Nightfall Study Guide

Nightfall by Isaac Asimov

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Introduction

In 1941, John W. Campbell, Jr., editor of the premier science fiction magazine at that time, asked one of the fledgling writers he mentored an intriguing question: What would happen if people saw the stars only once every thousand years? He postulated that people would go mad and asked twenty one-year old Isaac Asimov to write a story about it. The result was "Nightfall," now one of the most famous science fiction stories of all time. Originally published in *Astounding Science Fiction* in 1941, it now appears in dozens of anthologies, but is perhaps most easily found in *Nightfall and Other Stories* or another of Asimov's own anthologies *The Best of Isaac Asimov.*

To describe a population to whom the appearance of stars would be a rare phenomenon, Asimov created the planet Lagash where there are six suns and perpetual daylight. With no nighttime, the stars cannot be seen and therefore are not known. Astronomical science has not yet reached the point of being able to look beyond the suns. The concept of darkness is mysterious and frightening. However, scientists at Saro University are predicting a total eclipse of all the suns at once. They are aware, based upon archaeological studies, that civilization seems to have been destroyed about every two thousand years, the same time period of the occurrence of the eclipses. If the two are related, will the darkness once again cause a hysteria that will destroy the world? As the scientists prepare for calamity, they are joined by a newspaper reporter, and all hope to save future generations from fear through a record of factual knowledge. However, a religious cult is also predicting the phenomenon as a judgment against evil. "Nightfall" is a psychological thriller as scientists fight ignorance, zealotry, madness, and their own fears of the unknown.

Overview

On the planet Kalgash scientists from the fields of psychology, archaeology, and astronomy have recently made discoveries that are profoundly disturbing in their implications. The people of Kalgash live their entire lives in sunlight; their planet orbits multiple suns, at least one of which is always in the sky. They have little experience with darkness. When an amusement park ride offers the thrill of several minutes of darkness, some riders suffer nervous breakdowns.

A psychologist who specializes in the effects of darkness on the mind is called in to investigate the ride. His discoveries have dire implications when combined with what archaeologists and astronomers have found. A team of archaeologists who have been studying the oldest known city on their planet by chance discover an even older city. Under that city is another one, and then another below that one, and so on for several layers. Each layer is separated by soot, as if each successive city perished by fire.

The layers seem to be about three thousand years apart each, as if a recurring cataclysm had ended each civilization; whatever the cataclysm might be, its result is destruction so complete that each new civilization has had no knowledge of the preceding one. A theory to explain the motions of the suns of Kalgash has proven to have a frightful implication. A young astronomer has taken the theory, the Universal Law of Gravitation, and worked it out to a conclusion that seems impossible: there is a large object, perhaps a sun, that orbits the familiar suns of Kalgash, but cannot be seen. Perhaps the theory is wrong, which could hurt the reputation of the revered old astronomer who had devised it. Otherwise, an unknown object could very soon eclipse the suns of Kalgash, possibly plunging the entire planet into prolonged darkness.

Good, intelligent people, the scientists do what they can to prepare for the fall of darkness. The psychologist is sure many people will survive the darkness with their sanity intact, just as most riders at the amusement park survived the fright of darkness without lasting ill effects. But none of them are prepared for what will really happen; nightfall will brings horrors beyond their understanding. Nightfall is about how scientists often must struggle to understand the world around them with only a few clues from their research. It is also about how people try to survive a cataclysm that shatters minds and profoundly alters their views of themselves and their place in the cosmos.

Author Biography

Born in Russia on January 2, 1920 to Judah and Anna Rachel Berman Asimov, Isaac Asimov and his family moved to Brooklyn, New York, when he was three. He became a naturalized citizen in 1928. His parents owned a series of candy stores where Asimov worked until he left college. Having taught himself to read before he was five, Asimov voraciously read all the magazines the store carried. An extraordinary student, he graduated from high school when he was only fifteen years old. He sold his first story when he was eighteen. Graduating from college with a degree in chemistry in 1939, Asimov then received a master's degree in 1941 and a Ph.D. in 1948, all from Columbia University. During World War II, he worked in the U.S. Naval Air Experimental Station, and then served from 1945 to 1946 as a corporal in the Army.

In 1941, Asimov wrote "Nightfall," the story that was later voted best science fiction story of all time by the Science Fiction Writers of America. By 1958, he virtually retired after nine years of teaching biochemistry at the Boston University School of Medicine to devote his time to writing. However, he maintained a lecturing position at the university and was granted a full professorship in 1979 in recognition of his contributions to science education through his publications.

In his lifetime, Asimov published over 500 books and numerous articles on a wide variety of subjects including science fact and fiction, mystery, history, autobiography, poetry, and even guides to Shakespeare, Gilbert and Sullivan, and the Bible. He was noted for a unique ability to translate complex subjects into understandable language for the average reader, and he wrote for every level from preschool through college. It was Asimov who, with his editor John W. Campbell, Jr., formulated the three laws of robotics that dominated his robot and science fiction detective stories and influenced the image of robots throughout science fiction.

Included among numerous awards that Asimov received are: a Special Hugo Award (the highest honor from the World Science Fiction Convention) in 1962 for his articles in Fantasy and Science Fiction, another Hugo for Best All-Time Series in 1966 for his Foundation Trilogy, a Hugo and a Nebula (Science Fiction Writers of America) Award in 1973 for *The Gods Themselves,* a Hugo and a place on the New York Times Best Seller List in 1982 for *Foundation's Edge,* a Hugo and a Nebula in 1977 for best short story for *The Bicentennial Man* (later made into a movie starring Robin Williams), and a Hugo in 1995 for best non-fiction book for I, Asimov.

Asimov married Gertrude Blugerman in 1942. They had two children, David and Robyn, but were divorced in 1973. That same year, Asimov married Janet Jeppson, a psychiatrist who collaborated with him as a writer. A compulsive writer, he usually worked seven days a week from 7:30 a.m. until 10:00 p.m. Asimov died of heart and kidney failure on April 6, 1992.

About the Author

Isaac Asimov was born in Petrovichi, U.S.S.R, between October 4, 1919 and January 2, 1920. Two different calendars were in use in the region where he was born, neither of which matches the calendar commonly used in Western societies, which is why even Asimov himself was unsure of his birthday. He chose to celebrate it on January 2. His parents were Judah Asimov, then head of a food co-operative, and Anna Rachel Asimov. In 1923, the Asimovs moved to Brooklyn, and in 1926, Judah Asimov opened his first candy store.

Isaac Asimov would avidly read the magazines for sale in the store, making sure that the magazines still looked new when he finished with them so that they could still be sold. Isaac Asimov became a naturalized United States citizen in 1928.

In 1935, he entered Seth Low Junior College, then transferred to Columbia University, earning a Bachelor of science degree in 1939. He continued his graduate work at Columbia University, receiving a Master's degree in chemistry in 1941. World War II interrupted his studies, and in 1942, he became a chemist at the U.S. Navy shipyard in Philadelphia. That same year he married Gertrude Blugerman. He served in the army from 1945 to 1946, then in 1946 returned to his graduate studies at Columbia, earning a Ph.D. in chemistry in 1948. The next year, he became a teacher of biochemistry at Boston University School of Medicine. Although he loved teaching and his engaging lecturing style endeared him to students, he had problems with other faculty who were jealous of his publications. His department chair seemed to believe that Asimov was wasting his time writing, and by the mid-1950s Asimov was essentially relieved of his duties as a teacher.

In 1939, he had published his first story, "Marooned Off Vesta" in Amazing Stories. In 1941, he wrote "Nightfall," regarded by many, if not most, other science fiction writers as the greatest science fiction short story ever published. During the 1940s, he wrote the novellas that would form the Foundation Trilogy. John W. Campbell, editor of Astounding, frequently pressed Asimov for new novellas in the Foundation series, and Asimov responded well to the test of his inventiveness, creatNightfall 3679 ing what some critics call one of the "cornerstones" of the field of science fiction. In 1950, his first novel, Pebble in the Sky, was published, followed by several others. In 1955, he was the Guest of Honor at the World Science Fiction convention. In 1958, he became a full-time writer.

Hugo Awards are given annually at World Science Fiction Conventions; these awards are determined largely by the voting of science fiction fans. Asimov received one in 1963 for his monthly science articles in The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, a series he continued to write until his death. In 1966, he received another Hugo for his Foundation stories. He received Hugos for two of his novels, The Gods Themselves in 1973 and Foundation's Edge in 1983.

He also received a Hugo for the short story "The Bicentennial Man" in 1977.

The Science Fiction Writers of America give out annual awards for best novel, best novella, best novelette, and best short story. These are called Nebula Awards. Asimov received one in 1973 for The Gods Themselves and another in 1977 for "The Bicentennial Man." The Science Fiction Writers of America also gave him their Grand Master award in 1987.

Asimov wrote a great deal of nonfiction, mostly science books. During the 1960s, nonfiction dominated his writing. In 1964, the American Chemical Society gave him the James T. Grady medal for science writing about chemistry. In 1967, he received the Westinghouse American Association for the Advancement of Science award for science writing.

The last twenty or so years of his life were busy ones. Asimov became legendary for his enormous production of books, numbering over four hundred by the time of his death. His subjects ranged from the Bible to literature to astronomy to biology to mystery fiction to science fiction. His jovial wit managed to make even the dullest of subjects come alive, and he helped to educate at least two generations of readers.

In 1972, he had a thyroidectomy, and ill health was to trouble him significantly off and on for the rest of his life.

In 1973, he divorced his wife and then married Janet Jeppson on November 30. In the late 1970s, perhaps sensing how much his health was worsening, he began his autobiography, and in 1983, he had a triple bypass heart operation. The success of the operation seemed to give him renewed vigor, and he appeared as a public speaker at many events, even though he had a severe phobia against traveling. In 1988, he became president of the American Humanist Association, and he became an outspoken advocate of atheism. He argued that it was enough for a person to be all that his talents will allow him to be in one life; no supernatural forces were needed to urge human beings toward achievement.

This made him a controversial figure in his last years. He died of heart failure on April 6, 1992. He was among the most beloved of science fiction writers and is still known, as he was for decades, as the "Good Doctor" among writers and readers.

Robert Silverberg was born on January 15, 1935, in New York City to Michael and Helen (nee Bairn) Silverberg. His father was an accountant.

Robert began writing for publication while still in his teens. When he graduated with a B.A. from Columbia University in 1956, he went right into a full-time writing career. Also in 1956, he married an engineer, Barbara H.

Brown. He was an incredibly prolific writer whose production included short stories, novels, and nonfiction books, produced sometimes at a rate of over two million words per year. During the early years of his career he was regarded as a competent but not necessarily good writer.

In the mid-1960s came a shift in his output. His novels and stories became more detailed; the issues he encountered in his nonfiction research became significant elements in his fiction. Critics took notice, and in the early 1970s some regarded Silverberg as someone who wrote good literature, not just a commercial hack. Although there have been significant pauses in Silverberg's production, including a four-year hiatus in the 1970s, his work has continued to draw significant critical attention, and he is generally regarded as one of the most sophisticated writers of science fiction and fantasy, although his nonfiction has considerable merit, too.

He separated from his wife in 1976, then divorced her in 1986. In the late 1970s he needed to earn money to buy his wife her own house; this, he says, pushed him back into writing after his long break, with Lord Valentine's Castle being the result. He received $127,500 for the book, which became the foundation for a series of novels and short stories. In 1987, Silverberg married Karen L. Haber. Critics have noted that Silverberg's fiction of the 1980s and 1990s has been marked by brilliant descriptive prose; Silverberg has made strange, alien places come alive.

Silverberg has won numerous awards for his writing. He won the 1956 Hugo Award for "best new author." He won it for the best novella in 1969 for "Nightwings" and in 1987 for "Gilgamesh in the Outback." He won it for the best novelette in 1990 for "Enter a Soldier. Later: Enter Another." In 1970, he was the guest of honor at the World Science Fiction Convention.

Silverberg won the Nebula Award for best short story in 1970 for "Passengers" and in 1972 for "Good News from the Vatican." He won the Nebula Award for best novella in 1975 for Born with the Dead and in 1986 for Sailing to Byzantium. He won the Nebula Award for best novel in 1972 for A Time of Changes. In 1962, he won the New York Herald Tribune's Spring Book Festival Award for Lost Cities and Vanished Civilizations; in 1967, he won it again for The Auk, the Dodo, and the Oryx: Vanished and Vanishing Creatures. In 1960, Lost Race of Mars was named a best book for children by the New York Times.

Plot Summary

"Nightfall" is a story about a planet that does not experience nightfall except once in every 2,049 years. With six suns, Lagash otherwise exists in perpetual sunlight. In the course of describing the last four hours before darkness covers all, Asimov explains how a rare eclipse is able to blot out all the light and why the event always results in universal chaos. This feat he achieves by placing the story in the Observatory of the scientists who are able to predict the coming phenomenon. Aton 77, the aged director of Saro University and chief astronomer, is preparing to try to record the eclipse and whatever follows so that there will be scientific evidence to explain what has happened.

On a planet where darkness is unknown, the expectation is that everyone will go insane from fear and claustrophobia, and that in their fear they will try to burn anything that will catch fire in order to produce light. Archaeological evidence has shown that about every 2,000 years, on at least nine different occasions, whole civilizations have disappeared. The assumption is that the fires get out of hand and everything is destroyed in the chaos of madness. To prevent the panic and help people prepare so that they might survive the next eclipse, the scientists are determined to leave proof of the real reason for the coming of the darkness. In the meantime, a group of Cultists has also predicted the loss of the sunlight, but as a night of reckoning and fire produced by stars. The astronomers have never seen stars because of the brightness of the suns. They think that stars are just a myth perpetuated by religious fanatics to scare people into moral behavior.

Besides the team of astronomers, a faculty psychologist named Sheerin 501 and a newspaper reporter, Theremon 762, wait in the Observatory. They review the research that has led to the prediction of the eclipse and the subsequent madness. It was discovered, only ten years after the Universal Theory of Gravitation was finally formulated and accepted as law, that the expected orbit of Lagash is not in accord with the mathematics of the theory. This observation led to the conclusion that the law was valid, but there was an unknown factor pulling on Lagash, probably another planetary body. When Beta is the only sun in the sky and this moon passes in front of it, the total eclipse occurs.

In addition to the scientific evidence Sheerin has accumulated, he has also been through a fifteen minute tunnel ride of total darkness designed to amuse tourists that actually resulted in death and mental illness for many. However, an experiment by two of the astronomers, Yimot 70 and Faro 24, that tried to simulate the appearance of stars failed to produce any psychological ill effects. While they discuss these findings, they are interrupted by a disturbance caused by a Cultist who has come in an attempt to destroy the telescopic equipment and cameras that he regards as blasphemy. He believes that the salvation of his soul depends on seeing the stars and is thereby forced to remain quiet while the other participants threaten to lock him in a closet where he cannot see the stars when they appear. He occupies himself during the long wait by chanting scripture from his Book of Revelations.

Sheerin is supposed to ride out the terror of the night in a specially-prepared Hideout where a number of people from the university community have taken refuge with supplies and some crudely-made torches for light. Instead, his curiosity gets the better of him, and it is Sheerin and Theremon, both beginning to feel the first effects of the claustrophobia, who bolt the entrances of the Observatory against the crazed mob coming up from the city at twilight. The story ends as the night begins. The city goes up in flames, and the stars come out in terrifying multitudes.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

The planet Lagash seems to be on the brink of a catastrophic event that will end civilization, as its inhabitants know it. Theremon 762, a young newspaperman, has spent the last two months ridiculing the Director of Saro University, Aton 77, and his fellow astronomers, in his newspaper column. Aton claims that all six of Lagash's suns will soon disappear and the planet will be plunged into total darkness. This was a baffling thought for many people. After all, at least one of Lagash's suns had always shined. Now, Theremon has come to the observatory to meet with Aton in these "final hours" with a proposition for the Astronomers.

Aton 77 is not pleased that his telephotographer, Beenay 25, for bringing Theremon 762 to their Observatory. Theremon has spent months leading a vast newspaper campaign to belittle the findings of the Astronomers. Theremon has the gall to go to the Observatory, expecting the Astronomers' cooperation in writing another story. He asks Aton to consider what if the world doesn't end? What if nothing happens? Theremon asks Aton if he has planned for the possible reaction of the public.

Theremon suggests that while people do not truly believe the end of the world is coming, the effects of the Astronomers' words have had an impact. Business has taken a nosedive. Investors are holding on to their money. And, people are waiting to buy things-just to make sure. Theremon tells Aton that anger could ignite, and sparks could fly, if the end does not come.

Aton asks Theremon what he is proposing. Theremon wants to take charge of the publicity in the event the end of the world does not occur. He would handle things so that only the ridiculous side of the matter would show. His idea being to get people laughing over "a bunch of gibbering idiots," and then maybe they would forget about being angry at being misled. In return, Theremon gets an exclusive story from Aton. Aton and his fellow Astronomers discuss the suggestion and agree. They allow Theremon to stay with the group and witness the events as they unfold.

Sheerin 501, a psychologist, from Saro University, returns to the Observatory. He had been staying at the Hideout, but decided to leave. Sheerin then tells Aton that he was bored and hot waiting in the Hideout. Besides, he wanted to see the Stars that the Cultists were forever discussing.

Theremon asks Sheerin about the Hideout. Sheerin explains that the Astronomers have convinced about three hundred staff members and their families, mostly women and children, of the world's end. These people have agreed to hide out, away from the effects of the Darkness and the Stars. They will hopefully hold out through the ending of the world and have the resources to start over. The Hideout also contains all of the records and data the Astronomers have collected regarding the upcoming catastrophe.

The Astronomers hope that the records will provide answers to the next generation about the events to come.

Theremon questions Sheerin about the history of Lagash. Sheerin explains that archaeologists have found a series of nine civilizations. All had reached heights comparable to their own. All, without exception, at the very height of their culture, were destroyed. All centers of culture were thoroughly demolished by fire. No clues were ever left behind as to why.

Several explanations were suggested, but only one theory has been handed down over the centuries. It is the myth of the Stars, found in the *Book of Revelations,* and proclaimed by the Cultists. The Cultists believe that every two thousand and fifty years Lagash enters into a huge cave where all the suns disappear. There is total darkness over the entire world. Then, the Cultists believe Stars appear to rob men of their souls and leave them unreasoning brutes. It is these brutes that destroy the very civilizations that they worked to build.

Sheerin explains that Aton came up with the theory that there may be another non-luminous planet, similar to Lagash. If there was, it would only shine by reflected light, and that the eternal blazes of the suns would make it invisible to the naked eye. However, as the other planet orbited closer to Lagash, it would block out the suns, causing a lengthy eclipse. No part of the planet would escape its effects. This eclipse occurs once every two thousand and forty-nine years. The Astronomers vowed to take photographs of the eclipse in order to leave the next generation with a record of what happened. The hope being that the next generations would have more time to prepare before the start of the next eclipse.

Theremon wants to know how the Darkness will drive him mad. Sheerin explains that mankind has an instinctive fear of the absence of light and confined spaces. This fear is called claustrophobia. People lacking the mental resiliency to overcome these fears become hysterical and violent, ready to do harm to themselves and to others.

Theremon does not believe Sheerin. How can someone go crazy just because there isn't a sun in the sky? How does that destroy the cities? Sheerin explains that people will do anything to avoid the Darkness. More than anything else, they want light. How will they get light? The only way is to burn something. People will burn anything and everything to create the effect of light.

At this point, two fellow Astronomers, Yimot 70 and Faro 24, return to the Observatory. They were out conducting an experiment to try and see what effect the Darkness and Stars would have on them. The others ask what type of experiment? The men had purchased a building and covered it from top to bottom in black velvet. They wanted to come as close as possible to perfect Darkness. To mimic Stars, Faro and Yimot had punched tiny holes into the ceiling and roof. Then, the men had shut themselves inside and waited. The group of Astronomers asked Yaro and Faro what happened next. "Nothing," they answered. Neither man experienced any signs of madness or fear.

The group was stunned by the news. Theremon asked Sheerin what this did to his theory. Sheerin begins to respond when sudden crashing noises cause the group to run the Dome that houses their cameras and telescopes. An intruder is seen standing over a set of shattered photographic plates. Beenay quickly tackles the intruder and brings him to the ground. The intruder is a Cultist named Latimer 25. Latimer had come to stop the group from documenting the coming of the Stars. The Cultist believe that the Astronomers are putting everyone's' immortal souls at risk by not blindly following the will of the Stars.

Aton wants to call the police, but there is little time remaining. The group decides to allow Latimer to stay, after he gives an oath that he will not interfere again. Latimer gives the oath, knowing that if he breaks it, his immortal soul would be lost forever.

Sheerin and Theremon continue to talk. Theremon asks how the Cultists managed to keep the *Book of Revelations* through the generations. How was it written in the first place? Sheerin suggests that there are three kinds of people unaffected by the Darkness and Stars. They are the few who do not see the Stars at all. In the first group are the seriously retarded and the ones who drink themselves into a stupor at the beginning of an eclipse and remain drunk until the end. The second group is children under the age of six who still view the world as too new and strange to be frightened by Stars and Darkness. And finally, there are those people, whose minds are so extremely insensitive, that they would be scarcely affected. Sheerin suggests that it was the very young children, with fragmented memories, and the very confused, incoherent ramblings of half-mad morons, that formed the basis for the *Book of Revelations*.

Aton joins Sheerin and Theremon to tell them he has received a call from the Hideout. The Cultists are active in the cities. They are rousing the people of Lagash to storm the Observatory. The Cultists are promising people eternal salvation for their immortal souls. It is paramount that the group holds off the mob until they can take the final pictures. It is now a race against time.

Beenay joins Sheerin and Theremon. Beenay tells them he has a theory about the Stars. What if there are other suns in distant universes? Because the suns are so far away, they are too dim to see. The suns' light makes it impossible to view these Stars with the naked eye. But, with the darkness of the eclipse, they would appear.

As the sky grows darker, the group begins to hear noises coming from outside. The mob is making their way to the Observatory. Sheerin and Theremon run to blockade and seal all entrances to the Observatory. After they are done, Sheerin and Theremon return to the Dome to join the others. The remaining light is fading fast. The Astronomers work frantically to take the final pictures.

As the darkness finally engulfs the group, Theremon looks to the sky in awe. He is astounded by what he sees. Lagash is in the middle of thirty thousand suns shining brightly in the sky. Theremon begins to feel himself going mad. He thinks how horrible it is to know you are going mad and can do nothing about it. He screams for light, any light, but there is none. All that he hears is the crying and whimpering of Aton as he

stares up at the vast number of Stars in the sky. At last, "The long night had come again."

Analysis

Nightfall was Isaac Asimov's thirty-second story, and proved to be a watershed in his professional writing career. He was just twenty-one when he wrote it, but had been writing professionally for some time. The story is the result of a discussion Asimov had with *Astounding Science Fiction* editor, John W. Campbell, regarding an Emerson quotation that starts "Nightfall."

Asimov commented throughout his life that *Nightfall* was significant in his career because it was the first time he was taken seriously in the world of science fiction. As time went by, *Nightfall* became a classic that would appear in several translations and anthologies around the world.

Isaac Asimov described his work as social science fiction. Social science fiction is a form of writing which concentrates on examining the impact that scientific advancement has on the life of humans. This is in contrast to other genres of science fiction that tend to focus on describing complicated gadgets and hard, cold, scientific concepts.

Nightfall is true to this social science fiction style of writing. Throughout the story, Asimov uses simple, non-complex names of objects, and simplifies scientific concepts to avoid confusing the reader with what he considers irrelevant information. It allows the reader to focus on what Asimov found important, which was the people and what they were experiencing. The struggle to survive, or at a minimum, to leave a legacy for future generations, is a strong central theme in the story.

Asimov was a trained biochemist, a scientific thinker, a rationalist, and a professed atheist. He did not oppose the religious beliefs of others, but disapproved of superstition and unfounded beliefs. These themes are also found in *Nightfall*. Two opposing groups of people, the Cultists (religion) and the Astronomers (science), are in conflict. Unwilling to accept a scientific explanation for the *Book of Revelations*, the Cultists accuse the Astronomers of trying to corrupt their truth. They set out to destroy the Astronomers and their research. The Cultists know that if the Astronomers' research survives, it will provide proof that the *Book of Revelations* and its contents are flawed. People would no longer blindly follow the Cultists, but begin to question, and possibly, ridicule, their beliefs.

Finally, one interesting twist found in *Nightfall* is the role of claustrophobia in the story. Sheerin and Theremon discuss claustrophobia in great detail throughout the story. It is viewed as the primary fear, and ultimate result, of the Darkness and the Stars. It will, in essence, destroy Lagash's social organization and civilization. It is difficult to believe that a man who, in real life, was a claustrophile (a person who enjoys small, enclosed spaces) could write about this psychological disorder in such great detail when he probably never experienced it first hand.

Characters

Aton 77

Director of Saro University, Aton 77 is the elderly leader of a group of astronomers who are determined to leave a record of the night of darkness. A stern and stiff leader, Aton arranges the swap of information between the astronomers and the Cultists that leads to the discovery of the impending eclipse. It is Aton who expresses the moral to the story when he cries out at the end that they "didn't know that they couldn't know."

Beenay 25

Beenay, a "husky telephotographer," is the character who brings the reporter to the Observatory and catches the Cultist. He is also the character who comes up with some interesting theories about the universe. While he is right about the idea that the stars are actually other suns positioned too far away to have gravitational pull on their planet, he is wrong in thinking that there is not enough room in the universe for more than a dozen or so stars. He also thinks that life on a planet with just one sun would be impossible. Asimov uses Beenay and his theories to point out how mistaken even the best scientists can be, given limited knowledge.

Faro 24

Faro is part of the team that will stay in the Observatory during the eclipse to record the phenomenon. He and Yimot are late in arriving because they have been attempting to simulate the appearance of darkness and stars in their own experiment. Their fake stars fail to drive them mad, so Sheerin theorizes that the stars do not cause the madness; rather, the madness causes one to imagine stars as a way to fight the darkness.

Latimer 25

The Cultist who breaks into the Observatory and tries to stop the work of the astronomers, Latimer is an adjutant of the third class to Sor 5, his leader. Latimer is forced by Sheerin to give his word that he will not interfere further out of fear of being locked away and unable to see the stars when they come. The salvation of his soul depends on being a witness to the stars, and he cannot risk that. However, in the end, the blasphemy of the scientists trying to turn the judgment of sinners into a natural phenomenon is more than he can bear, and Latimer makes one last attempt to destroy the cameras just as the darkness sets in and the stars become visible. It is also Latimer who recites scripture from the Book of Revelations, thus giving the reader a glimpse of the cult's beliefs.

Sheerin 501

A portly psychologist at Saro University, Sheerin leaves the safety of the Hideout to join the astronomers in the Observatory for the final day. He is too curious to miss the experience. As the only person without a job to do in relation to the recording of the expected phenomenon, Sheerin is free to explain to the news reporter, Theremon, the information that he (and the reader) needs to understand the situation of the story. His expertise in psychology also enables Sheerin to provide insight into the reasons for the expected universal madness once the planet goes dark.

Sor 5

Referred to as "his serenity," Sor 5 is given only brief mention as the leader of the Cultists.

Theremon 762

A reporter for the Saro City *Chronicle,* Theremon dared to come to the observatory to cover the story of the predicted last day despite the fact that he had ridiculed the work of the astronomers for two months in his column. Theremon's conversations with Sheerin and others provide the background and the explanation of the science involved in the story for the benefit of the reading audience. Usually possessed of "an ample supply of coolness and selfcon fidence," Theremon boasts that he will be fine when the darkness comes. Yet, he and Sheerin seem to take turns at being affected by the claustrophobia and fear. Together, however, they bolt the doors of the Observatory against the mob. It is through the character of Theremon that readers witness the final moments.

Yimot 70

One of the two young astronomers who arrive late at the Observatory because they were experimenting with the concept of stars. The failure of Yimot and Faro's artificial stars to produce madness evokes a conversation between Sheerin and Beenay about other possible explanations for the stars. Yimot operates the huge solarscope while the others are all assigned to cameras.

Setting

The events of Nightfall take place on Kalgash, a planet that is always bathed in sunlight everywhere. The culture that has evolved is similar to the one that has developed in the United States. There are cities, freeways, automobiles, amusement parks, scientists of all kinds, religions, and all sorts of people. Their politics are complicated, marked by compromises and infighting. The dominant religion—the Apostles of Flame—seems at odds with Kalgash's modern culture; scientists tend to view it with apprehension because some of its views would limit freedom of thought. This distrust helps create the disaster that will come.

The scientists are reluctant to lend credence to the belief of the Apostles of Flame that an apocalypse is near; the Apostles of Flame oppose the secularism represented by modern science.

Even after scientists warn of the coming eclipse, politicians are reluctant to antagonize people and are afraid of creating panic among the general populace. The newspapers treat the scientists as crackpots whose inane theories give credence to the beliefs of the even crazier Apostles of Flame. The result is that little is done to prepare for the eclipse, an event that reasonable people regard as inane. An advanced culture with a science poised to make fundamental discoveries about the universe has its entire view of itself and the cosmos utterly shattered by the true horror of nightfall: not the darkness, but the stars.

Social Concerns

On the planet Kalgash scientists from the fields of psychology, archaeology, and astronomy have recently made discoveries that are profoundly disturbing in their implications. The people of Kalgash live their entire lives in sunlight; their planet orbits multiple suns, at least one of which is always in the sky. They have little experience with darkness. When an amusement park ride offers the thrill of several minutes of darkness, some riders suffer nervous breakdowns. A psychologist who specializes in the effects of darkness on the mind is called in to investigate the ride. His discoveries have dire implications when combined with what archaeologists and astronomers have found.

A team of archaeologists who have been studying the oldest known city on their planet by chance discover an even older city. Under that city is another one, and then another below that one, and so on for several layers. Each layer is separated by soot, as if each successive city perished by fire. The layers seem to be about three thousands years apart each, as if a recurring cataclysm had ended each civilization; whatever the cataclysm might be, its result is destruction so complete that each new civilization has had no knowledge of the preceding one. A theory to explain the motions of the suns of Kalgash has proven to have a frightful implication.

A young astronomer has taken the theory, the Universal Law of Gravitation, and worked it out to a conclusion that seems impossible: There is a large object, perhaps a sun, that orbits the familiar suns of Kalgash, but cannot be seen. Perhaps the theory is wrong, which could hurt the reputation of the revered old astronomer who had devised it. Otherwise, an unknown object could very soon eclipse the suns of Kalgash, possibly plunging the entire planet into prolonged darkness. Good, intelligent people, the scientists do what they can to prepare for the fall of darkness. The psychologist is sure many people will survive the darkness with their sanity intact, just as most riders at the amusement park survived the fright of darkness without lasting ill effects. None of them are prepared for what will really happen; nightfall will brings horrors beyond their understanding.

Nightfall is about how scientists often must struggle to understand the world around with only a few clues from their research. It is also about how people try to survive a cataclysm that shatters minds and profoundly alters their views of themselves and their place in the cosmos.

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Social Sensitivity

Nightfall lacks the fast pacing typical of the adventure novels of Asimov and Silverberg; it is not an adventure novel in spite of its adventure structure, featuring the struggle of a few sane people to reach safety. It is instead an "idea" or "concept" novel. Science fiction often focuses on an idea that it ex3688 Nightfall plores. Characterization and plot are often subordinated to the theme—or main idea—of the story. Nightfall is plainly a study of the effects of a revolutionizing new view of the universe upon people who are utterly unprepared for it.

In this, Nightfall examines a phenomenon that has occasionally occurred in earthly cultures. For instance, the landing of men on the moon had a stunning effect on people; there were numerous reports at the time of suicides by people who simply could not live with the idea that people could leave the Earth and walk on other planetary bodies.

Some national governments even withheld the news of the moon landings from their people for years after the events. Einstein's theories of relativity had a revolutionizing effect on the physical sciences, but they were so hard to understand that they did not fall on people as sudden revelations the way the moon landings did; they took time to absorb. Another revolutionizing theory was that of natural selection, as proposed by Charles Darwin. His explanation of evolutionary processes in the development of species established evolution as the overwhelmingly dominant scientific explanation for how life on Earth developed to its present state. From 1859, when Origin of Species was published, to the present, some people have refused to accept any form of evolution as fact; it is still forbidden to be taught in the schools of some countries. Creationism is a religious explanation of how life on Earth became what it is now; creationists argue that a supreme being made all living things; they assert that all life is the product of deliberate action rather than by the accident of natural forces. Because creationism is usually associated with religion and natural selection is associated with science, religion and science have been made to seem to be in constant conflict. The militant atheism of some advocates of the theory of natural selection—such as Carl Sagan and Isaac Asimov—has only exacerbated the antagonism between some religious leaders and some scientists. Since 1859, the change in world view that natural selection implies has been one that many people have simply refused to accept, or perhaps they simply cannot accept it. This sort of conflict may have inspired the religion versus science conflict of Nightfall. The battle between world views is fought out publicly in the press of Kalgash, much as the battle between creationism and natural selection is fought in the American press.

The situation in Nightfall differs in one significant way from the battles between science and religion in the modern world. The fall of night is utterly irrefutable proof that the view of the universe held dear by most people on Kalgash is completely wrong. The change in world views is immediate and unstoppable. Asimov and Silverberg take the view presented in Asimov's original short story that such a stunning revelation would drive people mad. What they do in Nightfall is compress the effects of a change in world view; they condense the madness. By creating an extreme case of sudden revelation, they

are able to explore in the space of a novel what the effects are upon people and society when people's understanding of the physical world changes.

Perhaps the most important point they make in their exploration of their main idea is that it is important to people to have a clear understanding of who they are in relation to the rest of physical reality. Take away that under standing without providing a new, clearly understandable one, and people are lost. One of the important contributions religion, philosophy, and science make to the everyday lives of people is the presenting of a powerful sense of how each person fits into the physical world. Asimov and Silverberg seem to suggest that this is essential for people to lead sane lives, and the point seems to have considerable validity. What would happen if tonight you were forced to realize that the laws of physics were completely wrong, that gravity could not hold you to the Earth, that the law of conservation of energy were utter nonsense, that you could be thrown off the Earth at any moment, or that a drifting molecule could suck the life right out of you any time? Certainly, such a revelation would make some people feel very insecure, especially when they learn the Earth would be sucked through the Sun and propelled away into space. Might some people turn to religion for hope, as they do in Nightfall? If they did not, what would they do now that science has proven to be crazy? Would we take to denying all reality, as many figures do in Nightfall, rather than accept the proof of our own eyes? Psychologists often speak of "denial," of people preserving their views of themselves by refusing to accept the evidence of their own experience. In Nightfall, such people light fires in order to drive away the stars, as if the fires could drive the memories of what they saw from their minds, as if by denying all they could change the very reality of the universe.

The ideas Nightfall presents make the novel challenging reading. Not in the sense of difficult language—most young adults will have little trouble following the adventures of the principal characters and will likely enjoy the imaginative depictions of a world different from our own. The challenge overall is a good one: The novel invites readers to think about what they read.

Nightfall gently urges its readers to think about important ideas concerning sanity and insanity, the relationship between science and religion, and the role of news reporting in how people understand the world around them.

The exciting adventure, the suspenseful action, and the tone of mystery are likely to make Nightfall fun to read, while stirring the imagination and stimulating the mind. Young readers may find themselves spinning out their own imaginative what ifs, just as Nightfall asks "what if" there were a planet where no one knew what nighttime was like?

Techniques

Nightfall's narrative structure is not particularly remarkable. Most of it is devoted to a quest for safety, with some events being predictable. The novel's principal characters meet with religious fanatics, crazed people, would-be dictators, as well as predictably encountering other stereotypes representing different responses to the novel's events. The novel's principal attractions are its ideas and its suspenseful tone of mystery. Any fan of science fiction is likely to enjoy the workmanlike plot, but the lively interplay of ideas and otherworldly suspense are likely to be the most important attractions to readers unfamiliar with science fiction.

The novel's situation is designed to focus on a particular set of ideas. Science fiction novels are often written this; authors can pretty much conjure up any kind of planet and culture they want, so they can "stack the deck" so that a particular idea is highlighted. In the case of Nightfall, the authors wish to explore the consequences of an abrupt shift in world view on people and society. Thus, they create a world in which the people have never seen the night sky; their view of themselves is decidedly parochial; so far as they are concerned, their world and its suns are all there is to the universe. When a scientist discovers that according to the Law of Universal Gravitation an addition dark body must be orbiting the suns, he believes that he or the Law of Universal Gravitation must be wrong — how could there possibly be more to the universe than he can observe? That the universe is huge beyond anyone's imaginings comes as a profound shock to people. By creating this situation, Asimov and Silverberg are able to present the shock to the beliefs of a culture and to then explore how individual people and the culture as a whole deal with the shock.

Creating a consistent tone of suspenseful mystery is very difficult to do. Asimov and Silverberg do it by using irony. In literature, the word irony has a specific use: It means that the audience of a work of literature know more about what is happening in the story than the characters do. This can create anticipation in a reader; the reader foresees events that will surprise one or more characters. In Nightfall, the irony focuses on the central event, the fall of night. Characters speculate on what the nightfall will bring, most of them quite reasonably focusing on the dangers of darkness.

Readers are likely to realize that the night sky will bring with it a vast array of stars. This creates anticipation because the audience knows that a big surprise for the characters is forthcoming, and it creates mystery as the audience wonders what the surprise of seeing the night sky will do to the characters. Asimov and Silverberg skillfully use the central irony of their story to maintain a focus on the novel's key events and themes.

Thematic Overview

What if everything we thought we knew about the universe were proven wrong all at once? Kalgash is a planet that is perpetually bathed in sunlight.

Its people have lived for a multitude of generations thinking that everything they could see was all there was to the universe. They could see their own planet and they could see their suns.

None of them, not even their foremost astronomers, had ever imagined that there was much more to the universe.

When the Universal Law of Gravitation predicts an eclipse, the greatest danger to the minds of the people of Kalgash seems to be the impending darkness. They have good reason to fear a prolonged period of darkness; even a few minutes in the dark can drive some of them insane, and even strong minds can be severely shaken by the experience. A group of scientists are fearful of what will happen when nightfall comes and darkness blankets all of their planet, but even they do not guess at the real terror the night will hold for them.

Stars! When nightfall comes, it is not the darkness that drives people mad; they see a sky full of stars — stars beyond counting. In an instant their little universe explodes into a universe vast and perhaps limitless. This revelation destroys minds and sends people into destructive frenzies. They light fires in the hope that the light of the fires will drive the stars out of the sky.

Even after the eclipse is over, people continue to light fires because they fear the return of the stars. Cities and forests burn.

Nightfall is a speculation about what happens to people when their view of the world around them is overturned.

The novel's central situation is designed to emphasize that theme; the night sky is a terrible surprise to peo ple who have lived for generations without knowing that there was a night sky. Asimov and Silverberg draw some interesting conclusions about their speculations of the effects of a stunning revolution in world view on people. First, they suggest that most people cannot handle true revolutions in scientific or religious thought. In the condensed and intense situation of Nightfall, people actually lose their minds, ending up raving lunatics who burn their civilization down in a frantic attempt to deny what their eyes have seen.

Second, they suggest that some people will be able to recover from the shock of a revolution in thought. Scientists with a firm grounding in logic and a flexibility of mind to absorb new information may be able to adapt to new situations better than most people.

In addition, people with clearly understood religious beliefs may also manage to survive a shocking change in world view.

In Nightfall, the Apostles of Flame are portrayed as already a little nuts before nightfall, so they remain at least a little odd after the cataclysmic event.

Still, in an unusual twist from the pens of Asimov and Silverberg, the novel shows religion as offering the best hope of preserving culture after the collapse of civilization. This speculation might be compared to what happened after the collapse of the Roman Empire, when clerics preserved knowledge through the Dark Ages. The authors also suggest that knowing that some sort of disaster is coming may help people survive the shock of a definitive shift in world view. In Nightfall, those characters who know something is coming recover their sanity better than do the other characters.

A third suggestion is that most people need some sort of underlying order to their lives. Culture provides much of this order by providing a set of principles for living. As an expression of culture, society providing roles for people to fill, such as the roles of scientist, cleric, and newspaper reporter.

Take away these roles, and even the most intelligent of people can flounder.

Thus, in Nightfall the principal characters flounder as they try to give meaning to their lives now that their old roles no longer exist. In addition, after the cataclysm, people try to recreate order; they form small fiefdoms, invent rules about who can and cannot be allowed to make fires, and what people are allowed to carry with them as they travel from one fiefdom to another. Some, such as Theremon, join a religion, which offers rules for conduct and a coherent world view.

In offering these suggestions, Asimov and Silverberg do not seem to be making judgments about what is good or what is evil. The rivals for social leadership — scientists, clerics, politicians, and news reporters — each have something valuable to offer their society. They do seem to lean in favor of scientists; scientists offer a rational view of how the world works. Even so, not all scientists are good scientists, and in Nightfall even the best scientists are often unsure of themselves. It is in the nature of their work that good scientists must recognize the fallibility of their reasoning and evidence; religious leaders and newspaper writers offer people far greater certainty about life than good scientists can.

The ending of Nightfall may represent Asimov and Silverberg's conclusions about the merits of rival views of how society should work. When Theremon joins the Apostles of Flame, he does so with the explicit intention of mitigating the effects of religious fanaticism on the culture that is to emerge from the ashes of civilization. Perhaps this means that a culture needs all of its major elements of leadership; the scientists, clerics, politicians, and news reporters balance each other, possibly mitigating the worst effects of any one element of society just as news reporter Theremon and scientist Siferra hope to do with the Apostles of Flame, who were, after all, right about the impending doom, but whose rules for society are too harsh for most people.

Themes

Darkness and Light

The whole story is built around the concepts of darkness and light. On a planet with perpetual sunlight, darkness is inconceivable. The story presents an interesting theory about the effects of darkness on a people who have never experienced it. Asimov's editor believed that such people would go mad in darkness, even though the stars would become visible. So, Asimov wrote a story based on that supposition.

Deprivation and Need

Being deprived of light is the worst fear of the people of Lagash. After 2,000 years of light, they are genetically in need of light. Darkness is an unthinkably terrifying concept. Thus, the conflict in the story is the problem of how to respond to a crisis when one of the most basic needs of existence disappears. Cleverly, Asimov provides a psychologist as one of the main characters in the story in order to discuss and analyze the situation.

Vulnerability

Knowing that they are dependent on light, the scientists understand that the impending darkness makes them vulnerable to insanity. Each person in the story is trying to come to grips with this vulnerability because survival depends on being able to overcome it. Asimov provides some telling lines in the story about falling victim to this vulnerability; for example:

Gamma, the brightest of the planet's six suns, was setting. It had already faded and yellowed into the horizon mists, and Aton knew he would never see it again as a sane man; He [Theremon] was going mad and knew it, and somewhere deep inside a bit of sanity was screaming, struggling to fight off the hopeless flood of black terror. It was very horrible to go mad— to know that in a little minute you would be here physically and yet all the real essence would be dead and drowned in the black madness.

Initiative

Aton and his team of astronomers take the initiative to save those in the future rather than just succumb or concentrate on personal survival. Aton also takes the initiative to ask the Cultists for their data that might help his research. The scientists also show initiative by inventing the torches to provide light once the darkness came, thus possibly helping to prevent the terrible consequences of total darkness. Initiative is an important theme to Asimov who believed strongly that humans create their own problems and are therefore the only ones who can solve them.

Madness and Sanity

Obviously, the preservation of sanity and the avoidance of the products of madness is the main concern of the characters in "Nightfall." The presence of a psychologist in the story allows Asimov to discuss how the mind works and why the darkness could cause insanity. Sheerin says: "Your brain is going to be presented with the phenomenon outside its limits of comprehension. You will go mad, completely and permanently! There is no question of it!"

Style

Character

The characters in this story are not aliens with four eyes and antennae. They are human. They may have numbers for last names, but they are physically the same as humans and use contemporary language. Asimov wanted the story to be a metaphor for life on earth, so he wanted his readers to be able to identify with the characters. Consequently, he has a "tubby" psychologist, a redheaded newspaper reporter, a white-haired pedantic director, and a cast of otherwise "just-like-us" characters who may be able to give the reader some insight about how to handle a crisis that calls for initiative and self-sacrifice.

Climax and Denouement

The whole story is aimed at the point at which the eclipse will be total and the planet will be plunged into unaccustomed darkness. The true climax comes when the stars come out. It is their existence that was most debated, and their effect that was most feared. The denouement is the few minutes it takes after Theremon sees the stars to go mad. The reader experiences the last rational thoughts of Theremon and Aton, and then knows that, indeed, "The long night had come again."

Point of View

The point of view is third person omniscient. Even though the character of Theremon is used to ask questions and get explanations for the reader, the story is not presented by him. The reader is allowed to view the whole scene and, after watching Theremon go mad, to observe the world of Lagash going up in flames outside the Observatory windows.

Setting

A common method of writers who want to comment on their culture without making direct references is to provide an otherworld setting. Asimov may be describing a situation on the planet Lagash, but he intends for the lessons in the story to be taken to heart by the readers on Earth. This task requires inventing the elements of the other place in appearance, dress, activities, technology, and so forth. In a short story, Asimov did not have to go into any great detail, so the only truly differentiating factor is the perpetual daylight caused by six suns. After that, Lagash could be Earth, but that one factor is what causes the unique catastrophe facing Lagash.

Suspense

The overriding characteristic of "Nightfall" is the suspense of waiting for the darkness and the stars to come. The astronomers are preparing their equipment for that moment. The people in the Hideout are probably experiencing great tension from the suspense of not knowing whether they will succeed in surviving, and what they will do with what's left of their world if they do. Every person in the story is trying to deal with the anticipation of impending madness. Of course, Asimov succeeds at building suspense when the reader can hardly wait to find out if the Cultists will manage to break in, if Latimer will break his word, if indeed everyone will go mad or if some of them will overcome their fears and genetic conditioning and maintain sanity.

Historical Context

"Nightfall" is set on a fictional planet at an indeterminate time. Consequently, there can be no discussion of the context of the times depicted in the story. However, written in 1941, "Nightfall" was created at an important time in the life of its author and in the history of the world.

At the time of this story's publication, Asimov was only twenty-one years old, but he had already been writing for a few years, publishing about a dozen stories, and was finishing his master's degree in chemistry at Columbia University in New York City. Asimov himself admits that "Nightfall" "was a watershed in my professional career." His payment for the story was the most he had ever received. "What's more, I was suddenly taken seriously and the world of science fiction became aware that I existed. As the years passed, in fact, it became evident that I had written a 'classic.'" Asimov went on, of course, to become one of America's most prolific and diversified writers of fiction and nonfiction. He received awards in a number of genres and activities. Yet "Nightfall," his youthful work written as something of an assignment by his editor, retained the reputation as the best science fiction story ever written.

The world of science fiction in 1941 was hot. It was a popular genre that had developed out of what was called scientific romance. The label, science fiction, was coined in 1929 by Hugo Gersback whose magazine *Amazing Stories* touted the works of Jules Verne and H. G. Wells as examples to follow. Until Asimov raised the bar for science fiction, it was the stuff of pulp magazines, and they existed in abundance, but mostly in the United States. It was in 1939 that Orson Welles caused panic with his broadcast of one of science fiction's most famous works, *War of the Worlds.* The tone of the early stories was largely that of social optimism about a future filled with technology. The readers were typically young males otherwise not interested in literature, but very interested in science, space, and mechanical gadgetry. Science fiction clubs flourished. Asimov attended his fist meeting of the wellknown Futurians in 1938. Legend has it that Asimov was often thrown out for being loud and opinionated.

Most of the science fiction magazines died out during World War II because, of course, the war preoccupied everyone, and the main audience for the magazines went off to fight. Nonetheless, the famous writer and editor John W. Campbell, Jr. held things together at *Astounding Stories* and mentored new authors such as Asimov. The result was that, despite the interruption of the war, the 1940s became what is known as the Golden Age of science fiction.

In 1941, America was just pulling out of the Great Depression. This was one of the most difficult and revolutionary times in American history. The stock market had crashed, and the banks had failed. One fourth of the labor force was out of work. People were broke and desperate and began questioning the role of government. A number of people explored the merits of communism and other social and political alternatives to fix the failures of democracy. This inquiry later proved detrimental to their reputations during the McCarthy era.

However, on the positive side, government did respond with numerous social action programs that put people back to work and guaranteed certain rights for the workers. It was in this period of social re-examination that Asimov injected the element of social responsibility into science fiction. Science fiction was no longer just "What if" but "What if, and how will it affect humans?" "Nightfall" is a perfect example of this questioning attitude. Asimov questions the validity of sacred scriptures and the motives of religion and asserts that science will provide the only real hope for the future. It was a precursor to cultural concerns in the latter half of the twentieth century

Critical Overview

On the whole, Isaac Asimov is greatly admired as one of America's most prolific and accomplished writers across a broad spectrum of subjects and genres. While some may argue that Asimov's most notable contributions are in the field of science fiction, others make a strong case that his remarkable ability to clearly explain complex issues in science for the lay reader left an important legacy in the public's understanding of modern technology.

The science fiction of the 1930s tended to be soap operas set in space with lots of gadgets. Asimov created science fiction that focused on people and the social and historical changes that affected them and their moral decisions. Mervyn Rothstein said in his obituary for the *New York Times* that Asimov was "a pioneer in elevating the genre from pulpmagazine adventure to a more intellectual level that dealt with sociology, history, mathematics and science."

Epitomizing this new direction is "Nightfall," the story that made Asimov a star among science fiction writers when it was published in 1941. As L. David Allen said in his article for *Science Fiction Writers,* "The concept behind the story evokes the sense of wonder that has been one of the hallmarks of the best science fiction." Allen also listed several other elements of "Nightfall" that made it so successful:

Although the characters in "Nightfall" are necessarily one-dimensional, the characterizations are sharp and cover a range of human reactions to an unusual situation. The background is carefully presented and made plausible. The opposition of science to mythology adds depth to the story. The suspense is built step by step to a powerful climax. There is a kind of poetry in the story. . . . the kind of poetry that arises when the idea and development of a story merge and flow forth. It is the way that all of the elements work together, rather than any single element, that gives "Nightfall" its lasting impact.

Allen's comments about the background of the story coincide with the observations of other critics as well. They note that Asimov is able to set up a credible explanation for the rare appearance of stars on Lagash: a 2049 year cycle of eclipses. From that situation, all the other elements of the story beautifully evolve: a population accustomed only to constant light and therefore having an inherent and deep fear of darkness, the potentially disastrous results of plunging the world into darkness without explanation or preparation, and the interpretations of archaeological and religious evidence of previous occurrences of the darkness. In addition, the critics note, Asimov provides believably advanced technology for a world so accustomed to perpetual light that people do not even know how to make a decent torch or candle.

Michael Stanton, in an article about Asimov for the *Reference Guide to American Literature* touched on two of the same points made by Allen about the power of the concept of Asimov's story and about the characters. Although speaking in general terms about all of Asimov's stories, Stanton felt that Asimov "was at least as interested in idea

as in character." Since the idea for the story was suggested to Asimov by his editor, one might say that he built the story around the idea and, therefore, the idea is more important. However, a study of critical material about Asimov reveals that, although the idea for the situation presented in the story was intriguing, it was the reaction of the people in the story to their situation that was most revealing. After all, Asimov's editor not only set up the background of the story and asked him what he thought would happen in that situation, but also Campbell opined that he thought the people would go mad. Asimov's response to Campbell's opinion was to insert another element that critics have found in much of Asimov's work: a hope that science would overcome human frailty.

Some critics, and Asimov himself, were perturbed by the idea that one of his earliest stories would be considered his best. As Asimov wrote in 1969 in the introduction to his collection *Nightfall and Other Stories,* "It seemed to me, after all, that although I know no more about Writing now than I knew then, sheer practice should have made me more proficient, technically, with each year." Nonetheless, in 1970, "Nightfall" was voted the best science fiction short of all time by the Science Fiction Writers of America, and it is now one of the most anthologized of science fiction stories.

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Kerschen, a former teacher, is now the executive director of a children's charity and a freelance writer. In this essay, Kerschen examines the similarities to Earth culture that permeate the alien world found in Asimov's most-admired short story.

"Nightfall," one of Isaac Asimov's earliest and best-known short stories, presents an alien world in crisis. Lagash has six suns and perpetual daylight, yet it is populated by humans, and they are struggling to confront the unknown and survive. Through the story, Asimov champions science and rational behavior as the only viable vehicles under such circumstances. Endowing life on Lagash with many of the same characteristics as that on Earth, the message is hard to miss that Asimov is commenting on what he sees as helpful and harmful to his own world's civilization.

Michael Stanton, in an overview of Asimov for the *Reference Guide to American Literature,* says that Asimov "is notable for a straightforward and unadorned style. The meaning of his fiction is very much on the surface and, while important themes run throughout his stories, symbol-hunting generally goes unrewarded." Examples of Earth-like touches include the use of the name Johnny Public for the common person even though the other names in the story are alien sounding. The newspaper in the story has the very familiar name of the *Chronicle.* Similar to Earth culture, Lagash has a "World Expo" called the Jonglor Centennial Exposition, complete with amusement rides. Also familiar to modern readers is the concept that news reporters are annoying and will do anything to get a story, that "putting a spin" on a story is a negotiable practice.

Asimov actually refers to the Earth by name at the end of the story: "Not Earth's feeble thirty-six hundred Stars visible to the eye; Lagash was in the center of a giant cluster." While it may seem a slip to mention Earth, Asimov was probably trying to impress the reader with the enormity of the change in the sky by providing a comparison that the reader would understand. Despite all the similarities to Earth, Asimov included sufficient differences to remind the reader that "Nightfall" is set in another world. For instance, the characters have numbers (family codes he called them in the novel version of the story) instead of last names, and currency called credits, a term used by a number of other science fiction writers, too.

Besides a few familiar terms, Asimov draws parallels between Earth's history and that of Lagash. There is evolutionary development from a Stone Age—one in which people "were little more than rather intelligent apes." Just as Earth has had Incas, Aztecs, and Mayans, Lagash has had whole cities and cultures at their height mysteriously destroyed with "nothing left behind to give a hint as to the cause."

While archaeologists are discovering a regular cycle of progress and destruction in the history of Lagash, the astronomers are busy calculating applications of the Law of Universal Gravitation. This law is a recent conclusion, and Asimov copies Earth history to describe its development. Sheerin explains that "After Genovi 41 discovered that Lagash rotated about the sun Alpha rather than vice versa— and that was four hundred

years ago—astronomers have been working." The mention of Genovi 41 is an allusion to Earth's Galileo and the similar discovery that Earth rotated around the sun rather than the sun around Earth.

Sheerin goes on to explain that twenty years earlier it was demonstrated that the law accounted for the orbital motions of the six suns. But ten years ago, the law and the orbit observed did not coincide. "Either the law was invalid, or there was another, as yet unknown, factor involved." Was the law really a scientific law, or back to being just a theory? Asimov is making the point that even universally accepted facts should be questioned and tested because there is always the possibility of an unknown factor. In this case on Lagash, the Law of Universal Gravitation does hold up, and the problem is indeed something unknown.

The extent to which humans can guess wrong based on inadequate information is demonstrated repeatedly in the story. Yimot 70 and Faro 24's experiment shows how primitive and misdirected the science can be when people are trying to figure out something never experienced. Beenay is correct when he theorizes about "suns that are so far away that they're too dim to see." But then Beenay blows it when he concludes that there would be only a dozen or two, maybe. "There just isn't any place in the universe you could put a million suns—unless they touch each other." This thinking is as limited as the IBM executive who turned down the idea of building personal computers because he could not imagine that anyone would want a computer in the home.

Beenay's next idea further emphasizes how wrong seemingly logical conclusions can be when based on ignorance. Beenay says: "Supposing you had a universe in which there was a planet with only one sun." The idea is so foreign to Sheerin that he asks doubtfully: "But would such a system be dynamically stable?" Although Beenay is able to say that it would be stable based on mathematical calculations, he goes on to say that "life would be impossible on such a planet. It wouldn't get enough heat and light, and if it rotated there would be total Darkness half of each day. You couldn't expect life —which is fundamentally dependent upon light— to develop under those conditions."

Such a conclusion gives the reader a good laugh. Obviously, life on such a planet is possible. The ironic point is, of course, that people on Earth are possibly making the same mistakes about life and conditions on other planets. In addition, Beenay's educated, intelligent, but totally wrong assumptions illustrate the moral of the story as expressed by Aton's final words: "We didn't know it all. We didn't know anything."

The idea for "Nightfall" was suggested to Asimov by his editor who quoted Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Nature:* "If the stars should appear one night in a thousand years, how would men believe and adore, and preserve for many generations the remembrance of the city of God?" However, they felt that they had to reverse Emerson's romantic notion that the stars were proof that there is a God and that they would therefore be comforted by the awesome sight of the stars. In this story, the possible existence of stars is interpreted by the religious to be an awe-filled and awful avenue to salvation. To the non-religious, the stars are a terrifying sight that turns out to be proof only of the limited knowledge of humans.

The fact that Aton had to call upon the Cult to get data that he needed may seem to give some credit to religion. Asimov, an atheist, was only admitting that there is some basis in fact for the beliefs of the religious. Otherwise, he makes sure to include statements such as Sheerin's "Of course they mix all this up with a lot of religio-mystic notions" and Theremon's "I've been laughing at that sort of thing all my life."

It is remarkable that Asimov wrote this story in 1941 because so many of the comments he makes about religion seem to come from the culture of the latter part of the twentieth century. For example, Theremon says, "This is not the century to preach 'The end of the world is at hand.' . . people don't believe the Book of Revelations any more." The Book of Revelations is, of course, an allusion to any of the religious texts such as the Bible, the Book of Mormon, the Koran, etc. These writings are interpreted literally by many, but Asimov sees them as mythology of the type the Cultists in the story use to explain the coming darkness—that Lagash enters a huge cave every 2,049 years.

Fundamentalists like the Cultists often give circular arguments. Latimer 25 objects to the attempt to back up the Cult's beliefs with scientific evidence: "There was no need to prove that. It stands proven by the Book of Revelations." The question is, of course, but what proves the validity of the Book of Revelations? To Latimer, the answer is simply "I just know." Just knowing is another way of saying, "I take it on faith; I believe without proof." To someone like Asimov, such acceptance without scientific verification is impossible. Instead, to Asimov, the Book of Revelations and its kin are, as described by Sheerin, formed "on the testimony of those least qualified to serve as historians; that is, children and morons; and it was probably edited and re-edited through the cycles." Consequently, these scriptures "can't help but be a mass of distortion." In contrast, to Latimer and other believers, the work of the scientists is blasphemy: "You made of the Darkness and of the Stars a natural phenomenon and removed all its real significance."

Asimov draws further comparisons to religious practices in his own world. He has Latimer 25 chant scripture in an ancient language, thus alluding to the chanting of many Eastern religions or Gregorian chants in Latin. Borrowing from the shaved heads of the Buddhist monks or the long sideburn curls of Hasidic Jews, Asimov describes Latimer as having a "short yellow beard curled elaborately in the style affected by the Cultists." Just as certain religious leaders on Earth have titles, the head of the Lagash Cult is called "His Serenity."

To Asimov, a belief in a god or gods is a way for people to explain the seemingly inexplicable, just as mythology was a primitive world's way to explain natural occurrences such as the seasons. He also knows that religious leaders can be unscrupulous people who take advantage of the gullible for their own benefit. Thus, in the story, Asimov shows the Cultists taking advantage of the eclipse to promote their cause: "The Cult is in for an hour of unexampled prosperity. I trust they'll make the most of it." He describes the scene in the city as "one gigantic revival" where people suddenly find religion in their fear. Even those who never give much thought to their souls are frantic to redeem themselves when faced with death, just in case there is something to this god thing.

Consequently, "the cultists are active. They're rousing the people to storm the Observatory— promising them immediate entrance into grace, promising them salvation, promising them anything." Since the work of the scientists is considered blasphemous, the attainment of salvation can be achieved by destroying the Observatory. Putting one's soul in jeopardy of eternal damnation is a powerful threat. It worked to get Latimer to give his promise not to interfere anymore, and it worked to get the people to form a mob to storm the Observatory. It seems odd that Sheerin would say "Keep on working and pray that totality comes first." Is "pray" just a figure of speech, or is there a whisper of belief in everyone? Perhaps Sheerin uses the word because "Your brain wasn't built for the conception [of darkness] any more than it was built for the conception of infinity or of eternity. You can only talk about it."

Marian Pehowski, writing about Asimov for *Contemporary Novelists,* remarked that

Asimov is the writer who most clearly established the science fiction thesis that the future is one of alternatives —good or bad—and that there are choices to be made by beings along the way. . . . his favorite proposal [was] that there is a way to survive, but first there must be a will to do so—the first of all good choices.

As Stanton noted: "Asimov was a scientist and an apostle of rationalism and scientific discipline. He was literally a secular humanist and his fiction, fully cognizant of human folly, celebrated human reason and human possibility." History is cyclical as evidenced by the rise and fall of many civilizations. But, with "Nightfall," Asimov is saying that the cycle can be broken with free will and determination. The scientists at the Observatory have chosen, at the risk of their sanity and their very lives, to try to break the cycle that is inhibiting civilization on Lagash from developing to its full potential. On the grand stage of world history, it is such seemingly minute but powerful actions of heroic individuals that effect change.

Source: Lois Kerschen, Critical Essay on "Nightfall" in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Tritt explores similarities between Lord Byron's poem "Darkness" and Asimov's "Nightfall," finding both have "darkness and mankind's reaction to it" as a central theme.

When Asimov sat down, a sheet of paper in front of him, blank except for Emerson's quotation from Nature as a heading, what a great feat of extrapolation was involved in pounding out "Nightfall" (1941), one of his best short stories. True, Asimov and his editor Campbell had talked of the Emerson quotation, had even decided together upon the name of the story; but in the end, it was up to Asimov to "face the empty sheet of paper in the typewriter." Without detracting from his imaginative accomplishment, I would like to suggest that Asimov may have drawn not so much on the American poet and essayist as on an earlier work of Byron's, the poem "Darkness" (1816). This poem, though not specifically recollected as a source by Asimov, may nonetheless have shaped "Nightfall." The two works are linked by a shared vision of a world become desolate without light. The terrifying destruction of man in the context of this desolation underlines the tenuousness of man's sanity and indeed of his very existence.

Darkness and mankind's reaction to it are at the heart of both Asimov's story and Byron's poem. In "Darkness," the "bright sun is extinguished," while in "nightfall" the last of Lagash's suns is eclipsed ("a giant eyelid shutting slantwise over the light of the world"). Both authors paint a blackened landscape which is horrible and frightening. Byron writes:

. . . and the icy earth
Swung blind and blackening in the moonless air;
Morn came and went—and came, and brought no day,
And men forgot their passions in the dread
Of this their desolation . . .

Asimov describes Saro City as a place "where the spires . . . gleamed bloodily on the horizon." He also portrays Beta, the sun, as "dwarfed and evil," while Lagash itself is shown to be a "cold, horribly bleak world." The two writers describe literally the effects of darkness on the landscape, but they also extend darkness to the level of metaphor, for the darkness without represents a darkness within man which is released by the barren landscape.

In "Nightfall," the cultists maintain a belief that as the darkness comes and the stars appear, men are robbed of their souls and become inhuman: ". . . the souls of men departed from them, and their abandoned bodies became even as beasts; yea, even as brutes of the wild; so that through the blackened streets of the cities of Lagash they prowled with wild cries." This "religious" belief is affirmed in the context of the tale as men are driven mad in their desperation. "He was going mad, and knew it, and somewhere deep inside a bit of sanity was screaming, struggling to fight off the hopeless flood of black terror . . . The bright walls of the Universe were shattered and

their awful black fragments were falling down to crush and squeeze and obliterate him." Men are reduced to beasts "crawling" and "groping," conscious not of each other, but only of a need for light: they "made for the observatory or fort and assaulted it with bare hands . . ." Even Aton, the super-rational head scientist, becomes a "terribly frightened child," and the final images of the story include "someone [who] clawed at a torch."

Byron likewise describes man reduced by darkness to a beast, lost and terrified: illustrating the "hideousness" of a "fiend."

. . . and all hearts
Were chilled into a selfish prayer for light:
The brows of men by the despairing light
Wore an unearthly aspect, as by fits
The flashes felt upon them; some lay down
And hid their eyes and wept; and some did rest
Their chins upon their clenched hands, and smiled;
And others hurried to and fro . . . . . and looked up
With mad disquietude on the dull sky,
The pall of a past world; and then again
With curses cast them down upon the dust,
And gnashed their teeth and howled . . .

Man, as he is portrayed in both these visions, is reduced to an irrational beast "howling" and "clawing"; he has moved from sanity to madness, from civilization to primitiveness.

With an all-consuming desire for light to ease the terrors of pervading darkness, men take to burning whatever will create light. In "Nightfall": "On the horizon outside the window, in the direction of Saro City, a crimson glow began growing, strengthening in brightness, that was not the glow of the sun." In "Darkness," "the thrones,/The palaces of crowned Kings—the huts,/The habitations of all things which dwell,/Were burnt for beacons . . ." The passion for light is futile, for the flames are "extinguished with a crash" and there proves to be nothing that can stem the coming of the "long night." Man passes into extinction.

What is presented, then, in both "Nightfall" and "Darkness" is a vision of man driven mad and desperate by a blackened planet. Man, the rational creature, becomes bestial, "howling" and "clawing." Where poem and tale differ is in the *finality* of the vision of destruction. In "Nightfall," the sun is extinguished for but a day; the eclipse will end, and life begin once again. Significantly, the stars, unlike in "Darkness," do not "Wander darkling in the eternal space" but rather, "appear." They indicate a universe which is yet alive; Lagash itself will return to life. In "Darkness" there is no evidence that life will begin again. The final passages of that poem relate a return to chaos which is eternal; the death is one not only of the earth but of the universe as well:

The waves are dead; the tides were in their grave,
The moon, their mistress, had expired before;
The winds were withered in the stagnant air,

And the clouds perished; Darkness had no need
Of aid from them—She was the Universe.

In the final analysis, one cannot state whether one vision is more effective than another. Surely, Byron's is the more poetic and haunting; what for him was "not all a dream" becomes for the reader nothing less than nightmare. The images he presents are terrifying; the two men who face each other and die of "mutual hideousness" remain with us. The image of the dog howling over his dead master blends with Byron's poem as a whole to capture beautifully a sense of utter desolation. Asimov, on the other hand, does not try to be poetic (though at times he may be so); he creates a work of SF in which a world and its inhabitants react to a specific natural catastrophe. He imagines an S-F context, a planet Lagash with six suns. Through this unusual setting, we are able to understand the meaning darkness has for Lagash's inhabitants, and beyond that their ignorance of the existence of stars. Asimov creates "cultists" whose religious beliefs explain the wonder and the reverence inspired by the stars, as described in his epigraph from Emerson, and further brings to life all of the characters and other variables which "glue" the whole together coherently.

Inevitably, both "Nightfall" and "Darkness," unique as they are, must be appreciated on their own terms. Perhaps what is most remarkable about the two works when they are examined together, is that two so very different men, writing in different eras, in different forms, should share similar visions of man driven mad, even to extinction, in a world deprived of light.

Source: Michael Tritt, "Byron's 'Darkness' and Asimov's 'Nightfall,'" in *Science Fiction Studies,* Vol. 8, No. 1, March 1981, pp. 26-28.

Critical Essay #3

In the following excerpt, Patrouch discusses Asimov's ambivalence about the quality of "Nightfall," and analyzes critically elements Asimov had identified as suspect.

Before writing "Nightfall" Asimov had written thirty-one stories and sold seventeen (four more would sell eventually). "Marooned Off Vesta," perhaps "The Callistan Menace," and "Homo Sol," along with the robot stories "Reason" and "Liar!" were the best he had done so far. His own assessment of his career to this point is "Looking back on my first three years as a writer, then, I can judge myself to be nothing more than a steady and . . . hopeful third-rater."

Then, on March 17, 1941, he began to write "Nightfall," his thirty-second written story, his sixteenth published, and the story that established him as a frontline science fiction writer.

Science fiction readers and writers are unanimous in their respect and admiration for this story. In 1968-69, for example, the Science Fiction Writers of America voted "Nightfall" by a wide margin the best science fiction short story ever written, and in 1971 the readers of *Analog* in an informal poll expressed similar feelings. Whenever the magazines poll their readers for favorite stories, "Nightfall" is at or very near the top. For the average reader Asimov and science fiction are synonymous; for the science fiction reader Asimov and "Nightfall" (along with the Robot Stories and the Foundation Series) are synonymous. Whenever I use "Nightfall" in the classroom, it is inevitably the students' favorite story in the course.

Yet Asimov professes himself to be ambivalent about the story's fame. He feels that the story shows a bit too much its pulp heritage, especially in its language, its characters, and its plotting. He also feels that he has written better stories since, perhaps many better stories. (He usually cites as his favorites from among his works "The Ugly Little Boy" followed by "The Last Question," though in *Before the Golden Age* he calls "The Last Question" "my personal favorite of all the short stories I have ever written".) In *Nightfall and Other Stories* he writes as follows:

I must say, though, that as time passed, I began to feel some irritation at being told, over and over again, that "Nightfall" was my best story. It seemed to me, after all, that although I know no more about Writing now than I knew then, sheer practice should have made me more proficient, technically, with each year.

He decided to bring out a collection that began with "Nightfall" and contained nineteen other stories in chronological order, so "now you can see for yourself how my writing has developed (or has failed to develop) with the years. Then you can decide for yourself why (or *if*) 'Nightfall' is better than the others." This looks as if the purpose of the collection *Nightfall and Other Stories* is, at least partly, to destroy the reputation of "Nightfall."

But Asimov couldn't really bring himself to do that. The result is a collection of stories that he had not seen fit to anthologize before. There are no stories from the forties, the period immediately following "Nightfall" and during which he was composing the Robot Stories and the Foundation Series. Three quarters of the stories are from the fifties, which he had already culled over for *The Martian Way, Earth Is Room Enough, and Nine Tomorrows.* The result seems to be that Asimov wants us to compare "Nightfall" with stories that he himself did not really think of as his best. This is a good indication of his ambivalence toward "Nightfall."

Let's turn to the story itself. It is headed by a quotation from Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay "Nature," the first paragraph of the first chapter (also called "Nature"). The remark is an exclamation designed by Emerson to show the powerful effect nature would have on man if it weren't so familiar: "If the stars should appear one night in a thousand years, how would men believe and adore, and preserve for many generations the remembrance of the city of God!" In effect, the story converts the exclamation point to a question mark (as was actually done in the editions of *Nightfall and Other Stories*) and answers the question "Under such conditions, how *would* man remember and adore?" Asimov divides men into two groups depending on their reaction. The great majority convert to the Cult and react by turning passive: it is God's will that the world should end, and they accept it as God's will. The minority, under Aton and the astronomers, try to do something about it. They react actively, rationally. And Asimov leaves no doubt in our minds as to which side he is on. It's "Marooned Off Vesta" in a different form: the hysterics of Mark Brandon versus the reason of Warren Moore, the religion of the Cultists and the masses versus the reasoned planning of Aton and the scientists. Asimov shows that Emerson was right—man would believe and adore— but that man was wrong to do so. He should think rather than merely believe.

Let's move on to the problems Asimov sees in the story, the problems of language, characterization, and plotting. The pulpish quality of the writing can be illustrated by its first two sentences (italics mine).

Aton 77, director of Saro University, thrust out a belligerent lower lip and glared at the young newspaperman in a *hot fury.*

Theremon 762 took that fury *in his stride.*

Note that the diction Asimov uses is not simply strong. It is extreme and trite. The thrust-out lower lip, the glaring, and the hot fury are overly familiar to us all, as is taking something in stride. No matter how interesting the content may be, there is no originality or interest in the language.

Very soon after this, "Beenay 25 thrust a tongue's tip across dry lips and interposed nervously." This reuse of "thrust" indicates a paucity of vocabulary. Then "the director turned to him and lifted a white eyebrow." The lifted eyebrow is trite. Follow Aton's actions for a moment: "The director . . . shook it [a newspaper] at Theremon furiously . . . Aton dashed the newspaper to the floor, strode to the window and clasped his arms behind his back. 'You may leave,' he snapped over his shoulder. He stared

moodily . . . He whirled. 'No, wait, come here!' He gestured peremptorily . . . Aton gestured outward." An extreme example of this stereotyped pulp diction can be found toward the end of the story: "Theremon cried out sharply and muttered through a blinding haze of pain. 'You doublecrossing rat!'" In the pulps any crying out was done sharply, the hero always muttered, a haze of pain was always blinding, and for some reason all rats were double-crossing.

Though the general quality of the writing has this pulpish triteness about it, some flashes of interesting language do get through. In the paragraph immediately following "You double-crossing rat!" we find, "then there was the strange awareness [still pulpy] that the last thread of sunlight had thinned out and snapped." Contrary to what happens in reading the greater part of the story, the interest here is almost solely in the language rather than in what is being described. (Have you ever seen any threads of light snap at sunset?)

And later, "Thirty thousand mighty suns shone down in a soul-searing splendor that was more frighteningly cold in its awful indifference than the bitter wind that shivered across the cold, horribly bleak world." That "shivered" is exactly right here, it is far from trite, and the whole sentence—the thought and the language combined—stimulates the reader. We have hints here of an Asimov who is a writer and knows how to manipulate language rather than simply an Asimov who knows his pulp idiom and how to write salable stories in it.

The characters tend to be pulpish, too. Writers for mass circulation media as old as the pulps and as new as TV quickly realized that certain professions are easier to write stories about because their practitioners can legitimately ask questions dredging up information the reader or the viewer needs to know. A detective, a physician, or a lawyer may ask what you were doing the night before last, but who would believe a plumber who asked the same thing? The point here is not that lawyers are inherently more interesting than plumbers. It is that stories about lawyers are easier to write than stories about plumbers, because the exposition is easier.

Another profession very popular in the pulps, on the radio, and on early TV—though not used so much anymore, perhaps because it has become trite through overuse—is the newspaper reporter. It is perfectly legitimate for a reporter to hear about something interesting and to go out to get the facts. And it is perfectly legitimate for the reader's-listener's-viewer's ignorance of "what happened" to be satisfied while the reporter learns these facts. Theremon is a reporter who goes to the observatory to have questions answered. As Aton and Sheerin answer them, we learn about the setting, the Cult, the conflicts, the eclipse. In other words Asimov in this story makes use of the age-old expository device of the inquiring newspaper reporter. Note how Theremon recedes in importance as the need for exposition diminishes.

Aton is another trite, conventional, unindividualized character. The extent of Asimov's characterization of him is to classify him as an astronomer—and you know how they are: "Astronomers were queer ducks, anyway, and if Aton's actions of the last two months meant anything, this same Aton was the queer-duckiest of the lot."

Only Sheerin comes across as an individual, with his high spirits and his gregarious willingness to help Asimov tell Theremon and us all we need to know to understand the story. He has curiosity. He leaves the Hideout in order to be "where things are getting hot" because he wants to see the legendary "Stars." He has courage. Sheerin leads the way down the dark staircases to bolt the doors against the invading mob from the city. Most important, he has hidden whiskey. "Tiptoeing to the nearest window, he squatted, and from the low window box beneath withdrew a bottle of red liquid that gurgled suggestively when he shook it. 'I thought Aton didn't know about this,' he remarked."

On the whole, the characters are not people but rather labels for the different parts of the story machine: a newspaper reporter who asks our questions for us, an observatory director who answers some of them, a jolly little tub who answers the rest when the director must get back to work. They exist not as people in their own right, but as counters to keep the story moving for ward. This is the pulp attitude toward characterization. The story is the thing.

Despite the fact that the story is almost entirely conversation, it has a helter-skelter quality about it. One scene tends not to flow into the next, but to be interrupted by the next. In the first scene shift, Sheerin and Theremon simply walk into an adjacent room for some expository conversation. This ends with a "sudden hubbub that came from the adjoining room." This second scene ends in midsentence when "from somewhere up above there sounded a sharp clang, and Beenay, starting to his feet, dashed up the stairs with a 'What the devil!'" It turns out that a religious fanatic, Latimer, is destroying photographic plates. The interrogation of Latimer is interrupted by Theremon's reaction to the onset of Beta's eclipse: "'Look at that!' The finger he pointed toward the sky shook, and his voice was dry and cracked. There was one simultaneous gasp as every eye followed the pointing finger, and, for one breathless moment, stared frozenly. *Beta was chipped on one side!*" Sheerin and Theremon's resultant conversation is interrupted by Aton's approach: "'You know why it didn't w—' [Sheerin] stopped and rose in alarm, for Aton was approaching, his face a twisted mask of consternation. *'What's happened?*'" A conversation between Beenay and Sheerin is then interrupted: "Sheerin's chair went over backwards as he sprang to his feet in a rude interruption. 'Aton's brought out the lights.'"

Then a pause. Silence. "After the momentary sensation, the dome had quieted." Then a gradual recognition of the "extraneous noise" of the townsmen coming to destroy the observatory. "The silence ripped to fragments at [Theremon's] started shout: *'Sheerin!'* Work stopped!" Out of the silence Asimov has begun to build his story's climax.

The pace of "Nightfall's" plot, then, is sustained with a series of interruptions which account for the story's helter-skelter quality. There really is no story. There is instead a continuing revelation of a situation. The "story" is 95 per cent exposition via conversation. The development—the forward thrust of the reader's interest—takes place in the reader's understanding. When we know what must happen and why and what its effects will be, the inevitable happens and the story is over.

The initial physical situation in "Nightfall" is very similar to that in "Marooned Off Vesta" in one important way. Both stories rely on a physical arrangement whose occurrence in nature is so highly unlikely that we might as well consider it impossible. A planet cannot have an orbit stable enough for long enough to support life when that planet moves in the midst of six suns. It is highly improbable that a moon the size described would be detectable only once every 2,049 years. It is very unlikely that a race could develop cities—and an urban architecture— without having experienced darkness and developing artificial sources of light on a large scale. Here on Earth the planet Venus is often visible in the daytime, yet we are to believe that Lagash is in the center of a globular cluster of "thirty thousand mighty suns" which remain invisible until the exact moment of Beta's total eclipse.

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Certain details are vague as well. For example, at the beginning of the story, yellow Gamma is just setting, and red Beta rides high in the sky. As a result, the light is described as orange. Later everything is bathed in the dim red of Beta alone. Note that we have been shown a range of colors from yellow through orange to red (and only two of the six suns were involved). Under these conditions, how can anything on Lagash be said to have a color? (Aton's eyebrows, you will recall, were described as white.)

Again, Yimot and Faro perform an experiment intended to simulate the appearance of stars in a dark sky in order to see what effect such an event might have on their psychology, but nothing happens. Despite Sheerin's assertions that he knows why the experiment failed, it turns out his explanation is wrong, and we are left holding a loose thread. And students are always asking, what happened to the people in the Hideout? We are left to assume that there are too few of them to change the shape of history (a theme developed at length in the Foundation Series), but we don't really know when we finish reading "Nightfall." They aren't taken into account by the ending.

In one sense the story ends too soon. It has been Aton's story if it has been anyone's. He has led the efforts to find out what is happening and to preserve that knowledge for the next cycle. He has established the Hideout to help some sanity survive. What is the result of these efforts on his part? It is as if "Marooned Off Vesta" were allowed to end with Warren Moore's "Aha! Why didn't I think of it before?" We are never told how Aton's efforts turn out. They are subsumed in the larger catastrophe. The extent to which we

are not told these things is the extent to which we are left holding loose threads at the end of the story.

After accepting the story for publication Campbell introduced into it one minor flaw and one nice touch. The nice touch was Aton's incoherent speech four paragraphs from the end, "We didn't know we couldn't know, etc." The flaw was the opening phrase of a slightly earlier paragraph: "Not Earth's feeble thirty-six hundred Stars visible to the naked eye." The whole story had meticulously refused to recognize the existence of Earth, yet this phrase added by Campbell violates this important part of Asimov's narrative strategy.

An early critic of "Nightfall" has dealt with some of these problems, at least by inference. Ernest Kimoy, in adapting the story for broadcast on the radio program "Dimension X" in the early fifties, made two major kinds of changes in the story. One kind was made necessary by the shift in medium from printed page to radio, from eye to ear. The narrative voice, for example, must actually speak aloud on the radio, and in effect this adds another character—the narrative point of view—whom most of us forget about when we read.

But the more important set of changes for our purposes include those made in an apparent attempt to deal with what Kimoy may have seen as flaws in the story. Kimoy the practicing writer is in effect Kimoy the practical critic. For example, he, too, seems to realize that "thirty thousand mighty suns" would be visible long before Asimov permits his characters to see them, since he changes the phrase to "thirty thousand minute suns." He also drops the whole Yimot-Faro experiment. One might argue that this was due to limitations of time. "Dimension X" was only a half. hour program. Still, cutting the Yimot-Faro experiment shows that it was cuttable. Besides being inconclusive, it did not contribute anything essential to the story.

The most significant difference in the two men's treatment of the same story can be found in their handling of setting. Asimov sets the whole story in the observatory. Thus people must come to the observatory to express their points of view. For example, Latimer, the Cultist who came to smash the photographic plates, is then interviewed at some length. Some things we can only learn at second hand, as when Sheerin tells Theremon that a fifteenminute-long amusement-park ride through a dark tunnel caused insanity. Kimoy, on the other hand, sends Theremon away from the observatory to interview people directly. In succession he talks with a priest of the Cult, Sheerin, a man in the street called Pallet, and an aged member of the Cult. The priest gives the information presented in the story by the captured Cultist. Sheerin actually takes Theremon to see and listen to a person driven insane on the amusement-park ride. The man in the street takes a very practical attitude toward the whole affair: the world may be ending but he's putting money in the bank just in case. And the old Cultist presents the opposite reaction: he has sold everything that he has and given it to the poor so that he can go to glory with the Stars.

As both men treat the story, it has a great deal of dramatic impact, but Asimov's is the stronger of the two. His single setting gives the story a more unified impact than the

diversified interviews in the street. Whether it is accurate or not, the flashing forth of thirty thousand mighty suns staggers us emotionally. It may not be scientifically true, but it is dramatically true, and for a writer effect is what counts. Asimov first made it as plausible as he could. Then he made it right.

What is "Nightfall" about, and where does its compelling power lie? In his essay "Social Science Fiction" Asimov distinguishes between two kind of fictional reactions to the French and Industrial revolutions: "Social fiction is that branch of literature which moralizes about a current society through the device of dealing with a fictitious society," and "science fiction is that branch of literature which deals with a fictitious society, differing from our own chiefly in the nature or extent of its technological development." In the context of the essay it is clear that Asimov views social fiction as presenting an alternate society with the intent of criticizing contemporary society, whereas science fiction creates an alternate society for its own sake, to show us that things could (not should or ought to) be different, to accustom us to change. Elsewhere he distinguishes between science fiction and what he calls tomorrow fiction, in which the writer simply tries to show what life will actually be like in a few years. The point in both distinctions is that science fiction must present an alternate society for its own sake rather than comment on contemporary society or attempt to show accurately where we are going.

"Nightfall" presents alternate society for its own sake. It obviously not an attempt to show what life will be like a few years from now, so it is not tomorrow fiction. And though it contains a few satirical touches directed at commonly held contemporary assumptions —for example, Beenay's notion that life as we know it could not exist on a planet revolving about a single sun—still it does not attempt to make us feel in our guts that air pollution is evil or that violent hoodlums have a right to their own identities. "Nightfall" not social fiction.

There is no obvious connection between the characters in "Nightfall" and ourselves. They do not live on Earth past or future, and they are not the remnants of a human colony that ran into trouble. At the same time, we are given no reason to picture them in our imaginations as anything different from ourselves. They have arms and eyebrows. Or at least Asimov uses the language worked out to describe human beings in describing his aliens. Perhaps this is Asimov's use of the "doctrine of accommodation" that Milton scholars talk about, wherein Milton describes his angels—fallen and unfallen —as they were shaped like us and collected sense data like us, though in fact they are not and do not. Milton simply accommodates the angels to human conceptions. Perhaps Asimov's aliens are really alien, but he has accommodated them to our concepts of ourselves so he can talk about them.

Fundamentally, though, it doesn't make any difference. "Nightfall" is about the relationship between consciousness and its environment. The physical apparatus in which that consciousness is embodied is irrelevant. Human-shaped or alienshaped, the consciousnesses on Lagash are what they are because they developed under six suns and a nightfall that comes once every 2,049 years. Their psychology is different became their environment is different.

"Nightfall" has the powerful effect it does because it convinces us that that's way we would be under those different circumstances. "Nightfall" embodies a cosmic conception: what we are and the way we think are determined by the accident of the environment into which we are born. It figures forth an alternate world and society for its own sake. But that world is not totally irrelevant to our own. It has lessons for us, too. Consciousness, regardless of the environment that shapes it, is sacred. The people of Lagash are our brothers. When they are destroyed, we are destroyed, because we share consciousness. John Donne wrote, "No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent . . . Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind." "Nightfall" expresses the same sentiments, only on a universal rather than a planetary scale. The sacredness and dignity of life is the message of Donne's Seventeenth Meditation, Asimov's "Nightfall," and science fiction.

Source: Joseph F. Patrouch, Jr., "The Earliest Asimov," in *The Science Fiction of Isaac Asimov,* Doubleday, 1974, pp. 3-29.

Adaptations

The Best of Isaac Asimov, a collection of short stories containing "Nightfall," has been recorded by Books on Tape; read by Dan Lazar, it is unabridged on 8 cassettes running 720 minutes.

The Complete Stories Volume 1, produced by the Voyager Company of Santa Monica, California, is computer software on disk in both Windows and Macintosh versions that allows the reader to search, make notes, mark text, and so on.

Read by various performers, "Nightfall" was recorded by Conde Nast in 1976 on a 33 1/3 rpm phonographic record.

NBC radio did a presentation of "Nightfall" on its show *Dimension* X on September 29, 1951. It is now available on *The Greatest Old-Time Radio Shows from Science Fiction,* a CD or cassette recording, presented with an introduction by Ray Bradbury; published by Radio Spirits, Inc., in April 2001.

A movie adaptation of "Nightfall," with some plot relationship to the novel version, was made in India and released in 2000 starring David Caradine and Robert Stevens, directed by Gwyneth Libby.

Topics for Further Study

Asimov was considered one of the three greatest writers of science fiction in the 1940s along with Robert Heinlein and A. E. Van Vogt. Read a work by each of these other two authors and comment on the science fiction of this time period.

The climax of "Nightfall" is a total eclipse. Research this phenomenon and write a report on the frequency of occurrence on Earth and the folklore surrounding a total eclipse of the sun.

Asimov was an atheist and a secular humanist whose skepticism about religion can be seen in his fiction, including "Nightfall." Define secular humanism and comment on its effect on modern culture.

Asimov believed that the world's greatest problem was over-population. Research Asimov's writings on this subject and summarize his proposals for solving this problem.

Asimov formulated the "Three Laws of Robotics." What are the three laws and how do they apply to any of the books or stories or movies that you are aware of that employ robotic characters?

There exists a subgenre of science fiction called social science fiction that deals with the impact of technology on humanity. Asimov is one of the primary writers within this subgenre. Identify other writers of social science fiction and explain the interaction between science fiction and social concern they are focusing on.

Compare and Contrast

1941: Despite Asimov's anti-religious assertions in "Nightfall," American culture is steeped in religion, mostly Christian, and atheists are looked upon with suspicion.

Today: Society is secularized with prayer removed from public events and schools.

1941: Despite the probable presence of cults since the beginning of religions, cults are generally rare and secret, so the idea of a cult is a strange one used by Asimov in "Nightfall" to represent the worst effects of religion.

Today: The creation and profusion of cults is a well-recognized facet of modern culture that has gained notoriety with the Jim Jones group suicide and the Branch Davidian catastrophe in Waco, Texas.

1941: Knowledge in the field of astronomy seemingly does not extend much beyond that of Asimov's imaginary world in "Nightfall." However, in the real world, it is known that there are other suns beyond the solar system, rocketry is in its infancy, and in 1938 Grote Reber had received short waves from the Milky Way.

Today: Knowledge of the universe expands virtually daily as various probes, the space station, space flights, and telescopes like the Hubble send back information and pictures.

1941: On December 7, the United States enters World War II after being attacked by the Japanese at Pear Harbor.

Today: The United States is once again at war after the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., are attacked by terrorists.

1941: Asimov's "Nightfall" has only male characters, although women are mentioned as being in the Hideout.

Today: When Asimov rewrites *Nightfall* as a novel in 1990, he adds female characters and eliminates the part of the sentence about the Hideout that said they need "strong, healthy women that can breed children."

What Do I Read Next?

Nightfall and Other Stories is a collection that Asimov published in 1969 so that his most famous story would appear in his own anthology. All the stories are presented in order of publication date so that readers can form their own opinions about Asimov's literary development and whether "Nightfall" is truly the best of his short stories.

In *The Best of Isaac Asimov* (1974), Asimov provides the collection of short stories with an introduction that explains the history and significance of each of the stories in relation to his career.

Nightfall, the novel published in 1990 by Isaac Asimov in collaboration with Robert Silverberg, is the book-length version of Asimov's most famous short story.

The World Treasury of Science Fiction, edited by David G. Hartwell with an introduction by general editor Clifton Fadiman, is a huge collection in one volume of over fifty complete works from all over the world. It ranges in scope from the 1930s until its publication date in 1989, and its stories run the gamut of science fiction topics and authors.

Age of Wonders by David G. Hartwell, published in 1984, describes the origins of science fiction and discusses the components of the genre.

Topics for Discussion

1. Is it really necessary for Asimov and Silverberg to tell their readers that it is okay to imagine that the people of Kalgash are different from human beings?

2. Why is it that some people love science fiction like Nightfall, while others say that they just don't get it?

3. Theremon eventually joins the Apostles of Flame. Is he selling out his ideals and responsibilities? Is he selling out his friends?

4. Is religion portrayed fairly in Nightfall?

5. What would happen on Earth if a cataclysm similar to that in Nightfall were to occur?

6. Is the ending of Nightfall positive or negative? Is it a good ending?

7. What if we learned from archaeologists that human civilization has risen and collapsed on a regular basis for thousands of years? This would go counter to what modern scientists hold to be true, just as the discovery by archaeologists in Nightfall contradicts commonly held beliefs. What would you do? What should government do?

8. What should be done for all the insane people roaming Kalgash after the nightfall? Can they be helped?

9. Nightfall provides no easy answers for the role science should play in society. In Nightfall, scientists predict the coming darkness and are ridiculed for doing so. Had they been taken seriously, much harm could have been prevented. Yet, scientists are often wrong, as scientists in Nightfall admit. How should we, as responsible people, go about figuring out what scientific predictions to take seriously and which to ignore?

10. Do you think Nightfall was written for young people or adults? Why?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Compare the ending of the original short story "Nightfall" to the moment the stars appear in the novel. Which captures the moment better? What are the different implications of how the moment is presented in the two works?

2. The point of view shifts a number of times in Nightfall. What effect does this have on the pacing of the narrative? How might it affect a reader's interest in the characters? Who is the main character? Is there a main character?

3. What is the most important idea presented in Nightfall? What makes the idea important? How does it affect your experience of the novel? Does it have application to real life?

4. In the twentieth century, novels that focus on characterization have been held in highest esteem by literary critics. Novels that focus on ideas have been generally regarded as inferior fiction. Do you agree with this view? What novels exemplify your views? How do they support your views?

5. Write a history of Kalgash, covering the hundred or so years after the end of Nightfall.

6. How did Asimov and Silverberg come to collaborate on a novel that was, after all, based on Asimov's idea? Why did Asimov not write the book by himself? (One place to research this is in Asimov's I Asimov: A Memoir [1994].)

7. How accurate is the psychology presented in Nightfall? Would any psychologists disagree with how their field is depicted in the novel? How useful is psychology in advancing the novel's themes?

8. Nightfall depicts the adventures of various characters, shifting its focus from one to another. Write a short story that depicts the adventures of a character of your own during nightfall and the events afterward.

9. The people in Nightfall who predict the eclipse are ridiculed for their views, even though they have scientific evidence that they can show. Find a similar instance in real life, in which a scientist or a group of scientists were ridiculed for their view but turned out to be right. An example of this would be the theory that the Earth's continents drift. The scientist who first argued for this theory was ridiculed all of his life for his views, yet scientists nowadays regard the motion of continents not just as theory, but as an established fact. What happened to the people in your example? What do your discoveries suggest about scientists and scientific research?

10. The end of civilization has often been predicted, and it is a matter of history that some cultures have risen to great heights only to eventually disappear. What have been some of the more prominent predictions of the end of civilization in the last hundred

years? Which ones have been taken seriously? Are there any that should be taken seriously right now?

11. Have scientists and religious leaders always been in conflict? Have they ever cooperated with each other?

12. Asimov and Silverberg use Nightfall to explore some ideas. Do they make good use of the novel form for this? Have they missed any opportunities for getting their ideas across to their audience?

Further Study

Chambers, Bette, "Isaac Asimov: A One-Man Renaissance," in *Humanist,* Vol. 53, Issue 2, March-April 1993, pp. 6-9.

Written by the President Emeritus of the American Humanist Association, this article reviews Asimov's relationship with the association and his beliefs concerning secular humanism and related issues.

Goldman, Stephen H., "Isaac Asimov," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography,* Vol. 8: *Twentieth-Century American Science-Fiction Writers,* edited by David Cowart and Thomas L. Wymer, Gale Research, 1981, pp. 15-29.

A good review of the life of Asimov and his works, this essay presents a critical analysis, particularly of plot development, of some of the most important of Asimov's works in chronological order of their publication.

Hassler, Donald M., "Some Asimov Resonances from the Enlightenment," in *Science Fiction Studies,* Vol. 15, No. 44, March 1988, pp. 36-47.

One of Asimov's biographers, Hassler discusses in this essay Asimov's use of Enlightenment philosophy in *I, Robot* and the Foundation trilogy. There are two comparisons to "Nightfall" concerning its use of a sense of cycles and of a reporter as a device.

Moskowitz, Sam, *Seekers of Tomorrow: Masters of Modern Science Fiction,* World Publishing Company, 1961.

This book presents a chapter on each of the authors generally considered the best writers of science fiction with an analysis of their influence and their most significant works.

Nichols, Lewis, "Isaac Asimov: Man of 7,560,000 Words," in the *New York Times Book Review,* August 3, 1969, pp. 8, 28.

An excellent biographical piece done after a visit to Asimov in his home that describes his work habits and environment.

Touponce, William F., "Chapter Seven: Asimov's Other Fiction," in *Isaac Asimov,* Twayne's United States Authors on CD-ROM, 1997.

This article is a discussion of some of Asimov's novels and his critical reputation.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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

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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Short Stories for Students

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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

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