Leaving the Yellow House Study Guide

Leaving the Yellow House by Saul Bellow

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Introduction

Saul Bellow's story "Leaving the Yellow House" is atypical of his body of work, which usually features urban settings and intellectual explorers. Still, yet it remains one of his most well-known and discussed stories. "Leaving the Yellow House" presents a protagonist who seems almost the antithesis of the Bellow searcher. Hattie Wagonner, seventy-two years old and alone, has lived most of her life under a cloud of self-deception. After an accident threatens her independent way of life, Hattie finds herself forced to look back on the past. Viewing her life as if it were a movie reel, Hattie is able to stop and examine the most important periods and events. Yet, such scrutiny seems to have little effect on her mindset. The resolution Hattie makes at the end of the story resides as firmly in her habit of denying the truth as any of the actions she has taken in the decades of her adult life.

This resolution has captivated scholars and critics. Many disagree on how to interpret the ending, Hattie's actions, and Hattie's character. Indeed, criticism of the story has been varied since its publication in the collection *Mosby's Memoirs and Other Stories* in 1968. Such a variety of ways to read the story only exemplifies its complexity and richness.

Author Biography

Saul Bellow was born in 1915 to Russian parents who had emigrated to Quebec, Canada. Solomon Bellows, as the child was called, spent the first years of his life in a poor, ethnic neighborhood in the suburbs of Montreal. When Bellow was nine, the family moved to Chicago, Illinois. A childhood illness led to a year-long confinement in a hospital, and during this time Bellow developed his interest in literature. His high school friends were also interested in writing as well as discussion of politics, religions, and ideas in general, and Bellow and his friends read their stories and writings aloud to one another. When he was only seventeen, Bellow and a friend ran away to New York City, where both boys attempted unsuccessfully to sell their first novels.

Bellow eventually returned to Chicago, studying literature at the University of Chicago. He switched his academic interests to anthropology and transferred to Northwestern University in 1935. After graduation, he began a program of graduate study in anthropology at the University of Wisconsin, but he quickly abandoned his studies because he was more interested in writing fiction than writing his thesis. After dropping out of school, Bellow obtained work with the WPA Writers' Project, preparing short biographies of midwestern writers. His ensuing jobs were all related to his literary interests. In 1938, Bellow began to work as a teacher. His first story was published in 1941.

During World War II, Bellow served as a merchant marine but was stationed stateside. This experience led to the writing of his first published novel, 1944's *The Dangling Man.* This novel established him as a spokesperson for his contemporaries. Until publication of his next novel, *The Victim,* published in 1947, Bellow worked as a teacher and a freelancer. *The Victim* helped earn him a Guggenheim Fellow, which enabled him to travel in Europe. Upon his return to the United States, Bellow settled in New York.

In 1953, Bellow published another promising novel, *The Adventures of Augie March.* While many critics negatively reviewed this book, it won for Bellow a number of impressive awards. It was his 1956 novella, *Seize the Day,* however, that attracted widespread critical acclaim. Today, this piece of work is considered a masterpiece of modern American fiction. "Leaving the Yellow House," another of Bellow's important works, was published two years later, but it was not incorporated into a short fiction collection until 1968. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Bellow continued a steady stream of publishing, including novels, lectures, a memoir, short stories, and a play. He was also co-editor of a journal.

Bellow has won numerous awards and made significant achievements throughout his career. His importance as a writer is recognized on an international level as well. For instance, French President Francois Mitterand made Bellow a commander of the Legion of Honour, and he was elected a fellow by the Scottish Arts Council. Most importantly perhaps, he also won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1976. Since the mid-1980s, he has primarily concentrated on writing novellas.

Plot Summary

As the story opens, seventy-two-year-old Hattie has lived in the old yellow house in the practically deserted community of Sego Desert Lake, Utah, for years. Born and bred on the East Coast, Hattie came out West after a failed marriage to a Philadelphia blueblood. She used to have a lover named Wicks. He was a cowboy, but Hattie, unable to overcome her inherent snobbery, refused to marry him and eventually rejected him. She also lived with another elderly woman, India, who left the house to her after her death.

Hattie is a likeable old woman, though she is difficult. She drinks too much and smokes too much, and is often mean-spirited. She also has a problem with self-deception. Although she lives alone, she maintains a routine that includes weekly trips to the nearest town to buy groceries, visit with friends, and get her hair done.

One day, returning from her neighboring friends' house, Hattie has an accident. Hattie explains away her loss of control of the car as due to a sneeze, but everyone knows that she was drunk at the time. Whatever its cause, the accident leaves Hattie's car stranded on the railway tracks, and a train is due along soon. Hattie hurries to the nearby Pace dude ranch for help. Darly, the elderly ranch hand, returns with her to the car. Darly wraps a chain around the car's bumper and tries to tow it off the tracks with his truck, but Hattie, near the chain, gets knocked down. The fall breaks her arm. Darly eventually gets the car off the tracks, and then he takes Hattie to the neighbor's house, the Rolfes. The couple take her home, put her to bed, and say they will call the doctor in the morning.

Hattie spends the next several weeks in the hospital, but she worries about how she is going to pay off her bill. Hattie has little money; her only asset is her house and its tattered furnishings. She thinks she will have to sell or rent her house in order to get the money, but when she speaks of her plan to Jerry Rolfe, he tells her she is expecting too high a price for the house.

After leaving the hospital, Hattie stays with the Rolfes. Jerry Rolfe thinks she should go back East to live with her brother, because she cannot (even before her accident) take care of herself. Hattie herself worries about what she will do. Once she returns to her own house, the Rolfes continue to help her, bringing her groceries and supplies back from town. Still unable to drive her car, Hattie must rely on their aid. She knows, however, that they will be vacationing soon. She resents their defection and she also wonders who will help her get by in their absence.

The Rolfes explore different options for Hattie's care. Jerry Rolfe talks to another neighbor, an elderly but tough woman named Amy Walters. When he suggests the two women live together, however, Amy says no because she and Hattie are too different. Amy, however, agrees to take care of Hattie if Hattie wills her the yellow house. Rolfe, knowing Hattie would refuse this offer, never even mentions Amy's proposition to Hattie.

Another neighbor, Pace, also offers to give Hattie a monthly stipend if she leaves the house to him. Hattie refuses angrily.

Meanwhile, despite the doctor's warnings, Hattie is drinking and smoking as much as ever. In her solitude, she thinks back over her life, playing it back like a film. She remembers how she had to kill her dog, when he turned mean and attacked her. She had publicly blamed Pace for the disappearance of the dog, and this memory makes her acknowledge the way she has lied to herself and others throughout her life.

She decides to take greater responsibility of herself and her actions by making a will, but she can think of no one who is deserving of her only asset, the house. She discounts her relatives and her friends. In the end, knowing that it is unreasonable, she wills the house to herself. Yet, she promises herself that she will think about her problem and work it out the next day.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

Hattie's neighbors at Sego Desert Lake are concerned for her safety. Desert life is difficult enough for hardy souls, but an old, frail woman such as Hattie, it could be dangerous. Hattie also doesn't manage her money wisely, and she has a drinking problem. Her neighbors have helped her in the past, but Hattie's frequent pleas are trying their patience.

Despite this, Hattie's neighbors genuinely are fond of her. Hattie is a pleasant woman, who in her youth graduated from finishing school and studied the organ in Paris. However, as Hattie ages, her memory begins to slip and she is given to frequent tantrums. Once a week, Hattie dresses up and drives 40 miles to buy groceries, do laundry and get her hair done. When her errands are completed, she usually stops for lunch and two martinis and then spends the remainder of the afternoon at Marian Nabot's Silvermine Hotel, drinking and gossiping with her lady friends. She heads home at precisely five o'clock.

Among Hattie's neighbors are the Rolfes, who are retired and financially well-off, and the Paces, who own a guest ranch. The other people who live in the area primarily are Mexicans, Indians and Negroes who lives in shacks and boxcars.

Hattie has lived in her house at Sego Desert Lake for more than 20 years. She first came to the lake during the Great Depression with a cowboy named Wicks. Hattie was newly divorced and didn't have much money, and she and Wicks lived on the range, trapping coyotes for a living. Once a month they came to town, rented a room and drank heavily. They got caught in a storm one day, so Hattie and Wicks knocked on the door of the yellow house where Hattie lives now and were greeted by Alice Parmenter, who took them in and let them sleep on the floor. Eventually, Wicks leaves Hattie and moves on.

Despite her fine upbringing, Hattie likes to think of herself as a rough, experienced woman of the West. As part of this persona, she drinks more than she should and keeps bottles of whisky hidden in her house and car.

One evening after having a few martinis with the Rolfes, Hattie loses control of her car as she passes over a railway crossing, and her car gets stuck on the tracks. Hattie doesn't want to admit that she has had too much to drink, so she decides to say that she sneezed as she was crossing the tracks and inadvertently twisted the steering wheel. She realizes that the engine is dead and the car is hopelessly stuck, so she goes to the Paces' ranch. Hattie knows the Paces are away, so she looks for Darly, the cowboy who works for them.

Hattie finds Darly tending bar in one of the ranch's cabins and asks him for help. Darly impatiently asks Hattie what has happened this time, and she gives the explanation that she has concocted. Darly gets angry and reminds Hattie that he told her to stay home after dark. Then Darly tells her that he is not supposed to close the bar. Hattie begs, and Darly eventually relents. As they go to Hattie's car, Darly tells her that he was on his way to getting a customer to spend his entire paycheck in the bar before Hattie interrupted with her emergency. When Hattie tells Darly that he is obligated to help her because they are neighbors, Darly tells her that she isn't fit to live in the desert anymore. Hattie knows he is right, so she doesn't respond. Hattie knows that if her car is destroyed by a train before they can get it off the tracks she will be forced to leave the lake, a prospect that scares her because she doesn't know where she would go.

The miner who was in the bar and his girlfriend also come along to help. Because all three are drunk, the process is difficult. After a few unsuccessful attempts at removing Hattie's car from the tracks, Hattie suggests that she find Swede, the town's telegrapher. Darly agrees, and as Hattie tries to cross the metal chain that Darly had hooked to her car to pull it from the tracks, Darly guns the motor of his truck, causing Hattie to trip and break her arm. With the miner's help, they finally move the car.

Hattie tells Darly she is hurt, but he thinks she is lying to escape blame for the accident. Darly finally relents and agrees to take Hattie to the Rolfes, saying that they were the ones who let her get drunk in the first place. As he drops her at the Rolfes' gate, she asks him to move her car. Darly speeds off without responding. Hattie goes to the Rolfes' house and tells them what happened.

After cleaning Hattie's wounds, Helen Rolfe takes Hattie home and puts her to bed. Hattie objects to the heating pad wrapped around her arm because it will cause her generator to run and burn valuable gas. Rolfe tells Hattie that this is not the time to be stingy and that they will be back in the morning to take her to the doctor. When the Rolfes leave, Hattie turns off the heating pad anyway, and she soon becomes keenly aware of the pain in her arm. Hattie realizes that Helen has covered her with a comforter that had once belonged to India, the woman from whom she inherited the yellow house. Hattie is sure this comforter covered India when she died, and Hattie pushes it away. As Hattie tries to sleep, she imagines that she is near death herself. She tries to banish that thought from her mind.

Hattie spends some time in the hospital, and her condition deteriorates. She becomes delirious and is confined to her bed to keep her from roaming the halls and harassing the nurses and other patients. Helen wonders if they should contAct 1 of Hattie's brothers, but Hattie begins to recover before they do. Hattie becomes obsessed with knowing how many quarts of blood were needed during her surgeries, and she tells her visitors that she needed gallons of new blood. The doctor tells Helen that Hattie shouldn't drink or smoke anymore, a notion that the Rolfes agree is preposterous.

Hattie is worried about how she will pay for her hospital stay, and she suggests to Rolfe that she could sell some of her valuables. Rolfe tells Hattie that she should consider selling her house. Hattie admits that she has thought about selling the house and says

she would like to get $20,000 for it. When Rolfe suggests that $8,000 would be more reasonable, Hattie argues that Sego Lake is one of the most beautiful places in the world. Rolfe counters that the lake is 500 miles from San Francisco and 200 miles from Salt Lake City, which makes it difficult to reach and suitable only for eccentrics like them.

Hattie spends the next few weeks undergoing physical therapy and worrying about how she will replace the blood in the blood bank. She asks her doctor if he is interested in buying her house, but he declines. As Hattie recovers, she reminds herself that she was near death and has managed to get better. Even so, Hattie is still quite weak and her mind wanders more than ever. Hattie finally decides that she needs to stop worrying because one way or another things will work out for her, just like they always have.

Hattie's thoughts now often turn to her deceased friend India, as Hattie recalls how her friend often became annoyed with her and how the two women spend far too much time drinking. India often blamed her excess drinking on Hattie saying that Hattie didn't share the same interests, making it difficult for them to converse. India often lamented that she felt as though the lake was the only place where she fit in. Indian was bitter about the way her life turned out, and she often lashed out at Hattie and treated her badly. Eventually India regretted her actions and begged Hattie for forgiveness. Hattie resented India's treatment of her, but Hattie acknowledges that she does not know what would have become of her if India hadn't left her the yellow house.

When Hattie is finally released from the hospital she stays with the Rolfes. The Rolfes know it won't help to completely cut Hattie off from alcohol, so they limit her to two drinks a day. Hattie is grateful to be back at the lake and makes plans for the coming summer. As the days pass, however, and the heat of summer arrives, Hattie finds she can't do much more than dress herself each day. On some mornings, Hattie goes to her house and spends a few hours looking over her things. Hattie is pleased to find that her car still runs. She looks at her garden, which is thriving under Sam's care. Returning to the house, she spots a piece of blanket that had once belonged to her dog, Richie. Hattie looks around and sees more traces of her beloved pet, including hair that he shed on the furniture that she had never gotten around to vacuuming and a collar still hanging on the doorknob of India's room.

Hattie has already decided that when it's her time to die, she will ask to be moved to India's bed because she does not see the need for two death beds in the house. Her thoughts turn to the will that she knows she needs to attend to. She had recently telephoned India's lawyer to begin the process, also mentioning that she hopes to sell the house for $15,000. Hattie told the lawyer if the house couldn't be sold she would rent it for $200 a month.

Hattie sits in her living room and wonders again what will become of her if she can't sell the house. She tries to push these thoughts from her mind, reminding herself that she always lands on her feet. Even so, Hattie recognizes that she is an old, feeble woman who is of little use to anyone.

As Hattie sits, she sees Sam, a local man who does odd jobs for some of the residents, watering her garden. Hattie is grateful for Sam's help and she longs for some company, so she invites him in for a beer, a gesture she has never made before. Hattie is reluctant because Sam suffers from a skin disease, which Hattie believes is impetigo and she is afraid of catching. Hattie takes great care not to touch anything that Sam touches. Hattie has Same drink his beer from the can rather than a glass, and she makes sure that she wears gloves before touching any of the gardening tools that Sam uses. As they talk, she tells Sam that she believes she will be on her own again by Decoration Day.

However, when mid-June arrives Hattie is still not well enough to go home. Helen Rolfe tells Hattie that she and her husband are leaving for Seattle. Hattie is surprised, and Helen reminds her that they had told Hattie about the trip at Christmas. Hattie assures Helen that she will be just fine on her own, but Rolfe asks who will look after Hattie in their absence.

As Hattie and the Rolfes contemplate this in silence, Hattie realizes that the Rolfes are the only people she can count on to help her, and now they were going away. Hattie knows that they are only going on vacation, but she gets angry that they are abandoning her before realizing that the Rolfes are trying to tell her that there is a limit to what they can do for her. Angry and hurt, Hattie tells the Rolfes that she will take care of herself, but if it does become necessary for her to leave the lake, they will find themselves very lonely. Hattie then returns to her house, fully aware that she is forgetful, responds to voices that only she hears and will likely find herself in trouble.

A few days after Hattie returns to her house, Rolfe stops by to tell her that he is going into town and asks if she would like him to bring her back some food. Hattie's feelings are hurt, but she knows that she cannot afford to refuse his offer. She instructs Rolfe to bring her some things from the market and to charge it to her account.

As the afternoon passes, Hattie get more and more tired and eventually falls asleep. When she awakes it is almost midnight. She is hungry, so she eats a few shrimp she had left out to thaw before going to bed. In the morning, Hattie once again begins to recognize that she needs to pull herself together. She feels a little better after drinking a cup of coffee. She wonders if she should contact her brother Angus, but she is reluctant because she knows that he most likely will make her quit drinking and smoking. More importantly, she has her own house and she does not want to leave it. Hattie is determined to take care of herself, so she begins to do the exercises the doctor had prescribed for her broken arm. Soon, however, Hattie is overwhelmed with sadness at the prospect of being left alone with no help.

While Hattie is full of good intentions, she never manages to take care of her personal matters. A letter from the insurance company goes unanswered and eventually gets lost, she doesn't call the attorney as she had promised herself she would and although she thinks it is in her best interest, she never follows through with her plan to contact an institution in Los Angeles that manages property for senior citizens. As a result, Rolfe

writes to Angus to tell him about Hattie's condition. Rolfe also visits Amy Walters, an old widowed woman who lived nearby.

Amy is working in her garden when Rolfe arrives. Rolfe gets right to the point and asks Amy if she would consider living with Hattie. Amy refuses, saying that the two women have extremely different habits and it would be difficult for them to get along. Rolfe persists, saying that there is no telling what might happen to Hattie if she is left alone. Amy says she would be willing to spend a few hours a day with Hattie, but that she would need to be paid for her time. Rolfe reminds Amy that Hattie has no money, and Amy suggests that Hattie leave Amy the house in her will. Rolfe knows that Hattie would never consider such a proposition, so he doesn't even mention it to Hattie.

One day, as Hattie is having a few drinks in Pace's bar, Pace asks her if she allow some cowboys sleep in her house in exchange for a one-time payment of $500, $50 a month and leave the house to him in her will. Pace's proposition angers Hattie, and she accuses him and everyone else of trying to push her out of her house. Hattie tells Pace that if he wants to help he can donate blood to the blood bank. When Pace suggests that Hattie's drinking caused her accident and put her in this position Hattie gets even angrier, and she leaves the bar to go home and take care of some of the things she has been putting off.

When Hattie gets home, she writes a letter asserting that Pace has no claim on her property. She describes the ways that Pace has taken advantage of her over the years. That finished, she thinks about how she has aged and how her body has changed in recent years, and she realizes that she feels as though she never really accomplished much with her life and now, as she nears the end, she can't even be assured of when, or if, death will come. Hattie remembers a time before she inherited the yellow house when she wished for death on a regular basis. This changed when she inherited the house and for the first time had something to call her own. But now, things have changed, and she has found that one by one, the people she thought she could count on have deserted her.

Hattie pours herself a drink and sits down with a cigarette. She contemplates all that has happened during the course of her life. She recalls being a promising young music student in Paris, a young wife, getting divorced and her refusal to marry Wicks because he was merely a cowboy and she was accustomed to the finer things than living on the range and trapping coyotes. Then her mind turned to a memory that she had suppressed for many years, the fact that she killed her beloved dog Richie. Rolfe had warned that the dog was ill-tempered and potentially dangerous, but Hattie ignored him. She regretted that decision the day the dog turned on her and attacked. Knowing she had only one way out, Hattie killed the dog with one blow of her hatchet. Ashamed at what she had done, Hattie buried the dog during the middle of the night and blamed a neighbor for her pet's disappearance.

Recalling this sad event causes Hattie to take stock of her life. When she thinks about all of the mistakes she has made she wonders aloud what she should do to help herself. The answer comes in an instant, and Hattie gets in her car. However, as hard as she

tries, she can't maneuver the brakes and gears. She returns home totally defeated, pours herself a glass of bourbon and sits down to write her will.

As Hattie writes, she still has no idea to whom she will leave her house. She realizes that no one came to her aid the way she did for India. Despite her overwhelming sadness, she feels a sense of pride in the fact that she has property to bequeath, a notion that up until a few years ago was out of the question. Hattie realizes that her death will bring some good to whomever she chooses to be her heir, and she wonders who would benefit the most by inheriting the yellow house. She goes through her immediate family, including her brothers, nephews and cousins. She can't find a suitable heir among them, so she thinks about her friends. Soon, her thoughts turn to her old boyfriend Wicks, who Pace told her was working as a handyman south of Bishop, California. Hattie remembers when she last saw Wicks. They had been arguing a lot, and one day, at the brink of anger, Hattie pointed a loaded pistol at Wicks and told him to leave and never come back. Wicks tried to apologize, but Hattie refused to let him and he left, never to return. Hattie realizes that if she hasn't chased him away, she likely wouldn't be alone now.

Hattie finally decides that the most suitable heir would be Joyce, the unmarried daughter of her cousin. Hattie quickly reconsiders, however, when she realizes that she could never condemn a young person to the type of life she has lived. She realizes that the yellow house isn't meant for a young person, but rather an old person like herself living out his or her last days.

By this time, Hattie is quite drunk. She writes in her letter that she cannot bear to give away the only thing that she owns, so she is leaving her house to herself. She realizes this is a preposterous idea, and she decides to wait until morning to make her decision.

Analysis

"Leaving the Yellow House" is a tale of loneliness and despair. The story describes the emotions of Hattie Simmons Waggoner, an old woman living alone in a small desert community, as she realizes that she is alone in the world.

The story's title, then, takes on dual meanings. First, as Hattie's mental and physical health declines she comes to realize that she needs to leave the house that she loves and let her brother take care of her. Before Hattie goes, however, she knows that she must find someone to whom she can leave the house. Thus, the title "Leaving the Yellow House" refers to Hattie's physical leaving of the house as well as to the process she undertakes to determine to whom she should bequeath her property.

The first impression of Hattie is that she is a feisty old woman who can take care of herself. Hattie carefully dresses in her best clothes and makes a weekly trip to town to complete her errands before capping off the afternoon with a few drinks at the town saloon. This notion quickly changes, however, when we realize that she is emotionally

and physically frail. As the story unfolds, we get a glimpse of the events in her life that have led to the predicament she now finds herself in.

Hattie's genteel upbringing is a sharp contrast to the environment in which she now lives. Although Hattie doesn't say it specifically, we can surmise that alcohol played a significant role in her downfall. She refers to her excess drinking when recalling the day that her husband left her. Drinking also played a large role in her relationship with Wicks, as the couple made monthly trips into town to "go on a bender." Her relationship with India revolved almost exclusively around alcohol. Alcohol played a large role in the accident that left Hattie grappling with her mortality.

With the personal costs so high, one is left to wonder why Hattie doesn't quit drinking. While there is no easy answer to this question, it is likely the result of two factors: the environment in which she lived and the fact that at this point, Hattie was likely an alcoholic. It seems as though every interaction Hattie has with people involves alcohol. She goes into town and has a few drinks with lunch before stopping off at a local bar for a few more, she goes to the Rolfes' house to drink, Pace owns the bar that she frequents and she drinks with India. She invites Sam the gardener in for a drink even though she's afraid of catching his skin condition, and she frequently drinks alone. Her addiction is easy to identify, as she drinks heavily despite her doctor's orders not to and she is reluctant to live with her brother, probably the only person who will care for her, because she knows he won't let her to drink. Hattie hides liquor all over her house and her car so that she never has to worry about being without a drink, and she gets drunk almost daily. Alcohol seems common in Hattie's entire community.

It is obvious to everyone, including Hattie, that her accident and the beginning of her downfall are a result of her alcoholism. Hattie refuses to admit this, however, because she knows that to do so would be to admit that she is becoming incapable of taking care of herself. Admitting that the accident was a result of her drinking would also force her to acknowledge that she has a drinking problem, something that she is unwilling to do. In an attempt to divert the attention away from herself, whenever she recounts the story of her accident she is quick to point out that Darly and the miner who assisted in freeing her car were "as drunk as sixteen thousand dollars."

Hattie's reluctance to take responsibility for her actions is seen in many instances throughout the story. Her decision to bury the dog she had killed and then blame a neighbor for its disappearance rather than admit that Rolfe has been right about the animal's temperament is just one example. Her decision to banish Wicks from her life was based on her own selfish pride, but she blames the breakup on a falling out over a steak. Time and time again Hattie presents herself as a helpless victim rather than the strong, adventurous woman she wants to be.

Despite Hattie's declining mental health, she still has the acuity to know that she could not subject anyone to the type of life she has led. As she contemplates suitable heirs, she makes a conscious decision not to condemn a young cousin to the same fate, another example of Hattie's belief that her situation is the result of her environment, not her actions.

Even though Hattie was reared in the East, attended a prestigious finishing school and studied the organ in Paris, she expends a great deal of time and energy portraying herself as a tough, experienced Western woman. While she doesn't give a specific reason for doing this, it is likely because she wanted to avoid questions regarding her past and thus admitting that despite the privileges she was given as a young lady, she has not done anything remarkable with her life. Despite Hattie's strong desire to sever ties with the past and embrace the culture where she lives, her refusal to relinquish her married name when Wicks proposes shows that she has not assimilated as fully as she may have thought. Recall the portion of the story in which she recalls his proposal: "Wicks was an excellent man. But he was a cowboy. Socially nothing." Despite her assertions to the contrary, Hattie is concerned with status and social standing. She also hasn't fooled the local residents as evidenced by Amy Walters' observation that "Hattie is a city woman."

The author re-visits this notion in other portions of the story. Hattie occasionally refers to not having anything to call her own, not accomplishing anything significant with her life and having no one to care for her now that her health is failing. Hattie seems determined to measure her self worth in terms of what she has acquired materially and emotionally over the course of her life, and she is quickly realizing that she has acquired very little.

The frequent appearance of India throughout this story reinforces this idea. When India comes to the forefront of Hattie's consciousness, it underscores Hattie's belief that she has amounted to no more than "a rich woman's servant and whipping girl." India's constant berating and belittling of Hattie most likely caused Hattie's self-confidence to deteriorate until she believed that what India was saying was true.

While this story is told from Hattie's point of view, she is not the only character in this situation. Darly, also transplanted from the East, is trying to pass himself off as a genuine Western cowboy. Hattie tells us that Darly was 40-years-old before he sat on a horse. Darly has no family, only a string of girlfriends who visit him occasionally. His body is so broken down that he frequently checks himself into the Veteran's Hospital to recover. Darly differs from Hattie in that, at least for now, he can care for himself. Rather than showing compassion toward Hattie, however, Darly is surly and uncaring. Darly probably sees a great deal of himself in Hattie and resents what she has become because it means that he is likely headed in the same direction. By emotionally and physically distancing himself from Hattie, Darly is avoiding this same reality in his own life.

Hattie is doing her fair share of avoidance. A notorious procrastinator, she never gets around to doing the things she wants to do. Aside from taking care of some of the important details of her life such as her insurance and the writing of her will, she never vacuums the hair shed by her long-dead dog. This characteristic remains with her at the end of the story when she decides to delay making the decision regarding who to name as her heir until the following day. While we don't know the ultimate outcome, we can surmise that Hattie may never make a final decision.

Characters

Darly

Darly is Pace's sixty-eight-year-old ranch hand. Like Hattie, he comes from the East Coast. Darly inadvertently causes Hattie to break her arm, but he never apologizes for his mistake. Throughout the story, he and Hattie are seen as behaving antagonistically toward each other, each annoyed by the others' tacit accusations of being a drunk. In reality, they are uncomfortable with the mirror image each presents to the other.

Pace

Pace, one of Hattie's neighbors, runs a dude ranch. He offers to help Hattie out by giving her a monthly stipend, but only in return for her leaving the house to him after her death.

Helen Rolfe

Helen Rolfe is a neighbor of Hattie's. She and her retired husband live comfortably, able to afford such luxuries as new cars and vacations. She is Hattie's friend, but Hattie also harbors resentment toward her for her life of relative ease.

Jerry Rolfe

Jerry Rolfe is Hattie's neighbor and perhaps her only real friend. Hattie respects what Jerry says and confides her problems to him, as much as she is able. Jerry also is the only person who truly seems to understand Hattie's pride and circumstance. He makes significant efforts to help Hattie out after she breaks her arm, but he is unable to find someone who will look after her the same way he and his wife do.

Hattie Wagonner

Hattie is the protagonist of the story. Originally from the East Coast and a city woman, Hattie came out West decades ago. She wants to be a "rough, experienced" western woman, but in reality, Hattie cannot take care of herself. She has no close friends; indeed, her only friends in the story are a neighbor couple, the Rolfes, but Hattie demands too much from them. She has already chased away or been chased away by her family, including a husband and a lover. Now, at the age of seventy-two, with a broken arm, Hattie finds herself essentially alone and isolated from any sort of community. In her helplessness, she grows to understand both the precariousness of her own situation and her relationships with others in her community. Despite this realization, Hattie does little to repair these relationships. Instead, her search within

herself leads to an affirmation that her identity is intrinsically linked to the house itself. The story's final action—Hattie's willing of her house to herself—seems to further reiterate her self-imposed isolation.

Amy Walters

Amy Walters is a self-sufficient miner's widow. She lives about twenty miles away from Hattie, and Jerry Rolfe approaches her with the suggestion that she and Hattie live together. Amy, however, can well take care of herself, and she will only help Hattie out in return for inheritance of her house.

Themes

Identity

The theme of identity is important in "Leaving the Yellow House" as Hattie strives toward some sort of self-understanding. Hattie has lived for decades under a cloud of self-deception. For instance, she pretends that her drinking is not as problematic as it is, and she pretends to care for India when she really feels that the other woman treats her like a servant. She blames her neighbor Pace for the disappearance of her dog when she killed the dog herself. After breaking her arm, Hattie realizes the extent of her reliance on other people, but she also realizes there are very few people, if any, whose assistance and love she can count on. This epiphany contributes to her attempts at self-exploration.

In reality, Hattie's striving toward self-understanding makes little progress. She concludes that the house is her only meaningful possession and indeed the best part of her. Though she reflects on the people she has chased out of her life, such as Wick, she does not explore the inherent sadness of life mostly lived at odds with others. When Hattie writes her will, which is her attempt to take some kind of responsibility for herself, she deems none of her estranged family as good enough to inherit her house. Her true feeling about the house, and the life she has led, are revealed when she writes "[b]ecause I only lately received what I have to give away, I can't bear it." With these words, Hattie demonstrates that only she is worthy of the house; thus, it is clear that she derives self-worth from the house.

Alienation and Loneliness

Hattie's alienation from any sort of community and her loneliness form the essential elements of her character. Hattie lives alone in the yellow house. She used to share the house with India, another aging alcoholic, but it is clear from Hattie's reflections that the relationship between the two women was not based on close ties but rather on mutual need: India needed someone to look after her, and Hattie needed someone to support her. The only neighbors with whom Hattie is on good terms are the Rolfes, yet she turns on them when she feels they are deserting her in her time of need; she believes they are selfish for vacationing when she needs their assistance. Hattie antagonizes Darly, the Pace's ranch hand, to such an extent that he cannot even bring himself to apologize for the role he played in her accident. Amy Walters and Pace both agree to help her after her accident only if they will receive financial remuneration after her death, i.e., the deed to her house. Hattie has turned away Wick, her lover, for inconsequential reasons, but primarily because he is not as good as her former husband, who himself turned her away.

This irony underscores Hattie's tenacious ability to cling to what has little worth even if she is left with nothing. Hattie had always dreamed of coming out west, but all she has

sown in this land of adventure is loneliness and isolation. By the time she writes her will, Hattie recognizes her own state, referring to herself as "cast off and lonely." Hattie's inability to will her house to anyone demonstrates her extreme isolation, for she feels that no one is worthy of it because there is no one in her life whom she loves or respects.

Poverty

The poverty Hattie experiences is both monetary and spiritual. Hattie has very little money in the form of a small pension. Her primary asset is the yellow house, however, even the house does not truly represent much worth because she cannot sell it or rent it for a reasonable price. Hattie's anxiety after she leaves the hospital is exacerbated by her inability to pay her medical bill and the knowledge that she has no way to raise the money. When both Amy Walters and Pace volunteer to take care of Hattie in return for ownership of her house after she dies, the instability that Hattie experiences because of her poverty is clearly demonstrated. These actions also underscore Hattie's spiritual poverty. She is a woman whom people, with the exception of the Rolfes, will only help if they are getting something in return for it. In truth, this is only fair, for Hattie herself offers little to anyone else. She is judgmental, deceitful, and self-absorbed to the point of pettiness and clearly has been this way for some time. Hattie's spiritual poverty is also apparent in her loneliness.

Style

Narration

"Leaving the Yellow House" is told chronologically. The beginning of the story gives relevant background about Hattie, and then the story shifts to an unfolding of the plot—Hattie's breaking her arm, her need for assistance, and her feelings of isolation. At the end of the story, Hattie seems about to embark on a crucial decision—who will inherit the yellow house—but she cannot follow through with completing this action; the decision she does make— to leave the house to herself—emphasizes that the story resides in the character's development rather than in any plot development. Indeed, in his study of Saul Bellow, Robert F. Kiernan called "Leaving the Yellow House" "[m]ore portrait than story."

Hattie also spends a significant amount of time reflecting on her past. She envisions her life as playing before her as if on a movie screen. Thus the past intertwines with the present narrative, a technique that shows the importance of former experiences to Hattie. The "film" also demonstrates how events and people from days gone by have influenced the situation in which Hattie finds herself at the present time. One memory—when she killed her dog Richie after he attacked her—is particularly significant, for it leads to her self-examination about the life she has led. She has lied to others, and perhaps more importantly, she has been dishonest with herself about the life she has chosen for herself.

Point of View

"Leaving the Yellow House" is told in the third-person omniscient point of view. The narrator reflects objectively on people, places, events, and thoughts. This point of view is effective for several reasons: first, the detached point of view negates Hattie's overenthusiastic perceptions of her life and surroundings; second, it allows readers to understand Hattie's situation through a variety of people.

The point of view focuses primarily on Hattie's thoughts and observations, particularly after she breaks her arm and experiences a crisis of identity. The narrative focuses on Hattie's psyche as she is in the process of increasingly pondering her options and the fabric of her life.

Setting

The setting of the story is Sego Desert Lake, Utah, where a tiny community of people—whites, Mexicans, African Americans, and Native Americans— live. The white people live in houses by the lake, while the minorities live in boxcars and shacks. The nearest town is forty miles away, through the mountainous desert, and supplies all must be

purchased from there. The narrator describes the region as "barren," which sharply contrasts with Hattie's insistence on the beauty of the place.

The idea of the West played prominently in Hattie's mind. Drawn to the seeming allure of the rough-and-tumble life, Hattie, like Darly, wanted to experience adventure. At times, Hattie glorifies her life out West; for instance, she recalls living on the range with Wick, but the clearest memory that emerges from this time is of her disturbed feelings as Wick trapped and killed a pure white coyote.

Symbolism

Many symbolic elements are present in "Leaving the Yellow House," particularly the house itself. Like Hattie, the house is run-down, aging, and a mass of contradictions. It is filled both with fine china and with decrepit furniture. The library walls are lined, not with books, but with canned goods. The house serves as a kind of prison for Hattie. She spends most of her time in it asleep, but she also feels that she cannot live without the house; this seeming contradiction shows that Hattie has come to embrace her place of confinement. By the end of the story, Hattie identifies herself with the house itself, seeing it as the best part of her.

Other elements of the story have symbolic value. The landscape reflects Hattie's demeanor; on the surface it is barren but underneath lie volcanic eruptions. Hattie keeps up a pretension of politeness to her friends and neighbors, but secretly she berates them and sometimes she even can't keep from exploding, as when she verbally attacks Pace. The white coyote killed by Wick can be seen as symbolic of the innocence of the West, corrupted by people, like Hattie, who don't belong there. Hattie's car stalled on the railroad tracks symbolizes the course of Hattie's own life; as she later admits, "I have stalled. And now what shall I do?" Like Hattie's broken-down car, Hattie's life and body are in states of disrepair and inactivity.

Historical Context

A Prosperous Nation?

For many Americans, the 1950s was a decade of economic prosperity. Unemployment and inflation remained low, usually below five percent. By the middle of the decade, more than sixty percent of Americans earned a middle-class income, which at that time was a salary between $3,000 and $10,000 a year. The number of homeowners increased by more than twenty-one million during this decade, and people enjoyed material comforts and the bene- fits of household inventions and improvements. Government programs benefited many Americans. Social security and unemployment benefits also expanded in the mid-1950s, and the minimum wage increased. President Dwight D. Eisenhower also supported the largest increase in educational spending up to that time.

Nearly forty million Americans, however, lived near or below the poverty line of $3,000 for a family of four, as determined by a 1957 study. Poor Americans were more often earning a lesser portion of the nation's wealth. Almost one half lived in rural areas and suffered from inadequate health care and a lack of education. City dwellers also saw their conditions worsen as urban slums deteriorated. In response, the federal government began a program of urban renewal to replace run-down inner-city buildings with new ones. When older urban neighborhoods were bulldozed to make way for low-income public housing projects, however, many residents felt this transformation ruined the fabric of their community.

A Changing American Population

During the 1950s, increasing numbers of Americans relocated. Millions of prosperous whites moved to the suburbs, while many poor rural citizens traveled to the cities to look for a better life. The construction of interstate highways contributed to the relocation of Americans, particularly to the Western states. Additionally, many Mexican immigrants settled in Western cities. Overall as well, the American population grew, particularly because many Americans had waited until after the end of World War II to marry or start families. Throughout the decade, the American population saw an increase of nearly 30 million, from 150 million to 179 million.

Many women in the 1950s stayed at home and took care of their families and households, though a larger percentage worked outside of the home, often part-time. In general, women often faced discrimination and exploitation both at home and at work. Minorities also experienced prejudice, and many were denied the same educational and employment opportunities as whites enjoyed.

The Beginning of the Civil Rights Movement

Protest movements took place in the 1950s to try and change these discriminatory practices. In 1955, African-American citizens in Montgomery, Alabama, began a bus boycott in an attempt to end segregation on public transportation. For almost a year, thousands of African Americans stopped riding the buses. In 1956, the U.S. Supreme Court declared Alabama's segregation laws unconstitutional. This struggle not only integrated the bus system, but it also brought a new civil rights leader to the forefront: Martin Luther King, Jr. Two years earlier, in 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court had ruled in the monumental decision known as *Brown v. The Board of Education of Topeka* that the segregation of school by race was unconstitutional. As a result of this decision, states throughout the South moved to desegregate their schools—most unwillingly, however. Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, was the first school to comply with *Brown.* Although angry whites and Arkansas' National Guard, sent by the governor, tried to keep nine African-American teenagers out of Central High, in 1957, African- American students began to attend what had been an all-white school.

A Society of Conformity

Despite these racial struggles, society of the 1950s was generally dominated by the idea of conformity. For instance, in the suburbs, houses looked the same and had the same floorplans. Some teenagers challenged this conformity through literature that mocked the hypocritical adult world, as well as through rock 'n' roll, which many parents disliked. Adults also challenged the conformity of American life. John Kenneth Galbraith argued in his 1958 book *An Affluent Society* that Americans were ignoring pressing social issues in their pursuit of material possessions and comfort. A group of writers and poets known as the Beats challenged literary and lifestyle conventions of the middle class. Jack Kerouac's *On the Road,* one of the bestknown Beat works, celebrated the search for individual identity. Other novelists such as Ralph Ellison discussed the experiences of those Americans who faced poverty and discrimination.

Critical Overview

"Leaving the Yellow House" was first published in Esquire magazine in 1957. Eleven years later, along with five other stories, it was collected in *Mosby's Memoirs and Other Stories.* This collection re- flected work written over a period of seventeen years; the first story was published only a few years after Bellow emerged onto America's literary scene with the publication of his earliest novels. *Mosby's Memoirs* included three stories that had been previously published with the novella *Seize the Day.*

"Leaving the Yellow House" was one of the stories that was not brought to the public attention since its original publication. Since the 1960s, however, it has become one of Bellow's most anthologized pieces of fiction, however, it is uncharacteristic of his work. Unlike most of Bellow's work, "Leaving the Yellow House" focuses on uneducated rural characters in a southwestern setting rather than the more typical urban intellectuals.

In considering the story and the collection as a whole, contemporary reviewers discussed such elements as plot, themes, and character. In *Library Journal,* Bill Katz categorized all the stories as being "about people who by design or by fate try to make it alone." Hattie, Katz writes, is "memorable" and she "well deserves a place with [other noted Bellow protagonists] Herzog and Henderson as classic characterization." Katz believed that four of the six stories, including "Leaving the Yellow House," were written in the "best Bellow style." C. T. Samuels, writing for the *Atlantic*, however, believed that "Leaving the Yellow House" was "more sentimental" than some of the others in the collection. Other reviewers focused on issues of aging and death in the story.

Contemporary criticism and discussion of the story has tended to regard it more in light of Bellow's body of work. Critics have compared Hattie with some of Bellow's most well-known and well-drawn male protagonists, such as Tommy Wilhelm of Seize the Day. Like Bellow's men, Hattie agonizes over the meaning of her existence. Most critics agree, however, that Bellow does not allow Hattie an intellectual resolution, as he does his men. Robert F. Kiernan wrote in his chapter on the volume in *Saul Bellow* that Hattie is "without the mental and spiritual resources that allow [Bellow's male characters] . . . to meet the world head-on." Constance Rooke further noted Bellow's particular strain of sexism and stereotyping in "Leaving the Yellow House." "While Bellow can grant Hattie certain of the characteristics which he has parcelled out from his own riches for the male protagonists," she wrote, "and can accord her the sympathy which is due to her participation in such qualities, he is obliged because she is a woman to withhold the Bellowesque *sina qua non* of a genuine intellectual life. He cannot in a single leap make of her a woman, a sympathetic character, and an intellectual." Noriko M. Lippit is one Bellow scholar who contended that Hattie, like Bellow's male characters, achieves salvation and recovers from selfimposed alienation through her confrontation of death at the end of the story.

Critics also disagree on how to perceive Hattie's final actions. Samuels, for instance, found Hattie's decision to "affirm existence at its lowest ebb." Others find her merely to be putting off the idea of death without drawing any truly positive elements from her

mental agitation. Other critics make note of the note on which the story ends, with Hattie's thoughts: "Only tonight I can't give the house away. I'm drunk and so I need it. And tomorrow, she promised herself, I'll think again. I'll work it out for sure." These thoughts echo the words of the southern belle, Scarlett O'Hara of *Gone with the Wind.* While Rooke sees these thoughts as further evidence of Hattie's avoidance of the reality of her advancing death, Eusebio L. Rodriguez analyzes this snippet in a laudatory fashion: "The parody proclaims that Hattie Waggoner is not Scarlett O'Hara but a gnarled, weather-beaten representative of contemporary man hurling forth a cry of protest against this place and this condition."

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Korb has a master's degree in English literature and creative writing and has written for a wide variety of educational publishers. In the following essay, she explores the dual nature of Hattie Waggoner and other characters and elements of "Leaving the Yellow House."

Saul Bellow's "Leaving the Yellow House" is one of his most frequently anthologized and discussed pieces of fiction, yet in many ways it is atypical of his body of work. It is set in the western desert, not the city, and its protagonist is a woman disinclined to intellectual or spiritual matters. However, the story is as complex as any of Bellow's other works. In Hattie Waggoner, Bellow creates a character with an unintentional duplicitous nature. Hattie's tendency toward prevarication—to herself as well as to others—leads her to create an unstable and disinterested world in which her way of life becomes threatened.

Many elements of the story manifest this dual nature. Hattie claims that Sego Desert Lake is "'one of the most beautiful places in the world,'" but in reality it is "barren" and decrepit with "very few trees" and fewer "good houses." Jerry Rolfe, one of the few characters who epitomizes good sense, points out some of Sego Desert Lake's deficiencies: for one thing, it is located hundreds of miles away from any major city. "'Who wants to live way out here but a few eccentrics?'" he asks Hattie, not shying away from labeling both of them thusly.

Many of the other people who populate Sego Desert Lake are eccentric and double natured. Darly is "not a genuine cowboy." Like Hattie, he is a "late-comer from the East," but he has taken on the necessary accoutrements of Western life, such as boots, and works at a dude ranch where women go to bed with him because they think he is a real cowboy. India, Hattie's former companion, was a cultured woman who claimed to be interested in intellectual discussions of religion and literature, but in reality, she generally spent her time, like Hattie, wandering around the house, drunk, clad only in her slip. India's double nature further revealed itself along with the development of her temper: "the worse her temper the more British her accent became." Amy Walters, another elderly resident, lives at what she calls Fort Walters, but the structure is really only a shack-like building made out of tar paper that sits over a deserted mine shaft.

Hattie's existence is truly based on her selfimposed network of false premises. The very presentation of the woman underscores her double nature. Although Hattie is an aging alcoholic who lives a life of sloth and procrastination, the narrator nevertheless asserts, "You couldn't help being fond of Hattie." For while Hattie is lazy and meanspirited, she is also "big and cheerful, puffy, comic." Once a week, Hattie dresses up in her girdle, high heels, and lipstick to make the forty-mile trip to the nearest town. Hattie's past also indicates a fall from grace, thus a change from what she once was; she once attended finishing school and studied the organ in Paris, and she had been married to a member of a fine, old Philadelphia family. This social shift is epitomized by her home, which has canned goods stacked on the library shelves but also "good silver and good china and engraved stationery." More important to the understanding of Hattie's complex

characterization, though, is that although "she wanted to be thought of as a rough, experienced woman of the West," she can't even take care of herself.

The most significant evidence of Hattie's double nature, however, is her habit of self-deception. For instance, Hattie claims to be a Christian, thus she can "'never bear a grudge,"' but the text points out that only by repeating these words to herself does she succeed in not holding a grudge against the people who have wronged her. She also thinks unkind things about the Rolfes though they are the only people who truly go out of their way—and with no other motivation than genuine concern—to help her. When the Rolfes tell her not to be stingy and leave the heating pad on her arm even though it will use up her butane gas, Hattie thinks, "'Stingy! Why you're the stingy ones. I haven't got anything. You and Helen are ready to hit each other over two bits in canasta."' But she immediately acknowledges to herself that "the Rolfes were good to her; they were her only real friends here." Such comprehension, however, does not keep her from silently calling Helen Rolfe such names as *"B—h-eyes."* She even believes that the Rolfes should not take a vacation because they will be leaving her alone: "But there was no reason to go to Seattle—" Hattie thinks of the Rolfes' upcoming trip, "no genuine business. . . . It was only idleness, only a holiday." Not only does Hattie fail to realize that her own life has also turned into one of idleness, she also extends her selfalienation when she concludes that the Rolfes are vacationing as a way of telling her that "there was a limit to what she could expect them to do for her." Hattie, who considers herself a nice person, only knows how to react to this supposed slight with cruelty; to get back at the Rolfes, she tells Helen, "if I have to leave the lake you'll be ten times more lonely than before."

Hattie also lies to herself, both about her own character and actions. She perceives of herself as "one of the pioneers" of the West, though she only arrived a few decades back, a "city woman" who could never make it on her own. Though she "had lived on the range like an old-timer," the story makes clear that it was her lover, Wick, who enabled the couple to survive thusly. In fact, though Wick wants to marry her, she refuses because she was a "snob about her Philadelphia connections. Give up the name of Waggoner? How could she?" But she is so deceptive that she never even tells Wick the real reason that she turns down his proposal. She further deceives herself by rejecting Wick, who truly cared for her.

Also significant in the story is the way Hattie lies to herself about her drinking. She maintains that she had the car accident because she sneezed, but it is clear that she was drunk and lost control of her car—just as she has lost control of steering her life on any proper course. As the car is stuck on the railroad tracks, so Hattie's life is stuck in Sego Desert Lake—primarily because of the choices she has made and her refusal to deal with life honestly.

A turning point comes for Hattie when she admits to herself that she killed her own dog, Richie, and buried him in the yard, though she has long accused a neighbor of the animal's disappearance. She had no choice but to kill Richie when he turned "evil" and physically attacked her. The human characters in the story, however, also have a habit of turning evil and figuratively attacking those who are closest to them: India attacks

Hattie and then begs for forgiveness; Hattie, in turn, attacks Wick and shuns his love. The cyclical nature of this mean spirit is demonstrated as Hattie reiterates India's words when she mentally asks Wick for his forgiveness; "'I hurt myself in my evil,'" she says, as did India. The revelation that she has lied to others about the dog, and to herself, shocks Hattie: *"God what shall I do?"* she thinks. *"I have taken life. I have lied. I have borne false witness. I have stalled."*

Her realization that her life is not progressing toward any goal makes her do what she has been putting off for weeks now: seeing if she can drive her car, which symbolizes her independence and her capacity to care for herself. But she is unable to shift the gears and steer. This inability makes her understand the frailty of her own life. Determined to do, at long last, something responsible, Hattie sits down to write her will. Though she has already "wept over the ruin of her life," reflecting on who to give the house to makes her think even more deeply. She acknowledges that she has waited for India to die and that she considered Wick to be inferior to her. Through her ruminations, Hattie comes to define herself by ownership of the house even more. Though she tries to tell herself that she should not give the house to her cousin's daughter Joyce because she does not want to "doom a younger person to the same life" that she had, in reality, Hattie believes that "[O]nly I fit here." Indeed, owning the house is all that she has ever had—her car no longer functions for her, and the house now is her only evidence of having achieved any kind of successful life. *"I was never one single thing anyway,"* she thinks. *"Never my own. I was only loaned to myself."* By the end of the story, in her seventy-second year, Hattie has come to equate herself with the house—it is her only worthy quality. Thus, she does the impossible—knowing full well that "'this is bad and wrong,'" she wills the house and its property to herself. In so doing, Hattie continues her lifelong habit of denying reality. Just as Hattie refuses to think that there is a beginning, a middle, and an end to life—choosing instead to divide time into the "early middle, then middle middle, late middle middle, quite late middle"—she arrives, not at the end of life where she doesn't want to be, but at the conclusion that "the middle is all I know." Such rationalizations not only justify her decision to leave the house to herself—if she isn't going to die, she doesn't need to will her house to someone—just negate self-knowledge of her inevitable death.

Source: Rena Korb, Critical Essay on "Leaving the Yellow House," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

Perkins is an associate professor of English at Prince George's Community College in Maryland. In the following essay, she examines Bellow's study in "Leaving the Yellow House" of how one woman copes with feelings of displacement.

Nobody truly occupies a station in life any more. There are mostly people who feel that they occupy the place that belongs to another by rights. There are displaced persons everywhere.

Earl Rovit in his article on Saul Bellow in *American Writers* determines that these words spoken by Eugene Henderson in Bellow's highly acclaimed novel, *Henderson the Rain King,* "could have been spoken by almost any of Bellow's characters, or, for that matter, by Bellow himself." Rovit finds that a major theme in Bellow's fiction is how we cope with a sense of alienation and displacement. This is also the case with Hattie Simms Waggoner, the heroine of Bellow's short story, "Leaving the Yellow House." Throughout the story, Hattie experiences sometimes overwhelming feelings of disconnection. Yet she endures through her strength of spirit.

At the beginning of the story, the other characters determine that Hattie "could no longer make it on her own." Since her arm has not healed from its break, and she has trouble taking care of herself, they urge her to sell her house so that she will have enough money for someone to look after her. Hattie had lived in the yellow house independently for more than twenty years, struggling to establish it and the surrounding area as her home. During this time she often experienced feelings of dislocation. Although she has had important relationships in her life, none has endured.

This sense expresses itself through Hattie's feeling that all of her memories appear to her as if they were on film in disconnected bits and pieces. She imagines that when she dies "she would see the film shown. Then she would know how she had appeared from the back" and that the pieces would come together, giving her a clearer sense of who she was and how she was connected to her world.

One of the main reasons Hattie has had such a difficult time creating a sense of place is due to her lack of family. All she has left are two older brothers and cousins' children, none of whom she is close to. The husband she had loved divorced her and left her with no money. Her painful memory of that broken relationship surfaces when Hattie wonders how her husband could "fling a wife away." She wonders whether she drank too much or bored him. She acknowledges that one of the reasons her husband left her was her inability to bear children but concludes, "There were no kids in me. . . . Not that I wouldn't have loved them, but such my nature was. And who can blame me for having . . . my nature?"

Rovit notes the important role family plays in Bellow's work. He comments that the idea of family "intrudes itself on the present as an ironically unusable past. It compels the memory of a way of life in which personality seemed not to be fragmented and isolated."

His characters were happy in the past when they were "integral parts of a congenial whole, able to share their griefs and joys spontaneously and directly, instead of carrying them onerously on their own shoulders." As is typical of Bellow's characters, Hattie suffers her burdens more acutely since she has no familial support.

Hattie did establish a relationship with Wicks, an itinerant cowboy, but her pride kept her from making a more permanent commitment to him. She never married Wicks because she didn't want to give up her name and all that it represented. Hattie acknowledges that Wicks was a good man, but, according to her, he was a cowboy and therefore, "socially nothing." She had gone to finishing school and studied the organ in Paris and so could not give up her upper class connections, represented by her "good silver and good china and engraved stationery." After an argument, she threw him out, admitting later, "I couldn't bear to fall so low . . . to be slave to a shiftless cowboy."

Hattie's relationship with India, who had owned the yellow house, compounded her feelings of displacement. India was more educated than she and so acted as her superior. While Hattie suggested to others that they were true equals, India left "many small scars" on Hattie's pride and treated her "like a servant."

Rovit explains that Bellow's heroes do not resign themselves to their suffering. Instead, they continually climb out of "the craters of the spirit," determined to shield themselves against future, inevitable onslaughts. Hattie exhibits this strength when she decides, "it's looked bad many a time before, but when push came to shove I made it. Somehow I got by." Her vision of her relationship to her surroundings helps sustain her. She sees herself as "one of the pioneers" in her ability to successfully live off the land. Often she can convince herself that others see her "as a rough, experienced woman of the West" as well as "a lady."

Hattie also endures through her devotion to routine. Once a week "in the same cheerful, plugging but absent way," she squeezes into a clean dress and high heels and travels forty miles across the desert into town where she shops and later drinks with her friends. There she tells of her time with Wicks, reminiscing sadly "but also gloatingly, and with many trimmings." Hattie often embellishes the truth as a way to ease the painful reality of her life.

Her accident, however, threatens to prevent her from falling back on her old survival skills. While she tries to fool herself into thinking that a sneeze caused her to get stuck on the railroad tracks, eventually, she must face the truth that "she was not fit to live in this place. She had never made the grade at all, only seemed to have made it." As the pain in her arm grows worse, she admits, "she couldn't take much more" and wonders, "how many more twists and angles had life to show her yet?"

Initially, she is confident that her friends will come to her aid, but when she acknowledges the fact that she must fend for herself, she worries about her future. When she considers moving in with her brother and his wife, she realizes he is "too crabby" and that he and his wife "were not her kind." If she lived with them, she would not be able to drink or smoke or, in essence, be herself.

Her sense of displacement is intensified by her response to her aging process. As her body has aged, it has become alien to her and, as a result, she feels that it has betrayed her as others have. She admits she has taken the shape of an "old jug, wider and wider toward the top," swollen "with tears and fat" and that "she no longer even smelled to herself like a woman. Her face with its much-slept-upon skin was only faintly like her own." It became a ball of yarn, drifting open and "scattered."

Bellow's descriptions of the barren atmosphere of the desert landscape symbolize Hattie's deteriorating state. The narrator notes at one point that at the back of the house "the soil had caved in a little over the cesspool and a few of the old railroad ties over the top had rotted." Yet, the sego lilies spring up everywhere through the parched land, even on the burnt granite. Hattie's indistinguishable desire to live gives her the strength to endure. Another symbol Bellow employs to suggest Hattie's resilience is reflected in the state of her car. After her accident, she tests the engine and determines, "yes, the old pot would still go." Even though at that point, she could not work the shift, she was confi- dent that she would soon be able to, which to her, suggests her need for control over her environment.

After she recovers from her surgery, "with joyous eyes, the cigarette in her mouth and her hair newly frizzed and overhanging her forehead," her spirit has been renewed. Although still pale and shaky, she is in high spirits and full of confidence. At one point she admits to Jerry that she feels "wrung out," but "she was not one to be miserable for long; she had the expression of a perennial survivor."

When the doctor tells her she might need another operation because she has not been exercising her arm enough, she panics, but immediately suppresses it. She decides, "night and day . . . I was in the Valley of the Shadow. But I'm alive." The narrator notes, "she was weak, she was old, she couldn't follow a train of thought very easily, she felt faint in the head. But she was still here." Her body "filled space," and it was "a great body." Though she was often in pain, she drank in life and reveled in the attention of others. She convinces herself her friends would eventually help her, explaining, "It never did me any good to worry. At the last minute something turned up, when I wasn't looking for it."

Her occasional bursts of anger over her predicament never last long, since they are "reabsorbed into the feeling of golden pleasure that enveloped her. She had little strength, but all that she had was a pleasure to her." She finds strength in the beauty of her world—from the fragrant flowers, from "the mares, naked and gentle," walking through them. The beauty she finds in the world touches "a deep place in Hattie's nature." Her philosophy is to "take what God brings" understanding "He gives no gifts unmixed."

Her strength of spirit ebbs, however, after she is forced to admit that she no longer can drive her car. Urged by all to sell her house, Hattie feels "disillusioned" deciding, "everybody wants to push me out." She insists, "this is my only home in all the world, this is where my friends are."

Again, though, Hattie rises up out of her despair, deciding that giving her house up would mean doing "right by her family." Her ownership of the house proves her value, a fact she is convinced her family will recognize when she wills the house to one of them. As a result of this decision, "her heart experienced a childish glory, not yet tired of it after seventy-two years. She, too, had amounted to something." She too could contribute.

Robert R. Dutton, in his article on Saul Bellow for *Twayne's United States Authors Series Online,* notes that at the end of the story, "[i]n spite of a life seemingly not worth living" and "one that cannot last much longer, Hattie refuses to call it quits, and she can no more give up her house than she can give up on life." She insists, "even though by my own fault I have put myself into this position, I am not ready to give up on this." As a result, she decides, "I leave this property, land, house, garden, and water rights, to Hattie Simms Waggoner." Although she claims her decision is wrong, she notes that it is the only possible one she can make, at least at that moment. She admits, "tonight I can't give the house away. I'm drunk and so I need it. And tomorrow . . . I'll think again. I'll work it out, for sure."

Rovit comments that through his work, Bellow reveals "a single-minded attention toward defining what is viably *human* in modern life□what is creatively and morally possible for the displaced person that modern man feels himself to be." Rovit argues that Bellow tries to "define habitable limits" within which people "can rest secure and still seize hold of the day with a partial power and the responsibility for [their] employment of that power." In "Leaving the Yellow House," Hattie embodies this sense of displacement as well as the desire to retain a measure of power over her life. For Hattie, the house becomes a metaphor for her commitment to survive her bleak world and to retain a measure of personal dignity. Through his characterization of this resilient woman, Bellow reaffirms our faith in the endurance of the human spirit.

Source: Wendy Perkins, Critical Essay on "Leaving the Yellow House," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay on "Leaving the Yellow House," Lippit proposes that the character Hattie is the one exception to Bellows's treatment of female characters in his fiction.

Charles Newman asserts that "there is not a single woman in all of Saul Bellow's work whose active search for identity is viewed compassionately, while every vice of his male introspectives is given some genuine imperative." While I agree, in the final analysis, with Mr. Newman's remark and with his subsequent comment that "this attitude is generally indicative of serious writing since the war," I believe that Bellow's "Leaving the Yellow House" (1957) provides an exception; Hattie, the protagonist of this work, is a female searcher. "Leaving the Yellow House" is also exceptional in its desert setting, for Bellow has consistently presented dramas of people living in the modern metropolis. Despite the difference in sex and setting, however, "Leaving the Yellow House" deals with one of the main themes of Saul Bellow, that of recovery from the narrow confinement of the self through inner search.

The yellow house where the heroine Hattie lives stands near Sego Desert Lake—some several hundred miles from San Francisco and Salt Lake City. The house, which Hattie inherited from her "friend" India, is one of the three structures around there that could be called a house. The story is about the aging Hattie, deprived of physical mobility because of an accident, who worries seriously about whom she should leave the yellow house to after her death.

Sego Desert Lake is a sterile nowhere, the end of the world. Its residents include an idle retired couple who move from place to place according to their convenience, alcoholic divorcées, the owner of a ranch that exploits rare tourists, a "cowboy" from the East who rode on a horse for the first time at the age of forty, and so forth: they are all drop-outs from life, floaters who settled at Sego Desert after wandering toward the West in search of their dream of "making it." Hattie herself, once married to a man from an old Philadelphia family, floated from the East; and India, whom she looked after, was once a "lady" who travelled in the world and talked of philosophy and literature at parties. Not one of them is a genuine Westerner; these modern frontiersmen are city-born failures, and the wilderness is a skid row akin to the Bowery in New York.

Among them, Hattie's corruption is particularly pathetic. She is a born sloth, a professional loser who has not accomplished a single thing in her life. In this respect, Hattie is a female version of Tommy Wilhelm in *Seize the Day.* Tommy, still pursuing the dream of "making it" while taking pills and alcohol in a shabby hotel-room in downtown New York, feels that the metropolis is not the place for him, yet finds there some mysterious, attractive and cruel force rendering him incapable of escaping. It is the same force that Hattie senses in the desert. Watching the lake in the desert, Hattie reflects: "They drew you from yourself. But after they had drawn you, what did they do with you? It was too late to find out. I'll never know. I wasn't meant to. I'm not the type, Hattie reflected. Maybe something too cruel for women, young or old." The cruel attractive force that Tommy and Hattie see in New York and the desert respectively is

the gigantic, unregulated energy of America, the energy that created American material civilization. Controlled by the force, both the metropolis and the desert are "giant raw places." American pastoral reality and urban reality are the same; to live in either is more terrifying than a nightmare.

"Leaving the Yellow House" depicts the wreck of the American dream comically and pathetically. Sego Desert Lake is a sarcastic symbol of America's Eden. The lake is mysteriously tempting and diabolic. It is bottomless and its surface as smooth as if it contained milk. White pelicans fly over the lake spreading their large white wings like angels. Hattie, watching the lake in a stupor brought by drink, feels as if she were in heaven. Yet she senses simultaneously the sterile and destructive force surrounding the lake. She feels the desert embodying this force is like a man who exposes his masculine chest covered with hair.

The greediness, loneliness, and sense of emptiness of the inhabitants of Sego Desert Lake are expressed in Amy, "a gold miner's widow," a miser who plays waltzes on her piano and reads murder-stories late into the night. India, who was also caught by the destructive power of the desert, completed the final touch of her self-destruction with alcohol, and Hattie steadily follows the pattern of her mistress. Sego Desert Lake is seemingly a virgin land, yet it is a ghost-town haunted by the unquiet shadows of the American dream. The sterile, deserted gold mine symbolizes this. The land is a virgin wilderness, a source of the American dream of earthly paradise, yet it is also an American junkyard; it is Eden and hell simultaneously.

This horrifying yet comical story of human ruin, however, does not remain as a mere comical grotesquerie. Although Hattie is an anti-heroine, she is a masochistic self-searcher, a proud loser with dignity, one typical of Saul Bellow's male protagonists. Hattie, like Tommy Wilhelm and Moses Herzog, gains salvation through confronting death and mental crisis. While Tommy and Moses arrive at a reconciliation with life and the universe through the dissolution of narrow self-identity, Hattie recognizes, in her confrontation with death, a greedy and idle self, unreligious, unloved and luckless, yet still wanting to live. Her writing a will leaving the house to herself is here way—absurd yet audacious—of insisting on her American ego. It is also her way of sublimating her frustration and of accepting life as she experiences it. Yet Hattie, like Tommy and Moses, arrives at self-recognition after losing everything and exposing her naked self. Recognizing herself as a failure and victim and admitting her guilt for not loving enable Hattie to accept her present state and to reconcile herself with her fate.

To the question "Who are you?" Hattie can only answer "I am I." It is, within the Judaic context of Bellow's literature, the only possible answer for secular Jews, who are unable to reply "I am the son of my father." In "Leaving the Yellow House," it is also the only answer that modern Americans can give. As Leslie Fiedler points out, America, after completing the great Westward expansion, lost its innocence as well as its Puritancolored cultural tradition. It is America's new generation, which must improvise its own history and determine its own fate, that inhabits Sego Desert Lake and struggles vainly to maintain its integrity in the desert.

Although Hattie is a loser, she is also, like Tommy Wilhelm and Moses Herzog, a "perennial survivor." She is a perennial sego lily, a dainty yet vital little wildflower that blooms among the rocks in a sterile desert. As her favorite joke tells, she had been caught in the mud many times, but each time she "came out of everything." After reviewing her whole life as if watching a movie film and experiencing a catharsis of anger and remorse, this prisoner of Sego Desert Lake arrives at a state of accepting her life, the equilibrium of a person who has confronted and survived destruction once again. Although this peaceful state (a delirious state of stupor, too) can by no means be called the silence of inward knowledge, Hattie reaches it through her own inner search, the inner drama of one who experiences a crisis of identity. "Then she thought that there was a beginning, and a middle. She shrank from the last term. She began once more—a beginning. After that, there was the early middle, then middle middle, late middle middle, quite late middle. In fact the middle is all I know. The rest is just a rumor. Only tonight I can't give the house away. I'm drunk and so I need it. And tomorrow, she promised herself, I'll think again. I'll work it out, for sure." The attaining of this tragicomical state of peace and reconciliation with humanity appears later, more fully developed, as a major theme of *Herzog*. Treating an archetypal American theme in "Leaving the Yellow House," Saul Bellow presents a unique drama of man's (woman's!) struggle for recovery from modern alienation.

Source: Noriko M. Lippit, "A Perennial Survivor: Saul Bellow's Heroine in the Desert," in *Studies in Short Fiction,*s Vol. XIII, No. 3, Summer 1975, pp. 281-83.

Topics for Further Study

How do you think Hattie will react to her situation the following day? Write a scene that could come at the end of the story, showing Hattie's reaction.

Read Bellow's novella *Seize the Day,* and draw your own comparisons between its protagonist, Tommy Wilhelm, and Hattie Waggoner.

Do you think Hattie is representative of the adventurous, self-sufficient Westerner? Why or why not? Do you think anyone in the story is representative of the West? Explain your answer.

The narrator states that "you couldn't help being fond of Hattie." Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?

Bellow scholar Robert Kiernan stated that Hattie's "alienation from her own emotions . . . borders on schizophrenia." Conduct research on schizophrenia and then assess the validity of Kiernan's statement.

Bellow's fiction generally takes place in urban settings. Imagine that Hattie lived in New York City. Would she experience the same problems as she does in Utah? Why do you think as you do? Imagine the course of Hattie's life if she lived in a city and write a paragraph about it.

Compare and Contrast

1950s: An annual middle-class income ranges between $3,000 and $10,000 annually. More than 60 percent of Americans fall into the middle class.

1990s: The annual median income of all U.S. households is $35,492. Americans aged 65 and older have a lower median income: $28,983.

1950s: Utah experiences a population gain of between 20 and 30 percent. By 1955, Utah's population is 781,000.

1990s: The population of Utah is 2,059,000, with 8.7 percent more than 65 years of age. Utah is one of the ten fastest-growing states in the country. The population rises by 19.5 percent from 1990 to 1997.

1950s: In 1955, 71 percent of American households own an automobile and 76 percent own a television set.

1990s: In 1996, more than 129 million automobiles are registered in the United States. In 1997, 98.7 percent of all American households own at least one color television.

1950s: An average of 21.3 per 100,000 deaths are caused by car accidents annually.

1990s: In 1995, 56,155 fatal car crashes, out of around 6.8 million total reported, involve alcohol. Of these, 6,238 of the cars are driven by women.

1950s: The median price for a single-family home is $10,050. Throughout the decade, increasing numbers of Americans buy their own home, many of which are located in the suburbs.

1990s: The median sales price of homes in the United States is $95,500. Close to seventy-three percent of all Americans live in an owner-occupied home. A slightly higher percentage of Americans aged 65 and over own their own homes: just more than seventy-nine percent.

1950s: Of a total U.S. population of close to 164.3 million in 1955, around 7.4 million are aged between 65 and 79, or 4.5 percent.

1990s: Of a total U.S. population of 273.9 million in 1998, just more than 18 million are aged between 65 and 79, or 6.6 percent.

What Do I Read Next?

Saul Bellow's 1956 novella *Seize the Day* tells of a significant day in the life of down-and-out Tommy Wilhelm. Like Hattie Waggoner, Wilhelm reflects on his past and searches for resolution.

Mrs. Bridge, by Evan S. Connell (1959), presents a portrait of a woman's life, from her childhood to her old age. Its companion book, *Mr. Bridge,* treats her husband's life in a similar fashion. Both novels have as their genesis the short story, "Mr. and Mrs. Bridge."

Mary Gordon's 1989 novel, *The Other Side,* narrates the story of an elderly couple as they reflect back on their lives.

"Timothy's Birthday," a short story by William Trevor in his 1996 collection *After Rain,* tells of an old couple who await their adult son's birthday visit.

Bellow is best known for his portrayals of modern urban dwellers. Henry Roth's novel *Call It Sleep,* first published in 1934, is the story of Jewish immigrants in a New York City ghetto. Largely forgotten until the late 1950s, today it stands as a classic of Jewish-American literature.

Wallace Stegner's prizewinning novel *Angle of Repose* (1971) switches between present-time, in which an older man is stricken with a paralyzing disease, and the past, in which the man's ancestors make their way in the rugged, nineteenth- century West.

Further Study

Fuchs, Daniel, *Saul Bellow: Vision and Revision,* Duke University Press, 1984.

This discussion of Bellow's writings draws on previously unpublished letters and manuscripts.

Halberstam, David, *The Fifties,* Villard Books, 1993.

This work provides an in-depth look at the major issues, both political and social, of the 1950s.

Malin, Irving, *Saul Bellow's Fiction,* Southern Illinois University Press, 1969.

This work provides a discussion of Bellow's writings.

Trachtenberg, Stanley, ed., *Critical Essays on Saul Bellow,* G. K. Hall & Co., 1979.

This collection consists of book reviews and essays about Bellow's work.

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Rodrigues, Eusebio L., "A Rough Hewed Heroine of Our Time: Saul Bellow's 'Leaving the Yellow House,'" in *Saul Bellow Newsletter,* Vol. 1, No. 1, Spring 1981, pp. 11-7.

Rooke, Constance, "Saul Bellow's 'Leaving the Yellow House': The Trouble with Women," in *Studies in Short Fiction,* Vol. 14, No. 2, Spring 1977, pp. 184-87

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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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