Life Study Guide

Life by Bessie Head

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The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

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Introduction

During her career, Bessie Head produced a body of work that focused on essential African concerns, such as village and tribal life, the effects of colonization, mythology and witchcraft, and the oral storytelling tradition. Her stories also delve into more universal issues, particularly the intermingling of traditional and contemporary culture and the roles of women. In "Life" (1977), Head examines the story of a young woman who has spent most of her life in Johannesburg, South Africa, but is forced to return to her native village in Botswana in the 1960s. Two very different worlds come in conflict when Life enters the village.

Life flouts convention when she becomes the village's first prostitute, but more than that she asserts a woman's right to be responsible for her own finances and own decisions. Despite her background, she marries the conservative, traditional Lesego. Both Life and Lesego believe that she can become a "woman," but when Life cannot give up her independence, Lesego kills her. The story explores how and why women seek to emancipate themselves, as well as the roles that both men and women play in keeping women at a subservient level. At its most fundamental level, perhaps, the story questions what it means to be a modern African.

Author Biography

Bessie Head was born in 1937 in a South African mental institution where her mother had been admitted upon the discovery of her pregnancy. Head was the child of an illegal union between a white mother and an unknown black father. Head was placed in foster care with a black family. Head's mother remained in the institution where she died six years later. During this period, Head's grandmother occasionally visited, but in 1943, all contact between Head and her white relatives ceased. Head grew up believing that her foster family was her true family, but when she was thirteen, welfare officials removed her to an orphanage due to the poverty of her foster home. There she acquired an education that encouraged her readily apparent interest in reading, and eventually she learned the truth about her background.

Head studied for her teacher's certificate, and in 1957, she taught at a primary school for black children. Head left this job a year later, however, and moved to Cape Town, where she found work as a journalist. After a brief period in Johannesburg where Head became involved with the Pan Africanist Congress, she returned to Cape Town. Unable to get her old reporting job back, Head began writing and printing a pro-Africanist news sheet called "The Citizen." She also became involved in leftist political circles. Head married, and in 1962, she gave birth to a son.

By the end of 1963, Head had left her husband. She decided to leave South Africa, which was experiencing increasingly repressive racial policies. She was given an exit permit, which meant that she could leave South Africa but could never return. In March 1964, having secured a teaching position in Serowe, Botswana, Head left her native country.

Head held this position for a few years but then turned to clerical work and odd jobs. During this period, she continued to work on her writing. In 1968, she published her first novel, *When Rain Clouds Gather.*

Head had previously experienced mental instability, but in 1970, she had a severe breakdown and went into a mental hospital. After her discharge three months later, she began to write A *Question of Power,* an autobiographical novel. It was published in 1973.

Throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, Head focused on her writing. She attended several writers' workshops as well as gave talks at international conferences. In 1979, she also was finally granted Botswanan citizenship.

In 1986, Head began drinking heavily. She fell quite ill and slipped into a coma. In April of that year, she died of hepatitis.

Plot Summary

"Life" opens in 1963, a period when all Botswana-born citizens living in South Africa were forced to return to their native country. Many of the people who are sent back had settled in the cities, but they return to villages in the rural countryside.

One woman forced to return to Botswana is Life. She left her native village when she was only ten years old and went with her parents to Johannesburg. Even though her parents have died by the time Life returns to the village (seventeen years later), the family's land is still unoccupied, as is village custom. The neighbor women help Life put her yard in order because weeds and grass have overtaken the ground and the mud huts are in disrepair. The women are impressed with Life's urbanity. They believe she will bring new ideas to their village.

They also notice that Life has a great deal of money, which she generously spends on the workers. She says that Johannesburg is filled with money and that you only had to know how to get it. The women heed Life's words with caution, for villagers believe that a person cannot be honest and rich at the same time. They think that Life will eventually settle down.

The women who first welcome Life to the village soon come to shun her because they realize that she is prostituting herself. The villagers are not prudish—they believe it is fine to have sex, but they do not think finances should be part of the bargain.

As the village learns of Life's new business, the beer-brewing women start to come over to her home. They have a lot of boyfriends—who mooch off them for as long as possible—but no husbands. Soon enough, Life's yard begins to resemble a Johannesburg township. The respectable villagers disapprove of the activities going on at Life's house.

A few months after Life arrives in the village, the first pub opens. It soon becomes Life's favorite place to arrange her business. One night, Lesego, a cattleman, comes into the bar. He has just returned from his cattle-post where he has spent the last three months. Lesego is highly respected in the village. He is wealthy and generous, and he is also a clear thinker whom people turn to for advice.

Life immediately notices Lesego; she likes his urban looks and behavior and the way the other men defer to him. Lesego also notice Life. He orders her to come sit by him, and she does. They look at each other, but each only sees a false picture: she sees a powerful man, like the gangsters she knew in Johannesburg, and he sees a totally different kind of woman from the other women of the village.

Lesego and Life leave the bar together, and a week later their marriage is announced. Lesego's friends are distraught. Sianana speaks up for the men. He tries to tell Lesego the truth about his fiancée, but Lesego replies that Life has already confessed her "past." Life also announces the news to her beer-brewing friends and renounces her old ways.

Lesego's life does not change greatly after the marriage, but he does make three household rules: he controls the money; he doesn't want the radio on all day long; and Life must not get involved with any other men, or else he will kill her. The neighbors approve of the marriage because Lesego has turned Life into a good woman, but the boredom of daily life has an adverse affect on Life. She comes to realize that married life does not suit her and feels increasing anger at her situation.

One day, Lesego has to visit his cattle post. While he is gone, Life takes up her old ways. When Lesego returns three days later, Life goes to a neighbor's house to keep a date with a man. Another neighbor comes over to tell Lesego of Life's actions. Lesego goes to the neighbor's house, kicks in the door, and finds Life with another man. The man runs away but watches from the edge of the yard. He sees Lesego with a large knife and promptly faints. Soon the neighbors hear a loud wail. Eventually they call the police—they initially forget to do so because they are not accustomed to murder in their village. When the police come to Lesego's yard, they find him sitting quietly.

Lesego explains his actions at his trial. The white judge is impressed by Lesego's calm manner and sentences him to five years of imprisonment. Sianana agrees to take care of Lesego's business during this period. He asks his friend why he killed Life instead of simply leaving her, but the question remains unanswered.

Characters

Lesego

Lesego is a successful, wealthy cattleman. His opinion is highly respected among the villagers, who often turn to him for help in sorting out issues. He spends months at a time at his cattle post, but when he returns to the village, he relaxes, spending time with his friends or attending the tribal court.

Lesego, though well-liked by women, has never stayed with one for long because they bored him. In Life, Lesego sees a whole new kind of woman. Initially he is attracted to her, but later, after their marriage, he seeks to repress what he liked about her in the first place. He takes away her independence by taking charge of all her money and by forbidding her from doing the activity that will earn her more money—prostitution. When Life disobeys him and sleeps with a man, Lesego kills her. His calm demeanor is rewarded at his trial; the judge, impressed with Lesego, sentences him to only five years in jail for her murder.

Life Morapedi

Life is the protagonist of the story. The daughter of two Botswana villagers who resettled in Johannesburg, South Africa, Life has spent the majority of her time in an urban environment. She absorbed the cultural mores of that city, such as liberal attitudes about money, sex, and crime. In 1963, Life is forced by law to return to Botswana, so she returns to her home village where she finds that she can claim the Morapedi family homestead.

Life is immediately brought into conflict with the social morals of the villagers. The respectable villagers, initially drawn to Life because of her vitality, shun her, and Life falls in with the people most like her acquaintances in Johannesburg—the beer-brewing women and the men who consort with them. Life also attempts to recreate her Johannesburg lifestyle by becoming the village's first prostitute.

When Life meets Lesego, she attempts to turn her back on her former lifestyle. She soon discovers that she is unsuccessful because married life is too confining. She asserts herself by sleeping with men for money, which leads to her murder by Lesego.

Sianana

Sianana is Lesego's friend. He has been with Life sexually and is no longer attracted to her. He believes that Lesego will also see that Life is "rotten to the core," but when Lesego announces that he will marry Life, Sianana attempts to forewarn his friend about her true nature. Lesego refuses to listen to his friend's advice, and Sianana can do nothing further to prevent Lesego from making a mistake. Lesego evidently respects

Sianana for his actions because while he is in jail, Sianana offers to take care of his business affairs.

Themes

Sexuality

Sexuality is an important theme in "Life"; Head uses sexual behavior to describe the interior life of her characters, their differences, and the social mores of the village. The first women who are drawn to Life are the farmers and housewives, but they soon begin "to shun her completely because men started turning up in an unending stream." Life's promiscuity makes her an unacceptable companion for these "conservative" women. The women who become Life's friends are the beer-brewing women, "a gay and lovable crowd who had emancipated themselves some time ago." Emancipation for the women, however, manifests itself through their drunkenness, illegitimate children, and trail of useless lovers. They see Life as their queen and her successful selling of her body as evidence of her superiority; unlike the farming women and housewives, they respect Life.

When Life wants to assert her independence from Lesego, she does so through her sexuality. She keeps an appointment with one of her customers, directly defying Lesego's order. Although Lesego kills her, he is only sentenced to five years in jail, which shows that woman's sexuality represents an object that men should be able to control.

Values

The values of the traditional village and the values of the modern city are contrasted in "Life." Life has been living in Johannesburg where "'Money flows like water.'" In marked contrast, the villagers believe that people with a lot of money cannot be honest. They "never imagined money as a bottomless pit without end; it always had an end and was hard to come by." Life, however, spends money freely on food and special treats, in fact, "anything the workers expressed a preference for." Not only does Life have greater access to money because of what she learned in the city, she is also willing to spend it.

Attitudes toward money also point out another cultural difference between the village and the city. Life becomes the village's first prostitute. Her ease at sexual relations stems from her desire for money. In contrast, village women engage in premarital sex but with "financial considerations coming in as an afterthought." In fact, it is the men who take advantage of the beer-brewing women, living off of them as long as they are able to do so. These are the same men who "could get all the sex they needed for free in the village, but it seemed to fascinate them that they should pay for it for the first time." The village men are attracted, not to sex, but to the unknown— in this case, the urban sensibility that Life represents.

Imprisonment and Entrapment

The Botswana village represents for most of the characters a place of imprisonment and entrapment. When Life first returns to the village and is shown to her family's yard, she sees that the "rubber hedge had grown to a disproportionate size and enclosed the yard in a gloom of shadow that kept out the sunlight." This yard physically represents the prison in which Life has found herself. Forced to leave South Africa, Life attempts to recreate her carefree life in Botswana but is unable to do so. Surrounding her are people who are trapped by expectation and tradition. The village women think that Life "would soon settle down—intelligent girls got jobs in the post office sooner or later." The beer-brewing women, despite their supposedly carefree ways, are also trapped—by the children they clutch to their hips and the boyfriends who leave as soon as they are asked to contribute to the household finances. Indeed, as the narrative points out, these women "too were subject to the respectable order of village life."

Life is initially drawn to Lesego because she mistakenly believes that he represents the more freewheeling life she enjoyed in Johannesburg. Lesego, for his part, is drawn to Life because she represents "new ideas," which the village is clearly lacking. Lesego, however, does not want to enjoy these "new ideas," but rather he wants to suppress

them. He takes over the handling of the money, forbids Life from playing the radio, and tells her she must give up her prostitution career. In essence, Lesego places Life in a prison by taking away those things that give her independence. At the end of the story, Lesego is also given the punishment of five years in prison, but his entrapment is only physical and temporary.

Style

Setting

The story takes place in a traditional Botswana village in the early 1960s. Botswana, which has been under British colonial rule for almost a century, is on the verge of independence. Tradition and custom, however, still prevail in the village, and the respected residents are those who maintain decorum and adhere to the roles governing society, which include deference to males. Significantly, the women who first greet Life help her put her yard "in order." The scenes of the men and women fixing up Life's yard depict a community celebration, further emphasizing the villagers'willingness to work together for one of their own.

The village is nothing like Johannesburg, South Africa, where Life has spent most of her life. Though the story does not show the city directly, the narration makes it clear that Life's Johannesburg is nothing like the village; instead of working as teachers, farmers, clerks, or nurses, black women work as singers, models, and prostitutes—the type of careers unavailable in the village. Instead of consorting with ranchers and farmers, people like Life consort with gangsters. The village is nothing like Johannesburg, but, because of Life, "[V]ery soon the din and riot of a Johannesburg township was duplicated, on a minor scale." Life, like the other Botswanans who had returned to their native country, "brought with [her] . . . bits and pieces of a foreign culture and city habits which they had absorbed." Life's attempt to convert her life into what she had known previously—which includes becoming the town's first prostitute and getting involved with Lesego because he was "the nearest thing she had seen for a long time to the Johannesburg gangsters she had associated with"—ultimately must fail. For Life is attempting to recreate something that only exists in her memory.

Narrative

The narrative style employed by Head in "Life" is integral to the story because it allows Head to explore the personal traits of her characters as well as the global traits shared by the villagers. Such a narrative style allows Head to fully set up the inherent difference between the villagers and the city dwellers, which is at the core of the story. The narration alternates between a detached factual voice that imparts pertinent information, such as the historical setting and the attitudes of the village women, and a more vivid portrayal of the village inhabitants that includes lively dialogue and image-filled descriptions. The story opens with the factual voice, to explain both the historical events that cause Life to return to Botswana and her feelings about this movement. At times throughout the story, the factual voice is used to more fully explicate various events. Although at times, the narration is deeply within the characters and their issues—as during Life's murder—the story ends on the same note as it began. "A song by Jim Reeves was very popular at that time. *'That's What Happens When Two Worlds*

Collide'." Head's narrative voice thus serves as a running commentary on the story's drama.

Symbolism

The very name Head chose for her protagonist, "Life," is symbolic. Life is vibrant and vivid. "She had a bright, vivacious, friendly manner and laughed freely and loudly. Her speech was rapid and a little hysterical but that was in keeping with her whole personality." In essence, Life is simply brimming over with spirit. The women immediately recognize this quality: "'She is going to bring us a little light,'" they said. Life represents the vitality of "new ideas that would freshen up the ordinariness and everydayness of village life."

Life, however, loses her self when Lesego oppresses her. As such, Lesego symbolizes death, a role he is placed in from his introduction: "Then one evening death walked quietly into the bar. It was Lesego, the cattle-man." Lesego is the virtual opposite of Life. On a literal level, for instance, he keeps his money in a bank while Life spends hers freely. On an emotional level, he responds to his surroundings from a traditional point of view in which the man takes command while Life constantly seeks to create her own space. Since they come together, they are in almost constant collision. Eventually, as is inevitable, death subsumes life, but life asserts its vitality by causing death's imprisonment.

Historical Context

The Creation of the Republic of Botswana

The area that comprises present-day Botswana came under British control in 1884. In the mid-1900s, as more and more African colonies began demanding self-rule, British governors considered handing the region over to South Africa. By the late 1950s, however, it became clear that such a plan would not work. The protectorate's government began preparing the region for political and economic self-sufficiency.

A legislative council was set up in 1961 after limited national elections. Two new political parties were founded in the first years of the decade. During 1963 and 1964, a series of constitutional discussions took place to determine proposals for internal self-government based on universal adult suffrage and a ministerial form of government. In 1964, the first census was conducted, and by the end of year, voters had been registered throughout the protectorate. In February 1965, transference of the capital from Mafeking, South Africa, to Gaborone in Botswana began. At this point, the protectorate was granted internal self-government. The first general elections were held in March 1965. On September 30, 1966, the country became the independent Republic of Botswana. Sir Seretse Khama, the heir to the Ngwato chieftaincy, was elected as Botswana's first president.

The New Country

The Botswana constitution, which was adopted on the day of the country's independence, provided for a republican form of government headed by the president and with three main branches of government: the legislature, the executive branch, and the judiciary.

For its first five years, Botswana remained financially dependent on Britain to cover the full cost of administration and development. However, economic development took place from 1967 through 1971, particularly after diamonds were discovered at Orapa, Botswana.

Through its initial years of being a republic, Botswana's economy grew annually between 12 and 13 percent. Botswana developed an urban and economic infrastructure that included mining development as well as basic social services. Throughout the 1970s, the diamond mines were expanded, and nickel and copper mines also opened though the latter two were less economically successful.

Seretse Khama's political party, now known as the Botswana Democratic Party, or BDP, was consistently reelected by a large majority. The Botswana National Front, or BNF, became a significant threat after 1969 when "tribal" conservatives joined BNF socialists in attacking government policies.

Botswana and Africa

From 1969 onwards, Botswana began to play a more significant role in international politics. It depicted itself as a nonracial, liberal democratic alternative to South African apartheid. With economic aid from the United States, Botswana built a road that went directly to Zambia. In the early to mid-1970s, Botswana, along with Zambia, Tanzania, Angola, and Mozambique, actively sought to bring majority rule to Zimbabwe, Namibia, and South Africa.

Toward the end of the 1970s, refugees fleeing Rhodesia's civil war as well as black South Africans fleeing urban insurrections came to Botswana. When Botswana began to form its own army, the Botswana Defense Force, the Rhodesian army crossed the border and massacred fifteen Botswana soldiers in a surprise attack. Botswana, however, helped bring about the final settlement of the Rhodesian war, which resulted in the independence of the colony, renamed Zimbabwe, in 1980. Also that year, Botswana helped devlop the Southern African Development Coordination Conference, or SADCC, to coordinate different economies throughout southern Africa.

Critical Overview

Bessie Head's body of work centers around village and family life, the African tradition, and the problems that women encounter in society; the themes in her novels and short stories display significant overlap. The stories in *The Collector of Treasures* (1977), from which "Life" is taken, raise a myriad of issues, but most explore good and evil and the mistreatment of women in village life. Unlike Head's novels, which have a clear didactic purpose, in her short stories "the distinction between right and wrong," writes Greta D. Little in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography,* "is never clear."

Head arranged the sequence of the stories to "reenact" the history of the African people from ancient times to colonialism to contemporary society. As such, Head is especially interested in African traditions, such as mythology, tribal witchcraft, and oral storytelling, oftentimes in juxtaposition with the demands of modern culture. "[E]ach story," writes Craig MacKenzie in his study *Bessie Head,* "is also deftly allusive and evokes vividly and richly the sense of a real, living, bustling village struggling to cope with the intrusion of new forces into the traditional social fabric."

The collection received mixed reviews at its publication but since then has been the focus of several critical studies. Michael Thorpe, writing in *Word Literature Today,* suggests that the stories "lend themselves especially well to an understanding of Head's aims as a writer" and demonstrate that Head seems "troubled" by the "contradictions within customary life." Sara Chetin explores Head's feminist themes and "the neglected realm of female experience" in an article in the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature.* She also believes that Head "consciously exploits" her "'outsider' status" in her writing, "by deliberately distancing herself from the community whose tales she narrates so that her stories reveal a distinctly ambiguous, unresolved tone."

"Life" demonstrates this characteristic. The narration remains detached and factual, and as MacKenzie points out, "no authorial judgment is imposed." Other critics note that Head's lack of self-involvement is appropriate to her issues. Writes Femi Ojo-Ade in the article "Of Human Trials and Triumphs," "We believe that the ambiguity is an adequate comment on the very nature of the evolving society."

"Life" also has the most precise historical setting of the collection. The setting of 1960s Botswana is important because it signifies the enormous change coming to the region, and as Kenneth W. Harrow writes in *Callaloo,* "The subject of Bessie Head's stories is change itself, and specifically the threshold where change takes place."

Harrow believes that Head is most concerned with the "boundaries between men and women, between past and present roles." The maintenance or rejection of these boundaries is a strong indicator of change. Such concerns are clearly evident in "Life" where Life finds herself in conflict both with the men in her community and the traditional women. "Life is represented as a figure of freedom who refuses to accept the constraints of boundaries." The beer-brewing women, as well, demonstrate this conflict.

As MacKenzie points out, though the beer-brewing women attempt "to escape the constraints of a patriarchal culture," they are "nonetheless abused by the men."

In addition to its focus on change, Head's work concerns itself with ways in which people, particularly women, seek to attain their independence. According to Harrow, Life "is a victim of the harsh and implacable enforcement of limits upon her conduct." However, even when Head's characters fail to achieve physical freedom, they still act and think independently.

Several critics note that Head's short stories are different from her novels in that they derive their structure, not from imparting a moral lesson, but from the complexities of the world that she is describing. That is partially because, writes H. Nigel Thomas in the article "Narrative Strategies in Bessie Head's Stories,"

one of her principal concerns was an understanding on the reader's part of the social forces determining the actions of her characters. Where the events of the story do not fully imply what those social forces are, she provides them in her own voice.

One only has to read the first and last paragraphs of "Life" to see this practice at work.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4

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 discusses the clash between the village world and the city world and explores the ultimate victory of the villagers.

Kenneth W. Harrow writes in *Callaloo* of Bessie Head's short stories, "The subject . . . is change itself, and specifically the threshold where change takes place." The story "Life," collected in *The Collector of Treasures,* begins with a period of great change, moves into a depiction of society in which change is little valued, and then asserts the victory of traditional values at its end. "Life" takes place in Botswana in 1963. Borders have recently been set up between that country and South Africa in anticipation of Botswana's upcoming independence. All Botswana nationals must leave South Africa and return home. Before this time, according to Head's narration, "Everything had been mingled up . . . and the traffic of people to and fro between the two countries had been a steady flow for years and years." Life, originally from a rural village in Botswana, had come to Johannesburg with her parents at the age of ten. Now seventeen years later, after an adulthood spent working as "a singer, beauty queen, advertising model, and prostitute" as well as associating with gangsters, the vivacious Life is forced to return to the quiet, traditional village.

The villagers, warns Head's narrator in the opening paragraph, carefully evaluate the "foreign culture and city habits" brought to Botswana by the migrants before deciding what they would accept. "What they liked, and was beneficial to them, they absorbed, for instance, the faith-healing cult churches which instantly took hold like wildfire; what was harmful to them, they rejected." So even before meeting Life, readers know what sort of challenge migrants face. The first paragraph ends with the blunt statement, "The murder of Life had this complicated undertone of rejection." Thus, it is immediately understood that it is not *what* happens to Life that is at the crux of the story but *how* it happens. Life, it is hinted, brings harmful change to the village. Interestingly, even though she lends her name to the title, Life is not the focus of the story but the village itself—the *lifeways* of the village—is the focus.

The environment into which Life must create a home is bound by tradition. When she first arrives in the village, "[O]n mentioning . . . her name . . . the villagers immediately and obligingly took her to the Morapedi yard in the central part of the village." That Life's family homestead still remains unoccupied and available for any returning Morapedi, after seventeen years, shows the importance that the villagers place on family and community ties. This is a place where stability reigns.

The village women initially welcome Life, believing that she will "bring us a little light," for their stable village offers little in the way of excitement, and an undercurrent of hysteria is detected in Life. The village women would welcome "new ideas that would freshen up the ordinariness and everydayness of village life," but only if they are not harmful. Though the "everyday round of village life was deadly dull in its even, unbroken

monotony," the women look forward to small changes, such as fixing up Life's yard that, in the number of people involved and the food served, comes to mimic "one long wedding-feast." It is Life's ease with spending money on "anything the workers expressed a preference for" that causes the women to first distrust her. Clearly, it indicates that "their child could not have lived a very good life in Johannesburg." Their fears are confirmed when Life starts the villages first prostitution business. The villagers are not averse to sex outside of marriage, but it must be "on a respectable and human level." The language the narrator employs again points to the villagers careful assessment of foreign ways; it is up to the villagers to decide what is respectable, and this decision comes from their community, not from any outside influences. By making people pay for what is widely "recognized as a necessary part of human life," Life challenges the villagers manner of running and viewing their own lives.

The only people who are drawn to Life are the men who are "fascinated" with the idea of paying for sex and the beer-brewing women whose main occupation is drinking all day long. Both these groups are playing at tasting Life's urban freedom, but it is only a game for them—it is not a way of life. Although they cavort in Life's yard, so much so that it begins to resemble a Johannesburg township, they are still tied to preconceived traditional mores. Sianana claims that the men want to "try it out . . . because it is something new," yet they continue to return to her. Sianana calls her "rotten to the core," even while he sits in the bar that serves as a symbol of the change that Life has brought to the village. The beer-brewers, though they had "emancipated themselves some time ago," are still tied to the "respectable order of village life." Although they don't have husbands, they do not sleep with men indiscriminately; their partners are "all for a time steady boyfriends." They make Life their "queen." The rest of the village reacts darkly to Life's new enterprise. "'They'll all be destroyed one day like Sodom and Gomorrah,'" they prophesy. What they are reacting to so strongly is not Life's usurpation of the standard village morality but rather her usurpation of the power held by male villagers. Instead of allowing men to be in charge of her and to dictate her mode of behavior, Life effectively places her self above them by demanding money for something she alone possesses.

When Lesego enters the story, it is immediately clear that he represents the male authority figure. He is well respected by villagers for his wealth as well as for his common sense. Life correctly notes his "power and control," but she associates it with Johannesburg gangsters, not a "king" of the village world. Lesego's character and stability indicate that, like most of the villagers, he would little welcome the change that Life brings to the village. He is nonetheless drawn to her because he correctly notes that she represents a "new kind of woman." What he primarily wants, however, is to tame her, taming being a mark of possession. The first interaction between the two indicates both his nature and the path that the relationship will follow. He says, "'Come here,'" and she obeys, whereas with the other men, they ask what time she is available, and she tells *them.*

For a period, Life believes that she will be able to change and she wants to do so. She tells Lesego and her friends, "'All my old ways are over . . . I have now become a woman.'" Her choice of words is significant, revealing her own impression of her

previous behavior as childlike or playful. A woman has certain responsibilities but whatever they are, "drawing water, stamping corn, cooking food," they are not appropriate for Life. She is accustomed to financial independence, but Lesego insists on taking control of all the household money. He also takes control of her environment, demanding that she turn the radio off. Further he tells her, "'If you go with those men again, I'll kill you,'" thus forbidding her the one activity that can bring her more money—money to replace that which he has taken away. The neighbors, those who had shunned Life, are impressed by the change in her behavior, saying, that "one never ought to judge a human being who was both good and bad, and Lesego had turned a bad woman into a good woman." Their approbation rests on Lesego's effective reining in of Life.

Life, however, cannot function within the dictates of this relationship. As soon as Lesego is called away on business, she returns to her former ways for "a wild anger was driving her to break out of a way of life that was like death to her." If she must live in a manner prescribed by another, it is not worth living. She deliberately allows Lesego to catch her with a man, and he fulfills her wish. Alone among the villagers, Lesego maintains his "unperturbed" demeanor. The villagers recoil in shock; the village police look on in horror. Though these people did not approve of Life, neither can they approve of murder, which is "outright and violent." Again, the village draws away from an activity that transgresses their normal boundaries.

Despite Lesego's reliance on murder to enforce order, the end of the story upholds the traditional values of the village and the superiority of the male. Lesego explains his actions to the judge "calmly": "'I thought if she was doing a bad thing . . . I'd better kill her because I cannot understand a wife who could be so corrupt.'" Lesego's explanation is inherently nonsensical; he sits in judgment of Life because he "had been doing this for years." His feeling that he has the right to do so shows, again, the way he asserts control over his surroundings. The judge remains unswayed by Lesego's explanation—he is a white man and knows that it is the white Africans who have ultimate control—but he does respond to Lesego's manner. Despite the seriousness of the crime, the judge sentences Lesego to only five years in jail instead of a hanging. (It should be noted that in "The Collector of Treasures" Head wrote of a *woman* who killed her abusive husband and received life imprisonment for that crime.) Lesego will go to jail, but when he is freed, he will return to his usual mode of life; While he is gone, Sianana will take care of his business affairs. Meanwhile, the village, freed from Life's subversive influence, returns to itself, having rejected Life's murder by her husband. "A song by Jim Reeves was very popular at that time," the narrator closes the story, *"That's What Happens When Two Worlds Collide'."* Such an ending underscores that the story is about a much graver issue than two people who are utterly incompatible; it is about two worlds— the city and the village—that cannot coexist.

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

Critical Essay #2

Kerschen is a writer and public school district administrator. In this essay, she explores Head's incorporation of the genre of the folktale with journalistic reporting of village life, all with an underlying feminist theme.

Bessie Head's unique talent lies in the way she intertwines her feminist aesthetic into traditional African folklore. Head's short story "Life" appears to be a simple folktale that provides a brief glimpse into a traditional Botswanan village after independence in 1966. The characters are stereotypical, the events matter-of-fact, and the moral crystal clear. Yet hidden beneath this tale is a clue to understanding not only the struggle of women in a patriarchal society, but also the struggle of all people forced into roles and categories by those in power.

Folktales are defined by Jan Harold Brunvand in his book *The Study of American Folklore* as "traditional prose narratives that are strictly fictional and told primarily for entertainment, although they may also illustrate a truth or point a moral." Both critics and Head herself have said that the stories, including "Life," in her collection *The Collector of Treasures,* are stories designed to read like folktales in that they are entertaining and instructive. However, Head was an experienced journalist who could not help but create her stories from actual events. As she told Susan Beard in a 1986 interview for *Sage: A Scholarly Journal on Black Women:*

What I could say about *The Collector of Treasures* is that it was like a kind of resume of thirteen years of living entirely in village life. . . . In actual fact, all of the stories are based on real life happenings. The village is like this: it's *very* peaceful and everyday. There's one story, "Life," which describes the rhythm almost as monotonous. One day is just the same as another, but human beings are so similar all over the world. Suddenly, a great drama explodes. Now you wake up and take your shopping basket and walk down the road and people say: 'Oh, have you heard. . . .' [A]ll I simply did was record stories that had happened and had been told to me and described to me. Most of the stories there are based on reality; they're not inventions. They happened; they are changed. They are decorated; they are interpreted. But there's a basis there in fact, in reality.

The title character, Life Morapedi, is a woman caught in a world that cannot understand her or accept her, nor does it even want to try. Life enters the village of her youth as an enigma; she is fancy, rich, and metropolitan. Everything about her, from her personality to her dress, is above and beyond anything the villagers have seen before. She is a woman unlike any other in the village, and at first she is welcomed as a new "light" that will impart "new ideas that would freshen up the ordinariness and everydayness of village life." However, it quickly becomes apparent that her "new ideas" are not acceptable within the constraints of traditional village society.

Life breaks the unspoken rules of how a woman is supposed to behave, and thus begins the struggle between Life's freedom and the demands of society's expectations.

The villagers who had once welcomed her with open arms are the same ones who turn away from her when they realize she is unwilling to pay the price for their hospitality—conformity. She frequents a pub and charges money for sex, something even the beer-brewing women (the lower class) consider beneath them. Life is a threat because she tests the boundaries that have been placed around her by village routine and by her gender and then proceeds to break right through them. This kind of blatant disregard for tradition upsets the careful, oppressive balance of the village, and something must be done, according to the villagers, to set it right again.

Hence the arrival of Lesego. If Life represents everything nontraditional, Lesego represents everything traditional. He is a strong, powerful, dominant, authoritative man. He is the epitome of masculinity, from his profession (rugged cattleman) to his emotionless sense of reason. He also represents society's last effort to integrate the wild woman into its comfortable clutches. His purpose is to marry Life and turn her into a proper village wife, one who does not handle money, does not throw loud parties, and does not fornicate with other men. At first, Life seems interested in this newfound order; as she tells the beer-brewing women, "All my old ways are over," she says. "I have now become a woman." In other words, she is now conforming to the village's definition of what a woman should be. Yet Life's will and soul cannot be suppressed for long, and she soon finds herself reverting to her old ways. However, this last rejection of traditional societal values comes with a fatal price. Lesego murders Life, knowing that he has the unspoken approval of the rest of the villagers. Her disruption of their society has to be stopped, either by taming her or killing her. Either way, the villagers will be satisfied as long as their lives can return to their ordinary ways.

The clear moral of this story is meant to be a warning to all young women: Life died because she was bad. "Bad" in this instance takes on many different meanings: different, controversial, immoral, uncontrolled, dishonorable, disrespectful, and evil. But the root problem is that Life did not conform to her traditional role as a woman. That nonconformity, in and of itself, was "bad" enough. Then it was merely a matter of designating her actions as "sins" against society to justify fully rejecting her. Yet it is not Head's intention to perpetuate the moral of this story; in fact, quite the opposite is true. She is attempting to point out the injustice and atrocity suffered by Life. She was the victim of a patriarchal society that did not value her as an individual woman but instead saw her as a piece of the whole that had to be made to fit.

On a small scale, Life represents the oppression of individual women. On a larger scale, she represents the oppression of an entire people under the auspices of racism, colonialism, and apartheid. The method of operation is the same: as the villagers repair Life's house and restore her yard in exchange for her conformity, so do imperialists build roads and impose order in exchange for a nation's subjugation. It is the classic story of those in power dictating to those in the minority. "Life" is an example of Head's writing that, according to *Feminist Writers,* is an effort to "recover a sense of one's own history and the dignity of a self stamped down by colonialist exploitation, especially that of women who were usually subject to state as well as patriarchal ideologies."

Head uses this folktale to tackle such large abstract issues because it is within the context of human relationships that the true nature of such institutions is revealed. The nature of good and evil is not understandable until it is viewed as a tangible action performed by one person on another. Therein lies the deepest struggle of all: the nature of good and evil in people, in society, and in political structures. Through "Life," Head attempts to show how blurry the line between good and evil can be. What is considered good by Life (her lifestyle being her only real option as a black woman in Johannesburg) is thought to be evil by the villagers; what is considered good by the villagers (ridding themselves of Life one way or another) is evil to anyone who does not see women as disposable property.

One cannot ignore the significance of the title character's name. She is Life because she is a woman and therefore the giver of life. She is also struggling to live her own life the way she sees fit despite the constraints of society. She is more alive than anyone else in the village because her soul and her spirit are free and unhindered by assumed feminine characteristics. Finally, her life is the price she pays for going against the system. She is, as her name suggests, the thing that others would like to subdue and control but ultimately cannot.

In a review of a biography of Bessie Head for *Africa Today,* J. Todd Moye reports, "Although she wrote about women and women's issues, Head hated to be called a feminist." She did not consider herself to be a feminist writer, but her works are filled with feminist subjects such as exploring the position of women within traditional African society and the mistreatment of women in village life. Nonetheless, Head's works cover a larger picture of discrimination and oppression.

In a study of the themes that Head emphasized, Huma Ibrahim notes that her interests as a writer "reside in the particular exploration of exile, gender, and resistance emanating from usually silenced voices." In "Life," the protagonist is both an exile and a woman who resists the dictates of her husband. As a reflection of her own experiences as an exile, a black, and a woman, Head uses her fiction, based on the heritage of African life, to comment on the conditions of modern life in Africa, particularly in her home of Botswana. Further, Bessie Head's novels and short stories reveal an understanding of the human condition that touches all people no matter what their station in life.

Source: Lois Kerschen, Critical Essay on "Life," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay excerpt, Ojo-Ade analyzes "Life," praising Head for making "a poignant statement on the potentially destructive forces dogging Africa's heritage."

Life is the heroine of the story of the same name. A well crafted tale, it relates the tragedy of the African woman recently returned to the village from the city. It goes deeper than the run-of-the-mill city-village dichotomy, however, for Bessie Head uses the story to make a poignant statement on the potentially destructive forces dogging Africa's heritage. Life is a stunning, young, black beauty just back to her Botswanan village after a stint in South Africa as "singer, beauty queen, advertisement model and prostitute." She symbolizes the fast growing foreign culture largely conveyed by returning migrant workers. The villagers accept some of these ever increasing influences while rejecting others; they accept Life, but reject her murder by her husband.

To see her upon arrival from Johannesburg, one would never associate death with Life. She is bubbling with life, disarmingly confident, totally charming, so much so that her fellow women are fascinated by her establishing humanity's oldest profession as a business in the village. For them, Life is a heroine; even although they themselves would not dare sell their body to the best bidder, they see her as a match for the men. In their turn, the men welcome her innovation with glee. Paying her for her services reduces, indeed, removes any danger of responsibility towards girlfriends abandoned with fatherless babies. Life is quick to declare her motto:

'Live fast, die young, and have a good-looking corpse.' All that was said with the bold, free joy of a woman who had broken all the social taboos.

With her budding business comes the first hotel in the village. The women beer-brewers of the village join Life in drinking and exhibiting this seemingly new-found freedom. Suddenly, with a quick stroke of artistry, Bessie Head shows that Life is more a symbol of modern mania than the suffragist type leading her sisters to behavioral emancipation. The sentence changes the story, definitively:

Then one evening death walked quietly into the bar. It was Lesego, the cattle-man.

At once, Life, as if destined to destruction, reveals the other side of her persona: she is weak, impressionable, just a woman capable of loving, and of being dominated by a strong male.

He was the nearest thing she had seen for a long time to the Johannesburg gangsters she had associated with—the same small, economical gestures, the same power and control.

The fire of desire is mutual; for Lesego, normally only interested in transient encounters, sees something special in this "new kind of woman." He marries her upon her assurance that her "old ways are over. I have now become a woman."

This last statement by Life is an eye-opener. She accepts that her vaunted freedom is, after all, only another prison and a sad solution to man's meanness, and that the so-called city-civilization is but another form of dehumanization. As usual in a Bessie Head story, and with an irony made all the more mind-boggling by scientific and sexual coupling, like poles repel. The good woman is forever seeking after the bad man; the good man, always attracted to the bad woman. Good women and men "seldom join their lives together." So it is with Life and Lesego, the good and the bad producing the tragedy of death. A further twist in the whole logic of science translated into human irony by Bessie Head is, that both qualities of good and evil are at once present in each of the two protagonists of the tragic drama. Life, the prostitute, makes an effort to "become a woman again" and Lesego, the calm one enjoying everyone's respect, ends up being a murderer. Still, the overwhelming fact is that, sooner than later, the couple's incompatibility is confirmed. Lesego does not like the noise of Life's transistor radio and, revealing the seedy side of that maleness admired by her, he takes total control of the family-purse. In spite of the communal culture of the village, Life cannot cope any longer. She states: "I think I have made a mistake. Married life doesn't suit me." So, when Lesego goes away briefly, "the old, reckless wild woman awakens from a state near death with a huge sign of relief." He returns home, asks her to go purchase some sugar for tea; instead she goes to keep an appointment with a customer. It is an appointment with death: Lesego is calm as ever, goes to the place and stabs Life to death. The white judge calls it a crime of passion and sentences him to five years in prison.

Now, Bessie Head has remained ambiguous about that crime. We believe that the ambiguity is an adequate comment on the very nature of the evolving society. Modernism is being espoused without proper understanding of its qualities and, as proven by Life—both the character and the state— the danger of destruction is as strong as the positive potentials of the new experience. The mania of modernism can only lead down the road to the cultural abyss where Africa's proud past has been buried. That the drunken village women have the last word on the saga of Life and Lesego is itself another comment on the modernist trend; for, as the repository of real culture, villagers are often too eager to imitate the been-to-the-city, thus tacitly accepting the inferiority of the culture whose preservation is being preached by some luminaries.

Villagers also support another woman, Mme-Mompati, "the patron saint" whose life proves to be just a facade for some fiendish activities, belongs to the elite, rich, humanitarian, Christian; she is "the warm-hearted, loud-voiced firm defender of all kinds of causes—marriage morals, child care, religion, and the rights of the poor." When her husband, Rra-Mompati, leaves her for another woman, the whole village sympathizes with her and forces him into exile; in addition, the divorce-court grants her a handsome settlement after her great oration "to God, the Church, the Bible, the Sick, the Poor, the Suffering, the Honour of an Honourable Woman, the Blessings of Holy Matrimony and so on." Their son, Mompati, stays with his mother. They remain together, like "two peas

in a pod" for ten years when Mompati takes a wife who brings about the end of Mma's influence upon the son. Then, the village loses faith in her. "The pose of God and Jesus were (sic) blown to the winds and the demented vampire behind it was too terrible to behold." Mother and son never see each other again.

The consolation is, that the villagers finally see through the hypocritical Mma. Bessie Head uses this story to criticize Christianity, one of the most pervasive aspects of modernist mania. However, the writer's position is not fully convincing; for, from the story-line, the woman's demise is really due to her highhandedness and too great motherly influence over Mompati. In essence, she represents better the notorious mother-in law than the hypocritical Christian. Viewed from this perspective, the story of "The Village Saint" would be considered as testimony of the triumph of love over every obstacle, as well as Head's advocacy for monogamy. Mompati's declaration would thus appear to be a defiance to the vainglorious polygamist and to the meddlesome mother-in-law: "I'm sorry, I never do anything without first consulting my wife." Unfortunately, the facts of life are not that simple. Besides, love, being a human condition and feeling, always falls prey to many an unsavory companion, just as the human beings themselves. The treasures of love are never immune to tragedies.

Source: Femi Ojo-Ade, "Of Human Trials and Triumphs," in *The Tragic Life: Bessie Head and Literature in South Africa,* edited by Cecil Abrahams, Africa World Press, Inc., 1990, pp. 85-89.

Critical Essay #4

In the following interview excerpt, Head discusses her exile from South Africa and the factual basis for many of her stories, including "Life."

[Beard]: You chose exile from South Africa. One of the most complex facets of your life must have been your reactions to exile.

[Head]: You know, it is such a complicated answer. Such a complicated answer. First of all, I never had feelings of sentiment about South Africa. The country, the life that had emerged there, the fact that we had the experience of white domination—it was such a choking, throttling, death-like kind of world. In contrast, there's a certain aspect to my life in Botswana which is full and rich. The difference is that for the 27 years I lived in South Africa, I had the experience of a Black South African—the poverty-stricken, slum-dweller; the feeling that there was no way in which you could look around and breathe and feel the air. There was nothing there . . .

I came to Botswana when it was still the British Bechuanaland Protectorate moving into independence. That was '64 . . . What is very significant is that Botswana was, for 80 years, under British control, but with a completely different historical experience. The British presence was barely visible. In the village where I lived in Serowe, there was a very tentative kind of administration. The Black population was 30,000, and whatever white faces you saw in the village amounted to about 50. The Black presence, the Black historical treasure really, or things that people have been able to keep for themselves, was very dominant.

I think what I'm really trying to say is that there has to be a very serious assessment made of this colonial experience. It has so many variations, to a certain extent. If British colonialism tended to be different, it was because the gains were not too high. A country like the old Bechuanaland Protectorate presented the British with a vista of a land that was dry and unproductive, and they were completely disinterested in it. I do not think they would have lacked interest had the country offered them resources because British colonialism tended to be very commercial. But, what was valuable for me, with my South African Black background, was to find a society where the African experience is continuous and unbroken.

Is that the reason, in Collector of Treasures, *that you focus on characteristics of traditional life ?*

Well, you know, a book grows with you. You make certain decisions about the next book and why you're going to write it. What I could say about *The Collector of Treasures* is that it was like a kind of resumé of 13 years of living entirely in village life. And village life is particularly enchanting. In actual fact, all of the stories are based on real life happenings. The village is like this: it's *very* peaceful and everyday. There's one story, "Life," which describes the rhythm almost as monotonous. One day is just the same as another, but human beings are so similar all over the world. Suddenly, a great drama

explodes. Now you wake up and take your shopping basket and walk down the road and people say: 'Oh, have you heard. . .' So that most of the stories have this odd combination of gentleness and violence. The reason is that most of the stories came to be written because they actually happened. They may be decorated and interpreted and so on, but you go out and people say, 'Have you heard. . .' And then, because it surrounds a dramatic death, a murder, or a very painful court case, you get to know all the details. In a village, it's so vivid. It's so vivid.

In reality, all I simply did was record stories that had happened and had been told to me and described to me. Most of the stories there are based on reality; they're not inventions. They happened; they are changed. They are decorated; they are interpreted. But there's a basis there in fact, in reality.

Source: Bessie Head with Linda Susan Beard, "Interview with Bessie Head," in *Sage: A Scholarly Journal on Black Women,* Vol. III, Fall 1986, p. 96.

Topics for Further Study

Very few characters in "Life" are given names and distinct personalities. Why do you think Head makes this artistic decision? How effective do you think this technique is?

Find out about the life of the typical villager in Botswana today. How does this lifestyle compare to that described by Head in "Life" ?

Find out more about Botswana's movement toward independence. How did neighboring countries react to this impending event? Why were borders set up between Botswana and South Africa?

Find some examples of traditional arts and crafts or folktales in Botswana. What impression do you get of tribal life in Botswana from these examples?

In many of her stories, Head emphasizes the oral storytelling tradition of African tribes. Do you think the story "Life" would be a good story to tell aloud and pass down from generation to generation? Explain your answer.

What can you tell about the roles of men and women in village life in Botswana from the story?

If you were the judge presiding over Lesego's trial, what sentence would you impose upon him? Explain your answer.

Head is a South African native and did not move to Botswana until adulthood. What role does she have within the Botswana community, as evidenced by "Life"? Do you see her as an outsider, as one critic maintained?

Compare and Contrast

1970s: The population of Botswana in 1971 is 630,000 plus approximately 11,000 nomads.

1990s: The population of Botswana in 1999 is 1,464,167.

1960s: The average life expectancy in 1966 is 50 years.

1990s: The average life expectancy in 1996 is almost 67 years.

1960s and 1970s: In 1969, diamonds are discovered in Botswana at Orapa. Mining begins two years later. Between 1970 and 1973, the value of Botswana's exports rose from thirteen million rand to forty-three million rand. (The rand is the unit of currency in Botswana. A rand is roughly equivalent to a dollar.) This increase is due primarily to the beef and diamond industries.

1990s: In 1996, Botswana is Africa's third-largest mineral producer. By 1997, diamonds account for about 70 percent of Botswana's exports, more than 45 percent of government revenue, and some 30 percent of the gross domestic product.

1960s: In 1965, the cattle population in Botswana is 1.4 million.

1990s: In 1994, the cattle population in Botswana is 2.8 million.

1960s: In 1966, Botswana is one of the twenty poorest countries in the world. The average per capita income is U.S. $80.

1990s: From the 1970s onward, Botswana has ranked among the fastest-growing economies in the world. The average annual growth rate has fluctuated between 5 and 10 percent. The average per capita income is U.S. $1,700.

1970s: About 90 percent of the population makes their living from agriculture. The major crops grown are sorghum, millet, cowpeas, and peanuts.

1990s: Agriculture provides a livelihood for more than 80 percent of the population. However, farmers supply only about 50 percent of food needs and account for only 4 percent of the gross domestic product.

What Do I Read Next?

The first novel of Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (1958), is today a modern classic. It explores the clash of traditional Igbo life with colonial missionaries and colonial government. Okonkwo, the leader of his community, is banished for seven years after accidentally killing a clansman but then returns from exile to find the intrusion of colonial society into the tribe.

Bessie Head's autobiographical novel, *A Question of Power* (1973), takes as its heroine a disoriented, paranoid woman who survives a mental breakdown through willpower. It is considered by many scholars to be her most unusual but most important work.

Doris Lessing is a British writer who grew up in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). In writings such as *Going Home* (1957) and *African Laughter: Four Visits to Zimbabwe* (1992), she reflects on the African community.

Buchi Emecheta is a Nigerian writer. Her first two books, *In the Ditch* (1972) and *Second-Class Citizen* (1974), are both semi-autobiographical and explore the author's search for first-class citizenship, self-confidence, and dignity. Her novel *Double Yoke* (1982) centers on the still unequal position of women in contemporary African society.

Ama Ata Aidoo is a writer from Ghana. Her short story collection *No Sweetness Here* (1970) is concerned with the role of women in modern Africa, in terms of both Western influences and traditional communal society.

Further Study

Abrahams, Cecil, ed., *The Tragic Life, Bessie Head and Literature in Southern Africa,* Africa World Press, Inc., 1990.

This is a collection of essays that explore Head's life and writing, including an essay on Head and southern African writing.

Eilersen, Gillian Stead, *Bessie Head: Thunder behind Her Ears: Her Life and Writing,* Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1995.

This is a biography of Head that includes some discussion of her works.

Head, Bessie, *A Gesture of Belonging: Letters from Bessie Head, 1965—1979,* edited by Randolph Vigne, Heinemann, distributed in southern Africa for South African Writers/ Heinemann, 1991.

This collection of unexpurgated letters that Head wrote to her friend, Vigne, depict fourteen years in the life of the struggling writer.

Ingersoll, Earl G., "Sexuality in the Stories of Bessie Head," in *CLA Journal,* Vol. 39, No. 4, June 1996, p. 458.

The author examines Head's views on male-female sexuality as depicted in the stories in her *Collector of Treasures and Other Botswana Village Tales.*

Zeleza, Paul Tiyambe, "Visions of Freedom and Democracy in Postcolonial African Literature," *Women's Studies Quarterly,* Vol. 25, Nos. *3^,* Fall-Winter, 1997, p. 10.

The author discusses three African writers, Bessie Head, Nurrudin Farah, and Ngugi wa Thiong'o, all of whom have different views of democracy in Africa.

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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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