The Necessary Grace to Fall Study Guide

The Necessary Grace to Fall by Gina Ochsner

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Gina Ochsner's story, □The Necessary Grace to Fall,□ is the title story in her award-winning collection published in 2002. It tells the story of Howard, a well-meaning but mediocre man who works in the claims department of an insurance company. As he processes insurance claims made on behalf of the dead, Howard becomes morbidly fascinated by death. He is trapped in a bad marriage, and his life seems to be going downhill, but at the end of the story, he is granted a moment of illumination that gives him a new sense of purpose. This is typical of Ochsner's stories, many of which end on a positive note in which the protagonists find new strength to continue with their lives. Ochsner stated in an interview with Rob Felton that she thinks of herself as a writer of faith. She commented that □I have a deep abiding and intense faith in a benevolent and personal God who's in charge. I do think it comes through.□ Most readers would agree that her spiritual orientation makes itself felt in □The Necessary Grace to Fall,□ as well as in her other stories, but Ochsner's writing is never overtly religious or Christian. She prefers to brings out in a general way the notion that life, even in difficult and painful situations, is more about hope and unexpected inspiration than hopelessness and despair.

Author Biography

Nationality 1: American

Birthdate: 1970

Gina Ochsner was born in 1970 and was adopted as an infant by Dick and Gayle Withnell. She acquired her love of literature as a child from her mother, a substitute English teacher.

Ochsner majored in language arts teaching at George Fox University, in Newberg, Oregon, and began writing short stories as an undergraduate. But during her senior year, in which she taught in a high school, she decided that she wanted to be a writer not a teacher. She graduated in 1992 and enrolled in a master's degree program in English at Iowa State University. After that she returned to the northwest to pursue a master of fine arts degree in creative writing at the University of Oregon.

In 1996, when she was twenty-five years old, Ochsner had a brush with death. After giving birth to her son, Connor, complications caused extensive bleeding, and two weeks later her doctor told her she was dying. She recovered after surgery. The experience made her reconsider the purpose of her life and may have contributed to the subject matter of her stories, in which death is often prominent.

Ochsner received her MFA from the University of Oregon in 1997, but at that point she did not have any stories that she thought were worth submitting for publication. In 1999, however, Ochsner won an international short-story contest sponsored by an Irish publishing company for her story □From the Bering Strait.□ From that point on, her stories began to be published regularly in literary magazines. In 1999, she sent all the stories she had available to the Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction competition, the winner of which would receive automatic publication. She won the competition, and her eleven stories were published by the University of Georgia Press in 2002, under the title *The Necessary Grace to Fall*, the name of the first story in the collection. In addition to the Flannery O'Connor Award, the book won the Oregon Book Award for Short Fiction and the Pacific Northwest Booksellers Association (PNBA) Book Award, 2003.

Ochsner's second collection of stories, *People I Wanted to Be*, was published by Houghton Mifflin in 2005. Many of these stories are set in Russia or the countries of the former Soviet Union. As part of her research for the book, Ochsner traveled to Prague, the capital of the Czech Republic; St. Petersburg, Russia; and Poland.

As of 2006, when she was in her mid-thirties, Ochsner had won an astonishing number of literary awards, twenty-three in all, including the William Faulkner Award, the Robert Penn Warren Fiction Prize, the Raymond Carver Fiction Prize, the Fish Short-Story Prize, and the Ruth Hardman Award for Fiction.

Ochsner believes that writers should support other writers, and she has had teaching positions in creative writing at George Fox University, the University of Oregon, Western Oregon University, and Chemeketa Community College.

As of 2006, she and her husband, Brian, lived with their four children in Keizer, Oregon, a suburb of Salem.

Plot Summary

□The Necessary Grace to Fall□ begins on an August day in an office in the Hope and Life Insurance Company in an unnamed American city. The main character, Howard, works in this office with Leonard, his immediate supervisor, who is a physical fitness fanatic. Howard has only recently switched to his current position in which he investigates the insurance claims of the deceased. Before this, he worked in the data coding department. Howard is a little disappointed in the work. He had thought it would be more exciting, akin to investigating a crime, but Leonard told him on his first day that he was an investigative assistant only, and his work would be mostly routine. Leonard then told him the routine for handling claims following suicide and natural and accidental deaths. Howard had hoped for a little more murder. The only excitement he had found was working with Ritteaur, the coroner's assistant, who would tell him over the phone all the gory details of the more interesting cases. Sometimes Howard visits the coroner's lab, too. He is fascinated by a case in which a wife killed and dismembered her husband.

Howard's wife, Carla, calls him at work, suggesting they have lunch together. She works on another floor of the same building, in the medical coding department. Howard does not want to meet his wife, and he makes an excuse. It is apparent that their marriage is not all it should be.

Howard gets interested in the file of a woman named Svea Johnson who has recently died after jumping or falling from a bridge. She was about his age and lived in the neighborhood in which he grew up. He thinks they must have gone to high school together, and he wishes he could remember something about her.

He takes a phone call from Carla telling him not to be late for dinner then leaves work early, at about four o'clock in the afternoon, and drives into the neighborhood where Johnson lived. He plans to take a look at her house. He drives around the neighborhood, going past the house where he lived as a boy. But he does not feel right about looking at the Johnson house and drives home without looking at the house numbers.

He returns late for dinner, and Carla demands to know where he has been. She is not satisfied with his response and is spoiling for a fight. But Howard does not have the energy to respond. Carla reminds him that his attendance is required at the Y the following night. Her eight-year-old son, Kevin, from a previous marriage is taking a karate test there.

The next morning Howard tries to avoid looking at the Johnson file. During a coffee break he tells Leonard that he has a strange feeling in his chest, and he thinks something may be wrong with him. Later that morning, he tries to focus on processing the Johnson file. But he suspects that the case was a suicide, and this depresses him. He still feels some physical discomfort. He calls Ritteaur for the autopsy results on the woman, and the coroner's assistant invites him to come over and take a look for himself.

In the coroner's lab, Howard sees the body of the dead woman. He observes that she had been beautiful, and he regrets going to the lab. The coroner has found no bruises on the body, which might indicate suicide (since there is no sign of a struggle), but he has also found bits of moss under the woman's nails, which might indicate she fell. However, it might indicate that she intended to jump but changed her mind at the last minute. Ritteaur has to do some more work before he can record a verdict, but he suspects the verdict will be accidental death. Howard expresses some thoughts about the dignity of the dead, saying that accidental death sounds better than □botched suicide.□

After Howard leaves the lab, he once again drives into the neighborhood of the dead woman and stops two doors down from her house. He sits in the car, thinking about his unhappy school days. When he returns to his office, Carla calls him to remind him of Kevin's green belt karate test. Howard does not want to go.

After work he again goes to Madison Street, where Johnson lived. He sits in his car, planning to knock on the door and ask if Johnson's parents could tell him a little about their daughter. But he does not carry out his plan. Instead, as he drives slowly past the Johnson house, he sees Carla's car in his rear-view mirror. She is at the end of the street, turning the corner.

Howard returns to the office. At seven-thirty, Carla calls him from the Y. She says she saw him on Madison Street, and she reproaches him. Then she says that she forgives him, although she does not know what he was doing in that neighborhood. She tells him to be sure to be at the Y for Kevin's test.

Howard starts for the Y, but stops and parks near the bridge from which Johnson fell or jumped to her death. He walks to the bridge then stands on it and leans over the railing. He wonders how the woman must have felt at that moment and what kind of sadness had brought her there. He removes his shoes and stands on the cement handrail. He sees how easy it would be to decide to commit suicide and jump off the bridge. He feels like laughing. Then he stops himself and cautiously climbs down from the ledge. He realizes he has small things to live for, including Kevin's test, and he tells himself he should try harder to get along with the boy. He also thinks of other things that might happen in the future that would be worth living for. He slips his shoes on and walks back to the car.

Characters

Carla

Carla is Howard's wife. She has an eight-year-old son, Kevin, by a previous marriage, and she works for the same insurance company that employs Howard. She is an aggressive woman who gets angry when Howard is late for dinner and reproaches him for his unreliability when she sees him in an unfamiliar neighborhood when he should be preparing to go to the Y. Howard thinks she maintains a long list of grievances against him, and he secretly fears her.

Howard

Howard is the main character in the story. He works in the investigations department of Hope and Life Insurance, processing claims. He is bored because his job lacks excitement, his marriage is unsatisfactory, and he does not get along with his wife's son. He seems fascinated by the morbid details about death he reads in coroner's reports. He also suffers from unusual physical symptoms and may have undiagnosed chronic depression. He often feels divided against himself, as if he is split into two people, □the Howard who wanted to arrive home in time for dinner so as to please his wife and the Howard who knew even as he promised that he would, he wouldn't.□ In other words, part of him wants to do the expected thing, while the other part seems in the grip of some other unpredictable impulse that he does not fully understand. His interest in the Svea Johnson case seems to indicate his own suicidal tendency, which he finally overcomes at the end of the story.

Kevin

Kevin is Carla's eight-year-old son. Howard tries to get along with him but fails, in spite of Carla's insistence that Kevin needs a father figure in his life.

Leonard

Leonard is Howard's supervisor at Hope and Life Insurance company. He is a muscular, physical fitness fanatic who consumes large quantities of power bars, energy drinks, and vitamins.

Ritteaur

Ritteaur is the coroner's assistant who keeps Howard informed about interesting cases and invites him over to the lab to view the corpse of Svea Johnson.

Themes

Mortality, Suicide, and the Affirmation of Life

The characters vary greatly in the extent to which the life force and the desire to live flows through them. Leonard, with his physical fitness, well-defined muscles and constant munching of □energy bars,□ has a strong hold on life, as does the aggressive Carla, with her desire to dominate and control her husband. Howard, by contrast□uncertain, diffident, trapped in a bad marriage and an unsatisfying job□has a much weaker grip on life, and Svea Johnson, who appears in the story only as a corpse, has lost her hold on life altogether.

In this story that is saturated with the sense of human mortality, often presented in explicit ways, the characters represent extremes of affirmation and negation of life. As a waverer, a man who seems unsure of his path and his purpose for living, Howard must acquire some of the trust in life that will enable him to keep going. As the story unfolds, it seems unlikely that he will succeed. His is the clear case of a man who is suffering from undiagnosed depression, a kind of mental illness that can in severe cases lead to suicide. This depression is strongly suggested by Howard's recollection of the time he spent volunteering at a suicide hotline. He wanted to tell the callers that he understood how they felt and that □*I'm just like you*.□ When they hung up, he felt he had failed again, the word □again□ suggesting that Howard has a habit of blaming himself when things go wrong. He is, he knows, □full of guilt and too many character faults to count.□ Howard even feels that Svea Johnson's suicide represents a failure on his part, simply because he and the dead woman were about the same age, went to the same high school, and lived in the same neighborhood. This inappropriate sense of guilt can be one of the symptoms of depression.

Howard's unhealthy mental state is also indicated by his morbid fascination with death, as shown by his visits to the coroner's lab and his more than professional interest in the fate of Svea Johnson. He feels responsible for her, whether her death was a suicide or an accident. Although Howard and Svea Johnson are of different genders, she is in a sense his *doppelgänger*, or double, a kind of ghostly second self that haunts the first self. It is she who gave in to the desire to die that Howard himself also feels. It seems to manifest in him as a longing to escape from the confines of the physical body, that □menagerie of flawed parts . . . [that] could and would fail.□ Because Svea Johnson has acted out his secret desire, she is a figure of fascination for him, which explains his need to see the house that she lived in and talk to her parents, as well as the guilt he feels that he cannot remember her from his schooldays.

Just as he imagines Svea Johnson doing, Howard also□driving around the neighborhood, stopping, going to the bridge from which the woman jumped or fell□seems to be waiting for the right moment to extricate himself from the sorrow and the difficulty of life. He imagines that it takes a moment of □necessary grace to fall,□ as

if picking the moment to die, even in this manner, requires a sense of timing, a knowledge of when such an act may be permitted.

But what he finds at the crucial moment, when he seems about to emulate Svea Johnson, is something else altogether, not the necessary grace to fall but the necessary grace to live. Suddenly, at that crucial moment of decision, he finds value in the small opportunities that life offers that he had formerly dismissed as unimportant or irritating. He also regains a sense of the mystery of life and its infinite possibilities (□the appearance of new suns□). No explanation is offered of how or why this happens, since by definition a moment of grace has no discernible cause and is certainly not the result of any effort put out by the beneficiary. It is a mysterious sign of the benevolence at the heart of the universe that affirms life rather than death.

Alienation

Howard is alienated from his wife and from his co-workers. He is self-absorbed, aware of his own conflicted feelings, and also aware of disconnecting from the relationships he has with his wife and her son and with his physical fitness pro of a supervisor. While he is detached from the living, he seems to gravitate toward the dead and toward the past. He wants to visualize Svea Johnson as a student in his high school, wants to see her house in his own neighborhood, wants to view the water from the bridge where she fell or jumped to her death, wants to see her body. It is as though just as he pulls back from interacting with people around him, he is drawn toward the dead, toward imagining the dying process, toward experiencing the kind of moment when one chooses to jump. The monotony of his job, his wife's nagging, his failure to connect with her son, all of these contribute to his inability to relate to his work and familial context. The resolution of this pattern happens in the moment when he has his shoes off and steps up on the railing of the bridge; through an act of grace, he has an inexplicable change of heart, and he turns from his obsession with death to a willingness to see what life has yet to offer him. The story seems to suggest that no matter how much one is drawn to suicide, the anodyne lies in considering what life has yet to offer.

Style

The story contains much imagery of the human body in its different forms. Leonard's muscular physique is emphasized, as is the physical presence of the corpse of Svea Johnson. But the main examples are in reference to Howard. Unlike Leonard, who is extremely comfortable inside his own skin, Howard is frequently aware of unusual and sometimes disturbing sensations in his body. At one point he feels a strange sensation in his chest, like he is □gulping sky□; another time he feels □an itch in [his] arteries.□ Several times he has an expansive feeling, as if there is an empty space inside his chest: □Howard's shoulders slumped and he could feel a space widening inside his rib cage.□ Sometimes this space seems to get wider, and it pushes at his lungs. These images suggest Howard's discomfort with the limitations of the physical body and his desire to escape its confines, either into some kind of vague state of spiritual transcendence or perhaps in death. This is especially clear in the following image, which occurs after he presses his hand against his heart and then his chest: □He hoped his internal organs would just disappear and he could give himself over to his internal gases and float, balloon-like, up and out of the office.□ These images suggesting a kind of floating out of the body culminate in the moment Howard stands on the bridge, apparently ready to jump. He □felt light, giddy in this feeling of anti-gravity.□ But his willingness to escape the demands of life and the physical body suddenly recede; as he steps down from the ledge, although he still feels a sense of physical lightness, this feeling is allied to a sense of the need for purposeful action in the world. His slipping into his shoes again symbolically represents his decision to ground himself in the responsibility of living a useful life, to bear the burden and not seek to escape it.

Historical Context

Suicide is a widespread social problem that occurs in all human societies. In the United States in 2000, suicide was the eleventh leading cause of death. The total number of suicides was 29,350, or 1.2 percent of all deaths. In 2001, the figure was 30,622. Suicide is more common than murder. The problem goes even deeper than the statistics state, since it is estimated that for every death by suicide, there may be from eight to twenty-five attempted suicides.

Risk factors for suicide vary. More than 90 percent of people who kill themselves suffer from depression or some other mental disorder or from substance abuse. Suicide as well as depression are associated with lower levels of a brain chemical called serotonin. Medication aimed at relieving depression boosts serotonin levels.

Depression and suicide may also be a response to adverse and stressful life events, such as loss of a job or spouse, although experts point out that suicide is not a normal response to stressful situations. Suicide may happen when the pain the person is experiencing overwhelms the coping strategies and resources they have for dealing with it.

Other risk factors for suicide include a family history of mental disorder or substance abuse; family history of suicide; family violence, including physical or sexual abuse; firearms in the home; incarceration; and exposure to the suicidal behavior of others, including family members and peers.

Suicide is more common among men than women. In the United States in 2000, suicide was the eighth leading cause of death for males and the nineteenth leading cause of death for females. More than four times as many men as women die by suicide, although women report attempting suicide about three times as often as men.

Suicide is more common among whites than other racial groups. In 2000, white men accounted for 73 percent of all suicides.

Suicides rates differ according to age groups. In 2000, suicide was the third leading cause of death among ten- to fourteen-year-olds, as well as among fifteen- to twenty-four-year-olds. Amongst teenagers, five times as many boys die from suicide as girls.

Older adults are also at risk for suicide. People age sixty-five and over comprise 13 percent of the U.S. population but accounted for 18 percent of all suicides in the United States in 2000. In 1999, 84 percent of suicides in this age group were men. The risk is especially high among white men age eighty-five and older. Divorced and widowed people are more at risk than those who are married, since being single can often lead to loneliness, social isolation, and depression.

Suicide prevention efforts rest largely on the identification and treatment of mental problems, including depression. Most forms of depression can be successfully treated,

but sometimes the illness can be hidden behind other symptoms and go unrecognized. Reducing access to means of suicide, such as toxic substances and handguns, may also be a way of reducing suicide.

One aspect of suicide prevention is the existence of crisis hotlines, such as the one Howard volunteered for in □The Necessary Grace to Fall.□ A crisis hotline is a phone number people can call to get emergency counseling, usually by trained volunteers. Such hotlines have existed in most major cities of the United States since the mid-1970s. Initially set up to help those contemplating suicide, many now deal more generally with emotional crises. However, there is no evidence that the existence of such hotlines has reduced the number of suicides.

Critical Overview

Although Ochsner's first collection of stories, *The Necessary Grace to Fall*, won literary awards, it attracted little attention from reviewers. This is not unusual for a first collection from a young, unknown writer. However, Ochsner's second collection of stories, *People I Wanted to Be* (2005), did attract some notice. Interestingly, many of the comments of the reviewers about these stories might equally be applied to □The Necessary Grace to Fall.□ The reviewer for *Publishers Weekly*, for example, describes Ochsner's characters as □a host of oddballs whose touchingly resilient hopes and small leaps of faith fly in the face of almost certain disappointment.□ This well describes Howard's sudden and unexpected moment of grace at the end of the story, set against the accumulated tensions and disappointments of his life. The reviewer also mentions as a notable feature of Ochsner's stories, □the tension between small, improbable miracles and the damp, chilly world in which they suddenly occur,□ which likewise might be applied to □The Necessary Grace to Fall.□

Ochsner's character Howard can again be recognized in the following comment made by Gillian Engberg in a review of *People I Wanted to Be*, for *Booklist*: □Ochsner's flawed, wholly sympathetic characters miraculously stumble into small moments, shaped with a delicious sense of the absurd, which connect them to a world that's magical, merciful, and infinite.□

In England's *Guardian*, reviewer Maya Jaggi notes that Ochsner's stories typically end in optimism rather than despair, and her comment also can be taken as applying to □The Necessary Grace to Fall□: □Despite, or because of, the insistent presence of death, these stories end on a sudden high, in intimations of flight, or stomach-fluttering hope.□

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Aubrey holds a Ph.D. in English and has published many articles on contemporary literature. In this essay, Aubrey discusses Ochsner's characterization of her protagonist and the way she crafts his moment of transformation at the end of the story.

Many of Ochsner's short stories, including □The Necessary Grace to Fall,□ are informed by a spiritual vision that offers moments of unexpected redemption to troubled characters. Ochsner's commitment to an optimistic view of the possibilities latent in even the most despairing of lives is an unusual, some would say refreshing, quality in a young American writer of literary short stories. She is no Raymond Carver, committed to a relentlessly bleak view of human life and human nature. Although she does not turn a blind eye to the sadness of life and the small hells that people create for themselves, and subjects such as death, suicide, violence, and terminal illness feature quite often in her stories, it seems as if she is looking always for the moment when the dark door opens, the clouds part, the oppressive weight is lifted, and a pure beam of light pours into the world.

Howard□poor, well meaning, mediocre□Howard in □The Necessary Grace to Fall,□ is a case in point. There are so many things wrong with Howard's life that it would hard to list them all. A bad marriage and a boring job would probably top the list and would be enough to drive stronger men than Howard to distraction. Howard is probably in early middle age, but the years have already worn him down. He is an odd, lonely man, apparently with no love or affection in his life, who longs for someone to show him kindness. He likes to perform acts of kindness himself mainly because □He desperately hoped his good intentions would bring back to him some small act of kindness in return, he didn't care how small.□ There is a world of rejection and pain in that last phrase. Howard is like a starving man who would be overwhelmed by gratitude if someone were to take pity on him and toss him a crust of bread. Perhaps not surprisingly, Howard does not feel in control of his life. He is not even in control of himself. He decides to do one thing but ends up doing another, for reasons he does not understand.

But in spite of all these failings, Ochsner ensures that Howard wins the reader's sympathy. She treats him rather gently, as if she likes him and wants to help him out. The more confident characters, Leonard and Carla, are treated more ruthlessly. They are hard, with firm ideas about the way life is and should be, and untroubled by any deep thoughts or speculations. In this sense, they are more limited than Howard, who at least has an inquiring mind, and Ochsner enjoys a little satire at their expense. But Howard she has marked for redemption from the beginning. He is a little man who would do good in life if he knew how, so Ochsner, as author, allows herself the license to play God and decides to give him the boost he needs.

The key to Howard's eventual moment of salvation is contained in the unusual, expansive images of inner and outer space that are placed at regular intervals in the story. They are always tied to some physical sensation that Howard is feeling. It is as if something inside him is tired of being cramped up in a small physical body with five

limited senses and wants to experience freedom. He wants to shed the weight of physical existence and experience the lightness of a new mode of being, although he does not conceptualize it in this way, since he has no firm idea of what he is looking for. These images can either be interpreted as a longing for mystical, spiritual experience or a longing for death and the dissolution of the body. Ochsner does not make it clear until the end of the story which interpretation she intends.

The first time the space metaphor appears is early in the story, when he is first disappointed with the routine nature of his job: □Howard's shoulders slumped and he could feel a space widening in his rib cage.□ Having seeded the story with this image, Ochsner works with it until it seems to signify something transcendent, a state of being without boundaries that is quite the opposite of little Howard's constant petty fears and imaginings. When Howard thinks of the family of the dead woman, for example

[H]e felt acres and acres of empty space growing inside of him, pushing everything else out of the way. His heart, his lungs□none of it mattered□and he could swear he felt them shrinking to the point where he could see himself reflecting pure sky, the vastness of that inner space.

Another example of the space image comes when Howard presses on his rib cage, □lightly fingering the spaces between the bones, feeling as spacious inside as before, if not spacier.□ As in the earlier passage, this is immediately followed by the image of the infinite expanse of the sky: □Outside, the sky was a cloudless blue, so pure Howard had to look away.□ By dint of repetition, Ochsner will not allow the reader to miss the significance of these images. They seem to hammer home the message that the small human self that is contained in one human body is not the entire being of the person. There are other states of being possible that substitute freedom for enclosure, infinity for the finite□or perhaps these images merely signify death, the dissolution of all things, and escape from the heavy responsibilities of being human.

There is a parallel in Ochsner's use of these expansive, inner-outer images in the work of Leo Tolstoy, in his novel *War and Peace*. In that novel, one of the main characters, the Russian aristocrat Pierre Bezuhov, is held prisoner by the French and is forced to take part in Napoleon's retreat from Moscow. One night under the stars, he sees the absurdity of the situation, realizing that his □immortal soul□ cannot be confined in this way. There is a full moon, and as he gazes up at the stars and the vastness of the sky, he thinks, □And all that is mine, all that is in me, and all that is *me*. And they took all that and shut it up in a shed barricaded with planks.□ He smiles and lies down contentedly to sleep, having realized that the essential self, who he in reality is, cannot be enclosed by anything or imprisoned by anyone.

This seems to be close to the experience to which Ochsner is pushing Howard□the breaking of the bonds of the finite. And yet when that image of inner and outer expansive space occurs once again, as the story builds to its climax, it seems to carry another connotation. Howard arrives at the bridge from which Svea Johnson fell to her death and wonders what she felt at that moment. He asks himself, □Did she give herself over to the collapsing arms of the air, to all that space within and without, a

falling between the ribs and then here between the arms, between fingertips and sky?□ Here those images seem to be associated with imminent death rather than with the expansion of consciousness.

And so in the end, Howard turns his back on those moments when he seems to expand beyond his body. It seems that those experiences are, after all, more the expression of a secret longing for death and annihilation, the desire not to be, than an intimation of potential spiritual freedom. He realizes now that he must ground himself in a more firm appreciation of life in the here-and-now, with an awareness of what he can contribute to it. He must stay in his body, so to speak, rather than encourage experiences that lead him away from it. Significantly, in that moment, he finds himself thinking of someone other than himself. He becomes outer- rather than inner-directed, thinking of how he might be able to help eight-year-old Kevin. The mystery of the infinite possibilities in life also takes hold of him, indicating that in this moment the smallness of his selfhood no longer defines him completely. He can reach beyond it to a way of transcendence not through the cultivation of unusual psychological or spiritual experiences but through a more simple wonder, engagement, and fascination at the miracle of continually unfolding life.

Source: Bryan Aubrey, Critical Essay on □The Necessary Grace to Fall,□ in *Short Stories for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Critical Essay #2

Hong is a poet and the editor of a fiction and memoir anthology. In the following essay, Hong discusses how Ochsner humorously and empathetically explores the drives toward life and death through characterization and by employing the motifs of water and air, as well as the tension between falling and flying.

Ochsner begins the title story of her acclaimed collection with the intriguing sentence, □All summer had been a medley of jumpers and fallers.□ In doing so, the author establishes one of the central themes of □The Necessary Grace to Fall□: death, and specifically the difference between intentional and accidental dying. She follows the opening sentence with grisly examples of ways to die: □The previous spring, simple dismemberment, and the winter before that, freakish hurricane-related deaths and injuries□deaths by debris, Leonard, Howard's immediate supervisor and cubicle-mate, called them.□ Although the context for this morbid list is not obvious from the opening sentences, Ochsner soon clears up the mystery by establishing that they emanate from the thoughts of the protagonist, Howard, an investigative assistant at a company called Hope and Life Insurance. Not incidentally, Howard is obsessed with death, suicide, and the like, and the story focuses on Howard's coming to terms with the twin impulses toward life and death. In relating this darkly humorous tale, Ochsner lightly satirizes the deadening effects of contemporary, American society, while exploring deeper, more universal themes.

The central character, Howard, embodies the story's primary tensions. A middle-aged, white-collar worker, Howard is noticeably uncomfortable in his body. Unlike Leonard, his supervisor at Hope and Life, Howard is clearly out-of-shape, a desk-jockey who eats cinnamon rolls, as opposed to the stockpiles of power bars Leonard consumes. The type of guy who does crunches for his oblique muscles at his desk during the daily coffee-break, Leonard represents Howard's antithesis, providing a physical and philosophical counterpoint to Howard's more introspective, passive way of being. In one early scene, Leonard offers Howard a Tiger bar, which Howard declines while pointing to the sticky baked good on the corner of his desk. Leonard responds by saying, □'Treat your body like a temple, and it'll take care of you.'□

Bewildered by this statement, Howard merely blinks, pushes up his glasses, and says nothing, while he thinks about bodies and ruminates on how Svea Johnson, the case he's currently handling, actually fell to her death. As an investigative assistant, Howard makes sure the paperwork for insurance claims is filed properly by following-up on police reports. The job is not as exciting as he would like it to be, and he craves □a little more murder□ as well as a deeper connection with the people who have died and their families. He wants to know the story behind the deaths that come across his desk as files.

Howard is sometimes helped in this quest for personal information on the deceased by Ritteaur, the coroner's assistant. Ritteaur conducts the autopsies to determine the cause of death. Although he knows it is morbid and weird, Howard finds these lab

investigations fascinating, and he pumps Ritteaur for details, even when the information is not technically required for his job. Howard seems to especially enjoy hearing about the more gruesome cases, such as Pietrzak, the man whose wife chopped him up into little bits and flushed him down the toilet □one flush at a time.□

Howard solicits Ritteaur's macabre reports partly to jolt himself out of boredom and partly to avoid his wife, Carla, who also works at Hope and Life Insurance. An employee in the medical coding department, Carla telephones Howard every day to see if he wants to have lunch, and although they used to have lunch together regularly in the break room, Howard now finds himself avoiding both lunch with her and, if possible, her phone calls. Rather than refusing her directly, however, Howard eludes her by either being on the phone himself or being out of the office during lunch hour. He notes to himself that neither hatred nor malice accounts for his desire not to meet Carla, as he thinks,

In fact, there was no particular reason why he wanted to avoid his wife. He just got tired of their regular lunches that over time began to feel forced, wearing on him like a habit that needed breaking. People need space, he reminded himself, though he knew she'd never let him get away with such a flimsy reasoning.

Like Leonard, Carla is also a character who contrasts with Howard, and their interactions highlight Howard's dilemma, which lies in his inability to express openly his feelings. Howard wants more excitement, empathy, and action than he can muster. A believer in human kindness, he also desperately wants to be good and do good for others. However, although he feels he should perform small acts of kindness whenever he can, he is frustrated by not quite knowing how. Prior to working at Hope and Life, Howard had volunteered at a suicide hotline where he had tried to dissuade people on the verge of suicide. His desire to help them stemmed from his ongoing need for reciprocal kindness as well as his identification with people in distress. He recalls trying to cheer the callers up by telling them about his high school summers doing the grim job of chicken picking on his grandparents' farm. The job entailed picking up the chickens by their feet and loading them in cages onto a truck to be delivered to their deaths. Once loaded, the chickens would start squawking with fear, and Howard relates that □Though he hated that job, hated what he had to do, somehow sending those birds to their deaths validated his own life.□

Although Howard does not completely understand why the odious work had this effect on him, he recalls telling the suicide callers about the job and what it meant to him, in a desperate attempt to make a connection with the callers. Inevitably, however, Howard would fail to make this connection. Even his suggestion that the caller get a pet or a goldfish to care about seemed useless. At that point, the callers would hang up, and Howard would be left feeling overwhelmed by his own sense of failure, of letting the other person down.

The recalled anecdote about Howard's stint as a volunteer at the suicide hotline illustrates the crux of his problem, which is the gap between his noble desires and the reality of his life. At the heart of his immobility lies the tension between what Howard

sees as two sides of himself: the bodily or physical Howard and his consciousness or will. He recognizes that there are two aspects of him that frequently seem to pull him in opposing directions, as they want different things. A pensive character, Howard understands that this opposition between his consciousness and his body accounts for his continual failure to please Carla, as part of him wants to please her and part of him wants something different from the usual marital and family routine.

Unlike Leonard, who solves this body/mind dilemma that all human beings face by making his body an impervious, muscular □temple,□ Howard has to take another route to resolving these antipathies. In one humorous scene, a distressed Howard seeks Leonard's advice on what his problem is by lifting up his shirt and showing Leonard his torso, where he feels the anxiety. Leonard responds by saying his problem lies in Howard's nonexistent oblique muscles and drinking too many beers. Uncomforted, Howard replies, □I think it's more serious,□ and indeed it is. Howard's problems intensify as he becomes obsessed with the Svea Johnson case.

From the outset, Howard identifies with Johnson, who either fell or jumped from the local bridge. She is exactly the same age as Howard, and they grew up in the same neighborhood. He worries that she was a jumper, an intentional suicide, rather than someone who fell off the bridge accidentally. He worries because he wants to believe she was not so depressed about life that she killed herself, a personal fear for him, as he, too, suffers from chronic depression. Howard is also upset by the idea that he might have known Johnson in high school and then forgotten her. This possibility distresses him because he knows he's capable of forgetting things, and yet for some reason, he feels responsible for her, which entails knowing who she was.

As his anxiety over the Johnson case increases, Howard finds himself driving to the neighborhood where Johnson and he grew up, intending to find her home and her family. Though he knows Carla will be angry if he is late for dinner, he goes anyway, leaving work early to seek out some clue about Johnson's life. However, the trip is not successful because while he drives around his old neighborhood, Howard becomes distracted by memories of delivering newspapers as a boy. He turns home without finding Johnson's house or gaining a sense of satisfaction about the case.

On his drive home to the anticipated conflict with his wife, Howard experiences the sense of

empty space growing inside of him, pushing everything else out of the way. His heart, his lungs□none of it mattered□and he could swear he felt them shrinking to the point where he could see himself reflecting pure sky, the vastness of that inner space.

As the story continues, Howard feels that inner space expand whenever he thinks about the Johnson case, as the two sides of him vie for dominance. In an effort to allay his discomfort, Howard calls Ritteaur, who offers to show him Johnson's corpse, which he is currently analyzing. In the lab, Ritteaur notes that it is either a suicide or an accident, and that it is possible that she intended to jump but then changed her mind at the last minute. The visit ends inconclusively, as Ritteaur has not completed the investigation,

and Howard leaves the lab feeling nauseated and more puzzled about Johnson, wondering how he perhaps could have helped her. He attempts again to drive to the old neighborhood to find the Johnson house but is again distracted from his purpose, this time by memories of his own miserable elementary school experiences.

Throughout the story, Ochsner invokes the motifs of air and water to reinforce the themes. Back at work, Howard again feels the air-filled space in his chest, and though he tries to thump it away with his hand, he also hopes □his internal organs would just disappear and he could give himself over to his internal gases and float, balloon-like, up and out of the office.□ Here, as elsewhere, the air motif signals a longing for freedom away from mundane and bodily concerns. The motif also sets up the tension between floating away and falling, as floating upward may be the opposite of tumbling downward to death.

Ochsner employs the motif of water in a similar way, and throughout the story, she makes several references to water. In the scene in which he seeks Leonard's opinion, Howard describes his feeling in his chest by saying, □Like I'm gulping sky, can't get enough of it. Other times I feel I'm drowning on air.□ When he asks if a person can do that, Leonard points out that fish do that □all the time.□ Both Howard and Svea Johnson are compared to fish, as her dead eyes look like those on dead fish, and at one point Howard wishes he could tell suicide victims how unforgiving water is when one jumps from a height into it. In the story, water is the element of life for good and for bad; it is the emotional element, and it sustains and connects the characters to one another. There is the anecdote about the woman attempting to flush her husband away, and when Carla follows Howard on his third attempt to find the Johnson house, he sees her car in his rearview mirror □fishtail□ away.

Carla tells him she caught him doing something suspicious and that she forgives him but that he needs to stop because people count on him. She reminds him to be at Y later that day when his stepson Kevin takes a karate test, which Howard would rather avoid. Howard agrees to be there, but as he approaches the Y, he detours and heads for the bridge where Johnson and others have fallen to their deaths. The bridge represents the line between life and death, and by going to the bridge, Howard accomplishes several things. He parks his car and walks to the thick cement rail, and then he stands on top of rail, re-enacting what Johnson might have done. As he does this, he is finally able to imagine her life and what may have compelled her to fall or jump. This identification with her gives him a sense of completion as he feels compassion for the dead woman and thus gains insight into his own sadness and challenges. These insights in turn enable Howard's two selves to coalesce, and at the end of the story, his will to live saves his body.

By standing on the rail, his corporeal self has finally acted to satisfy his wishes, and once that happens, his consciousness steps in as Howard tells himself to stop and get down from danger. After climbing down, he realizes that the people he has failed were not strangers like Johnson but those people close to him, Carla and Kevin, and he realizes, too, that their love and obligation is what kept him from jumping himself□that and myriad other pleasures and interesting phenomena life offers. Ochsner illustrates

how the protagonist's mind and body work together at the end, as Howard triumphs and wants to really live, to see among other things □distant limbs of the galaxy.□ He desires the fusion of the corporeal with the celestial and knows how he can provide solace to the living.

Source: Anna Maria Hong, Critical Essay on □The Necessary Grace to Fall,□ in *Short Stories for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Topics for Further Study

Team up with one other student and act out for the class a conversation on a suicide hotline. Your partner is desperate and wants to take his or her life. You must talk her out of it. You can prepare a script in advance or do the scene from notes or improvise as you go along. The class votes on whether they think you did enough to save the person's life.

Should terminally ill people have the right to end their lives at a time of their choosing? Should a doctor or relative be allowed to assist such as person? Research the right-to-die movement and compare the law on assisted suicide in Oregon to the law on assisted suicide in the Netherlands. Write an essay in which you compare these laws and argue for or against the right to die.

What are the legal aspects of suicide in the United States? Why was it once considered a crime to commit suicide? Examine past and present attitudes to suicide in some non-Western societies, such as China and Japan, and in ancient Greece and Rome. Under what circumstances was suicide considered an honorable death? Write an essay in which you present your findings.

Watch the movie, □It's a Wonderful Life□ (1947), starring James Stewart, in which an angel helps a suicidal businessman by showing what life would have been like if he never existed. Make a class presentation summarizing the plot and the theme of the movie and then discuss real-life suicide prevention strategies employed by medical professionals in emergency situations. What are some of the ways that people who want to take their own lives are persuaded not to do so?

What Do I Read Next?

Ochsner's second collection of eleven short stories, *The People I Wanted to Be* (2005), is set in Eastern Europe and Russia as well as Ochsner's native Oregon. Like many of the stories in *The Necessary Grace to Fall*, these stories feature sympathetic, long-suffering characters who suddenly find a kind of spiritual redemption in unlikely circumstances.

Will's Choice: A Suicidal Teen, a Desperate Mother, and a Chronicle of Recovery (2005), by Gail Griffith, is the story of one mother whose seventeen-year-old son tried to commit suicide by overdosing on an antidepressant. The author also discusses her own struggle with depression. The book shows that depression is a treatable illness, since both mother and son recovered from it.

Sylvia Plath's autobiographical novel, *The Bell Jar* (1963), is based on Plath's final college year in New York as a guest editor for a women's magazine. Like Plath, the protagonist, Esther Greenwood, suffers from depression and tries to commit suicide by taking an overdose of sleeping pills. She is given electric shock treatment and eventually recovers. Plath herself, however, committed suicide in 1963.

Just as □The Necessary Grace to Fall□ ends in a moment of illumination in which a troubled protagonist finds peace and a sense of renewal, so too does the protagonist in William Trevor's short story □After Rain,□ which appears in his collection of the same title (1996). In a moment of redemptive grace, a thirty-year-old Englishwoman, on vacation in Italy, is granted a crucial insight into why she has been unable to retain love in her life.

□Paul's Case□ (1906), by Willa Cather, is a character study of a boy who leaves school, goes to another city and spends all his money, and then commits suicide by jumping in front of a train. The story is told from the point of view of teachers and other authorities who review what happened and try to explain what caused this teenager to take his own life. The story is available in *Willa Cather's Collected Short Fiction 1892-1912* (1970), edited by Virginia Faulkner and published by the University of Nebraska Press.

Further Study

Hendin, Herbert, *Suicide in America*, Norton, 1996.

Hendin, a psychiatrist, casts new light on the problem of suicide. He demonstrates that treatment of seriously suicidal people is possible. He shows how American social policy toward suicide is marked by misconceptions. He also evaluates the right-to-die movement.

Jamison, Kay Redfield, *Night Falls Fast: Understanding Suicide*, Vintage, 2000.

Jamison, a psychiatrist, explores the psychology of those who commit suicide, especially people under the age of forty. She discusses manic-depression, suicide in different cultures and eras, suicide notes, suicide methods, preventive treatments, and the devastating effects of suicide on loved ones. The book includes many anecdotes about people who have committed suicide.

Marcus, Eric, *Why Suicide?: Answers to 200 of the Most Frequently Asked Questions about Suicide, Attempted Suicide*, HarperSanFrancisco, 1996.

Marcus, whose father committed suicide when Marcus was twelve, examines suicide from a variety of angles in a question-and-answer format. This is a practical book with much advice for anyone who is dealing with the suicide of a loved one. It includes a discussion of doctor-assisted suicide, as well as some cross-cultural comparisons.

Miller, John, *On Suicide: Great Writers on the Ultimate Question*, Chronicle Books, 1993.

This anthology features passages from novels, short stories, essays, and poems that deal with suicide. Authors represented include Plato, Sylvia Plath, Albert Camus, Gustave Flaubert, Virginia Woolf, Langston Hughes, Cynthia Ozick, Primo Levi, Graham Greene, William Shakespeare, Emily Dickinson, John Donne, Jorge Luis Borges, Leo Tolstoy, and William Styron.

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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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