Meeting Mrinal Study Guide

Meeting Mrinal by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

□Meeting Mrinal□ by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is the last story in the collection *Arranged Marriage*, which was published in 1995. Most of the stories in the collection examine the experiences and perspectives of Indian women who have immigrated to the United States, often through a traditional arranged marriage. The stories show women who find themselves caught between two cultures, the restricted but comforting Indian culture of their birth and the freer but ruthless Western culture. The protagonist of □Meeting Mrinal□ is Asha, an Indian-born woman who immigrates to the United States to join her Indian husband (acquired through an arranged marriage). In her new home, she leads the life expected of a traditional Indian wife until an event occurs that forces her to move beyond her accustomed role: Her husband leaves her for a younger white woman. The story opens at this point, recounting Asha's attempts to come to terms with her feelings of failure and her need to carve out an independent life in an alien culture. This process reaches a crisis during a meeting with Mrinal, a childhood friend from India who is now a successful businesswoman. Divakaruni explores the immigrant search for identity and coherence in the adopted culture, in which the traditional assumptions do not work and the new ways require unexpected and sometimes painful growth.

Author Biography

Nationality 1: Indian

Birthdate: 1956

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni was born on July 29, 1956, in Calcutta, India, the daughter of R. K. and Tatini Banerjee. One of her earliest memories is that of her grandfather telling her stories from the ancient Indian scriptures, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. She noticed that unlike the male heroes, the main relationships the women had were with men; they never had any important women friends. This realization was to greatly influence Divakaruni's writing, which focuses on women's relationships.

Divakaruni was brought up and continued to be in adulthood a devout Hindu. As a child, however, she attended a convent school run by Irish nuns. She gained a bachelor's degree from Calcutta University in 1976 and, in the same year, immigrated to the United States. In 1978, she received a master's degree from Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio, and in 1985, she received a Ph.D. from the University of California, Berkeley. She began to write fiction after graduating from Berkeley.

Divakaruni has drawn on her own experiences as an immigrant and those of other immigrant Indian women in her poetry, short stories, and novels. Her poetry collection, *Black Candle* (1991), recounts stories of women from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. *Arranged Marriage* (1995), a collection of short stories which marked her first foray into prose and which includes □Meeting Mrinal,□ portrays immigrant Indian women who are caught between two cultures: the Indian culture of their birth and the Western culture of their adopted country, the United States. Her novel *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), a blend of poetry and prose, draws on Indian mystical and cultural traditions to portray a woman who has acquired immortality through a rite of fire and the knowledge of how to use spices for healing. Eventually, she is forced to choose between her own culture and that of the non-Indian man she comes to love.

In 1999, Divakaruni published a novel, *Sister of My Heart*. The book explores the conflicts between Indian people who embrace their traditional culture and those who embrace new Western ideas. Divakaruni published another collection of poetry, *Leaving Yuba City*, in 1997. These poems also deal with immigrant women and their struggles to find an identity in their new country.

When asked why she writes, according to the quote posted on the Random House website, Divakaruni replied, □There is a certain spirituality, not necessarily religious□the essence of spirituality□that is at the heart of the Indian psyche, that finds the divine in everything. . . . It was important for me to start writing about my own reality and that of my community.□

While arranged marriages have formed a major theme in her work, Divakaruni herself opted for love; on June 29, 1979, she was married to S. Murthy Divakaruni. As of 2006, the couple had two sons, Abhay and Anand. As of 2006, she lived in Sunnyvale, California, and was a professor of creative writing at Foothill College, Los Altos, a position to which she was appointed in 1989. Divakaruni is active within the Asian American community. In 1991, she established Maitri, a hotline for South Asian women who suffer domestic abuse.

Divakaruni has received many awards for her work. In 1996, for *Arranged Marriage*, she received the PEN Oakland Josephine Miles Prize for Fiction, the Bay Area Book Reviewers Award for Fiction, and an American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation. *The Mistress of Spices* was named a best book of 1997 by the *Los Angeles Times* and a best paperback of 1998 by the *Seattle Times*. For poems that were later collected in *Leaving Yuba City*, she won a Pushcart Prize (1994), an Allen Ginsberg Poetry Prize (1994), and a Gerbode Foundation Award (1992).

Plot Summary

When □Meeting Mrinal□ opens, Asha, the Indian-born protagonist, who now lives in California, is somewhat guiltily preparing a ready-made pizza for her teenage son, Dinesh. Asha's husband, Mahesh, with whom she had an arranged marriage in India, has left her for a younger white woman. Though Asha used to spend hours preparing complex Indian meals from fresh ingredients for the family, she has almost given up cooking since Mahesh left. She now spends her time studying library science in order to get a full-time job and getting fit in an exercise class. Since Mahesh left, Asha and Dinesh no longer talk much. He shuts himself in his room, listening to or playing music.

One day, Asha gets a telephone call from Mrinal, a childhood friend from India whom she has not seen for nearly twenty years. Mrinal is now a successful businesswoman living in Bombay. She is coming to San Francisco for a conference and wants to meet Asha and her family. Asha has always had a competitive relationship with the glamorous, career-driven, and unmarried Mrinal and inwardly feels inferior to her. Asha's delight at hearing from her friend soon gives way to fear and shame at the thought of admitting that her husband has left her. Asha feels particularly defensive as Mrinal had counseled her against agreeing to an early arranged marriage, advising her to finish college and get a job. Asha talks to Mrinal as if her marriage is still intact but makes up excuses to get out of meeting her, saying that Mahesh is out of town, that she is busy, and that Dinesh has pressing engagements. Finally, she realizes that she cannot disappoint her friend and sets up a meeting.

Dinesh is angry with his mother for lying to Mrinal. He asks why she could not tell the truth: Mahesh got tired of her and left her for another woman. Asha slaps Dinesh, claiming to object to his swearing, but in reality, she is inwardly furious at his voicing an uncomfortable truth. For the next few days, Dinesh avoids Asha. She tries to win him over by cooking his favorite Indian dish and apologizing, but he says he has already eaten and coldly dismisses her attempts at reconciliation.

Asha rummages for an outfit for her meeting with Mrinal, worrying that all her clothes are too garish or too drab. She recalls the day when Mahesh told her that their marriage was over. Asha could scarcely believe what she was hearing, as she thought back to their apparently happy family life. When Asha asked him whether he had ever been happy with her, Mahesh said that he thought he had, but he did not know what real happiness was. Asha fought against the divorce, even buying a sexy negligee to try to win Mahesh back, but he moved out the same night.

Asha is nervous about meeting Mrinal. She reflects that Mrinal has the perfect life: She assumes simplistically that Mrinal has □*money, freedom, admiration*,□ and □*she doesn't have to worry about pleasing anyone*.□ Asha's envy is mixed with a feeling of comfort at the thought of Mrinal's success, despite the fact that it makes her own life seem cluttered and ordinary.

When Asha enters the restaurant, she sees Mrinal sitting at one of the tables, looking glamorous. Asha looks in vain for a sign that Mrinal is secretly unhappy. As the two women embrace, Asha notices a ring on Mrinal's finger and asks if is an engagement ring, but Mrinal says she bought it for herself. Asha is impressed by this independent act. Mrinal begs Asha to tell her about Mahesh and Dinesh. Asha does so, without revealing that her marriage is over. Mrinal sadly says that Asha is lucky to have such a wonderful husband and son. She reveals that she herself is unhappy and begins to cry. She admits that she had planned to pretend that everything was fine with her life, but when she saw the love for her family shining in Asha's face, she could not keep it up. The two women part without Asha's revealing her own secret.

Asha drives home. She closes the garage door behind her but does not switch off the engine. As the garage fills with fumes, she weeps for Mrinal's and her own loneliness and also for their profound disillusionment. The idea of Mrinal's perfect life had made her own sorrows easier to bear, but now as that perfection has been shown to be a mirage, she feels as though she has nothing to sustain her.

Suddenly realizing that suicide is not the answer, Asha turns off the engine and stumbles out of the garage. Dinesh appears. Full of concern for his mother, he helps her to the bathroom, where she vomits. She reflects that though she has always tried to be the perfect wife and mother, she has lost her husband, lied to her friend, and vomited over the sink in her son's presence. Then, an image takes shape in her mind: a beautiful clay bowl from her art appreciation class. There is a tiny flaw on the lip. Her teacher had said that this was a deliberate flaw that the master potter left in all his works in the belief that it made them more human and more precious.

When Dinesh asks his mother how the meeting with Mrinal went, Asha admits that she □made a mess of things.□ She offers to tell him about it over some hot milk with pistachios. Smiling, he agrees. As she prepares the milk, she plans the letter she will write to Mrinal to tell her the truth. She knows that she and Dinesh will not always agree, but they solemnly raise their glasses to their □precious, imperfect lives.□

Characters

Asha

Asha is an Indian-born woman and the protagonist of □Meeting Mrinal.□ Brought up in India, Asha leaves college early and agrees to an arranged marriage to Mahesh, an Indian man who has immigrated to the United States. Asha moves to California to join her husband, and they enjoy a seemingly happy married life. Asha throws herself into traditional wifely activities such as cooking elaborate meals for the family. When the novel opens, Mahesh has just left Asha and their teenage son, Dinesh, for a younger white woman, Jessica. Asha is forced to move beyond her accustomed role as a wife and mother and forge an independent life in an alien culture that offers more freedom but also poses more challenges than her culture of origin in India. She is afflicted by a sense that she has failed in her traditional role as a wife and that she is too gauche and unsophisticated to fit into the harsh, fast-moving Western culture that beckons.

A turning point for Asha comes when she meets a childhood friend, Mrinal, with whom she has always had a competitive relationship and to whom she feels inferior. Mrinal has succeeded in those areas that Asha finds threatening, having built a successful career and an independent life. Asha finds herself lying to Mrinal, pretending that her marriage is fine. When Mrinal admits that she is unhappy at her lack of a loving family life, Asha falls into despair. She attempts suicide but, when she reaches her lowest point, is finally able to let her mask of motherly control drop and accept help from her son. For the first time, Asha's relationship with Dinesh is one of truth and honesty, and she prepares to tell Mrinal the truth about her marriage. Asha's journey has taken her from desperately working to maintain the pretence of a happy marriage to an acceptance that while no one's life is perfect, every life is infinitely precious.

Dinesh

Dinesh is the teenage son of Asha and Mahesh. As is typical of the American-born children of immigrants, he has become much more assimilated into Western culture than his parents. He favors T-shirts emblazoned with gruesome slogans, wears an earring, and has his hair cut into a brush-like style. He talks to his mother very little since his father left and treats her with the withdrawn politeness of a stranger. However, the anger he feels at the breakup is suggested by his habit of locking himself in his room and playing hard rock music at full volume and by the fact that he can only refer to his father as □*him*.□

Dinesh's anger surfaces when he overhears Asha lying to Mrinal on the telephone about the state of her marriage. He does not understand why his mother cannot tell the truth. She tries to win him round by cooking his favorite meal and calling him by his baby name, Dinoo. The tactic fails because Dinesh is no longer a child and is thoroughly impatient with all kinds of lies, including those that are told to children to make them feel

safe in an uncertain world. The fact that he moved into the master bedroom when his father left is symbolic of his claiming new status as an adult.

The crisis between Dinesh and his mother is resolved when she attempts suicide. Dinesh moves into the adult role of protector, becoming, as Asha notes, "*motherly*," and helps her to the bathroom, where she vomits. Dinesh has seen his mother drop her pretences and descend to the role of a helpless child, and he has heard her honestly admit that she made a mess of her meeting with Mrinal. Now that he is being treated as an equal and trusted with the truth, he is at last able to show his love for his mother. He smilingly accepts her offer of pistachio milk, and together, they drink to their "precious, imperfect lives."

Jessica

Jessica is Mahesh's red-haired secretary, a white woman who is younger than Asha. Mahesh falls in love with Jessica and leaves Asha for her. She does not appear in the story.

Mahesh

Mahesh is Asha's ex-husband. At the time the story opens, he has already left Asha for a younger white woman, Jessica, so he is only presented through the memories of Asha. After his arranged marriage to Asha, Mahesh quickly settled into the role of dutiful husband, gazing adoringly at the baby Dinesh and choosing Asha's outfits when they would go out. Mahesh had thought he was happy in his marriage until he fell in love with Jessica; it was then that he realized he did not know what happiness was.

Mrinal

Mrinal is Asha's close friend from childhood. She provides a contrast to Asha. While Mrinal has stayed in India, she has turned her back on Indian conventions and chosen a more Western way of life. She has remained unmarried, forging a highly successful career. Mrinal is intelligent, glamorous, and wealthy. When she meets Asha, she is as determined as her friend to pretend that her life is perfect, but when she sees Asha's love for her family shining in her eyes, she can no longer maintain the pretence and admits that she is lonely and unhappy. Mrinal is proof that however impressive a person's life looks on the outside, much grief and anxiety can lurk beneath the glossy surface.

Themes

Women Caught between Two Cultures

□Meeting Mrinal□ shows the predicament of Asha, a woman who grew up in India, had an arranged marriage according to Indian tradition, and then had to adapt to a new lifestyle and culture as a divorced woman. The first change, taking place before the story opens, comes when she immigrates to the United States, a harsher culture full of □failing grades, drugs, street gangs, AIDS.□ However, the cultural shock is cushioned by the fact that she is able to sustain the traditional Indian role of wife and mother, albeit with a part-time job. This cushion is suddenly taken away from her when her husband informs her that their marriage is over. In the Indian tradition, the family is a woman's support system. If the family is no longer intact, she loses that support and must make decisions on her own□a situation that is much more the norm in Western society.

The divorced Asha faces both external and internal challenges. Externally, she considers moving out of the marital home and trains for a full-time job; she joins a fitness class and gives up cooking elaborate Indian meals for herself and her teenage son, relying instead on takeouts. Internally, she must come to terms with the failure of her marriage, a role to which she had committed her entire being for years, and become an independent woman in her adopted country. The prospect daunts her because she feels poorly equipped for her new role. Comparing herself with Mrinal as the epitome of what she must become, she finds herself lacking. She feels dowdy, incompetent, and ill-at-ease with the hustle and sophisticated gloss of life in the West.

Mrinal has made the opposite life choices to Asha. Mrinal remained in India, yet she rejected the traditional Indian wifely role and acquired the trappings of the successful westernized woman. She has a powerful and lucrative job, beautiful clothes, and a lovely home. However, her achievements have come with a price: she is lonely and childless.

In the flawed lives of Asha and Mrinal, Divakaruni shows that both the traditional Indian female role and the modern Western female role entail their own sacrifices, problems, and uncertainties; neither choice is better or more complete than the other. She also dramatizes a basic irony: the Indian woman who remains in India actually develops a more Western-style life for herself; the Indian woman who comes to the United States attempts to sustain a traditional Indian lifestyle and only departs from it when her marriage fails and she is forced to be on her own.

Women's Relationships

On her website, Divakaruni writes, □Women in particular respond to my work because I'm writing about them, women in love, in difficulties, women in relationships. I want people to relate to my characters, to feel their joy and pain, because it will be harder to

[be] prejudiced when they meet them in real life.□ □Meeting Mrinal□ shows the richness, conflicts, and complexities that mark Asha's relationships with her female friend, with her husband and child, and with Western society in general. Asha's relationship with Mrinal is particularly loaded with significance. Though Asha loves her friend, her perception of Mrinal as someone who has succeeded in all the ways in which she herself has failed adds a level of competitiveness, defensiveness, and dishonesty to their relationship. Each woman wants to be admired by the other. At their meeting, Asha cannot admit that her marriage has failed, and Mrinal tries to resist admitting that she is unhappy with her single, childless state, only giving in when her emotions break through her resolve to maintain the veneer of perfection. The pursuit of acceptable appearance which fails in both cases illustrates how people are aware of being judged by others by certain exterior characteristics and how the fear of judgment prevents them from being honest about the realities of their lives.

Asha's relationship with Dinesh is also compromised by a lack of truth: mother and son no longer talk. The more Dinesh withdraws, the more Asha attempts to compensate for what she sees as her failure as a mother by engaging in traditional motherly behavior such as preparing his favorite meals. The cycle of deception is broken by Asha's acceptance of Dinesh's support when she reaches her lowest point of half-heartedly trying to commit suicide and by her admission to him that she □made a mess□ of her meeting with Mrinal. When she promises to tell him about it, it is clear that she is ready to trust him with the truth and move into a more equal relationship with him. The irony here is that openly admitting to personal limitations enhances relationships, while pretending to be something one is not prevents intimacy.

Familial, Cultural and Social Expectations of Women

Why is Asha determined to project an image of the perfect life? It would be unfair to blame the men in her life for imposing their expectations onto her. Neither man is a demanding tyrant: Dinesh does not worry where his meals come from; Mahesh, in love with his secretary, has become tired of the husbandly role of choosing outfits for his wife and pretending to desire her sexually. Asha tries so hard to be the perfect wife and mother not because of her husband and son want that but because the culture in which she developed conditioned her to do so. As a girl and young woman, Asha was taught that she should cook elaborate meals for Mahesh and Dinesh, put her family before her career, dress to please Mahesh at social engagements, and keep him happy in the bedroom.

Also, Asha makes her own choices. She is no longer in India, and even if she were, many Indian women now choose to ignore gender-linked cultural conventions, as Mrinal does. In reality, Asha is both a product of her culture and a person who reacts to it. She has chosen to focus on pleasing and nourishing her family. Her choice is backed by centuries of cultural conditioning, but it is still her choice. Asha is as free as Mahesh or Mrinal to act independently, but doing so would entail moving out of her comfort zone, as is made clear from her response to the plush restaurant where she meets Mrinal: □As I awkwardly followed the maître d' I knew I didn't belong here, and that every

person in the room, without needing to look at me, knew it too.□ Eventually, she is forced by Mahesh's departure to drop the Indian wifely role and to see more deeply into the vagaries of her own experience. She has to learn the hard way that nothing assures one of happiness, and unforeseen events require one to adapt.

As the example of Mrinal shows, Western culture brings its own set of expectations which are just as onerous, in their own way, as those of traditional India. Many women feel that they are expected to be glamorous, physically fit, financially successful, and polished in social situations. Mrinal has achieved these traits, but at the price of loneliness. Finally, both women admit that they are unable to fulfill all the expectations they have embraced, but these admissions, far from being defeats, have the cautiously optimistic air of new beginnings, and they provide for greater intimacy and sincerity within their relationships.

James Bond

When Asha and Mrinal were childhood friends, they were both fans of James Bond, the suave, all-powerful, and womanizing fictional spy created by the English novelist Ian Fleming (1908-1964) and popularized in a series of Hollywood films. For Asha and Mrinal, Bond was a symbol of a romanticized image of the West, full of □golden guns and intricate machines and bikini-clad beauties.□ They vow that if they ever make it to the West, they will celebrate by drinking Bond's favorite drink: vodka martini, shaken not stirred. Indeed, when Mrinal meets Asha in the restaurant, she orders this drink for them both. At the beginning of the meeting, Mrinal seems to Asha to belong to this idealized world of affluence and power. Only when Mrinal bursts into tears and admits that she is not happy does the truth begin to push its way through the fiction. Mrinal has been forced into this revelation by her realization of the lack of love in her life, an element that Asha does have in her relationship with Dinesh. One of James Bond's defining characteristics is his lack of a love life (as opposed to a sex life, which he does have) or a family. Mrinal's story suggests that Bond is a character deserving of pity rather than blind admiration. Moreover, in using Bond as a desirable image, Divakaruni cautions people not to measure their own lives in terms of the slick ideals promoted by any culture.

Style

Setting

The story is set in two locations: India, where Asha was brought up and married and which is presented only in her memories and California in the United States, where she now lives. As well as being two separate countries, India and the United States have two different cultures and sets of social expectations. Asha's Indian upbringing teaches her to be a certain kind of wife and mother, whereas the United States challenges her to break away from these traditional roles and forge an independent life. The United States is presented in both negative and positive aspects: the negative, chaotic side is represented by Asha's fear of □failing grades, drugs, street gangs, AIDS□ that lie in wait for Dinesh, and the positive side is represented by the greater freedom and power that beckons to the newly divorced Asha.

The plush restaurant where Asha meets Mrinal brings out Asha's insecurity about affluent Western society: she feels that she does not belong there and that every person in the room knows it. She is more comfortable with inexpensive places like Chuck E. Cheese or the Chinese takeout.

Characterization and Point of View

Asha and Mrinal are contrasting characters who represent the different choices facing Indian women (and to varying degrees, women of all nationalities): to follow the traditional route of marriage and children (Asha) or to stay single and pursue professional success (Mrinal). Far from being stereotypes, however, both characters suffer conflicts and doubts amid their strengths and achievements that render them thoroughly human and believable. The fact that the story is told in first person from the point of view of Asha allows Divakaruni to expose Asha's opinions and hidden feelings, while she misreads Mrinal's appearance and what she knows about Mrinal's life. This point of view works to emphasize the story's point: people judge other people's outsides by comparing them to their own inner reality, often at their own expense.

Symbolism

Preparing elaborate meals from fresh ingredients for the family is an important part of Indian culture, one that Asha fully embraced in her married life with Mahesh. For her, cooking has come to symbolize the unity and nourishing quality of family life; it also signifies her investment in relationships with Mahesh and Dinesh. Now that Mahesh has left, Asha cooks differently. She relies on fast food and takeouts, reflecting her new, independent life: □I've decided that too much of my life has already been wasted mincing and simmering and grinding spices.□

However, when Asha faces a crisis of confidence, worrying about the negative influence of □failing grades, drugs, street gangs, AIDS□ on Dinesh, she takes refuge in cooking once more, as if there were some protection in that very ritual, □As though the translucent rings of onions and the long curls of carrots could forge a chain that would hold him to me, close, safe forever.□ Similarly, after Asha's argument with Dinesh, which is prompted by his anger at her lying to Mrinal about the state of her marriage and family life, she tries to win him over by cooking his favorite meal. Unable to face the truth or to discuss it openly with her son, she takes refuge in the motherly rituals, casting him as a child by using his baby name, Dinoo. The tactic fails miserably, since it is also a kind of lie; Dinesh has already eaten out, is no longer a child, and sullenly refuses to be drawn into the charade. The turning point for Asha comes after she poisons herself with fumes and then vomits□a reversal of nourishing oneself with food. During this incident, she is finally able to let go of her motherly role and allow Dinesh to look after her. Only then does Asha forgo her deceptions and decide to tell Dinesh and Mrinal the truth.

With mother and son communicating openly once more, they are able to share some pistachio milk that Asha prepares. Pistachio milk is a traditional Indian drink. The final scene in which Asha and Dinesh drink to their □precious, imperfect lives□ with the pistachio milk symbolizes Asha's acceptance of her Indian tradition; Dinesh's acceptance of his mother (he accepts her offer of the milk, unlike his previous hostile response when she cooked him his favorite meal); and Asha's and Dinesh's acceptance of each other as they are, not as they might be expected to be in some illusory, presumably perfect family.

Historical Context

Immigration from India to the United States

Indian immigration to the United States was uncommon before 1900; Hindu beliefs discouraged it, as did the British colonizers of India, who restricted the movements of the Indian people. In 1946, the Luce-Celler bill was signed into law. This law permitted one hundred Indians per year into the United States and allowed them to become citizens. The following year, India gained independence from Great Britain, marking the second wave of Indian immigration; between 1948 and 1965, over six thousand Indians entered the United States. In 1990, the number of Indian-born persons living in the United States was 450,000. By 2004, India had become the second highest source of legal immigration to the United States, second only to Mexico. As of 2006, ethnic Asians made up 4.2 percent of the United States population.

Arranged Marriages

Traditionally, many Indian women (and women of other Asian countries) have their marriages arranged through relatives, so-called marriage bureaus, or paid matchmakers called bride brokers. Many Indian families living in the United States retain this practice. The 1990s saw a surge in classified advertisements placed by parents looking for prospective brides and grooms in Indian newspapers circulated in India and the United States. In the late 1990s, the growing Internet provided a variety of matrimonial websites to replace the traditional matchmaker.

The advantages and disadvantages of arranged marriages are much debated in Asian communities. Defenders of arranged marriage point out that great care is taken by the families to match the bridegroom and bride according to social background, education, and interests. They say that most young people are not forced into an arranged marriage, that love usually grows between spouses after marriage, and that such marriages have a far higher rate of success and a lower divorce rate than marriages that arise from courtship and love that are more usual in the West, which may be based on short-lived infatuation or sexual desire.

Opponents of arranged marriage claim a high incidence of incompatibility and various types of spousal abuse. Some commentators in India or Asia draw a link between arranged marriage and the growing phenomenon of bride burnings and dowry deaths. They point out that arranged marriages are commonly between a man of higher caste (class) with limited money and a woman of lower caste whose family has money, with the incentive to the bridegroom being a lucrative dowry provided by the bride's parents. In some cases, once the man has pocketed the dowry, or if the family has failed to make the dowry payments, he kills his wife, often by dowsing her with gasoline and setting fire to her. He then claims that she died in a cooking accident. Because many cases of bride burnings are covered up, the number of victims can only be estimated. In

2003, the National Crime Records Bureau of India gave the number of reported dowry deaths, including bride burning, as 6,208. In 2004, the bureau reported the number at 7,026, an increase of 13.2 percent.

Proponents of arranged marriage comment that spousal abuse is as common in non-arranged marriages. They say that all family members share responsibility for an arranged marriage, so victims of such abuse can take refuge in the homes of relatives.

Critical Overview

The award-winning poet Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's first collection of short stories, *Arranged Marriage*, was published in 1995, and in 1996, it won the American Book Award, the Bay Area Book Reviewers Award for Fiction, and the PEN Oakland Josephine Miles Prize for Fiction. The collection was well received by the public, quickly becoming a bestseller, and met with critical acclaim. Paul Nathan's review in *Publishers Weekly* is typical of those who affirmed Divakaruni's first foray into prose: □The name Chitra Divakaruni is one that more and more people are going to learn to recognize, pronounce and remember.□

Donna Seaman, in her *Booklist* review of *Arranged Marriage*, hails Divakaruni as □a virtuoso short story writer□ and comments that □these are ravishingly beautiful stories, some profoundly sad, others full of revelation, all unforgettable.□ Seaman draws attention to the main theme of the collection (and of □Meeting Mrinal□), □the vast differences between women's lives in India, the country of her birth, and in the U.S., her country of choice.□ An anonymous *Publishers Weekly* reviewer's description of the central conflict of these stories applies to □Meeting Mrinal□: □Divakaruni places her characters at the volatile confluence of two conflicting pressures: the obligation to please traditional husbands and families, and the desire to live modern, independent lives.□

For Seaman, the message of the stories is predominantly feminist and pro-Western society, as they □revolve around the attempt to maintain traditional gender roles in the free-wheeling U.S., where even the most obedient and self-negating Indian women discover they can live a far more fulfilling life.□ This theme is echoed by Robbie Clipper Sethi in *Studies in Short Fiction*. Sethi notes that the women in the stories, far from being defeated by their ordeals, □prepare to battle the conventions they have left behind to take full advantage of their new lives in America.□

Francine Prose, writing in *Women's Review of Books*, observes a more ambiguous tone in the stories, commenting that the young Indian protagonists are □learning to cope with the unsettling novelties of life in the United States,□ performing a □strenuous balancing act.□ Sandra Ponzanesi, in the *Cambridge Guide to Women's Writings in English*, notes that Divakaruni □does not offer ready-made solutions□ to the confused roles and emotional turmoil of her heroines. She cites the final line of □Meeting Mrinal□ about □Drinking to our 'precious, imperfect lives'□ and comments, □No real catharsis is found but only adjustments and compromises.□

Prose cautions against what she perceives as a weakness of some of the stories□that they depend too heavily on a certain sort of □hot-button, up to the minute, highly contemporary and instantly recognizable□ social problem, rather than on character. Examples of such problems featured in the stories include divorce, abortion, and spousal abuse. But she adds, □Divakaruni's work is strongest when her characters exhibit a surprising and truly moving intensity of response to their situations.□ The anonymous *Publishers Weekly* reviewer is one of many critics who see much emotional

intensity in the stories, calling them □emotionally fraught□ and singling out □Meeting Mrinal□ as □particularly poignant.□ Seaman, in her *Booklist* review, also notes that Divakaruni □conveys emotions with stunning accuracy,□ calling the collection □deeply affecting.□

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Robinson is a former teacher of English literature and creative writing and, as of 2006, is a full-time writer and editor. In the following essay, she examines how the mirage of the perfect life is explored in Meeting Mrinal.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's □Meeting Mrinal□ opens on a scene in which Indian-born and newly divorced Asha prepares a meal for herself and her teenage son, Dinesh. Food and cooking identify a central theme of the story. Here, they symbolize how far Asha has departed from her accustomed wifely practice of preparing elaborate Indian meals from fresh ingredients. Now, Asha and Dinesh make do with ready-made pizza and whatever remnants of moldy vegetables Asha can find in her refrigerator. Dinesh often eats at Burger King, where he works. The scene is loaded with significance. It is traditional for an Indian wife to cook complex meals from scratch for her family and for the family to sit down to eat together. Now that Asha's husband, Mahesh, has left her for a younger white woman, Asha has left off cooking in the old way: □I've decided that too much of my life has already been wasted mincing and simmering and grinding spices.□ Instead, she is spending her time training for a new full-time job, which she will need as a single mother who is trying to build an independent life.

Another aspect of the scene is that the limp and moldy vegetables that Asha finds in her refrigerator suggest the rot that, unnoticed by Asha, had set into her marriage and that now threatens to infect what remains of her family life, her relationship with Dinesh. The convenience food and lifeless vegetables that she now serves up, somewhat guiltily, also reflect the lack of time, attention, and nourishment she is giving to her relationship with Dinesh. Since his father left, Dinesh has withdrawn to his room and into his music and now looks at her with □a polite, closed stranger's face.□ Asha's omissions regarding Dinesh will soon prompt a crisis between mother and son□not relating to food, but to the truth in and substance of their relationship.

The barrier between Asha and Dinesh is the same as that which arises between Asha and Mrinal: Asha's inability to openly acknowledge the failure of her marriage. When Mrinal telephones Asha, Asha cannot bring herself to tell her the truth about her situation. Instead, she keeps up the pretence of a happy family life, complete with invented, respectable activities for Dinesh. Witnessing his mother constructing a fake veneer of perfection over the ruins of his family life is too much for Dinesh to bear. He angrily demands, □I'm not good enough for your friend just the way I am, is that it?□ This is an unintentional, yet relevant comment on Asha's feelings about herself: She does not feel good enough for Mrinal, for Dinesh, or for society in general, just the way she is. She has worked hard at being the perfect wife and mother and feels that she has failed. Her feelings of shame deepen when, in fury at Dinesh's challenge to her to tell the truth□that Mahesh □got tired of you and left you for another woman,□ she slaps him. However, she loses the opportunity to be truthful with Dinesh when she falsely claims that her anger stems from his swearing rather than the uncomfortable truth that he voiced. In the ensuing coldness between Asha and Dinesh, she tries to win him round by cooking his favorite food and calling him by his baby name, Dinoo. This tactic

fails miserably because it is another lie; Asha is no longer the all-capable, all-nourishing mother, and Dinesh is a young man, not a child.

Asha's situation is particularly perilous because she has no firm foothold in her old life or in her new life. Though she has made her first brave steps towards establishing an independent life in a harsh and alien Western culture in the form of her training and her fitness classes, she feels that she is not up to the task. When she drives to her meeting with Mrinal, she finds that she is not used to negotiating city traffic, a reference to her uncertainty about negotiating her way through Western culture. When she arrives at the plush restaurant, she feels dowdy and awkward. She reflects, "I knew I didn't belong here, and that every person in the room, without needing to look at me, knew it too."

Asha's feelings of inadequacy are strengthened by the images of perfection against which she has chosen to measure herself. First, there is the image of wifely perfection that, it is suggested, comes with the territory of traditional Indian marriage. Asha pursues this ideal even after Mahesh has told her that the marriage is over, buying a sexy negligée to try to tempt him back. When Mahesh leaves, she blames herself, as is clear from the shame that prevents her from speaking openly about his decision.

The second image of perfection that plagues Asha is her idealized picture of her friend Mrinal: "*She has the perfect existence money, freedom, admiration . . . and she doesn't have to worry about pleasing anyone*." It is easy for Asha to project an idea of perfection onto Mrinal because Mrinal has succeeded in the areas in which Asha feels weak: She is glamorous, has a successful career, a lovely home, and power over men in her work. The competitive nature of their relationship is given an added edge by the fact that Mrinal warned Asha against contracting an early arranged marriage, advising her instead to finish college and get a job, but Asha ignored her friend's suggestion. Not only does Asha think that she has failed to measure up to Mrinal, but she is convinced that she has been proved wrong and, understandably, is reluctant to admit it.

The third image of perfection is James Bond, who, with his "golden guns and intricate machines and bikini-clad beauties," represents an idealized Western image of male sophistication and success that young Asha and Mrinal admired while they were growing up in India. They vowed that if they got to the West, they would celebrate with Bond's favorite drink, vodka martini, shaken, not stirred. Indeed, when Mrinal meets Asha in the restaurant, she orders this drink for them both. For Asha, Mrinal is part of James Bond's world, with her perfect grooming and sophisticated manners. What Asha fails to bear in mind is that Bond is a fictional character.

The edifice of perfection that Asha has created crumbles when Mrinal bursts into tears and admits that she is unhappy and lonely. She envies Asha her husband and child as much as Asha has envied her. Once again, Asha avoids telling the truth, but inside, she is plunged into a crisis by Mrinal's revelation: "I feel like a child who picks up a fairy doll she's always admired from afar and discovered that all its magic glitter is really painted clay." In Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's "Meeting Mrinal," it transpires that for Asha, images of perfection are not only her torment, but her sustenance, compensating for her

own messy and confused life. She wonders, □What would I live on, now that I knew perfection was only a mirage?□

In despair, Asha drives home and makes a half-hearted attempt at suicide by gassing herself with car fumes in the garage. When she changes her mind and staggers out of the garage, Dinesh appears and helps her to the bathroom where she vomits; he looks after his mother as if he were the adult and she were the child. He seems, she remarks, □*motherly*.□ Allowing Dinesh to see her at this, her lowest point, and to help her, is a breakthrough for Asha. She finally lets go of her need to be perceived as the perfect wife and mother and realizes that her role models were (unhelpfully) the superhuman heroines of Indian mythology and a hero of Western mythology. She thinks with compassion of Mahesh, noting that perhaps he had the same idealized notions when they married. She sums up her situation in brutally honest words: □I've lost my husband and betrayed my friend, and now to top it all I've vomited all over the sink in my son's presence.□ Far from sounding like a defeat, her words have an air of integrity. At last, Asha has allowed herself to be helped and faced her frailty; she can move forward into a future guided by truth and self-knowledge rather than false images of external perfection.

In her moment of resolution, Asha has a vision of a simple clay bowl from her art appreciation class. She remembers her teacher explaining that the master potter who made it always left a flaw in his later works, in the belief that it made them more human and more precious. The image is a positive transformation of the negative image she held in her disillusionment about the □painted clay□ of Mrinal's life. The clay bowl, beautiful yet flawed, is a symbol of Asha's life, and, by extension, of Mrinal's and Dinesh's and Mahesh's life□indeed, of everyone's life: far from perfect, but infinitely precious.

The resolution unfolds into a new truthfulness in Asha's relationship with Dinesh. She freely admits that she □made a mess□ of her meeting with Mrinal and offers to tell him about it over a glass of pistachio milk. It is significant that Asha is here breaking her new habit of convenience food and returning on this occasion to a nourishing and traditional Indian drink; it is a reconciliation with her Indian roots and with the motherly role that she turned her back on after Mahesh's departure. Dinesh smilingly accepts her offer, a sign that he is ready to be reconciled with his mother. As Asha and Dinesh solemnly raise their glasses to their □precious, imperfect lives,□ the final image that readers are given is optimistic: □The glasses glitter like hope.□ Asha recognizes and, more importantly, accepts that she and Dinesh will have other arguments. Liberated from false notions of perfection, Asha plans the letter she will write to Mrinal to tell her the truth.

Source: Claire Robinson, Critical Essay on □Meeting Mrinal,□ in *Short Stories for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Adaptations

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's first novel, *The Mistress of Spices*, was made into a film, released in 2005. The film was directed by Paul Mayeda Berges and stars Aishwarya Rai as Tilo. As of February 2006, the distributor was Entertainment Film Distributors.

Topics for Further Study

How do the cultures of India and the United States differ in □Meeting Mrinal□? Do some additional research to find more differences between the two cultures. Write a report on your findings based on both the story and your additional research.

Interview two people who have immigrated to your country and who come from an ethnic or national background different to your own. You may find it easier to tape-record your interviews, though it is a legal requirement that you first obtain the permission of your interviewees. One of these people might be a first-generation immigrant (who has moved to your country from elsewhere) and the other a second-generation immigrant (a person born in your country of parents who immigrated). Recount their experiences, both positive and negative. Compare the experiences of the two people, considering in what ways each person's experience was easier or more difficult.

Interview a woman or girl of Indian ethnic background about her experiences of her original culture and that of the country where she now lives. Write an essay describing your findings.

Choose an area of your country which has a history of immigration and one ethnic or national immigrant group that has immigrated to that area. Trace the historical factors that influenced the group to settle there and identify the ways in which the group has influenced the development of the area.

Interview an immigrant to your country about their experiences of immigration. Investigate reasons why they left their country of origin, the expectations they had of their destination country, what they found when they arrived, and how their lives have evolved since immigrating. Based on your findings, write either a report, or a first-person account, in the form of a play, short story, or diary entry suitable for reading aloud or radio broadcast.

Choose from one of the following two assignments. Interview a woman of Indian or other Asian origin who has had an arranged marriage, and a woman of the same origin who has had a non-arranged, love marriage. Write a report comparing and contrasting their experiences. You will need to bear in mind the potential sensitivity of the subject and treat your sources with the degree of confidentiality they request. Or research the topic of arranged marriage. Include an examination of any studies on the topic and consider how the custom is changing with the times. Write a report on the advantages and disadvantages of the system of arranged marriage.

Compare and Contrast

1990s: In 1990, the number of Indian-born people living in the United States is 450,000. By 1995, there is a 160,000-strong Indian community in California alone.

Today: India is the second highest source of legal immigration to the United States, second only to Mexico. In 2003, legal immigration from India to the United States totals 50,379. As of 2006, ethnic Asians make up 4.2 percent of the U.S. population.

1990s: Arranged marriage is common among Indian and other Asian immigrants to the United States. A 1994 opinion poll of 1,715 adults in five urban centers in India finds that 74 percent of men and women believe arranged marriages are more likely than non-arranged marriages to succeed.

Today: Arranged marriage is the prevailing trend among Indian and other Asian immigrant families. However, some commentators say that the custom has changed, having become primarily an introduction service where the children have the final say. This shift is especially true of those who are brought up in the United States.

1990s: Arranged marriages among Indian immigrants are organized by relatives or professional marriage brokers. Throughout the 1990s, the number of marriages arranged through classified advertisements placed by parents in newspapers and through Internet-based matrimonial agencies increases.

Today: As many Indian immigrants lose contact with family members and marriage brokers based in India because of the length of time away from the home country and geographical dispersal, the role of newspaper classified advertisements and Internet agencies in arranged marriages grows more prominent.

1990s: Classified matrimonial advertisements are often organized by community, caste, language, or religion.

Today: Reflecting the increasingly ambitious nature of the Asian American community, classified matrimonial advertisements gain new categories relating to profession, such as specifying doctors, lawyers, and so on.

What Do I Read Next?

Arranged Marriage seems to have developed from the poem, "Arranged Marriage" in Divakaruni's collection of poems *Black Candle: Poems about Women from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh* (1991), though the short story collection examines a much wider selection of themes.

In "Uncertain Objects of Desire," an essay published in the March 2000 issue of *Atlantic Monthly* magazine, Divakaruni examines the Indian tradition of arranged marriage and comments on how it is being adapted to modern realities.

Divakaruni's first novel, *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), draws on the rich mystical and cultural traditions of India to tell the story of Tilo, a woman who is trained in the ancient art of healing through spices and ordained as an immortal through a rite of fire. She travels through time and takes the form of a wizened old woman to set up a shop in California, from which she prescribes spices as remedies to customers.

A 1998 interview with Divakaruni entitled "Chitra Divakaruni explains how her family, her childhood and the stories she was told have all influenced her writing," can be found at http://www.bookbrowse.com/author_interviews/full/index.cfm?author_number=338 (accessed May 4, 2006).

Bharati Mukherjee's collection of stories *The Middleman and Other Stories* (1988) explores the meeting of East and West through the experiences of Third World immigrants to the United States and Canada. These include people of Indian origin but also people from Italy, Trinidad, Israel, Vietnam, Afghanistan, the Philippines, and elsewhere.

The travelogue of American journalist Elisabeth Bumiller, *May You Be the Mother of a Hundred Sons: A Journey among the Women of India* (1990), is the fruit of Bumiller's four-year residence in India in the 1980s. Bumiller takes a look at Indian women, considering the custom of arranged marriage, the outlook of village women, India's evolving feminist movement, bride burning, population control, and female infanticide.

In Thomas Dublin's book, *Immigrant Voices: New Lives in America, 1773-1986* (1993), immigrants to the United States from the time of the American Revolution to 1986 tell in their own words what it is like to move to the United States and become Americans. The stories show why they leave their original countries, why they choose to move to the United States, and what they find when they get there.

Further Study

Adler, Bill, and Stephen Sumida, eds., *Growing Up Asian American*, Perennial Currents, 1995.

This collection of fiction and non-fiction pieces presents stories of childhood, adolescence, and coming of age in the United States. The stories feature immigrants from several Asian countries, including Korea, China, Japan, and India, from the 1800s to the 1900s, and show how this population had a great impact on American life.

Daniels, Roger, *American Immigration: A Student Companion*, Oxford University Press, 2001.

This book was written specifically for use in schools and colleges as a resource for research in American history, ethnic and multicultural studies, and genealogy. It covers many aspects of immigration, including an examination of different ethnic groups and their historical background; key immigration legislation; different categories of immigrants, such as refugees, children, and exiles; and religious groups.

□□□, *Coming to America: A History of Immigration and Ethnicity in American Life*, HarperCollins, 1990.

Roger Daniels illustrates how, despite racial conflicts, immigrants to the United States, including Hispanics and cold war refugees, have adapted and contributed to American society. He describes the reactions of Americans to the various waves of immigration, from the rise of anti-foreign groups such as the Ku Klux Klan, to the restrictive immigration laws of the 1920s, through the World War II imprisonment of Japanese Americans in so-called resettlement camps.

Muller, Gilbert H., *New Strangers in Paradise: The Immigrant Experience and Contemporary American Fiction*, University Press of Kentucky, 1999.

Muller discusses the historical forces that have shaped immigration, including changes in the immigration laws in 1965 and shows how immigration has been treated in American fiction. Authors discussed include Isaac Bashevis Singer, Oscar Hijuelos, Jamaica Kincaid, Amy Tan, and Bharati Mukherjee.

Wheeler, Thomas C., *The Immigrant Experience: The Anguish of Becoming American*, Penguin, 1971, reprint, 1992.

This book provides a compilation of stories from a wide range of immigrants and describes their struggles to survive in a United States that turned out to be much harsher than they expected.

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Ponzanesi, Sandra, Review of *Arranged Marriage*, in *Cambridge Guide to Women's Writings in English*, edited by Lorna Sage, Germaine Greer, and Elaine Showalter, 1999, p. 21.

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Review of *Arranged Marriage*, in *Publishers Weekly*, Vol. 242, No. 23, June 5, 1995, p. 53.

Seaman, Donna, Review of *Arranged Marriage*, in *Booklist*, Vol. 391, No. 21, July 1995, p. 1860.

Sethi, Robbie Clipper, Review of *Arranged Marriage*, in *Studies in Short Fiction*, Vol. 33, No. 2, Spring 1996, pp. 287-88.

BOOKRAGS

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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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