Long Distance Study Guide

Long Distance by Jane Smiley

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Jane Smiley's "Long Distance" was first published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in January 1987 and then published later the same year in Smiley's short-story collection, *The Age of Grief*. Smiley wrote this book after she divorced her second husband, historian William Silag, an event that influenced the content of the stories—all of which deal with marriage and family in some regard. In the case of "Long Distance," which won Smiley her third O. Henry Award, the story examines one man's reaction to a failed relationship. During the course of a family holiday gathering, he is forced to confront his views of love, marriage, and responsibility, and in the process he realizes that his selfish actions have cheated others—and himself. Smiley wrote the story during a time when the concept of the American family was changing. Evolving roles of men and women—due in part to the influence of the modern women's movement and freer sexual attitudes for both men and women—were changing the structure of many families. Although *The Age of Grief* is not as well known as Smiley's novels, particularly her Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *A Thousand Acres*, it has received overwhelmingly positive criticism. A copy of "Long Distance" can be found in the paperback edition of *The Age of Grief*, published in 2002 by Anchor.

Author Biography

Smiley was born on September 26, 1949, in Los Angeles, California. Her parents divorced when she was very young, and the author was raised by her journalist mother, Frances, in St. Louis, Missouri. Smiley benefited from the close contact of her mother's large extended family, whose stories have appeared in many of Smiley's own works.

After graduating from high school in 1967, Smiley attended Vassar College in New York, where she graduated in 1971 with a bachelor's degree in English literature. During this time, she also met John Whiston, a student at Yale University. The two were married in 1970. After graduation, they moved to Iowa City, where Smiley eventually began graduate work in English literature at the University of Iowa, earning her master of arts degree in 1975. At the same time, Smiley applied for admission to the university's prestigious Iowa Writers' Workshop but was initially turned down. After honing her technique, Smiley reapplied and was accepted in 1974, graduating in 1976 with a master of fine arts degree. In 1975, Smiley and Whiston divorced. During the 1976-1977 academic year, Smiley earned a Fulbright-Hays study grant and spent the year in Iceland, where she began her first two novels, *Barn Blind* (1980) and *At Paradise Gate* (1981).

In 1978, Smiley earned her doctoral degree from the University of Iowa and married her second husband, historian William Silag. In 1981, Smiley began teaching courses in literature and fiction writing at Iowa State University. From 1984 to 1985, Smiley began researching and writing her epic historical novel, *The Greenlanders* (1988). Smiley and Silag, who have two daughters (Phoebe and Lucy), were divorced in 1986. The emotional impact of this divorce manifested itself in Smiley's novella, *The Age of Grief*. This novella was collected in a book by the same name in 1987, which also included some of Smiley's short stories, including "Long Distance." Also in 1987, Smiley married her third husband, Stephen Mortensen, whom she had met when she was an undergraduate student.

Though critics have raved over her short fiction, Smiley is best known for her Pulitzer Prize- winning novel, *A Thousand Acres* (1991), which recasts William Shakespeare's *King Lear* tragedy in a modern, rural American setting. The book, which also earned a National Book Critics' Circle Award, tells the story from a feminist perspective and includes some shocking twists. In 1996, Smiley stopped teaching at Iowa State and moved to Carmel Valley, California, to pursue full-time writing. During this time, she and Mortensen, who have one son (Axel James), divorced.

Unlike many writers who choose one genre and stick with it, Smiley set herself the challenge of completing a work in each of the four traditional literary forms: epic, tragedy, comedy, and romance. Smiley completed this long-term goal with the publication of *The All-True Travels and Adventures of Lidie Newton: A Novel* (1998), an unconventional romance. Smiley published the novel *Horse Heaven* in 2000.

Plot Summary

"Long Distance" begins with the main character, Kirby Christianson, in the shower, anxious about a visit from Mieko, a Japanese woman with whom he is having an affair. He finishes his shower and answers the ringing phone, annoyed; it is Mieko, calling from Japan. She tells him that she cannot make it to the United States to visit with him over Christmas because she has to stay with her father, who has lung cancer. This was the only chance that Mieko had to come to the United States because she had lied to her family and said that she was coming for a literature conference, a supposedly onetime event. The realization that Mieko will never be able to come to see him and that their relationship is effectively over has a strange effect on Kirby. He feels relieved because he was not sure that he could live up to Mieko's expectations, and now he does not have to. Now that their relationship is over, Kirby is no longer annoyed and can be a sympathetic listener.

After the phone call, Kirby gets on the road to drive to his brother's house in Minneapolis. During the trip he begins to think about the plans that he and Mieko had made to drive out West. Kirby drives into a blinding snowstorm, an event that makes him think about his own mortality. He thinks of several examples of people who have either frozen to death in similar winter conditions or who have overcome great odds to survive the elements. Kirby decides that the weather is not so bad that he should stop off at a rest stop, and, after he passes this exit, he starts to think of Mieko again. The thoughts of Mieko and their failed relationship distract him, and he misses the tourist center that he planned to stop at to ask about road conditions. He decides to drive past another potential stopping point, and, in an effort to keep his mind off morbid thoughts of dying in the cold, he daydreams about the time he spent in Japan as a teacher, where he met Mieko.

Kirby arrives at his brother Harold's house, and during dinner he thinks about the family members there, focusing especially on his brother Eric, an academic who specializes in writing about the family. Kirby thinks about how he and Harold often make fun of Eric, who they feel is overly pretentious. As he thinks of all of the people sitting at the table, Kirby wonders how Mieko would have fit in and decides that her meek Japanese demeanor would have made her an outsider. The next morning Kirby lies awake in bed, miserable. He fixes on images of furniture—in his brothers' homes, in his own home, and in the home of one of his teacher friends in Japan—but no image offers comfort. At breakfast, Kirby watches the way that Leanne, Harold's wife, bustles around the kitchen doing various domestic activities, and he begins to feel attracted to her. Since all of the others are involved in their own activities, Kirby sits in the living room and begins drinking. The only person who visits him is Anna, Eric's daughter, who asks him if he is a socialist, an idea that Kirby realizes she got from Eric and his wife, Mary Beth.

As Kirby continues to drink, he first starts making fun of Eric in his mind and then starts to feel depressed because he does not have a family of his own as his two brothers do. At dinner, Kirby is still intoxicated from his all-day drinking session. When Anna stands up to her father, Kirby comes to her aid and starts an argument with Eric, venting his

pentup emotions by goading Eric into a discussion about the family. The dinner becomes uncomfortable for everybody else. After dinner, they open the family Christmas gifts, and everybody is impressed by Kirby's unique, Japanese gifts. Later on, Harold invites Kirby outside for some air, realizing that his intoxicated brother needs it. The two men do not talk about the dinner incident but discuss the weather instead.

Back at the house, Kirby realizes that Leanne and Mary Beth are arguing because Leanne wrapped the presents for her baby, Isaac, in the same wrapping paper as the gifts from Santa Claus. Worried that her own children will figure out there is no Santa, Mary Beth pushes the issue, and Leanne says she will rewrap the gifts. Kirby tries to go to bed but is too intoxicated to sleep. He gets up, and Leanne makes him a cup of cocoa to help him sleep. They talk, and Leanne takes Kirby's side in the argument that he had with Eric. Kirby opens up to Leanne about Mieko and says that he promised himself that he would not date Japanese women when he was abroad because it is a different culture. He worries that, by being affectionate and caring to Mieko— something that he says a Japanese man would never do—he has shown her a different way to live, which will make her even more miserable in Japan. Kirby also admits that he broke his promise to himself because he was lonely, without really taking the consequences into consideration. Leanne notes that, even though Eric is heavily criticized in the family, he does not try to get something for nothing—as Kirby has from Mieko, who will most likely never get married. Kirby waits for Leanne to say something to make him feel better, to absolve him of his guilt, but she does not. As the two walk upstairs in the dark to go to their respective rooms, Leanne kisses him on the cheek, a sign that, although she does not agree with the way that Kirby has treated Mieko, neither does she condemn him.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

As Kirby Christianson showers, his mind is full of various, unrelated thoughts: his apartment never seems to have enough hot water; he never had this problem while he was in Japan; Mieko will arrive in four days, and he will not be able to control Mieko's expectations of him. As he thinks about Mieko, he begins to feel anxious.

When Kirby steps out of the shower, he realizes that the telephone is ringing. While he has no way of knowing for sure, he senses that the telephone has been ringing for a long time and he runs straight to the living room to answer it. As he answers, he learns that his suspicion that the caller is Mieko is correct.

As he speaks, Kirby realizes that his voice conveys a sense of annoyance, which he cannot fully explain. Mieko senses his annoyance, which makes Kirby feel as though he will be obligated to apologize. Rather than apologize however, he feigns telephone trouble, a trick that apparently works. Then, after effectively starting their conversation again, Mieko tells him that she cannot come to visit; her father has recently been diagnosed with lung cancer and she promised her mother that she would remain at home.

As Mieko relays this news, Kirby realizes that he has never met Mieko's father; in fact, he has not met anyone in her family. Kirby asks if she will be able to come at another time, however, Mieko reminds him that she concocted an excuse about attending a seminar that is only being offered one time. She tells Kirby that she realizes that she is only giving up a pleasure, but her father might very well die and so it is more important that she remain with him. As Kirby considers what she has said, he thinks of how much she was looking forward to this trip and how difficult it must be, despite her brave exterior, to give it up. When he expresses these thoughts to Mieko, she begins to cry.

Kirby is taken by surprise by her unexpected display of emotion. He realizes that during the entire five months that they spent together in Japan, he had never seen her cry. As Mieko continues sobbing, Kirby wonders what he should do. Although he is tempted, he does not want to hang up the telephone so that she can cry privately – he feels that he should remain on the line in a show of support.

Eventually, Mieko stops crying and then tells Kirby that he should not have listened. When Kirby protests that he wanted to be of comfort to her, Mieko tells him that under similar circumstances, a Japanese man would have hung up. Then, before ending the conversation, Mieko apologizes again for not coming. Kirby implores her not to hang up, and asks her to call again but he is not sure that she hears him.

Two hours later, Kirby is on his way to Minnesota visit his two brothers and their families for Christmas. As he drives, he realizes that he has not seen his siblings in years.

Originally, the plan was for Mieko to arrive right after Christmas and then the two of them were going to head west, including a stop in Yellowstone National Park.

It is snowing quite heavily as Kirby makes his way through Iowa and he is having difficulty seeing the road. He knows that it is important that he maintain a safe driving speed to minimize the chance that he is involved in a collision and so he makes a concerted effort to keep his speed at 35 miles per hour. As he drives, he recalls some of the stories he has heard over the years of people who were stranded in snowstorms and realizes that he can easily find himself in similar circumstances. As he approaches a rest stop, he contemplates whether to stop and eventually decides to push on.

The rest stop makes Kirby think again of Mieko and he wonders that if he were to die, would she ever know. Since his brothers did not even know she was planning to visit, he doubts that they would tell her. If she should call and find his line has been disconnected, she would probably assume that he has moved. Again, he wonders if he should stop, but once again, he decides to continue. Even so, he cannot rid himself of thoughts that something bad may happen to him. In an effort to calm his fears, Kirby decides to think of the time he spent in Japan.

Eventually, he arrives safely at his brother Harold's house. Harold is busy clearing a path through the snow with his snow blower and does not see Kirby pull into the driveway. Eventually, though, he does turn around and acknowledges Kirby with a big smile. Because Harold is a ski enthusiast and used to taking risks, Kirby decides not to share the details about his trip.

That evening at dinner, Kirby looks around the table at the different people gathered there. He realizes that he has only met Harold's wife Leanne once, on the day of their wedding. Eric, his other brother, and his wife Mary Beth are there as well. Eric and Kirby never have gotten along and typically limit their contact to a few letters each year. Eric is well educated and is much more serious than his two brothers are. Also at the table is Eric and Mary Beth's daughter Anna, their three-year-old daughter Kristin.

As Kirby looks at Anna, he is reminded once again of Mieko, and he wonders how she would have fit in with his family. He imagines that she would be very anxious to please and would easily have her feelings hurt.

Kirby awakes early the next morning. He is sharing a room with Harold's son (also named Harold) and he is afraid that if he attempts to get up, he will wake young Harold. As he lies awake in bed, he thinks he hears footsteps. Glancing toward the door, he sees Anna staring at him.

Kirby cannot summon the energy to get out of bed and the thought of spending the entire day in Harold's home causes a sense of dread. He compares the décor in Harold's living room to that of the interior of a coffin and cannot imagine living there. While he realizes his own home will not win any decorating prizes, he feels more comfortable there than he does in Harold's home or Eric's pretentious house. As he

often does when feeling anxious, Kirby tries to calm himself with mental images of some of the Japanese homes he had visited, but even these make him uncomfortable.

Kirby finally rises from bed and makes his way to the kitchen where Leanne is busy giving her children breakfast. As Anna enters the room, Kirby is somewhat startled to realize that she is only in fifth grade; the previous evening she seemed older. Harold is at work, and Eric has sequestered himself with his computer and so, Kirby is at a loss as to what to do with his time. He makes his way to Harold's bar and pours himself a glass of bourbon. It is nine o'clock in the morning.

Soon after, Anna appears in the doorway. Kirby greets her before asking why she keeps staring at him. Anna denies that she has been staring before asking Kirby if he is a socialist. Before he can answer, she has left the room.

Kirby finds himself imagining that Eric and Mary Beth are talking about him, a notion that offends him. However, rather than busy himself with something so that these thoughts stop, he pours himself another drink and picks up a book. As he sits, he thinks about how his brothers have changed; they now seem to be entirely defined by their homes, their families and their jobs.

Later that afternoon, Kirby is still sitting in the living room when Kristen comes in. She pulls one of the cushions off the sofa and begins to jump from the cushion to the floor. Kirby asks her what she is doing, a question that is met with the simple answer: jumping. In an effort to make further conversation, Kirby asks the young girl if she likes to jump. Kristen responds that it is a beautiful thing to do. Before long, the little girl tires of jumping and runs from the room.

That evening at dinner, Kristen gives her parents a hard time about eating. Consequently, Eric brings her upstairs. When he returns, Anna remarks that Kristen should have more control over her body. When it becomes obvious that Eric disagrees, Kirby feels compelled to defend Anna's assertion. This raises Eric's ire and he tells Kirby that at the age of three, Kristen cannot be expected to have any control over her actions. Kirby continues to challenge his brother, a strategy that seems to delight Harold.

Sensing that the conversation may spiral out of control, Eric reminds everyone that it is Christmas and that all should enjoy each other's company rather than argue. Nevertheless, Harold continues to bait him, and soon, Eric has launched into a dissertation about the purpose of the family. As the two continue to argue, Kirby resorts to vulgarity, a move that causes Leanne promptly to put an end to the entire conversation.

When the meal finally ends, the family turns to the task of opening their Christmas gifts. Kirby is surprised at the generosity of his siblings and is likewise anxious to see how they like the gifts he has chosen for them. He realizes that he will be leaving for home the next day, a thought that he greets with mixed emotions.

As Kirby makes his way to the stairs, intending to go to bed, he runs into Harold who suggests that they go outside for some fresh air. Kirby expects that Harold is going to mention the incident at dinner, but he does not. As they walk, Kirby notices the Christmas lights and feels for the first time in years, a bit of Christmas spirit.

When they return to the house, Mary Beth and Leanne are quietly arguing about how to handle the children's Christmas gifts. Mary Beth is concerned that her daughters will learn the truth about Santa Claus when they notice their gifts are wrapped in the same paper in which the adults' gifts were wrapped. Leanne finally agrees to unwrap her gifts so that all of the presents are identical.

Kirby goes to bed but is unable to sleep. Going back downstairs, he sees Leanne arranging the children's gifts under the tree. On his way into the kitchen, he comments that she must be tired – she has been awake since six o'clock that morning. As they talk, he realizes that in the entire time he had been there, the two of them have not spoken to each other. They spend a few minutes talking about Eric's child-rearing theories before Kirby asks Leanne if he can tell her about something.

Kirby then spends the next few minutes talking about Mieko and how while he is disappointed that she could not visit as planned, he is also relieved because he was sure he wasn't going to be able to meet her expectations and that she would spend the rest of her life compromising her beliefs.

He tells Leanne that he met Mieko at the Japanese school where he taught and that they had a brief affair. Even so, he was sure that no one has ever cared for Mieko before and as a result, she had become quite attached to him. This attachment scared Kirby and he was glad to leave Japan.

Kirby then tells Leanne about the previous day's telephone call and his fear that he inadvertently compromised Mieko's strength. He also says that he believes that as their relationship developed, he destroyed the inner strength that she worked so hard to build and that she was now unable to live in the stoic manner expected of Japanese women. Kirby comments that he tried his best to refrain from dating Japanese women during the year and a half he was away, but his resolve ultimately gave in to loneliness.

They are both silent for a moment before Leanne comments that although Eric is often criticized, she admires the fact that he never tries to get something for nothing. As Kirby listens, he realizes that he probably will never get over his loss of Mieko and that as a result, he will likely stay single for the rest of his life.

As the two leave the kitchen and head toward the stairs, Kirby, who is still somewhat drunk, stumbles in the dark. He reaches out to Leanne who guides his hand to the banister before giving him a quick kiss on the cheek.

Analysis

As implied by the story's title, the primary theme of Jane Smiley's short story "Long Distance" is distance: both emotional and physical. The most obvious example of this is the physical distance that separates Kirby from his brothers as well as the distance that keeps him from Mieko. There are however several other instances during the story where physical distance is a factor. First, Kirby meets Mieko while teaching in Japan. The fact that he decides to travel so far in order to teach implies that Kirby is in the process of trying to establish his own identity. Indeed, his brother Harold has remained near the neighborhood where they grew up, and even Eric, while apparently living some distance away, still manages to visit at least once a year. Kirby, on the other hand, lives four hours away and has not seen his brothers in several years. Physical distance also plays a part in Kirby's plans for Mieko's visit; rather than spend time with Kirby's family or at Kirby's home, they will travel from Minneapolis to San Francisco – again, an indication that Kirby is searching for something.

As mentioned above, physical distance is one of the factors that keep Kirby and Mieko apart. While there are certainly other factors at work here that will be discussed later, the fact that she lives so far away has required them to embark on a long-distance relationship. Physical distance is also an important factor in their decision to end the relationship; the combination of Mieko's family crisis and the distance she must travel to see Kirby makes continuing the relationship out of the question. Distance is also a factor when Mieko's telephone call annoys Kirby. Rather than embark on a series of apologies for his cross behavior – something that would require Kirby to display more emotion than he would prefer – he chooses to act as though the long-distance telephone connection has caused her to misinterpret his voice tone. Finally, due to the physical distance that separates the couple, Kirby is certain that if he were to die accidentally, Mieko would likely never know.

Physical distance also plays an important role during Kirby's stay at Harold's home. Rather than spending time with his in-laws, Kirby chooses to isolate himself in the living room. Similarly, Eric seals himself off in the sewing room so that he can work, while Harold leaves the house altogether to go to the store that he owns. Even the children have their own pursuits, as evidenced by Anna's decision not to go sledding with her cousin. The fact that these family members choose to be isolated in this way limits their ability to interact and form personal relationships. In fact, it is interesting that for much of the story the only people that Kirby seems to make an effort at talking with are the children. This is likely indicative of the fact that he has not quite matured himself, and so he sees himself more as a child than as an adult. As we get to know Kirby better, we can see that at least emotionally, he is not much different from a child.

Emotional distance is also a recurring theme in this story. We begin to realize early that Kirby does not have much of an emotional attachment to his siblings or their families. There are a number of indications provided: the fact that he has not seen either of his brothers in years, despite the fact that he lives only a four-hour drive from Harold,

In fact, the only indication we have that Kirby has at least some feeling for Harold is as the two men go for a walk after opening their Christmas gifts. Recall that as Kirby looks at the bright lights that decorate the neighborhood, he feels "a touch of mystery that he thinks of as the Christmas spirit. Or maybe it is love for Harold." The fact that Kirby is not sure what he is feeling tells us that he likely has not truly experienced love.

The storm that Kirby drives through on his way to Harold's house is symbolic of his relationship with his family. He admits that he and his brother Eric never have gotten along and comments that he and Harold often make jokes at Eric's expense. Yet, the fact that Kirby presses on through the storm rather than seeking refuge tells us that despite his differences with Eric and his emotional distance from the other family members, he - at least on some level – must derive some comfort from being with them. His determination to reach Harold's house tells us that he is seeking this comfort as well as a stronger personal connection with his family. In addition, it is important to note that once he reaches Harold's home, he will not admit that he had a difficult trip, for to do so would be to admit that he was somehow weak.

It is ironic that while Kirby seems to be searching for love and acceptance, he attempts to find it with a woman who comes from a culture where stoicism is encouraged. Despite Mieko's strong exterior, Kirby knows that she has become deeply attached to him, a fact that scares him.

The search for individual identity is also explored within this story. Mieko prefers to be identified by her Japanese customs and characteristics, however, when Kirby is able to get underneath her surface and "one by one, …broke down every single one of her strengths, everything she has equipped herself with to live in a Japanese way" he realizes – and dismayed - to learn that he has taken her identity from her.

Kirby's own search for his personal identity comes during the time he spends at Harold's home. Recall that as he sits in Harold's living room, he begins to associate the type of furniture he sees with the personality of the people who own it. In Harold's furniture, he sees permanence while in Eric's he sees pretense. Kirby describes his own furniture as worse - it is described being not very stable – very much like Kirby's own life and emotions.

Finally, it is interesting to note that each time Kirby seems to be anxious or afraid, he conjures up images from his trip to Japan to help sooth him. Kirby's inability to let go of the time he spent in Japan is one of our first indications that he is not nearly as aloof in his feelings for Mieko as he appears.

Characters

Anna Christianson

Anna is Kirby's niece and the oldest daughter of Eric and Mary Beth. Anna is only in the fifth grade, but when Kirby notices her spying on him, she seems much older. Anna tries to stick up for her sister Kristin to Eric but is unsuccessful until Kirby steps in to back her up.

Eric Christianson

Eric is Kirby's brother, Mary Beth's husband, and the father of Harold the younger, Anna, and Kristin. Eric is well educated but chooses to use his education not to teach, as Kirby does, but to write for a conservative think tank. Eric specializes in the family and becomes especially passionate when somebody challenges these views, as when first Anna and then Kirby criticize him for not letting Kristin eat whatever she wants. When Kirby draws Eric into this argument, he cites the necessity for authority when socializing children and talks about the effectiveness of a patriarchal, or male-dominated, society.

Harold Christianson

Harold is Kirby's brother, Leanne's husband, and the father of Isaac. Harold is an adventurous, self-made man who owns a store and who has spent his life skiing and ski-jumping. Harold is always open to making fun of his brother Eric, something that he and Kirby do often behind Eric's back. He is also more than willing to openly support Kirby when Kirby starts an argument with Eric. Harold is so critical of Eric that he never spends more than three days with him.

Harold "The Younger" Christianson

Harold the younger, so called to distinguish him from Kirby's brother Harold, is Kirby's nephew and Eric's son. The twelve-year-old Harold shares a bedroom with Kirby at Harold the elder's house during the holiday gathering.

Isaac Christianson

Isaac is Kirby's nephew and the son of Harold and Leanne. When Leanne wraps all of Isaac's presents—those from his parents and those from Santa Claus—in the same paper, Mary Beth is worried that her own children, especially Kristin, will notice this and realize there is no Santa Claus.

Kirby Christianson

Kirby is the protagonist in the story and the only single adult at a family Christmas gathering, where he is forced to confront his own views of love, marriage, and responsibility. In the beginning of the story, Kirby is relieved when Mieko, a Japanese woman with whom he has had an affair, cannot come to the United States to visit him, because he is worried that he cannot meet her expectations. During a road trip in a blizzard for a family holiday gathering at his brother Harold's house, Kirby worries he may die. When he arrives at Harold's house, Kirby is already on edge from his road stress and the breakup between him and Mieko, which has occupied his thoughts during much of the drive. Though Kirby adores Harold, neither of them gets along well with their other brother, Eric.

As the gathering progresses, Kirby begins to feel sorry for himself because everybody else has a family and he does not. He also begins to drink heavily. These factors come to a head during dinner over, this morbid thought fills Kirby with great despair.

The story also explores the effects of emotional distance. Though Kirby and Mieko were in a long-distance relationship, it could have worked if they had connected emotionally. But they are on two different emotional levels. Kirby's strongest emotion concerning Mieko is his "feeling of anxiety" that he gets in the shower. It is only after he realizes that Mieko is not coming that he lets go of his anxiety and becomes a caring listener, so much so, in fact, that when Mieko is saying goodbye, Kirby begs her not to hang up and to call him again. Mieko, on the other hand, is focusing only on the happiness that she and Kirby could have had. "I know that I am only giving up pleasure," she says. These two reactions indicate the emotional divide between Kirby and Mieko, which makes their union improbable. Kirby thinks about this after the breakup: "The connection in her mind between the two of them, the connection that she allowed to stretch into the future despite all his admonitions and all her resolutions, is broken now."

Themes

Family

Kirby is also emotionally distant from most of his family, which is one of the other major themes in the story. From the moment that Kirby sits down to dinner with his relatives the first night, he feels out of place: "The other people at the table seem unfamiliar." For Kirby, this feeling manifests itself in the way he views his relatives, how they seem to "waver in the smoky candlelight," a feeling that only goes away when Harold gives him a beer, which "seems to adjust all the figures around the table so that they stop wavering." Kirby's single status makes him feel like an outsider. As the story progresses, Kirby finds himself increasingly yearning for the comforts of family, such as having a wife like Leanne to take care of him: "'sweetie'—he would like for Leanne to call him that."

When Kirby begins drinking, he sits, thinking, and first directs his frustrations at his brother Eric, an academic who focuses on "the family." But then Kirby gets depressed as he starts to reflect on the importance of family in a man's identity, and he realizes that, whereas he and his brother Harold were more alike as children because of their personalities, "It is Harold and Eric who are alike now." Harold and Eric both have families, houses, and other things that Kirby associates with adulthood. "Only Kirby's being does not extend past his fingertips and toes to family, real estate, reputation." Kirby wallows in self-pity, drinking past the point of reason, until he tries to lash out at Eric by confronting him on his ideas about the family. This move backfires when Kirby offends Leanne, and he "blushes and falls silent." Kirby feels even more depressed and out of place at the end of the meal, "and by the time they get up from the table, Kirby feels as if he has been sitting in a dim, candlelit corner most of his life."

Responsibility

Part of the reason for Kirby's status as an outsider is his lack of personal responsibility. All of the other characters in the story are responsible to a parent, a spouse, or a child. In fact, the story begins with a conflict in responsibility. Mieko cannot come to the United States to see Kirby and thus must end their relationship because she feels a responsibility to her family: "Kirby, I cannot come. I cannot go through with my plan. My father has lung cancer, we learned this morning." Due to her sense of responsibility to her father, Mieko feels she has to stay in Japan.

But Kirby is self-involved and allows his selfishness to direct many of his actions. First, he drinks too much, realizing he should stop but drinking more anyway. Then, during the fight with Eric, as Kirby goads him on, Mary Beth and Leanne look at Kirby, "no doubt wishing that he had a wife or a girl friend here to restrain him." Because Kirby is unattached and is responsible to nobody else, he says and does whatever he wants. Even the fight itself is about responsibility—in this case, the responsibility of a parent to

teach children how to act, instead of letting them do what they want, potentially hurting themselves, as in letting Kristin eat whatever she wants. "For a certain period of their lives others control them," Eric says, defending himself. "In early childhood others control their bodies. They are taught to control themselves," he continues. Not everybody agrees with this theory. Referring to some studies that back up her claims, Leanne says she thinks children inherently know how to take care of themselves: "You know, I don't agree with Eric about that body stuff. I think they naturally do what is healthy for them." Yet, even though she disagrees with Eric's views, she notes that he "never tries to get something for nothing. I admire that." Leanne's comment is intended to dig at Kirby, who only thinks of himself—first in getting involved with a Japanese woman, even though he knew it could make future relationships difficult for her, and then in lashing out at Eric in a drunken rage. "Leanne's cool remark has revealed his permanent smallness." Kirby realizes at the end that he has been selfish and irresponsible by not taking into account others' feelings or the potential consequences of his own actions.

Style

Point of View

Smiley chooses to use a form of narration known as third-person-limited point of view in "Long Distance." The story is told from the point of view of Kirby alone, by an outside narrator who refers to Kirby in the third person, either by his name, "Kirby," or by third-person pronouns such as "he" or "his." Another way to think about the point of view is that the story is told *about* Kirby, not *by* Kirby, as it would be in the first person. The third-person point of view is evident from the first line of Smiley's story: "Kirby Christianson is standing under the shower, fiddling with the hot-water spigot and thinking four apparently simultaneous thoughts."

Throughout the narrative, the reader continues to hear only Kirby's thoughts, as well as to experience the sights and sounds of the story only as Kirby experiences them. By filtering the action through one character, authors like Smiley force themselves to develop one character more than the others. That's not to say that the other characters aren't developed, but the reader's understanding of the other characters is limited by the main character's experiences with them, and so the reader can only use these clues to guess at what is going on in the supporting characters' minds. This is the opposite of a third-person-omniscient viewpoint, in which an author employs a narrator that can jump in and out of any character's thoughts and tell the story from any character's point of view at any time. In "Long Distance," the use of a third-person-limited viewpoint is very effective. By focusing on Kirby, and Kirby alone, Smiley helps to underscore his isolation from the rest of the characters.

Flashback

Throughout the story, Kirby has many flashbacks, or recollections, in which he remembers events from his past and thus illustrates these events for readers. These flashbacks serve two narrative functions in the story. The first is that they help Smiley with her exposition, or the revealing of the back story (the events that took place before the story's first scene). For example, when the story begins, the reader immediately learns of a character named Mieko but is given very few details about the relationship between her and Kirby. When Kirby gets on the road, he starts to daydream, recalling his past with Mieko, beginning with the plans that they made, which are now canceled since she cannot make it to the United States. Kirby has several other recollection daydreams on the trip, which are comforting and which help to take his mind off the bad weather. When he gets to his brother's house, he has more recollections. For example, when he is avoiding getting out of bed one morning, he occupies himself by thinking about the furniture at various places he has visited, including his friend's house in Japan. But whereas earlier in the story he thought about images of Japan as "the one tangible gift of his travels," now as he is beginning to explore the depth of his despair over the loss of Mieko, "even the Japanese images he calls up are painful."

This shift in Kirby's attitude highlights the second narrative function of the flashbacks. As the story progresses, Kirby begins to realize that memories from his past, even fond ones, can no longer help him cope with or avoid the pain of the present. In fact, the reverse is true: examining his past has revealed the consequences of his actions, which in turn leads to more pain. As he looks over the events of his life, especially his relationship with Mieko, he sees that he has made some choices that he wishes he had not. "I was so careful for a year and a half. I didn't date Japanese women, and I was very distant," Kirby tells Leanne, as he talks about his past with Mieko. Unfortunately, Kirby was lonely in Japan, and so, against his better judgment, he started the affair with Mieko, which he now realizes has led to Mieko's inability to fit into her own culture. As he is talking to Leanne, he tells her that looking back "I see that, one by one, I broke down every single one of her strengths, everything she had equipped herself with to live in a Japanese way." Kirby is depressed, "and it seems to him that all at once, now that he realizes it, his life and Mieko's have taken their final form."

Historical Context

Japanese Culture in the 1980s

In the story Mieko starts weeping when she's on the phone with Kirby, after they both realize that their relationship is over. She tells him that he "should not have listened" to her cry, but Kirby, raised in an American culture, asks her, "How could I hang up?" To this, Mieko replies, "A Japanese man would have." Later, at the end of the story, when Kirby is telling Leanne about Mieko, he notes that Japanese women must make certain emotional concessions if they are to live "in a Japanese way." As Edwin O. Reischauer says in his book *The Japanese Today: Change and Continuity*, "Japanese men are blatantly male chauvinists and women seem shamefully exploited and suppressed," especially when viewed by Americans and other Westerners. Reischauer's book was published in 1988, one year after Smiley published "Long Distance," so his observations of Japanese culture help to better understand the world of the story. Whereas Japanese men largely followed their impulses, Reischauer notes that women, like Mieko, were expected to be composed at all times, "to have a strong character, to be always 'ladylike,' and to hold the family together." Women like Mieko were not supposed to weep uncontrollably, and it would not be out of place for a Japanese man to hang up on her if she did.

Though Japanese women were largely subservient to men, they did make certain advances in the 1980s. The most notable of these accomplishments was the Equal Employment Opportunity Law that was passed in Japan in 1986. This law created two work paths for Japanese women. Those who wished to have a less stressful work life could choose a general-track job, a menial job that tended to have less responsibility and more job security. Those who wished to have a more challenging career joined the integrated track, which placed them in the same job pool as men, with whom they competed for promotions and job security. Yet, even though the two-track work system led to more opportunities for women, Japan was still a male-focused society. Men were not given the option of the general track and were instead expected to join the integrated track. Furthermore, although young women often did work for several years after school in Mieko's time, many of them were not taken seriously and were looked upon as potential brides for the young workingmen. These attitudes have changed in recent years, and an increasing number of Japanese women are pursuing careers as more than just a diversion before marriage.

The American Family in the 1980s

While Japanese society was going through changes in the 1980s in regard to its treatment of women, Americans were experiencing radical changes in family structure—also due, in part, to changing attitudes toward women. To understand this change, one must look farther back into the past, to the post-World War II era in America's history. Following the devastation of this world war, which ended in 1945, many American

families chose to seal themselves off from the world, focusing on family and marriage. During the 1950s, this intense focus on family and family values reinforced the idea of the nuclear family, two parents and children. Because women were expected mainly to reproduce and raise families, the American birth rate shot up until it was higher even than some undeveloped nations, creating the event known as the baby boom.

But many women were not happy with this social arrangement, which often limited their educational and social options. In 1963, Betty Friedan tried to debunk the myth that American housewives were happy in these limited, male-focused roles when she published her landmark book *The Feminine Mystique*. This book is widely credited with sparking the modern women's movement in the 1960s. This movement, coupled with other societal factors, such as the difficulty in the later decades of the twentieth century for families to survive on one income, encouraged more women to become educated and join the workforce. Attitudes toward sex also changed, and, especially after the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, premarital sex was not the social taboo that it once had been. People were also not as willing to stay in bad marriages, as some had during the 1950s, for the sake of the children.

As women gained independence and equal rights and both men and women explored their sexuality and freedom to choose the right relationship, the nuclear, patriarchal family became less and less common. In the story both Eric and Harold head up nuclear families. Eric and Harold work; their wives cook, clean, and take care of the children. Yet, just as Kirby ends the story alone, so did many in the 1980s. Due to the greater emphasis on finding the perfect relationship and on the social acceptance of premarital sex, an increasing number of people waited until later life to get married or never married at all. And even for those who did marry, the unions did not always last. An increasing number of marriages ended in divorce, which helped lead to the trend of single-parent families. The trend of the single parent was also helped by the prevalence of premarital sex among teenagers and young adults, which led to an increasing number of births to young, unwed mothers.

Critical Overview

Both *The Age of Grief* story collection and "Long Distance" have captured the attention of critics. In Roz Kaveney's 1988 *Times Literary Supplement* review of the collection, the critic notes, "One of the major strengths of this quiet and unflashy collection by Jane Smiley is that in her stories things actually do happen." Kaveney also says that any moral commentary in the book "comes from the fact that her characters are shown as lovable and their actions as things we just have to accept."

Although other critics have noted the power of Smiley's understated style, some do not agree that all of Smiley's characters in the collection are lovable. In fact, as Thom Conroy says about "Long Distance" in his 2001 entry on Smiley for *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, "Kirby emerges as one of Smiley's least sympathetic characters." Conroy notes that, unlike other Smiley protagonists, Kirby's "emotional trauma is not brought on by naiveté, but by indifference." Conroy says that Leanne's biting comment to Kirby "reveals the pernicious nature of Kirby's shortcoming," that he only cares about his own comfort and not about the feelings of others.

Though Kirby may not be the nicest character, other critics agree with Raymond Sokolov, who notes in his 1987 *Wall Street Journal* review of *The Age of Grief* that "Ms. Smiley's best characters are men." Smiley herself has said that she does not find it hard to write from a male viewpoint and has offered an explanation why. "I think partly because I'm 6' 2." I think being tall makes my femininity less of a disadvantage. . . . I live in a slightly different world than most women," Smiley says in a 1998 *Publishers Weekly* interview with Marcelle Thiébaux.

Critics such as Anne Bernays also tend to highlight the family theme—especially the theme of marriage—that pervades much of Smiley's fiction. In her 1987 review of *The Age of Grief* for the *New York Times Book Review*, Bernays says that "Ms. Smiley is much occupied with marriage." Despite the unsympathetic protagonist, Bernays feels that "Long Distance" is "the most compelling of the five" short stories in the collection.

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Poquette has a bachelor's degree in English and specializes in writing about literature. In the following essay, Poquette discusses Smiley's use of narrative technique, imagery, and symbolism in "Long Distance" to enhance the story's dismal mood.

Smiley has become a successful author in part because many of her works contain characters that, while not very flashy, usually elicit sympathy from readers. As Thom Conroy notes in his entry on Smiley for *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, "Often passive and usually sympathetic, Smiley's characters salvage self-knowledge out of the intricate histories and traumas of their inner lives." Yet in "Long Distance," a story that *New York Times Book Review*'s Anne Bernays calls "the most compelling" of the short stories in *The Age of Grief*, readers are given a main character with whom it is difficult to sympathize. It would be very easy for Smiley to condemn Kirby, commenting on his selfish actions and pointing him out to her readers as an example of bad behavior. Instead, Smiley tells Kirby's story without making value judgments. As Roz Kaveney notes in the *Times Literary Supplement*, "Smiley's refusal to get angry with her protagonists, and the way this tolerance never becomes saccharine, are her most attractive virtues." That does not mean that Smiley has no opinion, however. In fact, by using a specific narrative style, as well as imagery and symbolism, Smiley amplifies the dark mood of the story.

The mood of a literary work refers to its defining emotional qualities, which reflect the author's attitude toward the work and its subject matter. Though Smiley does not condemn Kirby's behavior, she does work hard to show how this type of behavior can lead to unhappiness and despair. Even in the beginning of the story, before he has had the revelation that makes him regret the selfish choices he's made in his life, Kirby is not a happy man. He is emotionally distant, a quality that Smiley highlights through the narrative style she uses to describe Kirby's thoughts. In the first paragraph, readers go inside Kirby's head, while he is in the shower, and "hear" four short, simultaneous thoughts about the lack of hot water in his apartment, the abundance of hot water in Japan, the impending arrival of Mieko, and his inability "to control Mieko's expectations of him in any way." When he gets out of the shower, the phone is ringing, and when he answers it, it is Mieko, as he expected. Smiley describes Kirby's reaction as follows: "Perhaps he is psychic; perhaps this is only a coincidence; or perhaps no one else has called him in the past week or so."

This use of short, disparate thoughts in Kirby's mind, none of which register much emotional value or importance, continues throughout the story. When Mieko tells him, with regret, that she knows her sacrifice—not coming to America—could be pointless because her father might die, Kirby apologizes, but his thought patterns betray his indifference to Mieko's pain. "He understands that in his whole life he has never given up a pleasure that he cherished as much as Mieko cherished this one." He does not feel bad for Mieko, who is obviously in pain, and, as Conroy notes, "he offers her no consolation on the subject." Instead, Kirby feels "a lifting of the anxiety he felt in the shower" at not being able to live up to Mieko's expectations. Now that he is "off the

hook" and Mieko's pain is clearly "her father's doing, not his," he feels he "can give her a little company after all." As this short, dispassionate style of narration illustrates, Kirby is only able to help others through their pain after he has determined that he is not the cause of it, and after his own needs have been met.

In fact, barring his drunken episode, it is only when the events of the story threaten to cause Kirby physical or emotional harm that he exhibits anything other than casual concern or annoyance. And even then, the emotions are not that powerful. When he is faced with the prospect of his own death as he is driving through a terrible snowstorm, he feels only "self-pity." He is depressed at the idea that if he died on the road, Mieko would never know about it. "He can think of no way that she could hear of his death, even though no one would care more than she would." Mieko cares about Kirby, but it is obvious from these self-serving thoughts that he could not give her the same emotional support, and, if the situation were reversed and he learned of her death, his reaction would be different. As Conroy notes, later in the trip, "Kirby calls up pleasant images of his stay in Japan in order to divert his mind from a treacherous snowstorm, but he does not give a second thought to Mieko's emotional state."

This emotional indifference shelters Kirby from experiencing the type of pain and loss that Mieko feels, but it also limits his ability to experience some aspects of humanity to their fullest, a fact that becomes clear during the conversation with Leanne at the end of the story when Kirby realizes he has wasted his life and falls into a bitter despair: "it seems to him that all at once, now that he realizes it, his life and Mieko's have taken their final form." As Conroy notes, unlike other Smiley protagonists, Kirby's "emotional trauma is not brought on by naiveté, but by indifference."

Smiley adds power to this final, revelatory scene by employing imagery and symbolism that work together throughout the story to increase the tale's dark mood of despair. The most powerful of these images and symbols are related to the cold weather in which the story takes place. Winter is a season that is often used to symbolize, or represent, the idea of death. The story is saturated with winter imagery, beginning with the phone call between Mieko and Kirby. As Mieko is telling Kirby that she cannot come to America, "Kirby is looking out his front window at the snowy roof of the house across the street." Although this may seem like merely a casual observation, the timing is intentional on Smiley's part. The relationship between Kirby and Mieko is dying, just as the world outside is going through a season that traditionally symbolizes death. Snow and cold are also often used to describe somebody's lack of passion, as when the term "frigid" is used to describe a passionless person. Given Kirby's emotional indifference, the cold weather is an effective symbol for his own dispassionate state.

Later, as Kirby is driving through the blinding snowstorm, the winter elements take on even stronger associations with death: "The utter blankness of the snowy whirl gives him a way of imagining what it would be like to be dead. He doesn't like the feeling." This thought leads to several vivid images that he calls up from his memory of people either dying in the cold or overcoming great odds to survive the elements. Then he imagines himself in such a scene. "Were he reduced to his own body, his own power, it might be too far to walk just to find a telephone." Kirby not only lacks emotional drive; he

also lacks the lively spirit and lust for life that others, such as his brother Harold, possess. When Kirby finally arrives safely at Harold's house, he does not mention the bad driving conditions because, "Compared with some of Harold's near misses, this is nothing." Harold has lived an adventurous life, and even though some of his adventures "show a pure stupidity that even Harold has the sense to be ashamed of," there is no doubt that his emotional strength and vitality would help him survive a storm. The most that Kirby can manage is self-pity, which, in a survival situation, would not be enough to save him.

Besides the weather imagery and symbolism, Smiley also uses domestic images to symbolize Kirby's isolation and lack of emotional fortitude. At his brother's house, he can't bear to get up one morning to face all of his relatives, so he lies in bed, thinking. "As always, despair presents itself aesthetically." In this case, he thinks about images of furniture. On the surface, he is just comparing the various interiors of the homes of his family and friends to his own place. Symbolically, however, Kirby is weighing each lifestyle—as represented by the furniture—and trying to find one that fits him. Unfortunately, none does. He thinks of Harold's living room, with "matching plaid wing chairs and couch, a triple row of wooden pegs by the maple front door." The image is one of frontier, manly coziness and warmth. Indeed, when Kirby thinks later about the meaning of being a man, he says that Harold would define it as somebody who "can chop wood all day and f— all night, who can lift his twenty-five pound son above his head on the palm of his hand." This robust lifestyle is one that is alien to the emotionally unavailable Kirby.

Yet, Kirby also cannot relate to the pretentious lifestyle of Eric and Mary Beth, which manifests itself in their furniture: "antique wooden trunks and high-backed benches painted blue with stenciled flowers in red and white." The image is one of comfortable, responsible stability. When Kirby imagines how Eric would define manhood, he notes that Eric would say it is someone "who votes, owns property, has a wife, worries." Kirby does not relate to this other extreme either. These thoughts leave him in an unhinged state because he realizes that even the image of his own apartment, with an "armchair facing the television, which sits on a spindly coffee table," does not bring him happiness.

The fact that Kirby lives in an apartment is an important symbol in itself. Whereas Harold's house has sturdy furniture, a symbol of permanence and stability, Kirby's apartment lacks this stability as the "spindly" coffee table indicates. When he thinks about Harold's house, he realizes that "it is the house of a wealthy man." Though Kirby means material wealth, Harold's spacious house also symbolizes the emotional and familial wealth that Kirby does not possess. Kirby might be able to buy a house someday, but what he lacks—a warm, caring wife and children to fill it—he will never have, unless he learns how to put his selfish feelings aside and care for others. As Conroy notes of the conversation with Leanne at the end of the story, her comment about Eric not taking advantage of others reveals Kirby's shortcoming, which is much worse than any flaws the rest of his family, even Eric, may have. "Though Kirby's brother Eric may be overbearing and narrow-minded, he does not value his own pleasure over the feelings of others," Conroy says.

In the end, Smiley chooses not to condemn Kirby for his selfish behavior, instead employing techniques in the story that illustrate the loneliness one risks when acting the way Kirby does. The story also ends on a positive note when Kirby "feels a disembodied kiss on his cheek," a message from Leanne in the dark that, although she does not approve of Kirby's callous behavior or absolve him of his guilt, there is hope for him yet. Even the events immediately leading up to this kiss are presented in a symbolic way. Kirby is stumbling in the dark, "unable to see anything." Kirby is in the dark because he wants to change but does not know how. When Kirby stumbles, Leanne takes his arm "in a grasp that is dry and cool, and guides it to the banister." Leanne serves as a symbolic guide to help show Kirby to the stairs—which symbolize the emotional challenge that lies ahead of him if he truly wishes to change his ways—but he must make his way up these stairs himself.

Source: Ryan D. Poquette, Critical Essay on "Long Distance," in *Short Stories for Students*, Gale, 2004.

Critical Essay #2

Dybiec Holm is a freelance writer and editor. In this essay, Dybiec Holm traces the protagonist's journey toward discovering his personal identity.

At first glance, Jane Smiley's "Long Distance" appears to be a story about a long distance relationship and its implications. Kirby learns immediately in the story that his girlfriend in Japan will not be flying to meet him in the United States for Christmas. A deeper read, however, shows that "Long Distance" is actually about personal identity. Distance is both metaphorical and actual, as in the distance that Kirby needs to travel to define his own identity. Identity is a theme that runs through this story. Kirby searches for his identity, and other characters either lose part of their identity (Mieko) or clearly assert their own identities (Kristin, Anna, and Eric).

Kirby is a protagonist who often acts uncertainly or passively; who practices avoidance; a person with low-level fear; a person unsure of his identity. He cannot deal with the expectations that Mieko has of him, and he wishes the shower would wash his anxiety away. When Mieko calls on the phone, Smiley portrays Kirby's natural uncertainty in his thoughts: "Perhaps he is psychic; perhaps this is only a coincidence; or perhaps no one else has called him in the past week or so."

Kirby is uncertain of how to act on the phone when Mieko breaks down. "This attentive listening is what he owes to her grief, isn't it?" he wonders. Kirby is sure he would have disappointed her, no matter what he did, and would have failed to live up to her expectations. His own personal uncertainty outweighs the slight relief that he feels at her cancellation. As it turns out, the cultural divide between them shows Kirby another personal shortcoming that he didn't anticipate—his listening to her grief on the phone violated the unwritten rule of privacy that Japan values so highly. In one of Kirby's most revealing moments—at the end of the story—he realizes that in this unwitting, inept move on his part, he somehow lessened Mieko's identity.

During Kirby's road trip to Minnesota in the midst of a blizzard, he works himself into a state of fear, imagining all the things that could go wrong, all the ways he could die. Again, his uncertainty reveals itself: he cannot decide whether to pull off at the rest stop or to keep going; he wants to do both. Yet he still doesn't believe in himself or the essence of his own power. He is still not sure of his identity. "Were he reduced to his own body, his own power, it might be too far to walk just to find a telephone." When he gets through the storm and arrives at his brother's house, Kirby's thoughts sound extremely passive, as if he had nothing to do with getting himself safely to Minnesota. "His car might be a marble that has rolled, only by luck, into a safe corner." We get the sense that Kirby floats through life without identity—waiting for things to happen to him rather than directing his life.

Kirby's identity, or lack of it, is further tested once he settles in at his brother's home. Kirby doesn't dare talk about his dangerous experience driving through a blizzard on the interstate, simply because it could never stand up to some of the dangerous escapades

his brother Harold has been through. "The last thing he wants to do is start a discussion about near misses. Compared with some of Harold's near misses, this is nothing."

Kirby may not be quite sure of his own identity yet, but he is sure of what he doesn't want to be. His alienation from the mannerisms and the lives of his extended family become obvious as the holiday gets underway. Kirby doesn't like the "sweet and savory Nordic fare" that is served at dinner. His brother Eric and his wife have molded their self-identities with a Nordic theme. As Kirby observes, Eric has developed "each nuance of his Norwegian heritage into a fully realized ostentation." All the furniture in Eric's house is "pretentious; they have antique wooden trunks and high-backed benches painted blue with stenciled flowers in red and white." But Kirby doesn't even care for the house of the brother he is closer to, and he finds that the image of Harold's and Leanne's living room is like the "interior of a coffin. The idea of spending five years, ten years, a lifetime, with such furniture makes him gasp."

The children of Kirby's extended family show a better sense of identity than does Kirby. Anna's "No!" is "glassy and definite" when she refuses to go outside and play with her brother. Kirby's self-assurance continues to waver. Instead of confronting Eric and Marybeth about their gossip regarding his politics and his life, "he knows that if he were to get up and do something he would stop being offended, but he gets up only to pour himself another drink." Drinking is one way to avoid his feelings of discomfort with himself and his family, and Kirby continues to drink through the rest of the story.

Kirby studies his brother Eric, whom he's never liked, and begins to make an internal judgment, noting that Eric is a "jerk," acts like an old man, and has put on weight. But ultimately, Kirby is uncertain of this opinion, and "his bad mood twists into him." Kirby wonders whether the definition of a man resembles the more traditional Eric or the more adventurous Harold, "someone . . . who can chop wood all day and f—k all night." Notably absent from Kirby's musings are what Kirby thinks. How does he define a man? Kirby cannot know, because he has not defined himself. Kirby realizes that his brothers are similar to each other and he is the odd person out: "Kirby's being does not extend past his fingertips and toes to family, real estate, reputation."

But finally, the beginnings of possible identity make an appearance in Kirby's actions. Interestingly, this is spurred by younger family members who assert themselves and are sure of their identities. The argument that arises at the dinner table concerns a question of identity. Three-year-old Kristin refuses to eat her ham and, with cognizance that seems beyond her age, tells her father "I mean it." Older Anna defends Kristin and defies her rigid, traditional father by saying that Kristin can put whatever she wants into her own body, an issue related to one's concept of self and identity. "She should have control over her own body. Food. Other stuff. I don't know." Anna asserts her opinion, exposing her own identity by taking a risk. Anna is also defending a question of identity: Kristin should be allowed to make choices for herself, regardless of her age. Anna falters under her father's rage, and this is where Kirby begins to assert some identity by verbally defending Anna and Kristin.

During this interchange, something else happens that eventually leads Kirby to his biggest realization. While Eric is angrily airing his opinions about the function and purpose of the family unit, Kirby looks at Anna and sees a look that he has seen "on Mieko's face, a combination of self-doubt and resentment molded into composure." This is a huge wake-up call for Kirby, who seems to gain an understanding of the issues women face in patriarchal social systems.

During and after the argument, however, there are still subtle hints of Kirby's uncertainty. Smiley puts careful sentence construction and selection of words to good use to illustrate Kirby's hesitance. Kirby realizes "from the tone of his own voice that rage has replaced sympathy and, moreover, is about to get the better of him." Again, we have the sense that Kirby really is not yet in control of his own identity, that he's a passive observer watching himself spring into action, that rage could overtake him and he'd have no control in the matter. After the argument, "he cannot bear to stay here . . . he cannot bear to leave either." This resembles earlier instances of indecision in the story, such as his wanting both to pull off the highway and to keep on driving. In a way, the highway, or the long distance that Kirby travels to see his family, can be seen as a metaphor for Kirby's journey toward defining his own self-identity. All roads lead to his final, illuminating conversation with Leanne.

During this last scene, Kirby reveals more about himself and utters more dialog than he has at any previous point in the story. It seems that Kirby is beginning to crystallize his understanding of himself. Appropriately, perhaps symbolically, the conversation starts with Kristin, the little girl with a well-established sense of identity. Leanne also displays her own strong identity and her strong feelings for Kristin; Leanne has gone to some trouble to rewrap gifts so that Kristin will have a good Christmas.

But Kirby reveals that he's realized something that will lead to the key to his own identity: he's taken from Mieko everything she needed to protect herself. Kirby says, "I see that, one by one, I broke down every single one of her strengths, everything she had equipped herself with to live in a Japanese way." Kirby realizes, perhaps for the first time, the immensity of what he has done, even over a long distance. He has, without meaning to, lessened or injured Mieko's sense of identity. Again focusing on the topic of identity, Leanne points out that, as irritating as Eric can be, the identity that he projects and possesses is firmly established: "He never tries to get something for nothing. I admire that."

With Leanne's comment, Kirby comes closer than he ever has to understanding himself. He realizes that both his life and Mieko's have "taken their final form." Kirby admits the consequences of his actions, and Leanne reaffirms this when she says, "what people do is important." Smiley reinforces for the reader what the story is really about with the cadence of "And himself. Himself." Kirby has, throughout the story, struggled and journeyed toward identifying "himself," what he is about, his self-identity. Though Kirby feels that his "permanent smallness" has now been revealed, he is many steps closer to understanding himself and being more sure of himself, even if that understanding starts with a sense of sorrow for what he has done. At this point, the reader may not be sure about what will become of Kirby or whether he will ever get over his treatment of Mieko.

Reviewer Joanne Kaufman, in *People Weekly*, calls the ending to this story "a letdown, as if the author had run out of steam." While the ending may raise more questions than answers, it is the termination of a particular road that Kirby had to travel.

In the end, Leanne does grant Kirby a sort of pardon by guiding him to the stairs and giving him "soft and fleeting . . . a disembodied kiss on his cheek." The use of the word "disembodied" is interesting: it recalls the disembodied tone at earlier points in the story when Kirby seemed to be passively watching himself be led through life. Perhaps the usage is intended as a symbolic falling away of Kirby's passivity. Or perhaps the kiss represents forgiveness across a long distance; the forgiveness of Mieko.

In an interview in *Belles Lettres: A Review of Books by Women*, Smiley said that for her, the writing process is "akin to having three or four interesting objects on your desk and you move them around until you can see some relationship among them." All in all, this story does a wonderful job of looking at a protagonist's journey toward selfidentity, with undercurrents of family, gender issues, and distance (metaphorical and literal) pulled into the mix.

Source: Catherine Dybiec Holm, Critical Essay on "Long Distance," in *Short Stories for Students*, Gale, 2004.

Critical Essay #3

In the following review-interview excerpt, Smiley comments on critical reception to her collection The Age of Grief and discusses writing from the male viewpoint.

We talk too about *The Age Grief*, whose title story, a novella, deals with a pair of dentists and their three small daughters. The marriage is foundering, the wife has a lover. Told from the husband's viewpoint, the novella gets inside modern family life with exquisite sensitivity. The husband senses that he has arrived at a grief which is "the same cup of pain that every mortal drinks from."

Smiley says she was incredulous when *The Age of Grief* was nominated as a finalist for the NBCC Award. "I think if they had actually chosen me I would have been appalled, but it was great, it was totally unlooked for, so it was like this completely positive and totally abstract experience." Even the splendid reviews took Smiley by surprise. "I was unprepared for the personal way that a lot of people took it. I received letters that in some ways were more astonishing than the reviews. Tons of men wrote me saying that [the title story] was very convincing. It seemed like a phenomenon, as if I had tapped into some deep nerve without expecting to."

She finds she has no difficulty writing from a male viewpoint. "I think partly because I'm 6′2′. I think being tall makes my femininity less of a disadvantage. In a big city I notice that I never get accosted or even spoken to. And I think I live in a slightly different world from most women because of my intimidating height."

Whether she is writing from a man's or a woman's perspective, in a medieval or a modern setting, the topic of family life preoccupies Smiley. Living with her third husband, screenwriter Stephen Mortensen, and young daughters Phoebe and Lucy, Smiley finds that parenthood has had a powerful effect on her creativity. "The day my first child was born was a day in which my imagination became fully engaged. Now I'm interested in questions like: How do mothers grow to love their children, and what does that mean? I love books on theories of child-raising."

Source: Jane Smiley with Marcelle Thiébaux, "An Interview with Jane Smiley," in *Publishers Weekly*, Vol. 233, No. 13, April 1, 1998, pp. 65-66.

Adaptations

Smiley's title novella from *The Age of Grief* was adapted in 2002 as a feature film titled *The Secret Lives of Dentists*. The film was produced by Holedigger Films and Ready Made Film and was directed by Alan Rudolph. It stars Campbell Scott, Denis Leary, Robin Tunney, and Peter Samuel.

Smiley's novel *Good Faith* was produced as both an audiobook and audio CD in 2003 by Recorded Books Unabridged.

Smiley's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *A Thousand Acres*, was adapted as a feature film by Touchstone Pictures in 1997. The film, directed by Jocelyn Moorhouse, featured an all-star cast including Jessica Lange, Michelle Pfeiffer, Jennifer Jason Leigh, Jason Robards, Colin Firth, and Keith Carradine. It is available on VHS and DVD from Buena Vista Home Video.

Topics for Further Study

During his road trip, Kirby thinks about several instances in which people have been caught unaware in snowstorms. Research some real-life examples of people who have survived horrible winter conditions, and discuss the methods that they used for survival.

Research the dating rituals in modern-day Japan, and compare them to the dating rituals in modern-day America. Imagine that you are a Japanese teenager, and write a journal entry that describes a day in your courtship, using your research to support your ideas.

Research modern interracial relationships in at least five different countries other than the United States and Japan. For each country, write a short description of the prevalence of these interracial relationships, as well as the cultural challenges that these couples face.

Research the history of the family in America, from the beginning of the twentieth century until today. On a chart, plot the major trends that have occurred in family structure, and identify the factors—social, technological, or otherwise— that have helped to bring about these changes. Discuss the family structure that you think is the most effective.

In the story, Leanne references a study that says one-year-olds will choose a balanced diet when left to pick their own foods and that they will also choose to be toilet trained. Read a number of studies that address these "nature versus nurture" issues. Discuss which of one's skills and character traits you think are learned naturally and which are learned from one's environment, using examples from your research—and your own background, if you wish—to support your claims.

Research any proposed legislation that could affect American families. Discuss how this law (or laws) could affect the family, as well as whether or not you think this legislation is a good idea. Write one of your representatives in Congress and express your views on this topic.

Compare and Contrast

1980s: Thirty percent of Japanese women in their twenties are not married.

Today: Fifty percent of Japanese women in their twenties are not married.

1980s: Although Japanese women are still encouraged to marry in their twenties, it becomes socially acceptable for married women in certain classes to work part-time, as long as it does not interfere with their marriage duties.

Today: Almost half of all Japanese women work outside the home, in full-time and part-time jobs. Yet, for the working women with children, it is more common to pursue part-time employment, unless their children are old enough that they do not require full-time care anymore.

1980s: Following the modern women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s, many American women embrace their independence and choose to put child-rearing on hold while pursuing careers.

Today: Many American women are torn between being independent and raising children, and some try to do both by working first and then having children later in life or by using services such as daycare to take care of their children during the day while they work. New fertility studies, which suggest that it is difficult for some women to have children after their late twenties, increase the pressure on many women to choose between work and family. At the same time, advancements in technology make working from a home office more feasible, and many employers offer flexible working arrangements, creating new opportunities for women who want to do both.

1980s: About 50 percent of all American marriages end in divorce.

Today: About 40 percent of all American marriages are predicted to end in divorce.

1980s: In 1980, 18 percent of all births in America are to unmarried women.

Today: In 1998, 30 percent of all births in America are to unmarried women.

What Do I Read Next?

In *Family: American Writers Remember Their Own* (1997), editors Sharon Sloan Fiffer and Steve Fiffer collect essays from several American writers recalling family members who have changed their lives. Contributors include Edward Hoagland, Alice Hoffman, Jayne Ann Phillips, and Deborah Tannen, and there is also an afterword by Smiley.

In Joyce Carol Oates's 1996 novel *We Were the Mulvaneys*, an affluent, seemingly close-knit family gets torn apart after one of its members experiences a tragic event.

Like Smiley, E. Annie Proulx is an American writer regarded as a critical success for both her short stories and novels. Proulx's short-story collection *Close Range: Wyoming Stories* (1999) includes a story titled "The Half-Skinned Steer." This story, like "Long Distance," depicts a man trying to make it through a brutal winter storm in the northern United States as well as the man's efforts to deal with his family issues.

In *The Epidemic: The Rot of American Culture, Absentee and Permissive Parenting, and the Resultant Plague of Joyless, Selfish Children* (2003), child and family psychiatrist Robert Shaw examines the faddish child-rearing practices from the past three decades. Shaw believes that these practices, along with the effect of the media, are largely to blame for the increase in incidents such as the Columbine High School shooting, and he offers alternative solutions to help stem destructive trends among American children.

In "Long Distance," Eric has a Ph.D. but does not teach, instead using his knowledge of the family to write for a conservative think tank. In Smiley's 1995 novel *Moo*, she satirizes life at a Midwestern university during the 1989-1990 academic year, incorporating then-current events into the plot, which features a pig as a main character.

Smiley's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *A Thousand Acres*, first published in 1991, recast Shakespeare's play *King Lear* in a modern-day rural setting. The feminist revision of the story depicts an Iowa farmer who decides to divide his farm among his three daughters. The novel includes elements of sexual abuse and, like "Long Distance," examines sometimes painful family relationships.

Further Study

Caplan, Mariana, *When Holidays Are Hell. . .!: A Guide to Surviving Family Gatherings*, Hohm Press, 1997.

In this comprehensive guide, Caplan examines the advantages and disadvantages of visiting relatives during the holidays and explores—from the viewpoints of both adults and children—the many negative situations that can occur during these times of heightened stress.

Crohn, Joel, *Mixed Matches: How to Create Successful Interracial, Interethnic, and Interfaith Relationships*, Fawcett Books, 1995.

Crohn, a psychotherapist, uses several case studies to demonstrate the trends and unique challenges faced in interracial, interethnic, and interfaith relationships. Although this book is primarily intended as a guidebook for couples in these situations, it does draw on research to discuss these relationships, so it also serves as a good general resource for anybody interested in learning more about this timely topic.

Guldner, Gregory, *Long Distance Relationships: The Complete Guide*, Fawcett Books, 1995.

This book examines the factors necessary to sustain a long-distance relationship, such as the one that Kirby and Mieko have in the beginning of "Long Distance." This book is primarily for couples, but it includes quality research into the trends and effects of long-distance relationships.

Kamachi, Noriko, *Culture and Customs of Japan*, Greenwood Press, 1999.

Kamachi's book examines what life is like for people in Japan. The book includes sections on every major aspect of Japanese life, including thought and religion; literature and art; cuisine and clothing; women, marriage, and family; and social customs and lifestyle.

Nakadate, Neil, *Understanding Jane Smiley*, University of South Carolina Press, 1999.

Nakadate's book offers a comprehensive critical and biographical study of Jane Smiley's works. Nakadate employs published criticism, interviews with Smiley, and the author's own commentary to examine Smiley's major interests and themes.

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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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