The Last Lovely City Study Guide

The Last Lovely City by Alice Adams

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Introduction

In an interview with Neil Feineman in *Story Quarterly,* Alice Adams remarked that she preferred writing short stories to writing novels, which may explain why her short fiction has earned more critical favor than her longer works have. In all, Adams completed six collections of short stories, the last of which, *The Last Lovely City,* was published shortly before her death in 1999. Adams's short stories often portray themes of love, loss, and uncertainty, all of which are present in the title story of her final collection.

The title story shares its setting with most of the other twelve stories in the collection. The last lovely city is San Francisco, and for the main character in "The Last Lovely City," it represents his past, good and bad, and everything that has passed by him. Adams lived most of her adult life in San Francisco, so she experienced the city in a variety of ways. It is fitting that "The Last Lovely City" and most of the other stories in the collection are set in the city Adams loved best.

Author Biography

Alice Adams was born in Fredericksburg, Virginia, on August 14, 1926, the only child of Nicholas Barney and Agatha Erskine. Adams was reared in North Carolina, where her father was a professor of Spanish. Her early years were troubled due to a strained relationship with her mother and the dissolution of her parents' marriage. Upon completing high school, she enrolled in Radcliffe College, where she pursued her interest in writing. She graduated in 1946 and went to work briefly for a New York publisher. The following year, she married Mark Linenthal, Jr. The newlyweds then spent a year in Paris, where Linenthal studied before accepting a teaching position in California in 1948. In 1951, the couple had their only child, Peter. Unfortunately, the marriage was unhappy, and Adams and her husband divorced in 1958.

After the divorce, Adams struggledin several secretarial jobs and continued to write. In 1959, her first published story, "Winter Rain," appeared in *Charm,* and in 1969 she had a story published in *The New Yorker.* This story, "Gift of Grass," also won Adams the prestigious O. Henry Award for short fiction. In the following years, Adams earned acclaim for her short stories and novels. In 1982, she was awarded the O. Henry Special Award for Continuing Achievement, an honor bestowed only on Adams, Joyce Carol Oates, and John Updike. Adams continued writing up until her death in 1999. Her final collection of stories, *The Last Lovely City,* was published shortly before she died. In light of her death, the title story is poignant because it is about an aging doctor who bids farewell to the life he once loved.

Adams is known for stories portraying the modern woman's struggle to establish her identity in a confusing and disappointing world. More realist than romantic, she created characters who pursue careers and romance, both with mixed results. Her characters come to accept their particular blessings and curses as a result of a defining moment. For her presentation of characters seeking self-understanding, Adams has been compared to Colette, Ernest Hemingway, and F. Scott Fitzgerald.

Adams died in San Francisco, California, on May 27, 1999.

Plot Summary

"The Last Lovely City" is about a widower named Benito Zamora. He is a successful doctor whose wife, Elizabeth, died five months ago; he is struggling with feelings of loneliness and inadequacy. His elderly mother lives in Mexico, near a city where Benito operates two free clinics.

As the story opens, Benito has been invited to a lunch party by a young woman named Carla, whom he met a month earlier at a dinner. Although he barely remembers her and wonders why she is interested in him, he agrees to accompany her. As they drive to the party in S tins on Beach (near San Francisco, where Benito lives), they make pleasant conversation.

When they arrive at the party, the hostess, Posey Pendergast, greets them. She is delighted to meet Benito, having heard much about him. She and Benito talk briefly about her house, a lavish home designed by Posey's son, Patrick. Benito recalls walking past it with Elizabeth and thinking how opulent it looked.

As Posey introduces Carla and Benito to other guests, Benito runs into Dolores, a past girlfriend. Their romance was not particularly loving; in fact, Dolores once told him that she did not like men, but that she was in love with a woman named Posey Pendergast. Benito now realizes why Posey's name sounded familiar. He also remembers a time when Dolores suggested that it would be exciting for him to pay her after they made love. He refused.

Wanting to get away from Dolores at the party, Benito begins looking for Carla. When he is unable to locate her, he decides to go out onto the deck alone. As he surveys the city, he thinks of Elizabeth. He looks back into the party and sees another old acquaintance, Herman Tolliver. Herman is a lawyer who, many years ago, convinced Benito to enter into a business deal with him to buy run-down hotels. Benito agreed and made a lot of money in the process. He remained a silent partner in the business, intentionally staying as ignorant as possible about the hotels, because he knew they were being used for prostitution. Benito's initial meeting with Herman occurred at about the time he met Elizabeth, and his memories suggest that he was looking for a way to make more money so he would be deserving of her. Ashamed of his past with Herman, Benito eases his conscience by reminding himself that without the money he made from the hotels, he would not be able to run the free clinics in Mexico for people who cannot afford medical care.

Benito continues to look in at the party, where Herman is now talking to Carla. Benito's thoughts drift, and he considers how lonely he has been since the death of his wife. He realizes that his memory has become selective, because he remembers only the wonderful moments and forgets the hard times and problems.

Carla joins Benito on the deck. When he asks how she knows Herman, she reminds him that she is a reporter who knows everyone. Dolores comes onto the deck, and

Carla goes back inside. Benito excuses himself from Dolores to walk on the beach. Overwhelmed by the ghosts of his past, he is glad to be alone.

As Benito is thinking about his life in San Francisco, Carla runs up and joins him. He imagines that she is flirting with him and allows his fantasies to overtake his thoughts. He considers a future with her, and vows to be honest with her. They talk about Herman, and Benito confesses his past business relationship with him. He also tells Carla that Dolores is an ex-girlfriend. None of this seems to shock Carla.

As Benito becomes more convinced that he is really connecting with Carla, she mentions her fiancé, Patrick. This is done in such a casual manner that it seems that Carla has no idea that Benito thinks she is interested in him. She says that Patrick was unable to accompany her to the party, so she invited Benito because she thought he might know some people there and be able to tell her about them. Benito's hopes are dashed, and he tells her that he is getting ready to move back to Mexico. He plans to oversee his clinics and take care of his ailing mother. Carla suggests that they get together so she can interview him before he leaves.

Benito and Carla decide to leave the party. Carla chatters, but Benito is no longer paying attention. He thinks about his plans to leave San Francisco permanently and live out his life in Mexico.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

Benito Zamora is a widely renowned doctor in the United States as well as in his native Mexico. Recently widowed, he finds himself in the company of Carla, a young woman who invited him to accompany her to a party in Stinson Beach, California.

As they drive to the party, the doctor wonders why Carla invited him. He guesses her age to be around 30, but realizes she could be as old as forty-two. He also wonders if she is attracted to him or if she simply wants to write an article about him for the newspaper for which she works. His thoughts are interrupted by Carla, who asks him how often he returns to Mexico. The doctor tells her that because his mother is there, he makes the trip quite frequently. He does not mention the fact that he also oversees the two free clinics that he helped establish.

As the silence returns, the doctor's thoughts turn to his deceased wife, Elizabeth. Since her death five months earlier, the once steady stream of invitations and telephone calls had tapered off and the doctor now finds that he is alone more often than he would like.

As a result, when Carla called (they had met at a dinner a month earlier) he happily accepted her invitation.

As they approach their destination, the doctor asks Carla for the name of their hostess. Carla tells him that the hostess is a woman named Posey Pendergast and wonders if the doctor knows her. Dr. Zamora replies that while her name is familiar, he is not certain that they have met.

Upon being introduced to Posey, Dr. Zamora guesses that based on her difficulty breathing, she is ill with emphysema or heart ailments. As Dr. Zamora surveys his surroundings, he remembers walking past the home with his late wife. When Dr. Zamora comments on her house, Posey tells him that her son, Carla's friend, designed it. As Posey introduces Dr. Zamora and Carla to some of the other guests, many indicate that they have heard of his work. As the introductions continue, Dr. Zamora comes face to face with Delores, a woman he dated many years ago.

In an instant, the doctor is taken back to a time, nearly 50 years ago, when he and Delores found themselves in a cheap hotel room. Delores, looking to add a little excitement to their rendezvous, suggested that Dr. Zamora pay her – similar to a prostitute. Dr. Zamora refused, and the two parted ways.

Delores interrupts the doctor's thoughts by asking him how she knows Posey. As Dr. Zamora explains that they have just met, he remembers that Delores once told him that she had fallen in love with a woman named Posey Pendergast. Wishing to get away from Delores, Dr. Zamora begins to move toward the deck.

Once outside, he looks toward San Francisco, its skyline obscured by cliffs of land. He remembers his time as a young, poor medical student and recalls the ambition he had to acquire both wealth and power, which eventually to his purchase of several seedy hotels. Despite this, he was fortunate to meet his wife, Elizabeth, a woman he describes as beautiful and good. Although they never had children, the two enjoyed a happy marriage.

Dr. Zamora's thoughts are once again interrupted, this time by the sighting of Herman Tolliver, the lawyer he had once collaborated with in the purchase of the seedy hotels. While the business venture ultimately brought Dr. Zamora a significant amount of money – enough to live quite comfortably and finance the establishment of the two Mexican clinics – he is not proud of the specific circumstances. Now, as he sees Carla speaking with Tolliver, he again finds himself thinking of his deceased wife.

Carla soon joins him on the deck and laments the fact that she had to spend time speaking with Tolliver. Dr. Zamora asks how the two have met, and Carla responds that her job as a reporter has given her the opportunity to meet many, many people. He then asks how Carla knows Posey, but his question is interrupted by Delores who approaches the couple.

As the three speak, Dr. Zamora begins to wonder is Carla is flirting with him. He knows that there is a significant age difference between them, but also knows that it is common for people such as he and Carla to be together. As he begins to imagine how much brighter his life and home would be with Carla in them, she asks if he is hungry. Before he can respond, Delores says that he never eats and so Carla goes off on her own in search of some food. Delores sees that Dr. Zamora is angry and suggests that he go get something to eat as well. Dr. Zamora declines her offer and decides to go for a walk instead.

As he walks along the beach, he wonders what other people from his past are present at the party. He realizes that if he walks far enough, he will be able to see San Francisco, the city where some of the most important and pivotal events in his life occurred: the completion of medical school, his liaison with Delores, the business dealings with Herman Tolliver, his medical practice and his marriage to Elizabeth.

As he contemplates all of these events, he hears footsteps approaching from behind. He turns and is surprised to find it is Carla. They walk along the beach in silence at first, but after some time, Dr. Zamora begins to speak. He tells Carla about his business dealings with Tolliver, and says that he knew more about Tolliver's motives than he originally admitted. Carla tells him that she knows all of this – she had done a thorough investigation on Tolliver for the newspaper. As they continue their conversation, the doctor begins to feel calm, yet excited and again starts to fantasize about marrying Carla.

When Carla asks him how he knows Delores, Dr. Zamora admits that she is an old girlfriend before mentioning that Delores had told him that she and Posey are now lovers. Carla responds that she thinks that Delores lies quite a bit and she just is not

sure about any of them. She says she had hoped that Dr. Zamora could help her understand them.

Dr. Zamora does not clearly hear what Carla has just said and, lost in his own thoughts, asks her again how she knows Posey. Carla responds that Posey is the mother of Patrick, her fiancé. Because Patrick was unable to attend the party, Carla had asked Dr. Zamora to accompany her.

Dr. Zamora is clearly crushed by this news and his mood turns somber. As he struggles to compose himself, he comments on the corruption within San Francisco. When Carla reminds him that corruption exists everywhere, Dr. Zamora tells her that he will be happy to leave it all behind when he returns to Mexico permanently. Dr. Zamora begins to imagine his future there – a future that he had only now begun to contemplate. He decides that he will buy a home for he and his mother to live in and that he will spend the rest of his life working in his clinics. His thoughts are interrupted by Carla, who suggests that they do not return to the party, and instead drive back to San Francisco. The doctor agrees and they begin their trip home.

Analysis

"The Last Lovely City" is a short story that appears in Alice Adams' book of the same name. The primary characters in the story are a widowed physician named Dr. Benito Zamora and a young newspaper reporter known simply as Carla.

The central themes in this story are loneliness and guilt. Recently widowed, Dr. Zamora has found that he is alone far more often than he would like. This is the primary reason why he accepted Carla's invitation.

We know that Elizabeth's death has deeply affected Dr. Zamora. Indeed, there are several instances during the story – particularly when he is troubled or anxious – that his thoughts immediately turn to her and their life together. When he speaks of the "daily lack, the loss with which he lives" in the early part of the story, he is giving the reader a sense of how deeply their lives were intertwined. He is also referring to the fact that because they never had children, Elizabeth's death has truly left him alone. It is not surprising then, that despite his apparent attraction to Carla he cannot stop thinking about Elizabeth.

Despite his unhappiness with being alone, it seems that Dr. Zamora is not comfortable being around people. Recall that in the beginning of the story that he seems to alternate between being lost in his own thoughts and attempting to make small talk with Carla as they drive to the party. Later, shortly after becoming reacquainted with Delores, he retreats to the deck to escape the other guests. Finally, after being angered by Delores later in the story, he leaves the party for a solitary walk along the beach.

It is interesting that as Dr. Zamora describes the happiness shared between him and his late wife, he is confronted with two people that represent painful periods of his past. The first is Delores, a woman with whom he had a sexual affair when he was a young man.

The hollowness of the affair was underscored by her suggestion that the young Dr. Zamora treat her like a prostitute. Further, when he meets her at the party, the description he offers is less than flattering; a technique that helps to further make a distinction between the happiness of his marriage and the shame of his younger years.

The second person he meets is Herman Tolliver, the man that Dr. Benito collaborated with to buy some hotels. Again, he offers a less than flattering description of his former partner, further underscoring his unhappiness with his past. While Dr. Benito was, mostly, a silent partner, he was nonetheless bothered by the use to which Herman Tolliver put the hotels and for years, refused to admit to anyone – even to himself – that he was involved in anything illicit.

In light of the fact that the money Dr. Zamora used to establish his Mexican clinics was obtained through questionable means, there is some irony in the fact that he is known within the community as "Dr. Do-Good." Even the doctor recognizes this as witnessed by the fact that he is uncomfortable with the nickname. It is possible then, that Dr. Zamora chose to use his profits from the hotel deal to underwrite the clinics as a way to compensate for his lack of discretion. His decision to leave San Francisco and return to Mexico to live out his life caring for his mother and working in his clinics may have also been made because of his guilt over his shady business dealings.

The story's title also bears some discussion. To Dr. Zamora, San Francisco represents the past glories of Dr. Zamora's life. As he contemplates all that has happened to him during the course of his life as he walks along the beach, he realizes how much his life has been altered by the death of his wife. In fact, the ruined sand castle that he encounters on his walk is symbolic of how drastically his life has changed. Therefore, he will leave San Francisco, "the last lovely city" and return to his native Mexico to work among the poor and impoverished.

Finally, the presence of Carla in the story is also significant. In Carla, Dr. Zamora has final, fleeting thoughts of companionship and happiness. In many ways, Carla is also Dr. Zamora's "last lovely city:" a final chance at a personal relationship.

Characters

Carla

As the story opens, Carla and Benito are driving to a lunch party. Having met Benito a month earlier at another party, Carla has invited him to accompany her. Carla is younger than he is, works as a reporter, has long, streaked hair, and is thin. During the drive to the party, she makes conversation with him, and Benito remembers thinking when they met (although he does not remember her very well) that she seemed nice, quiet, and intelligent.

At the end of the story, the reader understands that Carla never had any romantic intentions toward Benito. She is engaged to Posey's son, Patrick, and has merely been friendly to Benito. She thought that he might know some people at the party and be able to tell her something about them. When the story ends, it is unclear whether or not Carla intentionally treated Benito as a date so he would give her information. Perhaps she is just very friendly and had no idea she was encouraging Benito's feelings.

Dolores

At the party, Benito runs into Dolores, a woman with whom he once had a romantic relationship. Although she was once attractive and thin, she is now overweight and has "a huge puff of orange hair" and pink spots on her face from skin cancer. She is a divorcée.

Dolores once told Benito that she did not really love men; she said she needed them, but she was really in love with a woman (Posey). On another occasion, she told him she would find it exciting if he would pay her after making love. He refused. Dolores's behavior in the relationship indicates that she is not a person who seeks true intimacy or friendship in her relationships but instead prefers seeing if she can push other people's boundaries.

Posey Pendergast

Posey is the hostess of the party. She is very thin, breathes heavily, and has pale skin. Benito wonders if she has emphysema based on her physical appearance and inability to draw deep breaths. Posey lives by the sea in a lavish home designed by her son, Patrick, an architect who is engaged to Carla.

Herman Tolliver

Herman Tolliver is a lawyer with whom Benito once entered into shady business dealings. Herman is described as "bright-eyed and buck-toothed," and when Benito

sees him at the party he thinks Herman is thinner and grayer but otherwise does not look much older.

Years earlier, Herman had approached Benito about buying run-down hotels with him. Benito agreed and remained Herman's business partner, even when it became clear that the hotels were being used for prostitution. Benito made a point of not finding out any more than necessary about the hotels because he was making so much money from them. Herman apparently honored Benito's wish not to know the details of the business. Herman's lack of ethics led to later problems with tax evasion.

Dr. Benito Zamora

Dr. Benito Zamora is described as having white hair, deep-set dark eyes, thick eyebrows, and heaviness around his face and neck. His wife, Elizabeth, died five months prior to the time of the story.

Benito is regarded as a successful doctor in San Francisco and in Mexico, where his aging mother lives and where he runs two free clinics. Recently widowed, Benito is sad and lonely, and he still imagines what Elizabeth would do or say in various situations. Now that he is alone in the world, he is plagued by self-doubt, seeing himself as an old man whose best years are spent. When Carla invites him to accompany her to a party, he agrees but is puzzled by what she could possibly want from him. He convinces himself that she is interested in him romantically and indulges in fantasies about marrying her.

Because of his shady business deals with Herman Tolliver, Benito is unable to be completely happy with his wealth. When he encounters people from his past, he reacts by wanting to distance himself from them. Although he comforts his conscience by remembering that much of the money he earned from those business deals now allows him to operate the two clinics in Mexico, he continues to feel shame. For this reason, he resists his nickname, Dr. Do-Good.

Benito's despair is his motivation for making the decision to move to Mexico to take care of his mother and oversee his two clinics. He seems to conclude that life in San Francisco no longer has anything to offer him, so he chooses to go to the only other place to which he has any ties.

Themes

Grief

Having recently lost his wife, Benito is consumed by grief and loneliness. In a very real way, he still feels his wife's presence as he hesitantly moves on with his life. When he retreats to the deck to be alone at the party, the narrator comments, "He is not at all graceful in the usual way of Latins; Elizabeth said that from time to time." Thoughts of Elizabeth are constantly with Benito, and he often brings memories of her into his present life. She has only been gone for five months, after all. He is having difficulty facing the reality that he must now do the work required to build a new life for himself. This is not easy, as revealed in the realization that "he has ended up alone. Childless and without Elizabeth."

Benito realizes that his memory is playing tricks on him. He recalls the good times he and Elizabeth shared, and the bad times seem to have faded away. The narrator reveals Benito's musings:

A problem with death, the doctor has more than once thought, is its removal of all the merciful dross of memory: he no longer remembers any petty annoyances, ever, or even moments of boredom, irritation, or sad, failed acts of love. All that is erased, and he only recalls, with the most cruel, searing accuracy, the golden peaks of their time together.

Perhaps the most difficult part of grieving for Benito is that he must find where he belongs in the world. When Elizabeth was alive, his place was with her, but now he is not sure where he belongs. An important part of his identity was rooted in his role as Elizabeth's husband, and now he is left to discover who he is without her. In the story, he recalls with disgust who he once was (with Dolores and Herman), and he imagines who he might be with Carla. Neither the past nor the possible future, however, can answer the important questions Benito must answer for himself. Perhaps by going to Mexico, he will be able to work through his grief and do the soul-searching necessary to determine his new place in the world.

Shattered Hope

Related to the theme of grief and loneliness is Benito's mounting hope for new love, which is dashed at the end of the story. He imagines that Carla is interested in him romantically and that they could have a wonderful future together. As he watches the party from the deck, the narrator reveals his thoughts: "Is she looking for him? the doctor wonders. Does she ask herself what happened to old Benito? He smiles to himself at this notion...." That he barely knows her does not slow down his fantasies of their life together. He indulges the idea that he knows her well, as when she giggles and

he thinks to himself that this is out of character for her. Benito is trying to resume the role he had with Elizabeth because it is a comfortable and familiar role for him.

At first, Benito wonders what Carla wants from him, but soon he imagines that she is flirting with him and jealous of his past with Dolores. As they talk on the deck, Benito reads something into her attention, thinking,

Is she flirting with [me], seriously flirting? Well, she could be. Such things do happen ... And she seems a very honest young woman, and kind. She could brighten my life he thinks, and lighten my home, all those rooms with their splendid views that seem to have darkened.

He temporarily puts aside his loneliness in favor of the hope for the future he finds in Carla. For the short term, Benito's fantasies about Carla allow him to escape from the pain that engulfs him. For the long term, they represent his willingness to take a risk and to embrace optimism for the future.

When Carla mentions her fiancé, however, Benito's hopes vanish more quickly than they came. The narrator comments, "The sun has sunk into the ocean, and Benito's heart has sunk with it, drowned. He shudders, despising himself. How could he possibly have imagined, how not have guessed?" Whether or not he actually wants to build a new life with Carla, his optimism for the future is undermined by the realization that Carla just wanted an escort to the party; she was not looking for anything meaningful or permanent.

Style

Partial Omniscient Narrator

The narrator of "The Last Lovely City" is omniscient with regard to Benito, but does not seem to know anything substantial about any of the other characters. The narrator's knowledge of Benito is related through two perspectives—one an objective view of Benito, and the other comprising Benito's thoughts and perceptions. This allows the reader to observe Benito from a distance while at the same time getting a glimpse at his thoughts and feelings.

Often, the narrator allows the reader to see the struggles taking place within Benito. He misses his wife terribly, and he is plagued by faltering self-esteem. Thinking about his clinics in Mexico, he wonders if all they really need from him is his money rather than his expertise. He thinks, "Had that always been the case? ... Were all those trips to Chiapas unnecessary, ultimately self-serving?" The narrator demonstrates Benito's feelings of loneliness as he ventures into the world, as when he thinks about the people likely to be at the party: "All those groups he is sure not to like, how they do proliferate, thinks old Benito sourly, aware of the cruel absence of Elizabeth, with her light laugh, agreeing."

At the same time, the narrator provides objective passages about settings and conversations, allowing readers to see how others view Benito. In the following passage, the narrator moves from Benito's thoughts to an objective point of view:

What old hands, Benito thinks, of his own, on the wheel, an old beggar's hands. What can this girl want of me? he wonders. Some new heaviness around the doctor's neck and chin makes him look both strong and fierce, and his deep-set black eyes are powerful, still, and unrelenting in their judgmental gaze, beneath thick, uneven, white brows.

Descriptive Settings

Throughout "The Last Lovely City," Adams provides highly descriptive passages of settings. She describes the landscape, the party, and a room in which Benito and Dolores once met. As Benito and Carla are driving to the party, they approach Stinson. Adams describes the view and gives life to the landscape by describing its inhabitants:

They have now emerged from the dark, tall, covering woods, the groves of redwood, eucalyptus, occasional laurel, and they are circling down the western slopes as the two-lane road forms wide arcs. Ahead of them is the sea, the white curve of the beach, and strung-out Stinson, the strange, small coastal town of rich retirees; weekenders, also rich; and a core population of former hippies, now just plain poor, middle-aged people with too many children.

The description of the party itself reads as a cursory glance across the room, capturing the feeling of being there with just enough detail to make it seem real. Adams writes, "This large room facing the sea is now fairly full of people. Women in short, silk, flowered dresses or pastel pants, men in linen or cashmere coats." Adams's descriptive passages also bring Benito's past to life. She describes a hotel room in which he and Dolores once met during their romance:

Heavy, gold-threaded, rose-colored draperies, barely parted, yielded a narrow blue view of the San Francisco Bay, the Bay Bridge, a white slice of Oakland. The bedspread, a darker rose, also gold-threaded, lay in a heavy, crumpled mass on the floor.

Historical Context

Realism in Literature

Adams's career consistently reflects tendencies of literary realism. She is known for portraying realistic characters (usually female) who are coping with the challenges and opportunities of the modern world. Because of her realistic bent, Adams never gives her characters a romantic ending. Instead, her characters learn to accept their situations and make the best of them.

Literary realism began during the post-Civil War years (1865-1900). The war had left many Americans feeling that their optimism for the country had been misguided, and a sense of cynicism grew. Writers like Charles Darwin and Karl Marx put forth new theories that called into question widely accepted religious and political ideas. The poets Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson wrote during this period, and their works represent a departure from romantic and sentimental verse that had been popular up until that time. The realism of Stephen Crane's fiction is made especially harsh by the author's spare style. Other writers, such as Mark Twain, William Dean Ho wells, and Henry James, portrayed various faces of realistic literature; it can be humorous or frightening, universal or distinctly regional. Although the realistic period ended in 1900, it continues to influence writers today.

Realistic writers focus on presenting the world as it really is, as opposed to portraying an idealized version of the world. The real world is full of flawed men and women, mistakes, good and bad luck, and chance encounters. Realism is identified with portraying the truth, which often means depicting the consequences—good or bad—of a decision or series of decisions. Realistic writers are often more interested in daily life and common occurrences than in extraordinary circumstances. Their characters often have revelatory moments as a result of the ordinary.

Because episodes in real life are not conveniently divided into beginnings, middles, and endings, realistic writers often leave unanswered questions and ambiguities in their stories. When a story ends, the reader is often left to decide what is most likely going to happen next. This is certainly the case in "The Last Lovely City" as the reader wonders what will become of Benito once he moves to Mexico.

San Francisco

San Francisco has a diverse population representing a wide range of interests, lifestyles, and backgrounds. The residents of San Francisco range from university students to aging hippies. Between 1980 and 1990 (when the story is set), the city experienced a population expansion of almost fifty thousand people. The population at the time was a little more than 50 percent Caucasian, almost 30 percent Asian and Pacific Islander, 13 percent Hispanic, 11 percent African American, and one-half percent

Native American. (Some people represent more than one race, which is why these numbers total more than one hundred.)

San Francisco's diverse population gives rise to a unique social climate. The city was at the center of the cultural revolution of the 1960s, when it was home to hippies, love-ins, sit-ins, and widespread drug use. In the early twenty-first century, it is a center of gay culture, with a relatively high population of homosexual men and women who live more openly than they do in most other American cities. There are neighborhoods settled by specific ethnic groups, such as Chinatown and North Beach (Italian). In these areas subcultures flourish, preserving many of the elements of foreign cultures, such as food, holidays, art, and religion. In addition, San Francisco has ten major institutions of higher learning, where students study general curricula, law, art, and music. The student population brings a wide variety of interests and events to the city. In recent years, the area around San Francisco has been the home of many technology businesses, especially online retailers. This new economic presence adds yet another dimension to the city.

Critical Overview

Adams wrote both novels and short stories, but her short stories have received more critical praise. Readers and critics alike admire her technique and her dedication to the craft of writing short fiction. In a review of *The Last Lovely City,* Rita D. Jacobs of *World Literature Today* applauds Adams's accomplishment in the short-story genre:

There are certain writers whose short stories exemplify the kind of perfection that theorists and critics extol. Alice Adams's stories frequently achieve the deftly limited but fully realized character, the complication quickly described, and the denouement which offers insight or a catch in the throat.

Also praising *The Last Lovely City,* Donna Seaman of *Booklist* observes that Adams's skill at describing personal interactions and revelations is evident in each well-crafted tale. She adds that each story, "including the haunting title story, revolves around the impossibility of escaping the past."

Because most of her stories are about average women making their way in the world, Adams is sometimes criticized for revisiting the same types of characters and themes too often. Other critics find fault in her habit of not providing the reader with a satisfying conclusion or a clear resolution.

In response to such criticism, Adams's defenders maintain that her use of average characters prevents her stories from becoming monotonous, rather than causing them to be too similar. Average people, they argue, experience a wide range of challenges and joys that provide endless material for fiction. Further, critics find Adams' s willingness to resist conventional happy endings refreshing, preferring her ability to show characters who find happiness in the real world in which everyone, including the reader, lives.

Adams's repeated use of average women as characters has earned her a reputation as an expert on the modern American woman. In "The Last Lovely City," Adams uses her insight into women to portray the very different characters of Dolores, Posey, and Carla. Further, in this story many of the issues faced by Adams's typical heroines are faced by a man, Benito.

Christine C. Ferguson comments on *The Last Lovely City* as a collection in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography,* and her general observations seem to apply to the title story. She writes:

Adams's characters become supremely human and thus worthy of empathy because they act so erratically despite superior intellect and experience. Their flaws, like those of most humans, are never of a spectacularly malignant nature; rather, they are rooted in mundane selfishness and petty hypocrisy.

Directly addressing Adams's characterization of Benito, Ferguson observes, "Perhaps the most tragic figure in these thirteen stories, he compels the reader's respect in the nobility with which he faces failure." Also commenting on Benito, a reviewer for *Publishers Weekly* remarks, "The best writing [of the collection] occurs in the title narrative, an elegiac musing on lost love by the 'sadhearted widower,' Dr. Benito Zamora."

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

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, Bussey explains that Benito's social interactions are awkward because he is grieving and not yet ready to develop relationships.

Described in the first sentence of "The Last Lovely City" as a "sadhearted widower," Benito Zamora is an aging doctor who is mourning the recent loss of his beloved wife. He is in the midst of working through his grief, and the process is painful and confusing. He feels alone in the world and desperately clings to the memory of his wife. In fact, memory of her is such a pervasive part of his life that he feels her presence as his constant companion; he imagines what she would say or think in various situations, and almost everything somehow reminds him of her. Because Benito has not reached the point in his grieving at which he can place his wife in the past, he is unable to sustain meaningful relationships with old friends or new acquaintances. The story, which revolves around a party, shows that Benito is not ready for in-depth relationships because of his grief.

Benito dwells on the past almost to the exclusion of participating in the present. His thoughts and feelings are more comfortable in the past with his late wife, Elizabeth. At the same time, Benito is selective about what he is willing to revisit. At the party he encounters two people from his past, but they are people associated with shame. An old girlfriend, Dolores, talks to him at the party, and she is as emotionally inaccessible as she was when they were involved. She reminds him of the days when he settled for meaningless relationships that offered nothing of substance. Benito distances himself from her because she is part of a past that is ugly, not the beautiful past he shared with Elizabeth. Benito also sees Herman Tolliver, a lawyer with whom Benito shared a business partnership many years ago. Although Benito made substantial money in this partnership, it came from hotels used for prostitution. Benito carries the shame of that reality with him. Seeing Herman at the party reminds Benito of his personal shame and weakness, and he keeps Herman at a distance. These figures remind Benito of the ugliness of his past at a time when he is trying to focus on the beauty of his past.

Benito draws sharp lines in his mind about his past; he indulges every happy memory of his wife and their time together but tries to keep out everything else. His descriptions of Dolores and her friend Posey, the party's hostess, reveal these boundaries. Posey is described as

a skinny old wreck of a woman, in a tattered straw sun hat and a red, Persian-looking outfit. She breathes heavily. Emphysema and some problems with her heart, the doctor thinks, automatically noting the pink-white skin, faintly bluish mouth, and arthritic hands —hugely blue-veined, rings buried in finger flesh.

When Benito sees Dolores, he describes her as "an immense ... short woman, with a huge puff of orange hair, green eyeshadow, and the pinkish spots that cancer leaves...."

By instantly perceiving these women as ugly and regarding them as clinical cases, Benito is able to quarantine them from his fond memories of the past.

On the other hand, Carla represents promise for the future. Benito is open to learning more about her and being admired by her. She has no link to his past and therefore serves as a possible bridge to the future. He does not know her very well, yet he develops fantasies about marrying her and having her bring vitality back into his house (in other words, his life).

These fantasies have nothing to do with Carla herself; they are merely a form of escapism. Benito surrenders to them too quickly and allows his mind to race with them. They provide temporary relief from the pain of grieving. He pins his hopes for the future to Carla because she has recently entered his life, and he imagines that she is interested in him. Benito fails to realize that a relationship with Carla (or any woman) at this point is ill-fated. His feelings for Carla are not genuine, and, until he brings closure to his grief, he is not ready for another meaningful relationship with a woman. Carla, however, is not interested; in fact, she is engaged to another man. Benito's hopes are dashed, but his heart is not truly broken. His feelings were never really invested in the hope for a future with Carla, so the despair he feels when she tells him she is engaged comes from the pain of returning to reality from fantasy.

Ultimately, Benito decides that he will move to Mexico to oversee his two free clinics and care for his aging mother. This is important because Mexico now represents the only other place on earth besides San Francisco to which Benito has any ties. Mexico is also the only place where he can indulge his memories of Elizabeth (who accompanied him to Mexico many times) without encountering the unpleasant ghosts of his past.

Benito's decision to move to Mexico is important for another reason. He is going, presumably, because he can feel needed and worthwhile there. He will take care of his mother, whose health is in decline. He can also participate more fully in the operation of his clinics, which provide medical attention to people who cannot afford such care.

The reality, however, is not that his mother and the clinics need him (his mother's failing health prevents her from recognizing him, and the clinics function smoothly year-round), but that he needs them. By going to Mexico, Benito will feel less helpless and lonely. He has accepted that his wife is gone, but he has not fully accepted that he is all alone. Perhaps he is approaching this realization, and so he hastily decides to go somewhere where he can feel useful and needed while he recovers.

At some level, Benito probably knows that he is not ready for new, meaningful relationships. By caring for a woman whose mental faculties are no longer fully functional, and by working diligently as a doctor in his clinics, he avoids relationships that demand much from him on an intimate level. People handle grief in many ways, and not everyone passes through it at the same rate. That Benito is willing to give himself the time and space to go through the process is a sign of health.

Source: Jennifer Bussey, Critical Essay on "The Last Lovely City," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

Hart has degrees in literature and creative writing and focuses her published writing on literary themes. In this essay, Hart looks at the psychological masks that Alice Adams explores through her characters in "The Last Lovely City."

Not until the middle of "The Last Lovely City" does Alice Adams explicitly mention the word mask, but the element that holds the fabric of this story together is Adams's implicit exposure of the masks behind which her characters hide. Beginning with the first paragraph, in which Adams has her main character, Dr. Benito Zamora, look down at his hands and describe them as "old beggar's hands," readers are forewarned that Adams is creating complex characters. How could a successful doctor consider himself a beggar?

As the story progresses, readers quickly realize that Benito wears many masks. The most obvious is his hidden longing for companionship. He is a recent widower and is driving a young, attractive woman named Carla to a party. The young woman initiated this action, calling the doctor and inviting him to a social gathering by the ocean. Her action has aroused the doctor's curiosity. Why did she call him? He asks, "What can this girl want of me?" He suspects that something lies beneath the surface of her actions, and the story follows his attempt to find the answers to his questions as Benito slowly and carefully removes the young woman's mask.

During their drive to the coast, Benito steals glances at the young woman's hair, her legs, and her thin body, while he maintains a professional conversation with her. The woman arouses both his sexual desires and his social hopes; he fantasizes that she might want to live with him, bringing life back into his darkened home. But when he looks at his hands, he feels old. And the question returns to him: What would a young, attractive woman want with an old man? Almost simultaneously, he feels a strength surging through his body, as if the signs of aging were but a mask. Behind the mask he feels the power of his youth gathering itself around his neck and chin. His eyes, he tells himself, are still as unrelenting as ever.

In one of the brief dialogs between the doctor and the young woman, another mask is exposed. Carla has been to Oaxaca, Mexico, the city outside of which Benito's mother still lives. Carla believes that her knowledge of Oaxaca is a connection that she can share with the doctor. Oaxaca is beautiful in Carla's world. She has visited it, staying in a fancy hotel with room service, silver settings at the dining room tables, and probably a swimming pool. But this luxurious setting is a mask that Oaxaca wears for tourists. Benito's mother and most of the native people of the outlying areas around Oaxaca are not familiar with this opulence. When Benito thinks of Mexico, his mother, and the people who live there, he does not think of fancy hotels. He thinks of poverty and the diseases that poverty brings. That is why he has donated much of his money to building and running two free medical clinics in Mexico. Later in the story, Benito also touches upon another mask in connection with Oaxaca, one that he wears when he visits his clinics. He questions whether the clinics really need him. He questions whether he

wears the mask of "Dr. Do-Good," a title sometimes jokingly given to him for his charitable work. Are his visits to Mexico just a way to feel better than everyone else? Was he wearing the mask of self-righteousness when, in fact, all the clinics really needed from him was his money?

As the car slides down the western slopes of the coastal mountains, Benito reminisces about his youth when he often attended other social gatherings in the same seacoast town. In reflection, he sees himself as one of the more eligible bachelors. He was invited to these rich parties, because he was young, handsome, and potentially moneyed. Included in his memory is the unmasking of his hosts and hostesses. They may have invited him to their private parties but when it came down to offering him one of their daughters' hands in marriage, their masks disintegrated rather quickly. Although he was looked at as a rising star, they could not get past his heritage. His complexion was too dark, and his name sounded too Mexican for the white people who had invited him to their parties.

It is at this point of the story that Benito remembers his wife and her death. As a physician, Benito is aware of the masks of mourners, put on to support the bereaved for the first couple of weeks after the tragedy of death but then taken off so their lives can return to a normal routine, leaving the bereaved to suffer in loneliness. He had seen it happen so many times that he was not surprised when it happened to him when his wife died. He was, however, angry and disappointed when the masks were removed, and his friends left him alone to find his own way through his misery.

There are masks to be found everywhere in this story, even in some of its simplest words. For instance, in another dialog between Carla and Benito, Carla describes the people who will be attending the party toward which they are heading. She uses the word marvelous. This word is a key word for Benito, a word that arouses unpleasant feelings. It is a cover word, used to mask quirks in personalities that are annoying. Benito likens the word "marvelous" to the word "characters," which is a cover word used to describe irritating people.

As the story moves toward the midpoint, Benito and Carla arrive at the party, and Benito bumps into an old friend. He hardly recognizes her as she has gained weight and "her doughy face [is] tightened into a mask, behind which he can indistinctly see the beauty that she was." This woman's name is Dolores Gutierrez, and she chides Benito about his name, telling him he should change it because it sounds too Mexican. Dolores wears many masks, one of which is that of marrying men for their English-sounding last names, which she, of course, inherits. Dolores also wore the mask of faithful wife. Dolores and Benito, in their youth, had an affair. During that affair, Dolores suggested that Benito pay her for sexual favors, as she donned yet another mask, that of make-believe prostitute. She also confessed to wearing the mask of heterosexuality: "I really don't like men at all," she told Benito and talked of her love of another woman.

Benito is unmasked, once again, when he sees Herman Tolliver at the party. Tolliver is an unscrupulous lawyer who suggested a shady moneymak-ing deal to Benito many years ago. It was because of this deal that Benito made all his money, was able to buy

an expensive home that overlooks the city and bay of San Francisco, and was able to fund the free medical clinics in Mexico. Although the story only alludes to the details about why this deal was immoral (possibly that the so-called hotels that he bought were involved in prostitution and drugs), Benito harbors guilt. He arranges to not be told the details of the hotels' use. He does not give interviews to curious news reporters about his works in Mexico. He is slightly irritated about the title Dr. Do-Good. And he never quite unmasks the truth behind the source of his money, even to his wife. But try as he does to hide behind his mask of respectability, when he sees Tolliver at the party, Benito is exposed, maybe not to the other members at the party but to himself.

Through the mask of death, Benito thinks about his wife, Elizabeth. The mask blocks remembrances of "petty annoyance ... or even moments of boredom, irritation, or sad, failed acts of love. All that is erased, and he only recalls ... the golden peaks of their time together." This mask of death is cruel, in some ways, because it makes the longing even harder to bear. In Benito's mind, Elizabeth has somehow become unearthly, an immortal goddess. Seeing her through this mask causes an insatiable hunger to rise inside of him, and he, almost desperately, tries to satisfy that hunger by finding a replacement for her. Could it be Carla, he wonders?

Carla grabs Benito's arm at one point and obviously flirts with him. After Dolores pays Carla a compliment, Carla asks Benito, "Why don't you ever say such flattering things to me?" This comment and the gesture of holding his arm make Benito's questions grow more intense. Is she interested in him? Could she be? "Such things do happen, the doctor reminds himself." And then he creates a mask for Carla. Although he hardly knows her, he structures her in a way that he wants to see her. Namely, he creates a mask of honesty and warm-heartedness. He makes her into someone who would appreciate his life, a life that has recently lost its value.

Dolores, on the other hand, annoys Benito. She reminds him too much of his past, a past he would rather forget. With Carla, as with Elizabeth, Benito tries to be as honest as he can. But with Dolores, who tries to unmask him with her questions about the source of his money and her comments that allude to her past intimacies with him, Benito holds tight to his mask while he fantasizes about pushing her over the railing and down into the sand. It is difficult enough to remove one's own mask, but when someone else tries to do it, it is downright infuriating.

The story then returns to the original couple, Benito and Carla, as they walk along the beach. Carla has run out to meet him, which once again spurs Benito's imagination, and he continues to elaborate on the mask that he has created for her. She would be a beautiful wife, he thinks. She could change the house any way she wants. "His imagination sees ... a brilliant house, with Carla its brilliant, shining center." But Carla has a few masks of her own. For one, she is not interested in Benito romantically because she is engaged to someone else. For another, she reminds him that she is a reporter, an investigative reporter, and her flirta-tiousness was spurned by her desire to do a story about him.

Immediately upon seeing Carla unmasked, Benito pulls a new mask out of his pocket to hide his embarrassment for not having seen Carla for what she truly is. "How nice," he says to her. Then he shuts off his most recent emotions and turns his attention to San Francisco, the city that spurred his dreams of becoming a doctor, making money, and finding a beautiful woman to love—the city where all his dreams came true.

In that moment of confusion, when one mask seems not big enough to hide all his disappointments, he attacks the last remaining vestige of his love and says: "You know, the whole city seems so corrupt these days. It's all real estate, and deals." With anger, frustration, and humiliation pouring out of him too fast for him to contain, the real Dr. Benito Zamora seems to gush out from behind all of his masks and commit himself to a dramatic change in his life. He tells Carla that he is moving back to Mexico to take care of his mother and "his poor." Although San Francisco fostered his dreams, he finds that his dreams have led him to a place of which he never dreamed. He is old, and he is alone. Those beggar's hands that he saw at the beginning of the story are well described. For having removed his masks, Benito realizes that his wealth has not kept him from wanting.

The author, Adams, then sums up the story with Benito walking past the big, pretentious beach house with all its masked partygoers and toward his car where he will make the "risky drive" to the city. In the end, readers are left with the image that it is a risky drive through life when one takes off all the masks, but what a way to go.

Source: Joyce Hart, Critical Essay on "The Last Lovely City," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #3

Aubrey holds a Ph.D. in English. In this essay, Aubrey considers Adams's story as one of moral and spiritual transformation.

Adams's "The Last Lovely City" is a story with many themes. Through its aging protagonist, Dr. Benito Zamora, it touches on emotions connected with loss, regret, loneliness, isolation, guilt and the longing for love. It is also a story about the past, about looking back and remembering. It shows how deeply the past exerts a hold on the present. Ultimately, though, this is a story about moral and spiritual transformation, the possibility that even an old life, deformed by many years of living by an ethical double standard may, yet give itself a fresh start.

At first glance, Benito seems an unlikely candidate for transformation. He is old and much of his life is now behind him. The portrait Adams presents in the opening paragraph is of a man set in a certain groove in life, strongly attached to his chosen mode of being: "Some new heaviness around the doctor's neck and chin makes him look both strong and fierce, and his deep-set black eyes are powerful, still, and unrelenting in their judgmental gaze."

However, Benito has plenty to regret, plenty to feel unhappy about, and dissatisfaction is always a potent spur to change. His wife died only five months previously. He is lonely. He is also angry that his friends have deserted him and that his life appears to be on the decline. Once famous, he is no longer asked by the media to give interviews. He is sometimes on the verge of self-pity. He also allows himself to entertain unrealistic romantic fantasies about Carla, the woman forty years his junior who has invited him to the party.

As the story develops through flashbacks triggered by people Benito meets at the party, it transpires that there is a deeper chasm in his life, an unresolved conflict stemming from his past actions. His considerable success and fame has been at the expense of his personal integrity, which means that he has gone through much of his life divided against himself. Adams gives an early clue to this when Benito confesses that the epithet by which he is known, Dr. Do-Good, is replete with irony.

Benito's problem is that the money that allowed him to finance the clinics on which his reputation rests was gained by unethical and illegal means. He gained the money when he bought a series of rundown hotels in San Francisco and allowed them to be used for child prostitution. Benito is in the position of a man who allows himself to benefit from practices that if applied in his own life would fill him with abhorrence. This is revealed by the flashback that shows him and Dolores Gutierrez in bed together when they were both young. Dolores confesses that what she would really like him to do is pay her for sex. For some reason, she appears to find this prospect exciting. Benito declines. It is clear that he is disgusted by the idea—and yet he is willing to make himself rich as the owner of hotels in which preteen Asian girls were most likely used to sell sex for money.

Even now in old age, he cannot fully shake the guilt he feels over this practice. His life is tainted.

Benito's moral and spiritual transformation comes at the climax of the story, triggered by his encounters with the ghosts of his past. In this process, the conscious, rational side of his mind breaks down, creating an opportunity for forgotten or repressed aspects of his psyche to surface, with dramatic consequences for the future course of his life.

The process happens in four distinct stages, as Benito walks on the beach in the evening. He has escaped from the oppressive party, but he is feeling confused. The encounters with people from his past have unsettled him. He feels the past rearing up at him. This is, in a sense, a moment of self-judgment; looking back at his life is not a comfortable experience for him. When he realizes that there may be even more ghosts from the past in the house, his rational mind can no longer bear to contemplate it. The result is that he becomes disoriented. For a moment he does not know where he is, even what country he is in, or how old he is. Present and past seem to merge. He loses his bearings in time and space. It is as if all the elements of his life have suddenly been tossed up in the air; to his conscious mind they no longer have recognizable form or shape and appear in no recognizable sequence. His moorings have been destroyed.

Benito recovers for a moment, but there is more to come. Below the surface of the controlling mind lies the realm of the heart, of feeling and emotion, the realm of life that men such as Benito often keep on a tight rein. But now he can no longer do so. This is the second stage of his transformation. In an effort to pull himself together, he remembers how close he is to San Francisco, earlier referred to as "the tall, pale city, lovely and unreal." So often the setting for Adams's stories, San Francisco is used here as a symbol representing the emotional core of Benito's life. In this emotionally charged moment, he recalls "beautiful, mystical San Francisco, the city and center of all his early dreams, the city where everything, finally, happened." He remembers how the city was the scene of his triumphs—where he studied medicine, opened his first practice as a cardiologist, met his adored wife, and bought his sleazy hotels. It was San Francisco where his success and fame were established. The city was truly the container of all he loved and cherished, the source of his greatest joys, his pride—and his secret shame.

Now, his whole life in San Francisco, in all its fullness and all its contradictions, looms up in his awareness. Partly because he knows that all his glory is now in the past, and partly because of his pressing knowledge of just how morally compromised his activities in the city were, Benito's heart breaks, just as his rational mind had failed him only a moment or so previously. Once more he is thrust into a kind of void in which nothing that he has previously relied upon can sustain him for a moment longer.

He stands absolutely still, a solitary figure on the dark beach. In a significant detail, he finds himself standing next to "an intricate, crumbling sand castle that some children have recently abandoned." The sand castle of course symbolizes the ordered building of his life that he has so carefully cultivated for so many years but which is now in ruins. Seemingly so solid, it has crumbled like a sand castle, or like a house of cards. Like the

adjective used earlier to characterize the city of San Francisco, it indeed proved "unreal."

What is taking place here is something close to the process of the emptying of the individual mind and shattering of the heart that is found in the literature of mysticism. The breaking of the individual ego, interpreted as a prelude to the entry of God into the individual life, is seen as a necessary process if there is to be any radical change in the individual's mode of being and orientation in life.

Benito is being emptied, but at the moment he has no idea of what the consequences will be. At this point the third stage of his transformation begins. It appears at first to be a backward step. Carla runs up to him on the beach, and he allows himself to assume that she has deliberately sought him out. His mind seizes on this possibility, and, in a moment, he has fallen prey to a ludicrous romantic fantasy. He pictures himself marrying Carla and installing her in his house overlooking the city. He assumes that he will then be able to recover all that he has lost.

Here, Adams hits on a profound psychological truth. The mind that has suddenly, in a moment of potential transformation, found itself turned upside down and inside out will seize on almost anything to regain its bearings—almost any prop will do. It is like a man falling down a deep chasm, flailing around, trying to grab hold of something that will break his fall. So, Benito fills his mind and heart with the foolish illusion that he can recreate his life with a woman so many years younger than he, whom he hardly knows. This diversion cannot possibly last for long, and it is indeed shattered after a few minutes, when Carla starts talking about her fiancé. She is not interested in Benito after all, and could never have been. As a result, yet another void opens up for Benito.

The permanent effects of this remarkable transformation process are ready to come to the surface, quite unexpectedly, as far as Benito is concerned. All it needed was the shattering of that last, despairing illusion. In response to a question from Carla, he says that he will return permanently to Mexico "to be near my clinics. See how they're doing. Maybe help." The narrator comments immediately, "The doctor had no plan to say (much less to do) any of this before he spoke, but he knows that he is now committed to this action."

This transformation is spontaneous. It is not the result of Benito's conscious thoughts but simply the work of the unconscious mind pushing its way to the surface and demanding to be heard. This move to Mexico announces the long-needed rectification of Benito's life; it is the act that will distance him irrevocably from the source of the double standards in his past. He will buy a house, he decides, bring his mother to stay there, and work in his clinics "with his own poor" for the rest of his days. It is a triumph, so late in his life, for simplicity and integrity; the double-edged glamour of the past, in which his integrity was soiled, is renounced forever.

There remains a final twist in this story of transformation. Old patterns and habits are not always easy to break. In Benito's case, they continue to exert a pull, like little devils unwilling to let go even though they have been unhoused. Benito senses this, and that

is why the prospect of returning to San Francisco to arrange his final departure fills him with dread. He well knows the seductive power of that city. So the story ends with a hint of warning, the suggestion that Benito's sudden, unexpected gains are fragile: "He manages to walk across the sand towards his car, and the long, circuitous, and risky drive to the city." The keyword here is "risky." Benito has made a breakthrough in healing the damaging split in his life between his inner values and his outer actions. He must be alert to continuing dangers; he cannot afford to slip back.

Source: Bryan Aubrey, Critical Essay on "The Last Lovely City," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2002.

Topics for Further Study

Read about the stages of grief and determine where Benito seems to be in the process. Think about Benito's interactions with the people in the story. How does his grief affect his interactions with people? Prepare a diagram showing the stages of grief, including where Benito is and why. Also predict what you think will happen when he moves to Mexico.

Choose one of the characters in the story besides Benito, and rewrite the story from that character's point of view. Be sure the facts of your version match the facts of Adams's version, but be creative in imagining the story from another perspective. How does your narrator perceive himself or herself? How does he or she perceive Benito? What is the narrator's motivation for coming to the party, and does he or she know the other guests?

Benito plans to go to Mexico and have his mother live with him. List some possible advantages of this arrangement both for Benito and his mother and list some potential difficulties or challenges they may face.

In the story, Benito funds clinics in Mexico City that help people who are unable to afford medical care by other means. Do some research about clinics like those mentioned in the story and report on what services they provide. Compare them with clinics in the United States and report on how they differ, including descriptions of how U.S. clinics are funded.

What Do I Read Next?

Adams's 1999 *The Last Lovely City* was the author's final publication before her death the same year. In addition to the title story, this collection features twelve other short works, most of which depict life in the San Francisco Bay area. The last four stories are considered a grouping of related tales that can be read as a novella.

Adams's novel *A Southern Exposure* (1996) draws from the author's youth in North Carolina. Set in 1939, this story is about a family that leaves Connecticut in favor of a more promising life in North Carolina. Acclaimed for its lively characters and many story lines, this story portrays life in the South before World War II, the civil rights movement, and the women's movement.

Edited by R. V. Cassill and Richard Bausch, the *Norton Anthology of Short Fiction: Sixth Edition* (2000) is a valuable resource for the student of short stories. Providing a breadth of writers, styles, and time periods, this collection reflects the genre's diversity and accessibility. Numerous schools and universities have adopted this anthology for literature and writing classes.

Further Study

Brothers, Dr. Joyce, *Widowed,* Ballantine Books, 1992.

Well-known psychologist and author Dr. Joyce Brothers discusses her personal experience with grief, which occurred when she lost her husband of over thirty years. Because of her perspective as a psychologist, Brothers is able to provide an account of the grief experience from both clinical and personal standpoints.

Friedman, Steven, *Golden Memories of the San Francisco Bay Area,* Arcadia Tempus Publishing Group, 2000.

Friedman presents the recollections and stories of nine people who have lived in the Bay Area for most of their lives. Their experiences range from wartime memories to simple stories about buying penny candy and other details of simpler times. Friedman brings his history of the Bay Area to life by including eighty black-and-white photographs of landmarks and people.

Magill, Frank N., and Charles F. May, eds., *Short Story Writers: Alice Adams—Hamlin Garland (Magill's Choice),* Salem Press, 1997.

This reference book provides overviews of major short-story writers from the United States and around the world. Each profile includes brief biographical information, a summary of the author's publications, comments on other genres in which the author has worked, an overview of the author's awards and contributions to the genre, and a critical treatment of the author's short-story career.

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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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