Mrs. Plum Study Guide

Mrs. Plum by Ezekiel Mphahlele

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Contents

Introduction

First published in Mphahlele's 1967 short story collection *In Corner B,* "Mrs. Plum" was written during the early 1960s while the author was living in Paris. The collection, which includes stories about life in Nigeria and South Africa, was published by the East African Publishing House in Nairobi, Kenya, though the author had taken a teaching position in Denver, Colorado, by that time. Such was the life of this homeless writer. Mphahlele's work had been banned in his own country of South Africa, and *In Corner B* was not available there until the banning order was lifted in 1979.

"Mrs. Plum," makes up four chapters, by far the longest story in the collection, and is sometimes considered a novella rather than a short story. It depicts the changing relationship between Karabo, a black South African cook from the village of Phokeng, and her employer Mrs. Plum, a white liberal living in the suburbs of Johannesburg during the years of apartheid. As Karabo observes Mrs. Plum's conduct over three years, she comes to realize that Mrs. Plum's attitude toward blacks is hypocritical, and that her belief in the equality of blacks and whites is shallow.

"Mrs. Plum" was heralded upon publication as an indictment of white liberal South Africans who claimed that they could bring about political change in the country by working within the system. This is a theme that the author had explored in other stories, including "The Living and the Dead" (1958) and "We'll Have Dinner at Eight" (1961). It is still considered one of Mphahlele's best and most important stories and has been included in several widely distributed anthologies of African and world fiction. Mphahlele himself included it in a later short story collection, *Renewal Time,* (1981) and called it "the best thing I ever pulled off."

Author Biography

Es'kia Mphahlele was born on December 17, 1919, in Marabastad Township, Pretoria, in the strictly segregated country of South Africa. His father was a messenger, and his mother a housemaid, like the character Karabo in "Mrs. Plum." His childhood was not a happy one, and Mphahlele learned to admire strong, resourceful women who survived in spite of domestic violence, poverty, and an oppressive government. His mother, for example, kept her children fed and clothed, and even sent them to good schools, by working as a domestic.

In 1945, Mphahlele began working as a high school teacher and married Rebecca Mochadibane, who became the mother of his five children and his supporter over more than fifty years. An avid reader, he had begun writing short stories and published his first collection, *Man Must Live,* in 1946. Mphahlele was a devoted teacher, but in the early 1950s the government made new laws requiring blacks and whites to attend separate and unequal schools. When Mphahlele protested this change, he was fired. In 1957 he was given permission to leave South Africa to teach and write in Nigeria, only on the condition that he never return.

Mphahlele's early years are described in the first volume of his autobiography, *Down Second Avenue,* a sometimes angry account of life in the black townships. The story of racial segregation in South Africa was a revelation to readers around the world. The book became an international success, and it led to Mphahlele being one of several writers officially banned in South Africa in 1961. This meant that it was illegal to sell—or even to quote— his work.

Mphahlele taught at different African universities, then moved to Paris to work with the Congress for Cultural Freedom. While in Paris, he published a collection of essays, *The African Image* (1962), and wrote several short stories set in Africa, including "Mrs. Plum," which was published in the collection *In Corner B* (1967). By then, Mphahlele was teaching and writing in Denver, Colorado, widely recognized as a major fiction writer and social critic.

After twenty years of exile, Mphahlele returned to South Africa in 1977 with the permission of the government. Two years later, the ban on his writing was lifted, and Mphahlele's next several books, including the novel *Chirundu* (1979) and the second volume of his autobiography, *Afrika My Music* (1984), were published in South Africa.

Mphahlele was given the name Ezekiel at birth, but changed his name to Es'kia when he returned from exile. Both names appear on his writings. In all, Mphahlele has written or edited more than twenty books of fiction and essays. As a chronicler of injustice, he helped bring about change, and he was witness to the end of apartheid and the creation of democracy in South Africa in the 1990s.

Plot Summary

The story opens with Karabo, a young woman from the black South African township of Phokeng, describing her white "madam," Mrs. Plum. In the suburbs of Johannesburg where Karabo works for Mrs. Plum, all of the homeowners are wealthy and white, and all of the servants are black and poor. This is South Africa under apartheid, the system of laws that kept whites, blacks, Indians, and mixedrace people or "coloreds" in separate places ("apart") to protect the power of the white minority.

Mrs. Plum is not like any employer Karabo has ever heard of. She uses Karabo's African name, instead of giving her a "white" name like Jane. She encourages Karabo to improve herself by giving her books and newspapers to read, teaching her to follow recipes, and paying for dance lessons. She praises Karabo when she does well. She even makes Karabo join her for meals at the table, which makes Karabo uncomfortable. No other whites invite blacks to sit at their table, and the food Mrs. Plum eats is not what Karabo is used to.

Mrs. Plum has a daughter, Kate, just Karabo's age. Kate confides in Karabo about her mother, her love life, her dreams, telling Karabo "many things a white woman does not tell a black servant." Karabo gets used to hearing Kate's confidences, but never shares her own. Although Mrs. Plum and Kate ignore Karabo's place in the social order, Karabo never forgets. Mrs. Plum is an author, who writes books and articles calling for the end of apartheid, and who participates in public demonstrations at government buildings. Karabo, who knows nothing of national politics, does not understand what Mrs. Plum is trying to accomplish, or why Mrs. Plum thinks she can speak for black people. But as she reads the newspapers, Karabo learns more about the position of blacks in South Africa and comes to see that beatings, arrests, and other mistreatment are part of a national pattern.

Karabo is also learning at the Black Crow Club. There, she chats with other servants, joining in making fun of their employers' strange ways. From these conversations, it is clear that whites and blacks live in completely separate worlds, although they inhabit the same space. Karabo and her friends do not understand the actions of the whites, especially the way they devote so much attention and money to their pets, and the servants are angry about the disrespect they are shown by their employers. Mrs. Plum is delighted that Karabo goes to the Black Crow Club to learn sewing and knitting and has no idea that Karabo is also listening to lectures by an anti-apartheid activist who urges the women to keep a wall of mistrust between themselves and their employers.

Mrs. Plum has two dogs, who sleep in beds with pink linens in her bedroom. They are looked after by Dick, the gardener and housekeeper, who feeds, brushes, and perfumes the dogs daily. Mrs. Plum is fond of the dogs to the point of foolishness, and she does not trust Dick to look after them properly. Actually, Dick is so afraid of white people that he would never dare do less than his duty. He knows that if he displeases his employer, she can dismiss him and mark his pass, the document that all black South Africans were required to carry at all times under apartheid, and he will be sent home.

During Karabo's third year with Mrs. Plum, the mild unease in the house becomes great tension, and Karabo becomes more confused about her employer. Mrs. Plum is accustomed to having dinner parties and inviting liberal whites and educated blacks together. Both Karabo and Kate fall in love with the same guest, a black doctor. Kate and the doctor make plans to leave the country and marry, because a marriage between people of different races is illegal in South Africa. Karabo never mentions her feelings to Kate or to the man, but pulls away from Kate in anger and hurt. Mrs. Plum, who has always spoken of equal opportunity for whites and blacks, is appalled that her daughter would consider marrying a black man. After a great deal of shouting, the marriage is called off. Soon after, the police begin house-to-house searches, looking for servants without the proper passes allowing them to be in the district. When the police come to search Karabo's and Dick's rooms, Mrs. Plum turns the hose on the police and makes them leave. The next day, she is arrested. Refusing to pay the small fine, she goes to jail for two weeks, hoping to call attention to the unfairness of the pass laws.

A few weeks later, Karabo's best friend Chimane discovers she is pregnant and has an abortion because her family cannot afford for her to be unemployed while she tends a baby. Dick reveals that he works to support a younger sister, who could not attend school if he lost his job. Karabo considers in a new way how hard the lives of blacks are because of apartheid, and she finds herself disliking everything about Mrs. Plum. One morning, when she goes to wake Mrs. Plum, she hears strange noises. Looking through the keyhole into the bedroom, she finds Mrs. Plum holding one of the dogs close to her while she masturbates. Karabo says nothing, but adds the disturbing scene to her collection of impressions.

When a rumor spreads that servants are planning to poison the white people's dogs, Mrs. Plum fires Dick. Soon after, Karabo's uncle dies, and Mrs. Plum refuses permission for her to travel to Phokeng to mourn him. Karabo has had enough. She quits her job and goes home. A week later, Mrs. Plum arrives in Phokeng and asks Karabo to return. She is just as uncomfortable in Karabo's home as Karabo has been in Johannesburg, a fact that interests Karabo. Karabo agrees to come back, but not before she negotiates a raise and more vacation time. She understands Mrs. Plum entirely now, and cannot be surprised or hurt by her again.

Summary

"Mrs. Plum" is Es'kia Mphahlele's short story about a young black woman named Karabo employed as a cook in the home of a liberal white woman named Mrs. Plum during the days of apartheid in South Africa.

Karabo states that she has come from the village of Phokeng to work for Mrs. Plum in Greenside, not far from the center of Johannesburg. Karabo has worked for two other white families and finds Mrs. Plum's liberalism a nice change. Mrs. Plum calls Karabo by her real name as opposed to other white employers, who insisted on calling Karabo by an English name.

Mrs. Plum also encourages Karabo's education by providing newspapers and magazines for Karabo to read. In an unprecedented move, Mrs. Plum allows Karabo to eat at the same table with herself and her daughter Kate. Karabo's education also extends to her time spent at the local Black Crow Club, where she spends Thursdays in the company of other domestics and takes classes in dance and sewing.

Mrs. Plum is a widow and spends her time writing books, playing with her dogs and organizing and attending social reform meetings and demonstrations. Mrs. Plum tries to convey to Karabo the reason for her activities, so that black people will one day have the same rights as whites in South Africa.

Karabo receives a form of education from Kate as well, who instructs the young domestic in language and social skills and confides in Karabo almost as if the two are friends. Karabo has a friend named Chimane who works as a domestic in the house next door, and the two girls go to the Black Crow Club each Thursday, which is their day off. There the girls commiserate with other girls in similar situations, who find huge disparities between the lifestyles of the white people and the way the girls were raised in their poor villages.

One of the main points of contention is the pampered treatment that the white people insist upon for their dogs. Almost without fail, each one of the white households has pets that are treated radically better than most blacks in the country. The young women also commiserate about the issue of inappropriate advances from the men in the white households, which oftentimes result in the girls losing their jobs.

Unbeknownst to Mrs. Plum and the other white employers, there is an instructor named Lilian Ngoyi at the Black Crow Club who advises Karabo and the other young women to be cautious about the activities of white people. According to Lilian, the line drawn between the two races in South Africa will never be eliminated, and any belief that it will be is a lesson in futility.

Karabo absorbs Lilian's points of view and begins to demand that Mrs. Plum provide her with newspapers and magazines about black people and issues instead of the white

periodicals she has been reading up to this point. Mrs. Plum accommodates Karabo's request, which both pleases and perplexes the young woman.

Of all the unusual occurrences in the Plum household, Karabo is most amazed at the reverence given to the two dogs, Malan and Monty, who have the run of the house. The main responsibility for their care is assigned to the household gardener, Dick, who must feed, brush, walk and perfume the pets each day. The black domestics agree that this attention is ridiculous but comply out of fear of losing their jobs.

During this time, Mrs. Plum invites notable black people to parties with her liberal white friends at her home. Karabo is conflicted because she does not know how to act around black people who are obviously better educated than she is. Karabo's tactic is to not engage with the black guests, just as she does not converse with the whites, a strategy that draws criticism from Kate, who is even more liberal than Mrs. Plum.

One of the men who attends Mrs. Plum's parties is a young black doctor to whom Karabo is attracted. The doctor's fine manners and kind attentions to the young woman cause her to fall in love with him, although she dare not speak about it. Much to Karabo's distress, she learns that Kate plans to marry the young doctor, a fact which enrages the normally liberal Mrs. Plum. Eventually, the marriage is called off, but Karabo never feels the same about Kate. She feels Kate's intentions to marry a black man, who should be left available for a black woman, were inappropriate.

The rising tensions related to apartheid in the city initiate police searches, looking for black servants in violation of their work passes. One night, Mrs. Plum denies two police officers access to her home and ultimately sprays them with a garden hose. This act causes her arrest the next day, and she spends two weeks in jail. Karabo notes that Mrs. Plum has the courage of her convictions but wonders how a white woman could possibly understand the plight shared by Karabo, her family and friends.

One morning, Chimane tells Karabo that she is pregnant and has mixed feelings on what to do. The father of the baby will probably marry her one day, but right now, Chimane's family back in the village rely on the money Chimane can provide by working as a servant. Ultimately, Chimane has an abortion to the dismay of an aunt living in the city, but Chimane determines that her greater purpose at the present is to help her family. Karabo and the other young women from the Black Crow Club contribute money weekly to help Chimane pay for the abortion.

Chimane's situation infuriates Karabo, who is becoming increasingly upset by the way apartheid rules the lives of black people. This feeling is intensified when rumors begin to spread that black servants are poisoning the dogs of the white people. The police searches in homes and on the streets place the black servants in a constant state of panic, and Mrs. Plum soon dismisses Dick out of fear for her own beloved pets.

Amidst all this turmoil, Karabo receives word that her favorite uncle has died, but Mrs. Plum denies her leave to attend family services. Karabo views this as the last affront to her personal integrity and quits her job to return to her village. On the bus ride home,

Karabo tries to sleep but has fitful dreams about a speeding red car and about Dick poisoning dogs and retrieving the sheets in which they were buried so that people can use the linens.

Before long, Mrs. Plum arrives at Karabo's parents' home, having been driven there by a white woman driving a red car. Karabo agrees to return to Mrs. Plum's household after the woman agrees to an increase in pay and more vacation time for Karabo.

The next morning Mrs. Plum and Karabo head back to Greenside, and Mrs. Plum tells Karabo that Malan and Monty are missing. They were stolen shortly after Karabo left. Karabo wonders if her dream about Dick could possibly be true and whether Mrs. Plum needs Karabo in the house to replace the pets. Mrs. Plum tells Karabo that she likes the African people, and Karabo muses that it is clear that Mrs. Plum respects the race of black people but not necessarily the individual black people she encounters.

Analysis

The author uses the first person narrative perspective to tell the story through Karabo's eyes. This allows the reader to witness events through Karabo's eyes and to understand her thoughts and feelings about what she is experiencing. Although the story is named for Mrs. Plum, Karabo is the main character, and her experiences poignantly address the issue of apartheid on a very personal level.

Historically, the story is important because it appeared in the 1960s at the height of the apartheid movement in South Africa. The author makes the assumption that the reader understands the basic mechanics of apartheid, which segregated blacks from whites. The setting of Johannesburg is notable in that the city had very distinct areas for blacks and whites, including the wealthy, all-white suburb of Greenside where Mrs. Plum's home is located.

The issue of civil rights is a complicated one as far as Karabo can determine. On one hand, she listens to Lilian, who encourages her students to maintain a cautionary distance from their white employers. On the other hand, Mrs. Plum actively works for social change publicly while displaying contradictory behavior personally.

Ultimately, the author makes the point that the black people are situated on a social status far beneath that of the pets of the privileged whites, and while disturbing, there is hope in the end. Mrs. Plum's pets have disappeared, and Karabo is symbolically returning to the household instead.

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Characters

Chimane

Chimane is Karabo's closest friend. She is from Karabo's hometown, and works for the white family next door to Mrs. Plum. When their duties permit, Karabo and Chimane meet in the backyard to share the latest gossip and remark on the strange behavior of their employers. On their Thursday afternoons off, they dress up and go to town together to shop and to see their friends at the Black Crow Club. When Chimane becomes pregnant, she worries that her family will suffer if she quits work to tend a baby, and she gets an abortion.

Dick

Dick works for Mrs. Plum, tending the garden, cleaning the house, and caring for the dogs. He uses his earnings to send his sister to school. He is a good worker and too afraid of whites to break any rules. Although he is the first to know Mrs. Plum's secret, he does not reveal it to anyone. Still, when a rumor is spread that the blacks are going to poison the white people's dogs, Mrs. Plum sends Dick away.

Karabo

The female narrator of the story, Karabo is from the black township of Phokeng, near Rustenburg. Like many black South Africans, she has come from her town to work as a domestic for white families in the Johannesburg suburbs, and she sends money back to her family every month. Karabo ages from nineteen to twenty-two years old during the course of the story and learns a great deal about herself and the world during those three years. When she begins working for Mrs. Plum, she knows her "place" as a servant in a white suburb, and she knows that all of the employers are white and the employees black. But she does not have a sense of the political and social standing of blacks and whites throughout the nation, and she has no idea that there are people working for systemwide change. As she becomes more sophisticated politically, and more sure of herself, she comes to resent Mrs. Plum's condescending attitude and eventually stands up for herself and demands higher wages. She is still Mrs. Plum's employee at the end of the story, but her approach to her job and to her relationship with Mrs. Plum is clear-eyed and confident.

Lilian Ngoyi

Lilian Ngoyi was an actual person. She was a member of the African National Congress, a political party campaigning against the unfair treatment of black South Africans. In the story, she lectures the women at the Black Crow Club about the relationships between blacks and whites and urges them to preserve their dignity as much as possible while

they are employed by whites. From her, Karabo learns to place her own individual situation in a larger political context.

Kate Plum

Mrs. Plum's daughter, Kate, is the same age as Karabo, and tries to be her friend. At the beginning of the story, she is off at boarding school during the week and comes home on the weekends. After she graduates, she becomes "wilder," playing loud music, staying out late at night, and falling in love with a black doctor. She tries to explain her mother to Karabo but becomes impatient when Karabo does not understand.

Mrs. Plum

The title character of the story is a widow living in the Johannesburg suburb of Greenside. She is a complex and, for Karabo, a confusing character. She is a member of South Africa's privileged white minority but also an author and activist campaigning for better treatment for the black majority. Mrs. Plum entertains whites and blacks in her home and goes to jail rather than have her black servants searched under the conditions of the pass laws but is adamantly opposed to her daughter marrying a black doctor whom Mrs. Plum invited to several dinner parties. She forces Karabo to eat at the table with her but does not try to learn about the food Karabo likes. She tries to help Karabo improve herself by offering her reading material and paying for dancing lessons, but she can be petty as an employer and refuses Karabo a few days off to mourn her uncle's death. Mrs. Plum is typical of the white liberal in South Africa under apartheid: she likes the Africans as a people but does not try to know them as individuals.

Themes

Civil Rights

Although they are the vast majority of the population of South Africa, the black Africans in the story do not share the personal rights that members of the white minority enjoy. The blacks are required to carry an identification document called a "pass" at all times, and they can work and travel only in the areas specified on the pass. Dick does his best to please his employers, because he knows that they could sign his pass at any time and force him to leave the district. When the police come to search for black servants who do not have the proper passes, they do not need a warrant or any reasonable cause to search Dick's and Karabo's rooms, and the servants have no right to refuse the search.

When Karabo is at the Black Crow Club, she listens to lectures by Lilian Ngoyi, who points out the injustices of South African minority rule. Ngoyi urges her followers to work toward a day when the government represents all the races and classes of South Africa, and when all South Africans are citizens with equal rights. Karabo finds Ngoyi's dreams of a united and equal South Africa intriguing. But because blacks do not even have the right to vote during the time of the story, the idea of them sharing political power seems impossible.

Public versus Private Life

The more Karabo learns about Mrs. Plum, the more Mrs. Plum seems "like a dark forest which one fears to enter, and which one will never know." Mrs. Plum is enigmatic because her public and private lives are so different. Publicly, she is an activist for equal treatment for blacks, writing books and articles and letters to the editor, and wearing a black armband as she demonstrates outside government buildings. She openly invites whites and blacks to the same gatherings at her house. She even goes to jail rather than submit to an unjust law. Mrs. Plum seems—and believes herself to be—a just and fair person who believes in equality.

But in her heart, and in her home, Mrs. Plum is not as free from the taint of her privileged upbringing as she seems to be. Though she makes a point of calling Karabo by her true name, she persists in referring to Dick and other adult male servants as "boy." She welcomes black men into her home, but refuses to allow her daughter to marry one. She encourages Karabo to expand and learn but will not tolerate Karabo challenging her authority. She seems to love Africans as a group, but not as individual people.

Most damning of all is Mrs. Plum's secret perversion involving the dogs. Mphahlele intends her secret to be alarming and frightening. A woman like that cannot be trusted and cannot be good.

Growth and Development

As she ages from nineteen to twenty-two, Karabo is continually learning and growing. Mrs. Plum sponsors some of her education. She learns to cook according to recipes and to look after guests. She improves her skills at reading, writing, and speaking English. Mrs. Plum even pays for Karabo to take dancing lessons at the Black Crow Club.

Karabo also learns things Mrs. Plum does not know about and would not approve of. At the Black Crow Club, she learns to look at her own situation in a wider, more political context. Listening to Mrs. Plum and Kate talk about politics, she learns that white people do not know everything about important matters. Karabo's refrain throughout the story is "I was learning. I was growing up." Finally she gains enough confidence to make demands of Mrs. Plum, and when her demands are not met, she stands up for herself and leaves Mrs. Plum's employ. When Mrs. Plum comes after her and asks her to return, Karabo negotiates a new contract. As the two drive back toward Mrs. Plum's home, Karabo reports that "I felt sure of myself, more than I had ever done."

Style

Setting

The setting of "Mrs. Plum" is important not only for the location in which the story takes place, but for the time period as well. The story takes place in the white suburb of Greenside, outside Johannesburg, South Africa's largest and most populous city. Johannesburg was, in the 1960s as it is now, a modern city with skyscrapers and industry in the center, pockets of poverty to the south and west, and wealthy suburbs to the north. During the time of the story, South Africa was strictly segregated, and only white people with large homes and black servants to take care of them inhabited the suburb of Greenside. The servants lived in simple quarters on their employers' property. Most of them, like Karabo and Chimane, left their families behind in small farms or towns far away, and sent money back whenever they could. Normally, they would visit their families back home only once a year.

Mphahlele assumes his readers will know something of apartheid and includes references to laws, locations, and people without explanation. For him, Mrs. Plum and Karabo represent typical people in South Africa during the 1960s. However, his focusing on Karabo's character means that readers who are not familiar with South African history will nevertheless be able to understand her growth and development even if the setting is unfamiliar to them.

Point of View

The story is told in the first person by Karabo, speaking to an unseen reader or listener. Everything that happens, therefore, is filtered through Karabo's consciousness. She reports what she sees and hears, and describes her own reactions to events in the story. But Karabo is not an introspective person, and her reactions tend to be impressions or actions rather than long passages of rational analysis. For example, she reports that when her former employer's cousin touched her inappropriately, she "asked the madam that very day to give me my money and let me go." She does not reflect on her compromised dignity or her position but lets her actions speak for themselves. Other characters, including Mrs. Plum and Kate, are presented only through their speech and action; the reader is not privy to their thoughts.

Telling the story from Karabo's point of view makes her the most well-rounded character in the story and helps the reader establish a sympathetic connection with her immediately. Mphahlele's work was banned in his own country, and books are expensive throughout Africa. The first readers of "Mrs. Plum" would have been educated and relatively wealthy Africans and Europeans. Because they would not have shared Mphahlele's experiences living in segregated poverty, his manipulation of point of view was important for building a relationship between his readers and his character and for helping them see the world through her eyes.

Bildungsroman

A *bildungsroman* is a story about a young person growing up, becoming an adult. The term comes from German and may be translated as "education novel." A number of critics have described "Mrs. Plum" as a *bildungsroman* because it is the story of Karabo's development of a "total awareness of self" by the end of the story. Her repetition of the statements "I learned. I grew up" and Lilian Ngoyi's and Mrs. Plum's encouragement of Karabo's education point to the importance of Karabo's growth and development. Not only does Karabo see more and more of the peculiar white society in which she lives temporarily, but her understanding of what she sees deepens, as well. Mrs. Plum is not a better person at the end of the story, but Karabo is a wiser one. She returns to Mrs. Plum's home, but this time it is with her eyes wide open.

Historical Context

South Africa and Apartheid

Mphahlele wrote "Mrs. Plum" while he was living in Paris, in exile from South Africa. He had left his country because he could no longer live and work under the restrictions of the system of laws called apartheid.

Records show that various dark-skinned peoples have inhabited the land that is now South Africa since the eleventh century. The first Europeans arrived in 1488, and by the middle of the seventeenth century, Dutch settlers called Boers had begun farming and establishing towns. By 1779, there were fifteen thousand whites living in South Africa and millions of blacks of different ethnic groups. The blacks had complicated systems of kingship and lived mostly by herding and farming. Their lack of sophisticated technology, especially modern weapons, meant that they could not retain their lands and their power against the white settlers. British settlers arrived in 1820, and at the turn of the century a war between the British and the Boers ended with South Africa becoming a selfgoverning colony of Great Britain. The new colony was established in 1910 for the good of the British, and the black residents were seen mostly as an inconvenience.

At first, blacks could serve in the parliament of the new colony if they were nominated by whites, but racial segregation was strongly encouraged. In 1948, a Dutch Reformed Church minister named D. F. Malan became prime minister, and segregation, called apartheid, became law. Malan hoped that the blacks who had moved to the cities would move back to their homelands and stay there, leaving the cities for the whites, who now made up approximately twelve percent of the population. Blacks, Asians, and mixed-race people called "coloureds" were restricted to separate entrances at public buildings, including post offices and train stations. Separate restaurants and movie theaters were established for the different groups. Marriage between whites and nonwhites became illegal. Between 1950 and 1957, the year Mphahlele left South Africa, the restrictions became tighter. All citizens were forced to carry identity documents called "passes," on which their race was marked. Blacks were not allowed to live in white areas and could work in only the areas specified on their passes. If a black worker in a white area lost her job, she had only six days to find new work or she would have to leave the district. Under the Bantu Education Act, separate schools for the separate races were created, but all students were required to learn English and to study English history and literature instead of their own traditional cultures. In some areas, blacks had their farmland taken away, and they were forced to live in townships with no means of support other than sending family members to the cities to work for whites.

Within South Africa, the responses to this oppression varied. Some blacks formed political parties and tried to overthrow the system of apartheid. Opposition leaders were jailed, and writers who opposed government policies found their work banned. As blacks became poorer and weaker, many whites enjoyed becoming richer and more powerful.

But many whites opposed apartheid, including liberals like Mrs. Plum who believed that the system could be changed by working within the law. Other whites, who worked outside the law and committed acts of civil disobedience, found themselves jailed or banned.

African Humanism

Because Africa has for so long been under the influence of European colonizers, generations of Africans grew up learning only about European culture in school, and African art, forms of government, and social structures became more and more Europeanized. As African nations gained independence in the 1960s, African intellectuals tried to identify what was essentially African underneath the layers of Western thought and culture. Through *The African Image* (1962) and other critical writings, Mphahlele emerged as one of the most important scholars articulating a definition of what came to be called "African humanism."

In an interview with Richard Samin, Mphahlele outlined the common values that inform African humanism as he defines it: a belief in ancestral spirits and the importance of elders, a strong sense of community that informs human relationships, a strong connection between human nature and nature outside human control, and a continuity between living and nonliving things. These beliefs stand Africans outside Western consumer culture, but consumer culture can encroach upon and weaken African humanism.

Critic Ruth Obee finds all of Mphahlele's fiction to be informed by this system of belief, as she discusses in her 1999 book, *Es'kia Mphahlele: Themes of Alienation and African Humanism*. According to Obee, Karabo's strong desire to go home to mourn her uncle and pay respects to her aunt is an example of Karabo's own African humanism, which "stands in dramatic contrast to Mrs. Plum's materialism."

Critical Overview

Mphahlele was living in Paris in the mid-1960s when he sent his manuscript of *In Corner B*, the collection in which "Mrs. Plum" first appeared, to the East African Publishing House in Kenya, East Africa. He wanted to support an African publisher rather than a European one-a decision he came to regret for purely practical reasons. Kenya was a new nation, having achieved independence only in 1963, and did not have efficient systems in place for producing books or other goods. The manuscript languished for three years before being published, and when the book was issued, there were no highprofile media outlets for promotion. The audience for the book built gradually, mostly by word-ofmouth, and although the book is now recognized as important and of high quality, contemporary reviews were few. In South Africa, Mphahlele's work was banned, and the book was not available there until 1979.

Those who were able to read *In Corner B* upon publication praised it for presenting a more confi- dent voice than the author's earlier work. Lewis Nkosi, for example, notes that "Mphahlele's writing has become tighter, more solid and assured as he acquires a more properly synthesized vocabulary to deal with the stresses of South African life." Several contemporary critics singled out the narrative voice in "Mrs. Plum" for special notice.

The story has met with almost universal approval. In a letter quoted by Ursula Barnett, Mphahlele himself called the story "the best thing I ever pulled off." Gerald Moore, in *Twelve African Writers* (1980), does not choose "Mrs. Plum" as one of the strongest stories in *In Corner B*, but describes it as the author's "most ambitious story to date." Norman Hodge, in a 1981 article in *English in Africa*, called it "the summit of the author's achievements in shorter fiction to date."

Mphahlele has frequently articulated his definition of African humanism, and his treatment of that humanism has drawn the attention of critics. In a 1980 article for *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, Samuel Omo Asein examines the author's humanism. Asein describes "Mrs. Plum" as a conflict between Karabo's humanism and Mrs. Plum's liberalism. Ruth Obee also calls Karabo a humanist. Obee writes that, in her attempts to help Chimane through her pregnancy and abortion, "Karabo exemplifies the compassion of the practicing African humanist." She concludes, "'Mrs. Plum' stands as one of Mphahlele's most definitive statements on African humanism, as both a philosophy and as a way of life."

Several critics have focused on Karabo's development as the most important thread in the story. Norman Hodge wrote about the story in an article published in the South African journal *English in Africa* in 1981, two years after the ban on Mphahlele's work was lifted. He called the story a "bildungsroman," or a story of education and maturation, and traced Karabo's growth through her experiences with the white and black worlds. By the end, he writes that Karabo has moved "from a basic ignorance of white urban realities to a relatively complete and comprehensive understanding of both the social situation and her position in this society." Her pattern of development is a

common and universal one. Other writers have agreed with Hodge's assessment but explored the unique details of a bildungsroman in the particular political setting of South Africa under apartheid.

Most critics have seen Mrs. Plum as hypocritical, and the story as a condemnation of her as the worst sort of white liberal. Ursula Barnett, in *Ezekiel Mphahlele* (1976), was more sympathetic. She acknowledged Mrs. Plum's willingness to go to jail for her beliefs and saw some kindness in her treatment of Karabo. She wrote of Karabo and Mrs. Plum, "Here are two people, each representing her race in some of its better qualities, who genuinely try to understand each other, and fail miserably."

More than thirty years after the publication of *In Corner B*, Mphahlele is considered one of the most important of the African writers, and his work is studied in high schools and colleges and universities in the United States, in Europe, and throughout Africa. As the end of apartheid brings a new era in scholarly study of African writers in South Africa, and as an improved economy makes books available to a larger South African readership, Mphahlele will finally be studied by South Africans and in the context of a large body of freely available South African writing.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4

Critical Essay #1

Bily teaches writing and literature at Adrian College in Adrian, Michigan, and writes for various educational publishers. In the following essay, she examines the concept of family in Mphahlele's story.

While it is certainly a story of politics, and a story of growing up, Es'kia Mphahlele's "Mrs. Plum" is also a story of family. Mphahlele's own family has always had a strong influence on him, and he has drawn throughout his life on the strength of women. Raised by his grandmother and then by his single mother, Mphahlele has been married to his wife Rebecca for over fifty years. By all accounts, his relationships with his children are based on love and respect. The author's mentions of humble family matters in his two volumes of autobiography demonstrate the importance he places on the family bond. In "Mrs. Plum," the author uses the states of his characters' families to suggest their moral worth.

Like many of the servants she knows, Karabo has come to Johannesburg from her rural hometown to work for white people. She sends part of her earnings home to her family in Phokeng, and sets some more aside for supplies to take with her when she visits. She is allowed only one trip home each year, at Easter, when all the servants go "for a long weekend to see our people and to eat chicken and sour milk and *morogo*-wild spinach. We also [take] home sugar and condensed milk and tea and coffee and sweets and custard powder and tinned foods." During their time apart, Karabo and her family exchange frequent letters. When the servants get together on their Thursday afternoons off, they "talk and talk and talk: about our people at home and their letters; about their illnesses; about bad crops; about a sister who wanted a school uniform and books and school fees."

Dick, who does the housecleaning and watches over Mrs. Plum's dogs, has a situation much like Karabo's. His family is in Orlando Township, and he sends his salary back to them so that his younger sister can stay in school. She wishes to become a nurse and midwife, which will require years of schooling, but Dick has been unable to hold any job very long. Still he will not abandon her. He borrows money from other servants "to pay his sister's school fees, to buy her clothes and books." But since he is gone to the city to earn money, the sister has had to assume extra responsibilities at home: "she looked after his old people, although she was only thirteen years of age." For Karabo and Dick, supporting their families is a duty and a source of pride.

By contrast, Mrs. Plum's family has fallen apart. Her husband killed himself before Karabo joined the household. Her daughter Kate is wild, undisciplined. Kate listens to music too loudly and stays out too late at night, and falls in love with people Mrs. Plum feels are wrong for her. Karabo reports that after a particularly nasty disagreement, "they were now openly screaming at each other. They began in the sitting room and went upstairs together, speaking fast hot biting words." Perhaps to compensate for the loving family she does not have, Mrs. Plum lavishes her affection on her dogs, who live in more comfort than many servants do. They are washed and brushed, they sleep on

pink linen, they wear doggie sweaters. As Karabo eventually learns, Mrs. Plum's affection for her dogs extends to the point of perversion. Mrs. Plum is depicted as a shocking and dramatic example of the warped values of South African whites.

Chimane's white employers are not a happy family, either. The husband's mother comes to visit, and the wife treats her with disdain. While Chimane cooks for the rest of the family, the mother-in-law is not invited to share their food. She cooks for herself when the family meal is over. If the family cat is sitting on the only available chair, the mother-inlaw is not allowed to move it and sit down herself. Chimane and Karabo do not know what to make of this kind of treatment of a family member. They can only conclude that "white people have no heart no sense."

Because whites have so little regard for their own families, it is not surprising that they do not respect the families and the family values of their servants. For Karabo, Chimane, and Dick, trying to sustain a family from such a great distance is difficult and worrisome. But under the laws of apartheid, there is little they can do. Their families are prohibited by law from moving to Greenside, Mrs. Plum's suburb; it is an area for whites only, and for their servants. Black families must live where they are told to live, but their wage-earning children must live where there are jobs.

The system is particularly hard on Chimane. When she learns she is pregnant, her immediate reaction is despair. Although she would love to be a mother and the wife of the baby's father, she feels trapped. If she takes time off work to have the baby and care for it, her family will have no income. She moans, "What shall we be eating all the time I am at home? It is not like the days gone past when we had land and our mother could go to the fields until the child was ready to arrive."

Chimane decides to have an abortion, a risky and painful process. It is painful, both physically and emotionally, but she feels she has no choice. Her aunt comes to help her recover and to mourn the lost child. She complains, "If she had let the child be born I should have looked after it or my sister would have been so happy to hold a grandchild on her lap." Then Timi, the father of the unborn child, rejects her because of the abortion. Apartheid forced Chimane to choose between feeding her family and saving her baby. In choosing the abortion, she wounded her aunt and lost her lover. But in choosing the baby, she would have taken food out of her parents' mouths. Chimane's employers, the bene- ficiaries of apartheid, never even know about Chimane's struggle.

For Karabo, the time for making a choice comes when her uncle dies. For months, she has been receiving letters from home, telling of various deaths from a mysterious illness. Africans feel a kinship with large extended families, and Karabo's mother keeps her informed about her father, her sisters, the mother-in-law of her sisters' teacher, and even "a woman she does not think I remember because I last saw her when I was a young girl[-] she passed away in Zeerust[-]she was my mother's greatest friend when they were girls." Now it is her uncle, her mother's brother, who has died. Karabo asks Mrs. Plum for a few days off to take "tears and words of grief to his grave."

For Mphahlele, Karabo's wish to go home is not extraordinary, although he knows that Mrs. Plum does not understand the request. Ursula Barnett explains in *Ezekiel Mphahlele* that a mother's brother is "a relationship considered closer by Africans than that of any other uncle." Before writing this story, Mphahlele described a typical situation in *The African Image*: "A man asks his employer for leave to go home in some reserve two hundred miles or so away, because his aunt's cousin's husband (spoken of as a direct uncle) is dead. The employer often doesn't understand why a man should travel two hundred miles to see a corpse. He doesn't know what it means to his 'boy' in terms of human relations and communal living." Mrs. Plum does not understand and denies the request.

Karabo decides that she must go anyway, and that she cannot continue in Mrs. Plum's employ. She quits her job and takes the bus home. At last the reader gets to meet Karabo's family, to determine whether they are worth all the worry. They are. When Karabo tells her father she has no job, he replies, "So long as you are in good health, my child, it is good." The talk between Karabo and her parents is respectful, and she defers to them when Mrs. Plum asks her to return: "You must ask my father first." When the parents are consulted, the father replies lovingly, "It goes by what you feel my child." There is no evidence that Mrs. Plum notices the remarkable contrast between this civil and kind conversation and her own screaming arguments with Kate, but the reader cannot help but see. As demonstrated by the families described in "Mrs. Plum," the social structure imposed by apart heid is detrimental to black families, yet these black families stay strong. Ironically, the white families, who seem to have every advantage, are full of conflict.

Source: Cynthia Bily, in an essay for Short Stories for Students, Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

Brent has a Ph.D. in American Culture, specializing in film studies, from the University of Michigan. She is a freelance writer and teaches courses in the history of American cinema. In the following essay, Brent discusses the significance of the dogs in Mphahlele's story.

In the 1972 short story "Mrs. Plum," Ezekiel (or Es'kia) Mphahlele addresses issues of black-white relations during the era of apartheid in South Africa through the narrator's focus on the white peoples' treatment of their pet dogs. Karabo, the narrator, is a young black South African woman working as a maid in the home of Mrs. Plum, a white woman active in organizing for the rights of blacks. Although Mrs. Plum is a liberal and makes many gestures toward treating Karabo fairly, she nevertheless harbors many racist attitudes toward blacks and continues to treat her black employees in a demeaning and unfair manner. Karabo's narrative focuses on Mrs. Plum's two pet dogs, Monty and Malan, in describing the racial relations between herself and her employer.

Mrs. Plum's treatment of her dogs is an insult to her black African employees because she to some extent equates her pets with her servants. As the story opens, Karabo makes the statement that Mrs. Plum "loved dogs and Africans," which were two of the "three big things in Madam's life." The irony here is that, while Mrs. Plum sees herself as someone who "loves" Africans, this "love" is an insult to her servants because she sees it as on a par with her "love" for dogs. The implication is that, to her mind, black Africans are no better than animals- even if they are beloved pets. This equation of the status of black servants with that of animals is further indicated by the fact that the black servants are even fed the same meat as the dogs. The expression "dog-meat boys" is used to describe the boyfriends of the domestic maids, because, as Karabo explains, "A boy who had a girlfriend in the kitchens, as we say, always told his friends that he was coming for dog's meat when he meant he was visiting his girl. This was because we gave our boyfriends part of the meat the white people bought for the dogs and us." At other points in the story, as well, the oppressed status of black Africans in South Africa is equated to that of animals. Karabo is told by Lilian Ngoyi, her teacher, "Remember your poor people at home and the way in which the whites are moving them from place to place like sheep and cattle." Karabo later thinks of herself as a herd of defenseless "sheep" in comparison to a white person who is a predatory "fox that falls upon a flock of sheep at night."

Karabo and her friends are also disdainful of the white peoples' habit of talking to their dogs as if they were human beings. Again, this is an insult to the black Africans because the dogs are given equal, or higher, status than black Africans, although they are in fact human beings, while the dogs are not. Dick, who works as Mrs. Plum's gardener, is particularly disdainful of this habit; he exclaims to Karabo, "These things called white people! . . . Talking to dogs!" Karabo comments that, "Monty and Milan became real dogs again," only when Mrs. Plum went out of town on vacation; in other words, with the white owner away, the black servants have the luxury of treating the dogs like animals, rather than like spoiled humans.

The black African servants resent their employers' treatment of their pet dogs. The underlying reason for this resentment is due to the fact that these animals are treated far better and provided with far more creature comforts, than the impoverished servants working to support their families. After hearing a white man call his dog "Rusty," Karabo thinks, "Dogs with names, men without." She is referring to the fact that white people often call black African men "boy," or "Jim," and are not interested in the real African names of their servants, but simply call them any convenient name. The black Africans are also disdainful of the various ways in which the whites treat their pet dogs like "gentlemen," fed "tea and biscuits" like honored guests, while they themselves are treated worse than animals. Karabo describes Mrs. Plum's royal treatment of her dogs with great disdain: "They are to be washed often and brushed and sprayed and they sleep on pink linen. Monty has a pink ribbon, which stays on his neck most of the time. They both carry a cover on their backs. They make me feel fed up when I see them in their baskets, looking fat, and as if they knew all that was going on everywhere." The pink sheets and pink ribbon indicate the frivolous nature of the extent to which the white people pamper their pets; the color pink is associated with a certain degree of prissiness and frivolity. The linen sheets and clothes provided for the dogs are a particular insult to Karabo, because she and her friends have very limited resources to buy dresses and stockings for themselves, while the dogs are privileged to luxurious outfits. The dogs are "fat," of course, from being well fed, while the servants are given little more than scraps to eat, and must send most of their earnings home to support their families who are living at a subsistence level.

Dick, who takes care of Mrs. Plum's dogs, is equally disdainful of the frivolous outfitting of the dogs, in part because of the added work it represents. He jokes with Karabo that "One day those white people will put earrings and toe rings and bangles on their dogs. That would be the day he would leave Mrs. Plum. For, he said, he was sure that she would want him to polish the rings and bangles with Brasso." This overdressing of the dogs, while the black servants have little resources for clothing, is particularly insulting to Karabo when Mrs. Plum's dogs ruin her stockings, and Mrs. Plum ultimately blames her rather than the dogs. Karabo explains that, "Once one of the dogs . . . tore my stocking-brand-new, you hear-and tore it with its teeth and paws. Then I told Madam about it, my anger as high as my throat, she gave me money to buy another pair. It happened again. This time she said she was not going to give me money because I must also keep my stockings where the two gentlemen would not reach them." The pet dogs of white people are even given the status of "masters and madams," when their owners are on vacation, and the black servants must wait hand and foot on the dogs. Karabo explains that, "In winter so many families went away that the dogs remained masters and madams. You could see them walk like white people in the streets. Silent but with plenty of power. And when you saw them you knew that they were full of more nonsense and fancies in the house."

The living conditions of dogs in African communities, compared to those of white communities, represent the contrast between the lives of African people and white people. Chimane tells Karabo a funny story about a dog belonging to an African man in which the dog jumps out of its master's arms to get at a pot of meat cooking in a market. This anecdote, which contrasts the behavior of an "African dog" with a dog owned by

white people, symbolizes the difference between the living conditions of black Africans and the "spoiled" lives of white people. Chimane concludes the story by stating, "That is a good African dog. A dog must look for its own food when it is not time for meals. Not these stupid spoiled angels the whites keep giving tea and biscuits." Karabo goes to see her friend Chimane in an impoverished black area, which she describes as "that terrible township where night and day are full of knives and bicycle chains and guns and the barking of hungry dogs and of people in trouble." Whereas the dogs in the white neighborhoods are "fat," the dogs in the black neighborhoods are "hungry."

Dick, the gardener for Mrs. Plum, also points out the differences between the black Africans' relationship to their animals and that of the whites. For the Africans, in their rural homelands, animals are not spoiled pets, but are used as tools for subsistence living gained through hard work. He points out to Karabo the difference between the ways in which Africans talk to their oxen and the way in which white people talk to their dogs: "at home do you not know that a man speaks to an ox because he wants to make it pull the plow or the wagon or to stop or to stand still for a person to inspan it. No one simply goes to an ox looking at him with eyes far apart and speaks to it." The pampered treatment of pet dogs by white people is later contrasted with the use of animals by traditional black African society for ritual sacrifice. At a party thrown by a black African while his employers are away, one of Karabo's friends announces that he and a friend have won a lot of money from betting on a horse. He comments that "At home I should slaughter a goat for us to feast and thank our ancestors."

Having to care for these overprivileged animals is often highly unpleasant for the servants of the white people. One of Karabo's friends describes the big pet rat of a child of her previous employers, which made her housework particularly distasteful: "He puts it on his bed when he goes to school. And let the blankets just begin to smell of urine and all the nonsense and they tell me to wash them. Hei, people . . . !" Karabo and other black servants occasionally assert themselves against either the pets, or their employers' expectations of them in caring for these pets. These moments of resistance represent a form of rebellion in that, at least in some small way, they are able to assert their own right to be treated like human beings, rather than being treated worse than animals. Sometimes these moments of rebellion are enacted against the pets when the white people are not around to find out. Even a small kick to one of the dogs by a black servant demonstrates a form of resistance to white oppression. One of Karabo's friends tells her that "Me, I take a master's bitch by the leg, me, and throw it away so that it keeps howling. . . . I don't play about with them, me." Other times, the black servants refuse to carry out certain tasks in caring for their employers' pets, another way of asserting their rights against white authority; another of Karabo's friends explains that "They wanted me to take their dog out for a walk every afternoon and I told them I said, It is not my work, in other houses the garden man does it. I just said to myself I said, They can go to the chickens. Let them bite their elbows before I take out a dog, I am not so mad yet." Dick even goes so far as to allow Mrs. Plum's dogs to run out into the street, nearly getting hit by a car, when she is not around. Through his carelessness, perhaps deliberate, Dick expresses a certain level of resentment against Mrs. Plum's treatment of the dogs compared to him.

Karabo and her friends are particularly insulted by the white peoples' plan to build a cemetery for their dogs. The dog cemetery represents a variety of ways in which the white people are far more concerned with their dogs than with the difficult lives of their underpaid black servants. The immoral nature of this discrepancy is expressed by Karabo's friend Chimane, who says that, "These white people can do things that make the gods angry. More godless people I have not seen." The idea of the dog cemetery further reinforces their resentment of dogs being treated like humans while they themselves are treated worse than animals. Karabo tells Chimane, "By my mother one day these dogs will sit at table and use knife and fork. These things are to be treated like people now, like children who are never going to grow up." Chimane adds that the white people prefer to spend their resources on their dead pets than on the basic needs of their black servants; she comments, "why do they not give me some of that money they will spend on the ground and on gravestones to buy stockings! I have nothing to put on, by my mother." Mrs. Plum's concern "that Monty and Milan could be sure of a nice burial" is particularly insulting to Karabo after she receives notice of her uncle's death and Mrs. Plum argues that there is no need for her to go home, since the funeral has already occurred. Thus, while she is greatly concerned with the burial of her dogs, Mrs. Plum is completely unsympathetic to Karabo and her family in mourning the death of a close relative. Mrs. Plum denies Karabo the right to take a day off in order to "take my tears and words of grief to his grave and to my old aunt." Karabo's decision to quit working for Mrs. Plum in order to go home is an assertion of her right to the human compassion Mrs. Plum reserves only for her dogs.

After her dogs have been stolen, and probably killed, Mrs. Plum appears at Karabo's home asking her to return to her employ. Karabo is for the first time able to assert herself in demanding from Mrs. Plum an increase in wages and more paid time off. Karabo has the realization that, for Mrs. Plum, she herself is just a substitute for the companionship of the dogs; she asks herself, "did this woman come to ask me to return because she had lost two animals she loved?" As the story closes, Karabo sees clearly that Mrs. Plum's "love" for Africans, which she equates with her love for dogs, is false, to the extent that she does not see the African people she knows and who work for her, such as Karabo and Dick, as individuals with the rights of human beings.

Source: Liz Brent, in an essay for *Short Stories for Students*, Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #3

Korb has a master's degree in English literature and creative writing and has written for a wide variety of educational publishers. In the following essay, she discusses Karabo's growing realization of the hypocrisy of Mrs. Plum's liberalism and her corresponding growth of her own independence.

With publication of such influential works as the autobiography *Down Second Avenue* and the novel *The Wanderers*, Ezekiel Mphahlele came to be widely viewed as one of Africa's most important twentieth-century writers. He has lived in his native South Africa, and after his exile in the 1950s, he lived in other African countries as well as in the United States. His most important works, however, have centered on the plight of Africans in racist South Africa, many during the years of apartheid. Like his longer works and his essays, his short stories also reflect these important issues. Published between 1946 and 1967-several in *Drum* maga zine, which was the launching point for many noted South African writers-these stories introduce the themes that governed black African life: life in the townships, the politics of protest, and black urban existence.

Reviewers praised his second collection of stories, *In Corner B*, and, along with the author, saw in it significant development. Ursula Barnett writes in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* that in these stories "Mphahlele's creative skills have matured" from his earlier collection. Along with the title story, Barnett singled out "Mrs. Plum": "There is an economy of words and a conciseness of imagery lacking before. They [the stories] mark the height of his creation of short fiction." Considered one of his most successful stories, both for its tacit exposure of the hypocrisy of white South African liberals and its realistically stultifying backdrop of typical black life in the white suburbs, "Mrs. Plum" is noteworthy for other reasons as well. Mphahlele, notes Finuala Dowling in her discussion of his short stories in *Reference Guide to Short Fiction*, believed the story to be "the best thing" he "ever pulled off." Additionally, its length-almost that of a novella-inspired Mphahlele to undertake new projects. As he told Cosmo Pieterse in 1968:

[W]hen I wrote "Mrs Plum" this was a kind of finger exercise to see what I could make of the long story or the novella, and once having done that I felt more confident; so I got into the novel and I have now finished a novel which is in the hands of the publishers [The Wanderers], . . . I'm not going to go back to the short story I think. I want to, I simply want to go on with the novel.

"Mrs. Plum" takes the forms of a young black servant's recollections of her mistress. Karabo comes to work for Mrs. Plum in her suburban Johannesburg home. At first, Karabo is surprised at her treatment in her new place of employ; Mrs. Plum insists on treating her with a real measure of equality. Over time, however, as Karabo learns her own self-worth, she comes to understand the shallowness of Mrs. Plum's liberalism. Her assertion of independence at the end of the story is both an indictment of Mrs. Plum and a strong statement of her value as an individual.

The story opens with a simple characterization of Mrs. Plum. According to Karabo, "She loved dogs and Africans and said that everyone must follow the law even if it hurt." These were the three main principles of Mrs. Plum's life: she loves her dogs because she is a lonely woman and they give her affection; she loves Africans because her championing their cause allows her to maintain a view of herself as a good person; and she believes in the law because she does not delve deeply into any of the issues that she claims plague her. Mrs. Plum only cares for these things for what they can give her, not for any of their own innate characteristics.

At first, however, Karabo only notes how different Mrs. Plum is from previous employers. Mrs. Plum insists on calling her by her African name, in striking contrast to Karabo's former families, where she was called either "Jane" or "You Black Girl." When Karabo first meets Mrs. Plum, she is impressed because she "spoke as if she knew a name is a big thing. I knew so many whites who did not care what they called black people as long as it was all right for their tongue. . . . [T]he only time I heard the name [Karabo] was when I was at home or when my friends spoke to me." Mrs. Plum also teaches Karabo how to cook and how to treat guests; helps her learn to speak and write better English; and wants Karabo to eat at the table with her and her daughter Kate. She also pays the fee for Karabo's Thursday afternoon Black Crow Club, where she will learn such skills as sewing, knitting, and dancing.

In so doing, however, Mrs. Plum unwittingly fosters the development of Karabo's self-will; for at the club, Karabo is exposed to the ideas of Lilian Ngoyi, who is a teacher there. Ngoyi was an important member of the African National Congress, which led the decades-long struggle against apartheid. Ngoyi, and her quest for true understanding and equality, becomes a counterpoint to Mrs. Plum, whose reform measures would only assuage the economic inequities of South Africa and not better the actual status of black Africans.

In her books, newspaper articles, and editorials, Mrs. Plum does call for changes in South African governmental policy toward blacks. She asks the government "to be kind to" Africans. They "should be treated well, be paid more money." Thus Africans who have attended school-meaning they have been taught to read and write-should be able to participate in the government by choosing "those who [they] want to speak for them." The reality of Mrs. Plum's plan is that only "a few of your people" would "one day be among those who rule." Ngoyi, by contrast, not only calls for a South Africa in which blacks are part of the government, but believes that "[T]he power should be given to the Africans." Blacks "shall be more than they" in this new government "as we are more in the country." The difference between the two women is also pointed out in Ngoyi's assertion that "A master and a servant can never be friends." As she notes, "You are not even sure if the ones you say are good are not like that because they cannot breathe or live without the work of your hands."

Before attending Ngoyi's classes, Karabo had demonstrated her comprehension of the inherent wrongness of Mrs. Plum's setting herself up as spokesperson for the black people. When Kate first tells Karabo that Mrs. Plum goes to meetings "[F]or your people," Karabo wonders why. Her own people "have mouths" too.

Why does she want to say something for them? Does she know what my mother and what my father want to say? They can speak when they want to. . . . [Kate says] I don't say your people-your family only. I mean all the black people in this country. I say Oh! What do the black people want to say?

Through her classes with Ngoyi, however, Karabo comes to understand her own source of discomfort with the role that Mrs. Plum takes for herself-she comes to understand the hypocrisy of women in Mrs. Plum's position. As Karabo confesses,

I always thought of Madam when Lilian Ngoyi spoke. . . . Now Lilian Ngoyi asked she said, How many white people can be born in a white hospital, grow up in white streets, be clothed in lovely cotton, lie on white cushions; how many whites can live all their lives in a fenced place away from people of other colours and then, as men and women learn quickly the correct ways of thinking, learn quickly to ask questions in their minds, big questions that will throw over all the nice things of a white man's life? How many? Very very few.

Karabo's understanding that Mrs. Plum does not have, as Ngoyi puts it, "both feet in our house" grows over time. Mrs. Plum notices that Karabo is changing, which does not please her. "What else are they teaching you at the Black Crow, Karabo?" she asks, showing her suspicion that Karabo's education is surpassing her intended boundaries. Karabo no longer wants to read Mrs. Plum's white newspapers because they contained "pictures of white people most of the time." Karabo reports that "they talked mostly about white people and their gardens, dogs, weddings and parties. I asked her if she could buy me a Sunday paper that spoke about my people. Madam bought it for me. I did not think she would do it." Karabo's surprise indicates her growing comprehension that Mrs. Plum pays only lip service to the needs and rights of blacks.

Barnett points out that "Mphahlele dislikes this type of liberalism intensely because it lacks the one characteristic that is his own ruling passion-a feeling of compassion for one's fellow human beings." That Mrs. Plum is such a person is seen in many different ways, for instance, her discomfort with Karabo's changes, her distrust of the garden man Dick, and her adherence to the law. Mrs. Plum gets arrested for obstructing police business when two officers come to the house to make sure that the pass laws, which determine which blacks may leave the townships and visit the cities, are being followed. Mrs. Plum bypasses paying a five-pound fine, which she can easily afford, and elects to go to jail for two weeks as her punishment. Instead of appreciating Mrs. Plum's gesture, Karabo again compares her to Ngoyi: "I thought of what Lilian Ngoyi often said to us: You must be ready to go to jail for the things you believe are true and for which you are taken by the police. What did Mrs. Plum really believe about me, Chimane, Dick and all the other black people, I asked myself? I did not know." Mrs. Plum had chosen jail over the fine "to show that she felt she was not in the wrong," words that significantly reveal that Mrs. Plum's protests stem from her own set of beliefs and not from any definitive knowledge or understanding of the African people. She never sees the black Africans who surround her as individuals, only as representatives of South Africa's unfair system. So even though Mrs. Plum does make efforts to help Karabo, it is not because of *who*

Karabo is but because of what she represents: the repressed black South African underclass.

Over time, Karabo comes to possess a more thorough understanding of the inequities that South African policy visits upon black Africans. Her friend Chimane must decide what to do about an unplanned pregnancy. Chimane doesn't feel that she can take time off from working to get married and have the baby because she will be unable to feed her family during this period. Karabo realizes that in a system that takes all rights from people, "Luck and the mercy of the gods" is all that saves her. Karabo comes to feel disgust for the trappings of Mrs. Plum that she has taken upon herself. Sitting on her bed she "smelled Madam" and quickly realized that it came from her own perfume. "I used the same cosmetics as Mrs. Plum's. . . . why have I been using the same cosmetics as Madam. . . . And then I took all the things and threw them into the dustbin. I was going to buy other kinds on Thursday; finished!" Even after this purging ritual, Karabo is still unsettled.

I could not sit down. I went out and into the white people's house. I walked through and the smell of the house made me sick and seemed to fill up my throat. I went to the bathroom without knowing why. It was full of the smell of Madam. Dick was cleaning the bath. I stood at the door at looked at him cleaning the dirt from Madam's body. . . . To myself I said, Why cannot people wash the dirt of their own bodies out of the bath? . . . Ag, I said again to myself, why should I think about it now when I have been doing their washing for so long and cleaned the bath many times when Dick was ill. I had held worse things from her body many times without number.

Karabo's shift in regard for Mrs. Plum culminates in the scene in which, peeping through a keyhole, she sees her employer sexually gratifying herself with one of her much loved and pampered dogs. Karabo and other black servants had already showed disdain for the white people's dogs. At the Black Crow Club, the women display their suppressed rage at their treatment by whites through discussion of their dogs. One dog is "Big in a foolish way." Another maid takes "a master's bitch by the leg, . . . and throws it away so it keeps howling." Chimane and Karabo draw comparisons between white dogs and African dogs. "A [African] dog must look for its own food when it is not time for meals. Not these stupid spoiled angels the whites keep giving tea and biscuits."

That the white people's dogs are a focus of black anger is apparent-the dogs invariably are better treated than the servants. When a story begins to spread through Johannesburg that the servants were going to poison the dogs, Mrs. Plum shows typical South African white bias in her assumption that Dick-who believes that it was wrong to hold animals accountable for the sins of their masters- poses a danger to her dogs. She asks Karabo for her opinion on Dick's trustworthiness, and Karabo sees a face on Mrs. Plum she has never seen before: "The eyes, the nostrils, the lips, the teeth seemed to be full of hate, tired, fixed on doing something bad; and yet there was something on that face that told me she wanted me on her side." Instead of contributing to Mrs. Plum's bigotry, after Mrs. Plum fires Dick, Karabo quits Mrs. Plum's employ. A week later, Mrs. Plum comes to Karabo's township to ask her to return. Karabo's assents after negotiating shrewdly. In the car on the way back to Mrs. Plum's house, Mrs. Plum tells

Karabo that she no longer has the dogs, for they were stolen the day after Karabo left. Karabo asks herself, "did this woman come to ask me to return because she had lost two animals she loved?" Before she can explore this question in her mind, Mrs. Plum says, "You know, I like your people, Karabo, the Africans." Karabo wonders, "And Dick and me?" The story closes on this scene, succinctly demonstrating Mrs. Plum's bitter dismissal of the individuality of Africans and Karabo's understanding of this truth.

Source: Rena Korb, in an essay for *Short Stories for Students*, Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #4

The following excerpt provides an overview of Mphahlele's "Mrs. Plum" and discusses the main character's liberal views.

[Mphahlele's] best-known story, of almost novella length, is "Mrs. Plum." It concerns a liberal, white widow who lives in a suburb with her daughter, her servants, and her dogs. Karabo, the female domestic worker who narrates the story, finds Mrs. Plum's liberalism puzzling but accepts it at first as one of the eccentricities of the white race: "my madam . . . loved dogs and Africans and said that everyone must follow the law even if it hurt. These were three big things in Madam's life." That is how the story opens. Relations between them deteriorate when there is trouble in the neighborhood. At first Mrs. Plum supports her servants against the police to the extent that she goes to jail. Karabo is impressed, but among her friends and at her home in Phokeng there is only poverty and tragedy; suddenly she is sickened by the smell of the cosmetics she secretly shares with Mrs. Plum, by the dogs, and by Dick, the other servant, who cleans out the dirt of Madam's body from the bathtub. Dick is suspected of poisoning dogs in the neighborhood, and Mrs. Plum dismisses him. In protest Karabo leaves her employ. The story ends when Mrs. Plum visits Karabo in her home village and asks her to return. She tells Karabo that two pet dogs have died. Did this woman, Karabo wonders, come to ask her to return because she had lost two animals she loved? "You know, I like your people, Karabo, the African," Mrs. Plum says. Karabo wonders if Mrs. Plum likes her as an individual.

In the course of the story readers gradually realize that while Mrs. Plum's liberalism is quite genuine, unlike that of Miss Pringle in "We'll Have Dinner at Eight," it is completely impersonal. Mphahlele dislikes this type of liberalism intensely because it lacks the one characteristic that is his own ruling passion-a feeling of compassion for one's fellow human beings. By bringing into the story a historical character, the black leader Lillian Ngoyi, as a teacher in a women's club Karabo attends, Mphahlele shows the white liberal as irrelevant to the education and maturity of a young black girl. Only by sharing a common cause with other women in her position can Karabo become conscious of her worth as a black woman.

Source: Ursula A. Barnett, "Es'kia Mphahlele," in DLB, Gale, Vol. 125, 1993, pp. 89-108.

Topics for Further Study

Read a few overviews of apartheid in South Africa and of Jim Crow laws in the United States. In what ways were they similar? How did they differ?

Find a description of the British educational system. Karabo states that she has completed Standard Six. How much education is that?

Investigate the role that the United States played in urging South Africa to end apartheid. How did the United States explain its role? Which other countries took similar positions? Which countries disagreed with the U.S. position?

The United States has sometimes established or supported economic sanctions against a nation that has not guaranteed the civil rights of its own people. Most recently, the United States has supported economic sanctions against South Africa and Iraq. What is the philosophy behind such a tactic? How effective has it been?

Read some recent accounts of life in South Africa. How have conditions changed for workers like Karabo since apartheid was dismantled?

Compare and Contrast

1948: South African Prime Minister D. F. Malan introduces apartheid, a system of laws that restrict the rights of blacks to preserve the power of the white minority.

1961: As South Africa declares independence from Great Britain and Malan is replaced by Hendrik Verwoerd, apartheid becomes even more restrictive. Blacks are forbidden to live in the white cities and towns but may travel to the cities to provide cheap labor for whites. They do not have the right to vote.

1990: South African President F. W. de Klerk announces that apartheid will be dismantled, and calls for a new bill of rights and a new system of government under which every adult will vote. Four years later, South Africa elects its first democratically chosen president, the black activist Nelson Mandela.

1949: The passage of the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act makes marriage between whites and other racial groups illegal.

1990: Along with most other restrictions under apartheid, the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act is repealed.

1950s: When the South African government makes mixed race people or "coloureds" ineligible to vote, a group of white women called the Women's Defense of the Constitution League protests. The group, also called the Black Sash, stages silent protests over racial injustice, and offers assistance to victims of oppression for the next forty years.

1990s: Women continue to work for equality in South Africa. Approximately one-third of the members of the post-apartheid parliament are women.

1960s: Abortion is illegal in South Africa. A woman in Chimane's position who feels she must obtain one must undergo a dangerous "back alley" procedure, usually performed in unhygienic conditions by a woman with no formal medical training.

1990s: Abortions are legal in South Africa (since 1977), though it is discouraged. Abortions may now be administered under safe conditions by doctors and midwives.

What Do I Read Next?

In Corner B (1967), by Ezekiel Mphahlele, is a collection of twelve short stories that draw on the author's experiences in Nigeria and South Africa. It includes "Mrs. Plum."

Afrika, My Music: An Autobiography 1957- 1983 (1984), by Es'kia Mphahlele, is the second volume of Mphahlele's autobiography. It covers the two decades of his exile in Africa, Europe and the United States, and his return to South Africa in 1977.

The Penguin Book of Southern African Stories (1985), edited by Stephen Gray, is a wellreceived anthology of thirty-nine short stories from South Africa, Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Namibia, Swaziland, and Zimbabwe.

When Rain Clouds Gather (1967), by Bessie Head, is an ultimately optimistic novel about racial and gender oppression in Africa. Head was classified as mixed race when born in South Africa, and like Mphahlele she found her true voice as a writer only after leaving South Africa.

My Traitor's Heart (1990), by Rian Malan, is a horrifying account of apartheid by a white reporter who left South Africa because of the atrocities he had seen, and who returned to confront and try to understand his native land. The author has been widely praised for his honesty and courage in writing this book.

The Land and People of South Africa (1990), by Jonathan Paton, is an illustrated overview of the country. Although it was written before the end of apartheid, it provides a thorough examination of the period during which "Mrs. Plum" takes place.

Further Study

Akosu, Tyohdzuah, *The Writing of Ezekiel [Es'kia] Mphahlele, South African Writer: Literature, Culture and Politics*, Mellen University Press, 1995.

This book is an important overview of the critical reception of Mphahlele's work and an assessment of his literary achievements. Akosu claims that aesthetic questions about African writing are inappropriate, and that Mphahlele's work should be analyzed from a functionalist stance-that is, how it works as literature.

Barnett, Ursula A., *Ezekiel Mphahlele*, Twayne, 1976.

Although published before Mphahlele's return to South Africa from exile in 1977, this volume is still the best introduction to Mphahlele's early and middle life and work. It includes a chronology, biography, and close reading of his major writings, including "Mrs. Plum."

Egejuru, Phanuel Akubueze, *Towards African Literary Independence: A Dialogue with Contemporary African Writers*, Greenwood Press, 1980.

These pieces are interwoven interviews with several important writers, including Mphahlele, on the importance of African literature for Africans and for Westerners. Mphahlele discusses the challenges of being both an African and an exile, and of writing for an African audience but being published and read by Westerners.

Hodge, Norman, "Dogs, Africans and Liberals: The World of Mphahlele's 'Mrs Plum,'" in *English in Africa*, Vol. 8, No. 1, March 1981, pp. 33-43.

Hodge's text is a close reading of "Mrs. Plum," emphasizing the indictment the story makes of white liberals in South Africa under apartheid.

Manganyi, N. Chabani, *Exiles and Homecomings: A Biography of Es'kia Mphahlele*, Ravan Press, 1983.

This insightful biography was written by a clinical psychologist with full cooperation from Mphahlele and his family. This biography is unusual in using a first-person narrative voice.

Obee, Ruth, "'Mrs Plum': The Authoritarian Personality and Black Consciousness," in *Es'kia Mphahlele: Themes of Alienation and African Humanism*, Ohio University Press, 1999.

Obee studies the psychological context for Mrs. Plum's embracing of morally bankrupt laws and Karabo's African humanism.

Ruth, Damian, "Through the Keyhole: Masters and Servants in the Work of Es'kia Mphahlele," in *English in Africa*, Vol. 13, No. 2, October 1986, pp. 65-88.

This essay is an examination of the theme of the white employer and black employee in South Africa under apartheid, as it plays out in three of Mphahlele's short stories. In each case, the white employer is blind to the humanity of the employee, while the employee is able to see and to grow.

Woeber, Catherine, and John Read, *Es'kia Mphahlele: A Bibliography*, National English Literary Museum (Grahamstown, South Africa), 1989.

This text is a thorough but unannotated compilation of Mphahlele's publications in journals and books, and of critical articles and reviews of his work.

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Moore, Gerald, *Twelve African Writers*, Indiana University Press, 1980, p. 58.

Mphahlele, Ezekiel, *The African Image*, Faber & Faber, 1962, p. 212.

Nkosi, Lewis, *Home and Exile*, Longman, 1965, p. 131. Obee, Ruth, *Es'kia Mphahlele: Themes of Alienation and African Humanism*, Ohio University Press, 1999, p. 130, 143, 148.

Samin, Richard, Interview in *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 28, Winter, 1997, pp. 182-200.

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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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