Rape Fantasies Study Guide

Rape Fantasies by Margaret Atwood

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Introduction

Margaret Atwood's "Rape Fantasies" was first published in the Canadian version of *Dancing Girls and Other Stories* in 1977 but was omitted from the American edition of the collection. It has become one of Atwood's best-known works, particularly after its inclusion in the 1985 edition of *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women.* The story, a first-person narration in which a woman discusses her concerns about being raped, exhibits many of the qualities often associated with Atwood's work, including biting humor, vivid characterizations, and an exploration of the power struggle between men and women. Furthermore, It highlights many women's fears of crime and victimization in an urban environment where safety depends on striking a delicate balance between trust and suspicion.

Although "Rape Fantasies" is one of Atwood's most popular stories, little criticism of her work focuses on it specifically. Several critics have noted that Estelle seems to be a naive protagonist, but that view is rejected by an equal number of reviewers. Estelle and her female coworkers have very different ideas on what romance is and how to obtain it without falling prey to the insidious forces in society. The story is often used as a starting point for discussing the gap between men's and women's perceptions of each other.

Author Biography

Margaret Atwood was born in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, on November 18,1939. She started reading and writing at an early age and was particularly drawn to the Brothers Grimm fairy tales because of their active female characters. Greek mythology and its themes of metamorphosis, rebirth, and transformation further excited the young girl's Imagination. Atwood's father was an entomologist and an avid nature lover. The young Atwood spent much time discovering nature in the wilds of Canada while she was growing up, a fact that is evident in much of her Writing. In the book *Conversations,* Atwood discussed the impact her father's work had on her: "The most transformative thing you can study is insects. They change from one thing into another, and the thing they change into bears no relation to what they were before."

As a high school student in Toronto, Ontario, in the 1950s, Atwood began to take Writing seriously. In school, she studied mostly British writers, and the Idea of a particularly Canadian literature was not common, a fact that she has successfully sought to change throughout her career. After receiving a degree from the University of Toronto in 1961, Atwood came to the United States to study at Radcliff and Harvard. Cultural differences between Canada and the United States first became an Issue when she was attending Harvard University. She discovered that many Americans had only the vaguest notion of Canada. "They seemed to want to believe that my father was a Mounted Policeman and that we lived in igloos all year round, and I must admit that after a while I took a certain pleasure in encouraging these beliefs," Atwood once said.

Atwood's first published work was a collection of poems, *Double Persephone,* which was published in 1961 It was not until 1970 that her first novel was published, *The Edible Woman,* the story of a reluctantly engaged woman who becomes infatuated with a mysterious man utterly unlike her fiancé. As her affair progresses, she becomes unable to eat. Over the years, Atwood has published many collections of poetry, stories, and essays in addition to her novels, and has won acclaim for all the genres in which she writes. No matter what form her writing takes, it often incorporates irony, symbolism, and self-conscious narrators. Her themes usually explore the relationship between humanity and nature, the unsettling aspects of human behavior, and power as it pertains to gender roles.

Now considered one of Canada's foremost writers, Atwood continues to write novels and stones to wide public acclaim. In 1996 she published *Alias, Grace,* a fictionalized account of a real-life murder that took place in Canada in the eighteenth century. Other works by Atwood that have proved popular include *Cat's Eye,* the story of a Toronto-based artist who is haunted by the memory of a cruel childhood friend; *The Handmaid's Tale,* a dystopian novel that takes place in the future, when childbearing women are rare and forced into servitude as breeding machines; and *The Robber Bride,* in which three very different women lose the men in their lives to the scheming, preternaturally beautiful Zenia. In addition to her fiction, Atwood contributes to the body of contemporary literary criticism through her frequent reviews and essays on literature

and Writing. She continues to live in Canada with her husband, the Writer Graeme Gibson, and their daughter, Jess.

Plot Summary

The first-person narrator of "Rape Fantasies" is Estelle, a young office worker who notes how popular the topic of rape has become in women's magazines. According to Estelle, articles on the subject seem to be everywhere; titles like "Rape, Ten Things To Do About It" appear in capital letters on the magazine covers, "like it was ten new hairdos or something." She recounts a conversation that took place during her lunch hour between herself and her coworkers after Chrissy, a receptionist in Estelle's office, has read one of these articles. Chrissy interrupts her coworkers' bridge game to ask if any of them ever fantasize about rape. Each character's response defines her personality: Estelle would rather continue playing cards, Chrissy and Sondra are interested in trading stories, and Darlene, the oldest and the only divorced woman in the group, finds such fantasies disgusting and turns her back on the women to go to the coffee machine.

Greta fantasizes about a handsome man corning through her balcony doors, a fantasy that draws on romantic television shows and movies. Chrissy relates that her fantasy is for a man to break into her apartment while she is taking a bath. Estelle responds to both women by saying "those aren't rape fantasies. I mean, you aren't getting raped, it's just some guy you haven't met formally. . . . and you have a good time. Rape is when they've got a knife or something and you don't want to." Her comments, however, are not met with enthusiasm, and her jokes are considered inappropriate. When prodded by Chrissy, Estelle describes a rape fantasy that involves being accosted on a dark street by a short, ugly man who is "absolutely covered in pimples." Once he pins her to the wall, his zipper gets stuck. He starts to cry and she ends up feeling sorry for him. Abruptly, Estelle interjects that she thought moving to Toronto "was going to be such a big adventure and all, but it's a lot harder to meet people in a city. But I guess it's different for a guy." This is the reader's first indication that Estelle is addressing her remarks to a listener within the story, rather than to the reader.

She then resumes her original narrative, launching into another rape fantasy. This time, she is bedridden with a terrible cold, and a man who, coincidentally, has a cold too, climbs through her window. "I'b goig do rabe you," is what he says. Eventually, they end up taking some medication and watching television together. Revealing her awareness of the seriousness of the topic, Estelle then offers a more realistic rape fantasies: she is accosted by a man with an axe in her mother's basement. She talks to him about the voices in his head, insisting that she hears them too. Her conversation confuses the would-be criminal, and eventually he leaves. Estelle doesn't like to think too much about this particular fantasy, since, as she says: "Dwelling on [unpleasant things] doesn't make them go away. Though not dwelling on them doesn't make them go away either, when you come to think of it." Vaguely aware that her rape fantasies may be no more realistic than those of her coworkers, Estelle acknowledges that "the funny thing about these fantasies is that the man is always someone I don't know, and the statistics in the magazines. . . say it's often someone you do know."_ Her monologue takes a serious turn when she goes on to talk about her personal life. She says she is not a drinker, but does not mind going to a nice bar by herself. Yet she obviously worries about the risks

involved: "It's getting so you can hardly be sociable any more. . .. You can't spend your whole life ... cooped up in your own apartment with all the doors and windows locked and the shades down.'" A crucial statement that hints at Estelle's motive for her lengthy speech about rape is directed at her listener, who is a customer, presumably male, in the bar she frequents: "I don't know why I'm telling you all this, except I think it helps you get to know a person, especially at first, hearing some of the things they think about.'" Getting to know a person is, at least in Estelle's view, a woman's best defense against rape, since she doesn't understand "how. . . a fellow [could] do that to a person he's just had a long conversation with. . ."

Summary

The story opens with one woman remarking on the fact that magazines are carrying on about "it," as if it were a new discovery or wonderful invention. "It" is rape, and the topic has caused a group of four co-workers to talk about it.

The narrator of the story says that the topic of rape is so prominent that you can't escape it, even though she has more enjoyable ways, (like watching a June Allyson movie on late night television,) to spend her time than talking and thinking about it. At the lunch table, a group of women who play bridge during their noon break take up the topic. Chrissy, the beautiful but cool receptionist, has looked at the magazine and asks if her cohorts have rape fantasies. The narrator makes a bid, hoping to escape the subject, and also hoping that her bridge partner, Sondra, will understand the hidden meaning of her one club bid.

Sondra is at first nonplussed, and then asks if Chrissy means fantasies like being accosted by a man in an alley. Darlene informs the group that she believes it's important to be safe and not to go out alone at night. The narrator explains that Darlene is actually forty-one years old, a fact she knows, because she investigates information in the company files that she has access to. Greta's response is that "it's only Toronto," the implication being that it's not nearly as bad as Detroit, where she used to work. The narrator of the story again points out that Greta has a superiority complex, because she used to work in such a tough city. In reality, she lived in a much nicer suburb and didn't actually live in Detroit. Therefore, her superior attitude isn't really valid.

Chrissy is not to be deterred and asks again if any one of them has rape fantasies, The speaker surmises that Chrissy is only asking because she wants to relate her own fantasy. Darlene's disgusted reply is that she absolutely does not. She leaves the table to get out of the discussion, as the narrator explains that Darlene is divorced and has been for a long time.

Greta admits her fantasy, while the narrator notes that the two people who want to talk most are Chrissy and Greta, both blondes. The narrator thinks that since Greta wants to get out of the filing department and become a receptionist like Chrissy, there's a sense of competition between them. Greta's fantasy is that a man all dressed in black, including gloves, comes over the balcony of her eighteen floor apartment, as she's relaxing and watching television. She doesn't lock the door, since it's so high up, and the man comes in. After they have sex, the man admits that he does this all over the building, using the balconies for entrance. Then, he lowers himself down his rope and is gone.

The narrator cracks a joke comparing the man in Greta's fantasy to Tarzan, but nobody else is amused. Chrissy, finally able to tell her story, reprimands Greta for the mildness of her fantasy and goes on to share her own. Chrissy begins by saying that she imagines herself bathing, with no clothes on, naked in the tub filled with bubbles. The

narrator cracks another joke about not many people taking a bath with their clothes on. However, Chrissy continues. A man comes in.

Greta asks how the man got in, and Chrissy says it doesn't matter. The man just comes in, blocks the way out of the bathroom, and slowly takes his clothes off and gets into the tub with her. Darlene, who has now returned to the discussion, is much more interested than she was initially. She asks Chrissy why she doesn't scream. Chrissy responds by saying that she's read articles advising victims of rape not to resist.

Once again, the narrator interjects a joke, saying that if Chrissy did try to scream, she might get bubbles up her nose. None of the narrator's colleagues are laughing at any of the jokes, feeling that she's making light of a very serious matter. The narrator, however, admits that she thinks life is too short not to laugh occasionally.

Finally, the narrator makes a serious comment. She points out that both of the fantasies that have been shared aren't really "rape" fantasies, because the women aren't threatened violently and are not forced to do something they don't want to do. The stories shared by Chrissy and Greta simply involve handsome strangers, and the women were willing.

Chrissy addresses the narrator, calling her "Estelle" and asking about her fantasies, probably because she was mad that Estelle had just poked holes in Chrissy's story. Sondra is mad, because Chrissy has asked Estelle before her, and Sondra wants to share her version.

Estelle, the narrator, agrees to share one fantasy in which she carries a plastic lemon in her purse, because an article had advised it. She says she doesn't really carry one in real life, but in her fantasy, she does. A man comes at her on a dark street, and she calmly asks him if he's going to rape her. When he answers "yes," she begins to dig in her bag to find the lemon, but can't. At that point, she asks the man to hold her stuff while she looks. So, the man ends up holding all kinds of miscellany found in her purse. When she finds the lemon at the bottom of her bag, she can't get it open and hands it to the man to help her. He gets the lid off the squeezable container, and she squirts him in the eye.

Chrissy can't believe Estelle's story, and Darlene admits that Estelle is "a card." Darlene and Estelle have been working at this same company longer than anyone else, and they know things about each other. Estelle admits that Darlene saw her behavior at the company Christmas party, when Estelle danced UNDER the table instead of on top of it. In a Cossack-style, she jumped underneath the desk and hit her head, knocking herself out. Darlene has good reason to refer to Estelle as a "card." Even though the story is true, Estelle would rather Darlene didn't repeat it.

The narrator protests that she's not pulling their legs. She's being totally honest, a comment the other women believe, because that's how she is. Estelle quips that if they thought that fantasy was strange, they should hear the one about the Easy-Off Oven Cleaner. The lunch hour, however, is over. The next day, the women argue about

whether to start a new game, or whether to continue the hand from the day before. The narrator notes that Sondra never did get to share her fantasy.

Estelle admits that the discussion got her started thinking about her own fantasies. Granted, she, too, has fantasies about some handsome guy coming into her room, and she hopes he'll be decent looking like Mr. Clean and not sweaty and short. These, Estelle thinks, are not rape fantasies, because, in a rape fantasy, you have to be frightened and anxious. Her first fantasy is of being on a dark street at night and accosted by a short, ugly, pimply-faced guy, who pins her against the wall. However, he gets his zipper stuck, as he tries to undo himself. Estelle's fantasy includes her conversation with her attacker, telling him that she once, too, had pimples and referring him to her past dermatologist. She feels almost sorry for him and tells him about how lonely she was when she first came to the city, not knowing how hard it was to meet people. Estelle then says, "but maybe it's different for a guy."

Estelle moves on to a second fantasy. In this one, she's in bed, sick with a terrible cold, red nose, clogged throat. When a man comes into her bedroom through a window, she finds he, too, has a terrible cold. Estelle even mocks the nasal voice and congested dialogue of the rapist and herself, wondering why the rapist even got out of bed, when he was ill. She shares her box of Kleenex with him and then fixes him a drink that she concocts to alleviate cold symptoms. They end up watching the Late Show together.

The third fantasy, Estelle admits, is scarier than the first two, because there's more threat. Her rapist tells her that he hears angel voices telling him that he must kill her. The setting for this fantasy is her childhood home, and an axe-wielding man is hiding in the cellar and grabs her when she goes downstairs to retrieve a jar of jelly. Estelle sees herself gaining control of her fear and then asking the man if he's sure the angel has the right person, because she also hears voices. Her voices tell her that she's going to give birth to the Mother of the Virgin Mary, and if the rapist interferes, he'll be messing up Jesus Christ. When the man gets confused and asks her for a sign, she shows him the scar from her vaccination, and he leaves. She can't remember what the man looks like in the fantasy, but she can remember his lace-up, outdated shoes. It's the last thing she sees of him, as he escapes up a coal chute. The fantasy really makes her nervous, and she tries not to think of it much.

Estelle says that she sometimes has short images of similar instances, like when a man grabs her in a store, but she's a karate expert and either sticks her fingers in his eyes or throws him against a wall. She notes what a contrast this is to her in real life, since she couldn't even hit a volleyball in class. Plus, she could never stick her fingers into someone's eyes, which would feel like hot Jell-O. Her comment is that she just couldn't live life knowing that someone was blinded because of her, and she muses, "maybe it's different for a guy."

Different from her other fantasies, Estelle's most emotional scenario envisions her saying to a man who accosts her, "You'd be raping a corpse." She explains that she has leukemia and is out walking the streets to get a handle on her emotions. Estelle theorizes that she picked this disease, because when a fourth-grade classmate had the

disease, the class sent her flowers. Estelle, not knowing that the girl would die, wished to have leukemia, too, so she'd get flowers. Her conversation with the would-be-rapist, however, reveals that he, too, is ill and is raping women only because of his rage against the disease. They walk together, get a cup of coffee, and are thrilled, because they've finally found the one person who understands. In her fantasy, Estelle can never decide which one of them dies first. This fantasy, like watching movies, sometimes makes her cry. Estelle points out that her mother, too, cries at movies.

The men in Estelle's rape fantasies are always people she didn't know beforehand, a fact that contradicts what the magazines say. The popular press says that most rapes are perpetuated by someone the woman knows or has met, possibly a boss or a man who buys her a drink at a bar. Estelle wonders how you're supposed to meet people if you can't even be sociable, noting that you simply can't lock yourself up in your apartment or stay isolated in the filing department. Admitting that she likes to go out occasionally for a drink, Estelle says that she goes to certain places, like the one she's at as she's speaking, a bar where the waiters all know her. Estelle admits that she's not sure why she's telling all this, but that it does help to get to know a person. She is not really like the worrywart her colleagues call her. She says she simply wants to plan ahead what to do in case of an emergency.

Estelle claims that in her fantasies, a huge majority of the time is spent talking to the other person, or figuring out what he's going to say or what she's going to say. Her belief is that conversation is the best way. After all, if the man knows she's human and has a life, how could he really do it to her? She twice repeats the fact that she doesn't really understand how rape could happen. She doesn't understand how a man could do that to a woman he'd talked to.

Analysis

The setting is Toronto, Canada, a clean, modern city used to contrast with Detroit, a city whose image is tarnished with reported violent crimes.

"Rape Fantasies" is written in a conversational tone, with the author actually talking to the audience, opening up an ongoing dialogue. The "conversation" is integrated throughout the whole story. Estelle is telling her story out loud, making comments that ask for agreement and understanding. The opening paragraph asks a question, "I mean, what's so new about it?" When Estelle comments on the fact that Greta didn't actually live in Detroit, she suggests that what counts is not where you work, but where you sleep, and then asks "right?" Estelle continually adds commentary for the benefit of her audience. After she sprayed her would-be-rapist in the eyes with the lemon juice that he had so politely opened, she says, "I hope you don't think that's too vicious." When she's telling about her fantasy of being accosted in the basement by a lunatic, she asks, "I mean, what do you say to a nut like that?" When he escapes up the coal chute, and she sees his old-fashioned, lace-up-to-the-ankle shoes, the narrator says, "That's strange, isn't it?" Her commentary continues by saying that she feels guilty about poking her fingers in the man's eyes in her fantasy. In real life, she just couldn't do

that. "Could you?....I mean how would like walking around knowing someone's been blinded for life because of you?" One of the final lines of the story is another question after contemplating the impact that conversation would have on a rape. She says, "I don't see how they could go ahead with it, right?"

The conversational tone is an effective literary device for several reasons. First, it creates a sense of immediacy and involvement with the character. Secondly, the use of conversational vocabulary, not formal, stilted, academic prose, enhances the believability of the narrator. Thirdly, the use of what's called "tag questions," "right?" "you know?" and "Isn't it?" are known to be ways that women speak in less powerful ways than men. Estelle is seeking agreement and support instead of just making a definitive statement, and her language use suggests her vulnerability and need for acceptance.

While her co-workers have one "rape fantasy," Estelle has many of them. Vast differences exist between Estelle's first story and Chrissy and Greta's. The other two women are secretly happy to acquiesce to having sex with a good-looking stranger, who does not appear to physically or violently threaten them. Estelle's fantasy, however, has her using her mind, her conversation, and her antics, to fend off the attacker, who is not a handsome stranger, but a pimply -faced male, a lunatic or terminally ill man. In the one fantasy she relates to the other women in the office, Estelle eventually squirts her rapist in the eyes with lemon juice, which she has carried for just this very purpose, even after he helped her open the bottle. Estelle's fantasies always include getting to know the attacker, soothing his vulnerabilities, or frightening him away with her own use of wits - as she did with the crazy man in the basement, but she never quietly agrees to have sex. She does, however, always feel sorry for the man, knowing that something must be wrong with him for him to act this way.

Estelle uses humor throughout the story, resorting to jokes, even when the other women do not think she is funny. She makes fun of Chrissy not screaming in the bathtub, since she would have gotten bubbles in her mouth. She mocks Greta's story by comparing her balcony-climbing rapist to Tarzan. After she relates her own story, Estelle follows up with a teaser line, "You should hear the one about the Easy-Off Oven Cleaner." The phrase, "Easy-Off" reflects her other fantasies, where she was let off easy and without physical injury.

After Estelle has divulged her fantasies, she talks about the need not to live in fear and isolation. She goes out to get a drink, and the setting of the story becomes more specific than just the city of Toronto. She is telling her story in a bar, "Like here, for instance, the waiters all know me and if anyone bothers me . . . I don't know why I'm telling you all this, except I think it helps if you get to know a person...."

The commentary and remarks that Estelle has been flinging out give more insight into the Estelle's motivation for telling her story. Her reputation as a worrywart and her need to figure out ways to deal with unexpected emergencies, may be the result of a rape in the past. Her continual success in altering the fantasy rapist's behavior toward her is possibly the way she counteracts her previous inability to fend off a real attacker. The

humor is gone at the end of the story, and Estelle is truly bewildered, unable to understand how one person could do this to another. The line she's uttered twice after revealing her fantasies, "Maybe it's different for a guy," emphasizes the different emotional states between men and women, and her uncertainty as to how men think.

Estelle's dialogue shows the full range of emotions of women, who might have suffered from a rape. These include fear, anxiety, sympathy and guilt. Her possible motivation for telling the story could be to gain acceptance from others, to create scenarios which would have been or could be successful in deterring a rapist, thus giving her a sense of control over difficult circumstances. She could also be trying to expose her own thoughts, so that she would be more human and less vulnerable to others, who may want to hurt her.

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Characters

Chrissy

Chrissy is Estelle's coworker who initiates the lunchroom discussion by asking, "How about it, girls, do you have rape fantasies?" Estelle describes Chrissy as "a receptionist and she looks like one; she's pretty but cool as a cucumber like she's been painted all over with nail polish, if you know what I mean. Varnished." Chrissy dreams of a rapist who breaks into her apartment while she is taking a bath. Chrissy represents a passive personality, someone who is easily influenced by novels, movies, televisions, and magazines.

Darlene

Darlene, who is 41, is the oldest woman in the office, "though you wouldn't know it and neither does she," Estelle comments. She is divorced and does not participate in the discussion about fantasies. She claims that she never thinks about such things and that the topic is disgusting. Darlene says, "I don't think you should go out at night, you put yourself in a position," a comment that insinuates that she does not approve of Estelle's behavior. She says she would scream if she were accosted by a rapist, and she tells Chrissy that she should do the same thing. These two comments indicate that Darlene is a cautious and somewhat Judgmental individual.

Estelle

Estelle is the first-person narrator of "Rape Fantasies." She works in the filing department of a large company in Toronto, Ontario She was brought up Catholic in a smaller town and has only recently moved to the city to be on her own. She is described as tall and clever, and her comments indicate that she has a good sense of humor and that she is adept at sizing up other people

Her coworker Darlene comments that Estelle has the "mark of an original mind" and that "she's a card" Since once at an office party, Estelle danced under a table instead of on top of it. Along with her sense of humor, she is cautious. Though her monologue reveals that her "rape fantasies" have happy outcomes, the reason for her monologue appears to be more dire. Twice she asks if things are different for men, indicating that the person to whom she is speaking is receiving a thinly veiled warning: "the waiters all know me and if anyone, you know, bothers me. . . ." She also states that her coworkers consider her a worry wart. That assertion is somewhat borne out by her monologue. At the end, she reveals that all her talk about rape is an attempt to start a dialogue. "How could a fellow do that to a person he's just had a long conversation with?" Her last statement, "I know it happens but I Just don't understand it," is an indication to some critics that Estelle is a naive narrator, but others interpret her words as merely the conclusion to a

long conversation in which Estelle reveals that she is very aware of the issues of power involved in rape.

Themes

Gender Roles and Stereotypes

Estelle's narration is filled with stereotypes of both men and women. For instance, she describes Chrissy as a receptionist who "looks like one." Atwood relies on the power of the stereotype for readers to envision Chrissy's appearance; the only details readers are given are that she wears lots of makeup, blushes at the thought of discussing rape fantasies, and "looks like she was painted allover with nail polish." Some of the story's humor also lies in stereotypes. When discussing Chrissy and Greta, who wants to be a receptionist, Estelle describes them as blondes who "try to outdress each other." Estelle is also cognizant of male gender roles, and feels sympathy for the men in her rape fantasies because they do not live up to her preconception of the ideal man, a "Clint Eastwood" type. "I mean there has to be something *wrong* with them," she says, after explaining that she imagines rapists to have bad skin or to exhibit symptoms of either physical or mental illness. To Estelle a rapist is a man who does not live up to the ideal of a virile, tall, handsome man able to Win a woman by the sheer power of his masculinity. She invokes an age based stereotype when she states that her boss could not possibly be a rapist because "he's over sixty. . . poor old thing." Even in her sympathy, Estelle tends to stereotype people.

Estelle does recognize that even though all her fantasies concern strangers, a rapist is more likely to be someone the victim knows casually. With that in mind, she imagines that a man at work, whom she calls Derek Duck, would be a likely rapist because he wears elevator shoes and has a "funny way of talking." In the end, Estelle is trying hard to reject the traditional female gender role of being a victim.

She fights back in her rape fantasies, or she averts the crime by commiserating with the would-be perpetrator. Both scenarios show her to be an active woman in control of her life and thoughts, rather than a passive observer. The fact that she is probably in a bar by herself hints that she rejects some traditional female gender roles: "I'm with Women's Lib on that even though I can't agree with a lot of other things they say."

Victim and Victimization

Though not evident at first, Estelle's monologue becomes an exploration of victims and victimization. She recounts her fantasies of being a victim, yet the reason she does so is to poss1bly prevent herself from becoming a victim. Though her coworkers claim she is a worry wart, she sees her fantasies as simply a way of "figuring out what you should do in an emergency." The fantasies also reveal that Estelle considers her imagined rapists to themselves be victims--of bad skin, of mental illness, or of leukemia. In the end, Estelle's best defense against victimization is a strong offense. In her fantas1es, she actively initiates conversations with her would-be rapists in order to establish their common humanity. "How could a fellow do that to a person he's just had a long

conversation with, once you let them know you're human, you have a life too," she wonders.

Though she criticizes women's magazines' preoccupation W1th the topic, the detailed accounts she provides of her own rape fantasies prove that she herself thinks about rape a great deal. Estelle has taken to heart the dangers of living alone in an urban area in the 1970s; her predicament is one that many single women identify with. "It's getting so you can hardly be sociable any more, and how are you supposed to meet people if you can't trust them even that basic amount?" she asks. Her last comment is deceiving: "I know it happens but I Just don't understand it, that's the part I really don't understand." Though her confusion could be mistaken for naiveté, a trait that would leave her vulnerable to victimization, her tactic of 1nitiating such a conversation in the first place suggests otherwise.

Style

Monologue and Narration

A monologue is a speech given by one person in a performance or work of literature. The entire narrative of "Rape Fantasies" is a monologue by Estelle. By creating a story in which the point of view is first person and everything, including the descriptions, actions, and words of the other characters are filtered through the narrator's perception, Atwood creates a highly subjective story in Wh1Ch much of the interpretation is up to the reader. This is one reason why criticism on first-person stories, including "Rape Fantas1es," often focuses on whether or not the narrator is reliable. If the narrator is reliable, then his or her words can probably be taken at face value, and little other interpretation of events need take place. If, however, the narrator is not reliable, readers must exercise caution in interpreting the events of the story. Atwood provides few clues to suggest how reliable a narrator Estelle is. While she seems to give biting and accurate character descriptions-describing Chrissy as "varnished," and even commenting negatively on herself as someone who cries at movies, "even the ones that aren't all that sad"-there is no alternate point of view in the story to corroborate the things she says.

Many readers can identify with Estelle's predicament about moving to a big city, further adding to her credibility as a narrator: "I thought It was going to be such a big adventure and all, but It' s a lot harder to meet people In a city." In addition, her speech patterns make her sound like many of the people readers encounter every day. Her speech is not studied or formal; her words sound like everyday conversation: "My mother always said you shouldn't dwell on unpleasant things and I generally agree with that, I mean, dwelling on them doesn't make them go away. Though not dwelling on them doesn't make them go away either, when you come to think of it." By creating a narrator whose speech cadences are familiar and colloquial, and having her give a monologue that is full of everyday experiences, Atwood implies that the topic of rape should not be taboo. Just like Estelle, Atwood infers that "it would be better if you could get a conversation going." Once men and women are able to discuss the politics of rape, it might become less common.

Comic Relief and Black Humor

Comic relief is the use of humor to lighten the mood of a story, and black humor is the juxtaposition of humorous elements and grotesque elements used to shock the reader. Both comic relief and black humor are evident In the story; Atwood is known for her biting, sarcastic humor, and "Rape Fantasies" is no exception. From the beginning of the story, Estelle jokes about a serious topic: "Rape, Ten Things to Do About It, like it was ten new hairdos or something." From the start, it is apparent that not only is the topic of the story rape, but also It is going to be treated irreverently. Black humor is comedy that coexists with horror. Tills is shown in Estelle's fantasies. When she is

accosted on a dark street by a potential rapist, she rummages through her purse to find a plastic lemon so she can squirt the man in the eye, but her purse is so cluttered, she can't find her "weapon." She must ask the rapist to assist her, which he obligingly does. In another instance of black humor, Estelle fantasizes about a rapist who has leukemia, from which, coincidentally, she suffers too. On its own, the topic of serious illness is not funny, but in the context of Estelle's exaggerated fantasies, the elements of rape, Illness, and pathos combine to form an absurd-and humorous-fantasy in which she and her attacker decide to live out their remaining days together.

But despite the sarcasm and black humor, the tone of the story turns somber at the end-and the seriousness of the conclusion becomes even more compelling than if the story had been told seriously from the start With no trace of sarcasm or irony, Estelle addresses her listener purposefully: "I think It would be better if you could get a conversation going. Like, how could a fellow do that to a person he's just had a long conversation with." Her seriousness is in stark contrast with her normally irreverent sense of humor, and therefore becomes all the more poignant. Humor is a valuable device, she realizes (and so does Atwood), but It serves a serious purpose-to break down taboos and begin a dialogue that, Estelle hopes, will prevent violence against women in general and herself in particular

Rhetorical Question

A rhetorical question is a question used for dramatic effect, one that is not meant to be answered directly or literally. At the end of the story, Estelle queries her listener: "How could a fellow do that to a person he's just had a long conversation with, once you let them know you're human, you have a life too, I don't see how they could go ahead with It, right?" Her comment is rhetorical, that is, she does not expect an answer She has argued persuasively through her rape fantasies that if a man and woman come to understand one another, crime and pain will be averted due to their mutual sympathy. Her monologue is an attempt to practice this theory. She has revealed much about herself in the hope that she will not become a victim. However, what Estelle may not understand when she says "I just don't understand it, that's the part I really don't understand," is that rape is a crime of power, not lust. According to the way Estelle sees it, a person would not want to rape someone he has just had a long conversation with. But date rape and marital rape, which Estelle never mentions, are serious problems, and operate contrary to her logic. Thus, her attempt at cautious sociability may miss the mark, because attaining familiarity with someone does nothing to address the issues of power that often underlie violent or sexual crimes.

Historical Context

At the time "Rape Fantasies" was first published in 1977, the women's movement had been, for a solid decade, asserting equality for women in many facets of society. Many women entered the work force during the decade, *more* and *more were* attending college and postponing marriage and childbearing, and they began to enter traditionally male occupations, such as law and medicine, in greater numbers than before. As women gained *more* economic and social independence, some unforeseen effects began to emerge. Traditional rules of courtship began to wither. It was no longer a given that men would ask women out, and if they did, men and women both *were* unsure of what the expectations of such an arrangement *were* supposed to be. The so-called "sexual revolution," spawned by available and reliable birth control and the legalization of abortion, led to supposedly higher levels of sexual activity among single people. Sometimes, the dictates of the "me decade," namely, "If It feels good, do it," had tragic consequences Judith Rossner's 1975 novel *Looking for Mr. Goodbar* told the story of a young teacher who explores her freedom with abandon after a sheltered upbringing. *Her* social life revolves around singles bars, where she meets a variety of men. *Her* indiscriminate encounters eventually cost her her life.

During the 1970s, Helen Gurley Brown was the editor-in-chief of *Cosmopolitan* magazine, the type of magazine that, as Estelle says, not only prints articles about rape, but also acts like "it's something terrific, like a vaccine for cancer. They put it in capital letters on the front cover." Brown got her start as the author of the 1962 best-seller, *Sex and the Single Girl,* which became one of the earliest literary works celebrating the independent, career-minded woman who knows how to take care of herself. In the 1970s, Brown corralled this Image into the formation of *Cosmopolitan* magazine's "Cosmo girl," a sort of female counterpart to the readers of *Playboy.* The Cosmo girl encompassed all the changes attributable to the youth culture; she was young, attractive, fashionable, independent, sexually active, and interested in politics, art, and current events. By the late 1970s, however, Brown was the target of backlash against the "Cosmo girl," a stereotype that feminists claimed was nothing *more* than the fulfillment of male fantasies. Outspoken in her opinions on the changing roles of women in society, Brown countered feminists' attacks on the "Cosmo girl" by stating that "a feminist should accept it if a woman doesn't want to realize her potential." In sharp contrast was *Ms.* magazine, founded by Gloria Steinem in 1972. The magazine, a handbook of the feminist movement, proved enormously popular upon publication of its first issue, and Steinem subsequently became a leading spokesperson for the women's movement. Part of Steinem's popularity stemmed from the fact that she advocated liberating men as well as women from gender stereotypes. According to her logic, only after both gender roles are sufficiently examined can society truly move forward toward equality.

By this time, though, others had found ways to capitalize on the progress of the women's movement as well Advertisers formed ad campaigns that celebrated women's newfound independence and their increased power as consumers. Virginia Slims cigarettes proclaimed "You've come a long way, baby," and suggested that women were

asserting their equality by taking up smoking, a habit that was once the sole domain of men. A television commercial for perfume praised women's ability to compete in the workforce all day, earn their own money, and still find time to cook dinner and lavish attention on the men in their lives. Many women, like Estelle, agreed with many components of feminism, but were uncomfortable with others. In 1979, women's wages were an average of 57 percent of men's, a fact that angered even conservative women. Obtaining the right to equal pay and equal jobs became a crusade for many, even for those who could not abide the more radical elements of the women's movement, such as bra-burning and urging the armed services to make women eligible for combat duty.

Representing the milder forces of feminism on television was Mary Richards on the *Mary Tyler Moore Show.* Mary was single and independent, and worked as a television news producer. Most Importantly, however, Mary did not tie her self-worth to marriage, men, or family. In the early 1970s, Mary Richards was somewhat an anomaly, but by the end of the decade she had much company on television. Strong women characters ran the gamut from *The Bionic Woman* to those high fashion, female crime fighters, *Charlie's Angels.* The women's movement had enough popular support to urge Congress to pass the Equal Rights Amendment in 1973, but support faltered by mid-decade, and the amendment failed the ratification process in the early 1980s.

Critical Overview

"Rape Fantasies" is frequently anthologized and is commonly taught in high schools and colleges, but critics often tend to ignore this story and focus on Atwood's novels. The writers who have commented on the story, however, often note the humorous tone of the story, which seems to be at odds with the serious topic of rape. Lee Briscoe Thompson in her essay "Minuets and Madness: Margaret Atwood's *Dancing Girls,"* notes that in "Rape Fantasies," "the cutting edge seems thoroughly dulled by the sheer zaniness of the dialogue." Another Atwood critic, Sherrill Grace, in *Violent Duality. A Study of Margaret Atwood* commends the story for "offering moving, indeed profound, insights into human nature and the problems of human relationships, without over-burdening the story form."

The most controversial point of the story concerns the narrator, Estelle Some commentators take her to be a naive woman, while others laud her tactical maneuvers in self-defense. Barbara Hill Rigney claims that Estelle is a "naive narrator" who believes rape can be avoided "by simply reasoning with the rapist." Sherrill Grace and Lisa Tyler, however, assert that Estelle is Just the opposite. In her essay, "'I Just Don't Understand It': Teaching Margaret Atwood's 'Rape Fantasies'," Tyler discusses how students often find the story too "provocative," others "sail through the story blithely," and yet others are "scandalized" or "indignant" that rape is spoken about in such a cavalier fashion. Tyler notes that through the technique of a dramatic monologue, the reader must first sympathize with the speaker in order to understand the work; then and only then can the reader judge the speaker's character or even recognize the pathology of emotions presented. Thus, readers must sympathize with Estelle before judging her. Estelle does not withdraw from human connection; she struggles to establish connections in spite of her vulnerability and fear.

Critic Sally A. Jacobsen admits in an essay for *Approaches to Teaching Atwood* that "Atwood acknowledges that rapport is no defense," especially considering that date rape or acquaintance raperelationships in which conversational rapport has presumably been established-is more common than rape by a stranger. Jacobsen's students have also agreed "the term rape fantasy is dangerous, for It fosters the mistaken perception that women want to be attacked and 'ask for it' in dress or behavior." Her students did "credit Atwood with dramatizing the absurdity that women desire rape."

Frank Davey, in *Margaret Atwood. A Feminist Poetics,* notices that Atwood portrays the rapists as inept men, and he argues that Estelle "insists naively, on the essential humanity of even a rapist."

Furthermore, Estelle's fantasies are closer to the "nurse romance" variety, Davey says, since she sends one rapist to a dermatologist and takes care of the other's cold In this characterization, Atwood highlights how some women want to save men from themselves and even to Improve or fix their destructive tendencies. Jacobsen best reveals the most common dilemma of reading "Rape Fantasies," that is, the importance of understanding that "Estelle is performing an intellectual exercise, or devising a

heuristic, to demonstrate the impossibility of a female 'rape fantasy'-showing that rape is an act of power, not of sexual attraction, and that one can refuse 'victimhood'."

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Walter is an instructor of English at Pennsylvania State University. In the following essay, she discusses the difficulties in determining the character of Estelle on the basis of her monologue.

With her usual caustic wit, Margaret Atwood uses humor to examine women's power and powerlessness and to exploit the distinction between fantasy and fear in her story "Rape Fantasies." Atwood, through the voice of the narrator Estelle, shows readers how hard it is for women to laugh at themselves when they have been conditioned by the media to take themselves and their desires far too seriously and their safety not seriously enough. It is implied that only a rare woman like Estelle analyzes what her "rape" fantasies mean and how they have originated, suggesting that television and magazines help inspire a woman's fantasies of submissiveness to a strange male. Estelle especially condemns magazines that have these questionnaires like the ones they used to have about whether you were a good enough wife or an endomorph or an ectomorph, remember that? With the scoring upside down on page 73, and then these numbered do-it-yourself dealies, you know? Rape, Ten Things To Do about It, like It was ten new hairdos or something".

This playfully sardonic line suggests that women must suffer many subtle indignities and condescending attitudes that are publicly sanctioned. The magazines prey on women's feelings of inadequacy but in a seemingly inoffensive, snappy format. Yet Estelle reveals how her intelligence is insulted by the magazine's fashionable coverage of such a devastating topic: "You'd think it was just invented . . . I mean what's so new about it?" she asks. She recognizes rape is an ancient violation and exposes the sensationalist way the magazine article presents the issue. Estelle appears to resent the idea that women are often not in control of their own bodies, whether it is in preventing a forcible entry, or preventing society's forced perception of how that body should look.

Because of her awareness, Estelle realizes how different she is from her coworkers: Chrissy, the varnished receptionist, and gullible Greta. Greta and Chrissy are excellent foils for Estelle and she sums them up this way-"They're both blondes, I don't mean that in a bitchy way but they do try to outdress each other." Estelle's comment highlights the superficial values the two women have. Their fantasies reveal their acceptance of the magazine's views of women. Chrissy can avidly quote the magazine to support her views: "It says here all women have rape fantasies." Clearly, the magazine's generalization of "all women" is damaging since Chrissy accepts fantasy as fact. The magazine's pop-psychology can be dangerous when, for example, in Chrissy's fantasy she is attacked, but she does not defend herself, even by screaming. Chrissy mentions, "But who'd hear me? Besides, all the articles say it's better not to resist, that way you don't get hurt." It is significant that Chrissy is helpless in her fantasy since the magazine condones her helpless passivity. "I can't very well get out of the bathtub. The bathroom is too small and he's blocking the doorway, so I just he there." Chrissy believes in the image of women as desirable only when they are defenseless.

Magazines are not the only medium to exploit women. When Chrissy discloses her fantasy about a man all dressed in black wearing black gloves, Estelle says, "I knew right away the [TV] show she got the black gloves off, because I saw the same one." Both TV and magazines encourage the idea that unreality is better than reality. Estelle finds her coworkers' fantasies impossibly silly after listening to one fantasy story about a man who climbs eighteen floors with a hook and a rope. The media can become a double-barreled shotgun aimed at women, especially when the fantasies seem like innocent little dreams; "and then he, well, you know," and the magazines and shows do not describe the violent, unwilling sex, but rather only inspire romantic fantasizing. Overall, though Estelle blames not only magazines and TV for their marketing-inspired nonsense, but also the women themselves who buy into the fantasy.

Estelle points out the harm of these fantasies with humor, but her coworkers do not laugh at her teasing jokes. Estelle describes their reactions: "I swear all four of them looked at me like I was in bad taste, like I'd insulted the Virgin Mary." Here, Atwood slyly reinforces that the public worships the image of women in a peaceful, but mostly passive, role After all, part of the Virgin Mary's myth is that she also did not resist. Estelle recognizes that saintly women are somewhat safer than the average woman. This is illustrated in her fantasy in which she tells her rapist that she will "be giving birth to Saint Anne, who will be one day giving birth to the Virgin Mary." If a woman is to be narrowly seen only as a sex object or a saint, it is much safer to be saintly. Estelle tells her coworkers their "rapes" are too safe to be actual rapes.

Only Estelle defines the difference between a fantasy and an actual rape, telling her coworkers that their fantasies are not true rapes: "You aren't getting *raped,* it's just some guy you haven't met formally. . . and you have a good time. Rape is when they've got a knife or something and you don't want to." To Estelle rape is about anxiety, panic, confusion, loss of will, disgust, and fear. Estelle may feel she needs to remind her coworkers to believe this negative side of sexuality still exists in a civilized, modern time when sexual and gender roles are changing. Women have the right to say no, but do they have the power to be believed? Greta knows she will not, so she will not even try to say no.

In sharp contrast to passive Greta, Estelle likes power; she is not helpless in her fantasies. Her fantasies of being a Kung-Fu expert demonstrate her wish for control over her body and her safety. Estelle can outwit, confuse, and fool her fantasy rapists; in fact, she hopes *she* is not too vicious to them. By calmly listening to her rapists or starting a conversation with them, she attempts to assert her: self. She can relate to and give advice to her rapists. They can even watch the late show together. Truly, Estelle's rapists are as unrealistically obliging and polite as her coworkers' rapists were romantically accommodating. These fantasy men are definite failures at raping Estelle, but they are more successful at having a relationship with a woman than the "successful" rapists. Ironically, the men even leave her feeling sorry for their unsuccessful attempts at rape. For example, Estelle mentions one rapist who gets his zipper stuck as he starts to undo himself and begins to cry, at "one of the most significant moments in a girl's life, it [rape]'s almost like getting married or having a baby or something." So Estelle dismantles the traditional view of rape and rapists. The rapists

in her six fantasies get cancer and colds. Some even have suicidal wishes. They are vulnerable. Estelle might not want to admit it, but she humanizes her rapists, so that she does not have to live in terror. It is her way of imagining control and of having power over them.

Despite her earlier ridicule, Estelle reveals that she does consider the magazine's statistics: "the funny thing about my fantasies is, that the man is always someone I don't know, and the statistics in magazines say it's often someone you know at least a little bit [like Estelle's boss, who, she is sure]. . . couldn't rape his way out of a paper bag, poor old thing." It becomes clear that the only way this narrator can discuss the fearsome topic is with defensive humor. She may not want to believe a rapist could be someone she knows.

Estelle also cannot completely successfully laugh off her fears of rape through her humorous fantasies. Her reputation as the "office worry wart" seems to contradict her jovial verbal portrayal of herself. Overall, this makes Estelle an entirely believable, well-rounded, all-too-human character. At first, although she appears merely an intelligent observer of human nature, Estelle morphs into a talkative and nosy person who investigates her coworkers' personnel files. Still, Estelle enjoys a good time and she is quite witty, so surely she cannot be a neurotic, hysterical woman afraid of being raped? Readers may hesitate to shift their opinions and view her in a negative light because in Judging Estelle too harshly, we could be looking too closely at our own human foibles and learn that our fears can unbalance and unnerve us In a sarcastic modern society, Estelle's coping mechanism of denying her fears by making fun of them, so as not to submit to advertising's brainwashing or live out her life in paralyzing fear, is clearly recognizable.

Despite her fears, a woman like Estelle wants her independence as well as her safety. Estelle says, "You can't spend your whole life in the Filing Department or cooped up in your apartment with all the doors locked." Estelle hopes to be able to go for a drink in a nice place, even if she is by herself. But, when Estelle casually mentions, "I'm with Women's Lib on that, even though I can't agree with a lot of other things they say," we begin to wonder to whom she is speaking. Estelle appears afraid of being thought too militant or even unfeminine by her listener. Furthermore, she nonchalantly says that the waiters in the bar know her. Through such nervous chatter, Estelle reveals her situation; she is talking to a stranger who could harm her-possibly to a man she fears could be a rapist.

Thus, the entire story is revealed as her one-way conversation. That we never hear from the man Estelle is talking to may show Atwood feels Estelle needs defensive measures and has a fear of opening up. Estelle may be ambivalent about her independence since she knows the high price of freedom is responsibility for her actions. Entering a bar and having a drink with a strange man might allow some to blame her and say she deserved the rape. There is also a lot of dialogue in her fantasies, which are often mere attempts to get a conversation going since "once you let them know you're human, that you have a life too, I don't see how they could go ahead with it. I know it happens, but I just don't understand it. " We realize that Estelle seems

to have been manipulating the man into this conversation, so that she will feel safer with him, although she declares, "I don't know why I'm telling you all this." Thus, even though Estelle says, "I'm totally honest and I always am and they know it," at this point in the story, we may suspect that Estelle may not be as entirely honest as she would have us believe. She is not being entirely honest about herself and her fear of being raped. Atwood, however, has honestly portrayed the vulnerability that even strong independent thinkers can have as well as the fear that can occur between unacquainted men and women.

Estelle is the ultimate unreliable narrator. She laughs, but she is a seriously hypocritical clown. Critical of her female coworkers for not fearing rape, she then takes those fears too seriously herself. In Estelle, Atwood asks which is better-to be powerless or powerful, to be a victim or victimizer? For Estelle, it may be good to have some fear, but she may be at the risk of being consumed by it.

One other final aspect that makes this story so powerful is it is not written by man condemning women's fears and fantasies, but rather it is written by a woman who sees-and makes us see-the flaws of one imaginary woman's psyche and that makes this story more believable and frightening, that Atwood, a woman writer, exploits the fears of some women and exploits the way women are themselves exploited

Source: Catherine Walter, "The Unreliable Feminine Narrative Voice in 'Rape Fantasies,'" for *Short Stories for Students,* Gale, 1998.

Critical Essay #2

Tyler is an Associate Professor of English at Sinclair Community College in Dayton, Ohio. In the following essay, she warns that students must balance sympathy with judgment when interpreting the inflammatory content of Estelle's dialogue.

Margaret Atwood's "Rape Fantasies" is an unusually provocative short story. Atwood or her publisher perhaps judged the short story *too* provocative for American audiences, since it was omitted from the American hardback edition of the collection *Dancing Girls and Other Stories.* Whoever made that decision may have been right. While some students in my introductory literature classes sail through the story blithely and enjoy its offbeat humor, others are scandalized.

In the story, the first-person narrator, a woman named Estelle, recounts that she and her coworkers shared their rape fantasies over a bridge game in the women's lunch room. The other women's fantasies involve sex with a romantic stranger. In Estelle's, she asks the rapist to hold the contents of her purse while she hunts through her purse for a plastic lemon-which she promptly uses to Squirt him in the eye. The lunch group breaks up, but Estelle nevertheless goes on to recount several other, equally ludicrous fantasies involving unusually cooperative would-be rapists.

Indignant female students scold Atwood and her narrator, Estelle, for treating rape too lightly, for not taking it seriously enough. Some readers classify Atwood's story with the magazine articles Estelle criticizes in the story's opening paragraph, those which glamorize rape. No woman who had experienced rape could discuss it in such a cavalier fashion, some of them angrily say in class discussions-and a handful speak from painful personal experience.

In her brief critical study of Atwood's works, feminist critic Barbara Hill Rigney echoes this judgment, referring in passing to "the naive narrator of 'Rape Fantasies,' who believes that rape always happens to someone else and is an event that might be avoided by simply reasoning with the rapist." Jerome Rosenberg makes a related observation, noting Estelle's "curiously benevolent voice." Edgar V. Roberts and Henry E. Jacobs describe Estelle as "bright but superficial" and add, "The actual violence and brutality of rape, in short, are uureal for her." Similarly, Lee Briscoe Thompson criticizes Estelle's "simplistic and determined optimism" and lambastes "the sunny normalcy of this lady's world view"; Thompson later comments that in this story, "it becomes apparent that the naive narrator's innocent premise is the power of the word."

But *is* Estelle naive? She scornfully dismisses her friends' romantic fantasies of sex with strangers as having nothing in common With real rape: "Rape is when they've got a knife or something and you don't want to." She elsewhere describes a short fantasy in which she physically disables a would-be rapist and goes on to remark: ". . . in real life I'm sure it would Just be a conk on the head and that's that, like getting your tonsils out, you'd wake up and it would all be over except for the sore places, and you'd be lucky if your neck wasn't broken or something. . .". That hardly suggests naiveté; Estelle is

obviously cognizant of the violence and fear associated with rape. Far from being blithely naive, Estelle is clearly terrified by rape and consequently obsessed with it. " . it's getting so you can hardly be sociable any more, and how are you supposed to meet people if you can't trust them even that basic amount?" She feels guilty or at least self-conscious about her dating, as her sensitivity to her coworker Darlene's comment demonstrates:

"I don't think you should go out alone at night," Darlene said, "you put yourself in a position," and I may have been mistaken but she was looking at me.

Estelle acknowledges that the "girls" at the office consider her a "worrywart," and she obliquely suggests that her mother does, too: "My mother always said you shouldn't dwell on unpleasant things and I generally agree With that, I mean, dwelling on them doesn't make them go away.

Though not dwelling on them doesn't make them go away either, when you come to think of it." But Atwood elsewhere endorses what some readers might see as Estelle's irrational fear:

. . . [I]n a society like ours where people are pretty much out there on their own hook, there's no real social support system for them, no small tribe or clan or integrated structure that's going to support an individual in It; so fear is a real motivating factor. And because you don't really know where the danger is coming from, fear takes the form often of a generalized anxiety or paranoia You don't know who the enemy is. Yon don't know what direction you'll be attacked from. So everybody ends up constantly swiveling around, looking for the next threat. People are afraid of whatever's out there and rightly so.

This is precisely Estelle's situation; she specifically comments on how difficult it was for her to negotiate the urban environment of Toronto. "I'm telling you, I was really lonely when I first came here; I thought It was going to be such a big adventure and all, but it's a lot harder to meet people in a city." Estelle tries to overcome her fears so that she can comfortably go out on dates, but she remains "uneasy," to use a student's apt term.

In trying to encourage students to judge Estelle less harshly, I sometimes point to the story's final two paragraphs, where she says:

I'm not what you would call a drinker but I like to go out now and then for a drink or two in a lice place, even if I am by myself, I'm with Women's Lib on that even though I can't agree with a lot of the other things they say. Like here for instance, the waiters all know me and If anyone, you know, bothers me. . . . I don't know why I'm telling you all this, except I think It helps you get to know a person, especially at first, hearing some of the things they think about.

Students rarely notice the clues in this passage on their own, but If I point them out, they are able to interpret them. "Who is she talking to?" I ask. When, I ask them, does a woman go to a restaurant or bar (a place with waiters) to spend time with a man whom she apparently does not know well? "A first date," they will say, "maybe even a blind

date." Perhaps she is picking men up. We know the listener is probably male because Estelle twice wistfully alludes to sexual difference, acknowledging that "maybe it's different for a guy."

I then ask them why a woman would tell her date about a series of so-called "rape" fantasies in which the rape never occurs. She is warning him, they suggest. She sees him, too as a potential rapist-a contention shared by critics Frank Davey, Sally A. Jacobsen, and Dieter Meindl.

In a sense, "Rape Fantasies" is a prose Variation on the dramatic monologue associated with the poetry of Robert Browning and Alfred, Lord Tennyson. Atwood, who studied nineteenth-century literature in graduate school, is certainly familiar with the genre; she specifically mentions studying Tennyson, whose dramatic monologues are almost as well known as Browning's. The dramatic monologue traditionally has several characteristics: It involves a speaker and often an at least vaguely identified auditor. More seriously, as Robert Langbaum points out,

. . . [T]he meaning of the dramatic monologue is in disequilibrium with what the speaker reveals and understands. We understand the speaker's point of view not through [her] description of it but indirectly, through seeing what [she] sees while judging the limitations and distortions of what [she] sees. The result is that we understand, If not more, at least something other than the speaker understands, and the meaning is conveyed as much by what the speaker conceals and distorts as by what [she] reveals.

Langbaum, author of a key study on the dramatic monologue, contends that what distinguishes dramatic monologue is a tension between judgment and sympathy. Confronted with "the pathology of emotions" that the speaker demonstrates, the reader must first sympathize with the speaker in order to understand the work; then and only then can the reader judge the speaker's character or even recognize the pathology of the emotions presented. What I attempt to do in class is encourage students to sympathize with Estelle *before* they judge her.

Students unused to reading and analyzing literature sometimes rush to achieve closure and begin interpretation rather than ensuring first that they understand the characters' behavior and motivation as fully as possible. Teachers can aid the latter process by pointing out elements in the text that problematize students' initial readings (or misreading) It is, I think, incumbent upon us as more experienced readers to slow students down, to point out what they have overlooked in the text in their haste to pronounce a verdict. After reading Tillie Olsen's "I Stand Here Ironing," for example, younger students in particular seem ready to condemn the narrator as a poor mother for neglecting her child-until I point out the line that reads, "It was the pre-relief, pre-WPA world of the depression." Students may not initially understand what the term "pre-relief' means or what the Depression meant in terms of unemployment, so we discuss the implications of that sentence in class. If students can slow down in their rush to judgment, if they first try to understand the character, they will gain a better appreciation for the plight of the young mother.

Similarly, if students can be persuaded to suspend their judgments about the apparently inflammatory content of Estelle's fantasies, they may discover that Estelle is a likable character with whom they can readily sympathize. She is frightened at the prospect of dating potentially dangerous strangers, but she is frightened, too, by the prospect of a solitary life. She chooses, caught in this dilemma, to take risks rather than protect herself through isolation. Barbara Hill Rigney contends that in Atwood's novels, "Atwood argues. . . for a recognition of and a commitment to [the] human condition, no matter how malignant, and for an engagement with life, with reality, no matter how brutal or absurd." In this respect, Estelle is admirable. She possesses a sense of humor, and she struggles to cope as cheerfully as possible with her fear of rape. She does not withdraw from human connection; she struggles to *establish* such connections in spite of her vulnerability and fear.

Why, then, do so many readers see her as naive? Her comic fantasies brand her as naive because in those, again and again, she is able with relative ease to dissuade remarkably rational rapists from actually committing the intended rapes. These fantasies, of course, provoke another, more puzzling question: Why does Estelle have rape fantasies in which no rape ever takes place?

One student (who is taking a psychology course) perceptively suggests that fantasies gratify wishes that would otherwise be unfulfilled. Estelle, then, repeatedly fantasizes that she could verbally fend off a rapist-precisely *because* she knows that she cannot protect herself completely in real life. As one critic observes of two of Atwood's novels, "To see the world and the self as funny, to refuse to take things seriously, is a means of protection against that which threatens and terrifies." Estelle knows that she cannot defend herself physically. She can't even manage to keep a plastic lemon in her purse. "

.. I tried It once but the darn thing leaked allover my chequebook . . .". She acknowledges her vulnerability when she mentions an Improbable fantasy in which she defeats her attacker Using kung fu:

. . I could never even hit the volleyball in gym, and a volleyball is fairly large, you know?- and I just go *zap* With my fingers into his eyes and that's It, he falls over, or I flip him ag31nst a wall or something But I could never really stick my fingers into anyone's eyes, could you? I feel a bit guilty about that one, I mean how would you like walking around knowing someone's been blinded for life because of you?

In each of her other fantasies, Estelle relies upon conversation to disarm her rapist. She establishes an empathetic connection with her rapist, and once that connection is established, the would-be assailant can no longer go through with the rape. Part of Estelle wants to believe that a man could not rape someone he knew, someone with whom he had talked. In this respect, Estelle may be behaving in a particularly "feminine" way-that is, in a way that our culture's construction of femininity fosters. Carol Gilligan, writing about different fantasies, nonetheless makes a point that seems particularly germane here: "If aggression is tied, as women perceive, to the fracture of human connection, then the activities of care, as their fantasies suggest, are the activities that make the social world safe, by avoiding Isolation and preventing aggression. . .". Estelle

gives the rapist her cold medicine, then, or the name of a good dermatologist, in order to forestall his aggression: "In her Imagination she turns constantly to conversation and sympathy as a civilized and sympathetic method of blunting the edge of potential violence." In effect, the story as a whole is another variation on the theme of Estelle's various rape fantasies: Estelle is attempting to establish that empathetic connection with the potential rapist she is dating in what she knows is a vain attempt to ensure her personal safety.

I identify with Estelle. What she doesn't understand about rape is what an occasional student will eventually admit that *she* (and the student who speaks up is usually a "she") doesn't understand:

Like, how could a fellow do that to a person he's Just had a long conversation With, once you let them know you're human, you have a life too, I don't see how they could go ahead with It, right? I mean, I know It happens but I Just don't understand It, that's the part I really don't understand.

I don't understand it, either.

Source: Lisa Tyler, "'Just Don't Understand It'. Teaching Margaret Atwood's 'Rape Fantasies'," forthcoming in *Teaching English in the Two-Year College,* 1998.

Critical Essay #3

Jacobsen is on the faculty of Northern Kentucky University. In the following essay, she discusses teaching "Rape Fantasies" as a means of opening discussion on the sensitive topic of rape, a topic which students of both sexes find both interesting and disturbing.

Margaret Atwood's poems and short story in Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women* (1985) lend themselves to themes of identity that may be discussed in a women's studies or a general studies literature course. My course, American Women Poets, is a women's studies course, but a majority of students of both sexes enroll because it carries general studies credit. Because Northern Kentucky University is largely a commuter college, the average age of students is twenty-six. Displaced homemakers and the occasional grandmother leaven the ideas of recent high school graduates, making class discussions a yeasty mix. Focusing on themes of identity fosters a lively involvement with literature, since students are already engaged in carving out their own identities-whether they were attracted to the course because they are interested in women's studies or want the general studies credit. While poems in *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women* explore identities brought to the fore in the women's movement-like "wife," "mother," "daughter," and "feminist activist" -it is easy to give these identities more universal names-like "spouse," "parent," "child," and "political activist"-so that men in the class see the relevance of these categories to their quests for identity, too. At the same time, men who may not have intended to enroll in a women's studies course benefit from having their consciousness raised to feminist concerns. Male students say that they are gratified by an increased understanding of women that the course gives them.

Every week students select from the assigned reading the poem or story about which they wish to write. The Written responses are based on their choice of one of seven identities they feel the work expresses: identity as a parent or child; a spouse, lover, or friend; a "mover and shaker" (political activist); a spiritual being; an artist or worker; a sufferer; or a loner. The "identities" approach leads to intense discussion of the nuances of the works when students read their responses, either to the class or to a small group responsible for leading the discussion of particular poems. Students keep their responses in a journal to review before examinations, and they submit a few of the weekly writings for evaluation. Students may later trace one of these Identities through the work of several writers as an essay choice in examinations or as a term paper topic. Hence, I mention here other poems in *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women* with which Atwood's may be compared, but these themes of identity would also be useful in taking up Atwood's works in connection with others' in an introduction to literature course. Articulation of these particular identities as topics to explore expands such literary elements as the quest motif, bildungsroman, and antihero-patterns in literature that, as traditionally taught, bear little relevance to the patterns of women students' lives. The identities offer enough variety to speak to the experience and concerns of many kinds of students. . .

Atwood's story "Rape Fantasies" explores female sexual fantasy, a variant of the "wives and lovers" identity, and the perversion of that identity in rape. The story is valuable in opening discussion of these sensitive topics; both have intense interest for students, and rape is a particularly troubling subject for both sexes. *(The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women* is the most readily available source for "Rape Fantasies" in the United States, because the story was omitted from the United States edition of Atwood's collection *Dancing Girls)* Students agree that the term *rape fantasy* is dangerous, for it fosters the mistaken perception that women want to be attacked and "ask for it" in dress or behavior. Students credit Atwood with dramatizing the absurdity of the idea that women desire rape.

In the story, four working-class women discuss a "rape fantasies" quiz in a woman's magazine. Estelle, a wisecracking nonconformist, objects to the quiz's use of the word *rape* to refer to fantasies of erotic encounters with strangers. That isn't rape, she says; "It's just some guy you haven't met formally. . . . Rape is when they've got a knife or something and you don't want to." Students wax eloquent on behalf of Atwood's point about erotic fantasy: "Atwood shows us the intriguing quality of fantasy and how we are in total contro1.Many women have been raised to view their sexuality as wrong" and "feel comfortable if they can imagine being satisfied without being responsible for it." One writer quotes an "anonymous" source: "I can't want sex and still be a good person. It should be his idea-he could even force it on me, gently of course and mostly for my pleasure. After all, it's my fantasy. "

As the story progresses, Estelle humorously tries to fantasize genuine "rape," in which a sense of the threat of rape exists. In each episode, she maneuvers herself out of the victim position by taking power back from the rapist. She identifies in each assailant an element of common humanity-the first displaying gallantry, the second suffering from a Winter cold, and the third experiencing mad delusions-and forms a conversational bond with them that allows her to tack them and escape. Many students do not understand that Estelle is performing an intellectual exercise, or devising a heuristic, to demonstrate the impossibility of a female "rape fantasy"-showing that rape is an act of power, not of sexual attraction, and that one can refuse "victimhood." Several students think that because Estelle "wants to have conversations with these 'perverts,'" she must be an exceptionally lonely person ("Even in her fantasies she doesn't meet Mr. Right ")-or, in the case of the rapist with a cold, that she is impelled to "mother" in a love relationship. (The Idea of the victim "mothering" a rapist is really very funny, most students recognize.) I help students past misunderstandings of the story by outlining the four basic victim positions defined by Atwood in *Survival.* Because Estelle takes action to minimize her victimization, she starts each fantasy in Atwood's "Position Three,"_ "To acknowledge . . . that you are a victim" but to decide how much of the victimization "could be changed if you made the effort"-a "dynamic position" in which anger is applied to effect change. Part of the humor of the story is Estelle's easy success in prevailing over the rapists, her movement to "Position Four'" "To be a creative non-victim,'" in which position the "role of victim . . . is no longer a temptation." In real life one cannot move to "Position Four" so easily, but there is satisfaction in refusing as much of the victim role as possible.

As in discussions of any aspect of female sexuality portrayed in the works studied, the men in the class sit in gratified silence, drinking in details for their sex education, while women students draw distinctions between "erotic" fantasy and "rape." Male students will join the discussion of rape If they are asked the question with which one student concluded his response to the story: "What about a man fantasizing about rape?" The instructor can remind students of the locker-room bragging in J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* and ask If they have witnessed similar boasting about planned rape exploits. Several of Atwood's points about the dangers of indiscriminate use of the term *rape* were driven home in my class when one man answered, , 'Yes. There is a type of man who, if he is rejected sexually by a woman, will grumble to his friends about what he plans to do to her, the next time he gets her alone-but I assume that's 'just talk.'" The two sexes stared bleakly across the classroom at each other, in a shock of recognition. Even so, students may not see the Irony in the ending of "Rape Fantasies" unless their attention is drawn to it. Estelle concludes, "Like, how could a fellow do that to a person he's just had a long conversation with, . . . I don't see how they could go ahead with it, right? I mean, I know it happens but I just don't understand it." This is exactly the situation in "date rape,'" the most insidious form of sexual assault threatening students. Estelle has built her entire fantasy defense on the establishment of conversational rapport with rapists. Atwood here acknowledges that such rapport is no defense. A further Irony lies in Estelle's revelation, at the end of the story, that she has "fantasized" these heuristic rape incidents in a bar, perhaps telling them to a new acquaintance, a potential rapist.

My undergraduate students' responses reveal the value they find in Margaret Atwood's works, in that the works speak to what really matters to them, and the students' writings demonstrate Atwood's ability to involve readers in literature, a new experience for some of my students. *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women* (now in its second edition) is the best collection I know for including Atwood in a survey course in the United States. . . .

Source: Sally A Jacobsen, "Themes of Identity in Atwood's Poems and 'Rape Fantasies'. Using *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women,"* in *Approaches to Teaching Atwood's* The Handmaid's Tale *and Other Works,* edited by Sharon R. Wilson, Thomas B. Friedman, and Shannon Hengen, The Modern Language Association of America, 1996, pp 70-6.

Critical Essay #4

In the following brief excerpt, Thompson talks about "Rape Fantasies, " specifically the inability of language to allow effective communication between men and women.

. . . The story winch best fits the critical stereotype of Atwood's "bubble headed/ladies' magazine fiction" (vs. her "serious poetry") is probably "Rape Fantasies." Agreed, its lower-middle-class diction, full of babbling asides and slang, is far removed from the fine intuitions of the *Power Politics* voices. And the subject matter, the dynamics of a female office/lunch room and the "girls'" revelations of their extremely unimaginative rape fantasies, hardly seems in the sarne league as the mythic patterns of *You Are Happy* or the multiple metaphors of *The Journals of Susanna Moodie.* Nevertheless, when the intellectual snobberies are put aside (and appropriately so, since that is one of Atwood's satiric targets here), the narrator does demonstrate an admirable sense of humour, appreciation of the ridiculous, and considerable compassion. For once in Atwood the cutting edge seems thoroughly dulled by the sheer zaniness of the monologue.

One imaginary rapist is "absolutely covered in pimples. So he gets me pinned against the wall, he's short but he's heavy, and he starts to undo himself and the zipper gets stuck. I mean, one of the most significant moments in a girl's life, it's almost like getting married or having a baby or something, and he sticks the zipper." She ends up drawing him out and referring him to a dermatologist. In another incarnation, she and the rapist are both slowed down by ferocious head colds, which make the would-be assault "like raping a bottle of LePage's mucilage the way my nose is running." The cheerful remedy here is conversation, Neo-Citran and Scotch, plus the Late Show on the tube. "I mean, they aren't all sex maniacs, the rest of the time they must lead a normal life. I figure they enjoy watching the Late Show Just like anybody else." As the reader is introduced to these and other alternatives, it becomes apparent that the naive narrator's innocent premise is the power of the word. "Like, how could a fellow do that to a person he's just had a long conversation with, once you let them know you're human, you have a life too, I don't see how they could go ahead with it, right?" That we see so easily the flaws in this simplistic and determined optimism serves to underscore a subtle counterpoint Atwood strikes throughout her writing-the actually severe limitations of language, and the doubtfulness of real communication. The sunny normalcy of this lady's world view glosses over a chaotic realm even she must tentatively acknowledge:" I mean, I know [rape] happens but I just don't understand It, that's the part I really don't understand."

What is also noteworthy is that this story explicitly draws men into the circle of victimhood that Atwood tends to populate with women. Rapists, yes, but failed rapists; they are betrayed by their jammed flies, their sinuses, their gullibility, their pimples, their inadequacies. And one sees that the filing clerk's rape fantasies are actually scenarios of kinship, friendship with and support of other mediocre, in fact worse-off, human beings.

Source: Lee Briscoe Thompson, "Minuets and Madness. Margaret Atwood's *Dancing Girls,"* in *The Art of Margaret Atwood' Essays in Criticism,* edited by Arnold E. Davidson and Cathy N. Davidson, Anansi, 1981, pp. 107-22.

Topics for Further Study

Compare "Rape Fantasies" with another first person narrative addressed to a silent listener, Robert Browning's poem "My Last Duchess."

Discuss how both authors develop their characters by what they have their characters say.

Who do you think has a greater chance of being raped, Estelle or her coworkers? Why? Do you think your answer is influenced by stereotypes in any way?

Examine rape statistics in the United States from 1977 to today. What kind of trends do you see? How does the United States compare with other countries? Give some possible explanations for the discrepancy between U. S. statistics and those of other countries.

What do psychologists and sociologists have to say about the underlying causes of rape? Do you agree with them?

Think of some television shows that utilize stereotypes of men and women. Do you think they are accurate? Do you find these stereotypes offensive? Discuss whether or not you think stereotypes should be restricted in the media.

Compare and Contrast

1978: John Rideout, the first U. S. man to be charged with marital rape, is acquitted by an Oregon Circuit court.

1997: A 35-year-old female teacher in Seattle is convicted of second-degree child rape for having an affair with a 13-year-old former student and is sentenced to six months in jail after she gives birth to their daughter.

1977: The U. S. Bureau of Justice Statistics reports that there are 2.33 rapes for every 1,000 people in the country.

1997: The U. S. Bureau of Justice Statistics reports that incidents of rape have fallen drastically in the past twenty years, reaching an all-time low in 1996 at 90 rapes per 1,000 people.

1977: *Looking for Mr. Goodbar* is a controversial and popular movie, in which a young teacher is murdered after picking up a man in a bar.

1997: *Push* by Sapphire is a controversial novel, telling the story of a young woman who has been beaten, abused, and raped for most of her life.

What Do I Read Next?

The Edible Woman (1969), Atwood's first novel, concerns a young, recently engaged woman who finds herself paralyzed by the decisions she must make about her future.

Judy Brady Syfer's classic essay, "I Want a Wife" (1971), often provokes strong reactions from both men and women in its definition of what the duties of a wife entail.

Jamaica Kincaid's "Girl" (1978) and *Annie John* (1983) are works that explore how women socialize each other into subservience to men.

May Swenson's poem "Bleeding" (1970) looks at power plays between victim and victimizer.

Deborah Tannen's *You Just Don't Understand* (1996) explores the differences between how men and women communicate.

Marge Percy's poems "The Token Woman" (1976) and "Barbie Doll" are acidic comments on what it means to be female.

Angela Carter's story "The Company of Wolves" (1979) reworks the fairy tale of Little Red Riding Hood and explores the relationship between romanticism and violence. It was also made into a movie.

Robert Browning's famous poem "My Last Duchess" (1842) dramatizes one man's perceptions of women.

Further Study

"Margaret Atwood," *in Short Story Criticism,* Vol. 2, edited by Sheila Fitzgerald, Gale, 1989, pp. 1-23.

Contains reprinted criticism focusing on Atwood's stories.

"Margaret Atwood," in *Contemporary Literary Criticism,* Vol. 84, edited by Christopher Giroux, Gale, 1995, pp. 1-59.

Contains reprinted Criticism covering all of Atwood's work, including stories, novels, and poetry.

"Margaret Atwood," in *Discovering Authors Modules,* CD-Rom, Gale, 1995.

Contains biographical information and critical excerpts on Atwood's work.

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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:

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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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