Paris 1991 Study Guide

Paris 1991 by Kate Walbert

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

Kate Walbert's *Where She Went* is a collection of fourteen connected stories about a mother and a daughter, Marion and Rebecca, who are searching for a place where they can establish roots and find contentment. □Paris 1991□ opens the collection. This story focuses on Rebecca's trip to Paris with her husband, Tom, where she hopes to conceive a baby. Rebecca had chosen Paris as the setting for becoming pregnant as the city is considered romantic, a city she has read about in books. She is not sure that this is the right time to get pregnant, but she determines that a child might provide her with the sense of fulfillment that she seeks.

Rebecca's imaginative visions of this exciting and romantic city, however, fade on its cold, rainy streets. There is little romance between her and her husband as they sit in cafés with nothing to say, feeling disconnected from the city as well as from each other. As Walbert arranges the imagistic scenes of the couple's few days in Paris, she conveys the tensions between romantic illusions and indifferent reality in this portrait of one woman's search for meaning.

Author Biography

Nationality 1: American

Birthdate: 1961

Ann Katherine Walbert was born in 1961, in New York City to J. T. and Donna Walbert. Her family moved frequently around the country, and between 1963 and 1965, they lived in Japan. She notes the influence that this had on her writing in an interview with Alyssa Colton-Heins, concluding, □that sense of being new, having to size up a situation immediately, having to hang back at the same time and read the scene as quickly and efficiently as you can really does a lot to strengthen the powers of observation.□ She notes the visual nature of her fiction and claims, □that's the result of looking and going from one place to another in radically different landscapes.□

Her first book, *Where She Went*, a collection of interlinked stories about a mother and daughter and their travels and relationships, which includes □Paris 1991,□ was published in 1998 and received positive reviews. Her literary reputation was solidified by her next two novels. *The Gardens of Kyoto: A Novel*, published in 2001, focuses on the experiences of two cousins prior to World War II. *Our Kind*, published in 2004, chronicles the lives of a group of women in the 1950s who struggle with traditional attitudes about women's roles.

Walbert has also written a one-person play, *Year of the Woman*, based on the life of Jeannette Rankin, who in 1917 became the first woman to serve in Congress. The play was produced at Yale University in 2001. Walbert has also contributed articles and fiction to various publications, including *Nation*, *Paris Review*, *DoubleTake*, *Fiction*, *Antioch Review*, *Ms*. , and the *New York Times*.

Walbert was awarded the Connecticut Commission on the Arts grant in 1994 and a Creative Writing fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts in 1998. The *New York Times Book Review* named *Where She Went* one of its notable books for 1998. An early version of *The Gardens of Kyoto* won the Pushcart Prize and O. Henry Award, and she was nominated for the National Book Award for *Our Kind* in 2004. As of 2004, she was teaching at Yale University.

Plot Summary

In the opening scene of □Paris 1991,□ Rebecca and her husband, Tom, fly into Paris at night where they hope to conceive a baby. They take a taxi to their room, which is so small that by stretching out his arms Tom can touch the walls on both sides of the bed. Rebecca leans out the window and listens to the street sounds.

They walk in the rain because □there is nothing else to do,□ talking little as they wait for Rebecca's temperature to rise, indicating that she is fertile. After wandering through the galleries in the Bibliotèque Nationale looking at manuscripts, they go into a café that looks romantic. Rebecca wonders if children can choose their parents. Her mother, Marion, died of cancer months ago, and Rebecca has this weird feeling of seeing her in the street or in doorways.

As they sit in the back of a café and eat, □they have nothing to say□ to each other. After her mother died, Rebecca determined □to live in the moment. No regrets, no sorrow. Only the next day and the next.□ She decided to get pregnant, so she cut up her diaphragm. Tom wanted to talk about the decision to have children, but Rebecca insisted that they already had, and □anyway, there's no good time, really.□ When Tom asked if she was sure, she remained silent.

Back in the café, Rebecca shows Tom a postcard of devils that she has bought in the gift shop, concluding, □Marion would have loved this.□ She □would have thought it very cosmopolitan.□ As the day fades, Rebecca is overcome with melancholy, thinking of Marion.

That night Rebecca observes a woman lighting candles in a room across the street from the hotel. She tells Tom that she wants to go out, but he thinks it is too late. She chides him, noting that Parisians are having dinner and that they should adopt their customs while there. As she looks at the woman across the way, she imagines romantic details in the other woman's room. Again, she suggests to Tom how nice it would be to go out for a drink and some fruit and cheese, and he acquiesces.

In the morning, as they wait for a church to open, Rebecca asks Tom what they should name the baby. At first, he says that he does not know and that it is bad luck to choose names before becoming pregnant. Tom notes that it could take a year or perhaps never. When he will not talk to her about it anymore, she feels □rebuked.□ She also □feels dowdy, old,□ compared to stylish Parisian women. In response, she imagines herself making colorful new curtains for their apartment and thinks about how handsome Tom is. When he asks if she likes the name Sophie, she admits that she never would have thought of that name.

After they enter the church and gaze at a famous portrait of the Virgin and Child, Rebecca notes that the face of the Virgin looks like a child while the Child looks like an old man. She lights a candle in front of an altar and declares, □Poor Marion . . . Poor Sophie.□

Time shifts back to the period when Rebecca and Tom first started dating. They often spent time playing an imagining game, thinking about □all the other lives they could have led,□ a game she learned from her mother. She imagined living in Florence or in Rajasthan or in Greece. Tom thought he could have been a passenger on a train across Canada had he not learned the route was disconnected.

Rebecca admitted that she fell in love with his name first because she liked the way it sounds and noted that people liked Tom. After remembering the hikes they went on when she visited his home in California, she thinks that they felt adventurous then, but now they feel awkward and self-conscious in Paris.

At dinner, Tom eats oysters, hoping they will make him sexually more potent. It seems as if arguments are erupting at all of the tables in the dark restaurant. Yet the wine makes Tom happy. Rebecca thinks of how her mother always wanted to go to Paris and tries to imagine her there, but Tom insists that she would have hated the food.

Back in the hotel, as they have sex, Rebecca does not look at his face. Recalling an earlier mentioned idea that the unborn choose their parents, she imagines someone watching, □a soul hovering, debating whether to come back into this world.□ She then imagines a carriage that contains a woman, □a mother, a daughter, a goddess□ and babies and devils, □hovering . . . waiting for their chance to be born.□ In this lyrical ending, Rebecca's thoughts of a child mix with thoughts of herself and her mother.

Characters

Marion

Marion, Rebecca's mother, died of cancer months before Rebecca and Tom go to Paris. She still has a profound influence, however, on her daughter. Rebecca seems to feel pressure to live an exciting, adventurous life that her mother could not have. When Rebecca buys the devil postcard and muses about how Marion would respond, she suggests that her mother had lived vicariously through Rebecca's chronicles of her travels. Twice during her stay in Paris, she declares, □poor Marion,□ expressing sorrow over her mother's lack of fulfillment. Yet she seems also to resent Marion's influence on her life when she cannot admit to Tom that she would have chosen her as a mother. Perhaps she blames her mother for her inability to find her own satisfaction in one place.

Rebecca

Rebecca, Tom's wife and Marion's daughter, is probably in her mid-thirties and feeling her biological clock ticking. Hesitant until now to start a family, she comes to Paris with her husband in 1991 intent on becoming pregnant. She and Tom appear to have traveled quite a bit and to be cosmopolitan in their tastes and references. Rebecca has an eye for detail and a refined imagination; watching a woman in a neighboring building, Rebecca imagines the woman setting a table with yellow pears on a wooden plate, having cut the fruit with heirloom pearl-handled silverware. Poetically aware of color, texture, and sound, Rebecca describes the □five-story buildings painted the color of old teacups and women with black hair.□ She hears □a crowd far away, pushing at the seams of quiet.□ Yet she is dissatisfied with herself; if her mother had come to Paris, she would have worn her □kelly green coat,□ but comparing herself to the Parisians, Rebecca feels □dowdy.□ She and Tom have difficulty trying to ignite their relationship and find the enthusiasm to start a family.

Rebecca's references to how her mother would have responded to Paris reveal Rebecca's sympathy for her and her unfulfilled dreams. She envisions her mother in Paris in better weather, meeting a dashing Frenchman. By contrast to this image, Rebecca's own experiences there leave her detached and empty.

Rebecca has an aloof relationship with her husband. While she sometimes tries to be affectionate with him, she often regards him as a stranger and finds little to say to him. She also exhibits a sense of detachment from others. When they sit next to the four old men playing cards in the restaurant, she does not try to interact with them, claiming, □it's like we're in a painting.□ Her sense of separation is heightened in the museum where □everyone reads a brochure, or listens to tapes hung around their necks.□

Her search for meaning reveals her self-absorption. She never considers the needs of her husband and often overrides his wishes. She makes the decision to come to Paris just as she has made the decision to have a baby, even though her husband voices his concern about the timing and their hesitancy. When Paris does not fulfill her romantic visions, she turns inward, withdrawing from everyone, including Tom.

Tom

Tom, Rebecca's husband, is tall, thin, and has large hands. He seems amiable and pliable, perhaps somewhat passive. Although he suggests that they should talk about having a baby, Rebecca is the one who cuts up her diaphragm, deciding to □live in the moment.□ In asking repeatedly if she is □sure,□ Tom may suggest his own uncertainty. Yet Rebecca is the one who envisions the impregnation, in Paris when her temperature □rises point six degrees.□ When she wants to go out late at night and eat like Parisians, he balks but eventually agrees. He consistently avoids confrontation and gives into Rebecca's desires, yet he never points out her lack of attention toward him.

People like Tom because he appears □quaint□ and most likely because of his amiability. Rebecca falls in love initially with the sound of his name, and she sympathizes with him over a difficult relationship he had in the past.

He appears more content with their lives but also seems to experience the same sense of disconnection that Rebecca feels. When they play the imagining game, he envisions he might have ridden on a train that crossed Canada except for discovering □that recently they disconnected the route.□ At one point, the narrator notes that while Rebecca holds his hand, he holds an umbrella, perhaps suggesting that he does not respond to her offer of affection. This lack of connection extends to their sexual relationship as well, as Tom feels the need to eat oysters to help him prepare for being sexual, and Rebecca drifts off into a fantasy during intercourse.

Themes

Self-fulfillment

Although readers do not get many details about Marion's life, Rebecca suggests that her mother experienced the same kind of discontentment as does she. When she buys the devil postcard, Rebecca implies that Marion lived vicariously though her daughter's travels, ones that she, as a married woman during the 1950s and 1960s in the United States, could not enjoy. The suffering her mother endured causes her daughter twice to declare, □Poor Marion.□

Ironically, Rebecca experiences the same sense of meaninglessness even though she suffers none of the conventional restrictions that her mother faced. Rebecca appears to have the upper hand in her marriage when she convinces Tom that the time is right to have a baby and that Paris is the perfect setting in which to become pregnant. She also has been able to convince him to leave his home in California and relocate to the East Coast.

Walbert suggests that Rebecca's freedom prevents her from finding fulfillment. Because she is able to take off for Paris on a whim, or perhaps to Italy or Greece, she imagines that each locale promises her the exciting, adventurous life that eludes her at home. When her fantasies are dispelled, she is compelled to invent another dream of another place where she may attain happiness. The longing and pursuit of something that resides elsewhere contributes to her dissatisfaction with the immediate.

Ironically, Rebecca envisions that her life will be fulfilled not necessarily by hopping from one location to another, but through motherhood, a conventional role for a woman. Yet she expresses uncertainty about whether it is the right time to have a baby. This indecision, coupled with her inability to find satisfaction through her travels, suggests that Rebecca will not find the sense of meaning she seeks.

Connection and Disconnection

Ironically, Rebecca appears to be more connected to her dead mother than to her husband. When her mother was alive, she communicated to Rebecca her desire to travel to other countries and experience exciting, romantic adventures. This connection remains strong as shown by Rebecca's buying a postcard that she thinks her mother would like and imagining her wearing her green coat sitting in outdoor cafés and meeting dashing Frenchmen. Rebecca tries to live the life her mother envisioned not only to find personal fulfillment but to compensate for her mother's lack of freedom.

Though written in third person point of view, the story is seen from Rebecca's perspective; readers do not have access to Tom's private thoughts. He does not discuss them with Rebecca, and he acquiesces to her. Yet he has been unable to help her find fulfillment because she has not been able to articulate clearly the connection she has

with her mother and what effect that has had on her life. Dependable, pliable Tom is not a part of her romantic fantasies other than his ability to impregnate her. By the end of the story, she withdraws from him into her vision of motherhood, which includes her mother and her child but not Tom.

Style

Walbert uses selected images to convey a scene, focusing on certain details to describe a street or view through a window. Her style is reminiscent of the Imagists, including Ezra Pound and Amy Lowell, a group of American and British poets in the second decade of the twentieth century who were noted for the exactness and clarity of the concrete details they employed in their work.

Rebecca has a photographic or painterly way of seeing and elaborating on details in the setting. In one instance, she sees a woman through a window in a building across the street from her own hotel room. She imagines the woman carrying cognac and sliced pears in from the kitchen to set on a table beautifully arranged amidst antique chests covered in velvet. These elegant and homey visions contrast with the gray Paris street and the bare hotel room, but ultimately, they seem to promise that someday she, too, can establish this sense of place and home.

At other points, Rebecca's visions become blurred. When she initially thinks of Paris before the trip, □the name is enough□ to conjure images of excitement, but they are only hazy bits of historic events and springtime blooms since □she can't remember□ the details. A picture on the wall of a café vaguely reminds her of a poem she read in school, but she cannot name it. This juxtaposition between photographic and blurry images reinforces the tension between reality and illusion in the story.

The title of the story juxtaposes the city name and the year. It provides two facts: one of place, the other of time. The suggestion is that the story is located in the past, that in the intervening cities and years between the setting of this story and the reading of it much has happened. But readers are not told about what follows or given hints about it.

Historical Context

During the first few decades of the twentieth century, feminist thinkers on both sides of the Atlantic engaged in a rigorous investigation of female identity as it related to all aspects of women's lives. Some criticized the institution of marriage, identifying patterns and inequities within the traditional sex roles arrangement and suggesting ways of achieving parity. Others questioned the traditional notion of maternal instinct, rejecting the notion that motherhood is the ultimate goal of all women or that biology is destiny.

The early feminists in the United States, such as Margaret Sanger (1883-1966) who led a crusade to legalize birth control, fought for certain rights for women, including the right to vote. They were not able, however, to change widespread assumptions about a woman's place within the home. During World War II, American and British women were encouraged to enter the workplace where they enjoyed a measure of independence and responsibility. After the war, though, they were encouraged or forced to give up their jobs to the returning male troops. Hundreds of thousands of women were laid off and expected to resume their domestic and family roles in the home.

In the 1950s, special emphasis was placed on training girls to seek and conform to a feminine ideal of perfect wife and mother. Women who tried to gain self-fulfillment in other ways, for example through graduate education and careers, were criticized and deemed dangerous to the stability of the family. They were pressed to find fulfillment exclusively through their support of their husbands. Television shows such as *Ozzie and Harriet* and *Father Knows Best*, popular magazines such as *Good Housekeeping*, and advertisements that featured women happily cleaning their homes, all encouraged the image of woman-as-housewife throughout the 1950s. The small number of women who did work outside the home often suffered discrimination and exploitation as they were relegated to low-paying clerical and service jobs or positions in traditionally female-dominated careers of teaching and nursing. The 1970s, however, brought this history and persistent social and economic patterns under the harsh scrutiny of the women's rights movement.

The restricted 1950s life of Rebecca's mother, Marion, exerts one pull on Rebecca. It urges her toward settling down and having children. But Marion's example also urges Rebecca toward a wider sphere of travel and exotic experiences. Rebecca's visiting Paris suggests that wider sphere; the fact that it occurs in 1991 pinpoints the time at which Rebecca confronts the decision to become pregnant and commit herself to the life of a mother. The title of the story seems to suggest the convergence of two plots or patterns in a woman's life, leaving that intersection unresolved.

Critical Overview

Reviews of the collection have been generally positive. Nancy Pearl, in *Booklist*, announces, □This collection of linked short stories introduces a writer we should watch for in years to come.□ She finds the stories graceful and insists that Walbert's □use of a fractured narrative works like a prism to reveal the broken lives of her two main characters.□ Don Lee in *Ploughshares* concludes that Walbert □gives us haunting portraits of two women, □while her □prose [is] always lyrical, [with] images and phrases recurring to great effect.□

A *Publishers Weekly* reviewer praises □Walbert's meticulous, unshakably sad collection□ but determines that □sometimes these enigmatic stories are precious and overworked, straining toward a hush of despair.□ More frequently, however, □they resonate with surprising pathos, and these moments establish Walbert as one of the season's most promising, idiosyncratic new writers.□

While Christine DeZelar-Tiedman in the *Library Journal* admires the stories that center on the mother, she finds that □the Rebecca stories are less compelling; what we get are mostly fragmented accounts of bizarre happenings in foreign countries.□ Criticizing the structure of the work as a whole, she concludes, □We assume that Rebecca's upbringing, along with a family tragedy, has left her unable to commit or find direction, but this connection is never made clear, and the character's self-absorption makes her unsympathetic.□

Molly Giles, in her review for the *New York Times Book Review*, suggests a different view. Although □Rebecca's more poetic narratives rely on interwoven segments that often form an uneven collage,□ Giles finds solid connections between her stories and those pertaining to Marion, the mother. Giles writes that □their stories are small, elegiac and inconclusive□ with □many quick flashes of beauty.□ She argues that at its best moments, the collection □goes far, and takes us with it.□

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Perkins is a professor of American and English literature and film. In this essay, Perkins examines the tensions between illusion and reality in the story.

In her short story □Paris 1991,□ Kate Walbert immediately contrasts light and dark. The story opens with Rebecca's arrival by plane □into the city of light [where] she descends in darkness.□ This first juxtaposition of light and dark imagery illustrates the tension between illusion and reality in the story, as Rebecca's fanciful imagination clashes with the evidence of her emotional emptiness. Paris's □gray storm-ridden sky□ colored □a strange mauve□ forecasts a confirmation of her sense of meaninglessness rather than the prospect of a significance for which she has been searching.

Rebecca believes that the famously romantic city is a perfect setting for conceiving a baby. She yearns for something to provide her with a sense of meaning, to alleviate the ennui of her life. She decided impulsively to cut up her diaphragm one evening, waving off her husband's desire to discuss the idea of having children. Yet, despite her dramatic decision, she remains apparently uncertain.

Rebecca tries to convince Tom to start a family through negation, insisting □there's no good time, really,□ and telling him, □you either do it or you don't. And we know we don't want to don't, so we might as well do, right?□ When he asks if she is sure, she first says no and later refuses to answer him.

While she hopes that a child will make a positive change in her life, her indecision becomes apparent after she and her husband arrive in Paris when, she estimates, □it is the right time, more or less□ to try to conceive, a comment that becomes appropriate not only for her hormonal cycle but also for her feelings about getting pregnant. Tom appears indecisive, too, as he twice eats oysters to □get him in the mood.□ Their obvious ambivalence suggests that her hopes will go unrealized.

The decision to have a baby becomes more of a staged □moment□ for Rebecca as she cuts up her diaphragm, part of a move toward making a permanent commitment and giving her life meaning. Another part of the staging is having a romantic Parisian setting for the procreation. Rebecca's active imagination has conjured an image of perfect marital harmony in the city of lights, which should inevitably lead to a purposeful, fulfilled life.

Rebecca frequently creates fictive worlds that are more exciting and adventurous than her own. She determines that □she would like to run through a rainstorm or hunt big game somewhere,□ One of her favorite games with Tom when they first met was to imagine other lives that they could have led. She saw herself living with a man in Florence or riding elephants in Rajasthan or sitting under the shade of grapevines at the edge of the Aegean. In Paris, she imagines shops with brightly colored clothing and rooms with trays of cognac and □ripe yellow pears, sliced with pearly-handled silver.□ The city's beauty, the □silver church domes of unimaginable heights,□ are all meant to

convey a thrill, an intense feeling, in which as she becomes pregnant, Rebecca can begin to live the adventure she envisions.

Reality, however, quickly dissolves the fantasy. Before Paris, Rebecca had felt "distracted always, often alone." As soon as they arrive, the sense of disconnection between her and her husband becomes apparent. In the cab ride, Tom speaks without looking at her, and later, when she tells him she is hungry, Tom is asleep. Often "she finds herself looking at [Tom] as if he is entirely unfamiliar to her, a blind date, or somebody's cousin she has agreed to meet."

Rebecca and Tom "came to [Paris to] find conversation, a way of being two together," but after they arrive, they sit in cafés and "have nothing to say" to each other. Rebecca acknowledges "the city of light's gone dark" for them. "She had thought that to be in Paris with a husband meant to be bent, head to head, in discussion" as they walked the streets. "She would like to tell him certain things, what she has done or imagined she has done before this moment in her life, but every time she opens her mouth to start a conversation she feels tired." The setting does not change their relationship or the detachment she feels from him.

Rebecca's impulse to focus on foreign locales comes from her mother, Marion, who has recently died. With her mother much in her thoughts, Rebecca admits that she often sees Marion "in doorways, crossing the street." Marion taught Rebecca her favorite imagining game and had herself dreamed of coming to Paris, which suggests that she had similar fantasies of finding happiness through adventure. After buying a fanciful postcard with swooning devils, "sharp-eared men with pointy noses, tiny fingernails, hovering on the shoulders of gentle women," Rebecca insists to Tom, "Marion would have loved this. I could have sent it with a note, Having a devilish good time. She'd think we were running nude in fountains or something." She "would have thought it very cosmopolitan." These remarks suggest that Rebecca is evaluating her present experience in light of Marion's likely assessment of them.

The fictive nature of Rebecca's fantasies for her mother, however, becomes evident when Rebecca tries to imagine her there. When she suggests that Marion "would have come to the city in better weather, and would have sat out in the cafés and watched the people and met some dashing Frenchman," Tom counters with a note of reality, insisting, "Marion would have hated the food." Similarly, Rebecca's illusions about what the city will provide for her are eventually dispelled by the reality of her experience there.

Faced with their inability to connect with each other, Rebecca and Tom determine that "there is nothing else to do" but walk in the rain, which becomes "tiny tears" to her. "[T]hey both feel awkward, as if they are watched from every window, their actions exaggerated, their voices loud and shrill." The romance of the city becomes impossible to find when they must bundle up in long underwear and heavy coats to try to ward off the cold, "aware of their numb feet and runny noses, aware of the bare trees."

The story ends with an elusive description of the couple having intercourse, Rebecca drifting away from the moment, imagining herself □borne out of this place to another.□ Though she had resolved to □live in the moment,□ in this moment of hoped-for impregnation, she locates herself elsewhere, trying to imagine the unborn waiting for the chance to be born.

Fantasy and the reality of the moment merge in Rebecca's final vision of a carriage containing a woman, □a mother, a daughter, a goddess,□ suggesting her unborn daughter, her mother, and herself, □all of them hovering, waiting to descend, waiting to be asked.□ The problem Rebecca has faced during her time in Paris is the conflict between her desire to fulfill her mother's romantic illusions of travel and her own desire to establish roots. The merging of these three images at the close of the story suggests Rebecca's persistent tendency to entertain the fantasy rather than take concrete steps to change her life. Here, she imagines attaining meaning through the advent of a child, meaning that eluded her in seeing Paris with her husband.

The story ends inconclusively. As she and her husband have sexual intercourse, Rebecca's fantasy images are described, a composite of female figures in a carriage. All the images, along with babies and devils, present a notion of possibility and expectation, but what actually those images have to do with Rebecca and Tom's future remains undetermined. The tension between desire and fulfillment remains, with Rebecca's focus on potential.

Source: Wendy Perkins, Critical Essay on □Paris 1991,□ in *Short Stories for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Critical Essay #2

Hong is a poet and the editor of a fiction and memoir anthology. In this essay, Hong discusses how Walbert uses the motifs of color and light to portray her protagonist's inner and outer landscapes.

As the title indicates, Walbert's short story □Paris 1991□ takes place in Paris in 1991, with a couple flashbacks to New York and California during the immediate years before. Setting the story in Paris, the city of light, enables Walbert to invoke the motif of light, which she does to several effects. Walbert also makes use of Paris's reputation for romance and its fame as a center of the arts and a magnet for imaginative, artistic people. Using the city's unique history and visual qualities, Walbert is able also to employ a motif of color. The author uses both light and color to elucidate her protagonist's state of mind and desires and to show the difference between those longings and the reality the protagonist experiences.

The protagonist of the story is Rebecca, an American woman, probably in her mid-thirties, who has come to Paris from New York with her husband, Tom, to try to conceive a baby. They have apparently flown to Paris on a whim, assuming the city to be the best place in which to become pregnant. The decision to have the baby is a bit sudden for the couple, who debated the issue for a while, and the choice is partly driven by the recent death of Rebecca's mother, Marion. In the wake of her mother's death, Rebecca wants to live spontaneously with □no regrets, no sorrow. Only the next day and the next.□ Rebecca thinks of Marion often while on the trip, as her grief about her is still fresh.

Walbert makes it clear that the couple is trying to revitalize their relationship. Their growing apart over the years has impelled the decision to try to have a baby, something new. Toward the beginning of the story, the narrator says, □They came to Paris impromptu; this is how Rebecca would tell it. In truth, they came to find conversation, a way of being two together.□

The couple is no longer young, and the evidence for their aging lies in the gray streaks in Rebecca's hair and in Tom's beard. Walbert uses a palette of colors to signal different things. Gray, unsurprisingly, shows up in the story as a sign of age and also of grim reality, contrasting sharply with the reds, blues, and yellows that appear at key points.

Walbert employs colors in a painterly way; the striking use of color is apparent from the story's opening paragraph in which she describes Rebecca and Tom's arrival in Paris:

Into the city of light she descends in darkness. Or this is how Rebecca hears it: I descend on the city of light in darkness. A gray storm-ridden sky, clouds bunched in fat grape colors, a strange mauve. The city of stone streaked with pigeon [sh□□t], ripped rock-and-roll posters. A poet's place.

Unfortunately for Rebecca, Paris continues to thwart her expectations for it to be utterly romantic, and again Walbert shows Rebecca's disappointment through her descriptions of the city's colors. Many of the things Rebecca sees in Paris are gray toned. In addition to the sky and the stone, she sees a gray river, gray steps going to the national library, and pigeons with wings that are □white and gray-speckled.□ The grayness is also apparent in the fading of the famous Parisian light, and Rebecca frequently notices light waning during the visit.

This waning light reinforces the state the couple is in, as they have arrived at a point in their relationship when excitement has to be summoned, and they find being together somewhat challenging. After looking for a café □that looks romantic,□ they settle into a place only to find that they have nothing to say to each other. Distressed by this fact, Rebecca looks out the window and remarks, □The city of light's gone dark.□ As in the opening paragraph, Walbert invokes the motif of light to point up the difference between what Rebecca longs for and what she knows in her heart is true.

However, the couple is also not entirely doomed, and as they work to regain a sense of connection and bonhomie with each other, Rebecca also experiences moments suffused with bright, intense colors whose life and vitality contrast with the depressing urban grays she sees in the Parisian landscape. Notably, she sees these vivid colors while either looking upon an actual scene in Paris or imagining some extension of what she sees. Watching a woman across the street from their apartment, Rebecca sees her lighting candles, as well as □Red geraniums in clay pots, cobalt blue shutters.□

The scene is one of domestic warmth, and after the woman closes the shutters, Rebecca imagines the woman preparing the table as for a sensual late meal with cognac, □ripe, yellow pears, sliced with pearly-handled silver. Heirlooms passed down in worn wooden chests, kept in corners covered in maroon velvet; everything draped with a soft worn fabric.□ The colors are vibrant, the fabrics supple, and as she continues her reverie, Rebecca also envisions the woman's black hair shining in the light, as well as a succession of women. Rebecca imagines that the woman has learned to brush her hair in a certain way from her mother who learned it from her grandmother and on and on back through the generations.

In this scene and several others, Walbert employs light and vivid colors to illustrate Rebecca's desire for a richer, warmer life. The colors and light signify how she wants things to be and her wish to join a maternal line of women. In the story's penultimate scene, Rebecca tells Tom how she imagines her mother would be in Paris. She pictures her in a □kelly green coat,□ enjoying a romance with a French stranger. Although Tom dryly circumvents Rebecca's fantasy for her mother by saying she would have hated the food, Rebecca here again succeeds in imbuing her inner life with a kind of intensity and colorful passion that goes beyond her reality. Green appears nowhere else in the story.

In another scene, she lights white candles in a church and thinks of both her mother and her possible future baby, mourning and conflating both female relatives as she says, □'Poor Marion, poor Sophie.'□ (Sophie is the name Tom suggested for their baby.) In

this scene, light again suggests life, while white suggests neutrality and the place life may come from.

The shade of white is different both from the vitality of colors and the dullness of gray, and as with the other colors in the spectrum, white appears both in the landscape of Paris and in Rebecca's memory. Tom's socks are white, as were the walls of his stucco house in California□the house he lived in while they were courting. In addition to the church candles and the wings of birds and their droppings, Rebecca's skin after her arrival in Paris is described as white □mottled with pink from cold, from rain.□

Pink suggests possible pregnancy for Rebecca, as the color is often associated with babies (especially the baby pink of female babies) and is only mentioned again at the end of the story after the couple has had sexual intercourse. As she lies in bed, Rebecca thinks of babies as □cherubs pink as the angels in the illuminated manuscripts,□ and she feels a soul debating whether to become her child.

In the story's last paragraph, as elsewhere, Walbert employs the well established motifs of light and color to depict Rebecca's longings and the richness of the character's imaginative capacities. She imagines the cobblestones outside shining beneath the window and □a carriage, a woman behind the shuttered carriage windows, her hand gloved in white velvet, her body swathed in fresh silk: a princess, a saint, a mother, a daughter, a goddess borne out of this place to another.□ She thinks of the other place as the world where babies, devils, and everyone else resides while waiting to be born. It is a kind of eternity.

The concluding passage echoes the earlier one, in which Rebecca imagines a line of women passing on knowledge to their daughters. The unnamed woman in this passage wears white, symbolizing the other world, and as in all of Rebecca's imaginings, the fabrics are glamorous and soft, contrasting with the itchy wool the characters actually wear throughout the story. This third motif of texture or the tactile further enriches the themes Walbert expresses by invoking light and color□the themes of individual longing, loneliness within marriage, and the sometimes painful gap between what people desire and what they experience.

Source: Anna Maria Hong, Critical Essay on □Paris 1991,□ in *Short Stories for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Topics for Further Study

Rebecca briefly mentions her mother, Marion, in the story. Read some of Marion's chapters in *Where She Went*, enough to get a sense of her character, and write an essay discussing her influence on Rebecca, which is only hinted at in □Paris 1991.□

Imagine Rebecca five years after the story ends. Write a scene for a play or a screenplay that focuses on dialogue between her and her husband, illustrating whether she has found meaning in her life.

Choose a place that you would like to visit and do some research about the culture of the area. Write a short story about a character who takes a trip to this chosen place, suggesting the significance the trip comes to have on the character's subsequent life.

Note all of the colors Walbert uses in her descriptions of specific scenes in the story. Draw one of the scenes using her colors. Be ready to explain why you think she chose those colors and what meaning they seem to convey given the story's themes.

What Do I Read Next?

Walbert's *The Gardens of Kyoto: A Novel* (2001) focuses on the experiences of two cousins prior to World War II.

Walbert's *Our Kind* (2004) chronicles the lives of a group of women in the 1950s who struggle against the social restrictions of the age.

The Awakening, first published in 1899, is Kate Chopin's long-suppressed novel of a young woman who struggles and fails to resolve the conflicting roles of wife and artist. This novel depicts the upper-class social roles of Creole wives living in New Orleans at the end of the nineteenth century.

□To Room Nineteen□ (1963), by Doris Lessing, follows a British housewife's slow descent into madness as she confronts what she sees as the meaninglessness of life in the suburbs as a wife and mother. This story appears in Doris Lessing's *A Man and Two Women* (1963).

Further Study

Coen, Stephanie, ed., *American Theatre Book of Monologues for Women*, Theatre Communications Group, 2003.

The monologues included in this text were selected from plays by authors such as Wendy Wasserstein, Edward Albee, and Sam Shepard, published in *American Theatre* magazine.

Downie, David, *Paris, Paris: Journey into the City of Light*, Transatlantic Press, 2005.

This exploration of Paris, written by an American ex-patriot, looks at the sites and the culture of Paris.

Friday, Nancy, *My Mother/My Self*, Delta, 1997.

Nancy Friday explores the often complex relationship between mothers and daughters, seeking to show the mirroring that occurs in many of these relationships.

Millet, Kate, *Sexual Politics*, Doubleday, 1970.

This work outlines women's fight for equality during the middle of the twentieth century as well as the history and dynamics of feminism.

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Giles, Molly, □Wanderlust,□ in *New York Times Book Review*, October 11, 1998, p. 19.

Lee, Don, Review of *Where She Went*, in *Ploughshares*, Vol. 24, No. 2-3, Fall 1998, pp. 233-34.

Pearl, Nancy, Review of *Where She Went*, in *Booklist*, Vol. 94, No. 19-20, June 1, 1998, p. 1730.

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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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