Menagerie, a Child's Fable Study Guide

Menagerie, a Child's Fable by Charles Johnson

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

"Menagerie, a Child's Fable," by Charles Johnson, was first published in a magazine in 1984, and reprinted in the short story collection *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* in 1986. Although it is subtitled "A Child's Fable," "Menagerie, a Child's Fable" is aimed at the adult reader and addresses serious social and political issues.

"Menagerie, a Child's Fable" takes place in a pet store where the main character, a German shepherd named Berkeley, works as a watchdog. One day the owner of the shoppe does not show up as usual, and the animals conclude that he is dead. After several days, Berkeley, who is the only one not confined to a cage, frees the other animals so they can get to the food supplies. Once all of the animals are released from captivity and must learn to live together, they begin to compete for the food supplies, to threaten one another with violence, and even to prey on one another. Berkeley tries to keep the peace, and to protect the more vulnerable animals from the predators, but the situation becomes more and more chaotic. Berkeley finally falls asleep from exhaustion and has a dream that the owner has returned to the shoppe and praises the dog for doing a good job of keeping the peace. When Berkeley wakes up, Monkey is holding a gun and shoots him in the chest. As Berkeley lies on the floor bleeding to death, a fire spreads throughout the shop.

"Menagerie, a Child's Fable" is a fable using animal characters in the setting of a pet shoppe to comment on the state of humanity as a diverse global community. The story addresses themes of freedom and oppression, racism and pluralism, democracy and fascism, and war and peace.

Author Biography

Charles Richard Johnson was born in Evanston, Illinois, on April 23, 1948. Johnson graduated with a bachelor's degree in journalism from Southern Illinois University in 1971. While attending college, he worked as a journalist and cartoonist for the *Chicago Tribune*. In 1973, he completed a master's degree in philosophy from Southern Illinois University. During his graduate study, Johnson began writing fiction under the mentorship of the novelist John Gardner, who taught creative writing at Southern Illinois University. From 1973 to 1976, Johnson attended graduate school in philosophy at State University of New York at Stony Brook, but left before completing his Ph.D. Since 1976, he has taught as a professor of English, in creative writing, at the University of Washington in Seattle, Washington.

Johnson was twenty-six years old and had written six unpublished novels by 1974, when his seventh novel, *Faith and the Good Thing*, was his first to be published. His next novel, *Oxherding Tale*, was published in 1982. In 1990 Johnson received the National Book Award in Fiction for his third published novel, *Middle Passage* (1990). Johnson was the first African-American author to receive this award since Ralph Ellison won it in 1953. Johnson's next novel, *Dreamers*, was published in 1998. He has published two collections of short stories, *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* (1986), which includes the story "Menagerie, a Child's Fable," and *Soulcatcher and Other Stories* (2001).

Johnson has also written and co-authored a number of non-fiction books, mostly concerning various aspects of African-American history and the African-American experience. Among his non-fiction books are *Being and Race: Black Writing Since 1970* (1988), *Africans in America: America's Journey through Slavery* (1998; co-author), *I Call Myself an Artist: Writings by and about Charles Johnson* (1999; co-author), and *King: The Photobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, (2000; co-author). In 1998, Johnson was granted a MacArthur Fellowship, also known as the "genius grant," which recognizes exceptional individuals with a personal gift of over $300,000.

Plot Summary

Berkeley, a German shepherd, works as the watchdog at Tilford's Pet Shoppe, owned by Mr. Tilford. Berkeley is proud of his work, and is considered one of the best watchdogs in Seattle. Although Mr. Tilford is unkind to the animals and never shows any affection or appreciation for Berkeley, the dog remains faithful to his master. One day Mr. Tilford does not show up at the pet shop. Monkey tells Berkeley that Mr. Tilford has obviously died of a heart attack and is never going to return, but Berkeley has faith that the owner will eventually come back.

After several days go by, all of the animals begin clamoring in their cages, demanding that they will starve to death if no one feeds them. Monkey convinces Berkeley to let all of the animals out of their cages so they can get to the food. Berkeley reluctantly frees Monkey and the other animals. The only one who does not want to be released is Tortoise, who had escaped from the pet shoppe a year earlier but returned of his own accord.

At first the animals are united by their common purpose of obtaining food, but soon animosity develops between the various species. Some of the animals become greedy and don't care if other animals get enough food or not. Berkeley tries to keep constant watch over all the animals in order to maintain the peace. The fish and birds are afraid of being eaten by the predatory animals and Berkeley promises to protect them. But, while Berkeley isn't looking, Siamese the cat assaults and rapes Rabbit. In response, Rabbit organizes the other females to protest against male aggression. Meanwhile, Frog gets ill and his infection spreads to Iguana. Monkey becomes increasingly greedy and threatens to eat the fish when the food runs out.

Berkeley loses weight and becomes exhausted, afraid to go to sleep for fear of what might happen if he does not keep watch over everyone. Finally, Berkeley allows himself to fall asleep. He dreams that Mr. Tilford has returned to the pet shop. In the dream, Mr. Tilford strokes Berkeley's head and tells him he's done a good job.

Berkeley is awakened from his dream by Parrot, who tells him Monkey has gotten a hold of a gun. Monkey is pointing the gun at the glass display case that holds the dog collars. Parrot tells Berkeley to take the gun away from Monkey, in order to protect the other animals. Berkeley jumps at Monkey, but Monkey shoots him in the chest, and he falls back against Tortoise's cage.

As Berkeley lies on the floor bleeding to death, a fire that has started in the storage room begins to spread throughout the shop. He realizes that Tortoise is the only one who will survive the fire, because of his ancient armor. Berkeley tries to explain his dream to Tortoise. He tells Tortoise, "We could have endured, we had enough in common—for Christ's sake, we're *all* animals." "Indeed," Tortoise replies. "Indeed."

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

"Menagerie, A Children's Fable" explores what happens in a fictional pet shop in Seattle when the shop's owner goes missing. The characters in this story are animals that are able to communicate with one another. The protagonist is a well-intentioned watch dog named Berkeley who struggles to keep order when the owner, Mr. Tilford, vanishes. Berkeley is described as steady and large in weight. He sits on guard near the glass window of the pet shop and watches the pedestrians that pass by and the derelicts that sleep outside the shop's entrance at night. Berkeley has great instincts and takes his job seriously. He is proud of the fact that no one has ever tried to break into the store to steal Tilford's exotic animals.

Mr. Tilford, the pet shop owner, is a cruel man who views animals as nothing more than profit. He is a stubborn, hot-tempered drunk, who lives alone. He is also described as senile because he often mistakes gunshots that he hears on television for real gunfire. In spite of Tilford's unpleasant nature, in Berkeley's younger years he craved the owner's approval. Now that he is older, he simply does his job and has no expectations of his work being appreciated. One night Berkeley hears Tilford leave and he becomes concerned, realizing that it is too early to close the shop. Berkeley walks into the storage room to see if Tilford left his nightly meal but finds his bowl empty.

Monkey is the story's antagonist. Berkeley has never liked Monkey. He is a troublemaker who will do anything to get a laugh. He does impressions of Tilford to entertain the other animals, which frightens Berkeley who sees these parodies as dangerous. Monkey notices that Tilford has left early and asks Berkeley what is going on. Berkeley tells Monkey that Tilford will be back but Monkey does not believe him. Monkey believes Tilford is sick. Berkeley waits for Tilford to return for two days. All of the animals in the shop want an explanation from Berkeley of where Tilford has gone. Berkeley tries to calm them down by insisting that Tilford is coming back. He becomes overwhelmed. The narrator says the animals are "an entire federation of cultures, with each animal having its own distinct, inviolable nature (so they said), the rows and rows of counters screaming with a plurality of so many backgrounds, needs, and viewpoints."

Monkey suggests that Tilford is dead and urges Berkeley to let the animals out of their cages so they can feed. Since Berkeley has no hands, he cannot open the feedbags but Monkey can. Monkey tells Berkeley that in this time of crisis they must pool their collective resources. He says that Berkeley must think democratically, keeping them locked up is fascist. Berkeley worries that there is risk of chaos if he lets the animals out but knows that he cannot let them starve to death. Berkeley releases Monkey from his cage and Monkey releases the others.

As Monkey releases the animals Berkeley is wary about letting the Tarantula out. Monkey implores that they all must be let out. He calls Berkeley a bigot and tells him to

give the Tarantula a chance to get to know him. All the animals make their way to the storage room to eat, except for the old Tortoise. The Tortoise does not want to be released. No one argues with his decision. Years ago, he escaped from the pet shop. When he returned a week later, he was different. The narrator explains that the Tortoise looked as though he had seen the end of the world or a vision of the world to come. Since then, he has kept to his self. He stays hunched inside his shell and eats almost nothing.

Berkeley does not join the others in the storage room. He is too worried to eat. Instead, he goes to the front door to try to draw the attention of pedestrians that may help them. Unfortunately, as people walk by, they notice the closed sign on the door and keep walking. Finally feeling defeated Berkeley walks back to the storage room with his tail between his legs. Berkeley finds that problems have already arisen in the storage room. The animals are disgusted with each other's eating habits, and they have chosen to segregate themselves. Monkey, who will eat anything, is snacking on fish food. Berkeley yells at him to stop. He says the fish have to eat too and they cannot be let out of their tank. Monkey responds callously, saying that it is their problem. Berkeley growls loudly, scaring Monkey and Monkey surrenders the fish food. Berkeley carries some food over to the fish tank. Having been left out, the fish ask Berkeley to tell them what is going on. He explains that Tilford is missing. The fish are worried that they will be left to starve to death but Berkeley assures them that he will protect them.

As more time passes, Berkeley's worries increase. He does not see himself as a hero and wonders if he will be able to keep order in the shop. Somehow, he finds a new determination. He has faith that Tilford will return and imagines that the owner will expect the shop to be in the same order as he left it. Sadly, Berkeley cannot be everywhere at once and things at the shop grow worse each day. The animals go to the washroom everywhere, which draws bacterial flies and maggots. Hamsters are chewing up the electrical cords in the storage room. The frog has a genital infection. The fish demand constant protection, claiming the rights of their ancient lineage. They say that because all life comes from the sea originally, the others owe them. Old grudges between different species rise again. The Siamese rapes the Rabbit when Berkeley is not looking, causing the rabbit to become pregnant with a new creature, a cabbit. After this violation, the Rabbit becomes lost in her grief and pain. She organizes the other females to stop cohabitating with the males. Later she considers aborting the cabbit but Berkeley tries to talk her out of it.

The chaos in the pet shop is still increasing. The birds have become frightened of the reptiles and the Frog has passed his illness to the Iguana. By the fifth day the storage room is half empty. Berkeley warns Monkey that they need to start rationing. Monkey says that there is always food, in reference to eating the goldfish. Berkeley realizes that power comes down to who can draw the most blood. His upper hand comes from the simple fact that his claws and teeth are bigger than the other animals. Nevertheless, Monkey's arrogance frightens Berkeley.

After hours of staying awake to guard the storage room, Berkeley finally goes to sleep. He has erotic dreams about poodles and pleasant dreams about his puppy hood when

life was simple. He recalls the words of his mother. When he was a puppy his mother told him that dogs have cold noses because they were late coming to Noah's ark and had to ride close to the rail. Just before waking Berkeley dreams of the shop owner. He describes the owner whispering to him like God whispering to Samuel. The owner whispers the word "begun." Berkeley imagines this statement is prophetic. Berkeley wakes up to the Parrot shouting at him that Monkey has a gun. The gun belongs to Tilford, who kept it behind the register as a precaution in case he was robbed. Berkeley notices that smoke fills the room. There is a fire in the storage room. The Parrot tells Berkeley to get the gun from Monkey, reminding him that he promised to protect them. Berkeley is terrified. There is no longer a balance of power.

Berkeley approaches the register and springs into the air. A bullet hits him in the ribs and he falls to the floor. His legs become numb and he lies on the floor twitching as blood from his wound spills out of his body. The flames from the storage room fire spread rapidly throughout the store. Berkeley sees the fish are dead floating in the water because someone unplugged the tank. While he slept the female animals murdered the Siamese, the Speckled Lizard ate baby canary eggs and the Frog and Iguana died. He sees the Tarantula walking over their corpses.

As he lies on the ground, near death, Berkeley hears the muffled voice of the old Tortoise beneath him. The Tortoise is the only one who will survive the fire. His shell will protect him. Berkeley tries to explain his dream before the fire reaches them. He tells the Tortoise that they could have survived. They all had enough in common, which is that they are all animals. As the Tortoise hides out in his shell, he replies to Berkeley, "Indeed."

Analysis

"Menagerie, A Children's Fable" is part of a 1994 collection of short stories by Charles Johnson called *The Sorcerer's Apprentice: Tales and Conjurations*. Johnson's work is considered one of the most important contributions to contemporary African American Literature. This collection explores a variety of mystifying and unconventional approaches to fiction, revealing Johnson to be not just a writer but also a creator. His ingenious, inventive style takes short fiction in a completely new direction.

Ironically, this story's title claims that the piece is a children's fable despite its complexity and allegorical nature. The subject matter however, proves that the story is not written for children. The author deals with topics such as corruption, genocide, disease and sexual violence. One of the most notable aspects of this story is that Johnson cleverly creates a mythology for his characters, as he gives each animal a historical context based on the characteristics of their species.

An additional use of irony is presented by Johnson's references to modern culture within this story. When the animals discover that Tilford is missing, Monkey pleads with Berkeley to let him out of his cage. The narrator says that Monkey holds onto the bars of his cage like "a movie inmate." Later on in the story, Berkeley questions his own

heroism by comparing his self to legendary dogs on screen like Old Yeller. Berkeley also describes himself as a character in a "Warner Brothers" cartoon. These media references come across as odd at first, given that the animals are confined to the store. However, it seems that they serve as a symbol to remind the reader of Tilford's character. Tilford, the unlovable owner is described as a loner who spends most of his time watching television. This hobby is what exposes the animals to so many mediums. For this reason, media content becomes part of the animal's knowledge bank, in turn becoming a way that these characters frame their view of the world.

Berkeley positions his self as more logical and well informed than Tilford. The narrator claims that Tilford mistakes gunshots on television for the real thing, where as Berkeley is able to make this distinction. Johnson uses humor here, in reality animals would make this mistake, most humans would not. Alike to this use of humor, the author plays on animal expressions that are used to describe human behavior. For instance, when Berkeley feels defeated he walks with his tail between his legs. When Johnson utilizes this in his writing he deconstructs the way language is used by removing expressions from their contextual meaning to give them a literal, and again ironic, meaning.

The story's primary theme is complex, a referral to Armageddon. For the animals in the shop, it is the end of their world and existence. As their final days unravel with a chain of growing chaotic events, the story alludes to a biblical description of the end of the world. Monkey, is the ultimate antagonist, a manipulator who sets evil in motion. He uses sly political jargon to convince Berkeley to release the animals from their cages. Upon their release, animals that are described as "an entire federation of cultures" have come together to fight for survival. However, in symbolic reference to *Revelations*, they turn their backs on each other. Disorder ravages their once pleasant existence. Agendas are created with genocide and sexual violence occurring as a result. The symbolic allusion to *Revelations* is carried out further by references to the spread of disease and famine before the animals meet their fiery end.

The Tortoise is an important character in this story. His personal history is used to foreshadow what is to come. He is the only one of the animals that escaped from the pet shop, only to return a week later as a sullen creature that is changed. The narrator describes his look when he returns as prophetic; he has seen the disparaging future. As a symbol of the biblical end of the world, the Tortoise is a watcher. Watchers are the prophets in *Revelations* that foresee the end long before the rest of humanity realizes the end is coming.

The dream that Berkeley's has near the end of the story reveals a rich interior of layers. As Berkeley is dreaming, he recalls his mother's words. When he was just a puppy she tells him that dog's noses are cold because they were late for Noah's Ark and had to ride close to the rails. On the surface, this notion appears to be an allegory within an allegory. Upon closer examination, it is evident that Berkeley's mother's story symbolizes the variants of religious traditions and historical connections maintained by different cultures. It shows that each culture's relationship to God is tied to a personal context.

Berkeley's dream is prophetic as well. Berkeley's son to father relationship with Tilford is written like a symbolic reference to humanity and god. Tilford's abandonment of the pet shop is like god's abandonment of human kind. Berkeley must have faith that Tilford still exists without actually witnessing his presence. Berkeley bears the solitude of a leader, trying to keep order in the midst of destruction. Symbolically, he is the last believer. In Berkeley's dream Tilford speaks to him, whispering the word, "begun." In yet another reference to the bible, the narrator describes this as God speaking to Samuel. These last words reveal a prophecy that is soon to pass. When Berkeley awakes, he discovers that the end has truly begun.

Characters

Berkeley

Berkeley, a German shepherd "with big shoulders, black gums, and weighing more than some men," is the protagonist, or main character, of "Menagerie." Berkeley is the watchdog at Tilford's Pet Shoppe, and is known as one of the best watchdogs in Seattle. At the beginning of the story Berkeley is proud of, and content with, his job as watchdog. Although the owner of the shop isn't particularly nice to him, he remains faithful to his master. When Mr. Tilford does not show up at the shop for several days in a row, Berkeley reluctantly lets the other animals out of their cages so they can get to the food supply. Berkeley tries to make sure all of the animals get their share of food, and to protect the vulnerable ones from being attacked by the predatory animals, but the animals become more and more violent and nasty toward each other, and he has trouble keeping the peace. Exhausted from his efforts, Berkeley finally allows himself to fall asleep and has a long, meaningful dream. When Berkeley wakes up he finds that Monkey is holding a gun. Berkeley attacks Monkey in order to save the other animals, but Monkey shoots him. The story ends as Berkeley lies on the pet shop floor, bleeding to death.

Frog

Frog is one of the animals in the pet shop. Frog begs Berkeley to let all of the animals out of their cages so they do not starve to death. After all the animals are set free, Frog becomes ill from an infection. Berkeley tries to splash various medicines on Frog but his infection soon spreads to Iguana. By the end of the story, Frog lies dead on the floor and Tarantula is crawling over his corpse.

Goldfish

Goldfish is one of the animals in the pet shop. Like all of the fish, Goldfish is among the most innocent and most vulnerable of the animals. Gold-fish depends on Berkeley to feed him and protect him from the animals who threaten to eat him when the food supply runs low.

Iguana

Iguana is one of the animals in the pet shop. After all of the animals are set free, Iguana catches an infection from Frog. At the end of the story, as Berkeley lies bleeding to death, he sees Tarantula crawling over the corpse of Iguana.

Monkey

Monkey is one of the animals in the pet shop. Berkeley had never liked Monkey, and considered him a "clown" who would do anything to get a laugh out of the other animals. When Mr. Tilford does not show up for several days in a row, Monkey concludes that the owner has died of a heart attack. He insists that Berkeley help him and the other animals out of their cages so they can get to the food. Once all the animals are released, Monkey behaves selfishly, not caring whether or not the other animals have food and indicating that he intends to eat the fish when the other food runs out. Eventually Monkey convinces Berkeley to go to sleep. When Berkeley wakes up, Monkey is holding a gun and pointing it at the glass display case that holds the dog collars. It appears as if Monkey intends to shoot open the display case, take one of the dog collars, and use it to restrain Berkeley. That way, Monkey would be able to take control of the pet shop. Berkeley jumps at Monkey in an effort to take the gun away from him, but Monkey shoots Berkeley in the chest and the dog falls back onto the floor, bleeding to death.

Parrot

Parrot is one of the animals in the pet shop. Toward the end of the story, Parrot wakes Berkeley out of his slumber, telling him that Monkey has gotten a hold of the gun. Parrot tells Berkeley to take the gun away from Monkey, reminding the dog that he had promised to protect the rest of the animals.

Rabbit

Rabbit is one of the animals in the pet shop. As the situation among the animals becomes more chaotic and lawless, Rabbit is assaulted and raped by Siamese, the cat. In protest, Rabbit organizes the other female animals. As a result of the rape, Rabbit becomes pregnant with a new kind of animal that is half-rabbit and half-cat—a "cabbit." Rabbit considers aborting the "cabbit," and is not swayed by Berkeley's efforts to convince her not to. Rabbit represents the feminist element in the pet shop. Her efforts to organize the other female animals represents the efforts of the Women's Liberation Movement to fight for women's rights.

Siamese

Siamese is a cat who inhabits the pet shop. After Siamese rapes Rabbit, Rabbit organizes the other female animals in protest. By the end of the story, Siamese has been torn to pieces by the females.

Tarantula

Tarantula is one of the animals in the pet shop. Berkeley is uncomfortable about letting Tarantula out of his cage, but Monkey insists that all the animals have a right to be free. At the end of the story as Berkeley lies on the floor bleeding to death, he sees Tarantula crawling over the corpses of Frog and Iguana.

Mr. Tilford

Mr. Tilford is the owner of Tilford's Pet Shoppe. Mr. Tilford regards the animals as objects he can sell in order to make money. He is described as "stubborn, hot-tempered, a drunkard and a loner" who was becoming increasingly senile. He is cruel to the animals and only feeds them minimal amounts of food. One time, while drunk, he put a cat he was not able to sell into the blender. When Mr. Tilford does not show up at the shop for several days, Monkey concludes that he has died, but Berkeley continues to believe he is alive and will soon return. In Berkeley's dream, Mr. Tilford returns to the shop and praises the dog for doing a good job.

Tortoise

Tortoise is one of the animals in the pet shop. He is the only one who does not wish to be released from his cage like the others. Tortoise had escaped from the pet shop once, a year earlier, and been gone for a week. However, he returned to the shop of his own accord, and has not spoken a word since. By the end of the story, Berkeley realizes that Tortoise, the most ancient of all the animals, is the only one who will survive the fire that is spreading throughout the shop. At the end of the story, as Berkeley lies on the floor bleeding to death, he tries to explain his dream to Tortoise. Berkeley says to Tortoise that they all should have been able to live together peacefully since they are all animals. Tortoise's reply, "Indeed," is the final word of the story.

Themes

Freedom and Oppression

Freedom and oppression are central themes of "Menagerie, a Child's Fable." Johnson uses the setting of the pet shoppe as an analogy for the status of oppressed peoples in any society in which they have little control over the conditions of their own lives and are kept down by those in power. Mr. Tilford represents the oppressive attitudes of people who hold power over others in an undemocratic society. In the beginning of the story, the animals in the pet shoppe are not free. They are under the control of Mr. Tilford, who keeps them in captivity and oppresses them by exerting complete power over them. All of the animals in the shop, except Berkeley, the German shepherd guard dog, are imprisoned either behind bars or in tanks. Mr. Tilford is stingy about feeding the animals, and only provides them with minimal amounts of food. The status of the animals is thus equated with the status of poor people in any society, who are prevented from seeking greater opportunities. Mr. Tilford does not value the lives of the animals; he is cruel to them and even put a cat he could not sell into a blender on one occasion. His treatment of the cat symbolizes the willingness of people in power to use violence against the less powerful in order to serve their own ends. When Mr. Tilford does not show up at the pet shoppe for several days, a power vacuum is created and the animals demand to be set free from their cages.

Racism and Pluralism

Johnson refers to the different species of animals in the pet shoppe as if they represent different races and ethnic groups among human beings. After Berkeley releases the animals from their separate cages, they come together as "an entire federation of cultures . . . a plurality of so many backgrounds, needs, and viewpoints." This description represents the variety of human cultures on the planet. Monkey, when trying to convince Berkeley to set the animals free, makes an argument for what is called "pluralism"—the idea that a diversity of people can live peacefully and prosperously in the same society, and that this diversity in fact enriches the culture. Monkey tells Berkeley, "we all have different talents, unique gifts. If you let us out, we can pool our resources." In their efforts to convince Berkeley to release them from their cages, the animals shout "Self-determination!" "Self-determination" is a slogan from the 1960s and 1970s that refers to the rights of every racial, ethnic, religious, and national group of people to determine the conditions of their own lives; it is a call for equal rights and equal opportunity for all people of all backgrounds and an end to inequality.

After all of the animals are released, however, various conflicts of interest among the different species begin to emerge. These conflicts represent racial tension in a diverse society. In "Menagerie, a Child's Fable" Monkey is the primary proponent and leader of racist ideas. The mammals in the shop, led by Monkey, consider the non-mammals to be "lowlifes on the evolutionary scale." This suggests racist theories in which one group

of humans considers itself to be naturally superior to another group. Monkey even accuses Berkeley of being a traitor to his race when he tries to defend the fish; he tells Berkeley "It's unnatural to takes sides against your own kind." Berkeley's plea as the story ends— that they all should have been able to survive together in harmony—is a plea for the possibility of a world in which the diversity of human cultures can live harmoniously. Berkeley's last words are, "for Christ's sake, we're *all* animals." Through Berkeley, Johnson expresses the idea that, regardless of racial or ethnic difference, we're *all* humans, and should therefore be able to respect each other's right to self-determination. "Menagerie, a Child's Fable" is thus a call for pluralism and diversity over racism and intolerance.

Democracy and Fascism

The pleading of the animals to be released from captivity is a bid to change the pet shoppe from an oppressive society to a democratic society. The term "fascist" is used in this story to refer to any oppressive society in which one person, or small group of people, exerts absolute and oppressive control over the majority of the people in that society. Monkey tells Berkeley, "I'm asking you to be democratic! Keeping us locked up is fascist!"

Once all of the animals are released from captivity, the pet shoppe becomes an experiment in democracy. At first, Berkeley and the other animals are hopeful that they will all be able to live as one community. They are all "united by the spirit of a bright, common future." But the experiment fails as the animals turn against one another. The result is not democracy but chaos, death, and destruction.

War and Peace

"Menagerie, a Child's Fable" is also a parable about war and peace. Through the animals, Johnson suggests that the power to wield physical violence is ultimately the determining factor in who runs a society. After the animals are released, Berkeley worries about keeping the peace among the different species. But what he observes of the animals' behavior toward one another is "no sight for a peace-loving watchdog." Nevertheless, Berkeley tries to maintain the peace by promising to protect the more vulnerable animals against attacks by the more predatory animals.

Berkeley is shamefully aware of the fact that he holds the most power in the pet shoppe because he has the greatest capacity for physical violence. Berkeley realizes that "For all his idealism, truth was decided in the end by those who could be bloodiest in fang and claw." He is proven correct in this assessment when, in the end of the story, Monkey gets hold of a gun. The gun shifts the power balance in the store so that Berkeley is subjected to Monkey's greater capacity for violence. Johnson employs the image of Monkey wielding a gun as a metaphor for superpowers, such as the United States, whose world dominance is based on the fact that they have the most powerful military with the greatest capacity for destruction.

Style

Allegory and Fable

An allegory is a story in which the surface-level events are meant to be interpreted on a secondary level of meaning. The fable and the parable, though similar in many respects, are two different types of allegorical story. Johnson's story "Menagerie" is subtitled "a Child's Fable." Fables often include animal characters that exhibit human traits, and are usually meant to be interpreted as a moral lesson or commentary on human behavior. Most people are familiar with the ancient Aesop's fables, which include animal characters and usually end with a clearly stated moral to be derived from the story. "Menagerie, a Child's Fable" is an allegorical fable using animal characters to express a commentary on social struggles over freedom and oppression, racism and pluralism, democracy and fascism, and war and peace in the modern world.

Personification

Personification is a literary device by which animals or inanimate objects exhibit human qualities. Fables and fairy tales often personify animals, as do many children's stories. In "Menagerie, a Child's Fable" Johnson utilizes personification to endow his animal characters with human thought and speech patterns. All of the animals have the ability to speak in human language and to communicate with one another in the same language, regardless of differences in species. Yet while these animal characters exhibit human speech patterns, they are represented naturalistically as real animals in terms of their physical traits and physical abilities. For example, Monkey is the only character who has hands that can be used for wielding a gun or for unlocking the cages in which the animals were kept.

Johnson uses the literary device of personification in order to comment on the brutal, animalistic elements of social power in human society. Although Berkeley, the German shepherd and hero of the story, is idealistic about wanting to maintain a democratic society, he is aware that his influence over the other animals is ultimately based on the fact that he weighs more, and has bigger fangs and claws, than they do. Thus, Johnson points out that in human society, as in the animal world, those who wield the greatest capacity for brute force can always maintain the position of power. Berkeley's statement at the end of the story, that they should have been able to co-exist peacefully, because after all, "we're *all* animals," is meant to be interpreted as a statement that human beings should be able to coexist peacefully in a global community because, after all, we're *all* humans.

Setting

"Menagerie, a Child's Fable" is set in a pet store in Seattle, Washington, a small city on the northwest coast of the United States. Although the year in which the story is set is

not indicated, there are various clues that suggest it is probably during the 1960s, 1970s, or early 1980s. Various references to American popular culture indicate to the reader that the story is set in modern times, in the post-World War II era. There are several references to television, such as Mr. Tilford, the pet shoppe owner, watching television. This indicates to the reader that the story certainly takes place at some point after television sets became readily available to middle-class people in the United States, which was during the late 1940s and early 1950s. Other references within "Menagerie, a Child's Fable" place it some time during or after the era of widespread political activism in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s, sometimes called the Civil Rights era. For example, the animals, while still in their cages, demand that Berkeley release them by crying "Self-determination!"; "self-determination" was a popular slogan during the 1960s and 1970s among groups of people struggling for greater social equality.

Another clue that "Menagerie, a Child's Fable" takes place during the Civil Rights era is the fact that Rabbit organizes the other female animals in protest against the threat of rape by the males; rape was a key issue in the Women's Liberation movement, beginning in the late 1960s, in which women began organizing for equal rights. Thus, Johnson's story seems to be set anywhere between the late 1960s and the early 1980s (when the story was first published). However, the fact that the story is called a "fable," and includes animals that can talk, suggests that it is meant to have a timeless quality, such as fairy tales that begin, "Once upon a time."

Historical Context

African-American Leaders in the Civil Rights Era

Although "Menagerie, a Child's Fable" was first published in 1984, its setting evokes the era of social and political turmoil in the United States of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, known as the Civil Rights Era. The Civil Rights Era was characterized by massive efforts on the part of the Civil Rights Movement to gain greater social equality for African-American citizens in the United States.

Beginning in the 1950s, the Civil Rights Movement focused on efforts at desegregation of public schools and other public institutions, particularly in the American South. In addition, the Civil Rights Movement worked toward the enforcement of equal voting rights for African Americans in the South, where local authorities often went to great lengths to prevent blacks from voting in political elections. Passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was one of the greatest achievements of the Civil Rights Movement. The Civil Rights Act focused on such concerns as equal voting rights and desegregation of public schools. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 helped to reinforce the principles set forth in the Civil Rights Act.

The Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., was the most prominent leader of the Civil Rights Movement, and an inspiration to many Americans hoping to create a more just society. King was inspired by the non-violent methods of Indian nationalist leader Mahatma Gandhi. Based on Gandhi's principles of nonviolent resistance, King worked through an organization known as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference to stage such events as the famous March on Washington in 1963. King was awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1964. In 1968 King was assassinated. His legacy lives on in continuing efforts to improve the civil rights of all American citizens through nonviolent efforts. The institution of a nationally recognized Martin Luther King Day in the United States is an acknowledgement of the positive influence King and the Civil Rights Movement exerted on American culture.

While King is regarded as the leader of the Civil Rights Movement, more politically radical African-American leaders were also extremely influential during the 1960s and 1970s.

Malcolm X was the leader of the black nationalist movement during the 1960s. Born Malcolm Little, he converted to the Nation of Islam faith of Black Muslims and later changed his name to Malcolm X. Malcolm X was critical of the Civil Rights Movement of Martin Luther King. By contrast, he advocated black separatism rather than integration and self-defense through violence rather than nonviolent protest. Malcolm X became known as a powerful speaker and effective leader in the Nation of Islam, and was assigned to be the minister at a mosque in Harlem, New York City. He was assassinated in 1965 during a rally in Harlem.

The Black Panther Party was another important influence on African-American culture during the Civil Rights Era. Originally called the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, the Black Panther Party was organized in 1966 in Berkeley, California, by Bobby Seale and Huey Newton. The primary focus of the Black Panther Party was to arm African Americans and patrol the streets of black neighborhoods in order to protect the African-American community from police brutality. Their signature "uniform" was a black beret. Although many African Americans sympathized with the Black Panthers, others were critical of their militant approach to battling racism. By the early 1980s, the Black Panther Party had essentially disbanded.

African-American Leaders Since the 1970s

Since the assassinations of Malcolm X and King and the dissolution of the Black Panther Party, a number of African-American leaders have risen to prominence. These influential figures have worked to strengthen African-American self-determination through their roles in political, religious, academic, and popular cultural institutions.

Jesse Jackson, a Baptist minister, was the most prominent African-American civil rights leader of the 1980s. Jackson had been active in the Civil Rights Movement during the 1960s and 1970s. During the 1980s, he became known as the first African American to make a significant showing in his run for the Democratic Party's nomination for the U.S. Presidency, in both the 1983-1984 and the 1987-1988 presidential races. In the process of running for presidential candidacy, Jackson organized a massive voter-registration drive throughout the United States. Jackson's voter-registration drive contributed to the election of Chicago's first African-American mayor, Harold Washington, in 1983.

Louis Farrakhan, the African-American leader of his own sect of the Nation of Islam (also known as the Black Muslims) founded in 1978, rose to prominence as an influential black leader during the 1980s and 1990s. Farrakhan advocates self-sufficiency for African Americans and a strong family. Farrakhan, however, has also been accused of promoting prejudice against Jews. In 1995 Farrakhan organized the "Million Man March" of African-American men in Washington, D.C.

During the 1970s and 1980s, Charles Johnson was active in helping to establish African-American Studies programs in American colleges and universities. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the field of African-American studies developed and expanded. Several scholars of African-American Studies rose to prominence on the national scene through the influence of their nonfiction books and their public speaking engagements. The most prominent African-American studies scholar is Henry Louis Gates, Jr., a Harvard University professor whose scholarship in the area of African-American literature attracted a broad-based readership. One of Gates's best-known works is the book *The Signifying Monkey: Towards a Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (1988). Gates has also taught at Yale University, Cornell University, and Duke University.

bell hooks (who intentionally spells both her first and last name in lower-case letters) became the most prominent feminist African-American scholar during the 1980s and 1990s. Her best-known work is the book *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (1981). hooks has taught at the University of Southern California, Yale University, Oberlin College, and City College of New York.

Oprah Winfrey, known primarily as a popular daytime TV talk show host and media personality, is influential as an African-American leader who promotes diversity at the level of the mass media and popular culture. "Oprah," as she is known to fans, is arguably the most influential African-American woman in the United States. She is an influential promoter of African-American writers and film production and engages in a variety of philanthropic efforts, such as speaking out against child abuse. Oprah was awarded the Woman of Achievement Award by the National Organization for Women in 1986, and the Image Award from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) four years in a row (1989-1992).

Critical Overview

Johnson has been granted two of the most prestigious awards available to a fiction-writer in the United States. In 1990 he received the National Book Award for his novel *Middle Passage*. In 1998, he was awarded a MacArthur Fellowship, commonly known as the "genius grant," a gift of over $300,000 to exceptional individuals for their contribution to society and culture.

Johnson's four published novels, as well as his two collections of short stories, have consistently received critical acclaim. Critics praise Johnson for his original use of literary form. They note that he uses traditional narrative forms, such as oral history, the slave narrative, the sea tale, and the fable, in original, transformative works of fiction.

Critics often praise Johnson for representing African-American history and the African-American experience from a variety of religious and philosophical perspectives. Johnson combines Western intellectual traditions of both Christian thought and modern philosophy with Eastern thought and traditions such as Zen Buddhism. Johnson also includes elements of traditional African myth and spirituality, such as voodoo, in his fiction. However, Johnson's unique blend of narrative elements has been met with mixed critical response. As Maryemma Graham, in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, commented, "What some critics find as serious flaws in Johnson's works—the philosophical indulgences, the exploitation of the supernatural for effect, and the balance between fantasy and realism—other critics find fascinating."

Despite high praise from the critical establishment, Johnson's fiction has not received as much critical attention or as wide a readership as one would expect, given his status in the literary world. In 1996, however, a special issue of *African American Review* was devoted to articles and essays discussing Johnson's many works of fiction and nonfiction. Michael Boccia and Herman Beavers, in the introduction to this special issue, commented that Johnson's "work has not, despite a National Book Award, received so much critical attention as it deserves." Boccia and Beavers observed:

Like the blues, Johnson's work provides us with protagonists who have a story to tell, and also like the blues, his work insists that each of us can find a place in a community of tellers, if we reorient ourselves toward experience.

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Brent has a Ph.D. in American Culture from the University of Michigan and works as a freelance writer. In this essay, Brent discusses Johnson's story as an allegory for Christian faith in a modern world.

Johnson's "Menagerie, a Child's Fable," while an allegory for social conflict in a diverse global community, is also an allegory for the nature of Christian faith in a modern world. Interpreting the story allegorically, one can see that Mr. Tilford, the pet shoppe owner, represents God, and Berkeley, the watchdog, represents a Christ-like figure. Tilford's absence from the shoppe thus represents the apparent absence of God in a modern world, where evil and destruction seem to reign free and many people have renounced their faith. Berkeley represents a figure akin to Jesus Christ, who remains faithful to God, despite His apparent cruelties, and maintains blind faith in Him, even in His apparent absence.

In "Menagerie, a Child's Fable," Tilford, the pet shoppe owner, represents God, who rules over all creatures of every species, great and small. The type of God represented by Tilford is less akin to the all-forgiving God of the New Testament and closer to the harsh, punishing God of the Old Testament. Some readers may find Johnson's representation of God in the form of Tilford to be offensive because he is by no means an idealized figure. Tilford is cruel, stubborn, hot-tempered, alcoholic, and senile. He is also stingy about feeding the animals, providing them only with minimal amounts of food. Tilford's cruelty goes so far as to include putting a cat he could not sell into a blender. However, this characterization of Tilford as an arbitrarily cruel figure is akin to some modern perceptions of God, given the atrocities of the twentieth century, such as the Holocaust, that caused many people to question a God who could allow such extremes of cruelty to be carried out.

If Tilford is interpreted as an allegorical figure for a cruel God, Berkeley represents a Christ-like figure, who maintains complete faith in God, despite His apparent cruelties and oversights. Johnson offers the reader several clues to indicate that Berkeley represents an allegorical Christ-figure. In the second sentence of the story, Berkeley is described as "a pious German shepherd." The word pious indicates someone who is deeply faithful to his or her religious beliefs. Piety is not a trait normally used to describe an animal, and Johnson's use of the term indicates to the reader that the story "Menagerie, a Child's Fable" is meant to be interpreted at an allegorical level, as a commentary on the nature of religious faith among human beings.

In addition, the fact that Berkeley is a "shepherd" indicates his affinity with Christ, who is often described as a shepherd and his religious followers referred to as his flock. Berkeley is further described as "faithful to his master though he didn't deserve it." Again Berkeley represents someone who maintains complete faith in God, even if there is no concrete evidence to suggest that God has his best interests in mind. Nevertheless, like the faithful who wait in vain for a sign from God, Berkeley remains hopeful that Tilford will one day show him a sign of love through a gesture of kindness. "The watchdog

always hoped for a pat on his head, or for Tilford to play with him, some sign of approval to let him know he was appreciated, but such as this never came."

One day, Tilford does not show up at the pet shoppe. The other animals conclude that Tilford is dead but Berkeley maintains faith that Tilford will return. Those animals who assume Tilford is dead because he seems to have abandoned the shoppe, represent people in modern society who have concluded that God is dead because He seems to have abandoned humanity to its own devices. Berkeley's faith that Tilford will return represents the faith that God has not abandoned humanity, and will one day return to earth. As the other animals continue to insist that Tilford is never coming back, Berkeley tells them: "Be patient. . . . Believe me, he's coming back!" Johnson deliberately uses the expression "believe me" to indicate that Berkeley's insistence on the eventual return of Tilford is indeed a matter of belief, of faith in God.

While the animals clamor to be released from their cages, Berkeley remains reluctant to free them, fearing that chaos would result. Chaos suggests a world in which there is no God to impose order. Berkeley fears that the release of the animals will be a violation of the order God (in the form of Tilford) has imposed on the pet shoppe. After several days pass, however, the other animals convince Berkeley that they will starve to death if he does not let them out of their cages so they can get to the food supplies. Berkeley does so reluctantly, "praying this was the right thing."

After all of the animals are released, it is as if the forces of both good and evil have been set loose on the world. In Johnson's story, certain animals represent the forces of evil, associated with Hell and the Devil, while others represent the meek of the earth, whom Berkeley tries his best to protect. Monkey represents the ringleader among the forces of evil in the pet shoppe. Monkey represents the Devil, a dark parody of God. Berkeley notes that Monkey enjoyed aping the behavior of Tilford, which Berkeley considered a frightening parody, "like playing with fire, or literally biting the hand that fed you." The reference to "playing with fire" associates Monkey with the fire of Hell and damnation. The idea of biting the hand that feeds you suggests an attack on the hand of God, who gives life to all creatures.

The snakes in the pet shoppe are also among the creatures representing evil. In the Bible, the snake represents the Devil. When Berkeley insists that Tilford will come back eventually, one of the three snakes in the shoppe reiterates Monkey's assertion that Tilford is dead. Tarantula is another creature in the pet shoppe who represents the forces of evil roaming the earth. Monkey lets Tarantula out of his cage, but Berkeley questions the wisdom of letting such a creature roam free. Tarantula had been ordered by a Hell's Angel—a member of a notorious motorcycle gang—who never came back to get him. Tarantula is thus directly associated with the forces of Hell—as if he had been ordered forth from Hell to spread evil across the earth.

As a Christ-like figure, Berkeley takes it upon himself to feed and protect the meek and mild animals within the pet shoppe. He is particularly protective of the birds and the fish, who fear the threat of the snakes and of Monkey. In the Bible, Jesus is associated with fish, and Berkeley's protective stance toward the fish in the pet shoppe furthers the

image of the dog in this story as a Christ-figure. Furthermore, the food provided for the fish is described as "thin wafers," which Berkeley feeds to them. The phrase "thin wafer" suggests the Christian practice of communion, in which thin wafers are used in ritual to represent the body of Christ.

One day, Berkeley finds Monkey greedily eating the thin wafers meant for the fish. Berkeley tells Monkey not to eat these, but Monkey crams the wafers into his mouth. Monkey's disregard for the welfare of the fish and his greedy way of eating the wafers are represented as acts of sacrilege, in which God's meekest and mildest creatures are disregarded and the sacred wafers are sloppily consumed without regard for their significance. Seeing this, Goldfish asks Berkeley, "'What the hell is going on?"' The mention of Hell by the fish indicates that the forces of evil are starting to dominate the pet shoppe.

At this point, Berkeley begins to question his faith in "the old man." He wonders if Tilford really is dead "or indifferent to their problems." This suggests the idea of a God who, if not dead, is "indifferent" to the suffering of humanity. But Berkeley, though questioning his faith, maintains his belief in Tilford. When Goldfish asks Berkeley if Tilford is ever coming back, the dog replies, "'It's his Shoppe. He has to come back."' This statement suggests that idea that, since God made the world, it is unthinkable that he would then abandon his creation to the forces of evil. Berkeley later thinks:

The owner could not be dead. Monkey would never convince him of that. He simply had business elsewhere. And when he returned, he would expect to find the Shoppe as he had left it. Maybe even running more smoothly.

Berkeley thus subscribes to the belief that, although God may appear to have abandoned humanity, He will one day return, and it is the task of the faithful to carry out His will during His temporary absence from the earth. Berkeley tells himself, "No evil had visited the Shoppe from outside. He'd seen to that. None, he vowed, would destroy it from within." Berkeley thus resolves to carry out Tilford's will until he returns to the shop.

When Berkeley finally allows himself to fall asleep, he has a religious vision in a dream. In the beginning part of the dream Berkeley remembers his mother telling him about Noah's Ark, the biblical story in which Noah took a pair of every type of animal aboard his ark to save them from the flood. This biblical reference adds to the allegorical meaning of "Menagerie, a Child's Fable" to suggest that the pet shoppe represents the world of animals, or menagerie, Noah saved from the flood.

Berkeley then dreams of the return of Tilford to the shoppe—representing the return of God to earth.

Tilford threw open the Pet Shoppe door in a blast of wind and burst of preternatural brilliance that rayed the whole room, evaporated every shadow, and brought the squabbling, the conflict of interpretations, mutations, and internecine battles to a halt.

In Berkeley's dream, the return of Tilford is described as the appearance of God on earth, entering in a "burst of preternatural brilliance." Tilford's arrival evaporates the shadows, symbolically ridding the world of evil. His presence also puts an end to the "conflict of interpretations." Johnson doesn't specify what "interpretations" he is referring to but the reader can surmise that he means the conflicting interpretations of various religious texts, as well as interpretations regarding the existence of God. The arrival of God also ends all infighting between the creatures of the earth, all "internecine battles" are brought to a halt.

In Berkeley's dream, the return of God (in the form of Tilford) reveals that the apparent differences of form among the animals are unimportant in the light of God: "the colorless light behind the owner so blinding it obliterated their outlines, blurred their precious differences." Berkeley sees that the apparent differences between the animals, the sense of "identity" differentiating the species, is actually just an illusion, and that every creature in the pet shoppe is actually a part of the same God, "as if each were a rill of the same ancient light." As the dream ends, Berkeley receives the acknowledgement from God (Tilford) he had always desired: "Reaching down, he stroked Berkeley's head. And at last he said, like God whispering to Samuel: *Well done*. It was all Berkeley had ever wanted."

Berkeley's dream of the return of Tilford, however, is only a dream. He is awakened from this dream by the sounds of Parrot telling him that Monkey has gotten hold of a gun. With the gun, Monkey becomes the most powerful animal in the shoppe; the forces of evil have won out over the forces of good. When Berkeley jumps at Monkey, attempting to take the gun away from him, Monkey shoots the dog in the chest. Berkeley falls back to the floor, bleeding. As he lies there, he sees that a fire has started and is spreading throughout the pet shoppe. The fire in the pet shoppe represents the fires of Hell overtaking the earth. Meanwhile, "in the holy ruin of the Pet Shoppe the tarantula roamed free over the corpses of Frog and Iguana." The pet shoppe is in a state of chaos of biblical proportions, a "holy ruin," in which the forces of evil roam freely over the corpses of the innocent.

As the fires of Hell consume the pet shoppe and Berkeley lies on the floor bleeding to death, he tries to explain his dream to Tortoise. Berkeley tells Tortoise they should all have been able to "endure," because they all have plenty in common. Berkeley's last words are, "for Christ's sake, we're *all* animals." Berkeley, whose final words invoke the name of Christ, represents a Christ-like figure who remains faithful to God and dies trying to rid the world of evil.

Source: Liz Brent, Critical Essay on "Menagerie, a Child's Fable," in *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

Witcover is an editor and writer whose fiction, book reviews, and critical essays appear regularly in print magazines and online media. In the following essay, Witcover discusses Charles Johnson's use of postmodern techniques in Johnson's story.

What to make of Charles Johnson's "Menagerie, a Child's Fable?" The story saw its original publication in the literary magazine *Indiana Review* in 1984 but appeared in book form for the first time in Johnson's 1986 collection of short fiction, *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*. Titles are always a good place to start thinking about a work of fiction, and the title of Johnson's collection suggests elements of magic, moralism, and multiple allusion that find purposeful echoes and variations in the individual stories it contains.

The title *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* is familiar to most people from a sequence of that name in the famous Walt Disney film, *Fantasia*, in which the cartoon character Mickey Mouse "plays" the role of the overreaching apprentice who triggers disaster by foolishly casting one of his master's magic spells—a spell he subsequently proves helpless to undo. But Johnson is alluding to more than just a movie and a mouse in his title. The music for the *Sorcerer's Apprentice* sequence in the film comes from a work of the same title by the French composer Paul Dukas (1865-1935), who in turn, based his composition upon a poem of that name by the German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832), who, in turn, had based his poem on an old tale either first set down or—more likely— borrowed from a still-older written (or oral) source (or sources) by the Greek poet Lucian of Samosata (c. 115-c. 200). Thus, in a mere three words, Johnson has cast his net of allusion across different art forms (films, music, poetry) and as many or more different cultures, continents, and centuries. Nor should readers overlook the fact that Johnson, like Mickey Mouse's creator, Walt Disney, is a cartoonist, or that in *Fantasia*, the name of the wizard whose spell Mickey appropriates is Yen Sid; that is, Disney backwards.

What Johnson pulls back in his net are images, themes, and other flotsam and jetsam of history, art, and philosophy—not just wriggling fish, clawclacking crabs, and arabesque seashells but old rubber boots, plastic six-pack holders, and soggy cigarette butts—out of which he will create works of art that are both original and derivative: derivative because they contain fragments of (or allusions to) other works of art; original because these fragments or allusions are assembled in new and different ways. An important part of Johnson's literary method and intent as a writer involves weaving together—sometimes smoothly, sometimes jarringly—elements derived from a number of different authors, genres, times, philosophies, and cultures, pulling from, pulling apart, and recombining a multitude of sources in a way that is at once homage, parody, metaphor, magic spell, and more.

This Frankenstein-like approach to the art of storytelling reveals clear affinities to the loosely constituted, self-contradictory, controversial, and hugely influential literary and philosophical movement known as postmodernism. Definitions of postmodernism are a

slippery business, but Patricia Waugh presents a useful outline in her book, *Postmodernism: A Reader:*

Though there are many forms of postmodernism, they all express the sense that our inherited forms of knowledge and representation are undergoing some fundamental shift: modernity may be coming to an end, strangled by its own logic, or rendered exhausted by economic changes which have propelled us into a new age of information technology, consumerism and global economics which erode the stability of such concepts as nation, state or essential human nature.

Among other things, postmodernism favors concepts of difference and multiplicity above notions of shared or unifying cultural beliefs and commonalities; the mere possibility, let alone the existence, of a single overarching or integrative world-view—such as, to name but a few, capitalism, democracy, Western civilization, Christian morality, the scientific method, and human reason—is greeted with suspicion if not outright hostility because of the plethora of voices such so-called "metanarratives" necessarily exclude; for example, the voices of African Americans and women excluded from thousands of years of patriarchal, white, Western culture. Such exclusion is inherently violent, and thus to be abhorred and all metanarratives are by definition coercive, and thus to be condemned.

Yet even excluded voices have no better claim to a privileged status ultimately, for then they, too, would become metanarratives, to be disassembled or deconstructed in their turn. Thus, postmodernism posits a fragmented and endlessly fragmenting world of hyper-relativism and self-referentiality in which ideas of wholeness or identity are illusory and dangerous; the cartoon character who saws off the branch of the tree on which she herself is sitting is performing a quintessentially postmodern act. Turned on itself, postmodern consciousness has, as it were, pulled itself down by its own bootstraps. Nor, once the process has begun, is escape possible. Where would one go to escape both the world and human consciousness? Whether one seeks to overthrow the constellation of metanarratives constituting one's particular culture, modify it, or join in, one is always and already complicit in the illusion. The most one can do is to be aware of that complicity and choose to consciously participate in the process of sabotaging all metanarratives from within. As Waugh writes:

[W]e can no longer seek transcendence. There is no position outside culture from which to view culture . . . no conceptual space not already implicated in that which it seeks to contest. There can only be disruption from within: micropolitics, language games, parodic skirmishes, irony, fragmentation.

This, then, is Johnson's method, but an analysis of the short story "Menagerie, a Child's Fable" will show, his aims are quite different. For postmodernists, the artist is a suspect figure because he or she is attempting to compel people to think or feel in a certain way; attempting, in other words, to impose an elitist metanarrative. The very idea of a "masterpiece," to a postmodernist, carries embedded within it the concept of the master-slave relationship, and as such, is to be rejected.

While Johnson would agree, as he does repeatedly in an interview with critic Jonathan Little reprinted in the collection *I Call Myself an Artist*, that "art is elitist," his use of the term carries no disapprobation; on the contrary, it is the highest praise that Johnson can offer, the artistic goal to which he himself aspires: "I do believe in the masterpiece. I believe that a great work of art is a special appearance in our lives." Johnson turns the weapons of postmodernism against the postmodernist enterprise, arguing that a state of integrative transcendence is not just possible: it's necessary.

A menagerie is a collection of wild animals displayed in cages or enclosures for the entertainment of human beings; there is generally a suggestion of the strange or even outlandish in connection with the use of this word that separates it, on the one hand, from "zoo" and, on the other, from "circus." Fables, made famous (although not invented) by the Greek writer, Aesop (c. 620-c. 560 B.C.), are didactic stories, often featuring animals in more-or-less human roles, whose purpose is to entertainingly communicate a moral lesson.

But Johnson is not content to alert readers that his story is a fable; he goes a step further by labeling it a "child's fable." This seems excessive; after all, isn't every fable a child's fable? In fact, while fables as a literary genre have come to be associated with children, especially in modern times, originally they were intended as much or more for adults, and many fables throughout their long history up to the present day have held true to this original meaning. One thinks, for example, of the dark fables of Franz Kafka and George Orwell. Surely, then, Johnson is helpfully informing his readers that his fable is one of those intended for children and should not be confused with fables written for adults.

Yet the truth is precisely the opposite. By labeling his story a "child's fable," Johnson is making a doubly ironic statement. First he is commenting upon what is and is not suitable for children in our culture; what one believes children need to be taught, and the kind of knowledge one believes they should be shielded from; in other words, he is attacking a particular metanarrative. Second, Johnson is addressing his readers as children, implying that readers must attempt to read his fable in a childlike way. This does not mean that he wants his readers to put their adult selves aside; rather, he is talking about a particular way of reading, of perceiving the world, analogous to what Jesus meant when he told his apostles that, "Except ye . . . become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven." (Mt. 18.3, King James Bible.) However, Johnson's kingdom is no Christian heaven, but a paradise of art that both dissolves and merges individual identity through a transcendent creative act combining elements of Eastern Buddhism and the Western philosophy of Phenomenology.

The story that takes place in "Menagerie, a Child's Fable" is, as befits the fable genre, a simple one yet, as befits Johnson, more complicated than first appears to be the case. The setting is Tilford's Pet Shoppe in Seattle where Berkeley, a "pious German shepherd," serves as watchdog. Berkeley is "not the smartest, but steady," a solid and stolid watchdog who prides himself on never being "asleep at the switch." Mr. Tilford, the owner, is "hottempered, a drunkard and a loner," a cruel man more concerned with profits than the welfare of his animals. He feeds them as little as he can and shows the

faithful Berkeley not the slightest sign of appreciation, not even a pat on the head. Yet despite the unpleasantness of Tilford, Berkeley's position is secure enough, and life at the Pet Shoppe proceeds in an orderly routine until one evening, Tilford leaves early, forgetting to feed the animals. And does not return.

Johnson's setting and title allude to two familiar stories. The first is the Biblical tale of Noah's Ark, in which diverse animals survive the Flood by living harmoniously under the patriarchal leadership of Noah. Here, obviously, the Noah figure, Tilford, has abandoned ship, as has that other patriarchal figure for whom Noah is merely a stand-in: God. The other story is George Orwell's classic novel *Animal Farm*, in which a group of animals rebel against the human owners of their farm and take control, running it for themselves with horrific results. *Animal Farm* is subtitled "A Fairy Story" for much the same reasons as Johnson has subtitled his story "a Child's Fable."

On Manor Farm, what begins as a democracy in which all animals are equal soon turns into a dictatorship where "all animals are equal—but some are more equal than others." At the top of the heap are the pigs, led by Napoleon, and the closing image of the novel, in which arguing pigs and humans have become indistinguishable from each other, provides both an extraordinarily pessimistic portrait of human nature and a devastating argument against the possibility, to say nothing of the morality, of utopian projects. The fate of the animals in Tilford's Pet Shoppe will be even worse, yet unlike Orwell, Johnson will permit a ray of hope to reach the reader, if not his characters.

With Tilford gone, the animals, led by Monkey, a postmodernist "comedian" and "clown" who frightens Berkeley by daring to mimick Tilford, clamor to be released from their cages. Johnson portrays the Pet Shoppe as a microcosm of postmodern America, with its emphasis on diversity and multiculturalism:

Tilford had collected everything from baby alligators to zebra-striped fish, an entire federation of cultures, with each animal having its own distinct, inviolable nature (so they said), the rows and rows of counters screaming with a plurality of so many backgrounds, needs, and viewpoints that Berkeley, his head splitting, could hardly hear his own voice above the din.

At last, by calling him a "fascist," Monkey shames Berkeley into releasing the animals so that, "united by the spirit of a bright, common future," they can feed and care for themselves.

Instead, chaos and violence ensue as the animals revert to their traditional animosities and alliances, expressing the animal equivalents of racism and sexism. Instead of sharing food equally, the strong prey on the weak. Sickness takes root and spreads. Berkeley pleads for reason and, when that fails, restraint, but the animals, egged on by the trickster figure of Monkey, refuse to cooperate. At last, Berkeley realizes that despite his belief in the humanistic values of cooperation and reason, "truth was decided in the end by those who could be bloodiest in fang and claw." Even in the Pet Shoppe, the Law of the Jungle prevails. Berkeley can impose a sort of order on the other animals,

but only because of his "bigger teeth." And even then, it is a precarious order. As Monkey warns, "'Dog,' he said, scratching under one arm, 'you gotta sleep *some*time.'"

And so, at last, exhausted, he does. Waking after a dream, Berkeley finds the Pet Shoppe in flames and Monkey in possession of Tilford's handgun. Attempting to wrest the pistol away from Monkey, Berkeley is shot. As he lies in his own blood, dying amid the flames that will devour the Pet Shoppe and all within save Tortoise, who can withdraw into his thick shell, Berkeley bemoans their failure: "'We could have endured, we had enough in common—for Christ's sake, we're *all* animals." To which the Tortoise grimly replies, as if no other outcome had ever been possible, "Indeed."

This seems just as bleak a vision as Orwell's, if not more so. As Jonathan Little notes in his book-length critical study, *Charles Johnson's Spiritual Imagination*, "This fable is an apocalyptic commentary on the contemporary culture wars, a virtual jeremiad against the supporters of ethnic and gender particularization." It depicts American society fragmented into viciously competing subgroups, including but not limited to those constituted by race and gender, each of which will sooner see the whole enterprise go up in flames than submit to any social or political ordering system that would deny the primacy of their own individual concerns.

Johnson's alternative is presented implicitly in his literary style and explicitly in a fragment of Berkeley's dream, referred to above. First, reference has already been made to Johnson's postmodernist literary style, his grab-bag mix of high and low culture. The dog Berkeley, for example, the only character in the story to have a nongeneric name aside from Mr. Tilford, is so named in order to punningly suggest the English philosopher Bishop George Berkeley (1685-1753) (pronounced "Bark-lee"). Nor, remembering the character of Yen Sid, should readers forget what the word "dog" spells backwards. Thus, at the same time Johnson references the philosophy of Bishop Berkeley, a precursor of the Phenomenological philosophy that he himself espouses, he undercuts the seriousness of the allusion with the hoariest and most groanworthy of puns.

Similarly, at a moment of deep existential angst, when Berkeley begins to consider the possibility that "Tilford was dead, or indifferent to their problems," Johnson compares the watchdog to "a mountaintop wolf silhouetted by the moon in a Warner Brothers cartoon." These playful contrasts of high and low call attention to the presence of the author: that is, of Johnson himself. As critic Gary Storhoff notes in "The Artist as Universal Mind: Berkeley's Influence on Charles Johnson" in the *African American Review:* "In 'Menagerie,' through his many literary jokes and self-reflexive techniques, Johnson calls attention to himself as the creator of the pet store world in which Berkeley participates." Tilford may be absent from the world of the Pet Shoppe, but Johnson is not; evidence of his presence is everywhere the reader looks, even though Berkeley and the other animals are blind to it. This is more than a mere conceit, but to understand its full importance, a discussion must be made into the philosophy of Bishop Berkeley.

Bishop Berkeley believed that everything in the world exists because of the presence of an apprehending mind. That is, all the objects one perceives around one through one's various senses, including other people, are produced by thought; matter is created by consciousness and cannot continue to exist without it. To avoid conundrums of the "If a tree falls in the forest" variety, Berkeley (who was, after all, a bishop in a highly religious age) held that matter has continuing existence because a single apprehending mind is responsible for and infinitely aware of the universe and everything in it: the mind of God. The Phenomenologist school, originated by the philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), removed God from Berkeley's thoroughgoing Idealism and replaced Him with a transcendental human consciousness.

Returning to "Menagerie, a Child's Fable," one can see now that Berkeley the dog has placed his faith in what does not exist: that is, God. In the philosophy of Bishop Berkeley, God's presence is proved by the continued existence of the world and everything in it. When Bishop Berkeley sleeps, the world does not cease to exist simply because he is no longer "there" to perceive it; the bishop may be sleeping, but God never sleeps. Yet when Berkeley the dog goes to sleep, the ordered world of the Pet Shoppe falls apart.

Tilford is not God; there is no God. But the fact that the Pet Shoppe is destroyed while Berkeley sleeps indicates that the Idealist position, of consciousness creating reality, is correct. The problem is that Berkeley the dog has placed his faith in the wrong thing. Instead of trusting in Tilford, or God, he should have faith in the ability of his own transcendental consciousness to imagine the world. According to Gary Storhoff, "Johnson employs Berkeley as an emblem of the ineffectual philosopher who is defeated by the world because he lacks confidence in his own imagination as transforming power."

One sees this most clearly in Berkeley's dream. Here the watchdog fantasizes about the return of Tilford:

Tilford threw open the Pet Shoppe door in a blast of wind and preternatural brilliance that rayed the whole room, evaporated every shadow, and brought the squabbling, the conflict of interpretations, mutations, and internecine battles to a halt.

So far, this is straightforward enough; it is Tilford's authority that overawes the animals; his presence, and the threat of his power, restores order as Berkeley has always known it. But then a curious thing happens, and something "behind" Tilford intrudes into the dream, with extraordinary results:

[T]he colorless light behind the owner [was] so blinding it obliterated their outlines, blurred their precious differences, as if each were a rill of the same ancient light somehow imprisoned in form.

The source of this "colorless light behind the owner" is none other than Johnson himself. He is showing Berkeley what the power of creative imagination can do, placing the creative artist where Bishop Berkeley had placed God, giving the creative artist the

transcendental consciousness of Husserl's Phenomenology, and adding to it the egodissolving transcendence of Buddhism, which recognizes and pierces "the illusion of identity." Yet Berkeley cannot process this insight, and the vision fades "like a dream within the watchdog's dream," until only Tilford and Berkeley remain. This is Berkeley's failure; in the end, he cannot transcend the dualistic, patriarchal limitations of his imagination and accept the dream within a dream offered by his true creator, Johnson. Because of this failure, the Pet Shoppe will perish.

But Berkeley's failure is not Johnson's. On the contrary, Johnson has used postmodern literary techniques not to burn down the metanarrative represented by the Pet Shoppe —what would be the point, or indeed, the challenge, in that?—but instead to triumphantly crack it open and reveal the transcendental possibility of what Jonathan Little terms "integration beyond the level of racial, national, and sexual differences."

Source: Paul Witcover, Critical Essay on "Menagerie, a Child's Fable," in *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #3

Prebilic is an independent author who writes children's literature. She holds degrees in psychology and business. In this essay, Prebilic discusses why Johnson's pet shoppe effectively illustrates the complexities of balance of power and how it interplays with multicultural tension.

Johnson chose Tilford's Pet Shoppe in Seattle as the milieu for his short story "Menagerie, a Child's Fable." He makes an excellent choice. His title cunningly describes his setting—a menagerie represents a place where people keep and train animals especially for exhibition. As animals speak and act like humans in Johnson's story, he transports readers on an adventurous journey. This venue allows Johnson to use philosophical fiction to present the issues of power—the possession of control, authority, or influence over others—and the multicultural tensions of prejudice and discrimination.

The pet shoppe setting contains fundamentals similar to society. It symbolizes an "entire federation of cultures, with each animal having its own distinct, inviolable nature." For example, the pet shoppe houses an unlimited number of bird, beast, or fowl species. This structure parallels the limitless cultures of today's cities. Likewise, animals as well as humans speak many languages. The multitude of behaviors, backgrounds, needs, and viewpoints, in conjunction with the pet shop's transient nature, create an atmosphere where negative sentiments would be hard to overcome. Add to this starvation, fear, and a deadly fire to create a state of affairs where gut reaction compels the outcome. Responsible choices for the highest good of all animals cannot be considered because of survival needs. In this setting, Johnson explores power and survival, prejudice and discrimination.

Each animal arrives at the pet shoppe for a unique reason. Perhaps they were ordered and not purchased, like Tarantula. Maybe they've been there a day or for weeks. No matter how they arrived, they must learn to coexist in a small location similar to a city. If Johnson had tried to use a zoo to present these issues, its effects would have been limited. For example, zoo owners exhibit their animals daily to a paying public. The animals count on a multitude of people to feed, clean, treat them fairly, and comfort them. Neglect and abandonment could not occur at a zoo without earning a spot on headline news.

However, a pet shoppe closed indefinitely would hardly stir the public ire, especially if the community saw the owner as a disgruntled hermit. Using the scenario Johnson aptly develops, he establishes the unique and helpless dependence that the animals have on Mr. Tilford. They must rely on him to feed them, clean them, treat them fairly, and comfort them. This situation conceivably parallels the reliance that people place on their government. People look to their government to provide continuous sovereign authority over the making and administration of policy. They rely on it to treat them fairly, provide for them, and establish a level of comfort. Perhaps if the proprietors of a government suddenly disappeared, mayhem would ensue in the community's quest for survival.

Using the analogy of animals as the players in this setting, Johnson refers to a multitude of differences without stereotyping and offending readers: fur or scale style and color, eating behavior, grooming habits, personal preferences, and attitudes. He describes how one species may get offended without rhyme or reason by the routines of another. Since animals' offenses and behaviors are nonhuman, readers can examine them objectively without feeling as if Johnson is highlighting *human cultural* differences. This story serves as a catalyst for cultures to understand how prejudice and discrimination injure a community. Readers can inspect their unrecognized attitudes towards diversity using this unbiased arena.

In "Menagerie, a Child's Fable," Johnson uses Berkeley as the central character. When cross, alcoholic Mr. Tilford fails to return to his pet shop, Berkeley the German shepherd reluctantly frees all creatures. For five days, they survive as they discover belatedly the disadvantages of abuse of power, prejudice, and discrimination.

It is through this pious watchdog's mind that readers experience the plight of the pet shoppe and explore the issue of power. Faithful and reliable Berkeley guards the shoppe for Mr. Tilford. "Weighing more than some men" Berkeley feels "confident of his power" but never flaunts it. Berkeley wants appreciation and a pat on his head. Hottempered, reclusive Mr. Tilford fails to see Berkeley's wish. Eventually, Berkeley turns apathetic, yet continues to do his duty.

In Mr. Tilford's absence, bird, beast, and fowl look up to Berkeley and demand an explanation. He has none. He hopes that Tilford will return or someone will rescue them. Attempts to get the attention of passersby fail. Berkeley begins to realize as days pass by that if Tilford *is* dead and no one rescues them, they all will die. Therefore, with Monkey's prodding and against his better judgment, Berkeley frees Monkey so he can release the others and open the feedbags.

Berkeley takes comfort in his power, his "bigger teeth," and the fact that he outweighs the other animals. He doubts that the weak sense of procedure and fair play in the shoppe will maintain order, keep the peace, and provide for them as Tilford had. Yet he doesn't know what else to do. He knows they must try to survive.

Once Monkey frees the creatures, the lack of a balance of power escalates into mayhem. Ancient blood feuds arise between beasts. Siamese jumps Rabbit with the idea of creating a cabbit with jackrabbit legs and catlike whiskers; the female animals attack and kill the Siamese. Fish drift belly up in a murky tank as lizards suck baby canaries from their eggs. The animals cannot find an organized peace. Perhaps Woodrow Wilson addressed this dilemma admirably when he spoke to the U.S. Senate on January 22, 1917, quoted from *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations* by John Bartlett: "There must be, not a balance of power, but a community of power; not organized rivalries, but an organized common peace."

As the imbalance of power plays out, Johnson exposes the idea of prejudice. He shows how the disadvantaged, the weaker, the confined, and the young tend to be mistreated. John Langone describes this phenomena in *Spreading Poison: A Book About Racism*

and Prejudice. He notes that prejudice thrives on "those who are physically, emotionally or economically injured." He adds that "society's 'outsiders' include the diseased and the mentally unbalanced . . . people in wheelchairs."

The pet shoppe enables Johnson to naturally depict the disadvantaged and the outsiders. Specifically, the goldfish fear for their safety as they realize their survival depends on another animal sprinkling food into their tanks. In this disadvantaged state, they realize that when the storeroom supplies deplete, they may soon become food themselves. Likewise, Tortoise bites at Monkey whenever Monkey tries to release him from his cage. Tortoise lives in the shoppe, but "you could hardly say he was part of it." He had not spoken in a year after escaping for a week and mysteriously returning. Even kind Berkeley feels apprehensive of the outsider Tortoise.

Johnson illustrates how prejudice is an injury resulting from an action of one being that disregards rights of another. For example, Berkeley strives to create a balance—equality among animals. He makes a promise to protect the fish, the pet shop's disadvantaged. For five days, he doesn't sleep until Monkey insists that he get some rest. Berkeley doesn't trust arrogant Monkey who sees nothing wrong with feeding on the fish. This puts Monkey in a power struggle with Berkeley. However, Berkeley must capitulate because he feels exhausted. As he woofs in his sleep in a ravenous slumber, Monkey grabs the Smith and Wesson gun and aims it at Berkeley. Parrot awakens Berkeley in a plea that Berkeley so something to protect them. It is too late. Monkey rips a hole in Berkeley's side, and Berkeley lays bleeding to death. Monkey's prejudice towards Berkeley led to murder, an extreme form of prejudice.

Johnson exploits the animals' eating habits to present discrimination, or the act of treating a person less favorably because of gender, race, religion, or another difference. As creatures with different preferences feast, the birds draw away in horror from the reptiles that savor eggs as a delicacy. Coldblooded reptiles feel nauseated at the body heat of mammals and refuse to feed beside them. Johnson illustrates how these natural differences can lead to discrimination. Perhaps, as Langone writes, "distrust of someone who is different" is "part of human nature. Being different" is "a heavy burden." He continues "beneath our different skins. . . . We all have hearts and minds . . . tendencies toward good and evil."

Perhaps this idea of being common at a gut level inspired Berkeley to view this mayhem spiritually. During Berkeley's deep sleep before his death, his surreal dream alludes to the greater good in all creatures. As he dreams Mr. Tilford's return, Berkeley experiences a "preternatural brilliance that rayed the whole room, evaporated every shadow, and brought the squabbling, the conflict . . . to a halt." Mr. Tilford reaches down and strokes Berkeley head. Berkeley has achieved what he wanted in life. Later, as he lies dying from the wound afflicted by Monkey's prejudice, a deadly fire burns out of control in the storeroom. It will consume the pet shop. Tortoise alone will survive, protected by his shell. In Berkeley's final transition from naivety to wisdom, he conveys to Tortoise, "'we could have endured, we had enough in common—we're *all* animals.'" Tortoise agrees.

This poignant story parallels Johnson's proclivity towards moralistic themes in his writing. His "works typically explore themes essential to black American history—connections between race and sex, race and class, as well as interpersonal relationships." However, in "Menagerie, a Child's Fable," he takes readers into the global issues of multicultural tension. No longer does Johnson specifically focus on African-American issues but, deliberate in attitude and purpose, he cleverly helps readers walk away with the opinion that we are *all* people of the world that struggle with multicultural tensions.

Langone sums up this struggle properly when he says:

The burden, then, is on each and every one of us . . . If we can appreciate that each one of us is a product of special cultures, if we can open our minds to the differences and still see that we are all, as they say, brothers and sisters under the skin, and if we renounce acts of racial and ethnic violence whenever they occur, then we will be able to live together.

If readers look at the multicultural tensions of today, they will note that the grotesque tragedies of Jewish concentration camps and sovereign beheading remain only in history. Yet, Johnson creates an awareness that the world cultures must continue to examine their beliefs about equal rights. Prejudice and discrimination based on skin color, economic status, religious affiliation, and gender make headlines news regularly. Murder in the name of God, Allah, or an almighty supreme being still exists. People of all cultures make choices to perpetuate multicultural tension. When a person physically beats up another because they don't agree, that community sees prejudice. When a person insults another, that community encounters discrimination. When a person bullies without intervention, that community allows hatred. Johnson reminds readers to keep vigilant. He hopes to impart the knowledge that people can make a choice; they can seek an organized common peace.

Source: Michelle Prebilic, Critical Essay on "Menagerie, a Child's Fable," in *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Topics for Further Study

Johnson's story "Menagerie, a Child's Fable" is a fable about social inequality and power struggles between different identity groups. Learn more about a societal conflict currently taking place anywhere in the world. This could include any group of people organized to struggle against legal, governmental, or societal powers to which they are opposed. (Examples might be the struggles between Israelis and the Palestinians, or between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland.) Try to explain the perspectives of all parties involved in this struggle. What does each group wish to achieve through this struggle? What are the major points of disagreement between the various sides in this conflict? What do you see as a possible solution that might be fair and satisfactory to all sides?

Johnson's major literary influences include the authors Jean Toomer, Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, and John Gardner. Learn more about one of these authors. Provide a brief overview of his life and literary career. What are his major works? What themes and concerns does he address through his fiction?

In "Menagerie, a Child's Fable" the animal society inhabiting the pet shop ends in violence, chaos, and disaster. Write an alternative version of the story in which the various characters take a different set of actions that result in a happy, peaceful outcome for everyone involved.

"Menagerie, a Child's Fable" is written in the form of a fable. Write your own original fable, using animals as the main characters.

Compare and Contrast

1960s, 1970s, and 1980s: The nations of Europe work increasingly toward peace and mutually beneficial trade relations through various international organizations that change names and merge several times over the decades. The European Economic Community, established in 1957, is designed to facilitate peaceful, mutually beneficial trade relations between the nations of Europe. In 1967 the European Economic Community merges with the European Cole and Steel Community and the European Atomic Energy Community to form the European Communities. In 1979 the European Communities establish the European Monetary System to facilitate international trade between its member nations. In the 1980s the European Communities change its name to the European Community. In 1987 the European Community adopts the Single European Act, declaring the intention of creating a free-trade market throughout Europe.

1990s and Today: The Treaty on European Union, also called the Maastricht Treaty, is completed in 1991. The Maastricht Treaty expands the scope of the European Community, changing its name to the European Union. The European Economic Community is now called the European Community. In 1994 the European Economic Area, an extensive free-trade zone across Western Europe, is created by the European Community. On January 1, 2002, twelve of the fifteen member-nations of the European Union adopt the Euro as their new currency. The Euro represents the increasingly peaceful, cooperative and interdependent relationship between the nations of Europe. The three nations that choose not to adopt the Euro—as well as many individual citizens within the nations adopting the Euro— argue that a single currency will threaten the diversity of cultures represented by the different nations of Europe. However, the terms of the European Union seek to ensure the cultural diversity among its member nations through a provision that all national languages represented by the Union will be preserved.

1960s, 1970s, and 1980s: The United States is in a continuing state of Cold War with the Soviet Union, a communist nation. Various arms treaties between the United States and the Soviet Union are designed to reduce the threat of nuclear war between the two superpowers. Within the Soviet Union, many former nations, such as Poland and Czechoslovakia, struggle against communist rule for the right to self-determination.

1990s and Today: Since 1991 the Soviet Union has been dissolved as a communist nation and separated into some eleven independent nations. The nations of the former Soviet Union belong to the Commonwealth of Independent States, an organization to promote peace and prosperity among its member nations. The dissolution of the Soviet Union ends the era of Cold War. However, the United States and Russia continue to negotiate over treaties aimed at reducing arsenals of nuclear arms.

1960s, 1970s, and 1980s: The Civil Rights Act of 1964 initiates the implementation of affirmative action policies. Affirmative action policies are designed to help equalize the racial and gender balance in education and employment by allowing women and minorities limited preferential status in hiring and admission to institutions of higher

education. In the late 1970s, various court cases arise in which white males claim that affirmative action policies represent "reverse discrimination."

1990s and Today: Beginning in 1989, the Supreme Court makes greater and greater restrictions on the scope of Affirmative Action policies, claiming that they are unconstitutional on the grounds of "reverse discrimination." Various states throughout the United States have passed laws restricting or abolishing affirmative action policies.

What Do I Read Next?

Cane (1951) is a collection of stories and poems by Jean Toomer, one of the early masters of African-American fiction and a major influence on Johnson. *Cane* addresses issues of racial oppression and African-American identity in both the South and the North.

Invisible Man (1947), by Ralph Ellison, is a novel treating issues of Black identity in American culture. Johnson considers *Invisible Man* an important influence on his own fiction.

Black Boy (1966), by Richard Wright, is a novel about the coming-of-age of an African-American boy as he develops into a young man. Wright has been a major literary influence on Johnson.

Middle Passage (1990) is Johnson's award-winning novel about an African-American man traveling on a slave ship.

King: The Photobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr. (2000), co-authored by Johnson and Bob Adelman, offers numerous photographs tracing major events in the Civil Rights movement led by Martin Luther King Jr.

Rites of Passage: Stories about Growing up by Black Writers from around the World (1994), edited by Tonya Bolden, includes short stories about childhood and coming-of-age by writers of African descent from around the world. This book includes a forward written by Johnson.

Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s through the 1980s (1990), by Henry Hampton, Steve Fayer, and Sarah Flynn, provides a history of the Civil Rights movement through the words of a variety of people who participated in the effort.

Freedom's Children: Young Civil Rights Activists Tell Their Own Stories (1993), by Ellen Levine, is a collection of interviews with African Americans from the South who were involved in the Civil Rights movement during the 1950s and 1960s.

We Have No Leaders: African-Americans in the Post-Civil Rights Era (1996), by Robert C. Smith, concerns the direction taken by African-American political activists in the wake of the Civil Rights era.

Further Study

Adams, Janus, *Freedom Days: 365 Inspired Moments in Civil Rights History*, Wiley, 1998.

Adams provides historical information, accompanied by photographs, of major events in a variety of civil rights struggles throughout the world.

Carson, Clayborne, ed., *The Eyes on the Prize Civil Rights Reader*, Penguin, 1991.

Carson provides a basic overview of the history of the Civil Rights movement.

Carson, Clayborne, and Kris Shephard, eds., *A Call to Conscience: The Landmark Speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.*, Warner Books, 2001.

Carson and Shephard provide a collection of major speeches by Civil Rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr.

Fairclough, Adam, *Better Day Coming: Blacks and Equality, 1890-2000*, Viking, 2000.

Fairclough provides discussion of the various struggles of African Americans for greater equality throughout the twentieth century.

Johnson, Charles, and John McCluskey Jr., eds., *Black Men Speaking*, Indiana University Press, 1997.

Black Men Speaking provides discussion by a variety of African-American men on issues of African-American identity and the African-American experience.

Robnett, Belinda, *How Long? How Long? African-American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights*, Oxford University Press, 1997.

Robnett provides a collection of essays on the crucial role of African-American women in the Civil Rights movement.

Rosales, F. Arturo, *Chicano!: The History of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement*, Arte Publico, 1997.

Rosales provides a historical account of the struggles of Mexican Americans fighting for greater equality within the United States.

Smith, Patricia, and Charles Johnson, *Africans in America: America's Journey through Slavery*, Harcourt Brace, 1998.

Smith and Charles provide an historical account of slavery in the United States.

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O'Connor, Maureen, "Being Different," in *Equal Rights*, What Do We Mean by Human Rights series, Franklin Watts, 1997, pp. 7-10.

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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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