Neighbor Rosicky Study Guide

Neighbor Rosicky by Willa Cather

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Introduction

"Neighbour Rosicky," written in 1928 and collected in the volume *Obscure Destinies* in 1932, is generally considered one of Willa Cather's most successful short stories. In it, she returns to the subject matter that informed her most important novels: the immigrant experience on the Nebraska prairie. Unlike *My Antonia* and *O Pioneers*!, two novels which compellingly explore the frontier experiences of young and vigorous immigrant women, "Neighbour Rosicky" is a character study of Anton Rosicky, a man who, facing the approach of death, reflects on the meaning and value of his life. In tracing Rosicky's journey from Bohemia to Nebraska, Cather explores the intimate relationship between people and the places they inhabit. Though the story considers the pain of separations, "Neighbour Rosicky" also celebrates the small triumphs of life. Written not long after the death of her father, the story reflects a new maturity in Cather's treatment of loss. Critics often remark on the story's graceful acceptance of death's inevitability. Like many of the novels and stories that Cather wrote in the decades after World War I, "Neighbour Rosicky" also criticizes the unthinking materialism that marked the 1920s. Though some early critics found her approach sentimental, critics in later decades tended to applaud Cather's portrait of an immigrant farmer whose honesty, integrity, and emotional depth help him achieve a meaningful and happy life for himself and for his family.

Author Biography

Willa Cather was born in 1873 in Virginia, where her family lived in a small farming community. In 1884 her father, Charles Cather, decided to join his parents on the Nebraska Divide. The family lived for a year and half on the prairie among settlers from Bohemia, Scandinavia, France, Russia, Germany, and Denmark. Settler life on the Nebraska prairie would figure prominently in much of her writing, including two of her best-known novels, *O Pioneers*!(1913) and *My Antonia*(1918), as well as the story "Neighbour Rosicky" (1928). However, Charles Cather did not share his family's fondness for working the land and soon moved them to a nearby town of Red Cloud, Nebraska. There he worked in a real estate and loan office. Though comfortable, the family never grew prosperous. Cather later described her father as a "Virginian and a gentleman and for that reason he was fleeced on every side and taken in on every hand."

While in Red Cloud, Cather studied medicine and put on amateur theatricals until, with the full support of her father, she entered the University of Nebraska in 1891. There she began to write short stories for the first time and wrote articles and reviews for the *Nebraska State Journal*. These experiences led to her first job as a writer in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. In Pittsburgh, where part of "Paul's Case" is set, Cather edited a woman's magazine called *Home Monthly* and taught high school English and Latin. She lived and traveled with her friend Isabelle McClung. In 1905 she published her first book of short stories, *The Troll Garden*, which included "Paul's Case." A year later she went to New York City to become managing editor for *McClure's* magazine. She worked in New York until 1912, when she retired on the advice of her friend and fellow writer Sarah Orne Jewett, who encouraged Cather to "find [her] own quiet centre of life."

From 1912 until her death in 1947, Cather wrote a number of successful novels, including *O Pioneers*!, *My Antonia*, and *One of Ours*, for which she won the Pulitzer Prize in 1922. She was also a prolific writer of short stories; after *The Troll Garden*, she published three more volumes of stories:*Youth and the Bright Medusa* (1920), *Obscure Destinies*(1932), in which "Neighbour Rosicky" appears, and *The Old Beauty, and Others*(1948). Like many of her contemporaries, Cather became disillusioned with social and political institutions after the First World War. An attitude of hopelessness often permeates her novels and stories, particularly after 1922. Critics have suggested that her turn toward historical subjects—nineteenth-century New Mexico in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927) and seventeenth-century Quebec in *Shadows on the Rock* (1931)—reflects a growing need to retreat from contemporary life.

Plot Summary

I

"Neighbour Rosicky" begins at the office of Dr. Ed Burleigh where Anton Rosicky learns that he has a bad heart. Readers also learn that Rosicky, a farmer on the Nebraska prairie, is a native of Bohemia, a region in what is today Slovakia. He is sixty-five and has a wife and six children as well as an "American" daughter-in-law. The doctor urges Rosicky to cease doing heavy farming chores.

After Rosicky leaves his office, Dr. Burleigh remembers how he breakfasted at the Rosicky farm the previous winter after delivering a baby for a rich neighbor. His warm welcome there causes Burleigh to reflect that good people such as the Rosickys never seem to get ahead; but he concludes that perhaps they enjoyed their life all the more.

II

As Rosicky leaves the doctor's office, he starts home but pauses by the "snug and homelike" graveyard that lies on the edge of his hayfield. It is snowing, and Rosicky remembers that winter means rest for the fields, the animals, and the farmers.

When he reaches home, Rosicky tells Mary that his heart "ain't so young." Mary recalls that Rosicky has never treated her harshly in all their years of marriage, which has been successful because they both value the same things. The section ends with a story about how they refused to sell their cream when approached by a creamery company, preferring to give the cream to their own children instead of someone else's.

III

In section III, Rosicky has taken the doctor's advice to relinquish the heavy chores to his sons. He spends his time in his "corner" patching his sons' clothes and reminiscing. He remembers his first days in New York City, when he came to America at the age of 20 and worked in a tailor shop. In the evening he went to school to learn English. His wages were adequate, but he never saved any money and instead loaned it to friends, went to the opera, or spent it on "the girls." Soon, however, Rosicky became restless. On the Fourth of July, Rosicky "found out what was the matter with him." He realized that, in the city, he was living in an unnatural world without any contact with earthly things. He began to think about going west to farm. He left New York when he was thirty-five to start a new life in Nebraska.

IV

Rosicky is worried about his son Rudolph, who rents a farm not too far from Rosicky's. Rudolph has recently married Polly, a woman from town whom the Rosickys describe as "American," meaning her parents are not recent immigrants. Polly has found the transition from being a single woman living in town to married life on a farm difficult. Because Rosicky is afraid that Polly's unhappiness will prompt Rudy to abandon the farm for a job in the city, Rosicky decides to loan his son the family car, suggesting that he and Polly go into town that evening. The section ends when, on his way home, Rosicky stops to look at "the sleeping fields" and "the noble darkness."

V

It is the day before Christmas and Rosicky, sitting by the window sewing, is reminded of his difficult years in London when he was always dirty and hungry. That evening, Rudolph worries about trouble ahead if the winter is too harsh for the crops. Mary responds by telling the story of how, one Fourth of July, the heat and wind destroyed their crops. Instead of despairing, Mary explained, Rosicky decided to have a picnic in the orchard. The storytelling continues when Rosicky describes one particular Christmas in London when he discovered a roasted goose that his poor landlady had prepared for the next day's meal and hidden in his corner of the room. Before he realized what he had done, Rosicky had devoured half of the goose. Horrified, he wandered the city in despair before meeting some wealthy Czechs who generously gave him money to replace the goose. Shortly after this incident, Rosicky left for New York. Polly is moved by Willa Cather this story and tells Rudy she wants to invite his family to their farm for New Year's dinner.

VI

In the final section of the story, Rosicky reflects on the future of his children. He hopes that they don't suffer "any great unkindness[es]." When spring comes, Rosicky decides to pull thistles from Rudolph's alfalfa field while his sons tend the wheat. The heavy labor causes another heart attack and Polly, calling him "Father" for the first time, comes to his aid. While she nurses him, Rosicky subtly asks Polly if she is pregnant. She suddenly feels that no one had ever loved her as deeply as Rosicky. Rudolph and Polly take Rosicky home, where he dies the next morning.

The story concludes when Dr. Burleigh, driving to the Rosicky farm one evening, stops by the graveyard where Rosicky is buried:

For the first time it struck Doctor Ed that this was really a beautiful graveyard. He thought of city cemeteries; acres of shrubbery and heavy stone, so arranged and lonely and unlike anything in the living world. Cities of the dead, indeed; cities of the forgotten, of the "put away." But this was open and free, this little square of long grass which the wind for ever stirred. Nothing but the sky overhead, and the many- colored fields

running on until they met the sky. The horses worked here in summer; the neighbours passed on their way to town; and over yonder, in the cornfield, Rosicky's own cattle would be eating fodder as winter came on. Nothing could be more undeath-like than this place; nothing could be more right for a man who had helped to do the work of great cities and had always longed for the open country and had got to it at last. Rosicky's life seemed to him complete and beautiful. (Excerpt from "Neighbour Rosicky")

Part 1

Part 1 Summary

Neighbor Rosicky is a short story about the life of Anton Rosicky, a man from Czechoslovakia who, in the middle stage of his life, moves to Nebraska to become a farmer and raise a family. During the waning days at the end of his life, Rosicky contemplates his life and his impact on his family and his world.

As the story opens, Anton Rosicky is at the office of the town's doctor, Dr. Ed Burleigh. Rosicky has gone to the doctor for recent shortness of breath and is told that his troubles are not asthma, but heart failure. Dr. Burleigh warns Rosicky that doing farm work will shorten his life, a fact that the sixty-five-year-old Rosicky seems to take in stride. To Rosicky's way of thinking, only women stay inside and work. The doctor's warnings, however, slowly sink in and Rosicky quietly leaves the office.

Dr. Burleigh wishes more than anything that he did not have to deliver this dire news to a man he has known for so many years. The doctor thinks about the time he delivered a baby at the home of Rosicky's wealthy neighbor. No provisions of breakfast were offered at the home where the doctor had spent the night delivering the new baby, so he stopped at the Rosicky farm where he was graciously welcomed with hot food and warm company.

The doctor wonders about the inequity in life that prevents good, hard-working people like the Rosickys from ever really getting ahead, but he also muses that perhaps the Rosickys enjoy their life and do not need the complications of wealth.

Part 1 Analysis

Willa Cather immediately establishes Rosicky as a humble, generous spirit whose influence is greater than he may have thought. The doctor is clearly moved by delivering the unfortunate news about Rosicky's heart and makes comparisons about Rosicky's goodness and generosity as compared to those who are better situated in life but whose spirits are small in comparison.

Rosicky receives this news about his health in the same way that he approaches everything, calmly and philosophically. Rosicky has lived much and loves his life, embracing every good thing of every day, which may be the reason that he is able to look at his demise with fewer regrets than others might. The setting of this part of Rosicky's life is Nebraska where he can be closer to nature and live the simple life that he inherently knows is his destiny.

Part 2

Part 2 Summary

After leaving Dr. Burleigh, Rosicky makes some purchases in town making sure to buy some candy for his wife and daughter at home. When Rosicky returns to his wagon, he notices that a light snow has begun and he is glad for the dormant time that is coming so that the land and the animals may have some rest. Approaching the old graveyard that sits at the edge of his farm, Rosicky stops for a few minutes to ponder on how peaceful it is, sort of snug and homelike, and that a man could lie down in the tall grass and see nothing but the vastness of the sky and hear the familiar noises of home.

Mary, Rosicky's wife, has been anxiously awaiting her husband's return and is visibly upset upon hearing the doctor's diagnosis. Full of emotions, Mary's life with Rosicky comes flooding back to her and she is grateful for this gentle man with whom she has shared so much. Mary had been a country girl and Rosicky from the city, but he has always treated her with respect.

There had been times over the years when the Rosickys had the opportunity to make more money, such as selling more of the cream from the farm like their neighbors were doing. Mrs. Rosicky did not like the fact that the neighbor children looked too thin and decided that her children would have the cream they needed. Mr. Rosicky bowed to her wishes in this and almost all other issues.

Part 2 Analysis

This section is filled with symbolism related to the theme of the cycles of nature. Rosicky notes that the winter snow means a rest for nature's activities and creatures and it cannot be far from his mind that his own rest is also coming. Man is part of the great plan of nature and the each man's cycle must also run its course, a fact which Rosicky bravely acknowledges.

The description of the graveyard in the snow is beautifully written. It is there that Rosicky faces his own mortality and rationalizes that the cemetery is a comfortable place and near to his own farm so that it will not be like he is really going so far away. The author uses the element of foreshadowing in the rationalization of the snow and the cemetery to indicate Rosicky's imminent death.

Stylistically, Cather's writing is full of imagery and similes, such as her description of Rosicky's moustache as coming down over his mouth like the teeth of a buggy-rake over a bundle of hay. The imagery tells much more about the man than a simple description ever could.

Part 3

Part 3 Summary

As the winter progresses Rosicky leaves the heavy farm work to his sons and stays inside and sews and mends clothes, a trade he learned while living in New York after his arrival in America over forty years ago. As a young man, Rosicky worked in a tailor's shop and lived with the shop's owner and his family. Although Rosicky made a decent wage he could never save any money because he was generous with friends and indulged on good dinners and girls.

The life Rosicky led was not bad but he felt vacant until one Fourth of July when Rosicky realized that he needed to be closer to the earth and live more authentically, something that was impossible in New York City. The move to Nebraska validated Rosicky as a simple man with roots like a tree, not a network but one firm tap-root searching for a place to anchor.

Part 3 Analysis

Symbolically Rosicky realizes his own independence from a restrictive life on a Fourth of July holiday. Rosicky completely loves life but longs to be closer to the earth and to put down roots in America, and Cather beautifully crafts this scenario. The metaphor of Rosicky being like "a tree that has not many roots, but one tap-root that goes deep," provides a vibrant description of this deeply principled man.

Part 4

Part 4 Summary

Rosicky is thirty-five-years-old when he moves to Nebraska and starts his family late in life; he muses that that is the reason he dotes on his children. His patience and indulgence engenders reciprocal feelings from the children toward him, too. At the present time, Rosicky is concerned for his oldest son, Rudolph, who rents a nearby farm and has recently married a local girl named Polly.

Rosicky is concerned that Polly's difficult transition from living in the city to the isolation of Nebraska farm life will prompt the couple to move to the city where he will not be able to see them as often. In an attempt to inject some vitality into Polly's life, Rosicky loans his car to the couple so that they may drive into town to see a movie. The other boys at home usually use the car on Saturday nights but Rosicky convinces them that Polly needs some magic right now and the boys reluctantly give up the wheels for awhile.

After Rudolph and Polly leave the house, Rosicky cleans up the kitchen and banks up the fire so the house will be welcoming upon their return. As Rosicky walks home across the fields, he muses about how different his life would have ended had he chosen to stay in the chaos of New York City, where his sons would have been worn down in factories instead of growing strong in these Nebraska fields surrounded by the bright stars and noble darkness, which Rosicky holds so dear.

Part 4 Analysis

The contrast between the city and the country become evident in this section of the story. Polly's restlessness with farm life is in stark contrast to Rosicky's disdain for city life where nothing grows robustly. Rosicky's attempt to assuage some of Polly's distress is more than a means to keep her and Rudolph nearby. Deep down Rosicky hopes that Polly will come to see the futility of city life as opposed to the natural goodness and healthy values of a life on the farm.

Although Rosicky is a simple farmer, he has much empathy for people and instinctively knows how to lift hearts with simple gestures such as loaning the car to Polly and Rudolph. Perhaps it is because Rosicky himself lived without many compassionate gestures from others for so long that enables him to project the need for other people.

Part 5

Part 5 Summary

The winter days pass and finally it is Christmas Eve and Rosicky sits by the window mending clothes. Mary has managed to grow some Jerusalem cherry trees full of berries and the plants remind Rosicky of the two years he spent living in London when he was only eighteen. Rosicky had come to London to live with a cousin who had unfortunately left for America by the time Rosicky arrived. Starving and cold, the young Rosicky sleeps in doorways and lives despairingly until a chance encounter with a tailor who apprentices Rosicky. The tailor's wife is kind to Rosicky but the family is poor and Rosicky himself wonders if his own clothes won't soon fall off from dirt and wear.

Rosicky rouses himself from his reverie in preparation for the holiday meal with the family, which has gathered at the farmhouse. Rudolph laments the possibility of a poor crop in light of the harsh winter. Mary shares the story of the year that their crops had been destroyed by unrelenting heat and winds one summer. On the Fourth of July Rosicky asks Mary to prepare a supper so the family could picnic in the orchard in spite of the intense heat. Rosicky tells Mary that the crop for the year is destroyed but they might as well celebrate what they do have. Mary wants her children to know that it was their father's positive attitude that maintained them through difficult times.

Rudolph thinks to himself that his father is undoubtedly a noble man but wishes that his father could have managed the farm business better and gotten further ahead. Rosicky picks up on his earlier reminiscences about life in London and tells his children about finding a roasted goose in the corner of the room where he lives during his time in London. Apparently the tailor's wife had put the goose in that spot to keep it away from the children. The smell combined with Rosicky's intense hunger so that before he knew it, he had devoured half the goose.

Embarrassed and in despair because of having no funds to replace the goose, Rosicky ends up in a bar where some visiting Czechoslovakians take pity on their fellow countryman and give him some money for the holiday. Rosicky is able to not only replace the goose but also buy other goodies for the family and he can still hear the sounds of joy coming from the tailor's wife when she discovered the holiday treasures waiting for her on Christmas morning.

Part 5 Analysis

Cather uses the technique of memories to piece together the sections of Rosicky's life just as he mends and sews the clothes in his Nebraska farmhouse. At the time he experiences them, some of the experiences are very difficult, but when viewed in the context of his entire life, the experiences are just small squares on a quilt of goodness,

health, and vitality. Rosicky's intent is to encourage his children to appreciate their lives but ultimately he learns that there are lessons for him, too.

Part 6

Part 6 Summary

The winter is hard with little snow and no rain causing the wheat crop to freeze in the ground, meaning that the ground needs to be re-tilled and planted with corn. Rosicky remembers times like this and how he always managed, but he was younger then. Now Rosicky worries about how his own sons will manage through, especially Rudolph and Polly, who are struggling in their first year together.

The spring finally arrives and Rosicky wants to do what he can for the young couple. One day while pulling thistles from Rudolph's alfalfa field, he suffers a heart attack. Polly finds her father-in-law in the field, struggles to get him into the house and cares for Rosicky as he recovers a little. The young girl and the old man talk for awhile and Polly is particularly struck by the beauty of Rosicky's hands. Most farmers have thick, burly, weathered hands but Rosicky's are flexible, the color of a pale cigar and have about them a quality of generosity.

When she remembers this time later on, Polly knows that it had been an awakening for her and she never learned as much about life from any other source than she did by looking at her father-in-law's hands. Polly also knows that no one else in the world ever loved her as much as this kind man. Rudolph and Polly take Rosicky home later that evening so that he may rest in his own bed, although he claims that he feels fine. The next morning Rosicky has breakfast with his family and encourages Mary to continue with her outside chores. Rosicky sits in his chair to begin his mending and is stricken with another heart attack. He dies after trying to get to the door of the farmhouse.

Dr. Burleigh is not in town when Rosicky dies, but drives toward the Rosicky farm one night to pay his respects to Mary. Coming upon the cemetery it dawns on the doctor that Rosicky is not in the farmhouse up ahead, but in the graveyard under this beautiful moonlit night. The doctor stops the car and sits for quite a while in the quiet and comes to realize what a beautiful place this really is with its long grass which will blow in the wind forever.

To the doctor it seems that nothing could be more unlike death than this place right in the middle of so much life and nothing could be more right for this simple, generous man who will always be a part of it.

Part 6 Analysis

Cather shows the cycle of life which is now completed for Rosicky, but which continues on with the advent of the spring and the new plantings of his family. The hardships and trials of life never hardened Rosicky, which Cather symbolizes by the description of his hands when viewed by Polly who interprets their lithe form as generosity and liveliness. Although the story ends on a sad note, the doctor's perspective about the beauty of the

graveyard and the nearness of so much life provides an element of hope in that the cycle of life continues just as it is supposed to for each living thing.

Characters

Dr. Ed Burleigh

Dr. Burleigh is an unmarried doctor in the small farming community where the Rosickys live. A young man, but "solemn" and already getting gray hairs, Dr. Burleigh provides the reader with the initial view of Rosicky as a happy and untroubled man. This view is deepened and qualified as the story progresses. Cather uses Burleigh to provide a frame for the story. Just as he introduces readers to Rosicky, Burleigh also provides a way for readers to say farewell to him, when, at the end of the story, Dr. Burleigh stops by the graveyard where Rosicky is buried and thinks once again about his neighbor.

Lifschnitz

Lifschnitz is the poor German tailor for whom Rosicky worked in London. He spoke a little Czech, so when he and Rosicky met by chance, he discovered how poor the young man's circumstances were and took him into his home and shop. Lifschnitz lived with his wife and five children in a small threeroom apartment and rented out a corner of the living room to another waif, who was studying violin.

Miss Pearl

Miss Pearl is a young town woman who works as a clerk at the general store. Rosicky waits for her to be free to wait on him; she knows "the old fellow admired her, and she liked to chaff with him." The story gives two clues that she is conscious of style: she plucks her eyebrows, and she interprets Rosicky's remark about not caring much for "slim women like what de style is now" as aimed at her.

Anton Rosicky

Anton Rosicky, the protagonist of the story, came to Nebraska to work as a farmer. Originally from Bohemia, Czechoslovakia, he experienced country life as a boy when he went to live on his grandparents' farm after his mother died. At eighteen he moved to London, where he worked for a poor German tailor for two years. At twenty he made his way to New York, again working as a tailor until at thirty-five he decided he needed to get out into the country and work on the land. Having saved enough money to buy his own farm, he has lived happily, if modestly, on his farm with his wife and six children.

The story begins when sixty-five-year-old Rosicky learns from his doctor that he has a bad heart. This news causes him to reflect on his life and the choices he has made. As the story reveals more about Rosicky and what he values, it becomes apparent that

Rosicky's heart is anything but bad. Rather, Rosicky embodies the ideal of the good man. He works hard but still finds the time to enjoy life's pleasures, including his pipe and coffee. More importantly, he is emotionally astute and is able to touch people profoundly. Cather is careful to point out that Rosicky's qualities have not prevented him from making mistakes, but his generosity makes him wholly capable of redressing those wrongs. After his death, Rosicky, who is buried in a small graveyard near the farm, remains connected to both the human community and the natural world.

John Rosicky

John, Rosicky's youngest son, is about twelve years old. He takes care of the horses after his father returns from town.

Josephine Rosicky

Josephine is Rosicky's youngest child and only daughter. It is she who sets an extra place for Dr. Burleigh at the breakfast table when he stops in after a house call.

Mary Rosicky

Mary is Anton Rosicky's wife; she is fifteen years younger than her husband. Also from Czechoslovakia, Mary exhibits a warm generosity and exuberant enjoyment of simple pleasures. The narrator comments that "[w]ith Mary, to feed creatures was the natural expression of affection." Her nurturing gift is also apparent in her house plants—Dr. Burleigh marvels that her geraniums bloom all year. She is the natural complement to Rosicky: "she was rough, and he was gentle"; he is from the city, and she is from the country. Their marriage succeeds because "they had the same ideas about life."

Polly Rosicky

Polly, one of four daughters of a widow, is the wife of Rosicky's son Rudolph. She is thin, blonde, and blue-eyed, and she "got some style, too," as Rosicky notes. Unlike her husband, to whom she has been married less than a year, Polly grew up in town and is not the child of immigrants. These differences make her feel somewhat awkward around Rudy's family—she calls her father-in-law "Mr. Rosicky" and is "stiff and on her guard" with Mary, whose occasional gifts of bread or sweets she is not quite comfortable receiving. Rosicky notes that "an American girl don't git used to our ways all at once." Polly sometimes feels lonely living in such an isolated area. Once a store clerk, she misses the social contacts she had at her job and in her church choir, and she is touched by Rosicky's kindness toward her. When Rosicky has a heart attack after raking thistles in the hayfield, it is Polly who nurses him through it. This is the first time in the story that she calls him "Father," and he is the first person she allows to know of her pregnancy. Afterward, while he is sleeping, it strikes her that "nobody in the world . . . really loved her as much as old Rosicky did."

Rudolph Rosicky

Rudolph is Rosicky's oldest son and Polly's husband. About twenty years old, he is described as a "serious sort of chap" and a "simple, modest boy," but "proud." Although he and Polly were just married in the spring, he "had more than once been sorry he'd married this year." This statement of regret comes immediately after a reference to the crop failure of the past year, but other references indicate there is also trouble with his marriage itself. Both Rosicky and his wife are afraid that Polly will grow too discontented with farm life and that her discontent will spread to Rudolph or start trouble in their marriage. He works his rented farmland, but he struggles with money, toying with ideas of going to the city to work for the railroad or a packing house for a more secure income. Before he married, he worked at the Omaha stockyards for a winter to earn money. Rudolph is not eager to take handouts, as when his father offers him a dollar to spend on ice cream and candy for Polly, but instead is personally generous—a man who "would give the shirt off his back to anyone who touched his heart." He feels less experienced and less worldly than his wife and her sisters.

Rudy Rosicky

See Rudolph Rosicky

Zichec

Zichec, a young Czech cabinet-maker, was Rosicky's friend and roommate in New York. He played the flute, and he and Rosicky often went to the opera together.

Themes

Goodness

What does it mean to be a good man? This is a fundamental question posed by "Neighbour Rosicky" and one of its major themes. Cather depicts Anton Rosicky, who must come to terms with his own mortality during the course of the story, as a man of integrity who has found value in an ordinary life on a modest farm. Generosity, a capacity for pleasure, sympathy, and hard work comprise some significant virtues of the good man. According to the story, Rosicky is also a man who maintains a lively interest in the world around him and who can communicate his good fellowship almost wordlessly to others. His capacity to forge connections with the people around him and his ability to understand and appreciate the land constitute Rosicky's goodness.

Wealth and Poverty

Closely linked to the idea of goodness is the issue of wealth, since Cather is careful to point out that Rosicky's "success" has nothing to do with material wealth. Rosicky is out of debt, but he is not a rich man. His inability to "get ahead," however, is seen as one of his strengths. "[M]aybe you couldn't enjoy your life and put it into the bank, too," muses Dr. Burleigh early in the story. Later, Rosicky offers his own ideas about material comforts to his sons: "You boys don't know what hard times is. You don't owe nobody, you got plenty to eat an' keep warm, an' plenty water to keep clean. When you got them, you can't have it very hard." Though wealth is not considered a virtue in this story, neither is poverty. Rosicky's own hard times in London have left him with painful memories. In addition, the fact that Rosicky owns his own farm is seen as a valuable achievement for an immigrant from a country where landowning was reserved only for people of a certain privileged class.

City and Country

The different experiences that Rosicky faces in the city and in the country help to explain his deep attachment to the natural world and comprise another important theme in "Neighbour Rosicky." In this story, the open expanses of the Nebraska prairie are contrasted with the enclosed spaces of cities like London and New York. Rosicky experienced both the best and the worst of the modern cities. He believes that while farm life might mean enduring occasional hardships, country people "weren't tempered, hardened, sharpened, like the treacherous people in cities who live by grinding or cheating or poisoning their fellow-men." For Rosicky, city life means a life of unkindness and a life divorced from living and growing things.

Cycle of Life

Rosicky's impending death is closely linked to the agricultural cycles that define life on a farm. A field of wheat must be planted in the spring, tended in the summer, harvested in the fall, and left fallow for the winter. Rosicky, at sixty-five, is still in many ways a robust and lively man, and it is clear that he will be missed by the people in his life. But Rosicky himself recognizes the need for winter—or death— to come for all things when he muses on the falling snow: "It meant rest for vegetation and men and beasts, for the ground itself; a season of long nights for sleep, leisurely breakfasts, peace by the fire." When Rosicky returns to the earth at the end of the story, he completes the cycle of life that defines the natural world, and his death is made meaningful.

Generosity and Greed

Generosity in "Neighbour Rosicky" takes many forms and is a major theme of the story. While Anton Rosicky's generosity is especially important and earns him the title of "neighbour," all of the members of the Rosicky family display a natural generosity and spontaneous affection. Mary, for instance, loves to feed both people and creatures. She also takes great pleasure in the success of others. Dr. Burleigh believes this is a rare quality in a woman and he is touched by Mary's concern for him. Rudolph, too, displays generosity when he expresses concern over a pregnant woman he saw lifting heavy milk cans. Rosicky displays his generous spirit many times in the story, when he buys candy for the women or loans the family car to Rudy and Polly. But his most poignant display of generosity occurs through the pain of his heart attack, when Rosicky is able to reach out to Polly and touch her. As a result, she relinquishes her natural reserve long enough for Rosicky to see her own capacity for tenderness.

Memory and Reminiscence

Much of "Neighbour Rosicky" consists of memories and reminiscences—primarily, but not exclusively, those of Anton Rosicky. In the story, reminiscences help readers understand what Rosicky values and why. Since Rosicky is facing his own mortality, reminiscing becomes especially important to him, and he recalls several pivotal moments in his life. He shares some of these memories with his family, especially when he wants to pass along a lesson to his sons or to Polly. By recalling and sharing his memories, Rosicky is able to come to terms with the hardships he had in life; he is able to weave those individual years into the larger pattern of a lifetime and share his wisdom with members of his family.

Style

Narration and Point of View

"Neighbour Rosicky" is narrated through an omniscient narrator; that is, a speaker who is not a part of the action of the story and who has access to the thoughts and feelings of all the characters. Through this narrator the reader enters the consciousness of several different characters and sees the world from their point of view. For instance, the story begins from Dr. Burleigh's point of view, and he provides readers with some crucial information about the Rosickys through his memories of past events. The story concludes from Burleigh's *point of view* as well, and his point of view functions as the story's narrative frame. Some critics have suggested that Burleigh's point of view is unreliable; they believe that his assessment of the story's characters or action is at times incorrect or flawed. Other critics believe that this framing device provides an objective balance to the story.

Most of the story, however, is narrated from the point of view of Rosicky, who participates in the story's present and also reminisces about the past. The story provides cues to help the reader follow these shifts in time. When Rosicky is about to think about a particular day in New York City many years ago, readers are told that "Rosicky, the old Rosicky, could remember as if it were yesterday the day when the young Rosicky found out what was the matter with him." The narration and point of view in "Neighbour Rosicky" serve to weave the past together with the present.

Setting

The main setting of "Neighbour Rosicky" is a small farm on the Nebraska prairie in the 1920s, but Cather shifts at times to New York City about thirty years earlier and to London, some years before that. These shifts in setting are crucial to the story's concern with the contrast between country life and city life. The country is portrayed as open and free, a place of opportunity that can sustain the people who live on the land. By contrast, the city is portrayed as lifeless and confining: "they built you in from the earth itself, cemented you away from any contact with the ground." Cather's idealization of the country and distrust of the city has led critics to identify some of her novels and short stories (like "Neighbour Rosicky") with the *pastoral* tradition in American letters. Though it originally described a literary style developed by the Greek poet Theocritus (c. 308-c. 240 BC), pastoralism—the idealized portrayal of country life—remained a vital literary tradition for many centuries. Cather's pastorals tend to celebrate the perfection of the Nebraska prairie.

Structure

The most significant challenge Cather faced in constructing this story was weaving together memories of past events with the present action of the story. "Neighbour

Rosicky" is divided into six sections; each section reveals a significant detail about Rosicky's life. In section I, readers learn that Rosicky has a bad heart; in section II Mary is introduced; in section III Rosicky remembers his carefree days in New York; in section IV he loans Rudolph and Polly the car; in section V Rosicky remembers his painful days in London; and in section VI he dies.

Cather also uses significant days to organize the action of the story. On the Fourth of July in New York, "the young Rosicky" realizes that he must leave the city; many years later in Nebraska, Rosicky celebrates the Fourth of July by having a picnic even though his crop has just failed. Similarly, the reader observes Rosicky's experience of two different Christmases: one in London and one in Nebraska, forty-five years later. The contrasts between these different holidays serves as a way for Rosicky, and the reader, to measure the progress of the character's life.

Finally, Cather frames the story with allusions to the graveyard where Rosicky is eventually buried. At the beginning of the story, Rosicky stops to contemplate the graveyard's comfort and homeliness. At the end of the story, Dr. Burleigh stops to contemplate the graveyard's connection to the unconfined expanse of prairie.

Imagery

Two closely related images in "Neighbour Rosicky," are the motif of hands and the motif of sewing. Though Cather carefully describes Rosicky's physical appearance early in the story, her descriptions of his hands take on special significance. Like Rosicky, they are communicative, reassuring, warm, and clever. In section IV, Rosicky's "reassuring grip on her elbows" touches Polly deeply; in section VI, his hands become a kind of symbol for his tenderness and intelligence. Because the human hand can convey what the heart feels, Rosicky's hands become something more than mere appendages, they express his essential goodness.

Rosicky often sits and sews in his corner by the window when he thinks about his life. Although he is usually patching his sons' clothes, sewing in "Neighbour Rosicky" is intimately related to the activity of remembering. Rosicky patches together his sons' clothes in the same way that he patches together parts of his past. Sewing can also be linked to the work of the imagination, and so to the activity of the writer. Rosicky's patching, mending, and reminiscing resemble the work a writer performs when creating a piece of fiction.

Historical Context

The Farming Crisis

Although it was not collected in *Obscure Destinies* until 1932, Cather wrote "Neighbour Rosicky" in 1928, just one year before the Stock Market Crash of 1929 plunged the country into the Great Depression, an economic crisis that affected millions of Americans. Before 1929, during the administration of Calvin Coolidge in particular, the country's economy was vigorous and prosperous. One important exception to this prosperity, however, was the American farmer. After World War I, European markets were restricted by new tariffs, and American farmers could not sell the food they were producing. As a result, many farmers experienced an economic crisis long before the Stock Market Crash. The price of wheat, for instance, fell from $2.94 a bushel in 1920 to 30 cents a bushel in 1932. While Cather does not explicitly allude to the farming crisis in the Midwest during the 1920s, she is careful to point out that although Rosicky planted wheat, he also grew corn and alfalfa. In fact, he is quite concerned over his alfalfa fields at the end of the story and considers this crop, not his wheat fields, to be an essential one.

Materialism

For Cather, the 1920s represented a time of crass materialism and declining values. In 1924 President Coolidge declared that "the chief business of the American people is business," a philosophy which dominated the country's political and social agendas. The tensions between labor and industry were severe. Rosicky, Cather tells the reader, "was distrustful of the organized industries that see one out of the world in the big cities." Many authors during this period responded to the 1920s with disillusionment. F. Scott Fitzgerald considered the consequences of American affluence in his novel *The Great Gatsby*; Sinclair Lewis criticized social conformity and small-town hypocrisy in novels like *Babbitt and Dodsworth*. While critics have debated whether or not Cather adequately examined the roots of American materialism, she clearly values Rosicky's rejection of the heartless pursuit of money. After 1929, the country became more wary of identifying its interests with the interests of big business. Throughout the 1930s, economic reform programs were established to help working people and farmers who were suffering under the Depression.

Multiculturalism

Recent critical attention to Cather has pointed to the ways in which her work brings into focus the multicultural heritage at the heart of the American Midwest. Like her novels, "Neigbour Rosicky" celebrates the spirit, imagination, and determination of America's immigrant population. Millions of displaced and homeless Europeans journeyed to America, particularly after World War I. Many remained in urban centers such as New

York, Boston, and Chicago and labored at jobs like the ones Rudolph considers—jobs working on railroads or in the slaughterhouses. A significant number of immigrants, however, sought out new opportunities to own and farm land on America's frontier. True to this pattern of migration, Rosicky arrives in New York and spends fifteen years there before seeking a new life in Nebraska. While "Neighbour Rosicky" focuses on the history of one Czech family in Nebraska, Cather's other stories and novels detail the lives and contributions of diverse ethnic groups.

Critical Overview

When "Neighbour Rosicky" was published, it was greeted with generous enthusiasm. Henry Seidel Canby pointed out in the *Saturday Review of Literature* that "Cather's achievement . . . lies in her discovery and revelation of 'great souls' inside the commonplace human [being] called . . . Neighbour Rosicky." Clifton Fadiman, writing in the *Nation*, found "Neighbour Rosicky" a fine example of Cather's subtle craftsmanship. By contrast, Peter Quennell, writing for the *New Statesman* and *Nation*, found the story sentimental and unimpressive. Another interesting exception to the story's generally positive reception was Granville Hicks's essay "The Case against Willa Cather," which appeared in the *English Journal* in 1933. Because he supported the kind of literary realism that "examine[s] life as it is," Hicks found that the romantic and nostalgic aspects of Cather's work "isolated [her] from the social movements that were shaping the destiny of the nation." In writing about "Neighbour Rosicky" in particular, Hicks argued that Cather "exaggerates the security of the country" in her depiction of Anton Rosicky's devotion to the land. Hicks's essay represented a point of view held especially by the social realists of the American left in the 1930s, who believed that writers should directly represent social and economic issues.

While Hicks criticized Cather's literary treatment of the land, commentators writing in the postDepression years have generally applauded it. Writing about "Neighbour Rosicky" in 1951, David Daiches argued that its "earthiness almost neutralizes its sentimentality, and the relation of the action to its context in agricultural life gives the story an elemental quality." In "'Land' Relevance in 'Neighbour Rosicky,'" Sister Lucy Schneider suggested that the land symbolizes the possibility of transcendence; writer Hermione Lee praised Cather's "celebration of old-fashioned American agrarian values . . . and [her] belief in land-ownership as better for the soul than urban wage-earning." Other critics, like Kathleen Danker and Dorothy Van Ghent, focused on Cather's pastoralism, which Danker defined as the "retreat from the complexities of urban society to a secluded rural place such as a farm, field, garden, or orchard, where human life is returned to the simple essentials of the natural world of cyclical season."

Many commentators on this story have noticed the special affinity between Rosicky and the earth. In an article from 1979, Edward J. Piacentino noticed how Cather uses imagery to connect Rosicky to the land. He pointed out that even Rosicky's triangular-shaped eyes suggest the shape of a plow. In her book *The Voyage Perilous: Willa Cather's Romanticism*, published in 1986, Susan J. Rosowski linked "Neighbour Rosicky" to the nineteenthcentury American poet Walt Whitman, whose poem cycle "*Leaves of Grass*" influenced many American writers, including Cather. Rosowski maintained that

"Neighbour Rosicky" is as Whitmanesque as was *O Pioneers*!. In 1913 [the year *O Pioneers*! was published] Cather announced the affinity with her title and then spelled it out with her conclusion—"Fortunate country, that is one day to receive hearts like Alexandra's into its bosom, to give them out again in the yellow wheat, heat, in the rustling corn, in the shining eyes of youth!" In 1928 the affinity is relaxed, natural,

unobtrusive—yet nonetheless present as powerfully as ever. Like Whitman, Anton Rosicky bequeathed himself to the dirt to grow from the grass he loved.

Critics too, have tended to agree on the story's precise balancing of opposites to achieve a kind of harmony or unity. Marilyn Arnold in particular emphasized the many dualities that are brought into a special rapport in this story: "city and country, winter and summer, older generation and young, single life and married life, Bohemians and Americans." By contrast, Jacquelynn S. Lewis suggested that these oppositions produce instead a "brand of aloneness" peculiar to Cather's characters.

In recent years, several critics have suggested that, in 1928, "Neighbour Rosicky" provided a new vision of the American Dream. Merrill M. Skaggs declared that the story redefined success, stating that Rosicky "becomes the model neighbor because he has made himself a life in which 'he had never had to take a cent from anyone in bitter need.'" Loretta Wasserman suggested that Cather's allusions to the Fourth of July are unusually patriotic. She argued that Cather's attention to this holiday demonstrates her commitment to "the original Jeffersonian American dream of the yeoman farmer, independent and virtuous."

Criticism

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

Burns is a writing specialist at Emmanuel College, and her areas of special studies include film studies and nineteenth-century British literature as well as gay and lesbian studies. In the following essay, she discusses the balances between life and death in Cather's "Neighbour Rosicky."

With her portrayal of Anton Rosicky, a Bohemian farmer on the Nebraska prairie in the 1920s, Willa Cather returns to the settings and themes of her early fiction. Like *O Pioneers*! and *My Antonia*, "Neighbour Rosicky" explores both the literal and symbolic importance of the land to the people who settled on the plains in the first decades of the twentieth century. Cather's sympathetic interest in the struggles and triumphs of the immigrants who domesticated the great prairies of the Midwest is keenly alive in this story about one farmer's gentle cultivation of his land and his home. Though A farm near Beatrice, Nebraska, the state where Willa Cather spent part of her childhood and where some of her stories, including "Neighbour Rosicky," are set. "Neighbour Rosicky" marks Cather's return to the great themes of her early fiction, critics agree that the story displays a new maturity of vision.

Cather's biographer, E. K. Brown, attributes Cather's mature vision to the fact that she wrote "Neighbour Rosicky" shortly after her father's death. Cather had always been attracted to the *elegiac* mode. An elegy is a poem of mourning and reflection written on the occasion of someone's death. Cather can be called "elegiac" because she often used her fiction to reflect on the meaning of death and separation. In "Neighbour Rosicky," Anton Rosicky faces his own impending death after the doctor tells him he has a bad heart. The knowledge that he soon will be leaving behind everything that he cherishes causes him to reflect on the important events that have marked his life. Though she is writing a story about death, Cather's deft handling of her subject matter transforms sorrow into celebration; the permanence of the land makes the brevity of life meaningful.

Critics have almost unanimously pointed to the story's careful balancing of life and death. In her book *Willa Cather's Short Fiction*, for instance,Marilyn Arnold observes that "[d]eath is neither a great calamity nor a final surrender to despair, but rather, a benign presence, anticipated and even graciously entertained. It is the other side of life, and comes . . . as a natural consequence of 'having lived.' It is a reunion with the earth for one like Rosicky who has lived close to the land." Indeed, at the end of the story Dr. Burleigh observes, after Rosicky's death, that "Rosicky's life seemed to him complete and beautiful." Since the story's publication, critics have attempted to define precisely what contributes to this sense of completeness. Many critics consider Cather's attention to the defining power of agricultural cycles to be central to the story's measured acceptance of death. In *Willa Cather: A Critical Introduction*, David Daiches argues that "the relation of the action to its context in agricultural life gives the story an elemental quality." However, Arnold points out that unity in "Neighbour Rosicky" is also "defined in human terms, a wholeness and completeness that derives from human harmony and caring."

In "Neighbour Rosicky," Cather establishes an accord between the natural world and the human one, between the inflexible facts of material existence and the human ability to transcend them. Cather strikingly illustrates the intimate connection between the human and the natural world through the image of the graveyard which occurs twice in "Neighbour Rosicky": once at the beginning of the story and once at its conclusion. When Rosicky first learns that he has "a bad heart," he stops by the graveyard on the way home from town and considers its finer points:

It was a nice graveyard, Rosicky reflected, sort of snug and homelike, not cramped or mournful,—a big sweep all round it. A man could lie down in the long grass and see the complete arch of the sky over him, hear the wagons go by; in summer the mowingmachine rattled right up to the wire fence. And it was so near home. Over there across the cornstalks his own roof and windmill looked so good to him that he promised himself to mind the Doctor and take care of himself. He was awful fond of his place, he admitted. He wasn't anxious to leave it. And it was a comfort to think that he would never have to go farther than the edge of his own hayfield. The snow, falling over his barnyard and the graveyard, seemed to draw things together like. And they were all old neighbours in the graveyard, most of them friends; there was nothing to feel awkward or embarrassed about.

Imagining this small cemetery as "snug and homelike," and finding consolation in its nearness to his own farm, Rosicky dwells on the pleasures of domestic life. Unwilling as yet to leave the home he has made for himself and his family, Rosicky is comforted by the fact that the graveyard is just at "the edge of his own hayfield." As he watches, the falling snow seems to draw his farm and the cemetery even closer together. He considers those who have been buried there "old neighbours." Rosicky's vision of death is softened by his ability to imagine it as a part of his domestic world—the world of family and neighbors, of comfort and pleasure.

This initial vision of death as a kind of homecoming helps Rosicky, and the reader, cope with the story's impending conclusion: Rosicky's death. Cather returns to the image of the graveyard at the end of the story when Dr. Burleigh stops there after Rosicky's death to contemplate the cemetery's beauty:

[T]his was open and free, this little square of long grass which the wind for ever stirred. Nothing but the sky overhead, and the many-coloured fields running on until they met that sky. The horses worked here in the summer; the neighbours passed on their way to town; and over yonder, in the cornfield, Rosicky's own cattle would be eating fodder as winter came on. Nothing could be more undeathlike than this place.

As Arnold points out, "this particular graveyard . . . is not a place where things end, but where they are completed." This sense of completion, however, depends on relinquishing the comforts of domestic tranquility for the transcendence of the natural world. The image of the graveyard at the end of "Neighbour Rosicky" remains slightly wild, "open and free." Rosicky has left his home and family behind him and has returned to the "grass which the wind for ever stirred." In her book *The Voyage Perilous: Willa Cather's Romanticism*, Susan J. Rosowski observes that Cather's ability to connect the

human and the natural in these scenes depends on her capacity to join "one person's life" to something "universal." Rosowski points out that in this final passage "one family's fields run into endless sky; a single man has merged with all of nature." This vision of the graveyard as a place of transcendence seems quite different from Rosicky's vision of the graveyard as "snug and homelike." Cather begins and concludes "Neighbour Rosicky" with these two images because she would like her readers to see the connections between the human and the transcendent. In her analysis of the story's concluding images, Rosowski observes that "this is a graveyard that is a part of life, where the fence separating the living from the dead is hidden with grass, where some neighbors lie inside and other neighbors pass on their way to town." The delicate balance between the human world and the natural one has been maintained, even, or perhaps especially, in death.

Other images throughout "Neighbour Rosicky" suggest that the "snug" boundaries of a single human life and the unboundedness of a transcendent natural world are deeply interconnected. In "The Agrarian Mode in Cather's 'Neighbour Rosicky'," Edward J. Piacentino argues that Rosicky symbolizes "the land, agricultural life, and agrarian values." He notes that even Rosicky's hands are described as warm and brown and observes that "[w]armth, in this sense, relates to the vital heat needed by the brownish-red soil in the developmental process of the vegetative cycle." Rosicky's hands are mentioned in many different contexts throughout the story. Rosicky's "reassuring grip" on Polly's elbows as he insists that she leave the duty of cleaning her kitchen to him and enjoy herself in town is one example among many of Rosicky's almost magical ability to touch the lives of those around him.

Another way that Rosicky expresses his generosity through his hands is by sewing. A tailor in his youth, Rosicky often patches his sons' clothes while musing over his past life. A domestic activity usually associated with female labor, sewing in "Neighbour Rosicky" is related to the other activity Rosicky performs with his hands, his labor as a farmer. The resonances between "sewing," using a needle to stitch together fabric, and "sowing," planting a field with seed, bring together quite forcefully the domestic and the natural worlds.

Perhaps because Rosicky is at the end of his life, we never see him actually sowing a field. Rather, as Piacentino and others have pointed out, we see him laboring to protect the fields he has already planted. Piacentino argues that "Rosicky's death comes after he overexerts himself cutting thistles that have grown up in his son Rudolph's alfalfa field. His death . . . can be seen as a labor of love for restoring the proper conditions for productive vegetation." Rosicky's sewing signals his desire to reflect and reminisce, sewing together the details of his previous experiences into a whole cloth—an entire picture. In a sense, his sewing restores "the proper conditions" for remembering a life. Both activities, sowing and sewing, producing and remembering, are vital to the human. And both of these activities are performed by the human hand.

In one of the most moving passages in "Neighbour Rosicky," Cather celebrates the capacity of the human hand to perform the tasks necessary to sustain both the human and the natural world. When Rosicky suffers a heart attack, Polly, his American

daughter-in-law, finds him between the barn and the house and helps him back into the comfort of a domestic setting where she nurses him until his pain subsides. Throughout the story Polly has been reserved and wary, unwilling to get too close to Rosicky even though she cares for him deeply. In "Character and Observation in Willa Cather's *Obscure Destinies*," Michael Leddy has pointed out that "it would be impossible to imagine Rosicky's life as complete and beautiful if he were to die without coming close to his daughter-inlaw, without the assurance that Polly has 'a tender heart.'" What touches Polly finally is, of course, Rosicky's hand:

After he dropped off to sleep, she sat holding his warm, broad, flexible brown hand. She had never seen another in the least like it. She wondered if it wasn't a kind of gypsy hand, it was so alive and quick and light in its communications. . . . Rosicky's [hand] was like quicksilver, flexible, muscular, about the colour of a pale cigar, with deep, deep creases across the palm.... [I]t was a warm brown human hand, with some cleverness in it, a great deal of generosity, and something else which Polly could only call "gypsy-like,"— something nimble and lively and sure, in the way that animals are.Polly remembered that hour long afterwards; it had been like an awakening to her. It seemed to her that she had never learned so much about life from anything as from old Rosicky's hand. It brought her to herself; it communicated some direct and untranslatable message.

Though he dies because he labors to save an alfalfa field, Rosicky continues to live in the legacy, "direct and untranslatable," that he leaves to Polly. It is a legacy of tenderness and determination, of hope and realism. Rosicky's life is complete—especially since Polly's life can now begin.

Source: Bonnie Burns, "Overview of 'Neighbour Rosicky,'" for *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

In the following excerpt, originally presented at the Brigham Young University's Willa Cather Symposium in September 1988, Skaggs offers an interpretation of Cather's "Neighbour Rosicky" and praises Cather's "courage to affirm a new route to . . . the American dream of success."

In "Neighbour Rosicky," one of her best short fictions, Willa Cather characteristically manages to establish plot, character, and theme in the compact scope of her opening sentence. The sentence reads, "When Doctor Burleigh told neighbour Rosicky he had a bad heart, Rosicky protested." We learn here the story's central concern is a bad heart, that the heart belongs to a man named Rosicky whose neighborliness defines him, and that Rosicky protests the diagnosis, thereby providing an action for the narrative. The story, we are forewarned, will reveal how Rosicky prepares himself and others to cope with bad hearts, and to understand the nature of good ones. We spot in the phrase a *double entendre*. Thus the story begins with the deftly woven and double-stranded intricacies we anticipate in Cather's major work.

The modified name used as title, of course, calls a reader's attention emphatically to the major character. Cather never tired of using realistic names that supplied a wider suggestiveness. She also expected sophisticated readers to catch literary overtones within her texts. Often her names make an important statement about character, and Rosicky's— pronounced in Nebraska with the accent on the second syllable—is no exception. Pronounced as Cather learned it, *Rose-sick-y* suggests the famous Blake poem "The Sick Rose." That poem, in turn, supplies the given conditions of the story by summarizing Rosicky's physical predicament and his reasons for resistance to Doctor Burleigh:

O Rose, thou art sick.
The invisible worm
That flies in the night
In the howling storm
Has found out thy bed
Of crimson joy,
And his dark secret love
Does thy life destroy.

Rosicky is dying. Having heard the truth in the opening sentence, however, he sets out to prepare all who are important to him for the lives they will live without him. His first act is to put his house in order by making purchases that are of good enough quality to outlast him. His second is to purchase candy for his women to sweeten the moment when he must announce his bad news. The third is to prepare himself for his end by looking carefully, on his way home, at the graveyard in which he will be buried. As snow falls softly "upon all the living and the dead," Rosicky surveys the cemetery. Unlike James Joyce's sadder Gabriel Conroy in "The Dead," Rosicky finds the cemetery to be "snug and homelike, not cramped or mournful"—a good place to lie with "old neighbours

..., most of them friends." Best of all, "it was a comfort to think that he would never have to go farther than the edge of his own hayfield." Rosicky concludes simply that in connection with his own death, "there was nothing to feel awkward or embarrassed about."

For several reasons, this story can be considered a *tour de force*. For one, it immediately suggests it will end with death, and thereafter keeps readers engrossed in spite of that threatening promise. For another, this consistently upbeat tale continues to hold an admiring public in a century that has associated value with ambiguous and darker shades of irony. A third reason, however, is that Cather creates in her character study of a simple man a story that is *itself* complex and multifaceted in form, without once undercutting a reader's admiration for Rosicky. The feat seems more astonishing the longer you look at it.

By its final sentence, the story has unequivocally established the fact that Rosicky's life has been "complete and beautiful." This life's final stages include a good, affectionate and hardworking wife, a family Rosicky can get some comfort out of, a farm unencumbered by debt, a neighborhood containing people who return his affection. His end appears to be deserved. Rosicky is a man with a gleam of amusement in his triangular eyes, a contented disposition, a gaily reflective quality, "citybred" and delicate manners, and a clear (though by no means conventional) sense of what a man does and does not do. Significantly, he is known not to be a "pusher" but in fact is characterized by a willingness to indulge himself. He is as considerate of others as of himself. He does not envy and refuses to take hard times hard. He not only remembers his good times but also creates them for himself.

Rosicky seems to love women generally, and his wife Mary specifically. For Mary, he has become an extension of herself: "They had been shipmates on a rough voyage and had stood by each other in trying times. Life had gone well with them because, at bottom, they had the same ideas about life. They agreed, without discussion, as to what was most important and what was secondary." They had agreed "not to hurry through life, not to be always skimping and saving." The key to Mary's enduring affection for Anton, however, is that "he had never touched her without gentleness."

This capacity for loving women gently and well is hinted at when Rosicky goes to the general store. After his fateful doctor's appointment, he waits patiently to be attended by the pretty young clerk who always waits on him and with whom he flirts mildly, for their mutual enjoyment. The small incident is worth noting, especially since no small incidents are trivial in Cather's fiction. The Rosicky marriage holds up so well, we infer, because the husband, fifteen years older than his wife, has known women before her and has learned how to treat them in his youth. In the five happy years he spent in New York as a young man, we read, he was self-indulgent, enjoyed all his favorite pleasures, and never saved money, for "a good deal went to the girls." He obviously learned enough to know that women appreciate receiving special attention. He learned some necessary cautions as well, and concluded, "the only things in his experience he had found terrifying and horrible [were] the look in the eyes of a dishonest and crafty man, of a scheming and rapacious woman."

The delayed marriage shapes Rosicky's attitude to his whole family:

Perhaps the fact that his own youth was well over before he began to have a family was one reason why Rosicky was so fond of his boys. He had almost a grandfather's indulgence for them. He had never had to worry about any of them—except, just now, a little about Rudolph.

His son Rudolph is a problem partially because he and his wife Polly have married so young that they must do a lot of their life-learning on each other. Yet Rosicky's special sensitivity to women is nowhere better dramatized than in his interactions with his daughter-in-law. He accurately infers that Polly, a town girl, must be lonely and increasingly discontent as an isolated farm wife. So Rosicky tactfully coaches his son about how to keep her happy: "I don't want no trouble to start in Rudolph's family. When it starts, it ain't so easy to stop." He suggests that Rudolph treat Polly as if they were courting, take her to town for a movie and an ice cream, and then he even provides the car and the money the outing requires, while he himself stays to clean up Polly's kitchen after supper. Rosicky knows how to give a treat and why treats are important. Because he is specially attentive, he first guesses that Polly is pregnant, before her husband or mother or mother-in-law know of it—intimate knowledge indeed. But, of course, the experienced capacity for such guesswork partially explains his own happy marriage.

As a member of a communal family, Rosicky enjoys his greatest triumphs. In that context he has also endured his most painful defeat. We are reminded very early that Rosicky has a past. That past includes so sore a spot that he has been able to reflect on it only in the last days of his life; for his two years in London were so great a misery that "his mind usually shrank from [it] even after all this while." As a hungry, dirty, harassed, exploited London tailor's apprentice, Rosicky once betrayed a woman's trust in a way that makes him writhe. He tells of the debacle on his last Christmas Eve. The tale emerges as a gesture of trust and concern for Polly and Rudolph, who are experiencing hard times of their own. But the contrasting Christmas Eves thus juxtaposed become one set of the doubled holidays Cather uses as a structuring device.

When young Rosicky lived in London, he subsisted by working for a tailor and sleeping in a curtained-off corner of his employer's apartment. When Christmas approached, his employer's wife arranged a surprise for her household and on Christmas Eve hid a cooked goose under the box in Rosicky's corner; it was the safest place available in her hungry family's quarters. That night Rosicky, hungry himself, followed his nose, found the bird, and characteristically indulged in a small advance bite. He thereafter ended up eating at least half the bird. Distraught with guilt and dismay over his betrayal of trust, he then ran out to the street contemplating suicide. But, accidentally, he heard wealthy patrons talking in Czech as they emerged from a fine restaurant. He approached them and begged them as "fellow countrymen" to give him enough money to replace the goose. Their money not only saved Christmas but also paved the way for Rosicky to get to New York, and to eventual good fortune.

The first point of this episode is that Rosicky's bitterest memory involves his betrayal of an extended family community; for he knows "how hard dat poor woman save to buy dat goose, and how she get some neighbour to cook it dat got more fire, an' how she put it in my corner to keep it away from dem hungry children .... An' I know she put it n my corner because she trust me." The second point is that he has enough faith left in fellow humans, even after he himself has played Judas, to throw himself, in emotional extremis, on the mercy of strangers. The third point is that it is the ladies of the group who rescue him, feed and comfort him, after which "both of dem ladies give me ten shillings." Thus having sinned by the worst betrayal he can imagine, he finds forgiveness and plenty. Community is reestablished and the next day "we all sit down an' eat all we can hold."

Willa Cather had an affinity for doubling effects and used them regularly as part of her techniques to expand the implications of a story. With her Christmases past and present, she suggests both the best and the worst of both past and present. Rosicky tells of his past London memory because of his present gnawing concern for Rudolph and Polly. Yet both Christmases end happily, and Rudolph and Polly run home arm in arm to plan for the first familial New Year's Eve.

In Cather country one pair of doubles deserves another. In contrast to the winter's high holiday is the summer's, and the Fourth of July proves as significant for Rosicky's life as does Christmas. After five happy years in New York, Rosicky remembers sitting miserably on one Fourth, "tormented by a longing to run away." He decides that the trouble with big cities was that "they built you in from the earth itself, cemented you away from any contact with the ground." He resolves to get back to the land and eventually gets to Nebraska and to his own farm. On his second memorable Fourth of July, however, he confronts in Nebraska the worst disaster the land can supply. At this point, he is past running. What Rosicky does in this most dramatic adversity defines him.

In his second summer trial, a heat wave burns up all his crops in a few hours. In the literal heat of this disaster, with no retreat possible, Rosicky suggests fun and frolic. He kills two chickens for supper, spends the afternoon splashing with his sons in the horse tank, and then at sundown takes his family outside for a picnic; his reasoning—"No crop this year.... That's why we're havin' a picnic. We might as well enjoy what we got." His wife adds, "An' we enjoyed ourselves that year, poor as we was, an' our neighbours wasn't a bit better off for bein' miserable."

While the two Christmases function to define Rosicky's response to familial and community bonds, his Fourth of July turning points appropriately become his personal Independence Days. In the first, he decides to relinquish one acceptable life in the city for another life near the earth. In the second, he decides when the earth fails him that he will rejoice and be glad. Thus he illustrates what makes him what he is: he loves himself, his family, his life, and his fun. Under the most adverse circumstances, "everything amused him."

What makes "Neighbour Rosicky" great is that the story provides a new set of definitions. Rosicky himself, our definition of a good man, can be summarized best in the phrase he "had a special gift for loving people." The good life is defined almost as succinctly: "You don't owe nobody, you got plenty to eat an' keep warm, an' plenty water to keep clean. When you got them, you can't have it very hard." The good family is depicted as one that can share its pleasures in mutual concern and affection. And the keys to Rosicky's brand of good fortune are as simple: no envy; self-indulgence; and a "habit of looking interested"—Cather's highest accolade. As a result of having these things, Rosicky can state as a simple fact, "We sleeps easy." But Rosicky is important above all as a "neighbour." His obligations as a neighbor are not defined in this story by what he is rich enough to give; rather, Rosicky becomes the model neighbor because he has made himself a life in which "he had never had to take a cent from anyone in bitter need,—never had to look at the face of a woman become like a wolf's from struggle and famine."

What does this story signify? First, its writer's courage to portray a loving man whole, and lovingly. But its significance also includes that writer's courage to affirm a new route to, or definition of, the American dream of success. With such an appealing definition, we can only hope the story eventually influences a national community.

Source: Merrill M. Skaggs, "Cather's Complex Tale of a Simple Man, 'Neighbour Rosicky,'" in *Willa Cather: Family, Community, and History (The BYU Symposium)*, edited by John J. Murphy with Linda Hunter Adams and Paul Rawlins, Brigham Young University Humanities Publications Center, 1990, pp. 79-83.

Critical Essay #3

Leddy is an assistant professor of English at Eastern Illinois University. In the following excerpt, he examines the disparity of perspectives between the observer and the narrator in Cather's "Neighbour Rosicky."

The organization of *Obscure Destinies* works along more complex lines that involve not only thematic but narrative elements as well. Cather's trilogy centers on acts of observation and narration, on the discrepancies between the perceptions of an observing character and the perceptions of a fictional narrator, and on acts of narrative compensation that make up for what observers fail to see. Such compensation is in strikingly different ways a distinctive feature of the first two stories of *Obscure Destinies* , "Neighbour Rosicky," and "Old Mrs. Harris," and it is Cather's forsaking of the compensating narrator that accounts for much of the atmosphere of sadness and loss in "Two Friends." Thus the narrative organization of *Obscure Destinies* involves not the repetition of a single narrative situation but three variations on the possibilities of observation and narration. In arranging the three stories as she does, Cather shapes *Obscure Destinies* so that the volume moves toward obscurity and darkness, from a life that is complete, beautiful, and intelligible to lives that are incomplete, isolated, and puzzling; from the compensations of narrative art to painful loss; from a fictional narrator who sees all to an observing character who is left, literally and figuratively, in the dark.

The narrative situation of "Neighbour Rosicky" centers on the discrepancies between the perceptions of Doctor Ed Burleigh and those of the narrator. Doctor Burleigh is the principal observer; the narrative begins with farmer Anton Rosicky visiting him in his office and closes with the doctor stopping by Rosicky's grave and concluding that Rosicky's life was "complete and beautiful." Cather's readers have been rather generous in their appraisals of the doctor's relation to Rosicky and his family: Stouck suggests that the doctor's "appreciative presence . . . gives accent to the richness and fullness of their lives" [David Stouck, *Critical Essays on Willa Cather*, edited by John J. Murphy, 1984]; Arnold, while noting that the doctor is "something of an outsider," goes on to say that he "understands, perhaps even better than Rosicky's family, the completeness and beauty . . . of the man's life" [*Willa Cather's Short Fiction*, 1984]. But "something of an outsider" begins to sound like an understatement when one considers just how much an outsider the doctor is and how little authority his perspective has. He has known Anton Rosicky for many years and has a "deep affection" for his wife Mary; he is quick to appreciate how "generous and warm-hearted and affectionate" the Rosickys are, yet in relation to the family he is essentially an admiring and very occasional observer. A visit from the doctor is an event; his last seems to have been a year before the present time of the story, when he came by unannounced for breakfast after delivering a baby nearby and Mary found it "a rare pleasure to feed a young man whom she seldom saw." As an infrequent visitor, the doctor tends to a doting appreciation of the Rosickys, delighting in their warm kitchen, their good, strong coffee, their hearty laughter, the "natural good manners" and the absence of "painful self-consciousness" in the boys; it is his perspective that is responsible for what Daiches calls the "incipient sentimentality" of the story [*Willa Cather*, 1951]. Obviously, the doctor

does not have the chance to see son Rudolph angry, face red and eyes flashing, taking the gift of a silver dollar from his father "as if it hurt him." More importantly, he knows nothing of the problems the Rosickys have with their new American daughterin-law, Polly, remarking to Rosicky during the office visit that Rudolph and Polly's marriage "seems to be working out all right." Rosicky keeps the problems all in the family, replying only that Polly is a fine girl with spunk and style, but it is not working out all right at all. Rosicky's wife, Mary, lies awake, afraid that Polly will make her husband discontented with farming; Rosicky shares her fears; Polly is sensitive about being married to a foreigner and misses the society of the store, the church choir, and her sisters; Rudolph at times regrets having married this year and resents his wife's stiff, guarded demeanor. Doctor Burleigh's summary evaluation of Rosicky's family displays the strength and weakness of his perspective, a sure grasp of the family's goodness coupled with blindness to any possibility of trouble: "My Lord, Rosicky, you are one of the few men I know who has a family he can get some comfort out of; happy dispositions, never quarrel among themselves, and they treat you right. I want to see you live a few years and enjoy them."

But the narrator of "Neighbour Rosicky" sees all and speaks with an authority that could only come from having observed Rosicky and his family at every moment, an authority expressed in two adverbs of frequency—"always" and "never"— that figure prominently in the descriptions of Rosicky and his family, suggesting their firm sense of custom, their consistency of character. As Rosicky heads home from his visit to Doctor Burleigh, for instance, the narrator notes that he always likes to drive through the High Prairie, that he never lunches in town, that Mary always has some food ready for his return. The boys, of course, always go to town in the family Ford on Saturday night. The adverb "never" often suggests the Rosickys' extraordinary consistency; indeed, Anton's character is constituted largely by what he has never done. He has never raised his voice to Mary; he and Mary have never disagreed about what to sacrifice; he has never touched his wife without gentleness. That Doctor Burleigh's lone "always" and "never" should miss their marks is a measure of the difference between the perspectives of the doctor and the narrator. Rosicky did not always long for open country as the doctor believes. He left the nightmare of London not for open country but for another city, New York, where he lived happily for five years. The problems with Polly and Rudolph give the lie to the doctor's claim that the Rosickys "never quarrel among themselves."

The narrator of "Neighbour Rosicky" compensates for Doctor Burleigh's limited perspective by presenting what the doctor does not see—the trouble in Rosicky's family and the bond that develops between Rosicky and his daughter-in-law as she cares for him on the day before his death: her spontaneous exclamation "Father," her disclosure that she is probably pregnant (Rosicky, not her husband Rudolph, will be the first to know), and the time that passes while she holds Rosicky's hand, a time that is "like an awakening to her." The relationship is crucial. It would be impossible to imagine Rosicky's life as complete and beautiful if he were to die without coming close to his daughter-inlaw, without the assurance that Polly has "a tender heart" and that "everything [would come] out right in the end." What Cather's readers seem to have missed is that as Doctor Burleigh knows nothing of the problems between Polly and her in-laws, so too he knows nothing of their resolution. He is away in Chicago when

Rosicky dies and has not seen the family since his return; no one could have told him what happened between Polly and Rosicky. Moreover, there is a strong implication that neither the doctor nor anyone else will ever know what happened; the only witnesses are the two people involved, and they remain silent.

Thus, when in the last paragraphs of "Neighbour Rosicky" Doctor Burleigh stops his car to meditate upon the graveyard in which Anton Rosicky is buried, his affirmation of Rosicky's life becomes entirely problematic: "Nothing could be more undeathlike than this place; nothing could be more right for a man who had helped to do the work of great cities and had always longed for the open country and had got to it at last. Rosicky's life seemed to him complete and beautiful."

No doubt one wants to give unqualified assent: of course such a life is complete and beautiful. But such a judgment is not based, as Doctor Burleigh's is, only on the fact that Rosicky finally reached the open country that he had (not always) longed for; it is based on all that the doctor has not seen: the family's problems and the moment that binds Polly to Rosicky, the moment that allows the reader to say with Doctor Burleigh, but with an enlarged frame of reference, that Rosicky's life is complete and beautiful. Doctor Burleigh is right but for an insufficient reason; to read the final sentence as a ringing affirmation is to ignore the disparity between the perspectives of observer and narrator....

Source: Michael Leddy, "Observation and Narration in Willa Cather's *Obscure Destinies*," in *Studies in American Fiction*, Vol. 16, No. 2, Autumn, 1988, pp. 141-53.

Critical Essay #4

In the following excerpt, Arnold gives an overview of Cather's "Neighbour Rosicky" and examines Cather's use of integrating devices to create a sense of balance, wholeness, and unity in the story.

The first story in the collection [*Obscure Destinies*], "Neighbour Rosicky," may have been written as E. K. Brown believes, in "the early months of 1928, when her [Cather's] feelings were so deeply engaged by her father's illness and death" [*Willa Cather: A Critical Biography*, 1953]. It is generally agreed that the portrait of Anton Rosicky is a composite picture of both Antonia's (Annie Pavelka's) husband and Charles Cather, Willa's father. Excruciating though the loss of her father must have been, Cather does not use "Neighbour Rosicky" to vent bitter feelings about death and loss. Rather, she makes the story an expression of acceptance and faith. In "Neighbour Rosicky" death is not a confinement, nor is it a rupture with life; it is, instead, a final liberating union of a human being with the earth. As a rule, Cather took death hard; yet, Rosicky's death seems somehow more a continuation than a severance, and nothing to be feared or fretted over. Rosicky has simply gone home, as perhaps Charles Cather had gone home.

There is a quiet perfection about "Neighbour Rosicky" that almost defies comment. Surely, it is one of the stories for which Willa Cather will always be remembered. Nothing is out of place, everything counts, and the tone is maintained consistently. What one senses in reading the story is harmony, unity, and completeness in both life and art. One of the story's thematic accomplishments is a strong sense of acquiescence, of bowing to things that must be, of enjoying the good rather than grieving over the ill. No blind idealist, Rosicky has a total understanding of what is worthy and what is not, and his one desire as an old man is to convey that understanding to his children. Through a lifetime of sorting out values he has acquired a sense of balance, a healthy perception of the other side of things, and a great tolerance for variety.

Cather seems to be looking, especially now, for a way to organize experience, not just in art but in life as well. She is using art to generate a comprehensive vision that can reconcile and make whole the vast number of disparate elements that constitute a human life. Particularly with *Obscure Destinies*, she seems to be trying to fit Nebraska into her life's larger scheme, a life spent variously—in Europe, in the American city, and on the prairie. Rosicky is a character who brings together all of those aspects of Cather's experience. In "Neighbour Rosicky" Cather uses memory as an integrative device, and the winter Rosicky spends indoors tailoring and carpentering in deference to his ailing heart is a highly reflective one for him. Rosicky's attitude toward the past, so different from the ambassador's in "On the Gulls' Road" and Harriet Westfield's in "Eleanor's House," is clearly the attitude endorsed by Cather. Rosicky does not look longingly at the past—indeed, he had known loneliness and terrible poverty in the past—but he sets it gently against the present and is grateful.

The picture of Rosicky's past gradually materializes as Cather weaves the various strands of his life and memory into a pattern, moving carefully and repeatedly from present to past and then back to present again, from earth to city and back to earth again. Rosicky's mother died when he was a youngster, and for a time he lived with his grandparents who were poor tenant farmers. On the death of his grandmother, however, he was returned to his father and stepmother. A hard woman, she made his life such an agony that finally his father helped him get away to London. Unfortunately, the cousin whom he sought there had already moved to America, and the young man was stranded penniless in a foreign land.

This was "the only part of his youth he didn't like to remember." But remember it he does, and on the day before Christmas his mind reaches back to the meager, starving years he spent in London, shivering in the wretched home of a poor tailor who took him in off the streets out of pity, but who had little to give him but a corner to sleep in. He was filthy always, and his quarters were infested with bugs and fleas. Rescued almost miraculously by some of his countrymen one bleak Christmas Eve, Rosicky made it to New York and got a job with a tailor. For the most part he remembers the New York years as good years, full of jolly times with friends and frequent exposures to the opera (at standing room prices). For a time "Rosicky thought he wanted to live like that for ever." But gradually he grew restless and began drinking too much, drinking to create the illusion of freedom. Then one day, appropriately the Fourth of July, he discovered the source of his trouble. Not only was the city empty in midsummer, but its "blank buildings" seemed to him "like empty jails" in "an unnatural world" that "built you in from the earth itself." It was then that he decided to go west and reestablish ties with the soil.

Still another piece of Rosicky's past is revealed through the memory of his wife, Mary. She recalls one terribly hot Fourth of July when Rosicky came in early from the fields and asked her to get up a nice supper for the holiday. He took the boys, just little fellows then, and dunked them in the horse tank; then he stripped off his own clothes and climbed in with them, playing and frolicking in a way that made a passing preacher raise his pious eyebrows. It was not until later as they picnicked under the linden trees that Mary noticed how the leaves were all curled up and thought to ask about the corn. He told her it was all gone, roasted by midafternoon, and added, "That's why we're havin' a picnic. We might as well enjoy what we got." So while the neighbors grieved and spent a miserable year, the Rosickys made out and managed to enjoy the little they did have.

Just as in its concern with the unity of experience this story carefully balances past and present, so it also balances life and death. A mood of spiritual equanimity pervades Rosicky's life and death, and death comes for him in the same sense that it comes for Jean Latour in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. Death is neither a great calamity nor a final surrender to despair, but rather, a benign presence, anticipated and even graciously entertained. It is the other side of life, and comes, as Latour says, as a natural consequence of "having lived." It is a reunion with the earth for one like Rosicky who has lived close to the land.

Cather creates this sense of balance between life and death, a balance that lends unity to experience, at least partly through structure and symbolic landscape. The story

opens with a consultation in Doctor Ed's office in which Rosicky learns that his heart is going bad. On his way home in the wagon he pauses at the small graveyard which nestles comfortably on the edge of his hay fields, especially cozy in the lightly falling snow. Aside from the Rosicky home itself, the most important setting in the story is that little graveyard. Cather introduces it early, and she ends the story there—bringing both her story and Rosicky's life full circle. Still pondering the news about his heart, Rosicky contemplates the view of his own fields and home from the graveyard. Though he admits that he "wasn't anxious to leave," Rosicky sees death and the graveyard as unifying, completing aspects of life. To him the graveyard is "sort of snug and homelike, not cramped or mournful,—a big sweep all round it." Life continues to hum along nearby, and home is close. "The snow, falling over his barnyard and the graveyard, seemed to draw things together like. And they were all old neighbours in the graveyard, most of them friends; there was nothing to feel awkward or embarrassed about". The winter snow itself is symbolic of death, for it too carries an element of the "mysterious"; it too means "rest for vegetation and men and beasts."

At the conclusion of the story, after Rosicky is dead, Doctor Ed starts one evening for the farm to see the family. He pauses by the graveyard as Rosicky had done some months earlier, remembering that his old friend is there in the moonlight rather than over on the hill in the lamplight. His thoughts echo Rosicky's thoughts the night the old farmer had stopped his horses to watch the snow fall on the headstones and on the long red grass. He, like Rosicky, feels something "open and free" out here with just the "fields running on until they met that sky." And he senses that this particular graveyard, unlike the dismal cemeteries of cities, is not a place where things end, but where they are completed. He sees a mowing machine where one of Rosicky's sons and his horses had been working that very day; he thinks of the "long grass which the wind for ever stirred," and of "Rosicky's own cattle" that "would be eating fodder as winter came on"; and he concludes that "nothing could be more undeathlike than this place." Ed feels a sense of gratitude that this man who had lived in cities, but had finally wanted only the land and growing things, "had got to it at last" and now lay beneath its protective cover. The story's conclusion sums up the man: "Rosicky's life seemed to him complete and beautiful."

In a multitude of other ways Cather achieves a sense of balance and wholeness in the story. Often she does it through contrasting or pairing opposites: city and country, winter and summer, older generation and younger, single life and married life, Bohemians and Americans. Not infrequently opposites are paired in a single sentence through a character's natural thought processes. For example, of herself and Rosicky Mary thinks, "He was citybred, and she was country-bred. . . ." She is aware that their life together "had been a hard life, and a soft life, too." Once the family has been warned about Rosicky's condition, they rush to his aid whenever he starts some manual task. In response, Rosicky sometimes even speaks in balanced rhetoric, complaining that "though he was getting to be an old man, he wasn't an old woman yet." And the narrator mentally balances Rosicky's older self against his younger self, observing that "the old Rosicky could remember as if it were yesterday the day when the young Rosicky found out what was the matter with him." Cather also achieves a marked sense of equilibrium by balancing two halves of sentences against each other. The technique seems quite

deliberate because some paragraphs are made up almost wholly of compound sentences. For example, although the first sentence in the following paragraph is not based on structural coordination, the rest are; and the achievement of balanced antithesis is felt in both subject and form:

On that very day he began to think seriously about the articles he had read in the Bohemian papers, describing prosperous Czech farming communities in the West. He believed he would like to go out there as a farm hand; it was hardly possible that he could ever have land of his own. His people had always been workmen; his father and grandfather had worked in shops. His mother's parents had lived in the country, but they rented their farm and had a hard time to get along. Nobody in his family had ever owned any land,—that belonged to a different station of life altogether. Anton's mother died when he was little, and he was sent into the country to her parents.

The pattern is the same for the concluding sentences in the paragraph.

But finally, perhaps the most important kind of balance in "Neighbour Rosicky" is more abstract, a balance defined in human terms, a wholeness and completeness that derives from human harmony and caring. Probably nowhere else has Cather drawn a more sublime picture of oneness and understanding than in the relationship between Rosicky and Mary, a relationship anchored in mutual love and in a value system that always keeps its priorities straight: "They agreed, without discussion, as to what was most important and what was secondary. They didn't often exchange opinions, even in Czech,—it was as if they had thought the same thought together. A good deal had to be sacrificed and thrown overboard in a hard life like theirs, and they had never disagreed as to the things that could go." When a creamery agent comes to tempt them to sell the cream off the milk they drink, they agree without discussion that their children's health is more important than any profit they might realize from skimming cream. Yes, people like the Rosickys do not get ahead much in worldly terms, Doctor Ed reflects, but "maybe you couldn't enjoy your life and put it into the bank, too." As Rosicky intimates to his favorite clerk in the general store, in a home as harmonious as theirs, "We sleeps easy."

Rosicky's unifying influence extends also into the somewhat troubled lives of his son Rudolph and Rudolph's wife, Polly, a town girl who has found farm life lonely and Bohemians a little strange. Rudolph is ready to leave the land and look for work in the city. Rosicky is worried about Rudolph and Polly, but is finally able to enclose them in the healing warmth of his remarkable capacity for love. Polly learns a little about that capacity when Rosicky slips over one Saturday night with the family car and sends her and Rudolph off to a movie in town while he cleans up their supper dishes. She has just a passing urge then to lay her head on his shoulder and tell him of the lonesomeness a town girl feels when stuck in the country. She learns still more the Christmas Eve he describes his last Christmas in London. Then, finally, the two of them are brought into complete harmony the day he rakes thistles to save his alfalfa field and suffers a heart attack. She leads him into her house and cares for him tenderly, understanding at last his ability to touch another life and make it whole. After hot-packing his chest until the pain subsides, she sits by the bed and holds his "warm, broad, flexible brown hand" in hers. From that hand comes a revelation that is "like an awakening to her. It seemed to

her that she had never learned so much about life from anything as from old Rosicky's hand. It brought her to herself; it communicated some direct and untranslatable message." This is the culminating experience of the story, a sacred moment of oneness for both Rosicky and Polly. She really knows now the meaning of love, and he knows that he can count on her. For the first time, she has called him "Father."

Watching the Rosickys over the years, grateful to visit a home where the kitchen is warm and lively and the food plentiful and wholesome—and where the laughter is ready and the comeback easy— Doctor Ed is himself a device for sustaining wholeness in the story. Something of an outsider even though Mary claims him for her own, Ed provides the appreciative eye that encompasses the Rosicky family phenomenon. Standing close enough to feel the radiated warmth, he frames the miracle. Artistically, the story is unified and whole, completing not only itself but in some respects My Antonia as well. Ed understands, perhaps even better than Rosicky's family, the completeness and beauty, as he calls it, of the man's life. Whoever Rosicky touched was graced by that wholeness—from the girl with the funny eyebrows in the general store to Polly, and to Ed himself. A work of art can be like that, restoring a sense of unity to experience. "Neighbour Rosicky" is like that.

Source: Marilyn Arnold, in *Willa Cather's Short Fiction*, Ohio University Press, 1984, pp. 135-40.

Critical Essay #5

In the following excerpt, Piacentino offers an interpretation of Cather's "Neighbour Rosicky," particularly with regard to the themes of Agrarianism. Piacentino also examines Cather's use of imagistic descriptions.

"Neighbour Rosicky," a story claimed to be "among the finest of Willa Cather's works," "a kind of pendant, or coda, to her classical pastoral *My Antonia*," was written in 1928, shortly after Cather's father's death, and became the first of three stories collected in *Obscure Destinies* (1932). This endearing story has been somewhat generally and briefly analyzed by several of Cather's critics, but no one has thoroughly examined its rich agrarian texture, even though a few commentators have hinted at its presence. David Daiches has properly observed that the story's "earthiness almost neutralizes its sentimentality, and the relation of the action to its context in agricultural life gives . . . [it] an elemental quality." [*Willa Cather: A Critical Introduction*, 1951] John H. Randall, noting that "Neighbour Rosicky" describes the demise of the pioneer epoch, has viewed the story as a symbolic archetype, a portrait of the "earthly paradise, the yeoman's feesimple empire founded in the garden of the Middle West." [*The Landscape and the Looking Glass: Willa Cather's Search for Value*, 1960] And Dorothy Van Ghent, in her study in the University of Minnesota Pamphlets on American Writers series, has accurately remarked, "There is in this tale that primitive religious or magical sense of relationship with the earth that one finds in Willa Cather's great pastoral novels." [*Willa Cather*, 1964]

Certainly, one does not have to read with much insight or perception to realize that Anton Rosicky intensely loves and appreciates the land, agricultural life, and agrarian values. The story affirms this repeatedly. Throughout, Cather accents the old man's admiration of and fondness for the agrarian simplicity of the Nebraska prairie, particularly through Rosicky's outspoken aversion to the world of urbanized mechanization and convenience. We are told, for instance, that Rosicky does not like cars, girls with unnatural eyebrows ("thin India-ink strokes"), or town food. Moreover, he believes that it is "extravagant" to eat any meals in town. In condemning town food, his wife Mary remarks to Dr. Ed Burleigh, the family physician, that he will ruin his health by eating at a hotel.

At other times, Cather points to the naturalness of the Rosicky family to affirm and to complement her preference for agrarian values. For example, very early in the story, it is said that Rosicky's five sons, who range from twelve to twenty years, exhibit "natural good manners," as evidenced in their caring for Dr. Burleigh's horse when he arrives at their farm, in their helping him off with his coat, and in their showing him genuine hospitality during his visit. In this same scene Cather describes Rosicky's wife Mary and states, "to feed creatures was the natural expression of affection,—her chickens, the calves, her big hungry boys." In short, as Dr. Burleigh, through whose consciousness the narrative is filtered, reflects, the Rosickys are "generous," "warmhearted," and "affectionate."

As an urban dweller during his early years in America, Rosicky rarely found evidence of these affirmative human qualities. In one of the story's several flashbacks, Rosicky, recalling a Fourth of July holiday in New York City when he worked in a tailor's shop there, vividly remembers this city as a place where "they built you in from the earth itself, cemented you away from any contact with the ground . . .—*an unnatural world* . . ." Moreover, in pondering the fate of his children (at the time of the narrative, his oldest son Rudolph is contemplating migration to a city in search of more prosperous opportunity), Rosicky facilely decides that subsistent existence in the country is preferable to any apparent material advantages city life may offer:

They would have to work hard on the farm, and probably they would never do much more than make a living. But if he could think of them staying here on the land, he wouldn't have to fear any great unkindness for them. Hardships, certainly; it was a hardship to have the wheat freeze in the ground when seed was so high; and to have to sell your stock because you had no feed. But there would be other years when everything came along right, and you caught up. And what you had was your own. You didn't have to choose between bosses and strikers, and go wrong either way. You didn't have to do with dishonest and cruel people.

This kind of affirmation, affirmation of "human relationships rather than success and accomplishments," to quote critic David Stouck, is clearly implied in the story's use of vital, organic imagery. Among the positive images Stouck cites are the blooming geraniums and bountiful food in the Rosicky kitchen, the child that is to be born to Rudolph and Polly, and, at the close of the story, the "undeathlike" country graveyard where Rosicky is buried, with Rosicky's horses working in a nearby field and his cattle eating fodder as winter approached.

Even more affirmative, it seems to me, are Cather's poignantly imagistic descriptions of Rosicky that verify the existence of a conscious harmony between Rosicky and the land. In most of the passages describing Rosicky's physical features, Cather consistently employs color imagery suggestive of the soil that provides his livelihood. The story's initial description, for instance, notes that on Rosicky's "brown face," "he had a *ruddy* colour in smooth-shaven cheeks and in his lips, under his long *brown* moustache" (my italics, here and following). A short time later as Rosicky is leaving the doctor's office, he holds out his "warm *brown* hand" to Dr. Burleigh. And near the end, after Rosicky's stroke, Polly, his daughter-in-law, holds his "warm, broad, flexible *brown* hand," "alive and quick and light in its communications," which to her seems "very strange in a farmer". Also, his neck, Cather points out, was "burned a *dark reddish brown*." And finally, as Polly and Rosicky are talking just after his stroke, Polly notices not only the warmth of his hand but "the twinkle in his *yellow-brown eyes*" as well, a fine detail that again illustrates the emerging pattern of Rosicky's description in terms of nature's earthy colors. In many of the same passages quoted above, the warmth of Rosicky's hands is also stressed, warmth that may be interpreted within an agrarian context. Warmth, in this sense, relates to the vital heat needed by the brownish-red soil in the developmental process of the vegetative cycle.

Besides combining images of the soil's color scheme and the life-giving heat that it must have for germination, Cather, in her descriptions of Rosicky, occasionally associates him with other images that fittingly suggest characteristics of agricultural implements or of cultivated farm land. A good illustration is the description of Rosicky's eyes, which are "large and lively, but the lids were caught up in the middle in a curious way, so that they formed a triangle"—the shape of a plow, an essential implement for a man of the soil. In addition, there are several passages pointing out the creases in Rosicky's forehead, neck, and hands: "His brown face was creased but not wrinkled"; "his forehead . . . was "naturally high and crossed by deep parallel lines"; his neck had "deep creases in it"; and, according to Polly, his hand "was like quicksilver, flexible, muscular, about the colour of a pale cigar, with deep, deep creases across the palm." These details may, of course, be coincidental, but nevertheless if the wary reader is willing to use his imagination, it is not difficult to perceive a possible connection between these creases and the furrows that a plow shapes on farm land.

Another feature of "Neighbour Rosicky" that complements the story's agrarianism is the occasional use of poetic figures that seem to establish an association between Rosicky and the land. Rosicky's moustache, for example, "was of the soft long variety and came down over his mouth like the teeth of a buggy-rake over a bundle of hay." Or to highlight his persistence, toughness and durability gained from farm life, Cather notes, "his back had grown broad and curved, a good deal like the shell of an old turtle." Most important, his natural simplicity, his dedication to the land and farming, is summed up very aptly in a standard organic image: "He was like a tree that has not many roots, but one taproot that goes down deep."

Significantly, Rosicky's death comes after he overexerts himself cutting thistles that have grown up in his son Rudolph's alfalfa field. His death, among other things, can be seen as a labor of love for restoring the proper conditions for productive vegetation, an act with an implicit ulterior motive of persuading his disgruntled son to recognize the value of a livelihood gained from the land. Furthermore, Rosicky, it seems, accepts death stoically, an event that John Randall perceptively recognizes as "timely and welcome when it comes after a full life, in its proper place in the sequence of the vegetation cycle." Finally, in the agrarian tableau that concludes the story, Dr. Burleigh, as he muses near the country graveyard where Rosicky is buried, seems to encourage this line of interpretation. He stresses the ebullient quality of ongoing life that is exhibited in the vast, open, "many-coloured fields" surrounding and adjacent to the graveyard—all a part of an harmonious organic totality: "Nothing could be more undeathlike than this place; nothing could be more right for a man who had helped to do the work of great cities and had always longed for the open country and had got to it at last. Rosicky's life seemed to him complete and beautiful."

In sum, "Neighbour Rosicky" is a fine work of conscious literary artistry, artistry that is partly reflected through Willa Cather's consistent selection and arrangement of references affirming and reaffirming the agrarian spirit. These agrarian references complement the story's central thematic focus, importantly giving it an idyllic flavor, which provided in the late 1920s, when it was first published as well as in the uncertain

present of our own times, a tender and captivating expression of our persistent, sometimes latent yearning for a return to a simpler, natural existence.

Source: Edward J. Piacentino, "The Agrarian Mode in Cather's 'Neighbour Rosicky,'" in *The Markham Review,* Vol. 8, Spring, 1979, pp. 52-4.

Topics for Further Study

Research the various groups of immigrants who came to the United States during the first part of the twentieth century. Who were they? Why did they leave their homelands? Where did they settle? What jobs did they perform? When did your family arrive in the United States? Can you link their history to larger patterns of immigration to or migration within the United States? Though you will want to use your school library to gather background information, you should also interview older members of your family. Like Rosicky, they might have memories they wish to share with you.

"Neighbour Rosicky" was written just before the Great Depression. During the early 1930s especially, farmers faced many hardships, including foreclosures on their farms. In addition, long periods of drought turned the usually fertile plains of the United States into a "dust bowl," and many families fled their farms seeking better conditions elsewhere. By investigating the conditions farmers faced in the thirties, think about whether Rosicky's dream that his children remain and farm his land was likely to come true. Do you think that Rudolph and Polly remained on the farm? What might their life have been like if they had? If they had not?

Though Cather celebrates the contributions that immigrants made to the growth and development of the United States, many American citizens remained suspicious and distrustful of foreign influences. In 1919, at the direction of Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer, people suspected of subversive activity were arrested and jailed, often without cause. Many were immigrants active in labor movements. Research the Palmer Raids of the early twenties. How does the fear and distrust of foreigners caused by the raids contrast to the portrayal of foreigners in "Neighbour Rosicky"?

Compare and Contrast

1920s: Farms are run by individual families who view the farm as a means of making a living close to the land and away from the commercialism of the city.

1990s: Farms may be run by individual families or by farming corporations, but the emphasis is often on farming as a business. Farms are worked with huge diesel-powered tractors pulling wide cultivators or several disc plows in combination.

1920s: Rosicky gives Rudolph a dollar for "ice cream an' candy" and possibly the cost of a movie.

1990s: The total for these items would be between fifteen and twenty dollars for two people.

1920s: Rosicky gets some kind of prescription from Dr. Burleigh for his heart, but that is the last mention of his medication. When he has a heart attack, there is only Polly with her hot compresses to care for him.

1990s: People take nitroglycerin and aspirin among other things for heart problems; emergency medical help is available by dialing 911 to summon an ambulance; heart bypass surgery is common; there are approximately 2,300 heart transplants performed in the U.S. each year, and approximately 73 percent of patients with transplanted hearts survive for three years after their surgery.

What Do I Read Next?

O Pioneers!, Cather's second novel, was written in 1913. Set in Nebraska in the late nineteenth century, the novel tells the story of a group of immigrants who settled there and met, loved, and parted. The novel provides a rich and detailed look at pioneer life.

My Antonia, Cather's fourth novel, written in 1918, anticipates the themes that dominate "Neighbour Rosicky." Narrated by Jim Burden, a farm boy on the Nebraska plains at the end of the nineteenth century, the novel recounts his memories of Antonia Shimerda, a Bohemian farm girl who survives various hardships to thrive in the new land.

The Professor's House, which Cather wrote in 1925, tells the story of a middle-aged professor at a Midwestern university who must come to terms with the melancholy that has haunted his life. Embedded in the professor's story is the story of Tom Outland's adventures on the mesa in the American southwest.

Death Comes for the Archbishop was written the year before "Neighbour Rosicky," in 1927. In this novel, Cather turns to the landscapes, myths, and histories of the southwestern United States to weave an episodic tale of the French missionary Archbishop Lamy, who came to America in the mid-nineteenth century. Though a departure from her early novels, it is considered one of Cather's finest achievements.

The Grapes of Wrath, by John Steinbeck (published 1939; Pulitzer Prize, 1940), is set in the Great Depression and traces the migration of an Oklahoma farming family from their Dust Bowlravaged farm to California. There the family faces hardships of an exploitive migrant farm worker system.

Winesburg, Ohio(1919), by Sherwood Anderson, is a novel comprising many interconnected short stories which tell of the hopes, defeated ambitions, earnest attempts at genuine communication, and sweetness of life in a small Midwestern farming town.

Main Street (1920), by Sinclair Lewis, is set in a Scandinavian-settled small town in Minnesota during the early twentieth century. This groundbreaking novel, called by many critics the foremost literary work to express the "revolt from the village" in American literature, is a scathing treatment of small-town materialism and dullness.

The poem "East Coker," by T. S. Eliot, is part of the poet's acclaimed *Four Quartets*(1943). This poem is a meditation upon the cyclical nature of life, the nature of religious belief, and the approach of death, with the poem informed by Eliot's Christian vision.

Further Study

Canby, Henry Seidel. Review in *The Saturday Review of Literature*, August 6, 1932, p. 29.

This is an early review of *Obscure Destinies* which praises Cather's realism.

Danker, Kathleen A. "The Passing of a Golden Age in *Obscure Destinies*," in *Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Newsletter*, Vol. 34, pp. 24-8. Cited in *A Reader's Guide to the Short Stories of Willa Cather*, edited by Sheryl L. Meyering, New York: G. K. Hall & Co., 1994.

Danker pays particular attention to pastoralism in "Neighbour Rosicky," offering a useful definition of the term and explaining the ways it can be applied to Cather's work.

Fadiman, Clifton. Review in *The Nation*, August 3, 1932, p. 107.

Clifton praises Cather's craftsmanship and purity of style in "Neighbour Rosicky."

Hicks, Granville. "The Case Against Willa Cather," in *The English Journal,* November, 1933. Reprinted in *Willa Cather and Her Critics*, edited by James Schroeter, New York: Cornell University Press, 1967, pp. 139-47.

A social realist, Hicks was critical of Cather's nostalgic and idealized notion of life on the land.

Quennell, Peter. Review in *The New Statesman and Nation*, December 3, 1932, p. 694.

Quennell offers one of the few critical opinions of *Obscure Destinies* and finds "Neighbour Rosicky" weak and indistinct.

Schneider, Sister Lucy. "'Land' Relevance in 'Neighbour Rosicky,'" in *Kansas Quarterly*, 1968, pp. 105-10.

Schneider discusses Cather's land-philosophy and suggests that Rosicky symbolizes the elemental and traditional.

Wasserman, Loretta. Willa Cather: *A Study of the Short Fiction*, Boston: Twayne, 1991, p. 55.

Wasserman examines Cather's allusions to patriotic holidays and suggests that she is attempting to redefine the American dream.

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Schneider, Sister Lucy. "'Land' Relevance in 'Neighbour Rosicky,'" in *Kansas Quarterly*, 1968, pp. 105-110.

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Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

Research
Michelle Campbell, Nicodemus Ford, Sarah Genik, Tamara C. Nott, Tracie Richardson

Data Capture
Beverly Jendrowski

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Imaging and Multimedia
Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

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:

Editor, Short Stories for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535