway's Lost Generation was a population of artists and intellectuals that looked to European ideas as an antidote to what they perceived as the stagnant middle-class morality of American culture. However broadly ranging and even contradictory these quests for a new way of seeing the world might have been, the Lost Generation very quickly established itself as an identifiable subset of American culture. This varied collection of writers and artists recognized an opportunity to reinvigorate their home country with their ideas, their passion for art and literature, and their intellectual disdain for what they saw as the oppressive values of their elders. In France, they were called the *Génération au Feu* (Generation of Fire), but on this side of the Atlantic their names became synonymous with a complex set of attitudes and behaviors. Disillusioned with social standards, they fueled their lives with an almost ritualized reverence for alcohol (often to the point of abuse), a proclivity for sexual (mis)adventures (often extramarital), and for a persistent struggle to nurture their creative energies.

In a world defined by empty relationships and a betrayal of beauty, even the art of death is denied the dignity it deserves.

James Salter's short story "Last Night" is a haunting evocation of the darker side of the disillusionment and aimlessness of the Lost Generation. Married but childless, Walter and Marit Such live in a world that appears to be defined by poetry, art, and beauty. As Salter marks in the opening lines of the story, for instance, Walter has a keen ear for languages and a public appreciation for poetry. Earning his living as a translator, he finds pleasure in "recit[ing] lines of Blok in Russian and then giv[ing] Rilke's translation of them in German, pointing out their beauty."

Salter's reference to the work of the Russian lyric poet Alexander Blok (1880–1921) suggests Walter's sense of himself as a man celebrating beauty in the world and the words that define his life. The unofficial leader of what came to be known as the Russian symbolist movement, Blok wrote poetry which is remarkable for its rich rhymes

and celebration of the beauty he saw in the most common surroundings. His poetry serves as a kind of intellectual debate between the classical ideals of beauty (as an appreciation of goodness, harmony, and a meaningfulness to life) and the inability of the common man to nurture beauty in the world of the everyday. Blok's understanding is grounded in a Platonic ideal that extends the concept of beauty beyond the appreciation of shapes, color, and sounds to the appreciation of beautiful thoughts, actions, and customs. Beauty and goodness are, at one level at least, synonymous within the Platonic ideal that Blok celebrates.

Tellingly, Walter consciously engages the beauty of Blok's poems through the filter of an intermediary; able to read Russian, he chooses instead to celebrate the poems in their *translated* form rather than allowing the original words to speak authentically for themselves. Moreover, in foregrounding the words of Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926), Walter repositions Blok's poetry in a dark world of anxiety, solitude, and struggle within an ethos of disbelief and disconnection. As understood by Rilke, as it is by Walter, beauty is intimately related to a sense of terror. It is a cracking open of the certainties of a harmonious, good-spirited world into a chaos of infinite darkness, unending space, and spiritual emptiness. As Salter establishes early in "Last Night," Walter's appreciation of the beauty of the world is not what it first appears to be. His vision is tainted by his own lost sense of wonder at the world of emotion and art engaged most fully in its untranslated form.

While Walter marks his ambivalent relationship with beauty through the words of poetry, Marit opts to celebrate the more sensual aspects of a life lived beautifully. Even as the metastasized uterine cancer strips her once vibrant body of its vitality, Marit finds comfort in the beautiful things that have been a part of her life for so many years. Dressing for dinner on her last night, she selects an elegant "red silk dress in which she had always been seductive" as well as a number of rings from "a lacquer box" nestled amongst her elegant "bracelets and necklaces." Before leaving for dinner, she spends a moment reflecting upon the room in which she felt most comfortable, an especially art-full space defined by "photographs with their silver frames," fine lamps, and "large books on Surrealism, landscape design, or country homes." Even the rug comforts her, "with its beautiful faded color."

For Marit, beauty provides a kind of solace, a respite from her pain and from the harsh reality of the assisted suicide that she plans. Following a dinner that includes overindulgence in an expensive but "fabulously good" red wine, she takes particular note of the night sky with its "brilliant blue clouds, shining as if in daylight." A brief exchange of words with her husband underscores powerfully the common ground upon which Marit and Walter have built their lives and, however tenuous it might be, their relationship: "'It's very beautiful tonight, isn't it?' Marit said. 'I'm struck by that. Am I mistaken?' 'No.' Walter cleared his throat. 'It is beautiful.'" Still later in the evening, as she awaits the lethal injection that her husband has agreed to administer, Marit takes pride in her preparations for passage into the afterworld, selecting for herself "an ivory satin nightgown, low in back" and taking care to make up her eyes and put on a fine "silver necklace."

If, like the Lost Generation before them, Walter and Marit are comforted by their appreciation for the finer things in life (including poetry, clothing, and wine), they echo, too, their cultural predecessors' frustration with the Victorian morality that had carried over into American culture from the late nineteenth century. Childless in marriage and expansive in their appetites for alcohol, they are representative counterpoints to the normative morality shaping American culture of the day, which has long been based on an ethic of self-discipline, especially in sexual matters. Like both the Lost Generation and the generation of his own parents, who came to accept extramarital affairs as commonplace, Walter has chosen to opt out of normative pressures. Instead he chooses what he perceives as the more cosmopolitan openness to excessive drinking and sexual relationships outside the marriage. Imagining himself to be part intellectual and part cultural iconoclast, Walter scripts himself into his life as a kind of Hemingwayesque figure, the hard-living rogue with the eye of the artist and the soul of the poet. The episode of his lovemaking with Susanna in the hours following Marit's injection is punctuated by words that underscore the intensity that Walter believes he brings to his life. His kisses are passionate, his sexual prowess is devouring, and his post-coital sleep is described as "profound."

What Salter illuminates in "Last Night" is not the couple's successful regeneration of the near-mythic ideals of their Lost ancestors, but the ultimate betrayals (of each other and of the ideals of beauty) that come to define their lives. The world of Walter and Marit proves to be little more than a thin veneer covering a set of beliefs that are, as Walter notes of himself as he fills a syringe, as "light as a sheet of paper, devoid of strength." Hiding behind their poetry and walls of unread books, the couple comes to be defined by their limitations rather than their horizons and by their weaknesses rather than their strengths. Just as Walter finds the beauty in Rilke's translation of Blok, the couple inhabits a translated world in which the goodness and the beauty that surrounds them are never realized directly but are filtered through a series of self-limiting assumptions.

In contrast to the generation that came before them, Walter and Marit have lost the passion of engagement necessary to create new ideas and progressive horizons. They simply mimic those earlier ideas. Whereas the excesses of the Lost Generation contributed to the creation of art, literature, and music, the excesses that accumulate during Marit's last night lead only to a botched assisted suicide and a drunken sexual encounter. The image of Marit descending the stairs the morning after the last night embodies perfectly the total collapse of the Suchs' illusions. Moreover, her descent also signals the failure of their attempt to orchestrate an act of euthanasia, a term derived, not coincidentally, from the Greek terms for *eu* (good) and *thanatos* (death): "Marit came unsteadily down the stairs. The makeup on her face was stale, and her dark lipstick showed fissures." Pale, cancer-ridden, and stripped of her once beautiful surface, Marit descends into a world of disbelief and betrayal. In other words, she reenters a world that, like the unread books that fill the shelves, means nothing at all when seen in the cold light of morning. In a world defined by empty relationships and a betrayal of beauty, even the art of death is denied the dignity it deserves.

In the Paris of the 1920s, the Lost Generation found a sense of community that its members believed could bring to them a new commitment to create and, more

importantly, to create intelligently. Being lost, in this sense, was a liberating experience, a kind of spiritual rebirth and intellectual response to the feelings of displacement for a group of artists who should have felt most at home in a culture, but did not. By the late 1990s, however, the condition of being lost was, like Marit's smile, a condition that "seemed to mean just the opposite" of what it could mean. Awakening into a world of betrayal and emptiness, Marit and Walter wander unsteadily and without the beauty of their youth into a world that has truly lost its way.

Source: Klay Dyer, Critical Essay on "Last Night," in *Short Stories for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Critical Essay #2

Kelly is an instructor of creative writing and English literature. In the following essay, he argues that Salter has built "Last Night" out of four distinct shorter stories.

James Salter has long been considered a master storyteller, a writer's writer. Salter is widely respected for his gift of compression: he is able to convey a whole character, a whole scene, or a whole life in just a few words or in one sentence. This talent enables a writer to keep readers engrossed and likely to find new meaning each time they reread the story. Of course, such a gift of compression may be a mixed blessing. Most short stories, even the short shorts of one page or so, need to immerse readers in something that feels like a setting. If Salter or someone like him really could give the whole story in just a sentence or two, then what would be the point in their writing anything more than the equivalent of a small poem?

This section is such an independent story that it never does reveal whether Marit went on to commit suicide successfully, or died naturally of cancer, or lived on, with or without Walter.

Salter might be able to put all of a story's impact into one line, but it is unlikely that one line could evoke the feel of life. A focused short story writer needs a narrative of some length to carry the more potent lines, so that the reader can find a context in which to appreciate what those concentrated lines have to offer.

One way to do this is to have a story that is mostly set-up, leading to a moment of shocking honesty. This is often the effect that one feels after reading a great short story, one which saves all of its impact for one culminating revelation. But there is another way, the path that Salter follows in his story "Last Night": instead of just leading to one grand moment, Salter takes readers through what amounts to a series of four short stories, each reaching its own climax and each with its own emotional implications. A story developed this way can, as "Last Night" does, follow the same sequence of events within a continuous period of time, while changing emphasis. Done right, it spares the author the necessity of limiting himself to just one narrative line. Done wrong, however, it can lead to a collection of barely related stories that feel stuck together for superficial or insufficient reasons.

For most of the time—that is, for roughly ten of its pages—"Last Night" is the story of one woman's last night. Marit Such is dying of cancer. She is still well enough to walk and eat, but she is certain enough that her illness will eventually defeat her that she has decided to beat it to the punch by taking her own life. The story is not told from her perspective, however, but from the perspective of her husband, Walter, who is to administer a lethal injection to Marit at the end of the evening, after one superb dinner, her last meal, a quiet little celebration with a chosen family friend.

There are a few elements that make this a compelling story. Death, of course, captures the readers' attention, all the more so when one has awareness of a planned impending death, and when it cannot be avoided. Such a story leading to its inevitable end is so inherently tense that readers can practically hear a clock tick minute-by-minute as they read. More compelling than what is known about Marit's situation, however, are those parts that are not known. For one thing, the story never says why she is so certain that she has to die. Medical treatment for cancer in the twenty-first century can be successful: Marit is ambulatory and lucid, and it is clear that, though weakened, she is far from devastated by the disease. It takes something like a reverse leap of faith for someone in her condition to be absolutely certain that nothing more can be done: Marit has made that decision, but she made it before the story begins, so readers can only look for signs of her absolute lack of hope in the ways she looks backward at life as she thinks about the night sky, her childlessness, and memories of her mother's death.

Interestingly, the main story is not really the story of the dying woman at all. The narrative stays with Walter Such, who is introduced in the first paragraph as an emotionless person who is moved more by habit than by feeling, writing with the same kind of old-fashioned pen and then "raising it in the air slightly after each sentence, almost as if his hand were a mechanical device." He is not the sort of person to look to for an understanding of the emotional implications, but Salter implies that it is Walter who occupies more of the drama in this base story.

By making Walter the focus, Salter indicates that there is really not that much to say about the story of someone who is facing a prearranged suicide because the situation is so potent that it will speak for itself. The real story lies with the close observer, the conspirator who has to watch and help but cannot make the decisions. Marit's story is one of heartache about imminent death, but come morning, Walter will be the one left to face the ethical question of whether he did the right thing.

Their story ends with the fatal injection, with Walter wavering "with despair" for a moment when asked if he loves her, then replying "Yes," and then confirming it with an exclamatory "Yes!" He gives Marit the drug that is supposed to take her out of the world as he and she know it, and thus in the act, he believes he "slip[s] her, as in a burial at sea, beneath the flow of time." Throughout the first nine pages, there has been the underlying question of whether one or the other would back out of this final act, and in the end, neither does. Marit dies muttering how lucky she was the night she met him, and Walter, having given her the shot, walks downstairs to find Susanna, the family friend that accompanied them to dinner. At this point, Salter begins what could be considered another story, which will color the reader's understanding of all that has come before.

This story is shorter, of course: with the situation well established in the preceding pages, there is little that needs to be set up. Readers know Walter Such to be a finicky man, uncomfortable with emotions; he struggles to understand that what he and Marit shared was indeed love and that he nevertheless has to be the agent of her death. When he begs Susanna to stay in the house until after the mercy killing is accomplished, it might just be read as his need for the comfort of company. But in this

second segment, when Susanna asks if Marit really wanted her there on the night of her death, readers are left for a moment with a mystery. Having had the selection of Susanna explained as another element of the Such couple's emotional coolness—they did not want anyone *too* close when Marit died, presumably to avoid the messiness of grief—they now have to wonder why Susanna would be there, or why, in fact, anything would be part of that night's arrangements if Marit did not want it. Salter answers this question with Walter's next line, one of those lauded cases where the author is able to cut to the essence of a situation in just one sentence: "Darling," Walter says, revealing the nature of his relationship to Susanna, "*she* suggested it." Walter goes on to assure her that Marit knew nothing about their affair.

If the Walter of the first part of the story was a poor soul torn between loss and duty, the Walter of this segment—the same man, of course, just minutes later—is a heartless conniver, an aggressor who has little concern for Susanna's feelings, who only lusts for her body, a man capable of assisting his wife in her suicide and in the next moment able to relate sexually to his mistress. Although there is good reason to believe that Marit died having no idea that her husband and her friend were lovers, there is also evidence that she might well have suspected what was going on. It might just be a coincidence that her final discussion with Susanna was about her own mother spending her last moments obsessing with who was sleeping with whom, but it could also have been a clue that she was actively trying to block out such thoughts on her own last night. Asking about Walter's love for her, in the past tense no less, is another reason to believe that Marit might suspect his disloyalty to her. If Walter were being honest with Susanna, he might at least admit a little uncertainty about what Marit knew.

He is not honest, though: he is desperate. He calms Susanna's guilt with unfounded certainty, plies her with drink, and takes her sexually, putting a hand on her mouth when she tries to speak and "devouring" her. All of this with his wife, dead from his own hand, in another room of the house. Salter has imbued Walter's character with enough humanity to let readers believe that he is not necessarily acting out of complete disregard for both Marit and Susanna but that he might just be channeling his grief into sexuality. Still, the fact that he and Susanna had already betrayed Marit before that night is clear, and that is certainly not something that one expected of the Walter of the story's first part. He is so ruthless in this second section that there is even reason to question whether he might be a murderer, having pushed Marit into an unnecessary suicide in order to clear the way for his new life with his lover.

The third part of the story is shorter still, just more than a page in length. It concerns the unexpected turn of events of the next morning when Marit, having been unsuccessfully injected, comes downstairs to find Susanna and Walter together at the kitchen table. This is, obviously, the high point of the overall sequence of events in "Last Night." In a flash, Walter, the story's protagonist, realizes that he has been a failure to both women. He has left Susanna in a position to be discovered, even though he had promised her that Marit would die without knowing about their affair, and he has botched the job of giving Marit a peaceful death. Walter of the first part is a man conflicted, Walter of the second part is a man driven to frenzy with lust, guilt, or some combination of the two,

but this third Walter is a man sentenced to know that he is neither a great husband nor a great lover.

In the previous sections, Walter is an obscure figure to the reader because he identifies himself in terms of the women: in this segment, he severs his ties to them both, leaving him to face his empty self. Ironically, this scene ends up having nothing, really, to do with the infidelity being uncovered: Marit mentions Susanna's presence at the breakfast table casually, but her real horror is focused on having to commit suicide all over again, which is the same thing that horrifies Walter. Readers might focus on the discovery of the affair, but, for that moment at least, the Suchs are still of one mind, focused on greater issues of how Marit can face death twice.

It is not until the story's final paragraph that Salter takes an honest look at the affair between Walter and Susanna. It is over by then: they "came to part, upon being discovered by his wife," a phrasing that suggests nothing about the high drama of Marit's suicide attempt. This section is such an independent story that it never does reveal whether Marit went on to commit suicide successfully, or died naturally of cancer, or lived on, with or without Walter. To make matters more complex, it may even hint that Marit staged the assisted suicide with a placebo drug perhaps, just to catch her husband and friend and rid her husband of both his marital and extramarital relationships. This section certainly concerns Walter's grief over a situation that is never explained in the story. When the focus is on Walter and particularly on Marit, Susanna only plays a functional part, as the woman he turns to for solace and practically molests. In five sentences, Salter is able to fill Walter with the complexity of a basically emotionless man who has loved then lost, alluding to a situation—"Whatever holds people together"—that has played no real part in the story up to this point. Readers who are looking for the author's famed skill at rendering a lifetime in just a few words need look no further than here, a perfect example of his understanding of just how little needs to be said.

"Last Night" is not really a collection of different stories, but one story, told by carefully tracking the changes that come over a man on this most important of nights. Over the course of these pages, readers' understanding of Walter Such evolves. For most of the story, a quiet, musical, melancholy span, he is a devoted husband, trying to do the best he can for his sick wife of many years; that ends, though, and readers quickly see him as a desperate aggressor; immediately after, his pretenses at being either dutiful or lustful are punctured, as he is revealed in one quick moment to be nothing but a failure; and finally, readers find that Walter, who has seemed so mechanical throughout the previous pages, has actually had an emotional attachment to Susanne. The "last night" of the title, presumed to be about Marit's life, is actually about something as small and tawdry as an affair with her friend. Of course, none of the second, third, or fourth stories would make sense without the background information provided in the first, but they each seem to take on an independent existence as Walter appears to be a different type of person in each one. The various Walters are just the kinds of personalities that James Salter can deliver quickly with just a few spare lines, but it is their relationship to each other that makes the writing work.

Source: David Kelly, Critical Essay on “Last Night,” in *Short Stories for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Critical Essay #3

Bussey holds a master's degree in Interdisciplinary Studies and a bachelor's degree in English Literature. She is an independent writer specializing in literature. In the following essay, she explores the theme of translation in James Salter's "Last Night."

"Walter Such was a translator." This opening line of James Salter's "Last Night" establishes that translation is going to be an undercurrent in this winding and emotional story. It is the story of a man whose wife, Marit, is terminally ill with cancer. The couple and another woman, a friend, go for one last dinner before Walter assists in his wife's suicide. As soon as he has injected her with the necessary poison and she drops to her pillow, the reader learns that the other woman, a twenty-nine-year-old named Susanna, is actually Walter's mistress. In a strange act of betrayal, vulnerability, and grief, he beds Susanna that very night. When Marit makes her way down the stairs the next morning and finds them together having coffee, Walter's life is thrown for an unexpected loop. It seems the poison was not adequate or it was given wrong: Marit survived. But Walter's relationship with Susanna does not survive because, in the words of the narrator, "Whatever holds people together was gone."

Again, Walter shows himself to be skilled at translating passages of text into meaningful language, but an utter failure at translating reality into meaningful truth.

Throughout this story, Salter subtly weaves the theme of translation. Walter is a translator by profession. He is so settled into his role as a translator that he has particular ways he likes to work. He has a green fountain pen, and he raises it in the air after every sentence. He can also recite lines from a work in a foreign language, followed by the work of another translator, followed by commentary on the craftsmanship of the translation. Walter's habits and mannerisms, along with his expansive knowledge of—and passion for—translation demonstrate how much translation is part of his identity. It is much more than a job he performs simply because he has to make a living; translating is part of the fiber of his being, and he is comfortable with it.

To appreciate fully Salter's use of translation as a theme, it is important to examine what is significant about the process of translating one thing into another. Walter's job is essentially to take passages in one language and make them meaningful in another. Translators must also stay as true to the original text as possible, so the job requires a deep understanding of the original text as well as familiarity with every tool of language. In "Last Night," truth, intention, and appearance are not always in line, despite the effort to make them seem so.

Salter introduces irony in the story as a pointed reminder of how the way appearance diverges from reality is often itself revealing. It is, in essence, a break in translation.

Sometimes the break is intentional, and sometimes it is not. In “Last Night,” it is the narrator who reveals irony to the reader, betraying the characters’ efforts to fool the outside world. When the reader first sees Marit, she is dressed to go to dinner in a “red silk dress in which she had always been seductive.” This description is ironic because she is not gaunt from the cancer, and her husband has given his lustful affections to another woman. A half-page later, Marit has a drink and offers a toast that is obviously ironic, even to Susanna and Walter. Salter writes: “‘Well, happy days,’ she said. Then, as if suddenly remembering [that they were gathered for her assisted suicide], she smiled at them. A frightening smile. It seemed to mean just the opposite.” After dinner, Marit goes upstairs to wait for Walter to come with the syringe that will relieve her of her suffering. Salter writes at the beginning of a paragraph, “Marit had prepared herself,” then proceeds to describe what she has done with her appearance as if that is how a woman prepares herself to die. The irony of this statement is clear in the last sentence of the same paragraph: “The wine had had an effect, but she was not calm.” Although the reader is told that Marit has prepared herself, she is not fully prepared and relaxed as she faces what is about to happen.

After Walter injects Marit and believes she is dead, he retrieves Susanna. When she says she feels funny, he pretends to be worried that she is sick and insists that she lie down for a little while. This is ironic because his intention is not at all what it seems. He seems to be concerned about his mistress, but in fact he is steering her toward a bedroom so that he can be with her. The selfishness of his intention is clear in the brief description of their lovemaking, which is very intense and all about him. In the morning, the reader is treated to another ironic description, this time of the house. Salter remarks that the house stands out from the others in the neighborhood because it is “more pure and serene.” Of course, that this house appears pure is a mere illusion, considering that in the house is, presumably, a man, his dead wife, and his half-dressed mistress. That the house is serene is about to become ironic because within the next half-page, the “dead” wife will make her way down the stairs to discover her husband with another woman. By integrating irony into the story, Salter keeps the reader sensitive to the tension between reality and appearance. This sensitivity shows the reader what happens when translation is distorted.

Walter intentionally sets out to present a façade as reality. As a translator, presentation is the ends and translation is the means. If he can manipulate the ends, then perhaps he can overlook the fact that he has falsely translated truth. Although there are hints along the way, the reader is not sure that Susanna is more than a “family friend” (as she is described at the beginning of the story) until Walter has injected his wife with the poison and believes she is dead. Until that point, he has managed to take the truth (that he has a young mistress) and twist it so that he appears to be a loving and devoted husband to the end. Susanna even worries that maybe Marit somehow knew, and Walter assures her that Marit never suspected there was anything illicit going on between them. In his mind, his presentation of reality is flawless. It seems odd that a translator, whose job it is to maintain the integrity of the original to the most detailed level possible, would be so cavalier about the integrity of his own life. Still, he does what many people in affairs do: he brings all of his resources to bear on covering it up.

In the end, however, Walter's façade crumbles. Reality refuses to be mistranslated, and he is discovered. After leaving his wife upstairs, he makes an error when he assumes that his wife is dead. He accepts her death at his hands as a fact, but this time, reality has turned on him. His assumption is basically a mistranslation. Marit is not dead; the injection did not work, and she comes down the stairs to find her husband having morning coffee with a partially dressed "family friend." Because of his error, his entire reality collapses. Although the narrator does not tell us what becomes of Marit, he does tell us that Susanna leaves Walter shortly after Marit's failed assisted suicide. The reader is left with an image of Walter all alone.

There is another subject of Walter's mistranslation, and that is Susanna. He has understood her to be in love with him, available to him, and his future. He feels so close to her and opens his life up to her so much that he allows her to be part of the night he is to help his wife commit suicide. This should have been such an intimate and emotionally charged evening, yet he agrees to have Susanna join them for dinner. He is obviously secure enough in the secrecy of their relationship that he feels comfortable inviting her into the darkest and strangest hour of his life, yet their bond is breakable. After they are discovered by Marit, they meet a few more times "at his insistence," but the magic is gone for Susanna. She leaves him, telling him "she could not help it," and that is the end of the relationship. Susanna is not the woman Walter has thought she was. Again, Walter shows himself to be skilled at translating passages of text into meaningful language, but an utter failure at translating reality into meaningful truth.

Looking at the story broadly, the narrator is ultimately the story's translator. While Walter might be the professional text translator, the narrator provides the reader with the information and the perspective to understand what it really going in within these characters. The narrator in essence takes the text of the characters' lives and translates it into the meaningful language of the story presented in "Last Night." The narrator first presents the story as Walter's experience saying good-bye to his wife, but in the end the narrator presents the story as Susanna's story of saying good-bye to Walter.

Source: Jennifer Bussey, Critical Essay on "Last Night," in *Short Stories for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Adaptations

- The story “Last Night” was adapted as a short film by Sean Mewshaw in 2002, starring Frances McDormand (Marit Such), Jamey Sheridan (Walter Such), and Sheeri Rappaport (Susanna). Although difficult to find in standard retail outlets, many public and school libraries as of 2007 had access to copies through lending networks.

Topics for Further Study

• Research the history of the concept of beauty, from its classical origins through to modern implications in the fashion and cosmetic industry. Make a timeline that traces the major shifts in the understanding of the term, with a visual representation of how the ideal of beauty might have looked across the centuries.

• Research the debate over euthanasia or assisted suicide. Write a summary of the key points of the arguments on both sides, including legal protections being put in place that might protect individuals who wish to end their own lives. Be balanced in your research, as though you are preparing for a debate that might position you on either side of the issue.

• Study the subject of memory. How do memories form and where do researchers believe that they are stored? What triggers recall of remembered events, and how accurate are these memories? Write an essay describing how memory works, making reference to the flashbacks that both Marit and Walter experience in Salter's story.

• Imagine that you have been asked to select a song (from any era and any genre) that you feel captures most effectively the main theme, idea, or tone of "Last Night." Write an essay in which you discuss the song that you have selected, giving the main reasons why you selected it. Be sure to avoid general and vague comments. Instead, focus on specific elements of the song (specific lines or words in the lyrics, for instance) and explain in detail how these specific elements of your song correspond to specific moments, words, or images in the story.

• Research the Russian symbolist movement and the style of Alexander Blok's poetry, both of which explored the mysteries of common events and everyday things. Write a poem in the symbolist style that celebrates a room in your home, a meal that you have enjoyed, or an aspect of your daily routine.

What Do I Read Next?

- For another view of Salter's world, *There and Then: The Travel Writing of James Salter* (2006) offers a collection of two dozen essays recounting the global travels and observations of this peripatetic writer.

- The stories of John Cheever, like those of Salter, explore the spiritual and emotional emptiness of middle-class, suburban life. *The Stories of John Cheever* won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1979.

- Another frequent contributor to the *New Yorker* magazine, Canadian story writer Alice Munro writes in a much more elaborate style than Salter but focuses, as he does, on the ambiguities of life and on its open secrets and profound ironies. *No Love Lost* (2003) is an excellent sampler of Munro's work, bringing together ten of the best stories from her previously published books, with commentary by noted Canadian novelist Jane Urquhart.

- Readers who appreciate Salter's analysis of people who find their dreams overwhelmed by the pressures and disappointments of everyday life might also enjoy any of the following collections from Raymond Carver, one of the most influential American story writers of the twentieth century: *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please* (1976), *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (1981), or *Cathedral* (1983).

- A minimalist in the tradition of Carver, Amy Hempel turns in her collection *The Dog of Marriage* (2005) to often dark, angular explorations of love (in its many forms) and the disintegrations of marriage. It was published the same year as Salter's *Last Night: Stories*.

- For a novel-length exploration of the spiritual and emotional malaise that weighs heavily on the life energies of suburban America, Jeffrey Eugenides's 1993 novel *The Virgin Suicides* is a provocative read. Set in the 1970s, the novel recounts the stories of the suicides of the five Lisbon sisters and the impact their decisions have on a seemingly happy community forced to make sense of their seemingly senseless deaths. Director Sofia Coppola adapted this novel into a critically acclaimed movie of the same title in 1999.

Further Study

Dowie, William, *James Salter*, Twayne, 1998.

The first book-length study of Salter's early works, this readable and well-organized guide provides a blend of biographical details and critical evaluations of his writing, from his early journalistic endeavors through his screenwriting successes and early novels.

Gorsuch, Neil M., *The Future of Assisted Suicide and Euthanasia*, Princeton University Press, 2006.

Gorsuch, who holds a doctorate in legal philosophy from Oxford University and a law degree from Harvard University, is widely published on the legal and ethical questions surrounding assisted suicide. An accessible discussion of the various philosophic arguments supporting both sides of the euthanasia debate, as well as the seminal case histories in the United States and abroad, this book ultimately builds a clear but subtle argument against further legalization of assisted suicide. At the same time, however, it establishes a substantive argument for the rights of patients to autonomy when faced with such issues as unwanted medical care and intervention.

Lewis, Milton James, *Medicine and Care of the Dying: A Modern History*, Oxford University Press, 2006.

This sometimes dense but nonetheless enlightening study describes the historical and cultural contexts that have shaped the shifting understanding of health, care, and death within Western culture. Lewis traces the source of contemporary conflicts and concerns through the twinned, though not always harmonious, rise of scientific medicine and the coincidental decline in religious influences within the English-speaking world. The philosophic terrain of conflict is clearly established: between the increasingly strident belief in the need to avoid death at all costs and the longstanding understanding of death as a natural and inevitable part of life.

Vernon, Alex, *Soldiers Once and Still: Ernest Hemingway, James Salter, and Tim O'Brien*, University of Iowa Press, 2004.

This study is an analysis of how three American writers explore issues of identity and community through their stories of war and war-time experience. Focusing on three writers of radically different literary voices and styles, Vernon also extends his study across three generations of American wars and three levels of authorial engagement: World War I with the noncombatant Hemingway; World War II and Korea with the fighter pilot Salter; and the Vietnam conflict with army infantryman O'Brien.

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Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

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:

Editor, Short Stories for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331–3535