The New Dress Study Guide

The New Dress by Virginia Woolf

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Introduction

Virginia Woolf's short story "The New Dress" was written in 1924 while she was writing the novel *Mrs. Dalloway,* published in 1925. Critics have entertained the possibility that the story may originally have been a chapter of the novel because some of the same characters and events appear in both works. The story was published in the May 1927 issue of the monthly New York magazine the *Forum.* In the story, a deeply insecure and painfully self-conscious guest at a party is convinced that she is the target of mockery.

Leonard Woolf later republished "The New Dress" in the collection *A Haunted House* in 1944, three years after Virginia Woolf's death. It was republished in 1973 in the collection *Mrs. Dalloway's Party,* with other stories by Woolf that focus on the guests and events of the day leading up to Clarissa Dalloway's party.

Author Biography

Virginia Woolf was born Adeline Virginia Stephen in London on January 25, 1882, the third of four children of Julia Duckworth and Sir Leslie Stephen, a noted historian and biographer. As a child, Woolf received no formal education but made use of her father's library and literary friendships to educate herself. After her mother's death in 1895, Woolf experienced a nervous breakdown, the first in a series of four debilitating emotional traumas. When her father died nine years later, Woolf had her second mental breakdown. Upon her recovery, she moved with her sister, Vanessa, and her brothers, Thoby and Adrian, to the Bloomsbury district of London.

She, her siblings, and their friends made up the famous Bloomsbury Group, which included such notable figures as E. M. Forster, Lytton Strachey, Roger Fry, and John Maynard Keynes. As the group's reputation spread among London art and literary circles, Woolf grew intellectually within her group of friends, which included Leonard Woolf, whom she married on August 10, 1912.

Amidst the nurturing and intellectual atmosphere of the Bloomsbury Group, Woolf began writing book reviews and critical essays for publication. Her early works appeared in such periodicals as the *Times Literary Supplement,* the *Forum,* the *Guardian,* and the *National Review,* among others. It was also during this time that Woolf completed her first novel, *The Voyage Out,* and suffered another emotional breakdown.

Woolf began keeping a diary in 1915, the same year that *The Voyage Out* was published. Two years later, she and Leonard started the Hogarth Press. Significantly, they began publication with her short story "The Mark on the Wall" and later "Kew Gardens" and "An Unwritten Novel." They also published *Monday or Tuesday,* a volume of short fiction which was the only collection of Woolf's stories published during her lifetime. Woolf never prioritized this genre, although she wrote short stories throughout her career. For her they were projects to sustain her between novels. Leonard Woolf explains that she "used at intervals to write short stories. It was her custom, whenever an idea for one occurred to her, to sketch it out in a very rough form and then to put it away in a drawer. Later, if an editor asked her for a short story, and she felt in the mood to write one (which was not frequent), she would take a sketch out of her drawer and rewrite it, sometimes a great many times. Or if she felt, as she often did, while writing a novel that she required to rest her mind by working on something else for a time, she would either write a critical essay or work upon one of her sketches for short stories."

Woolf wrote "The New Dress" in 1924 while she was revising her fourth novel, *Mrs. Dalloway.* The story was not published until 1927, when it appeared in the *Forum,* a monthly New York magazine read primarily by the intelligentsia. This was the first story in a group that was collected by Stella Mc Nichol in 1973 and published as *Mrs. Dalloway's Party.* Each of these stories explores the perspective a different guest at the Dalloway party.

Woolf continued to write novels and in 1929 completed *A Room of One's Own,* which has been hailed as a feminist manifesto of the twentieth century. In 1941 Woolf published her last novel, *Between the Acts.* She suffered another emotional breakdown in February 1941, but this time she did not recover. Woolf committed suicide by drowning on March 28, 1941.

Plot Summary

In Woolf's 1924 short story "The New Dress," Mabel Waring arrives at Clarissa Dalloway's party and is instantly consumed by feelings of inadequacy and inferiority. These negative feelings are set off by concerns that her new dress in not appropriate for the occasion. Immediately after greeting her hostess, she goes straight to a mirror at the far of the room to look at herself and is filled with misery at the conviction that "It was not *right.*" She imagines the other guests exclaiming to themselves over "what a fright she looks! What a hideous new dress!" She begins to berate herself for trying to appear "original": since a dress in the latest fashion was out of her financial reach, she had a yellow silk dress made from an outdated pattern. Her self-condemnation verges on self-torture, as she torments herself with obsessive thoughts of her foolishness "which deserved to be chastised." She thinks of the new dress as a "horror . . . idiotically old-fashioned." When the stylishly dressed Rose Shaw tells her the dress is "perfectly charming," Mabel is sure she is being mocked.

She tries to think of some way "to annul this pain, to make this agony endurable." The extremes of language and the obvious torment Mabel is experiencing may be intended to give the reader some indication that perhaps she is not entirely mentally or emotionally stable. It may also, however, be intended to underscore the discomfort that shy or socially unskilled individuals can experience in social settings.

Mabel tries to envision the partygoers as "flies, trying to crawl over the edge of the saucer," all looking alike and with the same goals. But she cannot make herself see the others in this light. She tells another guest that *she* feels like "some dowdy, decrepit, horribly dingy old fly," and then is mortified to realize that he must have interpreted her remark as a ploy for the insincere compliment that he hastily delivers.

Mabel remembers how happy and comfortable she felt at the dressmaker's, as Miss Milan pinned her hem, asked her about the length, and tended her pet canary. This image vanishes quickly, however, as she is catapulted back to the present, "suffering tortures, woken wide awake to reality." She berates herself for caring what others think of her, but drifts into thoughts about her own "odious, weak, vacillating character."

Mabel thinks about her unremarkable family and upbringing, her dreams of romance in far-away lands, and the reality of her marriage to a man with "a safe, permanent underling's job." She thinks about isolated moments in her life— characterized as "delicious" and "divine" — when she feels happy and fulfilled, connected with all of the earth and everything in it, "on the crest of a wave." She wonders if those moments will come to her less and less often, and determines to pursue personal transformation through "some wonderful, helpful, astonishing book" or an inspirational public speaker. She gets up to leave the party, assuring Mrs. Dalloway that she has enjoyed herself.

Summary

"The New Dress" is Virginia Woolf's short story about Mabel Waring, who attends a social gathering wearing a new yellow dress. The story is written in a stream-of-consciousness fashion as it describes Mabel's thoughts and actions while she is at the party.

Mabel is wearing a yellow dress that she designed with her dressmaker specifically for this particular occasion. She has taken an image from a old fashion magazine from Paris and has spent countless hours with her dressmaker attempting to get the design just perfect for this social gathering, where she wishes to make an image of perfection of herself.

As she arrives at the party and removes her cloak, Mabel sees herself in a mirror and immediately announces to herself that the dress is not right. There is just something wrong with it, although there is no indication of precisely what the problem is. The dress actually sounds quite exquisite from the description Mabel provides, with a high waist, long skirt and high sleeves, made of yellow silk.

Mabel takes a long look at her self in the mirror and finds a seat on a sofa where she can still view herself in the mirror. As the other attendees are enjoying their selves at the party, Mabel is focusing on her dress and obsessing about what the others are thinking about her. When the others attempt to make conversation with Mabel, she reads into their comments and silently interprets their comments as slights on her appearance. The only time that Mabel thinks anything positive about this entire experience is when one woman tells her that her skirt is just the perfect length. At this moment, and only for a brief moment, Mabel feels positively enthused about the many hours she spent to perfect the design of this dress. In the next instant, a gentleman makes reference to a picture that is very old-fashioned. Mabel misinterprets this comment to assume that the gentleman is speaking of her new dress. Suddenly she again hates the dress and feels incredibly self-conscious.

As Mabel obsesses about this dress, she thinks of the many things in her life that have never been quite right, from her childhood, to her marriage and children, and even to her house. Everything has always been just not quite right. Her house, for example, is nice, but a bit small. Another example is that she is married to a good man, although he is not quite what she had always imagined herself with.

Finally, Mabel begins to think of a way to help her self escape the undeniable shame that her dress is causing her. She thinks about going to the London library on the following day and getting books into which she will escape. She imagines herself becoming the characters about whom she will read, and suddenly she has the confidence to approach the hostess of the party.

Rather than tell the hostess, Mrs. Clarissa Dalloway, that she is happy to be in attendance, or rather than thanking her for having been invited, Mabel simply tells Mrs.

Dalloway that she is leaving and that she has had a wonderful time. As Mabel leaves the party, she continues to focus her thoughts on what others must be thinking of her. She believes they know she is lying about having had a good time, although there is no way anyone would know, since she had only been there for a very short time.

Analysis

In a trademark fashion, Virginia Woolf has written "The New Dress" as a stream-of-consciousness. The narrator is telling the story from a third-person point of view, although with access to the privy thoughts of Mabel Waring, the story's main character. Stream of consciousness is similar to the way a person thinks aloud or as if to have a conversation with oneself. Looking at the story as a whole, the plot is very flat. There is no exposition, although the details of the setting and the character unfold as the story wears on. There is a conflict, though. It is an internal conflict, as Mabel obsesses over what other people must be thinking about her new dress. Even when other people try to discuss things that are important in their own lives, such as their children, Mabel assumes they are giving hidden messages about her own appearance. She has little insight to the thoughts of others, although she does seem to be very insightful about her own obsession with her appearance.

The new dress, made of yellow silk, and crafted specifically for this occasion, symbolizes everything that Mabel has ever done in her life. On the surface, it looks absolutely stunning, just as she seems to have the perfect life, from an outsider's point of view. Below the surface, though, there is conflict; something is just not quite right, just as something is just not quite right in Mabel's own mind. It is interesting to note that Mabel's last name, Waring, is another symbol present in the story. This name, pronounced "wearing," is part of the character's identity. For example, had Woolf given her the name "Baker" instead, it would not have the same symbolic interpretation. However, the surname Waring indicates that Mabel's self, her identity, her history, and everything about her is ultimately defined by what she is wearing. In deed, this dress does come to symbolize all the imperfections Mabel sees in her self and that she believes others must see in her as well.

At one point in the story, there seems to be a turn of events, where one might think that Mabel might begin to feel better about her appearance so that she may truly enjoy the party she has shown up for. This moment is when another lady at the party tells Mabel that her skirt is just the perfect length. Mabel has much respect for this woman's opinion and believes, if only for a brief moment, that all others who are present at the party must share this opinion. However, just as quickly as Mabel feels good about her appearance, the enthusiasm dies as a gentleman's comment about an old-fashioned photo is misinterpreted to reflect thoughts of the new dress.

Up until this point, there is hope that Mabel needs only the endorsement of one guest of the party in order to feel better about her self. However, it becomes obvious that she cares only about the negativity that she believes everyone else is projecting on her.

There is an element of meta-fiction in this story, or fiction written about fiction. When Mabel begins to think of ways she can escape her horrid feelings about her own identity, she turns her thoughts to literature. She plans to go the next day to get books from the library into which she will delve her thoughts, thereby escaping her own reality. Woolf makes a powerful statement about literature with this closing of the story, by showing that no matter how caught up in one's own life one is, literature provides a healthy outlet for escape. Literature provides truly vicarious experiences that allow the mind to rest at ease.

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that no matter how caught up in one's own life one is, literature provides a healthy outlet for escape. Literature provides truly vicarious experiences that allow the mind to rest at ease.

Characters

Mrs. Barnet

Mrs. Barnet is a maidservant in the Dalloway household. Her behavior in greeting Mabel Waring and taking her coat seem unremarkable to the reader, but sets off great waves of insecurity in the party guest about her appearance and social role.

Clarissa Dalloway

Clarissa Dalloway is the hostess of the party that Mabel attends. Clarissa is affable and courteous to her guests, and her presence lingers, though the reader only hears her speak once in the story— to encourage Mabel not to leave the party early.

Mrs. Dalloway

See Clarissa Dalloway

Mabel Waring

Mabel Waring is a middle-aged woman who reflects constantly and, some might say, obsessively, about her alienation from the members of the elevated level of society she wants to join. When she is invited to a party given by the wealthy and socially prominent Clarissa Dalloway, she is overwhelmed with worry about her inability to dress fashionably because of the cost. She has an old-fashioned dress made from a book of dress patterns that had belonged to her mother, then spends much of her time at the party fretting over its inappropriateness and drawing the attention of other partygoers to it. She also engages in perfunctory conversations that provide further evidence of her dissociation from this strata of society.

Rose Shaw

Rose Shaw is a guest at Clarissa Dalloway's party. Mabel Waring characterizes her as being dressed "in the height of fashion, precisely like everybody else, always." Rose compliments Mabel on her new dress, but Mabel is convinced that she is being subtly mocked.

Themes

Alienation and Loneliness

Mabel Waring's feelings of alienation surface when she attends a party given by Clarissa Dalloway. The reader first sees her insecurity when the Dalloways's servant, Mrs. Barnet, immediately recognizes Mabel's humble origins from the new dress that she has had made for the party. The servant's behavior affirms Mabel's belief that she is an outsider and does not belong in this society. Social interactions at the party further verify her estrangement. Although the other guests engage Mabel in conversation, an acute self-consciousness about her appearance and manners makes her unable to communicate on anything other than a superficial level. Mabel's self-absorption and self-centeredness isolate her from the other party guests and make any communication impossible. Wrapped up in her own world, she never carefully considers what others say; instead, Mabel assumes that everything at the party somehow involves her. In the story, she imagines the guests making fun of her new dress: "Oh these men, oh these women, all were thinking—'What's Mabel wearing? What a fright she looks! What a hideous new dress!'" What Mabel does not realize is her own complicity in the alienation and isolation that she feels.

Human Condition

Closely connected to the theme of alienation in the story is the desperation of the party guests, whose inauthentic lives make them incapable of real communication. According to Mabel, they are all flies in a saucer, trying desperately to escape. But while everyone around her appears to be a butterfly or dragonfly, Mabel alone remains trapped. Lamenting her banal life and the superficiality of the conversations which "bored her unutterably," Mabel lingers in the saucer, amidst her own hypocrisy, unable to change her condition.

Class Conflict

Throughout "The New Dress," the disparity between Mabel's class status and that of the other guests is underscored as Mabel compares her clothes, furniture, and manners to those at the party. She concludes that she cannot be fashionable because she is not rich. Her husband, Hubert, is not the empire builder she had dreamed of but a safe, unthreatening underling employed at the law court.

Wealth and Poverty

The upper middle-class guests at the Dalloway party have their share of financial resources, but Mabel is a woman of limited means, and her lower middle-class status makes her feel inferior to the Dalloways and their friends. Throughout "The New Dress,"

she focuses on the power of wealth and the debilitation of poverty: "She could not be fashionable. It was absurd to pretend it even— fashion meant cut, meant style, meant thirty guineas at least." Mabel's intense envy of Rose Shaw, whose green gown makes her yellow dress pale in comparison, makes her unable to accept her financial limitations and make the best of her situation. She instead blames her parents and their poverty for her inadequateness at the party: "But it was not her fault altogether, after all. It was being one of a family of ten; never having money enough, always skimping and paring. . . and one sordid little domestic tragedy after another." Had her family had greater financial resources, Mabel might have married better, and her life might have turned out differently. She might have had a fashionable dress, and she might have been a Rose Shaw.

Style

Stream of Consciousness

Woolf's short story "The New Dress" is related through a stream-of-consciousness narrative in which the thoughts and feelings of Mabel Waring are central to the narrative. In fact, Woolf is commonly regarded, together with Edouard Dujardin and James Joyce, as one of the creators and early practitioners of stream-of-consciousness narrative. The focus is more on character than plot; actually, the plot is revealed as the reader learns about the protagonist. The story emerges from Mabel's thoughts as she perfunctorily addresses the other guests and her unconscious associations are evoked by a look or gesture. There is no logical progression of ideas in the story; they occur randomly, as Mabel's thoughts drift to and from the party.

Point of View

The story is told from an anonymous, third-person perspective. In a stream-of-consciousness narrative, the narrator knows the inner thoughts of the protagonist and takes advantage of the privilege of omniscience by presenting Mabel's feelings as they unfold.

Interior Monologue

The reader learns about Mabel's life through an indirect interior monologue that occurs during the party. Her thoughts are presented by an unknown, third-person narrator and reveal events from Mabel's past, her daydreams, and her feelings about the people she encounters at the party.

Setting

The setting of "The New Dress" is a party hosted by Clarissa Dalloway. The reader never learns the occasion for this gathering, but the party functions as a microcosm of the larger society from which Mabel Waring is alienated. The ubiquitous but unseen presence of Clarissa Dalloway, the uncanny intuition of the servant who recognizes Mabel's class status, the undescribed drawing room where the party occurs, and the party guests all contribute to Mabel's sense of her "appalling inadequacy."

Symbolism

As the title suggests, Mabel's new dress functions as an important symbol throughout the narrative. Its old-fashioned cut and material stand as everpresent reminders to the party guests and, more importantly, to Mabel that she does not belong. This enormously

self-absorbed woman sees her dress each time that she passes a mirror, and Mabel mentions it to everyone she meets. Paradoxically, the dress, which "marks" Mabel as inferior, is what she uses to begin conversations: "'It's so old-fashioned,' she says to Charles Burt, making him stop on his way to talk to someone else." She gets his attention, if not the response she wanted, when he exclaims, "Mabel's got a new dress!"

The fly is another important symbol in the story. Mabel repeatedly refers to herself as a fly in a saucer. She cannot escape from it, as the milk has covered her wings. The other guests are butterflies and dragonflies, able to dance and fly; she alone remains in the saucer. The fly thus signifies Mabel's estrangement and isolation from her contemporaries.

Historical Context

Although World War I had ended nearly nine years before the publication of Virginia Woolf's short story "The New Dress," in 1927, the lingering effects of the war resonate throughout the work. Many commentators have remarked that much of Woolf's fiction has little connection to events taking place in the world. This may seem to be true of "The New Dress." It records one woman's impressions and experiences at a party. The disillusionment and despair that Mabel Waring exhibits during the party, however, may be seem to mirror the anguish that touched much of English society after the war.

Britain in the 1920s was characterized by contradiction and paradox. It was a time of celebration— Britain and its allies had won the war— yet postwar elation quickly faded as war debts and loss of markets threatened to destabilize the English economy. Unemployment figures rose sharply, and prices fell concurrently. By 1929, 2.5 owned two-thirds of the nation's wealth and 1.5 received 23 of its income.

In spite of such disparities, however, the country as a whole prospered. People were healthier; infant mortality decreased and longevity increased. Literacy rates increased. There was an improvement in the quality of life, particularly for women. The 1918 Act gave all men over 21 the right to vote and all women over 30 the same privilege. These steps toward equality led to an increased democratization of British society. Moreover, the Matrimonial Act of 1922 allowed women to sue for divorce on the same grounds used by men.

It was within this landscape that Virginia Woolf wrote. Growing up at the turn of the century, she had witnessed enormous societal changes. Increased communication, social mobility, and affordable commodities dramatically changed how people lived. Estimates show that 9 of 10 homes owned radios; easy access to news events occurring throughout the world forged new links between members of all classes of society. Movies also helped unite people; 45 of the population went to the cinema at least once per week. Finally, electrical appliances changed life in unprecedented ways. Although many appliances had been available even before the war, their wide-scale use was not realized until the 1920s. For example, the invention of electricity promoted the development of refrigerators. Better storage meant food lasted longer, and this revolutionized food production, distribution, and consumption. This led to another change in behavior patters: daily marketing became less necessary.

Such technological advances and material gains radically transformed people's lives. Intellectual and scientific advances also contributed to a change in how people viewed themselves. Darwinian evolutionary theory, Einstein's theory of relativity, and Freud's concept of the unconscious, to name only three contemporary social and scientific hypotheses, diminished the sense of certainty that had previously characterized the British Empire. These ideas helped undermine what the war had not destroyed. They suggested that humankind could not with any certitude assume that it enjoyed a privileged place in the universe.

Working within this atmosphere of skepticism was James Joyce, whose publication of *Ulysses* in 1922 was a watershed in literary history. Woolf's own *Mrs. Dalloway* in 1923 and T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* in the same year contributed to the passing of Victorian sensibilities. D. H. Lawrence's frank and unabashed characterizations of human sexuality and Aldous Huxley's satirical novels also helped make the 1920s a time of radical and far-reaching consequences for the development of new literary styles and trends.

Critical Overview

The publication of the short story, "The New Dress" in *A Haunted House and Other Short Stories* suggests that the story had been well-received when Woolf initially published it in 1927 in the New York monthly magazine the *Forum.* Woolf chose this story, one of eighteen, for a collection she planned to publish in 1942, but her suicide in 1941 postponed the edition's publication until Leonard Woolf edited the stories in 1944.

Most Woolf scholars have focused on her novels, essays, and diaries. Consequently, the signifi-cance of the short stories in Woolf's canon has been largely overlooked. Leonard Woolf's comments in the foreword to *A Haunted House* may have contributed to this. He explains that Woolf considered short fiction an interlude, a form of writing that enabled her to relax during or in between writing her novels.

Only a few of her stories ("Kew Gardens," "The Mark on the Wall," and "Monday or Tues-day") have generated much critical work. There has, however, been some attention given to "The New Dress," though generally in its relationship to Woolf's novel, *Mrs. Dalloway.* For example, Jean Guiguet organizes Woolf's stories into three periods: 1917-1921, 1927-1929, and 1938-1940 and explores the connectons between these "experiments" and the development of Woolf's novelistic technique. However, while he convincingly establishes connections between the short fiction and novels, he reminds us that many of the stories, particularly "The New Dress," are also "self-contained narratives."

Although "The New Dress" can stand as an autonomous narrative, Stella McNichol encouraged reading it alongside six other thematically-related stories. Their "simple narrative and chronological unity "prompted McNichol to publish them as a collection, which she called *Mrs. Dalloway's Party: A Short Story Sequence.* While the editor states that one need not read the novels to understand the stories, she cautions that if one wants a thorough understanding of the novels, especially *Mrs. Dalloway,* the short stories are a good place to begin. Other critics have specifically emphasized the political vision Woolf presents in her short fiction. In Selma Meyerowitz's 1981 essay, she reads "The New Dress" as a statement of the vulnerability of female characters to class and social discrimination in English society. The short stories, she cautions, not only demonstrate the stream-of-consciousness narration so familiar to Woolf readers but also show Woolf's censure of social institutions that deny women access to education and the means to affect social change.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4
- Critical Essay #5

Critical Essay #1

In the following essay, Lyle examines the changing social and cultural conditions in England following World War I and their influence on such Woolf short stories as "The New Dress."

Virginia Woolf had seen the devastating effects of social unrest and war, but she also understood that small events in a single life had enormous consequences. A gesture or nod might radically change a person's thoughts or course of action. In an essay published in *Modern Fiction,* therefore, she encouraged writers to "record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall . . . let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness. Let us not take it for granted that life exists more fully in what is commonly thought big than in what is commonly thought small."

We see this attention to gesture in most of Woolf's fiction, including her short stories. In "The New Dress," published in 1927, Woolf traces Mabel Waring's thoughts as she attends a party hosted by Clarissa Dalloway. A forty-year-old wife of a minor official and the mother of two, Mabel has a yellow dress made for the party. Far from being insignificant, Mabel's dress prompts a series of reflections on her life. Its material and old-fashioned cut remind Mabel of her humble origins and low social status. Mabel's acute self-consciousness leads her to despair and hopelessness. She sees herself moving through the Dalloway drawing room suffering immense tortures, as "if spears were thrown at her yellow dress from all sides." This paranoia, however, is not without justification. The enemies may appear less tangible than those on the war front, but even without guns and tanks the guests exact colossal harm by their insincerity and inauthenticity. They become unyielding opponents, and trench warfare gives way to drawing-room campaigns; battles are fought through polite but insincere conversations.

Even though Mabel realizes the vacuousness of the party guests, she longs to be one of them. Rose Shaw, Charles Burt, and Mrs. Holman, in particular, represent the best and worst of the world Mabel envies. The ease with which Rose Shaw would have responded to insults, the delight with which Charles Burt had withheld his praise, and the ability with which Mrs. Holman had risen above the mundane are qualities Mabel desperately desires.

Instead, however, Mabel sees herself as a fly in a saucer. Although she tries to picture the other guests similarly, they appear as dragonflies, or butterflies, or "beautiful insects, dancing, fluttering, skimming, while she alone dragged herself up out of the saucer." Later in the evening, when one guest calls attention to Mabel's new dress, she again refers to herself as "the poor fly [that] was absolutely shoved into the middle of the saucer." As Mabel moves from conversation to conversation, her distress increases as she imagines herself trapped in the saucer.

"The New Dress" thus supports Marjorie Brace's claim that for Woolf the "unknowableness of people and the impossibilities of communion were . . . terrifying."

This belief is underscored each time Mabel tries to connect with the other guests. For example, when she turns to Rose Shaw for assurance about her dress, Rose responds, "It's perfectly charming," but Mabel watches her "looking her up and down with that little satirical pucker of the lips which she expected," and this look belies all assurances. Mabel then turns to Robert Haydon and laments, "'I feel like some dowdy, decrepit, horribly dingy old fly." But Haydon's polite response cannot fool Mabel, who recognizes that he is "quite insincere." A final and particularly telling example occurs during her conversation with Mrs. Holman, a matronly figure who, according to Mabel, "could never get enough sympathy and snatched what little there was greedily, as if it were her right." She cannot understand Mabel's need, but what Mabel does not yet realize is that her self-absorption makes her equally unresponsive to Mrs. Holman's needs. Thus, no real connection occurs between the women. As Mabel engages in a perfunctory conversation with the matron, her thoughts drift and wander to her past.

Mabel's regret that she had not married an "empire builder" is clear here. Her description of her marriage to Hubert, "with his safe, permanent underling's job in the Law Courts," reveals her dissatisfaction. Yet she admits that in her life with Hubert she had had "divine moments" when she would say, "This is it. This has happened. This is it!" These epiphanies, or moments of insight, occur during ordinary moments and are inspired by nothing out of the ordinary. Her memory of them temporarily assuages Mabel's stress and loneliness, and in a short-lived instant of hope she determines to escape from the saucer and her meaningless life.

Mabel's escape fails, however, when she leaves the party and tells Clarissa Dalloway, "I have enjoyed myself enormously." Whatever flicker of inspiration those earlier moments had sparked is extinguished as Mabel finally recognizes her own complicity in the affair. She exclaims to herself: "Lies, lies, lies! . . . Right in the saucer!" In this instance, the reader realizes that although Mabel has always lived on the fringe, such a position ironically affords her a small degree of comfort. As she thanks Mrs. Barnet for "helping her and wrapped herself, round and round and round, in the Chinese cloak she had worn these twenty years," we understand that Mabel has chosen this life, this marginal status, because she lacks the courage to change.

Selma Meyerowitz has commented that the female characters in Woolf's short stories feel inferior and inadequate. They are dissatisfied with their existence and cannot achieve fulfillment because of the deceptive nature of the class-bound society in which they live. This scenario is seen in "The New Dress," in which the reader witnesses Mabel's alienation and detachment from the upper-class world of the party. Yet Mabel's heightened self-consciousness and self-loathing arise as much from the banality of existence as from class inequality. Mabel's ruminations are as much about boredom as impoverishment. When Mabel exclaims that "a party makes things either much more real, or much less real," she may be referring either to class differences or the realization that we are all ultimately trapped in the saucer.

In "The New Dress," Woolf presents the Dalloway party as a microcosm of English society. Mrs. Dalloway, the elusive but controlling presence of the party, represents the unseen but all-powerful forces that propel society forward; Rose Shaw, the charming

and always appropriately dressed guest, represents the successful player of the game; Mrs. Holman, with an overwhelming sense of domestic responsibility, represents women of a past age. Similarly, Robert Haydon, the polite, old-fashioned man, is a throwback to an earlier time, whereas Charles Burt represents the witty, urbane young man of the postwar era. Mrs. Barnet, the servant who recognizes the guests' status and rank, represents a threat to the class-conscious women who aspire to the affluence of the Dalloways. Finally, Mabel represents a group of alienated and estranged women so wrapped up in social conventions that she chooses the masquerade rather than exclusion, despite its enormous burden and sense of dissatisfaction. The story's tragedy centers on Mabel's complete self-absorption and incapacity for action, which make her as unauthentic as the other guests. Like them, she cannot comprehend a life outside; the rules of the game may not be those that she wants to follow, but she never works to change them. Social prestige and its trappings leave Mabel empty, and there is no hope of emotional fulfill-ment. Although Mabel questions the values of this society, she ultimately embraces them. Such scenarios occur in most of Woolf's short fiction; "The New Dress" is the rule, not the exception.

In a diary entry from April 27, 1925, shortly before the publication of *Mrs. Dalloway,* Virginia Woolf wrote:

"[My] present reflection is that people have any number of states of consciousness: and I should like to investigate the party consciousness, *the frock consciousness, etc. The fashion world of the Becks . . . is certainly one: where people secrete an envelope which connects them and protects them from others, like myself, who am outside the envelope, foreign bodies."*

Mabel's source of anguish stems from her position in between. She can neither secure herself within an envelope nor remain outside of it: "Her odious, weak, vacillating character" prevents her from choosing a side, so she remains hopelessly suspended between two worlds— or, as she might imagine, she is a fly trapped in a saucer.

Source: Teresa Lyle, "Overview of 'The New Dress'," for *Short Stories for Students,* Gale, 1998.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, March examines the insecurity and self-ridicule demonstrated by the protagonist of "The New Dress." Virginia Woolf's short story "The New Dress" is often overshadowed by her more popular stories, such as "The Duchess and the Jeweler," "The Mark on the Wall," and "Kew Gardens." Stel-la McNichol includes "The New Dress in *Mrs Dalloway's Party,*" a volume of short stories by Woolf that centers around the experiences of guests at the party Mrs. Dalloway throws in Woolf's novel *Mrs Dalloway.* McNichol writes that "The New Dress" "was written in 1924 when Virginia Woolf was revising *Mrs Dalloway* for publication." Here, though, as in the other stories in that volume, Woolf gives us not Clarissa Dalloway's experience of her own party but the experiences of other guests at that party. Mabel, the protagonist of "The New Dress" is one of those guests, and she feels out of place, insecure about her new dress, unable to see herself as anything but ridiculed, unable to take a compliment, yet critical of those that she receives. She cannot enjoy the party because she will not *let* herself enjoy the party. The party, for Mabel, is a self-inflicted torture — an exercise in masochism and, ironically, vanity, from the moment she receives the invitation.

As soon as Mabel walks in the door of the Dalloway home, she has reservations about her dress. When Mrs. Barnet greets her in the foyer and helps her to arrange herself before entering the party, "Mabel had her first serious suspicion that something was wrong as she took her cloak off and Mrs Barnet, while handing her the mirror and touching the brushes and thus drawing her attention . . . to all the appliances for tidying and improving hair, complexion, clothes, which existed on the dressing-table, confirmed the suspicion — that it was not right, not quite right." But, as will become evident shortly, it is not Mrs. Barnet or her innocent actions here that have caused Mabel to be so self-conscious and insecure about her appearance. Shortly thereafter, Mrs. Dalloway herself comes to greet Mabel. Mabel's reaction is to reflect that "It was not *right.* And at once the misery which she had always tried to hide, the profound dissatisfaction— the sense she had had, ever since she was a child, of being inferior to other people— set upon her, relentlessly, remorselessly, with an intensity which she could not beat off." Thus it is clear that Mabel is insecure before she ever sets foot in the party. In short, she has a chip on her shoulder.

She goes on, as she is entering the party, to recall the arrival of Mrs. Dalloway's invitation. She remembers that her reaction was that "she could not be fashionable. It was absurd to pretend it even— fashion meant cut, meant style, meant thirty guineas at least— but why not be original? . . . And . . . she had taken that old fashion book of her mother's, a Paris fashion book of the time of the Empire . . . , and so set herself . . . trying to be like them . . . an orgy of self-love, which deserved to be chastised, and so rigged herself out like this." It would seem, then, that Mabel is undaunted by her limited finan-cial means and determined to make the best of them by procuring for herself a dress that is "original." She busies herself with the determination of just what sort of dress it will be, raiding the fashions of the past in "an orgy of self-love." This, she concludes, deserves "to be chastised, and so rigged herself out like this." That is, the dress, which begins as a statement of originality and vanity—indicators of self-

confidence — ends as the means by which she will bring ridicule on herself to punish herself for her vanity and frivolity. She cannot indulge herself without guilt.

Neither can she accept a compliment. Mabel's entire stay at the party consists of her encountering other partygoers whose compliments she either dismisses as lies or whom she secretly chastises for failing to compliment her. The dress is convenient to her larger goal of allowing herself to be ridiculed. As she enters the party, "she dared not look in the glass," an indicator of how truly insecure Mabel is. Furthermore, she "felt like a dressmaker's dummy standing there, for young people to stick pins into." But the choice to wear such a dress is Mabel's, and this response is not unexpected. Although Rose Shaw calls Mabel's dress "perfectly charming," Mabel is skeptical of the compliment and bitterly begins her metaphor of the flies: "We are all like flies trying to crawl over the edge of the saucer." Just as she asserts this, however, she changes her mind abruptly and notes that "she could not see them like that, not other people. She saw herself like that." So insecure is she that she ultimately turns even her criticism of others around on herself. In the following exchange, however, she tries to have someone compliment her and mean it. "'I feel like some dowdy, decrepit, horribly dingy old fly,' she said, making Robert Haydon stop just to hear her say that, just to reassure herself by furbishing up a poor weak-kneed phrase and so showing how detached she was, how witty, that she did not feel in the least out of anything. And, of course, Robert Haydon answered something, quite polite, quite insincere, which she saw through instantly, and said to herself, directly he went . . . 'Lies, lies lies!'." She has provoked the compliment, and once she has it, she cannot believe it. She *will* not believe it, perhaps because she *has* to provoke it. Whether provoked or unprovoked, however, the compliments Mabel receives are invariably rejected.

After the exchange with Haydon, Mabel turns to another flashback. She recalls the scene in Miss Milan's shop as the dress was being made. "Rid of cares and wrinkles, what she had dreamed of herself was there— a beautiful woman. Just for a second (she had not dared look longer . . .), there looked at her . . . , a grey-white, mysteriously smiling, charming girl, the core of herself, the soul of herself; and it was not vanity only, not only self-love that made her think it good, tender and true." At the fitting, she sees herself as beautiful, the dress as wonderful, and she concludes that this assessment is the result not of "vanity" but of something else, which goes unnamed. Yet she only watches herself in the mirror "for a second," indicating that she cannot sustain the illusion of her own beauty. She is fundamentally insecure and can believe the contrary only in brief and fleeting moments. When she returns her attention to the present again, to the party, "the whole thing had vanished." It had vanished long before, however, if indeed the belief in her own beauty has *ever* been present.

The remainder of Mabel's experiences at the party consist of more rejection of compliments. Mabel lures Charles Burt to herself by exclaiming "It's so old fashioned." Mabel tries "to make herself think that she meant, that it was the picture and not her dress, that was old-fashioned." Of course, she is hoping that Charles will think that she is referring to her dress and stop to contradict her. She thinks that "one word of praise, one word of affection from Charles would have made all the difference to her at the moment." It is clear, though, from the way in which Mabel has reacted to previous

compliments, that this is not true. She would only have accused him of lying, have said "Lies! Lies! Lies!" to herself once again. Mabel is, of course, unaware of what she is doing: "'Why,' she asked herself, 'can't I feel one thing always, feel quite sure that Miss Milan is right, and Charles wrong and stick to it'." After her conversation with Mrs. Holman, Mabel assumes that "Mrs. Holman . . . [thought] her the most dried-up, unsympathetic twig she had ever met, absurdly dressed, too, and would tell everyone about Mabel's fantastic appearance." Yet Mrs. Holman has said no such thing.

The party, for Mabel, is a failure before she ever arrives or receives an invitation. In "Worshipping Solid Objects: The Pagan World of Virginia Woolf," Marjorie Brace writes that Mabel's dress, "designed to be exotic, appears only laughably eccentric to her once she arrives at a party where she is doomed to be either snubbed or bored because—we grasp the point only too quickly— her own unreflecting egotism turns all dresses and parties drab." However, Mabel is not an egotist. She does not have an exaggeratedly high opinion of herself; quite the opposite. She cannot believe in her own fantasies of her own beauty, and she cannot believe in others' assertions, whether requested or spontaneous, of her beauty. In *Virginia Woolf and Her Works,* Jean Guiguet writes that "Mabel, having gone through the hell of her shame and loneliness, reaches the safe shore of happy memories, which reconcile her to herself and her life; she acquires new strength and resolution; but is it through having looked in the mirror, having once again encountered the same Mabel that the others see? She can merely mumble a conventional falsehood, and goes back to her own truth." Her "own truth," however, has not been left at the door upon her entering the party. It infects and affects every event of the party as Mabel experiences it. The "truth" of her being unattractive prevents her from enjoying the party, and she has created these circumstances herself, using the dress as punishment for a vanity that never truly existed. For Mabel, insecurity is primary and confidence is secondary and fleeting. Mabel tells Mrs Dalloway, as she is leaving, that she has "enjoyed" herself, and then thinks "'Lies, lies, lies!'. . . and 'Right in the saucer!" She has applied this phrase to others previously and now applies it to herself; they have "lied" about her appearance, and she has "lied" about having a good time. Or has she? After all, this is precisely the result that Mabel's actions have encouraged— the result that, for whatever reason, Mabel has needed to punish herself, to verify her own insecurities. In Mabel's world, everyone is a liar.

Source: Thomas March, "Overview of 'The New Dress'," in *Short Stories for Students,* Gale, 1998.

Critical Essay #3

In the following excerpt, Meyerowitz provides a thematic interpretation of "The New Dress" that focuses on the self-consciousness of the central character, Mabel Waring.

Social and class discrimination . . . destroy emotional fulfilment in "The New Dress," as seen in the character of Mabel Waring. Mabel is of the lower class, part of a family of ten 'never having money enough, always skimping and paring.' At Mrs. Dalloway's party, she thinks of 'her own drawing-room so shabby' and of her inability to dress fashionably because it is too costly. Mabel's anxiety about her appearance, her manners, and her values is provoked by her encounter with the society world of the Dalloways; however, her insecurity is more pervasive: 'At once the misery which she always tried to hide, the profound dissatisfaction—the sense that she had had, ever since she was a child, of being inferior to other people— set upon her, relentlessly, remorselessly, with an intensity which she could not beat off.' When she imagines that everyone is judging her appearance, Mabel's painful self-consciousness turns to self-hatred. Sensing her ineffectuality, she expresses her low self-esteem through an animal image, 'We are all like flies trying to crawl over the edge of the saucer'; she also expresses a similar sense of alienation from others: 'She was a fly — but the others were dragon-flies, butterflies, beautiful insects.' Her need for assurance makes her attempt to communicate with another guest, Robert Haydon, whose polite but insincere comments leave her even more disillusioned and unhappy with herself and her social interactions.

Virginia Woolf suggests that society's conventions destroy Mabel's inner resources, since she implies that there are moments when Mabel has self-confidence and experiences pleasure.

Mabel's sense of alienation also exists because her insecurity makes her self-centered and unable to respond to others. She sees herself and another guest, Mrs Holman, as a yellow dot and a black dot, both detached; therefore, 'it was impossible that the black dot . . . should make the yellow dot, sitting solitary, self-centred, feel what the black dot was feeling, yet they pretended!' Neither Mabel nor Mrs Holman understands what the other feels, because each demands sympathy for herself: 'Ah, it was tragic, this greed, this clamour of human beings . . . for sympathy— it was tragic, could one have felt it and not merely pretended to feel it!' To Mabel, and to Virginia Woolf, who presumably uses the above comment by the narrator to imply her own view, pretence and lies are more despicable and more destructive to interpersonal communication than a self-centred demand for sympathy.

Woolf does suggest positive values in this story. Again, although Mabel feels only distress from social interactions, she can at least remember moments of spontaneous joy, either in nature, where social competition and alienation do not exist, or in everyday activities. . . . Mabel's sense of the meaning and peace of life gives her a momentary determination to reject dissatisfying social relationships and strive for a way of life which provides 'divine moments.' She decides to leave Mrs Dalloway's party, but she is again caught in the trap of social intercourse. Exclaiming, 'I have enjoyed myself' to Mr and

Mrs Dalloway, she realises that she is back 'right in the saucer.' Her struggle to rise above superficial social amenities and painful social interactions is thus largely unsuccessful. Mabel cannot develop a consistently independent sense of values necessary for security. Instead, she is vulnerable to social status and social pretences.

Source: Selma Meyerowitz, "What Is to Console Us? The Politics of Deception in Woolf's Short Stories," in *New Feminist Essays on Virginia Woolf,* edited by Jane Marcus, University of Nebraska Press, 1981, pp. 238-52.

Critical Essay #4

In the following excerpt, McNichol notes the interrelated nature of the stories she has collected and published as Mrs. Dalloway's Party: A Short Story Sequence, *to one another and to the novel*

Mrs Dalloway.

"The New Dress" was written in 1924 when Vir-ginia Woolf was revising *Mrs Dalloway* for publication. In a pencil note to the manuscript opening of the story Virginia Woolf states:

The New Dress At Mrs D's party She got it on this theory the theory of clothes but very little money this brings in the relation with sex; her estimate of herself.

"Mrs Dalloway in Bond Street" and "The New Dress" are both connected with the genesis of the novel *Mrs Dalloway;* the other five stories written consecutively and probably not later than May 1925 form a kind of epilogue to it. Though the party goes on after the novel is finished Mrs Dalloway's is no longer its central consciousness. The focus now shifts from guest to guest revealing their reflections and insights. It is the other side of Mrs Dalloway's party. The seven stories or chapters, therefore, besides being all centred on Mrs Dalloway were also all written more or less at the same time as the novel.

The Mrs Dalloway stories, then, do form a related group in that they relate to each other thematically: the social theme and subject of the party and the actual or implied presence of Mrs Dalloway give a unity to them.

Source: Stella McNichol, in an introduction to *Mrs Dalloway's Party: A Short Story Sequence,* by Virginia Woolf, edited by Stella McNichol, Hogarth Press, 1973, pp. 9-17.

Critical Essay #5

In the following excerpt, Guiguet discusses the relationship between the short story "The New Dress" and the novel Mrs. Dalloway's Party. *He identifies prominent themes, main characters, significant action, and satirical elements of the story and praises the story as a self-contained narrative.*

With "The New Dress" we come to the stories which form part of what one might call the *Mrs Dalloway* saga, which comprises also "The Man Who Loved His Kind," "Together and Apart" and "The Summing Up." In this group, "The New Dress" stands apart. From its date, 1927, as well as from several pieces of internal evidence, it seems to be a reject left over from the novel. We see the famous party through the eyes of Mabel, a humble acquaintance of the Dalloways. Like the other guests in the novel, she is greeted in the cloakroom by Mrs Barnet, who sizes up each visitor's class and dress. The perspicacity of the old servant . . . lies at the root of Mabel's misfortunes; Mrs Barnet's attitude makes her aware of the unsuitability of her dress, and this feeling isolates her during the whole party, making her conscious, amidst all these rich people, of her own poverty, then of the failure of her life, and revealing to her, moreover, the vanity and sterility of such social contacts. After having endured the hypocrisy, indifference and selfishness of others and her own humiliation, she makes her retreat with a polite lie: "I have enjoyed myself enormously." This lie synthesizes all the lies, all the treacheries not merely of these few hours but of the whole of existence. We see from this that its setting is not the only factor that connects "The New Dress" with *Mrs Dalloway.* The satirical implications of the story are akin to those of the novel; at an even deeper level, through her pessimism, Mabel recalls Septimus, while like him she is connected with Clarissa by "a divine moment" of sea and sand and sun. Apart from the recurrence of this theme we may note also, as though referring to Peter Walsh and his life-story, Mabel's youthful daydream: she had pictured herself living in India, married to a hero, whereas Hubert, her husband, has a dreary subordinate job in the Law Courts. Finally, perhaps she was intended to form a parallel to Ellie Henderson, or else to take her place at the party. Like Ellie, in fact, Mabel is an outsider, reluctantly invited at the last minute, and is too poor to spend money on her dress. The distance that divides her from this world allows it to be seen, through her, from a different angle to that of the other characters. Nevertheless, Mabel's viewpoint is as unlike Ellie's as is their way of dressing: Ellie is natural and sweet-tempered, whereas Mabel is timid and embittered. Perhaps Virginia Woolf was rightly reluctant to alter the atmosphere of the closing pages of her novel by this corrosive ingredient, and therefore relegated this character into the drawer where she kept her rough sketches.

In spite of all the links that can be found between the short story and the novel, "The New Dress" is none the less a perfectly self-contained narrative, with its own progress and peripeteia. Mabel, having gone through the hell of her shame and loneliness, reaches the safe shore of happy memories, which reconcile her to herself and her life; she acquires new strength and resolution; but is it through having looked in the mirror, having once again encountered the same Mabel that the others see? She can merely mumble a conventional falsehood, and goes back to her own truth.

Source: Jean Guiguet, "Synthesis and Fiction: *Mrs. Dalloway,* Stories and Sketches," in *Virginia Woolf and Her Works,* translated by Jean Stewart, Harcourt, Brace, 1965, pp. 329-43.

Topics for Further Study

Many of Woolf's works highlight gender and class oppression. Research the decade of the 1920s in English history to discover why these were pertinent themes for Woolf and her contemporaries.

Woolf has become a cultural icon for feminists across the world. Read her essay *A Room of One's Own* and explore the extent to which her ideas are useful for feminists today.

After some preliminary research into Sigmund Freud's theories of various mental conditions, offer a partial "diagnosis" of what might be troubling Mabel Waring and how she might best approach attaining good mental health.

Mabel Waring suffers from feelings of inadequacy, unworthiness, and personal failure. Identify a work of fiction — a short story, novel, play, or poem— in which a man feels inadequate, unworthy, or incapable of performing as he thinks he should. Some suggestions: "The Beast in the Jungle," by Henry James; "The Door in the Wall," by H. G. Wells; "Paul's Case," by Willa Cather, "The Short, Happy Life of Francis Macomber," by Ernest Hemingway; "Babylon Revisited," by F. Scott Fitzgerald; *An American Tragedy*, by Theodore Dreiser; *The Wild Duck*, by Henrik Ibsen; *Hamlet*, by William Shake-speare; "Richard Cory," by E. A. Robinson. Do women and men experience these feelings in the same ways? Discuss what you see as similarities or differences.

Compare and Contrast

1920s: Most items of womens' apparel are homemade or custom-made. Apart from basics such as stockings, underclothing, and nightgowns, most women have dresses made for them during once-yearly or seasonal sessions with dressmakers.

1990s: Most clothing is bought off-the-rack. Only a fractional percentage of the world's population regularly buys couture, or custom-made clothing.

1920s: Very little is known about different kinds of mental illness, despite widespread familiarity with the theories of pioneering psychoanalyist Sigmund Freud. Woolf's mental breakdowns are variously diagnosed and treated primarily with "rest cures."

1990s: The number of recognized mental illnesses codified by the medical profession has grown from several dozen to several hundred. A combination of drug and psychiatric therapies are recommended for most mental illnesses.

1920s: Britain offers unemployment insurance for the first time; it does not cover domestic servants or farm workers.

1990s: Few households continue to employ domestic servants. Most household employees work for agencies rather than individuals.

What Do I Read Next?

Mrs. Dalloway, Virginia Woolf's fourth novel, was published in 1925 and uses interior monologue from Dalloway's point of view to describe the events leading up to her party.

Dean R. Baldwin's *Virginia Woolf: A Study of the Short Fiction* (1989) traces three periods of Woolf short-story writing and provides an overview of all of Woolf's short fiction. He uses a strong biographical focus to explore the stories, and the study contains a collection of critical essays on selected works.

Avrom Fleishman's essay "Forms of the Woolfian Short Story," included in *Virginia Woolf: Revaluation and Continuity*, considers the extent to which Woolf's stories contribute to the development of the modernist short story.

Stella McNichol's edition of *Mrs. Dalloway's Party: A Short Story Sequence*, published in 1973, offers a useful introduction to the seven Woolf short stories that are thematically related to *Mrs. Dalloway*.

T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* was published in 1923 by Hogarth Press, which was owned and operated by Woolf and her husband. It provides a useful social critique of postwar society and emphasizes the sense of despair and hopelessness of Mabel Waring's generation.

Aldous Huxley's 1923 novel *Antic Hay* is interesting for its depiction of postwar London's bohemian district.

F. Scott Fitzgerald's short stories collected in *Flappers and Philosophers* (1920) and *Tales of the Jazz Age* (1922) chronicle the values and behavior of the United States in the decade before the Great Depression.

Further Study

Baldwin, Dean R. *Virginia Woolf: A Study of the ShortFiction,* Twayne, 1989, pp. 1-76.

A book-length analysis of Woolf's short stories which places them in a largely biographical context. Also contains short critical essays on selected stories.

Chapman, R. T. "'The Lady in the Looking-Glass': Modes of Perception in a Short Story by Virginia Woolf," *Modern Fiction Studies,* Vol. 18, No. 3, Autumn, 1972, pp. 331- 37.

Explains that Woolf's stories are fillled with the minute details of life. The way characters perceive these details constantly changes and drives the narratives forward to well-structured totalities that serve a greater function than the constituent parts.

Hussey, Mark. *Virginia Woolf A-Z: The Essential Reference to Her Life and Writings,* Oxford University Press, 1995, pp. 169-79.

An indispensable reference tool that provides lengthy historical and critical entries on Woolf's fiction, diaries, letters, and essays. It also offers listings for notable figures in Woolf's culture.

Mott, Frank Luther. "The Forum," in his *A History of American Magazines, 1885-1905,* Vol. 4, Harvard University Press, 1957, pp. 511-23.

Five-volume history of the rise of the American magazine industry. Provides detailed historical and contextual information for all major magazines published in the United States. Offers editorial, circulation, and subscription information for each publication.

Rice, Thomas Jackson. "Studies of the Short Stories," in his *Virginia Woolf: A Guide to Research,* Garland, 1984, pp. 163-67.

A short, now-dated annotated bibliography of essays and books written about Woolf's work. Organized by genre.

Roberts, Clayton, and David Roberts. "Britain between the Wars," in their *A History of England, 1688 to the Present,* Prentice-Hall, 1991, pp. 748-78.

An accessible and interesting textbook of English history. Follows the traditional periodization of Brit-ish history and provides a useful overview of the social and cultural trends of each period. Offers helpful suggestions for further reading.

Woolf, Leonard. "Foreword," in *A Haunted House,* by Virginia Woolf, Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1944, pp. v-vi.

Places Virginia Woolf's short story writing in the context of her other work and suggests that she used this genre as an interlude between the novels.

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Product Design
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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
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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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