Leaving This Island Place Study Guide

Leaving This Island Place by Austin C. Clarke

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Introduction

Austin C. Clarke's short story "Leaving This Island Place" has been published in the short story collection *From Ink Lake: Canadian Stories*, collected by Michael Ondaatje, in 1990.

"Leaving This Island Place" is told from the perspective of a first-person narrator, the protagonist of the story, who is not named. The narrator is a young man preparing to leave his native Barbados ("this island place") in order to attend college in Canada. As the story opens, he is going to visit his father, who is dying in an almshouse. The narrator's mother and father were never married, and so he grew up in a home with his mother and stepfather and was not given his father's surname, making him a "bastard" child. Although his mother forbade the mention of his father's name throughout his childhood, the narrator occasionally sneaked off to visit his father. However, during the present time of the story, the narrator, who has made his way into the realm of the privileged social classes through his education, has become completely alienated from his father. His girlfriend, Cynthia, who is from a wealthy family, as symbolized by the Jaguar sports car her father has given her, does not even know he had a father. And, although she promises to see the narrator off at the airport, she does not show up. Throughout the story, the narrator repeats to himself the statement that he is "leaving this island," a step away from his family, friends, and native home about which he feels a mixture of guilt, anxiety, fear, and relief.

This story centers on themes of family, paternity, death, socioeconomic class, and the significance of "leaving" one's homeland for a foreign culture. The narrator is aware that he is, to some extent, "out of place," as an illegitimate child of an underprivileged family who has worked his way into the realm of the privileged classes. His success as a cricket player represents both his connection to his father, who had been the captain of his village cricket team, and his own hard-earned success as a social climber.

Author Biography

Austin C. Clarke is best known for his Toronto Trilogy, a series of three novels about immigrants from Barbados living in Canada: *The Meeting Point* (1972), *Storm of Fortune* (1973), and *The Bigger Light* (1975). In addition, Clarke has written five novels and six short-story collections. Clarke's autobiographical works include *Growing Up Stupid under the Union Jack: A Memoir* (1980) and *A Passage Back Home: A Personal Reminiscence of Samuel Selvon* (1994).

Clarke was born on July 26, 1934, in St. James, Barbados. His father, Kenneth Trothan, was an artist, and his mother, Gladys Clarke, was a hotel maid. Clarke attended Coleridge-Parry Primary School in St. Peter, Barbados. He attended secondary school at Harrison College in Barbados. In 1955, Clarke entered Trinity College, of the University of Toronto, Ontario, in Canada, where he studied economics and politics. From 1959 to 1960, Clarke worked as a newspaper reporter in Timmins and Kirkland Lake, Ontario. In 1963, he became a producer and freelance broadcaster for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) in Toronto. From 1974 to 1976, he was a cultural and press attache for the Barbados Embassy in Washington, D.C. From 1975 to 1976, Clarke was general manager at the Caribbean Broadcasting Corporation, in St. Michael, Barbados. Clarke also worked as a freelance journalist for the *Toronto Globe* and the CBC. Clarke has held numerous positions as professor, lecturer, fellow and writer-in-residence at universities throughout the United States and Canada, including the positions as Hoyt Fellow and visiting professor of Afro-American literature and creative writing at Yale University from 1968 to 1971; professor of literature at Brandeis University from 1968 to 1969; visiting professor of literature at Williams College in 1971; lecturer at Duke University from 1971 to 1972; visiting professor at the University of Texas, Austin, from 1973 to 1974; writer in residence at Concordia University in Montreal, Quebec in 1977; and writer in residence at the University of Western Ontario in 1978. Clarke also served on the board of trustees of the Rhode Island School of Design from 1970 to 1975, as vicechairperson on the Ontario Board of Censors from 1983 to 1985, and on the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada in 1988. Clarke's first marriage, to Trinity Collego, ended in divorce, and in 1957 he married Betty Joyce Reynolds, with whom he has three children: Janice, Loretta, and Jordan.

Plot Summary

The narrator of this story, who is not named, is preparing to leave his native Barbados in order to attend college in Canada. As the story opens, he is going to visit his estranged father, who is dying in an almshouse. The head nurse of the almshouse, Miss Brewster, shows the narrator to the room where his father lies dying. His mother and father had never been married, and so the narrator was born a "bastard" and was not given his father's surname. His mother then married another man, and he was raised in a house with his mother and stepfather. Although his mother forbade the mention of his father's name for the eighteen years of his childhood, the narrator occasionally risked punishment to sneak off and visit his father at his shack. The narrator was disturbed by the pornographic pictures of women hanging on his father's walls. The last time he visited his father, he had been so disturbed by these photos of naked women that he had run screaming away from his father's home. His father had been the captain of his village cricket team, but had been repeatedly arrested for drunkenness by a local policeman who seemed to have something against him. The narrator's relatives say that it was in jail that the father contracted the disease from which he is now dying, although the disease is not named. While he is visiting his dying father, the father asks that he have a nun from the Nazarene Church say a prayer for him before he dies, but the narrator ignores this request.

The narrator has made his way up in socioeconomic standing through his success in school, and as a cricket player. He is always aware, however, that he is "out of place" in the social world of his privileged friends, who throw him a going-away party the afternoon after he visits his father. His girlfriend, Cynthia, is from a wealthy family, and drives around in a Jaguar sports car her father has given her. After the party, he and Cynthia walk together on the Gravesend Beach. Cynthia insists that he write her every day from Canada. She claims that they should get married, but it is clear that she has not told her own father about their relationship, probably because of his lower social standing. When the narrator tells Cynthia that his father is dying, she laughs and says that she didn't even know he had a father. She promises him that she will see him off at the airport. But the following morning, as he boards the plane for Canada, he notes that Cynthia has not come. He wonders if his father is dead yet, and, if so, how he died, but realizes that he will never know. Although he feels guilty for leaving his dying father, the narrator reminds himself that he is "leaving the island" for better things. After the plane takes off, he looks down and sees nothing ahead of him but "the sea, and the sea, and then the sea."

Summary

"Leaving This Island Place" is Austin Clarke's short story about a young man whose imminent departure from his native Barbados to attend college in Canada stirs up feelings of regret, fear and relief.

A young man stares at the parish almshouse across the road from the cricket field, where he is playing on a hot afternoon. The young man can see faces staring out of the windows of the almshouse and searches for the face of his father, knowing that his father would never again enjoy a sunny day himself.

The young man, who is the narrator of the story, thinks that it is not cricket that reminds him of his father on this day, but rather the fact that the young man is leaving the island. The young man approaches the almshouse and hesitantly enters the disease and dirt-ridden facility to bid farewell to his dying father.

The head nurse, Miss Brewster, seizes the young man and guides him to the older man's room, telling the son that the father asks for him every day in his convulsions. Miss Brewster chastises the young man for not visiting more often. She knows that the reason he does not visit is because the older man is destitute and in a poorhouse.

As Miss Brewster leads the young man through the ward filled with dying and decaying bodies, he projects his mind onto the farewell party awaiting him later today with all his cricket-playing and society friends. The young man also conjures up the image of the face of his girlfriend, Cynthia, and tries to imagine her in this horrible place. He can only hear her imagined voice telling him to leave immediately.

At last, the young man reaches his father's bed and recoils when the older man's dirty, skeleton-thin hand reaches out for him. The older man acknowledges the fact that his son is going away and that he himself will also be leaving this place soon. The young man wonders if his mother's hatred drove his father to this place.

The young man remembers that his father was also a good cricket player, but his local celebrity led to his alcoholism and the destruction of everything positive in his life. Eventually, the man contracted the unnamed disease that has brought him to this place. The young man's mother would not allow him to mention his father's name in the home provided by his new stepfather, but the young man would periodically sneak away to visit his father over the eighteen years of his youth.

Remembering those days, the young man can recall the gift of shillings at each visit and the parade of women and pornographic materials at his father's house. During what would be the last visit to his father's house, the young man became so disturbed by the image of a naked woman hanging on the wall that he ran screaming from the house, never to return.

The young man returns his attentions to the present when his father asks him to bring a nun named Sister Christopher to say a prayer for him. The older man does not understand when his son tells him that the nun has been dead for five years. He repeats his request, which the young man ignores.

The young man is anxious to leave and get back to his own world of cricket fields and the young women at the local girls' school. Preferring to think about his private school days instead of the stench of the dying in this building, the young man rationalizes that it is fine that his father is dying because he, too, is leaving this island.

Before leaving, the young man must visit the canon to make arrangements for his father's burial, and the experience haunts him during the afternoon's bon voyage party. The whole experience with his father has made his own situation precarious, as he is reminded that he would also be a pauper had it not been for his excellent cricket skills, which have enabled him to advance in society and catapult him into another world entirely.

After the party, the young man spends time with Cynthia and feels even more out of place with Cynthia's privileged lifestyle because of his visit with his father. As the young man and Cynthia stroll on the beach, she petulantly demands that the young man write to her every day from Canada and tells him that she will inform her father about their plans to be married after the young man leaves tomorrow.

The young man feels like he should share the day's events with her, and so he tells Cynthia that he has visited his dying father at the almshouse. She simply laughs at the prospect of having a pauper for a parent. Cynthia does not wait for any explanation of the young man's situation, and the two young people speed off in her father's sports car.

The next morning as the young man waits at the airport, he wonders if his father has died yet, and he thinks about Cynthia, who promised to come see him off. The young man realizes that he will never know the final details of his father's death, and he realizes also that Cynthia is not coming to bid him goodbye.

The young man is content to be leaving the island, and as the plane climbs higher all he can see are the tiny little buildings, the patches of land and "then there is the sea, and the sea, and then the sea."

Analysis

The story is told from the first person point of view of the narrator, whose name is never revealed. This technique allows the author to share with the reader all the inner turmoil the young man is experiencing related to his father's death, his lack of social standing among his schoolmates and his imminent departure from the island.

The story, which is set on the island of Barbados, contains minimal dialogue, but the local dialect is very obvious in the character of Miss Brewster when she chastises the young man for not visiting his father until now. "And you is such a poor-great, high-

school educated bastard that you not acting too proud to come in here, because it is a almshouse and not a private ward, to see your own father! And you didn' even have the presence o' mind to bring along a orange, not even one, or a banana for that man, your father!"

The author uses visual imagery in the metaphor that compares the almshouse cots to muddied cricketers' clothes. "... I could see the men, looking half-alive and half-dead, lying on the smudged canvas cots that were once white and cream as the cricketer's clothes, airing themselves. They have played perhaps, in too many muddy tournaments, and are now soiled."

Another graphic metaphor is used when the young man disgustedly views the sick and dying men lining the hallways of the almshouse. "... and I looked instead at their bones and the long fingernails and toenails, the thermometers of their long idle illness." This is a much more graphic way to say that the men had lain a long time with no care and no one to tend to their personal needs.

One of the most obvious techniques used by Clarke is repetition. Time and time again the young man acknowledges to himself that he is leaving. Every time he thinks of something unpleasant or of something for which he should feel a sense of remorse, he calms himself by reminding himself that he is leaving this place. The story's title is derived from this mind game, and it symbolizes not only a physical departure from the island but also the imminent separation from the past which has held the young man captive in his shame and guilt.

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Characters

Miss Brewster

Miss Brewster is the head nurse at the almshouse who shows the narrator to the room in which his father lays dying. The narrator's description of her evokes images of death which express his anxieties about his dying father: "She is old and haggard. And she looks as if she has looked once too often on the face of death; and now she herself resembles a half-dead, dried-out flying fish, wrapped in the grease-proof paper of her nurse's uniform."

Cynthia

Cynthia is the narrator's girlfriend. She is of a significantly wealthier family and higher socioeconomic class than the narrator. Her class status is symbolized by her Jaguar sports car. When the narrator tells her that his father is dying, she laughs and says she didn't even know he had a father. Cynthia promises the narrator that she will be at the airport to see him off when he leaves for college, but she does not show up. The narrator laments, "Cynthia is not coming through the car park in her father's Jaguar. She has not come, she has not come as she promised."

Narrator

The narrator of the story, who is not given a name, is the central protagonist. The story is told from his first-person point of view. The story centers on a period of time as he is preparing to leave his native Barbados to attend college in Canada. As the story opens, he is going to visit his estranged father, who is dying in an almshouse. Although the narrator comes from an underprivileged socioeconomic class, he has worked his way into the world of the privileged through his education and his success as a cricket player. His girlfriend, Cynthia, is from a wealthier family than he, as are his friends, who throw a going-away party for him. In addition to his class status, the narrator is aware of the fact that he is a "bastard"□a child born without a legally named father□and therefore carries his mother's last name. He feels guilty to be leaving for college while his father is dying□yet his desire to "leave this island place" and escape his family and cultural roots in pursuit of a higher education prevails and he boards the plane as planned. Nonetheless, the class differences between the narrator and his girlfriend also seem to prevail: she fails to see him off at the airport, as she had promised. As his plane takes off, the narrator reminds himself once again, "I am leaving the island"□a statement he has repeated throughout the story, which expresses a mixture of regret, guilt, alienation, and the overriding desire to escape his own background in order to start a new life in a foreign country.

Narrator's Father

As the story opens, the narrator's father lies dying in an almshouse, where the narrator goes to visit him. The narrator explains that his father and mother were not married, and so he does not carry his father's surname and was raised by his mother and stepfather. The narrator relates that his father had been the captain of the village cricket team, but had been broken down physically and in spirit from repeated arrests for drunkenness by a local policeman. Although his mother forbade the mention of his father's name for eighteen years, the narrator occasionally risked getting in trouble in order to visit him. The narrator feels guilty for leaving the island when he father is dying, but he also feels estranged from his father, and tries to comfort himself with the idea that he is leaving the island anyway and that it doesn't really matter that his father is dying.

Narrator's Mother

The narrator's mother became pregnant by his father out of wedlock, and so the narrator carries his mother's last name, rather than that of his father. His mother married a man who became his stepfather and forbade the mention of his biological father's name in the household.

Themes

Leaving

A central theme of this story is "leaving." The story follows the day prior to the departure of the narrator from his native Barbados to go to school in Canada. He mentions repeatedly that he is "leaving" the island of Barbados. The story focuses on the various implications for the narrator of "leaving" his home. Out of guilt, he goes to visit his dying father the day before he leaves. He is also leaving his girlfriend, Cynthia. Although she insists that he write every day, and that they should have run off to get married, and that she will be at the airport to see him off, her promises are hollow. She doesn't even show up at the airport to say goodbye to him. So leaving the island means not only abandoning his poor, dying father, but also forfeiting his relationship with Cynthia.

"Leaving" also functions symbolically in the story. "Leaving" symbolizes death. His father even describes his own imminent death by stating that his is "leaving." Furthermore, "leaving" the island, for the narrator, means leaving his family and his cultural roots. Throughout the story, the narrator expresses ambivalence about the fact that he is "leaving." At one level, the reminder that he is "leaving" is a justification for abandoning his father. "Leaving" also represents a fantasy of "escape" from both his troubled family history and his socioeconomic background. He tells himself that he is "leaving. . .for Canada. . .for hope. . .for glory." But he also feels the anxiety of leaving the home that he knows for the unknown, as represented by the image of the vast and endless sea which ends the story.

Social Climbing

One of the central anxieties expressed by the narrator is over his socioeconomic status. He is from an underprivileged background. The fact that he was born out of wedlock and is therefore a "bastard" is a constant reminder of his lower socioeconomic status in society: "The absence of [my father's] surname on my report card would remind me in the eyes of my classmates that I might be the best cricketer and the best runner, but that I was after all, among this cream of best blood and brains, only a bas-" His success at sports, particularly cricket, is a symbol for the narrator of his success as a social climber. He continually contrasts the world of the cricket field with the room in the almshouse where his father lies dying. Despite his success at school, and his association with his wealthy and privileged classmates, the narrator, at his farewell party, is constantly reminded that "I was out of place here, that I belonged with the beginning in the almshouse. Each giggle, each toast, each rattle of drunken ice cubes in the whirling glass pointed a finger back to the almshouse." One of the themes of the story, in relation to social climbing, is that, no matter how successfully one works one's way into the upper classes, no one can escape his or her roots.

Family and Paternity

This story is centrally concerned with the theme of family, and particularly with paternity. The narrator's parents were never married, and so he is an "illegitimate" child. His mother, who married another man, forbade the mention of his father's name throughout his childhood. Much of the narrator's anxieties throughout the story revolve around this condition of alienation from his own father. Although he was forbidden, he did occasionally sneak off to his father's shack to visit him. And, although his mother assured him that his father "had come 'from no family at-all, at-all'" and "had had 'no background'" the narrator feels a strong sense of family in the presence of his father; he states that "to me in those laughing days he held a family circle of compassion in his heart." However, years before the story opens, the narrator had run away from his father's home and never again went to visit him. As the story opens, he is going to visit his father, who is dying in an almshouse. The narrator feels extremely ambivalent about his father, and about his father's death, but his overriding feeling is one of guilt for abandoning him as he is dying. The narrator tries to justify the fact that he is abandoning his own father in a time of need by telling himself that his father is already dead to him; he tries to relieve his conscience by reminding himself that he is "leaving the island" for a better life.

Style

Setting

This story is set in Clarke's native home of Barbados, the "island place" referred to in the story's title. Like the narrator and protagonist of his story, Clarke left Barbados as a young man in order to attend college in Canada. Thus, many of Clarke's stories are about immigrants who leave Barbados for North America. "This island place," in the story, represents not just home but the narrator's entire familial, ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomic roots. Thus, "leaving this island place" represents for the narrator the sense that he is abandoning his cultural roots in pursuit of socioeconomic success in the white-dominated Western world.

Point of View

This story is narrated from the first-person point of view. This means that the narrator is a character in the story, and that the reader is given only information, thoughts, or ideas available to that character. In this story, the narrator is not named, but is the protagonist of the story. First-person narration is important to this story because it concerns the narrator's inner conflicts as he prepares to leave his native island of Barbados to attend college in Canada. The reader is presented with the narrator's thoughts about his family and his socioeconomic standing. The first-person narration also presents impressions and descriptions of the protagonist as reflections of his own inner anxieties; for instance, when he is visiting his dying father, many of the people and objects he sees around him are described in terms which refer to death.

Dialogue

Clarke is celebrated among critics for his skillful rendering of the rhythms of speech of his Barbadian characters. Anthony Boxill, in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography,* makes note of his "unerringly sharp ear for Barbadian speech patterns and rhythms" which contribute "much to the richness of his characterization." An example of this is the speech of Miss Brewster, who shows the narrator to the room in the almshouse where his father is dying:

> That man having fits and convulsions by the hour! Every day he asking for you. All the time, day in and day out. And you is such a poor-great, high-school educated bastard that you now acting *too proud* to come in here, because it is a almshouse and not a *private ward*, to see your own father! And you didn't even have the presence o' mind to bring along a orange, not even one, or a banana for that man, *your father!*

Repetition

This story makes use of repetition as a central narrative device. The title of the story, "Leaving This Island Place," is echoed throughout the narrative. The narrator repeats phrases such as: "But I am leaving"; "I am leaving"; "I am leaving this place"; "I know I am leaving this island"; "I am leaving this island place"; "I am going to leave"; "I was leaving"; and "I am leaving the island." This serves in part to emphasize the theme of *leaving* as central to the story. In addition, the very fact of the excessive repetition of this phrase by the narrator implies that he is struggling with the fact that he is "leaving" and with its significance to his life. The phrase also takes on different implications at different points in the story. In some instances, the narrator reminds himself that "I am leaving" as a means of justification for the fact that he is abandoning his dying father. At other points, the narrator reminds himself that "I am leaving" as an expression of his desire to escape his family and his uncomfortable social standing in Barbados. At other points, it is an expression of anxiety at the prospect of leaving his home, his family, and his girlfriend.

Historical Context

Barbados

This story takes place in Barbados, an island nation in the Caribbean. As Clarke is originally from Barbados, many of his stories either take place there or are about immigrants from Barbados to the U.S. and Canada. Ninety percent of the population of Barbados is made up of people of African descent. The official language is English, but Bajan, a dialect of English, is also spoken. The capital of Barbados is Bridgetown. Barbados was colonized by the British from 1627, when they first established a settlement there, to 1966, when the island achieved national independence. In the seventeenth century, sugar plantations became the primary basis of the economy of Barbados. Africans were forcibly brought to Barbados to work as slaves on these sugar plantations. A slave rebellion was waged in 1816, but slavery was not abolished in the area until 1834. Nevertheless, Barbadians of African descent continued to be employed primarily on sugar plantations and continued to occupy the least privileged socioeconomic strata. Labor disturbances in the 1930s, however, led to various reforms in the 1940s, which made it possible for black political organizers in the region to gain power and influence. Barbados achieved complete internal self-rule in 1961, and national independence in 1966, although it remained part of the British Commonwealth. Throughout the 1980s, the political system of Barbados was considered one of the most stable in the English-speaking Caribbean.

West Indies

The island nation of Barbados is part of the West Indies. The West Indies are made up of twenty-three island nations occupying the Caribbean Ocean in the region between Florida and South America. The history of the West Indies is characterized by the colonization of British, Dutch, Spanish, French, and Danish, who fought back and forth over territories in the region in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Thus the culture and language of the nations of the modern West Indies generally coincide with the culture of the nation by which it was colonized. The history of forcing enslaved Africans to work on the sugar plantations, however, characterizes the entire region. Many nations of the modern West Indies have organized around common economic interests through the formation of the Caribbean Community and Common Market, formed in 1973.

Cricket

The sport of cricket is important to the narrator's central concerns throughout the story. His father had been the captain of his village cricket team, and the narrator himself has become a cricket star in his own right. For the narrator, cricket represents his status as a social climber, for it is in the community of his wealthy, educated friends that cricket

has become central to his identity. A game of cricket requires eleven members on each team, and is played with a bat and ball; each team is in a position to either "bat" or "bowl," and then switches between innings. The game of cricket began in the 1840s in New Zealand, but is derived from a game played by rural boys as far back as the thirteenth century. The formalization of cricket as an organized sport may in part be indicated by the founding of the New Zealand Cricket Council in 1894. In the West Indies, cricket was introduced in the early nineteenth century. Barbados was the first West Indian nation to participate in an inter-colonial match, in 1891, with what is now Guyana. An organized board for regulating cricket matches between islands of the West Indies, and with nations outside of the West Indies, was founded in 1927. In 1926, the West Indies joined the Imperial Cricket Conference, which was renamed the International Cricket Conference in 1965 and then the International Cricket Council in 1989. The first World Cup cricket competition was held in 1975. During the 1980s, the West Indies were a dominant force in international cricket competition. Although women played cricket beginning in the eighteenth century, the International Women's Cricket Council was not founded until 1958.

Literary Heritage

Clarke can be categorized according to two distinct literary heritages: he is both a Caribbean writer and a Canadian writer.

As a native of Barbados, which is part of the Caribbean, Clarke is grouped within this larger regional literary tradition. Because the Caribbean was colonized by Spain, France, Great Britain, and the Netherlands, the literature which has emerged from the island nations occupying it has been written in several different languages, corresponding to the language of the nation by which each island was colonized. Because the Spanish, who originally colonized the area, completely destroyed the people and culture native to the region, there is no record of the oral traditions which would have characterized the pre-Columbian era of Caribbean history. It was not until the 1920s that writers of the French- and Spanish-speaking Caribbean began to formulate a distinct literature emerging from black West Indian culture (rather than from European culture). The English-speaking Caribbean, which includes Barbados, did not develop along these lines until 1945. Early writers of the new tradition include George Lamming, V. S. Naipaul, and Louise Bennett.

Canadian literature has developed along two distinct lines: anglophone (written in English) and Francophone (written in French). Clarke is part of Canada's anglophone literary heritage. Clarke's story "Leaving This Island Place" has been collected in the anthology of Canadian literature entitled *Ink Lake*, edited by Michael Ondaatje.

Critical Overview

Clarke received early encouragement in his writing in high school, and in college won prizes for several of his poems. Clarke went on to write as a journalist before settling on fiction as his preferred genre.

Clarke is known for his novels and short stories which focus on the struggles of black people attempting to succeed in white society. Anthony Boxill notes that Clarke "became the foremost recounter of the black West Indian immigrants' experience in Canada." Boxill describes the overriding tone of Clarke's fiction in regard to race relations: "Of his generation of West Indian novelists he is perhaps the most outspoken and bitter in depicting the experience of the poor black when confronted with the establishment, whether it is that of the white majority in Canada, the colonial expatriate, or the postcolonial ruling black middle class in Barbados."

Clarke's first novel, *The Survivors of the Crossing*, was published in 1964, ten years after his arrival in Canada. It concerns the conditions of sugar plantation workers in Barbados. In this novel, the main character, Rufus, tries to organize sugar plantation laborers, but is discouraged both by the institutional powers of a white ruling class and also by members of the black middle class. His second novel, *Thistles and Thorns*, is also set in Barbados and centers on a boy, born illegitimate, who leaves the home of his mother in order to find his father. These novels were received by critics as flawed, but certainly the work of a promising author. As with most of Clarke's works, critics generally agreed on Clarke's talent for capturing the rhythms of Barbadian speech and for his depiction of comic scenes. However, as Boxill explains, "they are weakly structured and lack aesthetic distancing and tonal discipline." Clarke's characters also tend to fail to draw the reader in.

In his first two novels, Canada represents a promised land of escape from economic and social woes. His next three novels depict what immigrants from Barbados find when they reach Canada. His Toronto Trilogy is comprised of a series of three novels about immigrants from Barbados to Canada. These novels generally portray the condition of West Indian immigrants to Canada in terms of their struggles with racial prejudice and economic hardship. The first in the trilogy, *The Meeting Point*, was published in 1972. It centers on a woman who is a black immigrant from Barbados and who works as a maid for a Jewish family in Toronto. The second, *Storm of Fortune*, was published in 1973. It includes some of the same characters as the first, but after they have achieved a degree of financial success and harbor expectations of assimilating into mainstream culture. The third, *The Bigger Light*, was published in 1975. It centers on a man, an immigrant from Barbados, who becomes alienated from his family and his culture in the process of attempting to succeed in white society. While critics continued to admire Clarke's facility with the dialect of Barbados, his plot structures in the Toronto Trilogy were criticized as contrived to suit his social message.

Clarke's collections of short stories include *When He Was Free and Young He Used to Wear Silks* (1973), *Short Stories of Austin Clarke* (1984), *When Women Rule* (1985),

Nine Men Who Laughed (1986), *In This City* (1992), and *There Are No Elders* (1993). His talents as a short story writer are indicated by the fact that in 1965 he won the University of Western Ontario President's Medal for the best story published in Canada that year.

Clarke's autobiographical work *Growing Up Stupid under the Union Jack: A Memoir* (1980) has been generally praised. Boxill states that in this work "Clarke is once again at his best. . .Full of humor and vigor, it recreates the world of his boyhood with much affection but without glossing over the injustice and brutality with which the society treated the poor and the black. One has the feeling that far from forcing his material into a predetermined rigid mold, the author has allowed this book to grow organically."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Brent has a Ph.D. in American Culture, with a specialization in film studies, from the University of Michigan. She is a freelance writer and teaches courses in the history of American cinema. In the following essay, Brent discusses the theme of death in "Leaving This Island Place."

As death is a central theme of this story, the narrative is filled with references, both direct and indirect, to death. Because the story is told from the first-person point of view of the narrator, these recurring references to death express his own inner psychological state and preoccupations. On a literal level, he is preoccupied with death because his father is dying. This fact, occurring just as he is preparing to leave Barbados for college in Canada, has brought up memories of his family circumstances and reminded him of his socioeconomic roots, in contrast to his current lifestyle as an educated, upwardly mobile young man. On a figurative level, the narrator's preoccupation with death symbolizes the theme of "leaving" and the various symbolic forms of death which accompany his imminent departure from his family and culture.

As the story opens, the narrator is visiting his dying father in an almshouse just across from the cricket field where he plays every Saturday. This is the narrator's first visit to his estranged father in many years. As he enters the almshouse and the head nurse shows him down the hallway to the room where his father lies dying, his perceptions of what he sees, hears, and smells around him are filled with associations to death. Everyone in the almshouse seems to him to be dying or already dead. "Something in those faces told me they were all going to die in the almshouse," he reflects. His own father's impending death is first indicated in the story by the narrator's comment that he "would never live to see the sun of day again." The narrator's feelings of guilt and ambivalence toward his father are in part motivated by the knowledge that his father is dying, and in part palliated by the reminder that he is "leaving" and therefore does not need to get "involved" with his father. "I know it is too late now to think of saving him," he notes. "It is too late to become involved with this dying man."

Everyone there seems to him on the verge of death. The other men inhabiting the almshouse look to the narrator "half-alive and half-dead." Even the head nurse, Miss Brewster, seems to the narrator to be occupying the space of death: "She is old and haggard. And she looks as if she has looked once too often on the face of death; and now she herself resembles a half-dead, dried-out flying fish, wrapped in the grease-proof paper of her nurse's uniform." The impression that the almshouse is filled with masses of dying men is implied by the image that some of the men in the ward lie on their backs in bed, "like soldiers on a battlefield."

The narrator's impression that he is surrounded by death becomes transferred onto his own sense of himself, as if he were also dying; he feels that the men in the almshouse "all looked at me as if I were dying." When the narrator is finally in his father's room, he says, "I was alone with the dead." In his mind, his father is already dead. And his father's death again leads him to feel as if he himself were dead or dying, as he states

that "there is death in this room and I am inside it." The narrator himself is nowhere near literally dying; symbolically, however, the imminent death of his father, and his imminent departure from the island, represent the death of his ties to his family and to his cultural roots. The death of his father symbolizes the disappearance of his only true connection to his personal and cultural history. And, while his father seems to him to represent his own death, his wealthy, educated friends, particularly his girlfriend Cynthia, are associated with life. In the room with his dying father, he tries to imagine Cynthia's face, as "I kept myself alive with the living outside world of cricket and cheers and 'tea in the pavilion.'" Thus, for the narrator, his desire to be associated with a wealthier socioeconomic class feels like a means of rescuing himself from death.

While in the room with his father, the narrator continues to evoke imagery symbolically associated with death. Echoing his claim earlier that his father will never again see the sun of day, his sees his father "in the sunset of this room." The sunset is a figurative image of death. The narrator repeatedly describes his father as not just dying but already dead. When his father speaks, he says that "it was the skeleton talking." And when his father holds out his hand to the narrator, the narrator perceives it as a "dead hand" and does not take it. In describing his father as if he were already dead, the narrator is attempting to justify the fact that he is going to be abandoning his own dying father when he leaves the island for Canada. By telling himself that the father is already dead, the narrator can imagine that there is nothing more he could be doing for the man, that he need not feel guilty for abandoning him. The narrator imagines that the physical distance of Canada will relieve his guilt over his abandonment of his father; later that day he imagines that, once in the airplane, he will be "bound for Canada, for hope, for school, for glory; and the sea and the distance had already eased the pain of conscience; and there was already much sea between me and the cause of conscience"□the "cause of conscience" being his dying father, about whom he feels so guilty.

It is the father who directly makes the connection between the narrator's plan for "leaving the island" and his own inevitable "leaving" when he dies. "I hear you going away," he says, "and that is a good thing. . .because I am going away. . .from this place." As he listens to his father's "words and words and words" he continues to remind himself that, as far as he is concerned, his father is already dead. He thinks back to his childhood, when his mother forbade the mention of his father's name in the house, and concludes that "he had died before this present visit." And again, the narrator tells himself, "He was dead before this." Here the narrator is repeatedly trying to relieve his own sense of guilt by trying to convince himself that his father is already dead to him.

The narrator then uses the metaphor of his father's "claim" upon his life. A claim is an official document which proves legal ownership, usually of land. The narrator tells himself, "Let him die. I am leaving this island place. And let him die with his claim on my life. And let the claim be nailed in the coffin." This imagery implies that the narrator feels his father holds the rightful ownership to his own life. All of the narrator's efforts to tell himself that his father is already dead are thus in part an attempt to deny his father's "claim" upon his life, that is, to deny to himself that he has any duty to take care of his own father, even to help pay for something better than a pauper's funeral. Nonetheless,

the narrator continues to feel that his father does indeed have a claim upon him. And this claim is in part the fact that the narrator belongs to his own family and his own culture. This claim is the proof that, although he can "leave the island," he can never escape his personal or cultural roots; they will always hold a claim upon him, no matter how successfully he makes his way into the privileged socioeconomic world.

When, after the farewell party thrown by his friends, the narrator walks on the beach with his girlfriend, he continues to perceive his surroundings in terms which make reference to death. The beach they walk on is called "Gravesend Beach," echoing his own guilt over the fact that his father will be buried in a pauper's grave. He hears "the laughter of crabs scrambling among dead leaves and skeletons of other crabs." Later, he describes the docked fishing boats as "lifeless," as they are "taking a breather from the deaths of fishing."

As he waits in the airport terminal for his plane, the narrator wonders, "My father, is he dead yet?" The degree of his alienation from his father is expressed through the fact that he considers looking in the obituary column of a newspaper in order to find out if his own father had died yet. Even his mother encourages him to think of "leaving the island" as a justification for abandoning his father; she tells him, "Look, boy, leave the dead to live with the blasted dead, do! Leave the dead in this damn islan' place!" But, despite his own, and his mother's, insistence that "leaving the island" is a legitimate excuse for abandoning his father, he continues to express guilt and sadness over this departure. However, rather than directly expressing his own sadness that he is leaving, the narrator projects this sadness onto the strangers he sees around him at the airport; he sees only "the fear and the tears and the handshakes of other people's saying goodbye and the weeping of departure."

While he has stated that "leaving the island" for him represents "hope . . .school. . .and glory," the final image of the story expresses his feelings of emptiness and loneliness upon "leaving" his family and his roots. As he looks down from the plane, he sees only, "the sea, and the sea, and then the sea."

Source: Liz Brent, in an essay for *Literature of Developing Nations for Students*, Gale, 2000.

Topics for Further Study

Clarke was born and grew up in Barbados, which is in the West Indies. Find a map of the West Indies, a grouping of many island nations. What other countries are part of the West Indies? Learn more about one of these countries, including its culture and history.

Clarke can be categorized as a Canadian author, and therefore as part of the Canadian literary tradition. Learn more about Canadian literature. What historical trends and developments have characterized Canadian literature? Learn more about another Canadian author and his or her principal works. Read and discuss a story by this author.

Clarke is a native of Barbados. Learn more about the history of Barbados and also about contemporary Barbados. What significant events or developments have occurred there?

Clarke's fiction can be categorized in the literary tradition of the West Indies. Learn more about the history and significant developments in West Indian literature. Who are some other West Indian authors of note? Read and discuss a story by another West Indian author.

Clarke's fiction is concerned primarily with the experiences, struggles, and achievements of immigrants from Barbados to Canada. Learn more about another population of immigrant to your own country or local area. What are and have been the immigration patterns of this group of people? What particular issues and concerns face immigrants from this particular nation or culture? What is the policy of your own nation toward immigration?

What Do I Read Next?

From Ink Lake: Canadian Stories, edited by Michael Ondaatje and published in 1990, contains Clarke's story "Leaving This Island Place."

Clarke's *The Meeting Point* (1967) is the first novel in his Toronto Trilogy. The novel is about a group of immigrants from Barbados to Canada.

Clarke's *Storm of Fortune* (1973) is the second novel in the Toronto Trilogy, and follows the further experiences of the characters presented in the first.

The Bigger Light (1975) is the third novel in Clarke's Toronto Trilogy.

Growing Up Stupid under the Union Jack: A Memoir is Clarke's autobiographical story of his childhood in Barbados.

The Black Writer in Africa and the Americas (1973), edited by Lloyd W. Brown, contains a piece contributed by Clarke.

Further Study

Clark, Austin C., *Amongst Thistles and Thorns*, Heinemann, 1965; McClelland & Stewart, 1965.

Amongst Thistles and Thorns tells the story of a young boy growing up in Barbados.

□□□, *The Bigger Light*, Little, Brown, 1975.

The Bigger Light is the last of Clark's "trilogy" following the fortunes of characters introduced in *The Survivors of the Crossing* and *Storm of Fortune*.

□□□, *The Meeting Point*, Heinemann, 1967; McClelland & Stewart, 1967.

The Survivors of the Crossing is the first in Clark's socalled "trilogy" of works exploring the unique problems of West Indian immigrants.

□□□, *Storm of Fortune*, Little, Brown, 1973.

Storm of Fortune is the second of Clark's "trilogy" is the second of Clark's "trilogy", following the fortunes of characters introduced in *The Meeting Point*.

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Boxill, Anthony, "Austin C. Clarke," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Volume 53: *Canadian Writers since 1960*, Bruccoli Clark, Gale, 1986, pp. 124-29.

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Literature of Developing Nations for Students (LDNfS) 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, LDNfS 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 LDNfS 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 LDNfS 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 LDNfS 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 LDNfS 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

LDNfS 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 Literature of Developing Nations 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 LDNfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the LDNfS 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 Literature of Developing Nations for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Literature of Developing Nations 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 LDNfS 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.□ Literature of Developing Nations for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from LDNfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Literature of Developing Nations 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 LDNfS, 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 Literature of Developing Nations 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 LDNfS, 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 Literature of Developing Nations 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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