# Mateo Falcone Study Guide

## Mateo Falcone by Prosper Mérimée

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# Introduction

Prosper Merimee's "Mateo Falcone" (1829), originally subtitled "Les moeurs de Corse" ("The Ways of Corsica"), chronicles the killing of a ten-yearold boy by his father. The story, Merimee's first, is provocative in spite of the detached narrative voice of his unnamed narrator. This laconic, disconnected voice heightens the shock value of the event and at the same time demands the reader to interpret the story objectively. Such contemporaries as Stendhal (Henri Beyle), Henry James, and Walter Pater admired Merimee and praised him for his craft. Pater called "Mateo Falcone" "the cruellest story in the world."

"Mateo Falcone" is a brief, but complex story. It features at least five points of view and at least four "ways of life" (the "moeurs" of the original subtitle). Merimee's themes include betrayal and honor, savagery and civilization, vendetta and law, and custom and morality. Most importantly, "Mateo Falcone" exemplifies the art of storytelling at its most concentrated and allusive. Most critics consider the story disturbing and unforgettable.

# Author Biography

Prosper Merimee was born in Paris in 1803 to a moderately successful painter, Leonor Merimee, and his wife, Anne. Merimee's mother was a painter as well as the granddaughter of Madame Leprince de Beaumont, who had written and published a version of the popular children's story "Beauty and the Beast."

Merimee began attending the Lycee Napoleon at the age of eight. He showed promise in Latin and a few other subjects, but was generally considered an average student. He developed a strong interest in art and archeology, however, and from an early age became infatuated with members of the opposite sex. Although Merimee did not become a painter, he valued the skills of drawing and sketching and made much use of them in later life. He taught himself Serbian, Russian, and Greek, and he had learned English at home from his parents.

After graduation from the Lycee, Merimee entered law school; after receiving his degree, he embarked on a lifelong career as a civil servant. Most significantly, he became Minister of Historical Monuments in 1834. With his position he is credited with salvaging much of the French Gothic architectural legacy. He had a strong sense of history, and he strove not only to preserve important sites and buildings but to instill a popular appreciation of them.

Merimee began writing as a young man. He knew Stendhal and other writers of the day and received valuable advice from them. His earliest published works were two "hoaxes:" a collection of supposedly Spanish plays and a volume of "Illyrian" (Albanian) ballads. Merimee also wrote travel books and journalism, and he translated the Russian poet Pushkin into French for the first time. While not prolific as a fiction writer, Merimee produced a respectable body of work. In 1870, the year that Merimee died, composer Georges Bizet adapted a Merimee story with a Spanish setting as an opera. Probably because of the enormous success of that opera, "Carmen" (1845) is Merimee's bestknown work.

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# Plot Summary

"Mateo Falcone" is set in Corsica in the seventeenth century in the region of Porto-Vecchio, which is midway between the town of Corte and the maquis, the wild country of the Corsican highlands where outlaws and misfits find refuge from law and authority. Mateo Falcone, a forty-eight-year-old father of three married daughters and one ten-yearold son, is a successful sheep rancher. He sets off to gather his flock one afternoon. His wife, Guiseppa, accompanies him, and they leave their son, Fortunato alone.

Fortunato daydreams in the autumn sun. He anticipates going into town in a few days to have dinner with his uncle, a local notable, or "corporal." Suddenly, gunshots echo from nearby. On nearby path, a wounded man appears. He has been shot in his thigh. Seeing Fortunato, he asks whether the boy is the son of Mateo Falcone. He introduces himself as Gianetto Sanpiero, the implication being that he has a tie to Falcone and thus a right to expect asylum. Fortunato at first declines to hide Gianetto, but when the bandit offers a piece of silver, the boy conceals him beneath the hay.

Six soldiers arrive, led by adjutant Tiodoro Gamba, who addresses Fortunato as "cousin," once again implying a tie to the Falcones. Tiodoro wants to know whether Fortunato has seen a man on the trail. Fortunato evades Tiodoro's questions, and Tiodoro suspects that the boy is in complicity with Gianetto. He threatens to beat Fortunato, but the boy only replies that he is Mateo Falcone's son, and the lieutenant understands that he dare not harm Fortunato for fear of angering the father. The soldiers search the property but find nothing. Finally, Tiodoro attempts to bribe Fortunato with a shiny new watch:

As he spoke he brought the watch closer and closer until it was almost touching Fortunato's pale cheek. The child's face clearly showed the struggle between cupidity and the claims of hospitality that was raging within him. His bare chest was heaving, and he seemed to be fighting for breath. And still the watch swung, twisted, and occasionally bumped against the tip of his nose. At last his right hand slowly rose towards the watch; his fingertips touched it; and he felt its full weight in his palm, though the adjutant still held the end of the chain. The dial was pale blue, the case newly furbished; in the sunshine it seemed ablaze. . . . The temptation was too great. (Excerpt from "Mateo Falcone" translated by Nicholas Jotcham)

Fortunato accepts the bribe and silently nods in the direction of the haystack. The soldiers discover Gianetto, who curses the boy. Fortunato throws the silver back at Gianetto. The prisoner accepts his capture; the soldiers treat him with respect, even though he has killed one of them and wounded another.

Mateo and Guiseppa return from the pastures. Tiodoro advances cautiously and explains to Mateo what has happened. The soldiers leave with their prisoner. When Mateo ascertains the facts, he terse ly asks his wife whether the boy is really his child.

Fortunato collapses in tears, sobbing and crying, and the wife becomes hysterical. Mateo commands Fortunato to leave with him into the high country.

As Mateo and Fortunato climb into the mountains, Guiseppa prays inside the house to an icon of the Virgin Mary. In a ravine, Mateo commands Fortunato to kneel and say his prayers. When he finishes praying, Fortunato begs for mercy, but Mateo gives none. He raises his rifle and shoots.

# Detailed Summary & Analysis

## Summary

In the nineteenth century, the maquis above Porto-Vecchio is home to Corsican shepherds and outlaws. The maquis is a savage wilderness of dense brushwood resulting from the burning of woodland by Corsican farmers, who, to save themselves the trouble of fertilizing, sow seeds in the ashes of the trees. After the grain is harvested, they abandon the fields, which, over time, sprout a tangle of trees and shrubs so dense not even wild sheep can penetrate. This is where the unnamed narrator of "Mateo Falcone" instructs us to go if we have killed a man. With a good rifle and ammunition, an outlaw can live in safety in the maquis, with milk, cheese and chestnuts provided by the shepherds.

Half a league from the maquis is the home of Mateo Falcone, a middle-aged sheep rancher of some means. Small but robust, Mateo has a legendary skill with a rifle, which he used to dispose of a rival before marrying his wife Giuseppa. A dangerous enemy but a staunch friend, Mateo is "always ready to do his moral duty."

Mateo and Giuseppa have three married daughters and a ten-year-old son, Fortunato. Although Mateo can "count on the daggers and rifles of his sons-in-law" in need, Fortunato, the promising only son, is the hope of the family and heir to the name.

One autumn morning Mateo and his wife set out to inspect one of his flocks in a clearing in the maquis. Fortunato stays behind to look after the house. Several hours later, Fortunato is lying in the sun daydreaming about dinner with his uncle, who is a caporal in Corte, when he hears a gunshot out on the plain. He gets up and looks out. He hears more shots, at irregular intervals and coming closer. Then a man appears on the path from the plain to Mateo's house. He is leaning on his gun and dragging himself along, having just been shot in the thigh.

The man, who is dressed in rags and wearing the pointed cap of the mountain people, is an outlaw who was ambushed by Corsican troops when he went to town to buy gunpowder. He managed to escape them, but they are close behind, and now wounded, he cannot reach the maquis before they catch up with him.

When he meets Fortunato, he recognizes the boy as Mateo Falcone's son and introduces himself as Gianetto Sanpiero. He asks Fortunato to hide him, but Fortunato hesitates, since he cannot ask his father's permission. Gianetto tells Fortunato that he is no son of Mateo Falcone if he would have the yellow-collars arrest Gianetto right at Mateo's doorstep. This agitates Fortunato, who asks what Gianetto will give him if he hides him. The outlaw takes out a five-franc piece and offers it to Fortunato.

Fortunato takes the coin and hides Gianetto in a pile of hay beside the house, ingeniously placing a cat and her kittens on top to make the hay look undisturbed. Then

he covers the trail of blood with dust before lying back down in the sun.

Within a few minutes, six men in uniform arrive, led by adjutant Tiodoro Gamba, a distant relative of Mateo Falcone. Gamba greets Fortunato and asks if he saw a man just pass this way. Fortunato evades his questions, but Adjutant Gamba accuses him of trying to be clever and asks which way the outlaw went. Still, Fortunato evades the question, saying he was asleep, and denying that the shots woke him.

But Gamba is now certain Fortunato saw the bandit. He tells his men to search the house. Fortunato asks him what his papa will say, when he hears someone entered his house while he was out. Adjutant Gamba takes him by the ear and threatens to give him twenty strokes with the flat of his sabre. Fortunato only laughs. His father is Mateo Falcone! Gamba reminds Fortunato that he can send him to prison, clap him in leg-irons and have him guillotined, but again Fortunato only laughs—his father is Mateo Falcone!

One of the soldiers warns Gamba that they don't want to get on the wrong side of Mateo. The soldiers have searched the small house with no luck, and one even half-heartedly prodded the pile of hay with his bayonet. All the while, Fortunato stroked his cat and watched the soldiers in delight. Now Gamba and his men are at their wits' end. Gamba, having realized threats will get him nowhere with Fortunato, tries bribing him.

Gamba offers Fortunato his silver pocket watch, worth at least ten crowns. It's better than the watch Fortunato's uncle the caporal will give him, and Fortunato eyes it hungrily as Gamba swings it on its silver chain. Gamba asks him if he wants it, telling Fortunato he could stroll the streets of Porto-Vecchio proud as a peacock with it.

Fortunato struggles mightily between "the traditional claims of solidarity against the authorities" and his own greed. Finally, his hand rises toward the watch, his fingers touch it, he feels the weight of it in his palm, and the temptation is too great. He points at the pile of hay. Gamba lets Fortunato have the watch, and Fortunato moves quickly away while the soldiers tear apart the hay. The wounded man is captured and collapses.

From the ground, Gianetto curses Fortunato, who tosses back the silver coin. Gianetto ignores it, turning instead to the soldiers, who treat him with respect. The soldiers are busy making a comfortable litter with which to carry their prisoner when Mateo Falcone and his wife return, Giuseppa struggling under an enormous sack of chestnuts and Mateo ambling along with only his guns (it is unbecoming, says the narrator, for a man to carry anything but his weapons).

Mateo wonders at first if the soldiers have come to arrest him for some offense in the distant past, and he approaches with caution, prepared to defend his self if necessary. He tells his wife to be ready, since it is the wife's task in combat to load her husband's weapon.

Gamba, however, feels just as ill at ease at the sight of Mateo advancing with his gun at the ready. He worries that Gianetto might be a relative or friend of Mateo, and, summoning his courage, hails Mateo like a long-lost friend.

The two exchange greetings, and Gamba tells Mateo that they have just caught Gianetto Sanpiero. To Gamba's delight, Giuseppa responds in relief, saying the outlaw had stolen a milk goat from them only last week. But Mateo expresses some sympathy for the bandit, who he says was hungry. Gamba is quick to respond, saying Gianetto fought like a lion and killed one of his men before hiding himself so well not even the devil would have found him. Then he says if it had not been for Fortunato they never would have found him.

Gamba tells Mateo what happened and says both Mateo's and Fortunato's names will go in his report to the Public Prosecutor. He is certain Fortunato's uncle the caporal will send Fortunato a fine present. But Mateo only curses. Gianetto, seeing Mateo with the adjutant, spits on the threshold of Mateo's door and calls it the house of a traitor.

Instead of killing Gianetto for the insult, Mateo raises his hand to his brow in despair. The soldiers depart with their prisoner, leaving Mateo standing in silence. Fortunato looks from his mother to his father, who is looking back at him in fury. Giuseppa asks Fortunato where he got the watch, and he tells her from his cousin the adjutant. Mateo takes the watch and smashes it to pieces against a rock. Is this child really his? He asks his wife. Fortunato is the first in his line to have committed a betrayal.

Finally, Mateo picks up his gun and sets off again toward the maquis, calling Fortunato to follow. Giuseppa runs after Mateo and tells him Fortunato is his son, but Mateo tells her to leave him alone; he is the father. Giuseppa kisses Fortunato and goes into the cottage, where she prays to an image of the Virgin.

Mateo leads Fortunato to a small ravine. He tests the earth with the butt of his gun and finds it soft enough to dig. He tells Fortunato to go stand by a big stone. Fortunato does as he is told. Then Mateo tells him to kneel down and say his prayers. Fortunato begs his father not to kill him, but Mateo tells him again to say his prayers. Fortunato does, his father uttering "Amen!" at the end of each. When Mateo has finished reciting all the prayers he knows, he begs his father for mercy. But Mateo raises his gun and takes aim, saying, "May God forgive you!" Fortunato tries to clasp his father by the knees, but he is too late; Mateo fires and Fortunato falls like a rock.

Mateo is walking back to the house for a spade when Giuseppa runs up and asks him what he's done. "Justice," replies Mateo. He says Fortunato died like a Christian and he'll have a mass sung for him. Then he tells her to have his son-in-law come live with them.

## Analysis

"Mateo Falcone" is a story of two competing notions of justice, that of civilization and that of wilderness, or savagery. The main character, Mateo Falcone, a Corsican sheep rancher with a brutal reputation and a legendary skill with a rifle represents savagery. Mateo is a mountain man who leads the simple life idealized by eighteenth-century

romantic literature, but whose actions illustrate that living on one's own terms in the natural environment comes at a price.

The opening description of the wild maquis above the city of Porto Vecchio lays the foundation for the contrasting ways in which justice will be handled in the story—and foreshadows the brutality to follow. This is the home of shepherds and outlaws, a place where survival depends on strength, cunning and loyalty. Bandits like Gianetto can survive so long as they have a good rifle and ammunition, hidden by kinsmen like Mateo who have a similar distrust for the institutionalized authority of the city.

Mateo, while not formerly a relative of Gianetto, sympathizes with the thief. Mateo understands hunger—a primal need for food—and seems to feel bound by a relationship based on a mutual way of life. Both are mountain men, and both reject the civilized notions of the law espoused by the city.

Specifically Adjutant Gamba represents by the soldiers, and the law of the city. The conflict between the two men—Gamba and Mateo—stems from their differing ideas of justice. In Gamba's civilized world—the world of the city—the law is objective, based on a hearing and determination of the evidence. The respect shown between the soldiers and their prisoner illustrates this objective dispensation of justice; men who traded fire only moments before can now let the matter be settled in court.

In Mateo's world, order is maintained by loyalty and vendetta, a custom that requires a life for a life. The brutality of the vendetta mirrors the brutality of the natural environment and ensures the success of a loose-knit population that must rely on strength, loyalty and ancient familial bonds to survive. For this reason, Gamba is naturally ill at ease in confronting Mateo. He has left his own civilized world and knows full well that the rules are different. But, familiar with the rules of the maquis, Gamba uses distant familial ties to establish the tone of the encounter, calling Fortunato his "little cousin."

Fortunato himself is a symbol of the conflict between civilization and savagery. Lying in the sun in front of his mountain home, he is dreaming of dinner in town with his uncle. Only ten years old, Fortunato is not yet savage or civilized. For this reason, he commits the ultimate offense: he betrays a man for a shiny silver watch.

In betraying Gianetto, Fortunato rejects the custom of his people and endangers the entire family. More than eliciting a reprisal from Gianetto's people, Fortunato's action risks damaging the reputation that has protected the family of Mateo Falcone for decades. This is why Mateo takes his son's life—vendetta requires it. With Fortunato dead, the betrayal is settled—in Mateo's own words, "justice" has been served.

But can such brutality be legitimately called justice? The character of Giuseppa represents a moral alternative to the code of vendetta, even in the wilderness. On learning that Gianetto has been captured, she seems willing to let the law deal with the bandit who'd stolen from them. Later, she appeals to Mateo and then, fearing for her son, prays to the Virgin. Here, Christianity represents a different kind of order, in which criminals may be treated with mercy.

The first-person narrator provides some plausibility to a shockingly brutal story, by assuring us that Mateo Falcone does exist (since the narrator met him personally). And while the narrator refrains from moral judgment against Mateo for his act, we can detect his stance from the attitude he takes in describing both the setting (a wilderness created largely by the self-interest of the farmers) and the characters, chief among them Mateo, whose "noble life" means a life without work.

Romanticism, the prevailing literary movement of the eighteenth century, widely explored the idea of the "noble savage," which maintained that man left alone in the natural environment—free from the repression of civilization—was essentially good, or noble. But by 1830, when "Mateo Falcone" was written, romanticism had begun to give way to realism, which attempted to more realistically depict man in a natural environment. Furthermore, France just after the defeat of Napoleon (a Corsican), was in the throes of revolution, justice often taking the form of vendetta, the code espoused by Mateo.

Although Mateo retains elements of the noble savage, he is far from noble. Rather, he decides his son's fate in a matter of minutes, based on a custom he does not bother to examine. He makes the boy say prayers to which Mateo responds with a practiced and unfeeling "Amen," and appeals to God for a mercy Mateo himself does not offer. Finally, perceiving the need for another man in the house, Mateo quickly replaces his son as he would any commodity.

All of the characters in "Mateo Falcone" are living uneasily between two worlds. Gianetto is savage enough to trust the bonds of loyalty and vendetta, but accepts the authority of the soldiers when captured. Gamba is actually related to Mateo and relies on this when necessary; nevertheless, he is zealous (if not overly so) in maintaining the law and order of civilized man. Giuseppa accepts the traditional role of the savage wife, but favors more "civilized" ideals when it comes to dispensing justice. Mateo Falcone, though a man of the mountains, makes a good living from the sale of his sheep in town. Fortunato, like his father, spends time in both worlds but is too young to understand the narrow line between them. It is because of this that his actions, unlike his father's, seem human.

# Characters

## Fortunato Falcone

Fortunato Falcone is Mateo's ten-year-old son. His father regards him as "the hope of the family." The name Fortunato, meaning "the fortunate one," reflects his father's pride. Before the wounded Gianetto appears at the family home, Fortunato had been daydreaming about the meal that he is to eat with his wealthy uncle in Corte in a few days. Fortunato shows little human feeling towards the hunted Gianetto and agrees to hide him only when bribed with a piece of silver. When Tiodoro offers him a watch in exchange for information about Gianneto, Fortunato eyes it "just as a cat does when a whole chicken is offered to it" and gives away the bandit's hiding place. On the other hand, once he has divulged Gianetto's hiding place, Fortunato returns the silver.

## Giuseppa Falcone

Giuseppa is the wife of Mateo Falcone and the mother of Fortunato. Merimee discloses few details about her. She has borne four children to Mateo, whom she married after a rival had been shot dead, presumably by Mateo himself. She is thus implicated in the Corsican cycle of violence. She begs for mercy for Fortunato when Mateo takes the boy to the mountains to kill him and prays to the Virgin Mary when her husband refuses.

## Mateo Falcone

Mateo Falcone, aged fifty when the narrator knew him, was "a comparatively rich man for that country—Corsica—where he lived." Falcone owns a large, one-room house of the peasant type halfway between the nearest town (Corte) and the wild maquis, or cane-fields, where outlaws take refuge from the law. He excels in the Corsican art of shooting; his acquaintances consider him an excellent marksman. The narrator implies that Falcone married his wife, Giuseppa, after dispatching his rival with a single rifle shot from long distance. The three daughters that Giuseppa bore "enraged him." At last she bears a son, which pleases him.

Those in the region of Porto-Vecchio, in which Falcone lives, consider him either a "a good friend" or "a dangerous enemy." Admired and feared, "he lived at peace in the district." Readers understand Falcone as a man entirely devoted to the Corsican code of vendetta, or blood-feud. Protecting family and friends is a priority; the family bond transcends any abstract idea of law. Falcone, having married off his girls, knows that he "could count in case of need on the daggers and rifles of his sons-in-law." The wounded bandit who seeks asylum in Falcone's house when he is absent tells Falcone's reluctant son, Fortunato, that his father will say that the son "did right" in hiding him from the pursuing soldiers.

Falcone adheres to the concept of machismo. His wife and children are hardly more than chattel. His wife, for example, must carry burdens from the field, "for it is considered undignified for a man to carry any other burden but his weapon." After Falcone kills his son, he goes looking for a spade "without throwing a single glance back at the body."

## Tiodoro Gamba

Tiodoro Gamba is an adjutant (an officer) of the local militia and, as such, a representative of the law. He regards himself as a relation of Mateo, as indicated by his use of the term "cousin" in addressing Fortunato. Tiodoro is wary of Mateo and, out of fear of angering him, does not beat Fortunato to get information, as he contemplates doing at one point during the interrogation. Tiodoro demonstrates psychological acuity when he determines to bribe rather than coerce Fortunato; he can understand Fortunato better than Fortunato can understand Tiodoro. He also approaches Mateo with calculated circumspection because he knows Mateo to be volatile and violent. Tiodoro differs from Mateo and all the other characters in that he no longer belongs to the vendetta world of the mountains. Like Gianetto Sanpiero, however, Gamba carries out his duty without letting personal feelings enter into it. He metes out decent treatment to the wounded captive. He also seems remarkably unconcerned over the death of one of his men in the pursuit: "That is not of great consequence, for the dead man was only a Frenchman."

## Gianetto Sanpiero

Gianetto Sanpiero is a fugitive from the law. One of his crimes is that he stole a milch-goat from the Falcones. Gianetto has apparently been in town to buy powder for his rifle so that he could protect himself and hunt game where he has been hiding. Merimee gives him dignity; he shows no personal animosity towards the soldiers who pursue and capture him. He shows understandable spite towards Fortunato after the boy reveals his hiding place to the soldiers.

# Themes

## Culture Clash

"Mateo Falcone" concerns the cultural clash between savagery and civilization. The French, in particular, developed these themes, beginning with the work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose Essay on the Origin of Inequality Among Men (1854) presented the notion that primitive people were uniquely free and true to themselves in their existence, while civilized people, on the contrary, led corrupt, hypocritical lives. Health and simplicity were associated with the savage, according to Rousseau, and neurosis and complexity to the "civilized" human being.

Merimee was not a follower of Rousseau, however, even though he was interested in Rousseau's philosophy. Merimee's idea of savagery was actually grounded in classical literature. Thus the Corsican ways described in the tale resemble those of the Cyclopes in Homer's Odyssey. The Cyclopes, like Merimee's Corsicans, are island-bound pastoralists; the Cyclopes understand a basic and brutal code of vengeance.

Law and Order

In "Mateo Falcone," vendetta assumes the role of law and authority instead of the traditional legal system. With vendetta, the response to acts of violence is always another act of violence. For example, if one man kills another's brother, the deceased's brother then kills the killer, and then the kin of the second dead man seek to kill his killer, and so on. Violence breeds more violence, and the founding principle of the system is not justice but revenge. Under an established legal system, those accused of a crime—say, of a killing—come under the jurisdiction of established authorities, whose loyalty is to an abstract system rather than to clans or to individual persons. The accused receives a trial in a court where evidence influences the discussion. Vendetta belongs to the countryside, law to the town. (Corte, the name of the town in Merimee's story, means "law-court.")

Vendetta is a custom, an unwritten rule acted on out of ancient habit and the pressure of conformity. A custom is a "lifeway," in the language of anthropology, and the original subtitle of "Mateo Falcone" was "The Ways of Corsica."

## Honor and Betrayal

Honor, in the Corsican context, is the local custom of cultivating and appreciating loyalty among family and friends. Betrayal is the failure to recognize the bonds of loyalty, as when Fortunato gives up Gianetto for the sake of a shiny watch. Yet it is not a betrayal, according to the rules of vendetta, for Mateo to kill Fortunato for having revealed Gianetto for a price.

## Natural Law

In this story, the sacrifice of Fortunato is considered obedience to the natural law. Fortunato must die in order to avenge the betrayal of someone in the community; the boy's death will guarantee the tenuous peace in the region. Otherwise, Gianetto's partisans might have come after someone in Mateo's family, whereupon Mateo would have been obliged to retaliate, and so on. It ought to be noted that Mateo's killing of Fortunato resembles Abraham's aborted sacrifice of Isaac in the Old Testament. There, however, God intervenes to substitute a lamb for the child.

## Violence and Cruelty

Violence is the eternal human problem. Cain killed Abel; the Egyptians oppressed the Hebrews; the Romans permitted the execution of Jesus. Wars are waged over boundaries and devastate vast civilian populations. Revenge leads to new wars. Civilization and religion address the problem of human violence and to this day try to find solutions to eliminate or lessen the violent impulses of man.

# Style

## Romanticism and Realism

"Mateo Falcone" (1829) illustrates the cruel toll exacted on a Corsican family by the code of vendetta, or feud. Falcone kills his own son, Fortunato, because the son has betrayed a man to the authorities. Two concerns govern Merimee's style in "Mateo Falcone." The first is geographical and ethnological verisimilitude; the second is narrative minimalism, so that, for most of the story, Merimee's style can be described as spare and laconic.

It is useful to know that before he wrote the sequence of short stories that make up the collection Mosaic, in which "Mateo Falcone" appears, Merimee had written two literary hoaxes, the second of which, La Guzla (1827), exploits stylistic conventions associated with romanticism. Briefly, La Guzla (the word refers to the national instrument of the Albanian "bards," or poets) pretends to be a translation of native ballads of the mountagnards of "Illyria" (Albania), collected and translated into French by an Italian traveler familiar with the region. La Guzla, comes complete with scholarly notes on the sources of the poems and the character of the montagnards. In his mid-teens, Merimee had been deeply impressed by James MacPherson's Ossian, offered as translations into English of actual (but in truth fictitious) Celtic originals from the Middle Ages. Merimee also admired Byron's Don Juan, which includes many vignettes in exotic settings. The three opening paragraphs of "Mateo Falcone" reflect—perhaps ironically—features of romanticism.

## Romantic and Realistic Syntax

The long opening paragraph of the story stretches out its sentences. It guides us from Porto-Vecchio, a coastal town of Corsica, "northwest towards the center of the island," where the ground becomes hilly and is "strewn with large boulders and sometimes cut by ravines." The maquis itself is a type of underbrush "composed of different types of trees and shrubs mixed up and entangled thickly enough to please God." Merimee explains that "if you have killed a man, go into the maquis of Porto-Vecchio, with a good gun and powder and shot, and you will live there in safety . . . . The shepherds will give you milk, cheese, and chestnuts, and you will have nothing to fear from the law. . . ."

Such a wild place, outside the long arm of the law, is a romantic convention. In fact, the effect of the first three paragraphs of the story is to lull readers into romantic expectations.

By the fifth paragraph, Merimee omits the standard long periods of the scene-setting introduction. Much of the action is expressed in concise dialogue. Consider the killing:

"Oh, father, have mercy on me. Forgive me! I will never do it again. I will beg my cousin the corporal to pardon Gianetto.'"He went on talking. Mateo cocked his rifle and took

aim.' "May God forgive you!" he said.'The boy made a frantic effort to get up and clasp his father's knees, but he had no time. Mateo fired, and Fortunato fell stone dead. (Excerpt from "Mateo Falcone")

Merimee reduces everything to the minimum. In French, "Mateo fired" reads "Mateo fit feu." The tri-syllable followed by the two monosyllables has tremendous finality. Merimee also deploys ambiguity in the tale. Who is the "he" who says "May God forgive you!"? Is it Fortunato or Mateo? Or does it matter?

Merimee's two styles in "Mateo Falcone" do not contradict each other or disrupt the unity of the text. On the contrary, they work together to force upon the reader the difficult ethical questions posed by the tale.

BOOKRAGS

# Historical Context

## Napoleonic France

By the time of Merimee's birth in 1803, Napoleon, a Corsican who had made himself Emperor of France, was at the height of his power. By 1814, when Merimee was eleven years old, Napoleon's wars had devastated Europe. Napoleon finally was beaten at the hands of an allied force led by the Duke of Wellington at Waterloo in Belgium. The island of Corsica became part of France in the eighteenth century and was retained by the French nation even after Napoleon's defeat.

## France after Napoleon

The vendetta, portrayed so shockingly in "Mateo Falcone," was a significant part of French politics in the first three decades of the nineteenth century.

## Romanticism

Essay on the Origin of Inequality Among Men (1754), *The Social Contract* (1762), *Emile* (1762), and *Reveries of the Solitary Walker* (1778) signaled a return to emotionalism and primitivism in Europe and the United States. "Man is born free," Rousseau claimed in *The Social Contract*, "and everywhere he is in chains." Savages led noble lives; civilized men and women suffered from the repression of their natural impulses.

Influenced by Rousseau's ideas, young artists in Great Britain and Germany took up the cause of spiritual liberation. For example, William Wordsworth preached the innocence of childhood, the salvation offered by wild nature, and the corrup tion of great cities, in his poems. Mozart celebrated "natural man" in the person of Papageno, the birdcatcher, in the opera *The Magic Flute* (1783). Johann Wolfgang von Goethe gave the world, in his *Faust*, Parts I and II, the archetypal Man of Will who yearns for the infinite and cannot be satisfied by the narrow confines of logic or propriety. In France, Goethe enjoyed great popularity, as did George Gordon, Lord Byron, another British poet, whose *Don Juan and Childe Harold* influenced a young Merimee. The great poet of French romanticism was Victor Hugo, also an advocate of will and imagination.

## Realism and Naturalism

By 1830, the fascination with romanticism began to fade. Artists and writers turned from the primitive began studying the psychological and social customs of people in natural settings. They started to show things as they really were, not a romanticized version of it.

"Mateo Falcone" certainly has romantic elements, particularly in its description of settings. Yet it also reflects the blossoming interest in realism, as it describes the action in the story in concise terms. "Mateo Falcone" represents, in this sense, a crucial moment not only in the development of Merimee but in the larger development of nineteenth-century French and European thought.

# Critical Overview

Walter Pater, an English critic writing around 1880, called Merimee's fiction "intense, unrelieved, an art of fierce colours." "Mateo Falcone" has, in particular, provoked admiration. Pater, for example, thought it quite possibly "the cruellest story in the world," intending the description as a compliment.

Critics have cited the classical qualities of "Mateo Falcone," as in A. W. Raitt's 1970 comment that the story "obeys the unities as strictly as any classical tragedy." For Maxwell H. Smith (1972), the story represents Merimee's "first dazzling success" and constitutes a "brief tale condensed into a dozen pages . . . sufficient to confirm the literary reputation" of its creator.

Smith's reading of the tale exemplifies the typical interpretation, for Smith refers to "the tragic loneliness of Mateo after the sacrifice of his beloved son," a remark which subtly justifies the killing, at least, so to speak, in its context. The typical reading is thus one that discusses the social code depicted in the story, particularly the role of vendetta. One might call this recurrent reading the "ethnological reading" in that it takes the position of a noninvolved and non-judgmental observer of a particular ethnic "way of life." Merimee's original subtitle, "Les moeurs de Corse," or "The Ways (or Manners) of Corsica," perhaps influences critics to take this stance.

Some critics have examined the detached and alienated narrative voice of the narrator in the story. Raitt and Albert J. George, for example, both comment on the narrator's detachment, a trait noted previously by Hippolyte Taine and Pater in the nineteenth century.

# Criticism


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

# Critical Essay #1

*Bertonneau is a Temporary Assistant Professor of English and the humanities at Central Michigan University, and Senior Policy Analyst at the Mackinac Center for Public Policy. In the following essay, he examines the roles of treachery and vendetta in "Mateo Falcone" and contrasts them with rational justice that prevails in civilized urban communities.*

Prosper Merimee's short story "Mateo Falcone" (1829) culminates in the killing of a ten-year-old boy by his father; the killing—the question needs to be posed whether it is a murder—takes place in a ravine in the rugged hills of Corsica, and its victim bears the ironic name of Fortunato. The father and killer, Mateo Falcone, bears a surname which, in the Italiote dialect of Corsica, means "falcon," a bird of prey; in addition, just before the climax, Merimee endows Falcone with "lynx eyes," yet another indication of his predatory nature. Mateo believes himself justified in the terrible act of killing his own son and does not even glance backward as he turns from the bloody scene to fetch a spade for the burial.

Fortunato's crime, in the eyes of his father, is that he has betrayed Gianetto Sanpiero, a thief and outlaw who has ties to Mateo and the right to seek asylum with him if pursued; he had come to Mateo's house, chased by the militia, only to find Mateo absent and the house under the charge of Fortunato, who hid him for a price and then revealed him to the militiamen for a higher price. "Is this my child?" Mateo asks his wife, Giuseppa, when he learns of the facts. The dissolution of the filial tie comes abruptly and completely: "All I know is that this child is the first member of his family to commit an act of treachery." And under the code of vendetta, which is the prevailing custom in Corsica, treachery summarily incurs a capital sentence. Fortunato must die.

It would seem that this is the prevailing custom. The original subtitle of "Mateo Falcone" "Les moeurs de Corse" ("The Ways of Corsica"), indicates that, cruel as the unwritten law might be, this is how things are done in Corsica, whose people cannot be judged by imported standards or dogmatic notions of moral rectitude. The lack of commentary by the author bolsters this supposition. Given the prevailing Romanticism of the early nineteenth century, with its celebration of primitive and non- European peoples and its Rousseau-derived assumptions that civilization is inherently corrupt and corrupting, one might guess that "Mateo Falcone" is simply one more vote for the uncomplicated authenticity of cultural taboos and ethnic traditions. But is Merimee really suspending judgment? Are his readers really intended to suspend judgment along with him? Consider not the end but the beginning of the tale.

The first two paragraphs of "Mateo Falcone" present a picture postcard of Corsica. According to Merimee (who would not in fact visit the island until seven years after writing about it), Corsica is civilized along its coast, where the cities lie, and increasingly uncivilized as one penetrates towards the interior:

Coming out of Porto-Vecchio, and turning northwest towards the center of the island, the traveller in Corsica sees the ground rise fairly rapidly, and after three hours' walk along tortuous paths, strewn with large boulders and sometimes cut by ravines, he finds himself on the edge of a very extensive *maquis,* or open heath. This heath is the home of the Corsican shepherds, and the resort of all those who come in conflict with the law. . . .

If you have killed a man, go into the *maquis* of Porto-Vecchio, with a good gun and powder and shot, and you will live there in safety. . . . The shepherds will give you milk, cheese, and chestnuts, and you will have nothing to fear from the hand of the law, nor from the relatives of the dead man, except when you go down into the town to renew your stock of ammunition.

Corsica lies divided into two major regions mediated by a transitional region. There is the ring of cities and towns along the coastline, where people feel "the hand of the law," and there is the thick chaparral of the maquis, home to pastoralists living in a type of prehistoric world and to men of violence flying from the law. Finally, between them there is the no-man's land where, not coincidentally, Mateo Falcone lives.

In an economic sense, Mateo has ties with civilization, since his wealth derives from his flocks, the produce of which is sold in Porto-Vecchio or Corte; sociologically, he belongs to the pre-urban world of the montagnards, a world governed not by law (and by all that implies) but by vendetta, a concept which contains the sub-concepts of honor and treachery. In the world of vendetta, peace is established not through the endorsement of impersonal justice decided rationally in courts by judicial officials but by the threat, and sometimes by the act, of violence. Mateo, for example, "lived on good terms with everybody in the district of Porto- Vecchio," but this is partly because he is known as "a dangerous enemy." Mateo gained his wife, Giuseppa, by eliminating a rival for her affections. "He was a Corsican and a man of the mountains, and there are few mountain-bred Corsicans who, if they delve into their memories, cannot find some little peccadillo, a gunshot, a knifing, or some such trifling matter." The illusory peace of the mountains is thus purchased at the price of those shots or dagger-thrusts, the victims of which serve as reminders that trespass will incur personal vengeance from parties who consider themselves injured.

Once dead, the exemplary victims of this unwritten law are reduced in a rhetoric of memory to "trifling matters." One remembers the victims and what their death portends for anyone who breaks the unwritten law, but one also reduces them by thinking of them as of no importance. The mental gesture is in complicity with the practical and lethal act. In such a world, immediate familial and personal ties, governed by the ideas of honor and treachery, overwhelm any larger or more abstract obligations, including those embodied in the word "law." These same ties can disrupt family from within, as they do in the case of the Falcones, resulting in Fortunato's death. It is in flight from the law that Gianetto Sanpiero stumbles, wounded, into the Falcone property, where young Fortunato has been daydreaming about a forthcoming dinner at his uncle's in Corte. To which world does Fortunato belong? The answer is: to none. Although he is probably destined to inherit the vendetta world of his father, at present Fortunato is simply an

immature creature motivated by childish greed. At first he refuses asylum to Gianetto and hides him only when offered a bribe— one piece of silver.

When his "cousin," Tiodoro Gamba, an adjutant of the militia, arrives with a posse, Fortunato reveals Gianetto for the price of a shiny new watch, which Tiodoro promises him. This is the crime, the "treachery," that infuriates Mateo and leads to Fortunato's killing. In geographical terms, the killing is outside the law, for according to custom or not, it takes place beyond the Falcone property, in the hills, towards the no-man's-land of the maquis. Also, when Giuseppa divines Mateo's intentions, she pleads mercy (not given) and then prays before an icon of the Virgin. The killing is not only outside the law, it violates the Judaeo-Christian notion of mercy. It is an impious deed.

At this point, one begins to notice certain tangential but important allusions in Merimee's text. Instantly determined to exercise maximum punishment for the act, Mateo "struck the ground with the butt of his gun, then shouldered it, and set off again on the path leading to the maquis, calling on Fortunato to follow him. The child obeyed." The image of the father leading his only son into the mountains with the purpose of killing him brings to mind the story of Abraham and Isaac in the Old Testament. Merimee tells us that Giuseppa, to Mateo's fury, had first borne three daughters but at last bore a son, "the hope of the family." Here again, Mateo and Fortunato resemble Abraham and Isaac, for Isaac was the only son of elderly parents and Fortunato is the only son of Mateo. Abraham is willing to sacrifice Isaac at the behest of God. In the Biblical story, however, God stays the sacrifice at the last second by substituting a lamb for Isaac. From then on, human sacrifice is forbidden, and a new moral dispensation appears.

Giuseppa's devotion to the Virgin links her to that new moral dispensation, and her inclination to mercy, contrasted with Mateo's brutality, shows that there is an alternative to the unwritten rule of age-old custom. Indeed, in his description of the maquis, Merimee wrote that it was "thick enough to please God." Merimee was perhaps not a believer in any orthodox sense (it is known that his parents were agnostic), but neither was he a partisan of violence. Although the phrase "to please God" is a figural commonplace, it nevertheless suggests a presence, a concept, which Giuseppa recognizes and Mateo does not. And while not identical with the law, as represented by Tiodoro Gamba and the militia, this principle, like the law, stands in explicit opposition to vendetta.

The principle is mercy, which demands that men acknowledge the humanity of other men so as not to sacrifice them to idols and false causes—for example, the illusory honor of the Corsican "way." "Father, father, don't kill me!" shouts Fortunato, kneeling in prayer. But Mateo merely instructs him to say his prayers; "the child recited the Lord's Prayer and the Creed, stammering and sobbing." (The Lord's Prayer asks God to "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us"—an injunction which Mateo does not heed.) Mateo intones an "amen" each time Fortunato concludes, but the act seems empty given the circumstance. Fortunato then says the *Ave Maria*, reminding us that his mother is at that very moment praying to the Virgin. Then someone—Merimee's calculatedly ambiguous syntax makes it uncertain who—says, "May God forgive you!" (English translations that attribute these words to Mateo resolve

an ambiguity without warrant to do so.) Mateo fires. Fortunato dies. In the very last line of the story, Mateo tells his wife to "send word to my son-in-law Tiodoro Bianchi to come and live with us," making the dead Fortunato merely a replaceable commodity—something already reduced to a trifle.

Yet how does one justify this interpretation given the lack of any narrative judgment in Merimee's text? One starts by acknowledging the vast difference between the mentality that permits Mateo to kill his own son over a matter of "honor" and the mentality that regards that act as inexcusable. If readers of Merimee's time and our own instinctively rebel over Mateo's deed and immediately find apologies for Fortunato (his youth, his parents' failure to instill in him a moral sense, the manipulative cleverness of Tiodoro Gamba), this in itself is significant. Readers rebel because they belong to an order conditioned by notions of impersonal law and Judeo-Christian mercy, an order which can only come into being through explicit rejection of an earlier order based on the endless sacrificial violence of the vendetta. That vendetta is a lower order of existence than mercy is suggested by the animal qualities with which Merimee endows Mateo. He is an ignoble savage; compared with mercy, vendetta is sub-human.

If modern readers thus instinctively believe that the killing of Fortunato is a murder and not an act of "justice," as Mateo claims, this is because they have a more refined notion of justice, tempered by mercy, than the implacable montagnard. Not for nothing does Merimee stress the unchanging antiquity of the Corsican interior, which reflects classical concepts of barbarism, as in the depiction of the Cyclopes by Homer in the *Odyssey* . The Cyclopes, like the Corsican montagnards, are an island people without written laws and with no permanent institutions; they live by herding, and their only principle of organization is family solidarity and a code of vengeance. Merimee's observation that the maquis is a region where obliging pastoralists provide one with milk, cheese, and chestnuts needs to be balanced against the acknowledgment of what it costs to sustain that idyllic condition. The cost is that one gives up the protection of the law and submits to violence without mercy. A man is safe only as long as he has weapons and ammunition. Fortunato has none; all he has is a shiny new watch. So Fortunato dies, an Isaac whom God cannot rescue.

**Source:** Thomas Bertonneau, "Overview of 'Mateo Falcone,'" for *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 2000.

# Critical Essay #2

*In the following excerpt, Raitt examines the narrative style of Merimee's "Mateo Falcone," maintaining that the lack of moral judgment by the narrator contributes to the impact of the story.*

Prosper Merimee, in Studies in Modern European Literature, 1900].

**Source:** A. W. Raitt, "Story-Teller," in *Prosper Merimee*, London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1970, pp. 120-36.

BOOKRAGS

# Critical Essay #3

*In the following excerpt, George asserts that the bare narrative style of Merimee's "Mateo Falcone" underscores the theme of family honor.*

To be sure, "Mateo Falcone" (1829) came primarily from an article in the *Revue trimestrielle* of July, 1828, which contained the story of a Corsican shot by his relatives for betraying two deserters. Merimee also turned to the abbe Gaudin for details on a land he had not yet visited, but to this basic material he brought the skill that would make him one of France's greatest storytellers.

"Mateo Falcone" is related like an anecdote, in a clean style, stripped to essentials, lacking even the colorful adjectives so dear to the romantics. The plot is handled with a sure sense of the dramatic, all elements united to produce a single effect. Merimee thus produced a narrative that fits perfectly Poe's later definition of the formal short story.

Merimee introduced the reader to the *maquis* with a fine sense of visual appeal, then fell back on the direct approach: "Si vous avez tue un homme . . ." To heighten the exoticism, he gave advice on how to prepare for a stay in these wilds. Then, abruptly, he presented Mateo as though he had known him personally: "Quand j'etais en Corse en 18—. . ." Mateo lived on the edge of the heath, a good friend and an implacable enemy, famed for his marksmanship. He had three daughters, which infuriated him, and a ten-year-old son, ironically named Fortunato, upon whom he doted.

Most of the story happened in Mateo's absence, although he dominates the action. One fall day he left with his wife to inspect the flocks, leaving Fortunato to mind the house. The subsequent plot is articulated almost like a four-act play. Act I introduces an escaping bandit, Gianetto Sanpiero, wounded and hotly pursued by gendarmes, who bought refuge in a haystack from Fortunato for five francs. Act II revolves around Fortunato's betrayal for a silver watch offered by Sergeant Tiodoro Gamba. In a scene forecast by Fortunato's bargaining with Gianetto, the sergeant tempts the child, thrice subjecting him to bribery before the boy turns Judas. Act III brings Mateo back, and when he appears the stage is set for an explosion. Characteristically, he thinks the soldiers have come for him, then finds himself in a dilemma when Gamba reveals Fortunato's treachery. Mateo faces his problem in Act IV. He smashes the watch the sergeant had given Fortunato and marches the child into the glen. Patiently he hears the boy recite his prayers, then shoots him. Without a glance at the corpse, Mateo orders his wife to send for a relative to replace his son.

The narrative ostensibly revolved around the Corsican code of honor. Fortunato occupied the stage most of the time but only to prepare the dilemma, as important to the plot as the wounded bandit. At this point Merimee's ironical mind came into full play. Mateo was created according to the accepted recipe for the primitive but he failed to conform to the tradition of the "good" savage. Unlike the rational creature so dear to the eighteenth century, he never examined his own code. Family "honor" took precedence over all else and no transgression could be pardoned, even for a child. Mateo took all of

ten minutes to decide on the murder of an only son who had informed on the killer of a policeman. Far from being a natural democrat, the good savage was an egotist who dared not challenge the local tabus. . . .

**Source:** Albert J. George, "Stendhal, Balzac, Merimee," in *Short Fiction in France 1800-1850*, Syracuse University Press, 1964, pp. 65-134.

# Topics for Further Study

Read Part I of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Essay on the Origin of Inequality*, paying particular attention to the theory of "the noble savage." Compare Rousseau's idea of the primitive and the pre- or non-civilized with the depiction of Corsican montagnard life presented by Merimee in "Mateo Falcone."

Discuss the concept of justice both in the abstract and as it relates to Merimee's "Mateo Falcone." Pay particular attention to Mateo's killing of Fortunato. If the killing strikes you as intuitively unjust, what then is the precise definition of justice? What is the just punishment in this case?

Research the history and ethnology of Corsica. Use an encyclopedia and other sources, if they are available. Does Merimee give a generally accurate picture of Corsican life? If not, where does his depiction diverge from reality?

Read the "Exordium" and the "Eulogy on Abraham" in Soren Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* (1843), in which Kierkegaard discusses the test of Abraham and Isaac that is related in the Old Testament. Compare the story of Abraham and Isaac and Kierkegaard's commentary with Merimee's story of Mateo and Fortunato Falcone.

From the Chicago mobsters of the 1920s to today's drug cartels and street gangs, the ideas of "honor" and "treachery" have been used to justify brutal acts. Compare the code of the mobsters and drug cartels to the code of the Corsican montagnards as depicted by Merimee.

# Compare and Contrast

**Nineteenth Century:** The vendetta is perceived as a viable and ancient method of justice in many communities. The interest in Rosseau's theory of primitivism, with its implied rejection of the established legal system, somewhat legitimized traditional methods of justice and punishment.

**Twentieth Century:** The vendetta still exists in different forms throughout the world. In the United States, revenge killings and drive-by shootings take thousands of lives every year. The perceived failure of the established legal system has led to vigilantism, as frustrated citizens take matters into their own hands to settle their own alleged vendettas.

**Nineteenth Century:** France is a world power, despite its often turbulent domestic and foreign politics. After the overthrow of the monarchy in 1789, the country is a republic for many years before the ascension of Napoleon. France then waged war against the rest of Europe (1796- 1815) until Napoleon was finally defeated in the battle of Waterloo. With Napoleon exiled, the monarchy was restored, but eventually overthrown in a violent revolution in 1848.

# What Do I Read Next?

Merimee's story "Colomba," like "Mateo Falcone," features a Corsican setting; it can also be found in Merimee's collection *Mosaique*.

Merimee's story "The Taking of the Redoubt," also in *Mosaique,* is a study of the violence of war, which Merimee considers different from the violence associated with feuds or criminality.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Essay on the Origin of Inequality among Men* (1754) maintains that civilization is corrupt and full of injustice, whereas primitive culture is "naturally just." Since "Mateo Falcone" can be read as a riposte to Rousseau's popular theory of savage nobility, Part I of the Essay makes good comparative reading.

Jorge Luis Borges's story "The South" concerns the fate of a civilized, sophisticated librarian from Buenos Aires who journeys into the southern provinces of Argentina hoping to explore what seems to him to be the romantic life of gauchos and other colorful characters. What he finds is a world of machismo and brutality. This is an excellent contrast between the civilized and uncivilized, between law and vendetta.

# Further Study

Bowman, F. P. *Prosper Merimee: Heroism, Pessimism and Irony*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1962. .

Considers Merimee's fiction as a running autobiographical account of his life and a continuous commentary on his times.

Garraty, John, and Peter Gay, eds. *The Columbia History of the World*, New York: Harper and Row, 1972.

Overviews developments in France during the period of Merimee's life.

George, Albert J., "Stendhal, Balzac, Merimee," in *Short Fiction in France 1800-1850*, Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1964, pp. 65-134.

Comments on the verbal economy of Merimee's story and analyzes the themes of honor and betrayal.

Lyon, Sylvia. *The Life and Times of Prosper Merimee*, New York: Dial Press, 1948.

A detailed biography which establishes the vital context for Merimee's literary activity.

Taine, Hippolyte. *Essais de critique et d'histoire*, Hachette: Paris, 1874.

A valuable nineteenth-century critical reference on Merimee by a contemporary and acquaintance of the author.

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**Introduction**

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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

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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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