Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter Study Guide

Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

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Introduction

Chitra Divakaruni's "Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter" was first published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1998 and was included in Divakaruni's second shortstory collection, *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* (2001). Divakaruni is an Indian who immigrated to the United States, and "Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter" is one of her many stories that explores the culture shock faced by Indian women who have made such immigrations. In this particular case, Mrs. Dutta, an Indian widow, bows to her sense of duty and pressure from her Calcutta relatives. She decides to come and live with her son and his family in the San Francisco Bay area—a setting that Divakaruni uses repeatedly in her fiction. Throughout the story, Mrs. Dutta tries to answer her Calcutta friend's question about whether or not she is happy in America, but she keeps putting her response letter aside. She is afraid to explore how she really feels, since this may conflict with her loyalty to her family. However, through a series of cultural conflicts, she finally gains the strength to be honest with herself about her unhappiness. When this story was published in 1998, India was highly visible in the international arena for the cultural conflict among its religious groups, its nuclear weapons tests, and its ongoing border dispute with Pakistan. A current copy of "Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter" can be found in *The Best American Short Stories 1999,* which was published by the Houghton Mifflin Company in 1999.

Author Biography

Divakaruni was born in Calcutta, India, on July 29, 1956, into a traditional, middle-class Indian family. She lived in several Indian cities while she was growing up and then attended the University of Calcutta, where she earned her bachelor's degree in English. Her family expected that she would get married after she finished her education and spend her time raising a family in India. However, in 1976, when she was nineteen, she immigrated to the United States. In 1978, she graduated with a master's degree in English from Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio. The next year, she married S. Murthy Divakaruni, although not in a traditional arranged marriage. In 1985, she graduated from the University of California at Berkeley with her doctorate in English. While she was a student at Berkeley, she volunteered at a women's center, where she worked with abused women. This experience would inspire her in many ways. After school, she taught creative writing at Diablo Valley College (1987-1989). She also began writing her own poems.

In 1989, Divakaruni began teaching creative writing at Foothill College. While teaching there, she published several works. In her poetry collection *Black Candle* (1991), the poems concern the various issues faced by women in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. The same year, she helped form Maitri, a nonprofit organization in the San Francisco Bay area that assists South Asian women facing domestic violence, emotional abuse, or family conflict. Maitri is a Sanskrit word that means friendship. Her volunteer work with other immigrant women at Maitri—where she also served as president for several years—inspired her to write Arranged Marriage: Stories (1995). This collection of short stories, which won the American Book Award in 1996, examined the experiences of immigrant Indian women who are torn between their Indian heritage and American culture. In 1997, she published two works, her first novel, *The Mistress of Spices, and a poetry collection, Leaving Yuba City: New and Selected Poems.* The latter was awarded the Allen Ginsberg Poetry Prize and the Pushcart Prize. In 2001, Divakaruni published her second collection of short stories, *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* (2001), which includes the story "Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter." Her latest novel, *The Vine of Desire* (2002), is a sequel to her 1999 novel, Sister of *My Heart*. Divakaruni lives and works in the San Francisco Bay area.

Plot Summary

"Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter" follows two days in the life of Mrs. Dutta, an old, widowed Indian woman who had moved into her son's American home two months earlier. On the first morning, she gets up too early, prompting her son, Sagar, to tell her that she is waking up his wife, Shyamoli, and that Mrs. Dutta should get up later. In this way, Mrs. Dutta's habits, which she learned as an arranged wife in India, conflict with the American customs of her son's family. The next morning, Mrs. Dutta gets up later as ordered, but now she ends up being in the bathroom when her grandchildren need it, and they complain. Mrs. Dutta is surprised when Shyamoli does not punish the children for being disrespectful to Mrs. Dutta, their elder. As she does throughout the story, she compares this American behavior with the Indian customs that she has followed her whole life. She also thinks about the letter she received from her Calcutta friend, Mrs. Basu, who has asked if Mrs. Dutta is happy in America. Mrs. Dutta is struggling to be loyal to her son's family, although she feels uncomfortable about life in America, and so she has not sent a reply to her friend yet. She starts making alu dum, a traditional Indian meal. In her mind, she writes a response to Mrs. Basu, saying that she misses India and then rebukes herself for being nostalgic. She continues making her meal, noting that Shyamoli is worried that Mrs. Dutta's food has too much cholesterol and is making them gain weight.

Later in the day, Mrs. Dutta washes her clothes. She has insisted on doing her own laundry so that nobody else will have to touch her underclothes. However, she is terrified of the modern washing machine, so she secretly washes the clothes by hand. She hangs the clothes on the fence to dry, while crafting another mental response to Mrs. Basu—this time saying that she is fitting in very well in America. She remembers her departure from India, when she got rid of her house and gave away most of her possessions. When she is pulling the dry clothes off the fence, she notices the next-door neighbor and waves to her, but the neighbor ignores her. Sagar comes home early from work that day, and Mrs. Dutta is happy when he enjoys the story she tells him about his childhood. However, when Shyamoli arrives home, upset, Mrs. Dutta goes to her room to give them some privacy. She realizes that she left her unfinished response to Mrs. Basu on the kitchen table and goes to retrieve it. She overhears Shyamoli arguing with Sagar, saying that the next-door neighbor complained about Mrs. Dutta hanging her clothes over the fence. Although her sense of duty says that she should stay with her son's family, Mrs. Dutta realizes that she is an outsider and that she would be much happier back in India. She writes a response to Mrs. Basu, saying that she is coming back to India and asking Mrs. Basu to rent out her downstairs flat to Mrs. Dutta.

Characters

Mrs. Roma Basu

Mrs. Basu is Mrs. Dutta's longtime friend and neighbor in India. It is her letter that prompts Mrs. Dutta to examine whether or not she is really happy. At the end of the story, Mrs. Dutta writes to Mrs. Basu to ask if she can rent her friend's downstairs apartment, which has been recently vacated.

Mrinalini Dutta

Mrinalini is Mrs. Dutta's granddaughter, who is not interested in exploring her Indian heritage. Shyamoli calls Mrinalini "Minnie"—a further sign of the family's assimilation into American culture.

Pradeep Dutta

Pradeep is Mrs. Dutta's grandson, who is not interested in exploring his Indian heritage. Shyamoli calls Pradeep "Pat"—a further sign of the family's assimilation into American culture.

Mrs. Prameela Dutta

Mrs. Dutta is a dutiful Indian widow, who experiences cultural conflict while trying to live with her son's Americanized family. Mrs. Dutta wed Sagar's father in a traditional Indian marriage when she was seventeen. Throughout her life, she has been subservient to her husband and other family members, suppressing her own desires in order to fulfill their needs. When her husband dies, she lives as a widow in their home for three years, until she is stricken with pneumonia. Her son invites her to come and live with his family, and she feels that she is following her Indian duty by accepting his invitation. Despite the misgivings of her best friend, Mrs. Basu, Mrs. Dutta gives up her Calcutta home and gives away most of her possessions to friends. When Mrs. Dutta arrives at her son's home in California, she is shocked at the customs of American culture, which often clash with her traditional Indian upbringing. Throughout the story, she remembers what her life was like in India, as she compares it to her immigrant experience in America. Mrs. Basu writes Mrs. Dutta a letter, asking Mrs. Dutta if she is happy in America. Mrs. Dutta struggles to answer this letter in a positive manner but must keep putting it aside because she is not happy. However, Mrs. Dutta does not feel comfortable saying anything bad about her son and, at first, thinks that it would be shameful to return to India.

Although Mrs. Dutta tries to fit in at her son's household, there are some customs that she cannot understand. Shyamoli becomes frustrated when her mother-in-law throws

out uneaten food, but saving leftover food is a practice that conflicts with Mrs. Dutta's Hindu belief about not saving contaminated food. Mrs. Dutta also does not condone her grandchildren's behavior toward their parents and is horrified when Shyamoli addresses Sagar by his first name and asks him to fold laundry—especially since the laundry includes Mrs. Dutta's underclothes. As a result, she volunteers to wash the laundry but is terrified of the washing machine and hand washes them instead. A neighbor sees her drying the clothes on her fence and tells Shyamoli, which leads to a fight between Sagar and his wife. Mrs. Dutta overhears this argument and realizes that she is not happy in America and that she should put her own needs ahead of her family duty. She writes to Mrs. Basu to let her know that she will be returning to India and that she wishes to rent Mrs. Basu's downstairs apartment.

Sagar Dutta

Sagar is Shyamoli's husband and Mrs. Dutta's son. He was born in India and was married to Shyamoli through a traditional, arranged marriage. Since moving to the United States, he has assimilated many aspects of American culture, although he still tries to be a dutiful Indian son. As a result, when Mrs. Dutta gets sick with pneumonia, he encourages her to move in with him and his family in California. When Mrs. Dutta arrives, Sagar tries to help her make a peaceful transition to American life. However, unlike Shyamoli, Sagar is still interested in various aspects of his Indian heritage. He likes his mother's cooking and appreciates hearing humorous stories from his childhood, which makes it harder for him to deny her. He does try to train his mother in various American customs—such as how to use a washing machine—but he is unsuccessful. However, he does not confront his mother on many issues that Shyamoli has with her, which leads to tension between Sagar and his wife. When Mrs. Dutta's Indian behavior draws negative attention from a neighbor, Shyamoli and Sagar have an argument. Although Shyamoli and Sagar resolve their conflict, he does not realize that Mrs. Dutta has overheard the argument and has decided to return to India.

Shyamoli Dutta

Shyamoli Dutta Shyamoli is Sagar's wife and Mrs. Dutta's daughter-in-law. She was born in India and was married to Sagar through a traditional arranged marriage when she was a young woman. However, when she moved to the United States, she totally assimilated American culture. Mrs. Dutta notes that, as a light-skinned Indian, Shyamoli —who is now a modern working mother—can almost pass for an American. Unlike Sagar, Shyamoli is not interested in revisiting her Indian heritage. In fact, she worries that Mrs. Dutta's Indian cooking is unhealthy for them. Shyamoli also kisses her husband in public, calls him by his first name, and asks him to do chores around the house—all nontraditional behavior that shocks Mrs. Dutta. Shyamoli, who goes by the Americanized name "Molli," is particularly anxious lest her neighbors perceive her family —the only Indian family in the neighborhood—as savages. This fear comes true when Mrs. Dutta dries clothes by hanging them over the fence into the next-door neighbor's

yard. This incident causes an argument between Shyamoli and Sagar, which Mrs. Dutta overhears.

Minnie

See Mrinalini

Molli

See Shyamoli

Neighbor

Sagar's and Shyamoli's next-door neighbor complains to Shyamoli after Mrs. Dutta hangs clothes over the fence that divides the two properties. This incident leads to Shyamoli's argument with Sagar and makes Mrs. Dutta realize that she wants to return home to India.

Pat

See Pradeep

Themes

Cultural Conftict

The major theme in the story is the many differences between traditional Indians and modern Indians living in America and the conflict that this cultural divide can create. On one end of the spectrum is Mrs. Dutta, who has been raised to be a traditional Indian wife. In India, she was taught that her needs should be placed below the family's needs and is used to getting up earlier than everyone else to make breakfast. However, in America, her early morning activities are a problem, because they wake up Shyamoli. "But the habit, taught her by her mother-in-law when she was a bride of seventeen, *A good wife wakes before the rest of the household,* is one she finds impossible to break." This is the first of many cultural conflicts that Mrs. Dutta faces. On the other end of the spectrum are Shyamoli and Mrs. Dutta's two grandchildren, who have totally assimilated American culture. They do not like Mrs. Dutta's traditional Indian meals and would rather engage in American activities like reading the *Wall Street Journal* or playing video games than listen to Mrs. Dutta's stories. Finally, Sagar is trapped between the two cultures. He enjoys various aspects of American culture, such as watching television crime shows, but he also enjoys his mother's food and stories. Also, he wants to please his Indian-American wife but feels compelled to be a dutiful son to his Indian mother. This creates the largest conflict of all, because he is unable to be totally supportive of either woman. At the end, Sagar bonds with his wife and family, and Mrs. Dutta realizes that her place is not with her family in America; it is with her friend, Mrs. Basu, in Calcutta.

Roles of Women

The story also explores the roles of Indian women in both India and America. Both Shyamoli and Mrs. Dutta have had arranged marriages, but their respective homes offer them very different environments. In India, women are expected to serve the family, to put their own needs last, and, above all, to be subservient to their husbands and other men. At one point, the narrator notes that "Mrs. Dutta . . . had never, through the forty-two years of her marriage, addressed Sagar's father by name." Also, women are expected to live with a man, not on their own. Mrs. Dutta does live on her own for a few years after her husband's death, but her other relatives do not think this is appropriate and let her know that they are glad that Sagar asked her to come to America: "Good thing that boy of hers had come to his senses and called her to join him. Everyone knows a wife's place is with her husband, and a widow's is with her son."

On the other hand, Indian women who live in the United States, like Shyamoli, often enjoy the freedoms that other American women have. Shyamoli is not subservient to Sagar. She argues with him when she is angry, such as when Mrs. Dutta's behavior attracts negative attention from their neighbor, and says, "I know having her here is important to you. But I can't do it any longer. I just can't. Some days I feel like taking the

kids and leaving." Shyamoli does not totally depend on Sagar, either. She has her own job outside of the home and expects Sagar to share the housework with her, a fact that mortifies Mrs. Dutta. Says Shyamoli, "Here in America we don't believe in men's work and women's work. Don't I work outside all day, just like Sagar?"

Happiness

When Mrs. Dutta became a wife, her own needs were placed below the needs of her husband and family. As a result, her own happiness since then has been measured in terms of how much she is needed by others. When she displeases her son, she is sad, and when her son accepts her offer to make him a snack, "it is as though merciful time has given her back her youth, that sweet, aching urgency of being needed again." When she receives the letter from Mrs. Basu that asks "Are you happy in America?" she is unable to answer it right away, because she has conflicting feelings: her duty tells her to serve her family, but her family does not want to be served. "And so she has been putting off her reply, while in her heart family loyalty battles with insidious feelings of—." In this early part of the story, Mrs. Dutta is afraid to acknowledge that by following her duty she is not happy. However, as each attempt to adapt to American life and help her family fails, these feelings of unhappiness get stronger. When she overhears Sagar and Shyamoli talking about her, she realizes that she is unwanted and also that she does not want to be in America. It is only when she casts aside her expected duty that she is able to realize what will truly make her happy—returning to Calcutta.

Style

Setting

Setting The setting is extremely important in this story. The differences between Indian life in India and Indian life in America are profound. Mrs. Dutta, Sagar, and Shyamoli were all born in India, but Sagar and Shyamoli have assimilated American culture, whereas Mrs. Dutta still follows traditional Indian customs. Mrs. Dutta notices this on many occasions. For example, unlike Indian women, Shyamoli expresses her frustrations often. "Mrs. Dutta did not remember that the Indian Shyamoli, the docile bride . . . pursed her lips in quite this way to let out a breath at once patient and exasperated." Also, Shyamoli gives Mrs. Dutta instructions that contradict their mutual Hindu religion. For example, Shyamoli asks Mrs. Dutta to save food that has not been eaten: "But surely Shyamoli, a girl from a good Hindu family, doesn't expect her to put contaminated *jutha* things with the rest of the food." However, Shyamoli, who has become as American as her surroundings, does expect Mrs. Dutta to go against her habits and religious beliefs. In the end, Mrs. Dutta cannot do this and chooses to return to India.

Flashback

The present action in the story consists of a number of events that take place during two days of Mrs. Dutta's stay with her son's family in America. However, this is only half of the story. The other half consists of flashbacks, each of which helps to give the reader more information about a specific aspect of Indian culture, while illustrating the conflict between Indian and American cultures. For example, while Mrs. Dutta is getting ready in the bathroom on the second morning, she hears Mrinalini complaining that Mrs. Dutta has been in the bathroom too long, which Mrs. Dutta thinks is disrespectful. She "hopes that Shyamoli will not be too harsh with the girl" and then remembers back to all of the times she had to punish Sagar. "Whenever she lifted her hand to him, her heart was pierced through and through. Such is a mother's duty." When the narrator returns to the present, Shyamoli does not punish Mrinalini, further illustrating the difference between the two cultures.

In several cases, the flashbacks are more recent and take place after Mrs. Dutta has already arrived at her son's house. For example, when Mrs. Dutta is hand-washing her clothes in secret because she is afraid of the American washing machine, she remembers back to the day that she asked Sagar to hang up a clothesline for her so she could wash her own clothes. Shyamoli objected, saying that people do not do that in their neighborhood and told Mrs. Dutta to just store her dirty clothes in a hamper in her room until the end of the week when the family does their laundry. "Mrs. Dutta agreed reluctantly. She knew she should not store unclean clothes in the same room where she kept the pictures of her gods. That would bring bad luck."

Imagery

The story also juxtaposes many contrasting images that further help to underscore the conflict between Indian and American cultures. For example, in America, Mrs. Dutta uses "her metal tongue cleaner" but does not like "the minty toothpaste" that Sagar's family uses, since it "does not leave her mouth feeling as clean as does the bittersweet neem stick she's been using all her life." Other contrasting images include food. When Mrs. Dutta prepares a traditional Indian meal, it is an involved process: "With practiced fingers she throws an assortment of spices into the blender: coriander, cumin, cloves, black pepper, a few red chiles for vigor. No stale bottled curry powder for her." This exotic image contrasts sharply with the "burritos from the freezer" that Mrs. Dutta knows her grandchildren would rather eat. Also, when Mrs. Dutta looks out the window of her son's house, where one can stare "for hours and not see one living soul," she offers some images of what life was like in India. She remembers "vegetable vendors with enormous wicker baskets balanced on their heads," "peasant women with colorful tattoos on their arms," and even animals, such as the "cows that planted themselves majestically in the center of the road, ignoring honking drivers.

Historical Context

The story was written and takes place in the late 1990s. As a result, the historical context of India in the story is very similar to its current context. In the story, Divakaruni demonstrates the various cultural conflicts faced by Indians who have immigrated to America. But Indians faced similar conflicts in their native land in the late 1990s, which they still face today. In area, India—which is one-third the size of the United States—is the seventh largest country in the world. In population, however, India is the second largest, with more than one billion people. This massive population occupies several distinct ethnic and religious groups. Despite efforts to find some common national identity under which all of these groups can exist in harmony, these groups sometimes clash with each other.

The greatest conflict involves religion. More than 80 percent of India's population is Hindu, and Muslims enjoy a significant percentage of the remaining minority. Hinduism, a religion that is not easily defined, is considered to be one of the oldest religions in the world, if not the oldest. Unlike most religions, it has no founder and has no set doctrine; several different, and sometimes contradictory, religious movements are considered to be part of Hinduism. However, what is known is that Hinduism provided the impetus for India's social caste system, which is thousands of years old and which most Indians conform to, regardless of religion. A caste is a rigid social class, by which people's rights and responsibilities are determined. People are born into their caste and generally are expected to marry within it.

The four traditional castes are the Brahmans (priests), Kshatriyas (warriors), Vaisyas (merchants), and Shudras (serfs). These caste designations are based on the level of pollutants—such as blood, saliva, dirt, and leather—that people in each caste traditionally come into contact with. A fifth, unofficial, caste, known as the untouchables, is the lowest caste of all, because the members' poor lifestyles and occupations brought them into contact with a high level of pollutants. Although discrimination against members of a lower caste is technically banned, it does still occur today. At the end of the twentieth century, Hindu groups began a massive nationalist movement, placing pressure on non-Hindus to conform to Hinduism. This was confusing to many non-Hindus in India, given Hinduism's relatively indefinable nature. Also, many of the beliefs that are widely identified as belonging to Hinduism, such as the avoidance of contaminants, were already practiced by many non-Hindus. As part of the Hindu nationalist movement, pro-Hindu groups also tried to limit the rights of minorities like Muslims. These collective actions led to violent conflicts between Hindus and Muslims.

In the late 1990s, India also experienced conflict with its neighbors on the Indian subcontinent, most notably Pakistan, a former Indian land that became a new nation when the British sacrificed control of this land in 1947. India and Pakistan, the latter of which is predominantly Muslim, had a long-standing border dispute, dating back to the 1947 emancipation that gave both countries their independence. In 1998, this dispute erupted when India performed nuclear weapons tests, prompting a response from Pakistan, which conducted its own nuclear weapons tests.

Critical Overview

The Unknown Errors of Our Lives, the story collection in which Divakaruni included "Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter," has received mixed reviews since it was published in 2001. Some, like Frederick Luis Aldama, praise the collection in its entirety. In his review of the collection for *World Literature Today,* Aldama says that the stories "lyrically describe and breathe life into the lives of South Asian characters." Aldama also notes that these characters "struggle to discover freedom" in a male-dominated world that seeks to oppress them. Likewise in her *Booklist review,* Donna Seaman says that Divakaruni has "narrative elegance" and notes that each story "revolves around a reflective and strong-willed heroine." Seaman thinks that the "hauntingly beautiful stories of epiphany and catharsis" have universal appeal and places Divakaruni "in the vanguard of fine literary writers."

Not everybody liked the collection, however. "Divakaruni's stories can verge on melodrama," says Sudip Bose, in the *New York Times Book Review.* Furthermore, Bose opines that "the immigrant experience, at least in the terms Divakaruni considers it, has been mined almost bare in contemporary fiction." Because of this, Bose says that Divakaruni's "reluctant immigrants, forever cursing their alienation, too often seem like characters we've met before." However, other reviewers find fault with some of the stories but praise the collection as a whole. The Publishers Weekly reviewer notes that it "is a mixed collection." Still, the reviewer says that it is worth a reader's time, since many of the stories "illuminate the difficult adjustments of women in whom memory and duty must coexist with a new, often painful and disorienting set of standards." This reviewer thinks that Divakaruni is "at her best" in tales like "Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter." The reviewer for Kirkus Reviews also feels that this story is "the best piece" in a collection that the reviewer calls "solid if unexceptional." The reviewer says that "Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter" is "a touching and simply expressed account of feeling hopelessly lost in an unfamiliar country."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Poquette has a bachelor's degree in English and specializes in writing about literature. In the following essay, Poquette discusses Divakaruni's use of letters as plot devices.

"Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter" is a relatively static story. Not much action takes place in the present, in which Mrs. Dutta spends a lot of time remembering her past. In the place of a lot of action, the tale relies instead on a plot device, which helps to drive the story forward. The plot device consists of two letters in the story—Mrs. Basu's letter and Mrs. Dutta's response, the letter that is mentioned in the story's title. If it were not for these two letters, Mrs. Dutta probably would not have come to the same conclusions that she does at the end of the story. The letters become more than simple objects. They disrupt the normal pattern of Mrs. Dutta's life and ultimately force her to question and change her long-held beliefs.

Mrs. Basu's letter and Mrs. Dutta's many potential responses play an important role in the story. Although Mrs. Basu's letter is mostly harmless, "filled with news from home," it also contains a short question: "At the very bottom Mrs. Basu wrote, *Are you happy in America?*" For Mrs. Dutta, the answer is not a simple yes or no, because she is in conflict. If she says she is happy, she will be lying to Mrs. Basu, her long-time friend, who will see through the lie. However, if she says she is unhappy, then she will sound as if she is complaining—something that, as a loyal Indian wife, she has been trained not to do. As a result, she has delayed her reply, "while in her heart family loyalty battles with insidious feelings of—but she turns from them quickly and will not name them even to herself."

Mrs. Dutta sets the letter aside, but it still preys on her thoughts. The pressure caused by Mrs. Basu's letter and Mrs. Dutta's attempted responses disrupts Mrs. Dutta's life. Mrs. Dutta is normally very religious and takes her Hindu rituals seriously. On the second morning in the story, she lies awake, waiting for the rest of the household to start getting up, which is her cue to start her day. Her first task is to repeat "the 108 holy names of God." She starts doing this but notes that her mind is not totally focused on God this morning. Instead, "underneath she is thinking of the bleached-blue aerogram from Mrs. Basu that has been waiting unanswered on her bedside table all week." Despite her best efforts to suppress her feelings of sadness, Mrs. Dutta is briefly overcome by them when she starts to craft her first mental response to the letter and thinks back to her life in India. "In her mind she writes to Mrs. Basu: *Oh, Roma, I miss it all so much. Sometimes I feel that someone has reached in and torn out a handful of my chest.*" However, Mrs. Dutta is still very much attached to her belief that she must not "indulge in nostalgia," and so she "shakes her head clear of images."

She crafts her next mental response while she is washing her laundry. However, Mrs. Dutta does not think of telling Mrs. Basu that she is afraid of the washing machine, which leads to her having to sneak around behind the backs of Sagar and Shyamoli to wash her laundry by hand. She also overlooks the "anxiety" produced from this need to be covert. Instead, she puts a positive spin on the situation: "In her mind she writes to

Mrs. Basu: *I'm fitting in so well here, you'd never guess I came only two months back. I've found new ways of doing things, of solving problems creatively.*" Mrs. Dutta does not find anything wrong with her covert laundry behavior. "Ignorance, as Mrs. Dutta knows well from years of managing a household, is a great promoter of harmony." Mrs. Dutta is still focused mainly on following her duty and keeping everybody else happy while ignoring or suppressing her own feelings of anxiety.

This sense of duty is derived from her many years as a subservient wife in India, where she was constantly reminded of what she should and should not do. In fact, when Sagar invites his mother to come and stay with his family, Mrs. Dutta's relatives in India are relieved because they feel this is supposed to happen: "Everyone knows a wife's place is with her husband, and a widow's is with her son." Because of this deeply ingrained sense of duty to her son, Mrs. Dutta scolds herself once again when she starts to remember fondly her life in India. She tries to make herself believe that she is lucky to be in America and that all of her Calcutta relatives envy her. She tells herself, "*After lunch you're going to write a nice letter to Roma telling her exactly how delighted you are to be here*." Mrs. Dutta is in the process of doing this when Sagar comes home early that day.

Since Mrs. Dutta still bases her happiness on her ability to serve others, especially her son, she is overjoyed at Sagar's early arrival: "So it is with the delighted air of a child who has been offered an unexpected gift that she leaves her half-written letter to greet Sagar." However, her delight turns to anxiety as she waits to see if Sagar will accept her offer to make him a special Indian snack: "As she waits for his reply, she can feel, in the hollow of her throat, the rapid thud of her heart." When Sagar accepts, all is well, at least for the time being. This changes when Shyamoli comes home, obviously upset about something. Mrs. Dutta, still happy that Sagar was pleased with her act of servitude, looks upon Shyamoli's behavior in a negative manner. "In her mind-letter she writes, *Women need to be strong, not react to every little thing like this.*" As she continues crafting this latest mental response to Mrs. Basu, Mrs. Dutta regurgitates her decades of training, noting, "*we had far worse to cry about, but we shed our tears invisibly. We were good wives and daughters-in-law, good mothers. Dutiful, uncomplaining. Never putting ourselves first."*

However, at this point, the tide starts to turn. Mrs. Dutta remembers a time when she burned a dessert and was punished by her strict mother-inlaw. The young Mrs. Dutta had cried after everyone left the house and then "washed her face carefully with cold water and applied *kajal* to her eyes" so that her husband would not know she had been crying. She thinks about Shyamoli's own tearful face, and suddenly "a thought hits her so sharply in the chest that she has to hold on to her bedroom wall to keep from falling." This thought, which is crafted as yet another response to Mrs. Basu, is the first real defiant thought that Mrs. Dutta has had. She has felt sad before, but now she is angry and reflective, wondering if all of the punishment she received was worth it: "*The more we bent, the more people pushed us, until one day we'd forgotten that we could stand up straight. Maybe Shyamoli's the one with the right idea after all* . . ." This independent thought shocks Mrs. Dutta, and she tries to bury it and finish writing her letter to Mrs. Basu.

"Then she remembers that she has left the halfwritten aerogram on the kitchen table." This poses a dilemma for Mrs. Dutta. She wants to be respectful and give Sagar and Shyamoli space to talk about whatever is bothering her. But something new, "a restlessness—or is it defiance?—has taken hold of her." She decides that she will retrieve her letter, even if it means interrupting her son's family. Mrs. Dutta is starting to defend her right to be an individual, making decisions that are based not on the family's needs but on her own. In her next mental response to Mrs. Basu, Mrs. Dutta criticizes the amount of television that the family watches and then quickly notes, "Of course she will never put such blasphemy into a real letter." Her duty to herself is still struggling with the duty to her family, although the former is slowly starting to gain ground, because even though she cannot include this thought in a letter yet, "it makes her feel better to be able to say it, if only to herself." This is a huge leap for a woman who felt guilty earlier in the day merely for entertaining the thought that she might be unhappy.

Mrs. Dutta's final leap happens when she overhears the argument that she has caused between Shyamoli and Sagar and sees their shadows reflected on the wall. At the end of the argument, their shadows, and the shadows of their children, "shiver and merge into a single dark silhouette" as the family resolves its issues in a group hug. She returns to her room and reads over the happy letter that she has started to write to Mrs. Basu, in which she puts a positive spin on her negative experiences. She starts to cry, and one of her tears falls on her unfinished letter. Bowing to her old habit of hiding her emotions from others, she carefully wipes up the tear. "She blows on the damp spot until it is completely dry, so the pen will not leave a telltale smudge. Even though Roma would not tell a soul, she cannot risk it." Mrs. Dutta is still worried about what her relatives will think if they find out that she is not happy. Then, suddenly, she remembers the silhouette of her son's family and realizes that her duty to her son's family is useless; they are a separate unit that does not need, and does not appreciate, her help. With this newfound knowledge, she is finally able to break the chains of her past servitude, and she writes a new letter to Mrs. Basu, saying that she is coming home to India. "Pausing to read over what she has written, Mrs. Dutta is surprised to discover this: now that she no longer cares whether tears blotch her letter, she feels no need to weep."

In the story, Mrs. Dutta makes a rapid transformation over a period of two days. If Mrs. Basu had not written her letter, with its deceptively simple question about happiness, Mrs. Dutta might never have made this change. However, in her many attempts to write an honest response to her friend, Mrs. Dutta is forced to examine all of her long-held beliefs and to be honest with herself about their flaws. In this way, the letters become a plot device. They give the story its narrative structure and provide the catalyst that drives Mrs. Dutta forward through her striking evolution—from a dutiful Indian widow to an independent thinker who puts her own needs first and does not care what others think.

Source: Ryan D. Poquette, Critical Essay on "Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter," in *Short Stories for Students,* Gale, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

Norvell is an independent educational writer who specializes in English and literature. In this essay, Norvell discusses the unexpected elements in Divakaruni's story that keep it from being entirely predictable.

In its opening pages, "Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter" seems to be a well-written but predictable story of cultural and generational differences. An aging widow moves from her Calcutta home to live with her son and his family in California. Although Mrs. Dutta is already in the United States when the story opens, the early pages are liberally sprinkled with her recollections of life in India. Author Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni evokes Mrs. Dutta's life in India so beautifully and powerfully that even an American-born reader unfamiliar with the country does not merely understand Mrs. Dutta's homesickness but feels it. Mrs. Dutta stares out at her son's silent suburban neighborhood, emptied of humanity and activity on a weekday when everyone is at work or at school. In her mind, she compares the sterile scene to her Calcutta neighborhood, with its vegetable vendors and knife sharpeners (they are tradesmen, not appliances), its menagerie of dogs and goats and cows. There is so much to miss, and so little to take its place.

The pace of the story slows when the narrator begins to explain why Mrs. Dutta washes her clothes in the bathtub and hangs them over the back fence to dry even though her daughter-in-law, Shyamoli, has told her that this is not done in nice American neighborhoods. Divakaruni dwells on this in such detail that the reader knows that this is the conflict on which the story will turn.

And it does, so that right up until the last few pages, the story unfolds in a completely predictable manner. Just as one would expect, Mrs. Dutta's son, Sagar, is patient and solicitous toward her. Just as one would expect, his American-born children speak and behave in ways that she finds shockingly rude. Just as one would expect, his wife tries to be patient with Mrs. Dutta but lets the trying show, and, almost inevitably, it is finally the daughter-in-law who gives her husband an ultimatum about the mother-in-law.

It comes as no surprise that Mrs. Dutta overhears Shyamoli's tirade about her or that Mrs. Dutta then retreats to her room and cries. It is not a surprise, either, that she bravely joins the family at dinner and acts as if all is well, because Divakaruni has drawn her as a stoic woman. Besides, what alternative is there for an old woman who has sold her home and given away her possessions to move to America and be with her family? Her circumstances seem to allow her no choice, and her culture confirms what her circumstances suggest. "Everyone knows a wife's place is with her husband, and a widow's place is with her son," she knew her relatives in India had thought when she told them of her planned move to America.

Of course, life is not that simple, and it is the complications—even familiar, predictable ones—that make a story. Though this particular story of conflict between two cultures and between a mother-in-law and daughter-in-law seems destined for a predictable ending, Divakaruni sneaks a couple of subtle but sweet surprises into her closing

pages. These surprises are a delight for two reasons. First, they bring a happier ending for the brave and perceptive Mrs. Dutta than most readers will have dared to hope for. Second, because while they are unexpected, they are not at all artificial or incredible. Mrs. Dutta's surprising outcome illustrates one of the most admirable traits of the Indian character: the inspiring ability and the good-natured willingness to learn even from those who are hurtful or oppressive.

This is the story's first surprise: When Mrs. Dutta overhears her daughter-in-law's harsh words about her, her first reaction, which is to angrily think that Shyamoli should be more stoic, quickly gives way to an epiphany about the stoicism of Mrs. Dutta's generation of Indian women. She thinks:

And what good did it do? The more we bent, the more people pushed us, until one day we'd forgotten that we could stand up straight. Maybe Shyamoli's the one with the right idea after all.

This is extraordinary. Not many people can, amid the storm of pain and anger that blows through the mind when one is wronged, conclude that perhaps the wrongdoer is right—not right to have caused pain, but right to think as she thinks and live as she lives. Even in the pain of the moment, Mrs. Dutta is able to acknowledge both that Shyamoli was wrong to say the hurtful things she said and that she was right to stand up for herself.

When someone has been hurt, the temptation is to see the person who caused the hurt as being wholly wrong and wholly bad. Mrs. Dutta does not succumb to this temptation. Further, she grasps immediately that she must learn from Shyamoli; she must now stand up for herself as she has seen Shyamoli do for herself. It does not occur to her that if she adopts this one trait of Shyamoli's she will be condoning the younger woman's outburst or the pain it caused. It also does not occur to Mrs. Dutta that if she accepts this one element of American culture she will be abandoning or betraying her own. Virtually all of American culture that she has experienced she judges to be far inferior to her own. She is not about to adopt it wholesale. But Mrs. Dutta is a pragmatist and a survivor. She will take from Shyamoli and from America the good she sees in them, and the rest she will distance herself from without bitterness. This bespeaks a rare kind of wisdom, insight, and maturity.

This mature, sophisticated response is characteristic of India and Indians. It has its roots in Hindu culture and religion, which acknowledge that all ways of life and all human beings are a mixture of good and bad, love and hate, wisdom and ignorance. Some, of course, are better than others, but neither a person nor a culture is to be condemned for imperfection or weakness. The wise course is to absorb the best of all cultures and leave the rest alone; to see the good in all people while protecting oneself from the bad. This is why, after more than three hundred years of unwanted and sometimes brutal British rule, the Indian people, on the whole, do not hate the British. Fifty-plus years ago, Indians won their independence from Great Britain through amazing courage, perseverance, determination, and stoicism—the same strengths that see Mrs. Dutta through her trial. The Indians celebrated the end of British rule, but many Britons remained in India, a land they had come to love and where they were, by and

large, welcome to remain. India patterned its government after those of England and America. It made English one of its official languages, for the pragmatic reason that it served as something of a *lingua franca* (a widely understood language that serves as a medium of communication among groups with different native languages) in a nation with hundreds of indigenous languages. What could have been cast out as the language of the oppressor was adopted as a favored language of the new nation, because this served India. Similarly, India recognized the value of the infrastructure the British had built and made use of it to build their country. And today, the average Indian is at least as likely as the average Briton to stop everything at 4 p.m. sharp to enjoy a relaxing cup of tea. It is a British custom that Indians have made their own. All these reflections on India are inspired by old Mrs. Dutta, whose creator, Divakaruni, endowed her with the very best of Indian character and thus equipped her to rise above all the grief, disappointments, and rude awakenings that even mostly predictable lives and stories are all too likely to bring.

There is still one more factor in Mrs. Dutta's willingness to learn from Shyamoli that deserves mention. Mrs. Dutta's cultural background has prepared her to accept wisdom even from an adversary, but it has not prepared her to accept a much younger woman as her teacher. In Hindu families, the daughter-in-law occupies the lowest rank in her husband's extended family, and she is expected to be a humble student of her mother-in-law in all things. Divakaruni instructs American readers in this cultural reality by having Mrs. Dutta recall her relationship with her own mother-in-law. As a seventeen-year-old bride, Mrs. Dutta lived in the home of her husband's family. Her mother-in-law informed her that she was to get up before everyone else and make tea for all in the household. More than once in the course of the story, Mrs. Dutta recalls how her mother-in-law scolded her.

Divakaruni also reveals that the confident American businesswoman Shyamoli was once a shy Indian girl whom Mrs. Dutta prepared for marriage and sent off to her son, already in America. This strongly implies that the marriage was an arranged one, as is traditional in Hindu families. There was a time, then, when Mrs. Dutta held all the power. Back then, Shyamoli did not even have the power to choose the man with whom she would spend her life. Mrs. Dutta's expectation would have been that Shyamoli would live under her roof and under her supervision, as Mrs. Dutta had once lived with her mother-in-law. By tradition, it was Mrs. Dutta's turn to rule the roost.

This background gives non-Indian readers at least a hint of how upside-down Mrs. Dutta's life in California is. Instead of living in her own home and having authority over her daughter-in-law, Mrs. Dutta finds herself living in her daughter-in-law's home, once again in a position of powerlessness. As a young bride, she was forced to get out of bed each morning earlier than she wanted to. Now, as an old woman, she must stay in bed longer than she wants to so that she does not wake the others.

There is nothing in Mrs. Dutta's background that prepared her for this. She is forced to accept Shyamoli's authority in the home and, understandably and not surprisingly, she chafes at this. This makes it all the more remarkable that when crisis comes, Mrs. Dutta is able to acknowledge that, although Shyamoli's authority over her may be illegitimate

in her eyes, the younger woman still has something to teach the older one. In addition to the wisdom that her traditions taught her, Mrs. Dutta shows a humility that requires her to reach beyond her traditions. Beyond being an exemplar of Indian wisdom, she is a remarkable individual.

This prepares the reader for Divakaruni's second surprise, which she saves for the very end of the story. Mrs. Dutta is not going to adopt Shyamoli's independent, outspoken spirit merely to carve out a place for herself in her son's house or in American culture. She is going to do what she truly wants to do, in spite of what her son and other relatives will surely think and in spite of having divested herself of her home and possessions. Mrs. Dutta, whose culture and religion have taught her to balance tradition and innovation, is going back to Calcutta to live out her days with her lifelong friend, whose ways are her ways and who both needs and nurtures her more than her closest relatives do. It comes as a shock to Mrs. Dutta that her son's family is complete without her and that they do not need her. But, she absorbs the shock and very quickly figures out how to adjust her expectations and her course.

Still willing to learn and adapt although she is old, Mrs. Dutta has learned what America had to teach her, and she is going home. To readers unfamiliar with Indian culture, this turn of events may seem not just surprising but incredible. Mrs. Dutta might be expected to be too old and frail, too tradition-bound, too weak to stand up to her family after a lifetime of acquiescence. But Mrs. Dutta is none of these things. The same traditions and beliefs that held her in her accepted role for most of her life also allow her to learn new lessons, adopt new ways, and seek happiness. Those traditions and beliefs, combined with her own courage and intelligence, allow her to triumph over all of life's trials, even one as difficult as a sojourn with her family in America.

Source: Candyce Norvell, Critical Essay on "Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter," in *Short Stories for Students,* Gale, 2003.

Adaptations

The Best American Short Stories 1999, which includes the story "Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter," was adapted as an audiobook in 1999. It is available on four audiocassettes from Mariner Books. "Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter" is read by Divakaruni.

Topics for Further Study

Research arranged marriages as they exist in India today, and compare these unions to the arranged marriages that take place among Indian families in the United States. Discuss how the respective women's movements in each country have affected the women in these marriages.

Research what life is currently like for widows in Calcutta, and discuss some possibilities for what might happen to Mrs. Dutta when she returns to live with Mrs. Basu.

In the story, Mrs. Dutta is an Indian living in America. Research what life is like for Americans living in India, and discuss the cultural conflicts that these men and women face. Choose one daily Indian ritual that seems alien to you, and write a short report on the purpose of this ritual, how it got started, and how it has changed over the years.

Research the varieties of traditional Indian food that are still enjoyed in India today. Create a sample Indian menu that includes several of these foods, and write a short description for each item. Try to come up with at least five items for each major meal course.

Find another, non-Indian culture from any time in history, which believed women should be subordinate to men. Compare this culture to Indian culture. Find one woman from this other culture who defied this rule, and write a short biography about her.

What Do I Read Next?

Divakaruni's first short-story collection, *Arranged Marriage: Stories* (1995), tells many stories about Indian women who are in traditional, arranged marriages. The stories take place in either India or the United States, but in both cases these women face many challenges as they attempt to reconcile their Eastern heritage with Western ideas.

Divakaruni was an established poet by the time she started writing short stories and novels. One of her volumes of poetry, *Black Candle* (1991), includes poems about the harsh treatment faced by many women in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh.

In Divakaruni's first novel, *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), Tilo is a young Indian woman who ends up on a remote island where she is taught the magical, curative properties of spices. She is sent to Oakland, California, as a spice mistress, destined to live alone while she heals others with her gift. However, when she meets an American man who sees through her old-woman disguise and falls in love with her, she must choose between love and duty.

Some critics consider E. M. Forster's controversial *A Passage to India* (1924) to be one of the author's greatest novels. The book, which was published in the racially tense times when India was still under British control, examines whether or not it was possible for members of the two cultures to be friends.

In *Pilgrimage: One Woman's Return to a Changing India* (2000), Pramila Jayapal, an Indianborn, Western-educated woman, describes what it was like for her to live in India for two years after living in the United States for twenty-five years. Her search for a cultural identity reveals an India in conflict, struggling to reconcile its traditional and modern aspects.

Bharati Mukherjee's novel *Desirable Daughters* (2002) journeys to many locations, including Calcutta and San Francisco, to tell the story of Tara Bhattacharjee and her two sisters. Tara is an Indian woman—separated from her husband—who lives in the United States with her son and boyfriend. When a suspicious stranger shows up one day claiming he is related, Tara discovers secrets that force her to question her knowledge of her family.

Further Study

Arnett, Robert, *India Unveiled,* Atman Press, 1999.

Arnett, a non-Indian who is enamored with India, offers an in-depth discussion of India's geography, people, and culture. The book, which discusses India region by region, includes more than two hundred photographs and seven detailed maps.

Henderson, Carol E., *Culture and Customs of India,* Greenwood Press, 2002.

Henderson's book examines what life is like for the one billion residents of India, who represent hundreds of different social groups. The book includes sections on every major aspect of Indian life, including food and dress; women, marriage, and family; and religion.

Lakhani, Mrs., *Indian Recipes for a Healthy Heart: 140 Low-Fat, Low-Cholesterol, Low-Sodium Gourmet Dishes from India,* Fahil Publishing Company, 1992.

In Divakaruni's story, Shaymoli worries about the high-fat content of the traditional Indian dishes that Mrs. Dutta prepares for Sagar's family. In her cookbook, Mrs. Lakhani shows how the fat content can be cut out of many traditional Indian meals without sacrificing taste. The last section of the book includes information on spice usage and flavor; an explanation of proteins, fats, carbohydrates, and sodium; and the cholesterol differences between raw and cooked foods.

Moorhouse, Geoffrey, *Calcutta,* Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971.

In one of few book-length profiles of Calcutta, Moorhouse discusses the social conditions, people, and politics of this massive city. Although this book is outdated, it does give an idea of what life was like in the city when Mrs. Dutta would have lived there with her husband and son.

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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

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