# The Pugilist at Rest Study Guide

## The Pugilist at Rest by Thom Jones

BOOKRAGS

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# Introduction

□The Pugilist at Rest,□ by Thom Jones, was first published in the *New Yorker* in 1992 and then reprinted as the title story in Jones's first collection of short stories in 1993. The collection was widely praised by reviewers, who regarded Jones as an exciting new voice in American fiction.

The story is told by a first-person narrator who is a decorated Vietnam veteran and former Marine boxing champion. He now suffers from debilitating depression, for which he takes heavy doses of medication, and from epilepsy. At the end of the story, he agrees to undergo psychosurgery that may cure his condition but could also, he fears, ensure that he spends the rest of his life in an institution.

□The Pugilist at Rest,□ which takes its title from a famous Roman sculpture of a boxer, draws on the author's own experience. Jones trained as a Force Recon Marine, although he did not serve in Vietnam, and was also a boxer. Like the narrator of the story, he suffers from epilepsy. He told an interviewer for the *Austin Chronicle* that his best friend was killed in Vietnam, and for a while he was reluctant to write about the war because he did not feel he had the right to do so. But then he realized he was angry that his friend had been cheated of his life, so he started writing about Vietnam for his friend.

# Author Biography

**Nationality 1:** American

**Birthdate:** 1945

Thomas Douglas Jones was born in Aurora, Illinois, on January 26, 1945, the son of Joseph Thomas Jones and Marilyn Faye (Carpenter) Graham. His father was a boxer, and Jones took up the sport as a teenager. He said in a 1995 interview in *Poets & Writers Magazine* that he had conflicts with his father and later his stepfather and did not take kindly to people pushing him around, and this fact contributed to his interest in boxing. He also reported that he had been fired from various jobs because he refused to take orders.

Jones joined the U.S. Marine Corps and trained as a Recon Marine. But in 1963, before he was sent overseas, he was honorably discharged after sustaining an injury in a boxing match, which led to his developing epilepsy. He was hospitalized on various occasions with epilepsy and even spent some time in a mental ward.

Only one of the twenty Marines Jones trained with survived the Vietnam War. In 1968, Jones married Sally Laverne Williams, the former girlfriend of one of Jones's friends who had been killed in Vietnam.

Jones had resumed his education, and he graduated from the University of Washington with a bachelor of arts in 1970. He then enrolled in the prestigious writing program at the University of Iowa. In the interview mentioned above, he said all he had ever wanted to do was write. At the University of Iowa, Jones's teachers suggested that he take a mentally undemanding job while he was writing. Jones took their advice and for eleven years worked as a janitor at North Thurston High School. He graduated with a master of arts degree in creative writing in 1973.

However, it was not until 1991 that his work was published. The breakthrough came when the *New Yorker* published his story □The Pugilist at Rest□ in 1991. The story won the O. Henry Award in 1993. More published stories soon followed, in magazines such as *Esquire*, *Harpers*, the *New Yorker*, *Playboy*, and the *Paris Review*. □The Pugilist at Rest□ then became the title story of Jones's collection of stories published in 1993, which received a National Book Award nomination. Many of these stories contain characters who are shaped by their experiences in Vietnam.

Jones received the Best American Short Stories Award from Houghton Mifflin, for four successive years, from 1992 to 1995, and he was a Guggenheim Fellow, 1994-1995. In 1995, he published his second collection of stories, *Cold Snap: Stories*; a third collection, *Sonny Liston Was a Friend of Mine*, appeared in 1999. Both collections were lavishly praised by critics.

As of 2005, Jones lives in Olympia, Washington. He teaches writing and gives readings throughout the United States.

# Plot Summary

□The Pugilist at Rest□ begins as the first-person narrator recalls, many years after the event, an incident that took place in August 1966 at a twelve-week boot camp he attended at the Marine Corps Recruit Depot in San Diego, California. One recruit got caught writing a letter to his girlfriend when he should have been taking notes on the specs of the M-14 rifle. His letter began □Hey Baby,□ and that became the name by which he was subsequently known by the other recruits. The narrator goes on to explain that Hey Baby was not in the Marine Corps for long. He had a habit of harassing the narrator's buddy, a small and unassuming recruit named Jorgeson. One day, only two weeks from the end of boot camp, the narrator sees Hey Baby give Jorgeson a nasty shove with his M-14, which almost knocks Jorgeson over. The narrator, who is a big man, intervenes, striking Hey Baby hard in the temple with the butt of his M-14. Hey Baby is badly injured, sustaining a fractured skull. There is an investigation into the incident, but the narrator is not caught. Even though three other recruits saw him strike Hey Baby, they do not betray him to the authorities. They are silent because they do not like Hey Baby; by contrast, the narrator is popular with the other recruits.

The story then returns to the present, as the narrator explains that he had been cleaning the attic when he came across his old Marine dress-blue uniform. He also took out the various medals he won in the Vietnam War, including the one that gives him most pride, the Airborne wings. This signifies that he was a Force Recon Marine, a member of a reconnaissance unit.

He then recalls what happened to him and his buddies in Vietnam. Only three days after they arrived, they were parachuted in on a routine reconnaissance patrol near the DMZ (the demilitarized zone that marked the border between South Vietnam and North Vietnam). His team moves across a clear field while he is sent to investigate a small mound of loose red dirt in the jungle nearby. The mound turns out to be an anthill, but as he approaches it, the Marines are attacked by North Vietnamese troops. The narrator is blown into the air by the impact of a mortar round. He suffers concussion but is mostly unhurt, although his M-16 rifle is jammed. Several of the other Marines are killed by the mortar round, but the narrator sees Jorgeson firing back at the enemy as they advance. He also sees Second Lieutenant Milton firing his .45 pistol and assumes that his M-16 has also jammed. Milton has his arm shot off by a rocket but continues to fire his gun. Jorgeson is alone in the open, firing his M-16 as the North Vietnamese fire at him. He then runs to a dead Marine and takes his M-60 machine gun and fires, killing more North Vietnamese Army (NVA) troops. The surviving North Vietnamese either take cover or turn back and head for the trees. Jorgeson keeps firing and also looks across at the narrator and smiles. Moments later, he is hit by a rocket grenade.

The enemy converge on the dead Marines, and it appears they have forgotten about the presence of the narrator. But then one North Vietnamese soldier remembers him and moves in his direction, only to turn back when Jorgeson gives a huge shriek. The NVA soldier bayonets Jorgeson in the heart.

The deadly incident ends with an air strike by American planes, called in by the narrator. They drop bombs and napalm. (Napalm is a highly flammable explosive used by the United States in Vietnam to burn an area and incinerate the enemy.) The narrator escapes by running as fast as he can.

The narrator completes three tours of Vietnam but he is badly scarred by his experiences. Wanting revenge for the death of Jorgeson, he possesses what he calls a reservoir of malice and sadism in his soul and says that he committed unspeakable crimes and was awarded medals for his acts.

When he returns to the United States, he becomes a heavy smoker and a borderline alcoholic. He remains in the Marines, garrisoned at Camp Pendleton in California. In the mid-1970s, at the age of twenty-seven, he participates in a boxing match with a light-heavyweight boxer from Marine artillery. The narrator is a former Marine boxing champion, and he wins the vicious fight on points. But he takes a bad beating and suffers serious consequences. Over the next two weeks, he has constant headaches and double vision.

As his health gradually deteriorates, he becomes introspective, wondering why he enjoys getting into fistfights and inflicting pain on others. The only thing that gives him relief is the pessimistic writings of the nineteenth-century German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860).

About a year after the boxing match, the narrator begins having seizures, a form of epilepsy sometimes called Dostoyevski's epilepsy, after the nineteenth-century Russian writer who suffered from the same condition. Like Dostoyevski, the narrator experiences a kind of ecstasy a split second before the fit starts that makes him feel he is experiencing the supreme, divine reality. But then the feeling goes and he doubts the existence of God.

As he continues to suffer from epilepsy, he rarely leaves the house. To avoid falling injuries, he wears headgear, and he also carries his mouthpiece, which he slips into his mouth just prior to an attack, to stop himself from biting his tongue. The seizures get more frequent, and he takes many prescribed drugs to treat the condition. He acquires two dogs that are trained to watch him as he sleeps and ensure that if he has a seizure he does not suffocate himself face down in his bedding. He also suffers from serious psychological problems, as indicated by the fact that he takes amitriptyline, an anti-depressant, and thorazine (a drug used to treat disorganized and psychotic thinking).

A neurosurgeon visits him and says he can treat his depression through a surgical procedure called cingulotomy. The doctor says that this procedure cauterizes a small area of the brain, and the narrator will no longer have to rely on drugs to treat his mental problems. Cingulotomy is a controversial treatment that destroys bundles of nerve connections in the brain. It is used as a last resort to treat mental illness in patients for whom other treatments have been ineffective.

The narrator is not convinced that the cingulotomy will work, but his condition is so bad that he believes he cannot go on the way he is, so he agrees to the procedure. He believes that it could go wrong and he may end up as a □vegetable.□

He thinks of his friend Jorgeson, knowing that Jorgeson was a hero, and wishing he were alive. He also reveals that he claimed the credit for killing the enemy soldiers who in fact had been killed by Jorgeson. He was almost awarded the Medal of Honor, but there was no one to corroborate his story.

He wonders also about the vision of supreme reality that he gets before his seizures. Perhaps, he thinks, it is merely a neurochemical phenomenon, nothing to do with God.

The story ends with the narrator hoping that if the operation goes wrong, he will at least be allowed to keep his dogs. He fears being sent to an asylum.

# Characters

## Lance Corporal Hanes

Lance Corporal Hanes is an experienced Marine with two Purple Hearts who has only twelve days left on his tour of duty in Vietnam. He is killed when the platoon comes under fire from the North Vietnamese. The narrator is angry that Hanes, since he had such a short time left, was not sent to the rear, out of harm's way.

## Hey Baby

Hey Baby is the nickname of one of the Marine recruits at boot camp. He is large and fairly tough, but he is a bully and is not liked by the other recruits. He takes to picking on Jorgeson, the narrator's buddy. But when he shoves Jorgeson hard with his rifle, the narrator responds by striking him in the temple with the butt of his rifle. Hey Baby suffers a fractured skull.

## Jorgeson

Jorgeson is a friend of the narrator since they were both training to be Marines at boot camp in San Diego. At boot camp, Jorgeson is an unconventional character. Drawn to being an artist rather than a Marine, he wants to live a Bohemian lifestyle, drinking, playing jazz, hanging out with Jack Kerouac and other beatniks, studying Zen Buddhism and astrology. The narrator thinks Jorgeson has a skeptical attitude regarding his Marine training, but he changes his mind when he runs into Jorgeson again at Camp Pendleton, where Jorgeson is working as a clerk. He has gained fifteen pounds through weight training, and his training routine includes running seven miles in full combat gear. It is Jorgeson who persuades the narrator to join him and train as a Force Recon Marine. He no longer talks about becoming an artist. When he is sent to Vietnam with the narrator and their team is attacked in the field, Jorgeson puts out steady fire against the enemy before he is felled by a rocket grenade. As he is dying, it may be that he saves the narrator's life by distracting the attention of a North Vietnamese soldier.

## Second Lieutenant Milton

Second Lieutenant Milton is fairly new to the Marines. When the Marines come under fire in Vietnam, Milton is the only one other than Jorgeson who returns fire. But he can only use his .45, which is not much use in this situation. He is soon killed by a rocket.

## The Narrator

The unnamed narrator is a Vietnam veteran who suffers from epilepsy and depression. As he looks back on the major events of his life, he recalls being at boot camp, where he first met his friend Jorgeson. At boot camp he first revealed the aggressive behavior that has characterized his life ever since; he fractured the skull of another recruit with the butt of his rifle. The narrator is more emotional than Jorgeson; Sergeant Wright's speeches about how a Marine would do anything to save the life of another Marine brings tears to his eyes. After boot camp he attends communication school in San Diego, which he deliberately flunks. Then Jorgeson talks him into becoming a Force Recon Marine. He is the only one in his platoon who escapes the carnage of the attack by the North Vietnamese, which takes place when he has been in Vietnam for only three days.

The narrator's experiences in battle scar him for life. On his three tours of Vietnam, he does things of which he would not have thought he was capable. Filled with the desire to avenge the death of Jorgeson, he perpetrates what he knows are war crimes, for which he is not reprimanded but awarded medals. His medals include the Navy Cross, but this is only because he claims the dead Jorgeson's deeds as his own. He does not feel remorseful about the lies he told.

After returning to the United States, he remains in the Marines, at Camp Pendleton, but he is a troubled man. He drinks too much and gets into fights. While boxing, he suffers a head injury in a fight, which results in epilepsy. He also suffers from serious long-term depression, for which he is heavily medicated. The drugs make him feel languid and unable to do anything.

Despite his rough exterior and disturbed mind, the narrator is also a reflective man with an interest in philosophy. He derives comfort from absorbing the pessimistic philosophy of Schopenhauer, and he also reads the Russian novelist Dostoyevski. Stimulated by mystical insight that occurs in the split second before his seizures begin, he speculates about the existence of God. His hero is Theogenes, the ancient Greek boxer who reportedly won all of his 1,425 fights to the death. The narrator keeps on his wall a black and white picture of the Roman statue copied from the Greek and known as □The Pugilist at Rest,□ which may be of Theogenes. He studies it and reflects on the expression of resignation on the battered but noble face of the boxer.

## Sergeant Wright

Sergeant Wright is in charge of the Marine recruits at Marine Corps Recruit Depot in San Diego. He is a tough Marine and is admired by the men, who regard him as □the real thing, the genuine article.□

# Themes

## The Masculine Code

The story presents an ideal of manhood in terms of toughness and aggression. In the narrator's world, real men put their masculinity to the test in extreme conditions, whether on the battlefield or in the boxing ring. Courage, fearlessness, and endurance are the qualities to be cultivated. Men must show other men what they are made of. In the boxing match, for example, the narrator makes a decision to stay in the fight because his buddies are watching, and he cannot let them down. The fact that he does not get knocked out is as much due to will power as brute strength. He believes when men act with aggression, they are being true to their own nature, which explains why the narrator feels exhilarated during the fight, as he did on the battlefields of Vietnam. There is no fear in such situations. Even though he takes a beating in the boxing match, he is sorry when the fight is over. The assertion of manhood is one of life's main thrills.

The macho ideal is emphasized in Marine training, as the raw recruits are transformed into tough warriors who will think nothing of charging an enemy machine-gun nest to save their buddies. Those who cannot be toughened up simply drop out. From the outset, the narrator is out to prove his toughness, as shown in his assault of Hey Baby, his declaration to the Marine colonel that he wants to be in the infantry because he did not join the Marines to sit at a desk all day, and his final decision, influenced by Jorgeson, to become an elite Recon Marine. Jorgeson also embodies the masculine ideal, as shown by the fact that he quickly gives up his original desire to be a beatnik and an artist and gets absorbed by the masculine world.

## Heroism

Although the story presents a pessimistic view of human nature, it also contains a glimpse of the traditional heroic ideal. This is seen in Jorgeson's actions when the Marines are ambushed by North Vietnamese troops. Although Jorgeson has never before been exposed to enemy fire, he stays cool and returns fire on the enemy. His situation is desperate, but he keeps his head, firing his M-16 in □short, controlled bursts,□ killing a lot of enemy soldiers. Even when he is mortally wounded, his shriek distracts the attention of a North Vietnamese soldier who is heading in the narrator's direction. The narrator believes that Jorgeson screamed on purpose in order to save his, the narrator's, life. Jorgeson, therefore, lives up to the highest ideals of the Marine Corps.

The minor character Second Lieutenant Milton is also presented in a heroic light. Even though his M-16 is not working, he fires at the enemy with his .45 pistol and still tries to reload even when his entire arm is severed by a rocket.

# Pessimism

Pessimism about human nature and human life pervades the story. The narrator knows that human life is difficult at best and often made worse by the actions of other humans. □The world is replete with badness,□ he says, and he regards it as a kind of hell. Sickness and suffering are all around. He points out that in the United States of the twentieth century, in spite of great material abundance, personal and social problems abound. There are still prisons and nursing homes, homelessness and alcoholism. Wherever one looks, the narrator seems to suggest, one finds evidence of cruelty and hopelessness. Nor does he hold out any hope for improvement because that is the nature of things. He has arrived at this view of life not only from his own experience but also through his reading of the philosopher Schopenhauer, who believed, like the Buddhists, that life is suffering, the perpetual restless striving of desire. Every desire that is satisfied only gives rise to another desire, and so the cycle goes on forever. The narrator believes there is never any final rest or fulfillment, only discontentment and misery. Pleasure is always fleeting, an illusion that veils the reality of life. According to this philosophy, which the narrator embraces with relief, the only attitude worth cultivating is that of stoic resignation to the way things are.

# Style

The narrator frequently brings attention to one image: the blue eyes of his friend Jorgeson. There is nothing remarkable about Jorgeson's appearance other than his □very clear cobalt-blue eyes□: □They were so remarkable that they caused you to notice Jorgeson in a crowd. There was unusual beauty in these eyes, and there was an extraordinary power in them.□ While Jorgeson is firing at the enemy, he turns and looks at the narrator □with those blue eyes,□ and just as Jorgeson is about to die, the narrator sees in his eyes □a final flash of glorious azure before they faded into the unfocused and glazed gray of death.□ Later, the narrator is reminded of Jorgeson's eyes by the color of his Marine uniform, not because they were the same but because each color was so startling.

Jorgeson's eyes suggest some courageous quality he possessed that enabled him to rise above the horror of battle and the strife of life. Jorgeson's eyes may also symbolize the friendship between him and the narrator, the bond they shared. The blue eyes also represent perhaps a kind of beauty that transcends this world, the sort of beauty known to artists. Jorgeson's original desire, after all, was to become an artist. However, the image of Jorgeson's eyes might also be intended to show what happens to beauty in this cruel world, since Jorgeson's exposure to combat lasts a mere twelve minutes, in contrast to the narrator, a far less heroic figure, who survives three tours of Vietnam without serious injury.

The story's central symbol is the Roman sculpture known as □The Pugilist at Rest.□ The narrator studies it and is inspired by the figure depicted in the sculpture, who he believes may be the boxer, Theogenes. The sculpture is a symbol of the brutality of male competition. The boxer bears on his muscular body the signs of many battles. But in spite of the brutality of his occupation, the boxer's face, in the eyes of the narrator, has nobility. His character had been tested in combat, and he has passed the test. There is also calm in the boxer's facial expression. He is a symbol of philosophical resignation to the reality that life is suffering, which is the philosophy that the narrator has learned from Schopenhauer.

# Historical Context

## Vietnam War

In the summer of 1966, when the narrator in □The Pugilist at Rest□ was attending boot camp in San Diego, the war in Vietnam was steadily escalating as the United States sought to prevent communist North Vietnam from taking over South Vietnam, which had a non-communist government. American planes began bombing Hanoi, the capital of North Vietnam, in late June, 1966, and by the end of the year the number of U.S. troops stationed in South Vietnam had risen to 385,300. This figure rose to 475,000 by the end of 1967 and peaked at 543,000 troops by 1969.

However, the war was becoming intensely unpopular at home. Nightly television news broadcasts from the battlefields brought the reality of the conflict home to the American public. American casualties were high, the United States seemed increasingly likely to lose the war, and to many Americans the war was morally unjustifiable. In April, 1967, an estimated 400,000 protesters marched against the war in New York City. In October of the same year in Washington, D.C., 100,000 people demonstrated outside the Pentagon. Also in 1967, Martin Luther King Jr. exercised his moral authority by publicly speaking out against the war.

In 1968, the North Vietnamese launched surprise attacks on a number of South Vietnamese towns, including the capital city, Saigon. Known as the Tet offensive, the attacks showed the American public that the United States, despite the presence of its huge military forces, was not winning the war. Later that year, peace talks began in Paris and the bombing of North Vietnam was halted. There were continued massive protests against the war in Washington D.C. and other cities.

The war dragged on for another four years before a cease-fire was signed in Paris in January 1973. North Vietnam released 590 American prisoners of war, and the last U.S. troops left the country.

## U.S. War Crimes in Vietnam

The narrator in □The Pugilist at Rest□ commits □unspeakable crimes□ in Vietnam, yet he is not court-martialed but given medals. This point touches on the issue of American war crimes in Vietnam and their cover-up, which was a controversial and divisive issue in the United States during the late-1960s and early 1970s. One notorious incident took place on March 16, 1968, at the village of My Lai, in which between 347 and 504 civilians were killed by American soldiers. The victims were mainly old men, women, children, and babies. Two initial Army investigations in 1968 concluded that the massacre did not take place. However, irrefutable details, including photographs, emerged in 1969. In 1971, Lieutenant William Calley, the leader of a platoon of soldiers who carried out the massacre, was convicted of the premeditated murder of twenty-two

civilians. He was initially sentenced to life in prison but instead served only three and a half years of house arrest in his Army quarters at Fort Benning, Georgia. Calley claimed that he was following orders from his captain, Ernest Medina, who denied ordering any killings. Medina was tried and acquitted.

Several other investigations were conducted into alleged war crimes in Vietnam. A group known as the Vietnam Veterans Against the War organized the Winter Soldier Investigation in 1971, seeking to show that My Lai was not an isolated incident and that such crimes were the inevitable result of U.S. war policies in Vietnam. During the Winter Soldier Investigation, over one hundred Vietnam veterans gave testimony about war crimes they had committed or witnessed in Vietnam. However, no further war crimes trials were held.

## Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) can result from a traumatic experience such as combat in war or from any highly stressful experience, such as natural disasters (fire, flood, earthquake); torture or rape; an automobile or airplane accident; or childhood physical abuse. The traumatic event may retain its power, years later, to evoke the same emotions, such as panic or terror, which the person felt at the time. Any stimulus that the person perceives as being related to the trauma can trigger memories of the original event along with the accompanying psychological reactions. The emotions may also return as nightmares or what are called PTSD flashbacks, in which the person finds himself re-experiencing the traumatic experience. (In the story, the narrator says he can still feel and smell the heat waves of napalm that he experienced in Vietnam.) PTSD is classified as an anxiety disorder; it may include symptoms such as depression or anti-social behavior (such as the aggressive behavior of the Vietnam veteran in □The Pugilist at Rest□).

The incidence of PTSD is higher among Vietnam veterans than in the general population. According to the National Vietnam Veterans Readjustment Survey (NVVRS), conducted from 1986 to 1988, 31 percent of male veterans and 27 percent of female veterans had experienced PTSD at some point in their lives. (In the general population the figures are 5 percent and 10 percent, respectively.) Although the survey found that the majority of Vietnam veterans had successfully reintegrated into society, a substantial minority had difficulties. Forty percent of male veterans had been divorced at least once; almost half of the men suffering from PTSD at the time of the survey had been arrested or in jail at least once, and 11.5 percent had been convicted of a felony. Thirty-three percent of male veterans had at some point experienced alcohol abuse or dependence.

Some problems experienced by Vietnam veterans may have been exacerbated by the fact that the war was unpopular in the United States, and the veterans returned to a bitterly divided country. Rather than being welcomed as victorious heroes, as the veterans of World War II had been, these veterans were sometimes mistrusted and subjected to abuse by fellow citizens angry at the war and its outcome.

# Critical Overview

Jones's collection of stories *The Pugilist at Rest* was received enthusiastically by reviewers, who hailed the author as a strong new voice in American short fiction. According to *Publishers Weekly*, □Jones's voice . . . is irresistible□sharp, angry, poetic. His characters . . . are scarred, spirited survivors of drug abuse, war and life's cruel tricks.□ Most reviewers noted the similarities between the title story and many of the other stories. According to John Skow, in *Time*, the book □is a sheaf of extraordinary short stories, most of them about scarred, damaged men on the far side of violence. The viewpoint does not vary much: a straight-on, wondering stare back through the wreckage.□ Skow admired the strength and clarity of the voice in the stories and commented that □it is hard to imagine the author finding another as effective.□ Like Skow, Mary Hawthorne, in the *Times Literary Supplement* noted that that the pugilist in the stories is always the same figure presented in different ways. But this figure □rarely achieves the grace of his ancient prototype . . . he is by turns swaggering, intolerant, self-righteous, aggressive, deluded□desperate to prove his manly 'realness.'□ Hawthorne also noted that Jones is □a man's kind of writer□ who □reveals much about the condition of the American male psyche.□

# Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

# Critical Essay #1

*Aubrey holds a Ph.D. in English and has published many articles on twentieth century literature. In this essay, Aubrey discusses the narrator's attempts to escape his suffering through the philosophy of Schopenhauer, as well as the significance of his epilepsy.*

The depressed, epileptic Vietnam veteran who narrates □The Pugilist at Rest□ and whose life is a toxic cocktail of pain, cruelty, aggression, and suffering is not an isolated figure in Jones's short fiction. The same basic character appears in □Break on Through□ and □The Black Lights,□ the two stories that immediately follow □The Pugilist at Rest□ in Jones's first collection of stories. All three stories are told in the first person by a Force Recon Marine who has been on several tours of Vietnam and has won medals for his courage in combat. His is a violent, masculine world in which the tougher and more ruthless a man is, the more respect he is accorded by his peers. It is a world awash in drugs of all kinds that are used to assuage pain, whether physical or mental. Life in these stories is lived in the raw, on the edge. It is also lit up from time to time with the strange exhilaration that men feel in the heat of combat. The narrator in □The Pugilist at Rest□ says that he felt completely alive in the war zones of Vietnam, even in the midst of mayhem and death, and he reports the same experience in the boxing ring, during the fight that results in his brain injury. Similarly, the unnamed narrator in □The Black Lights□ says, as he and a fellow Marine ignore an order to pull over and drive through a checkpoint as they leave a psychiatric military hospital in California:

For a moment I felt like I was back in the jungle again, a savage in greasepaint, or back in the boxing ring, a primal man□kill or be killed. It was the best feeling. It was ecstasy.

Surprisingly also, the protagonists in these stories, despite the macho world in which they live and the fact that they have only a high school education, are also reflective, philosophically inclined men who read philosophers such as Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche, and writers such as Marcel Proust and Franz Kafka, none of whom would be considered exactly staple reading for the average Marine. These readings help them to grapple with the craziness and cruelty of their lives as tortured souls, bound, like Shakespeare's King Lear, on □a wheel of fire.□ As that wheel turns and turns from day to day, they occasionally glimpse moments of escape into some higher realm of understanding. In □The Black Lights,□ for example, the patients in the psychiatric ward are provided with entertainment at Christmas. As the narrator watches the square dancers perform, he reports:

I saw myself as if from on high, saw the pattern of my whole life with a kind of geometrical precision, like the pattern the dancers were making, and it seemed there was a perfect rightness to it all.

In □The Pugilist at Rest,□ the narrator glimpses two avenues of escape, neither of which can give him lasting relief. First, he manages to find some □peace and self-renewal□ in the pessimistic philosophy of Schopenhauer. The book he reads is

Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation*, first published in 1819 and revised and expanded in 1844. This book was later regarded as one of the most important philosophical works of the nineteenth century, although it made very little impact at the time of publication. Schopenhauer's philosophy has much in common with Buddhism and Hinduism, the latter as found in texts such as the Upanishads. According to Schopenhauer, the constant elements in human life are want, care, lack, and pain. Suffering cannot be avoided. Genuine, lasting happiness is not possible because humans are driven by the constant, restless need to satisfy some desire or craving. As soon as one desire is satisfied, another takes its place. All pleasures are fleeting and also illusory, in the sense that they mask or hide the reality of life, which is suffering. The world is simply not designed to support human happiness. Misery is not an accident that can somehow be rectified; it is the natural condition of man. In Schopenhauer's view, the only attitude worth cultivating is one of resignation, a calm acceptance of the way things are. This alone can free a person from the endless wheel of desire and enable him to view life objectively, beyond the striving for small satisfactions that are only temporary diversions and distractions from the truth about the human condition.

The narrator sees this kind of Schopenhauerean resignation in the ancient sculpture known as □The Pugilist at Rest.□ The boxer's face bears the marks of pain and suffering. Like every human being in his or her own way, he has endured many blows. Yet the narrator sees something more than suffering in the man's face: □There is also the suggestion of world weariness and philosophical resignation.□ It may be that the pugilist is about to face another fight to the death, but he has no fear. He accepts life for what it is and has no false expectations. He will take what is to come, whether good or bad, with equanimity. As such, the ancient pugilist serves as an inspiration to the narrator, who keeps a photograph of the sculpture in his room and studies it. A tough man, much battered by life, he seeks consolation through philosophy and art, and there is something very moving about his contemplation of this grainy black and white photograph. A poorer reproduction of this Roman statue, which is itself a copy of a Greek original, could hardly be imagined. But through it all he senses its grandeur.

The narrator's second avenue of escape from the grim daily reality of his life is scarcely an ideal one, since it is associated with the epilepsy that causes him so much distress. In the split second before the epileptic seizure begins, he experiences an indescribable feeling of ecstasy in which he knows beyond any shadow of doubt that God exists. He calls it □my vision of the Supreme Reality,□ but he cannot explain it any further, and he does not pretend to understand it. It is □slippery and elusive□ when he tries to recall it after it has gone, and later he comes to doubt the truth of what he experiences in those moments.

Such are the narrator's occasional consolations□Schopenhauer and the □aura□ that precedes an epileptic seizure□for his life of □tedious, unrelenting depression.□ But they are not enough; they do not make the same imprint on his life that his afflictions do. The reader senses this not only from the overall tone of the narrator's story and the pessimism he expresses at the end, as he awaits a risky form of psychosurgery that may do as much harm as good, but also from the style in which the narrator writes. When he writes about suffering and violence, his prose is vivid and conveys a palpable,

in-the-moment sensation. Recalling his Vietnam experience, for example, he describes in clinical detail the fatal wound sustained by Milton:

I could see the white bone and ligaments of his shoulder, and then red flesh of muscle tissue, looking very much like fresh prime beef, well marbled and encased in a thin layer of yellowish-white adipose tissue that quickly became saturated with dark-red blood.

Of the boxing match in which he takes a beating, he writes, □It felt like he was hitting me in the face with a ball-peen hammer. It felt like he was busting light bulbs in my face.□

The similes and metaphors here are striking and apt; the voice renders direct, real experience that cuts to the quick. As the narrator himself admits, he feels fully alive in such moments of violence and danger. But when he writes about the aura that precedes his epileptic seizure, his gift for language seems to desert him. Instead of describing his own experience, he discusses that of others, giving the reader a short tour of some notable figures in history who suffered from the same form of temporal lobe epilepsy. It is as if he has switched from recording the raw experience of suffering in the present to the more objective mode of the historian. He seems particularly fascinated by the case of Dostoyevski, who, apparently, □experienced a sense of felicity, of ecstatic well-being unlike anything an ordinary mortal could hope to imagine.□ The narrator goes on to report that Dostoyevski □said that he wouldn't trade ten years of life for this feeling, and I, who have had it, too, would have to agree.□

There is an oddly detached, derivative quality to this description, quite unlike the narrator's vivid description of injury and violence. In contrast to his first-hand accounts of violence and mayhem, he relies on someone else to describe the epileptic experience and then tamely says that he agrees with it. Later, he says that in this moment, the □murky veil of illusion which is spread over all things□ is lifted, but he makes no attempt to explain what the illusion is. The impression left on the reader by this change in the narrator's style is that the so-called illusion is in fact more real, more stubborn, and more persistent than the fleeting illumination that supposedly shatters it, which is never conjured up with the same force as the violence and suffering endured (and dished out) by the narrator. In the end, it appears that the moments of apparent escape, far from being revelations of truth, are themselves the illusion; the reality is the revolving wheel of fire on which the narrator is bound and from which there is no escape.

**Source:** Bryan Aubrey, Critical Essay on □The Pugilist at Rest,□ in *Short Stories for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

# Topics for Further Study

Research the types of brain injury caused by boxing. How many boxers have died over the last decade directly as a result of injuries sustained in the ring? Should there be more regulations to make boxing safer? Should boxing be banned altogether?

The narrator in the story was probably in Vietnam during the Tet offensive in 1968. What was the Tet offensive? In what sense did it mark a turning point in the war?

What are the symptoms of depression? How is depression treated? How does depression alter the way a person feels and the way the person perceives the world? Write two separate paragraphs describing a significant incident in your life. Write the first paragraph from the perspective of an emotionally level state of mind. Then write the second paragraph about the same incident from the perspective of a depressed mood. Note how different the same incident can sound when told from two radically different psychological perspectives.

Select a piece of visual art□a painting, photograph or sculpture. Describe it and also describe its significance for you. What does it tell you about life that is so appealing? What questions does it pose for you, and what questions does it answer? For inspiration, re-read the passage in the story where the narrator describes the sculpture, □The Pugilist at Rest.□

# Compare and Contrast

**1960s:** In 1963, the drug sodium valproate (VPA) is found to be effective in controlling epileptic seizures. In 1968, the Epilepsy Foundation of America is formed, dedicated to promoting the welfare of people with epilepsy.

**1990s:** Congress passes the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990, preventing discrimination against anyone with a disability, including epilepsy.

**Today:** In 2000, the Epilepsy Foundation of America holds a conference, □Curing Epilepsy: The Promise and the Challenge,□ in which it sets goals, including the prevention and cure of epilepsy. Epilepsy is effectively treated with medication that prevents seizures from occurring. A new procedure called vagus nerve stimulation (VNS) uses a device to prevent seizures by sending a small pulse of electricity to the vagus nerve, a large nerve in the neck.

**1960s:** In spite of its huge manpower and technological superiority, the United States cannot defeat the enemy in Vietnam. The war is a divisive issue among Americans and saps American self-confidence.

**1990s:** The United States and its allies are victorious in the Gulf War in 1991, in which Saddam Hussein's Iraq is evicted from Kuwait following the Iraqi invasion. The victory is hailed by many as laying to rest the ghost of Vietnam and restoring America's belief in itself and its armed forces.

**Today:** The continuing conflict in Iraq, in which the United States has 135,000 troops but is failing to quell a growing insurgency, is compared by some to the quagmire of Vietnam. Supporters of the war, however, argue that the United States must continue the quest to bring democracy to Iraq and not abandon it to probable civil war.

**1960s:** After two well-publicized deaths from injuries received in the boxing ring, there are calls for boxing to be banned. In 1962, Cuban boxer Benny Paret dies ten days after being badly beaten in the twelfth round of a fight with Emile Griffith at Madison Square Garden in New York City. The following year, featherweight boxer Davey Moore dies after a fight with Cuban boxer ltiminio (Sugar) Ramos at Dodger Stadium. As a result, California's governor Pat Brown asks the State legislature to ban boxing, and bills to outlaw the sport are introduced in several states, although no bills are passed.

**1990s:** Boxing becomes safer as a result of changes made in the 1980s. Title bouts are limited to a maximum of twelve rather than fifteen rounds, and referees are quicker to end bouts in which one boxer is being exposed to dangerous punishment.

**Today:** There are fewer deaths from boxing than in previous decades. Boxing ranks eighth in fatality rates for all sports, with 1.3 deaths per 100,000 participants, according to the Johns Hopkins Medical Institute. However, the risk of incurring brain damage as a result of repeated blows to the head remains high, and there are still boxing fatalities. In

2005, Becky Zerlentes becomes the first female boxer to die in a sanctioned boxing match in the United States. She dies twenty-four hours after being knocked out in the third round of an amateur bout in Denver.

# What Do I Read Next?

Jones's *Sonny Liston Was a Friend of Mine: Stories* (1999) is his third collection of stories. Like *The Pugilist at Rest*, the collection includes stories about damaged boxers and Vietnam veterans, desperately trying to keep their lives afloat, but also some very different voices, such as a high school vice-principal and a ninety-two-year-old woman.

In *Home to War: A History of the Vietnam Veterans' Movement* (2002), Gerald Nicosia reports on interviews with six hundred Vietnam veterans who became active in the antiwar movement or worked as veterans' advocates. Nicosia, whose sympathies lie with the antiwar movement, focuses on the leaders of Vietnam Veterans Against the War. He also covers such topics as the Veterans Administration's record on Agent Orange (a toxic chemical defoliant used by U.S. forces in Vietnam that led to health problems for those exposed to it and contaminated the land) and on post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

*Vietnam: A History* (2nd edition, 1997), by Stanley Karnow, is a highly acclaimed political and military history of Vietnam from its origins at the end of World War II to the collapse of South Vietnam in 1975. Karnow is former Southeast Asian correspondent for *Time* and *The Washington Post*, and his account has been widely admired for its depth of understanding and lack of bias.

# Further Study

Kelleher, Ray, "The New Machoism: An Interview with Thom Jones," in *Poets & Writers Magazine*, Vol. 23, No. 3, May/June 1995, pp. 28-37.

This is a wide-ranging article in which Jones talks about boxing, mysticism, and epilepsy, and how they fuel his imagination as a writer.

LaPlante, Eve, *Seized*, HarperCollins, 1993.

LaPlante chronicles the lives of three ordinary people who suffer from temporal lobe epilepsy (TLE), as well as discussing prominent figures from the past, including Saint Paul, Dostoyevski, Gustave Flaubert, and Lewis Carroll, who also suffered from TLE. She analyzes the connection between TLE and creativity.

Pinsker, Sanford, "Review of *The Pugilist at Rest*," in *Studies in Short Fiction*, Vol. 31, No. 3, Summer 1994, pp. 499-500.

Pinsker admires the stories for their "vision of life as fierce as it is uncompromising," as well as Jones's skillful technique. He also comments that not since Raymond Carver's first collection of short stories has a writer of so much promise appeared.

Schumock, Jim, *Story Story Story: Conversations with American Authors*, Black Heron Press, 1999, pp. 248-67.

This book contains interviews conducted by Schumock on his radio program with nineteen American authors. The interviews focus on the connections between the writers' lives and their work.

Solotaroff, Ted, "Review of *The Pugilist at Rest*," in the *Nation*, Vol. 257, No. 7, Sept 6, 1993, pp. 254-57.

Solotaroff notes the ambivalent psychological dynamic operating in the narrator who is both fascinated and repelled by his buddy Jorgeson's artistic side, which is at odds with his own ostensibly macho attitude. The narrator balances both sides by a ferocious act of violence against Hey Baby which is also protective of his friend.

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Johnson, Tyler D., □In Person,□ in *Austin Chronicle*, Vol. 18, No. 29, http://www.austinchronicle.com/issues/vol18/issue29/books.inperson.html.

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Review of *The Pugilist at Rest*, in *Publishers Weekly*, Vol. 240, No. 15, April 12, 1993, p. 47.

Shakespeare, William, *King Lear*, edited by Kenneth Muir, Methuen, 1972, act 4, scene 7, p. 178.

Skow, John, Review of *The Pugilist at Rest*, in *Time*, June 28, 1993, Vol. 141, No. 26, p. 72.

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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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