Raymond's Run Study Guide

Raymond's Run by Toni Cade Bambara

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BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

Toni Cade Bambara has long been admired for her short stories. "Temperamentally, I move toward the short story," Bambara has said, defining herself, like her protagonist Hazel Parker, as "a sprinter rather than a long distance runner." In "Raymond's Run," the young Hazel Parker relates the events of two days in her life in which she prepares for and runs a race. The story first appeared in 1971 in an anthology edited by Bambara, *Tales and Short Stories for Black Folks*. A year later it appeared in her first collection of short stories, *Gorilla, My Love*.

Bambara's story of Hazel's race against the newcomer Gretchen, during which Hazel comes to a turning point in her relationship with her mentally challenged brother, Raymond, has been seen as a ground-breaking initiation story. Along with others in the collection *Gorilla, My Love*, it has been classed as among the first to place a young black female as a central character in the *bildungsroman* (a novel about the moral and psychological growth of the main character) tradition.

Critics have also praised Bambara's compassionate portrayal of the African-American community, a community in which Hazel Parker takes center stage and speaks with her own voice. The vibrant idiomatic language and upbeat tempo, which are compelling features of the story, are characteristic of Bambara's style. Her ability to capture, translate and play in and out of the voices and idioms of black communities has been widely admired.Through the use of voice as well as theme, "Raymond's Run" emphasizes the importance of achieving selfhood for young black women within the context of community.

Author Biography

Born Miltona Mirkin Cade in 1939 in New York City, Bambara adopted the African name "Bambara" in 1970. Upon her death in 1995, the *New York Times* deemed her a "major contributor to the emerging genre of black women's literature, along with the writers Toni Morrison and Alice Walker." She grew up in Harlem, Queens, and Jersey City. In 1959 she received her B.A. in Theatre Arts and English from Queens College and won the John Golden award for short fiction. While enrolled as a graduate student of modern American fiction at the City College of New York, she worked in both civic and local neighborhood programs in education and drama and studied theater in Europe. After receiving her Masters degree, Bambara taught at City College from 1965 to 1969. Immersed in the social and political activism of the 1960s and early 1970s, Bambara sometimes saw her writing of fiction as "rather frivolous," yet this period of her life produced her most well-loved works.

Bambara is known as a member of the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. During this period in American history, civil rights, Black Power, anti-war and feminist movements were pressing issues, and Bambara joined in the political activism of the era. Along with other members of the black intelligentsia, Bambara sought to challenge traditional representations of blacks, celebrate African American history, and explore black vernacular English. Bambara's fiction and other writings also explore themes of women's lives and social and political activism.

In 1970 Bambara (writing as Toni Cade) was one of the first to explore feminism and race with her anthology *The Black Woman*. In her second anthology, *Tales and Short Stories for Black Folk* (1971), Bambara collected stories by writers such as Langston Hughes and Alice Walker as well as stories written by herself and her students. In 1972, Bambara's short stories, including "Blues Ain't No Mockin Bird" and "Raymond's Run," were collected in *Gorilla, My Love*. Celebrated for its focus on the voice and experience of young black women and its compassionate view of African-American communities, this collection has remained her most widely read work.

Before publishing her second collection of stories, *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive* (1977), Bambara moved with her daughter to Atlanta, Georgia, where she took the post of writer-in-residence at Spelman College from 1974 to 1977 and helped found a number of black writers' and cultural associations. In 1980, Bambara published a novel, *The Salt Eaters*, which is set in Georgia and focuses on the mental and emotional crisis of a community organizer, Velma Jackson. The novel's experimental form received both praise and criticism. In form, and in its shift in perspective beyond the local neighborhood, the novel moves away from Bambara's early short stories; however, it remains linked to them through its emphasis on black women, community, and voice.

In the 1980s and 1990s Bambara concentrated on film, another medium for "the power of the voice," working as scriptwriter, filmmaker, critic, and teacher. She collaborated on several television documentaries, such as the award-winning *The Bombing of Osage Avenue* (1986). Her death at the age of fifty-six is seen by some as a profound loss to

American culture not only because of her groundbreaking artistic contributions, but also because of her wide-reaching efficacy as teacher, critic and activist. A selection of her writings, *Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions*, was published posthumously in 1996.

Plot Summary

Setting the Scene

"Raymond's Run" plunges its readers immediately into the world of its narrator Hazel, known in her neighborhood as "Squeaky," a young black girl verging on adolescence. We meet Hazel walking down a street in Harlem with her older—but mentally younger—brother, Raymond. While she guards her mentally challenged brother from dashing into the traffic or soaking himself in the gutters, Hazel resolutely keeps up breathing exercises to train herself as a runner. Known in the neighborhood as "the fastest thing on two feet" she is determined to maintain her reputation by winning the fifty-yard dash at the school May Day track meet the following day. Unlike her schoolmate Cynthia, who pretends to be nonchalant about her abilities, Hazel works hard to be the best and does not care who knows it.

Suddenly Hazel and Raymond come face-toface with Gretchen and her followers. Gretchen is a newcomer to the neighborhood and a potential rival of Hazel's for the fifty-yard dash. She is a rival in other ways as well: Gretchen's followers Mary Louise and Rosie were once friends of Hazel. Mary Louise attempts to tease Raymond, but is no match for Hazel's razor-sharp wit. Hazel and Gretchen size each other up, but decide against a confrontation. Hazel notes that Gretchen's smile at her is "really not a smile" because "girls never really smile at each other."

The May Day Race

Hazel walks slowly to the race the next day in order to miss the May Pole dancing that precedes the track meet. Even though her mother thinks she should participate, Hazel rejects the feminine role of dressing up and "trying to act like a fairy or a flower." Arriving at the park, she takes Raymond to the swings and finds her teacher Mr. Pearson approaching her, ready to sign up "Squeaky" as an entrant in the fifty-yard race. Hazel insists he write down her full name, "Hazel Elizabeth Deborah Parker." When he suggests that she might consider letting someone else win this year, such as the new girl, Hazel stares him down and heads for the track.

Her race is called, and at the starting line Hazel sees Gretchen ready to run and Raymond, on the other side of the fence, bent over in starting position. Hazel feels herself enter a familiar dream world, where anger and rivalry is forgotten and she is "flying over a sandy beach in the early morning sun." As she runs, she sees Raymond on the other side of the fence, running the race with her "in his very own style," teeth bared, arms at his sides, "palms tucked up behind him." Astonished at this vision of her brother, Hazel is almost halted in amazement, but her body takes her tearing past the finish line. Seeing Gretchen cooling down like a professional, she feels the beginnings of admiration for her. The loudspeaker crackles and the girls look at each other, wondering who will be announced the winner.

Then I hear Raymond yanking at the fence to call me and I wave to shush him, but he keeps rattling the fence like a gorilla in a cage like in them gorilla movies, but then like a dancer or something he starts climbing up nice and easy but very fast. And it occurs to me, watching how smoothly he climbs hand over hand and remembering how he looked running with his arms down to his side and with the wind pulling his mouth back and his teeth showing and all, it occurred to me that Raymond would make a very fine runner. Doesn't he always keep up with me on my trots? And he surely knows how to breathe in counts of seven cause he's always doing it at the dinner table, which drives my brother George up the wall. And I'm smiling to beat the band cause if I've lost this race, or if me and Gretchen tied, or even if I've won, I can always retire as a runner and begin a whole new career as a coach with Raymond as my champion. After all, with a little more study I can beat Cynthia and her phony self at the spelling bee. And if I bugged my mother, I could get piano lessons and become a star. And I have a big rep as the baddest thing around. And I've got a roomful of ribbons and medals and awards. But what has Raymond got to call his own? (Excerpt from "Raymond's Run")

Hazel laughs out loud as she sees both herself and Raymond in this new light, and Raymond runs over to her in his own inimitable style. The loudspeaker announces the winner, "Miss Hazel Elizabeth Deborah Parker," and "Miss Gretchen P. Lewis" in second place. The two girls smile at each other, but not as they had the day before. This time their smiles are real, "considering we don't practice smiling every day, you know, cause maybe we too busy being flowers or fairies . . . instead of something honest and worthy of respect . . . like being people."

Summary

"Raymond's Run" is Toni Cade Bambara's short story about a young girl named Hazel Elizabeth Deborah Parker and her brother Raymond. Hazel has a couple of nicknames, including Squeaky, because she has a squeaky voice, and Mercury, because she is fast, like quicksilver when she runs.

In the first person point of view, Hazel dictates quite a bit of information about herself, her neighborhood, her brother, and other children as she walks down the street with her brother, Raymond. She is six years old and she loves to run. In fact, she takes her running very seriously and prides herself in being the fastest runner in her age group and in her neighborhood. She admits, however, that her father is the one person who is faster than she is, although, she says that is a secret.

Hazel walks with Raymond, making certain that he stays closest to the buildings. Apparently, Raymond is mentally handicapped, and Hazel has taken on a role as caretaker for him. He is much bigger than she is, but she still refers to him as her little brother. Raymond pretends to be in a circus, walking a tightrope on the edge of the curb, unless Hazel requires him to stay close to the buildings. If he has a chance to walk along the curb, he typically steps in the deepest puddles and messes up his clothes and shoes. IF this happens, Hazel is the one who takes the blame with their mother.

As the siblings walk along the busy neighborhood street, Hazel counts her breaths in groups of seven as she practices breathing exercises that help with her running. She thinks about the other children her age, especially Gretchen Lewis, who believes she is faster than Hazel is. Gretchen believes she will be able to beat Hazel in the upcoming race in which they both plan to participate.

Gretchen confronts Hazel as the two meet along the walk, and Hazel acts tough, as is typical for her. Hazel actually has earned a reputation for being rough and tough with the other kids. Even though she is little, her big attitude helps prevent other kids from teasing her. When the other kids try to tease Raymond for being different, Hazel is there to defend him as well. Gretchen taunts Hazel about the upcoming race, claiming that Hazel is not going to win this year, but she wants to be sure that Hazel has at least signed up for the race.

Indeed, Hazel has signed up for the race, and when the day comes, she arrives just in time to be pinned with her number before the race begins. As she is running, Hazel sees Gretchen in a blur to her side, and Raymond up ahead on the other side of the fence pretending to also run. As the runners cross the finish line, there is some confusion as to how the winner's name will be announced. The slight delay makes Hazel wonder if she did indeed win the race. With these spare moments, she decides that if she had actually lost the race that she would become Raymond's coach and help him to become a fast and serious runner like her.

Finally, the winner is announced, "Miss Hazel Elizabeth Deborah Parker," with "Miss Gretchen P. Lewis" coming in second place. The two girls smile real smiles at each other, as Hazel thinks that this is one of the few things they have in their lives that deserve real smiles. Hazel is proud that she has won the race, but she is also proud that Raymond has made his first "run" as well.

Analysis

Hazel Elizabeth Deborah Parker tells "Raymond's Run" in the first person point of view in the conversational tone of a six-year-old girl. As the story begins, she seems to resent the fact that she has to watch over her brother who is mentally disabled. However, by the end of the story, she has proven to be a dynamic character, changing into someone who is proud of her brother and hopeful about his future.

Running symbolizes an escape from the harsh realities of Hazel's life. She is poor and she lives in a city that is likely polluted and crowded. For her, running is the one thing she can do where she feels like she matters. She stands out among the crowd when she runs, because she is the fastest kid in her neighborhood. As Hazel focuses her attention on running, her attention is drawn away from the stressors in her life, such as poverty and her disabled brother.

Identity seems to be a prevalent theme of "Raymond's Run" in that Hazel has several names by which she is known. Some people call her Squeaky, because she has a squeaky voice, while others call her Mercury or Quicksilver because she is so fast. However, as she registers for the races, the announcer refers to her as "Squeaky," and she corrects him, giving her full name instead. Once she has won the race, her full name is announced, symbolically announcing that she is important. It is important to get her name right, because this is who she is - the winner and a person who matters at this moment.

There is irony in the story, because it begins in such a way to say that Hazel would prefer to run away from Raymond if she had the chance. She seems burdened by his existence at first. However, during the race, he is seen up ahead of her, on the other side of the fence, in such a way as to place Hazel actually running towards her brother instead of away from him. By this time, she has also realized that instead of running to escape from her duties of caring form her brother, Hazel can incorporate him into her running. She now realizes that she can embrace his existence and enjoy having a common ground to share with him.

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Characters

Gretchen P. Lewis

Gretchen is a newcomer to Hazel's neighborhood. She has attracted Mary Louise and Rosie, once friends of Hazel, to be her friends instead. Gretchen and Hazel meet and size each other up, but do not come to open conflict, although Mary Louise tries to make fun of Raymond and is put down by Hazel instead. The smile that Gretchen and Hazel give each other on this occasion is "really not a smile" because "girls never really smile at each other." On the day of the race, Gretchen competes well with Hazel and comes in second. Gretchen's dedication to running and her abilities impress Hazel, and the two exchange real smiles of beginning friendship and respect.

Hazel Elizabeth Deborah Parker

The narrator and main character of the story, Hazel Parker describes herself as "a little girl with skinny arms," whose voice had earned her the nickname "Squeaky." She is known to be the fastest runner in her school. Contrasting her appearance, however, is the strength of her character. Hazel's narration conveys to the reader a spirited self-assurance. She takes care of her mentally challenged brother, Raymond, with both pride and compassion. She is ready to use her fists or her sharp tongue if anyone has "anything to say about his big head." Moreover, her striving to be an athlete conveys to the reader her determination to make something of herself. By the end of the story, Hazel is able to recognize that same potential in her brother as well as in her rival, Gretchen.

Raymond Parker

Raymond is Hazel's brother; she feels she has to take care of him because he is mentally challenged. Under his sister's watchful and caring eye, Raymond is happy in his own world in which he imagines himself as a circus performer or stagecoach driver. He is vulnerable to teasing by others, but he can depend on Hazel to defend him, even with her fists if necessary. By the end of the story, Raymond is no longer a burden to Hazel and has become a catalyst. Raymond's "run" alongside Hazel, "with his arms down to his side and his palms tucked up behind him . . . in his very own style," reveals his individuality and potential. Hazel considers becoming her brother's coach so that he can become an accomplished runner.

Squeaky

See Hazel Elizabeth Deborah Parker

Themes

Identity

From the beginning, Hazel strongly voices her identity as an athlete—"Miss Quicksilver herself"— and establishes her outspoken assertiveness: "no one can beat me and that's all there is to it." At the same time, the story shows that Hazel's identity has been and continues to be hard won. To become a good runner, she has had to persevere with her practicing, sometimes carving time for herself out of the hours she spends looking after her mentally challenged brother, Raymond. Caring for her brother is no easy task either, and in some ways sets her apart from others. Her confrontation with Gretchen's "sidekicks" demonstrates her loyalty to her brother and her readiness to challenge those who would tease or belittle him. Although she scorns girls who dress up in white organdy for the May Pole dancing, it is also true that Hazel "can't afford to buy shoes and a new dress you wear only once in a lifetime."

Nevertheless, Hazel's belief in herself and her refusal to accept less than the respect she deserves is reflected throughout the story: in her willingness to strive to become an athlete despite the risk of failure or ridicule—"I'm serious about my running and I don't care who knows it"; in her refusal to let anyone "get smart" with Raymond; in her insistence that Mr. Pearson address her by her full name instead of the nickname "Squeaky"; and, ultimately, in her success. The story suggests that a selfrespecting identity, like the ability to run, involves persistence and dedication.

Growth and Development

While the story dramatizes the importance of identity, it also reflects on a particular moment of growth and change for both Hazel and Raymond. As the title suggests, not only Hazel's but Raymond's run has implications for both characters. The title points not only to Raymond's own potential as an athlete, but also to Hazel's intuitive recognition of his possibilities, a recognition that redefines her. Up until that moment, which occurs, interestingly, while Hazel is in the process of fulfilling a goal, Hazel has led a somewhat lonely existence, despite her vivacious style and tone. Her closeness to her family is evident, both in her father's support for her running and in her mention of her mother, brother and grandfather.

Nevertheless, Raymond has been a burden as well as a companion, and a girl like Gretchen, with whom she shares a passion for running, is a rival rather than a friend. The distance Hazel feels between them is marked by their inability to smile sincerely at each other. According to Hazel, girls "never really smile at each other because they don't know how . . . and there's probably no one to teach us how." When Hazel, in that meditative state that running induces in her, looks over and sees Raymond running parallel to her, she is suddenly able to see him afresh, not just copying or following her, but "running in his very own style." Through him, her difficult and somewhat lonely

struggle to define herself suddenly widens to include a connection that empowers them both. The realization of Raymond's potential, something that has always been there, enriches Hazel's sense of her own possibilities. What Raymond has taught her is marked by her new response to Gretchen: "And I look over at Gretchen.... And I smile. Cause she's good, no doubt about it. Maybe she'd like to help me coach Raymond."

Style

Narration

The most prominent stylistic aspect of "Raymond's Run" is the narrator's voice. Hazel Parker, narrating in the first person ("I"), recounts her experiences on the city streets and at the May Day races with verve and flair. The immediacy of an oral voice is communicated by the use of colloquial expressions (the everyday language of a community), as in Hazel's declaration "I don't feature a whole lot of chit-chat, I much prefer to just knock you down from the jump and save everybody a lotta precious time."

Repetitive, rhythmic phrasing is another technique which contributes to the oral quality of the narration, such as when Hazel describes her mother's reaction to Hazel's "high-pranc[ing]" down 34th Street "like a rodeo pony" to strengthen her knees: "she walks ahead like she's not with me, don't know me, is all by herself on a shopping trip, and I am somebody else's crazy child." Hazel also makes asides to the reader ("Oh brother") and commands a range of tones from confident to defiant to lyric, as in her dream-like visions before the race: "I dream I'm flying over a sandy beach in the early morning sun, kissing the leaves of the trees as I fly by." Through these techniques, the narration of "Raymond's Run" engages the reader and reflects the exuberant vitality of a young girl and her particular community.

Point of View

Like the language, the point of view of "Raymond's Run" is that of Hazel Parker. The firstperson point of view ("I") and the use of the present tense involve the reader in the pre-adolescent Hazel's perception of the world in the present moment. This point of view also limits the story's perspective; it does not allow the reader to enter the minds of other characters besides Hazel and does not allow Hazel the hindsight to consider the meaning of her experiences. The reader is invited to look beyond these limitations and evaluate Hazel's observations and declarations and consider what is left unsaid. For example, Hazel describes her own and Raymond's actions in the present, but it is up to the reader to assess and interpret the complexities of their relationship.

Epiphany

An epiphany is a sudden flash of insight, during which an ordinary object or person becomes illuminated with meaning. Hazel does not describe in any detail an experience of epiphany, but she implies that such a moment occurs during the race when she says "on the other side of the fence is Raymond . . . running in his very own style, and it's the first time I ever saw that and I almost stop to watch my brother Raymond on his first run." This important epiphanic moment in which Hazel's perception of her brother suddenly shifts is suggested in the title of story, "Raymond's Run."

Setting

Since we see the story through Hazel's eyes, there are few descriptive passages of setting. However, the story does contrast an urban and a pastoral setting. The most striking description of Hazel's urban environment occurs when she enters the "jam-packed" park to race. She describes "Parents in hats and corsages and breast-pocket handkerchiefs peeking up," "kids in white dresses and light-blue suits," "the parkees unfolding chairs and chasing rowdy kids from Lenox," and "big guys with their caps on backwards, swirling their basketballs on the tips of their fingers." Hazel comments that "even the grass in the city feels as hard as a sidewalk." This urban scene contrasts with Hazel's dreamy meditations just before running, when she imagines "the smell of apples, just like in the country when I was little and used to think I was a choo-choo train, running through the fields of corn and chugging up the hill to the orchard." The two settings indicate an earlier, more peaceful time in Hazel's life that she is able to invoke by running, yet both settings suggest the vitality associated with Hazel.

Historical Context

The Black Power Movement

When "Raymond's Run" was published in 1971, the Black Power Movement was having a significant impact among African-American artists and writers. While the Black Power movement, which extended through the decade from 1965 to 1975, grew out of the Civil Rights movement, the Black Power movement opposed integration and demanded economic and political power as well as equality with whites. The movement was fueled by protest against such incidents as the shooting of Civil Rights leader James Meredith in 1966 while he led a protest march across Mississippi. Shortly after, Civil Rights leader Stokely Carmichael initiated the call for Black Power and the first National Conference on Black Power was held in Washington, D.C. in 1966. In the same year, the Black Panther Party was founded in Oakland, California by Bobby Seale and Huey P. Newton, taking a militant stand against police brutality and the appalling conditions of black urban ghettoes, which lacked adequate municipal services and suffered crime rates 35 times higher than white neighborhoods.

African-American communities were also seen as the source of a vibrant culture. By the early 1970s, Black Power had become a widespread demand for black people to control their own destinies through various means: political activism, community control and development, cultural awareness and the development of black studies and "Black Arts." Pride in both African heritage and in the cultural distinctiveness of black communities in the United States, often summed up in the word "soul," was reflected in a variety of forms, from "Afro" hairstyles to soul music and soul food. In the arena of sports, heavyweight champion Muhammed Ali embodied the self-confident attitude of black pride. In the arts, black writers saw themselves as both inheritors and creators of a black aesthetic tradition. African-American writers like Toni Cade Bambara played an important part in developing awareness of a distinct African-American culture and folk tradition which emphasized the collective and maintained oral forms of expression.

By the mid-1970s organizations like the Black Panthers, targets for police and FBI surveillance, were decimated—in part because of their insistence upon achieving their goals "by any means necessary," including armed violence. In 1976, the 4,000 black officials elected represented a larger number than had ever held office, but were still only 0.5% of all American elected officials. In the 1990s, African Americans constitute less than 2% of all elected officials. Economic conditions for African Americans suffered in the 1980s: the recessions in the early 1980s reduced black family income to only 56% of white family income, less than in 1952, and the gap remains the about same in the 1990s. Nevertheless, the cultural heritage of the Black Power movement, black self-awareness and the celebration of an African-American culture and identity has had a significant impact on American culture and politics.

Black Women and the Women's Movement

The Women's Movement developed in the late 1960s in North America partly in response to the radicalizing processes of the Civil Rights, Black Power, and antiwar movements. At the same time, many women were radicalized by their realization that they were treated as second-class citizens. Women analyzed their situation and advocated radical change, forming their own local organizations and national networks for women's equality and women's rights. Consciousness groups were formed and women's centers established, concerned about issues such as sexual discrimination and harassment, wife abuse, rape and the right to freedom of choice concerning abortion. In "Raymond's Run" Bambara challenges conventional female roles through Hazel's self-assertive and openly competitive behavior. Unlike her classmate Cynthia Proctor, Hazel doesn't hide her passion for running or her abilities with false modesty. She resists her mother's attempts to make her "act like a girl" and insists of defining herself: "I do not dance on my toes. I run. That is what I am all about."

Women in African-American communities, however, did not necessarily fight for the same issues as the mainly white, middle-class women who composed the majority of the women's movement. As Toni Cade Bambara did in her anthology, *The Black Woman*, black women tended to connect issues of race and class with sexual equality. The struggle for welfare rights and decent housing were also seen by women in the black community as women's issues.

Critical Overview

In her essay "Salvation is the Issue," Bambara says "Of all the writing forms, I've always been partial to the short story. It suits my temperment. It makes a modest appeal for attention, allowing me to slip up alongside the reader on his/her blind side and grab'm." When her first collection of stories, *Gorilla, My Love*, which included the story "Raymond's Run," was published in 1972, it succeeded in "grabbing" the critics: the stories were lauded as "among the best portraits of black life to have appeared in some time" by the *Saturday Review*.

Bambara has been praised for her ability to capture the cultural richness of African-American communities, particularly as it is reflected in the voice of African-American people. Charles Johnson has noted Bambara's ear for language and dialogue in his study *Being and Race: Black Writing since 1970* (1988). He comments that "Bambara's strength is snappy, hip dialogue and an ever-crackling narrative style that absorbs all forms of specialized dictions."

The close connection between Bambara's characters and their communities has also been a recurring theme amongst her critics. In a 1983 article, Nancy Hargrove commented on "Raymond's Run" as a "story of initiation," in which Hazel Parker, "perhaps the most appealing and lovable of Bambara's young narrators" in *Gorilla, My Love*, discovers "the value of human solidarity, of love for family and friends." Martha M. Vertreace connects Hazel's development and growth to a more specifically tribal tradition within the community, in which children pass through different stages of "identity formation." She suggests that in "Raymond's Run" Hazel is at the level of "artisan" when "solutions to problems fall within one's personal control." By learning to trust and cooperate, Hazel and Gretchen together will benefit "the community, represented by Raymond."

Susan Willis also sees Hazel's and Gretchen's "mutual appreciation" as prefiguring "the crucial role that all teachers will play in Bambara's later writing." Moreover, their connection, Willis asserts, is important in establishing a "bonding between women" which opposes the dehumanization of women in a society dominated by males. Willis also suggests that Hazel's recognition of Raymond's potential should be viewed not so much as "altruism" on Hazel's part, but as a representative of a "black community" that "would embrace all its members, allowing each to fulfill a self-sustaining and group-supporting role."

In his article on "Raymond's Run" (1990), Mick Gidley takes a slightly different approach by analyzing the narrative complexity of Bambara's "exuberantly straightforward story." He considers the different levels of Hazel's narration that establish her own identity but also invite the reader to "question the teller's version of things" and tell the story not only of her own but of Raymond's life. He probes the complexity of Hazel's relationship with Raymond, suggesting that when she sees Raymond "rattling the fence like a gorilla in a cage," she "wants to bring him over the fence into the race of life." In her 1996 preface to Bambara's *Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions*, Toni Morrison sums up Bambara's

abilities with this comment: "[A]lthough her insights are multiple, her textures layered and her narrative trajectory implacable, nothing distracts from the sheer satisfaction her story-telling provides."

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Grauer is a professor of Canadian Literature at Okanagan University College, in Kelowna, British Columbia. In the following essay, she examines how the character of Hazel Parker in Bambara's "Raymond's Run" attempts to deny "false roles of femininity."

In her preface to the anthology in which "Raymond's Run" first appeared, *Tales and Stories for Black Folks*, Bambara notes that her stories are intended to present black young people with an opportunity "to learn how to listen, to be proud of our oral tradition, our elders who tell tales in the kitchen." Bambara suggests that both the form and the content of the stories, their language and their potential lessons, have something to reveal about the strengths of the African-American community. "Raymond's Run," and other stories published in Bambara's first collection *Gorilla, My Love*, have been admired for the construction of vibrant African-American voices and communities. Young Hazel Parker, in "Raymond's Run," self-confidently addresses the reader in her own particular colloquial voice. Her voice reflects her character. Moving through her community of Harlem, New York City, she appears, as Alice Deck has observed about many of Bambara's characters, "comfortably familiar with the people and each building, street lamp, and fire hydrant. . . ." In the course of the story, however, Hazel is faced with a source of discomfort. Interestingly, it turns out to be someone who is most like herself: a young, confident African-American girl.

From the beginning of "Raymond's Run," Hazel's voice and behavior reflect her strength. At the same time, her first words comment on her role as a female. Direct and outspoken, she tells the reader about herself: "I don't have much work to do around the house like some girls. My mother does that." She informs the reader of her responsibility for "mind[ing]" Raymond, her mentally-challenged brother who is "much bigger and older" but "not quite right." In defining herself this way, Hazel suggests that although she does not help her mother with the housework, she has taken on a caretaking role often associated with women. This idea is immediately negated by her declaration that "if anybody has anything to say to Raymond, anything about his big head, they have to come by me." She asserts that, though small and thin, she would rather act against taunts from others than "[stand] around with somebody in my face doing a lot of talking. I much rather just knock you down and take my chances even if I am a little girl with skinny arms and legs." Although she is nicknamed "Squeaky," Hazel is no mouse. Rather than seeing her job of looking after Raymond as a self-sacrificing female role, Hazel undertakes it with responsibility and pride. Furthermore, she enters traditional male territory by adopting the role of warrior in defense of Raymond, and she implies that she does it better than her brother George who previously had the job of "minding" Raymond and had been unable to prevent the insults of "a lot of smart mouths."

Hazel also claims space in the traditional male territory of athlete with her dedication to running. As she simply states, "I run. That is what I'm all about." To become the champion runner she is, Hazel has taken every opportunity to practice. When she is out with her mother, she "high-prance[s] down 34th Street like a rodeo pony to keep my

knees strong," despite her mother's embarrassment. While looking after Raymond, she practices her breathing and pacing while he plays his own games of being a stagecoach driver. "I never walk when I can trot, and shame on Raymond if he can't keep up," she states. Feminine modesty is not characteristic of Hazel. She is proud of what she has accomplished and proclaims her skill to herself and to anyone else: "I'm the fastest thing on two feet," "I'm the swiftest thing in the neighborhood," "I am Miss Quicksilver herself."

In practicing as an athlete, Hazel differentiates her attitudes and behaviour from what she sees as two models of falseness or inauthenticity. One is the behaviour of her schoolmate Cynthia, who acts as if her hard-earned talents are spontaneous. Cynthia pretends to play the piano because she has accidentally landed on the piano stool, although Hazel has seen Cynthia "practicing the scales on the piano over and over and over and over." Unlike Cynthia, whose lacy blouses suggest the ideal of a refined, unperspiring femininity, Hazel is willing to show her sweat. She takes the risk of both failure and ridicule that openly striving for a goal and acknowledging its importance involves. The second model of inauthenticity is the participation of girls in the May Pole dancing on May Day, which involves dressing up in "a white organdy dress with a big satin sash" and "new white baby-doll shoes" and "trying to act like a fairy or flower or whatever you're supposed to be." What you're supposed to be, as far as Hazel is concerned is "a poor Black girl who really can't afford to buy shoes and a new dress you only wear once in a lifetime cause it won't fit next year." With these statements, Hazel states her belief in taking pride in what she is rather than pretending to be what she is not. She senses a false model of femininity that denies the varied potentials of African-American girls by reducing them to "baby-dolls." As she points out, the May Pole dancing, not the track meet, is seen as "the biggest thing on the program."

When Hazel confronts the newcomer Gretchen, however, she also comes face to face with her own inauthenticity. Gretchen "has put out the tale that she is going to win the first-place medal this year." Hazel is "strolling down Broadway" with Raymond at her side on the day before the May Day races, practicing her breathing, when she comes upon Gretchen and her "sidekicks." Gretchen's follower Mary Louise has abandoned Hazel for Gretchen, and her other cohort Rosie "has a big mouth where Raymond is concerned." Quelling her first instinct to duck into a store, Hazel decides to confront them in a "Dodge City"-style showdown. Gretchen and her friends do not draw sixguns, however, but rather smiles. First of all Mary Louise hypocritically "smiles" her question to Hazel: "You signing up for the May Day races?" Hazel does not bother to respond to either Mary Louise or Rosie but says "straight at Gretchen": "I always win cause I'm the best." In answer, Gretchen smiles and Hazel observes "but it's not a smile, and I'm thinking that girls never really smile at each other because they don't know how and don't want to know. . . ." She admits to herself that "there's probably no one to teach us how, cause grown-up girls don't know either." As it turns out, a physical confrontation is avoided and the rivals go their separate ways. Hazel is not bested by Gretchen either physically or verbally, but a personal defeat is implied. With the word "us," Hazel includes herself among the "girls" who can only exchange phony smiles.

Hazel's inability to be real with Gretchen seems of little import at the time; after the incident, Hazel strolls with Raymond towards 145th "with not a care in the world

because I am Miss Quicksilver herself." The incident, however, allows the reader to glimpse Hazel's Achilles heel. In many ways, Hazel can overcome her society's stereotyping of women: she can talk with people, she can fight, she can become a champion runner. Her experience with Gretchen, however, suggests that the tendency to belittle and dehumanize women occurs not only externally but also internally. The phony smiles girls exchange mask real feelings of fear, contempt and hostility. In a society in which women are infantilized as "baby-dolls" and have little share of the power, they learn to devalue themselves and compete against each other for what advantage they can get. At the same time, open competition is often branded as unfeminine—do fairies or flowers compete?—and occurs indirectly, disguised by a smile. Distrust and rivalry between women become the norm. That these feelings exist among the women of Hazel's community and are passed on to the young girls is suggested by Hazel's insight that there is "no one to teach" girls how to smile with true feeling. However, someone from an unexpected quarter does teach Hazel. That someone is her brother Raymond, who has also been belittled and dehumanized.

The idea that girls should manipulate events and each other indirectly rather than compete openly and honestly is reinforced by Mr. Pearson's hint before the May Day race begins that Hazel should let Gretchen win. It is hard to imagine him asking this behaviour of a young boy. The incident suggests that Mr. Pearson does not consider "Squeaky," as he calls her, a real athlete who needs to test herself and deserves the recognition that comes from winning. That Hazel wants to test herself against a worthy rival is suggested by the way she looks for Gretchen as soon as she and Raymond enter the park and by the incipient admiration in her description of Gretchen at the starting line "kicking her legs out like a pro."

During the race, however, it is not Gretchen but Raymond who compels Hazel's attention. Although Raymond is on the other side of a fence from Hazel, he runs the race alongside her. Glancing out of the corner of her eye Hazel sees him running and "it's the first time I ever saw that and I almost stop to watch my brother Raymond on his very first run." The language here is ambiguous-it could be the first time Hazel has seen Raymond because it is the first time he has run in that way, or it could be the first time *Hazel* has ever been able to see Raymond's ability to run. In any case, Raymond has revealed himself to be a complex being, not reducible to a "pumpkin head" or someone who is "not quite right." In many ways, Raymond is like Hazel. Raymond runs well, and he runs despite society's labels. While she will "prance" like a pony for the sake of running, he runs "with his arms down to his side and the palms tucked up behind him." Furthermore, with no ulterior motives or attempts to manipulate, Raymond simply runs "in his very own style." For a moment, Raymond becomes a mirror for Hazel, and, more than that, a model. Raymond's run, in spite of all the forces that attempt to bind and reduce him, communicates to Hazel in a wordless fashion the diversity and possibility of human potential beyond social expectations, including that of girls like herself and Gretchen. Joyfully, Hazel welcomes Raymond over to her side of the fence.

When the winner and runner-up of the race are announced, "Miss Hazel Elizabeth Deborah Parker" and "Miss Gretchen P. Lewis," Hazel and Gretchen share "this great big smile of respect between us." The use of the girls' full names suggests not only that

they have won respect as athletes but that Hazel is ready to accept and value her full self and therefore to be curious about rather than threatened by Gretchen's potential—"I look over at Gretchen wondering what the 'P' stands for." The reader has every reason to believe that the girls, at last able to exchange smiles of respect, will also learn how to exchange smiles of joy for and in each other, as Hazel and Raymond have done.

Source: Lalage Grauer, "Overview of 'Raymond's Run,'" for *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

In the following excerpt, Gidley provides a general overview of "Raymond's Run," and offers an interpretation of the characters Hazel and Raymond, particularly with regard to the themes of acceptance and identity.

Toni Cade Bambara's "Raymond's Run" (1971), reprinted in her first collection of tales, *Gorilla, My Love* (1972), seems an exuberantly straightforward story: the first person, present tense narration of specific events in the life of a particular Harlem child, "a little girl with skinny arms and a squeaky voice," Hazel Elizabeth Deborah Parker, usually called Squeaky. Squeaky is assertive, challenging, even combative, and concerned to display herself as she is—at one point stressing her unwillingness to act, even in a show, "like a fairy or a flower or whatever you're supposed to be when you should be trying to be yourself". Above all, she's a speedy runner, "the fastest thing on two feet", and proud of it. "I run, that is what I am all about," she says.

Squeaky's narrative records the movement towards a race she has won easily in previous years, the May Day fifty-yard dash. This year she is pitted against a new girl, Gretchen, and the organizing teacher, Mr. Pearson, comes close to suggesting that, as "a nice gesture" towards the new girl, she might consider losing the race. ("Grownups got a lot of nerve sometimes," Squeaky snorts.) Earlier, when out with and looking after her older brother Raymond—a boy with an enlarged head who is "not quite right" and often lost in his own world of mimicry, games and make believe—Squeaky has to confront Gretchen and her "sidekicks" in what she calls "one of those Dodge City scenes" of verbal barracking and incipient physical violence, a showdown in which, though outnumbered three to one, she bests the opposition without needing to resort to fisticuffs. Similarly, on May Day itself, though it is literally a close-run thing and there is marked suspense as she waits for the official announcement of the result, feisty Squeaky breaks the tape first. Even before the loudspeaker broadcasts her victory, honoring her with her full and proper name ("Dig that," she says), Squeaky grants Gretchen increased respect for such things as the way the new girl runs and then gets her breathing under control "like a real pro," so that at the actual announcement Squeaky can sincerely "respect" her rival and exchange "real smiling" with her. Thus one of the story's technical feats is the registration of Squeaky's enlarged awareness *despite* the use of the first person present tense, a perspective which does not permit the speaker—who, of necessity, is always limited to the here and now—any distance from which to reflect upon events.

Indeed, as several seminal discussions of narratological problems have insisted, this narrative perspective imposes much responsibility on the reader. All intimations must be disposed in and through the story, with the reader left to assess their import. Raymond, his nature and the burden he must represent to a young girl, forms one locus for such speculation. In the very first paragraph Squeaky tells the reader this: "All I have to do in life is mind my brother Raymond, which is enough". And it is. Minding him, coming to terms with the insults his condition provokes, gets her into scrapes and actual scraps —"I much rather just knock you down and take my chances," as she puts it—including

the one with Gretchen and her two pals. And by the end of the story Squeaky is planning to quit running herself in order to concentrate on training Raymond—who, she has just realized, can also run. If she carries out such a decision Squeaky will not be just looking after Raymond but truly "minding" him: *he* will be considered, in *her* mind, no longer merely running alongside "and shame on [him] if he can't keep up." That is, without making it the obvious center of concern, indeed without even fully focusing on it, the story charts Squeaky's acceptance of Raymond.

This in itself constitutes a closer, more intimate and charged issue than might initially seem the case. In a detail which could be taken primarily as an admission of vulnerability on Squeaky's part, a rounding out, so to speak, of her character, she confides that her father is even faster than she is: "He can beat me to Amsterdam Avenue with me having a two fire-hydrant headstart and him running with his hands in his pockets and whistling. But that's private information". Later, in Squeaky's description of Raymond's running, *he* has "his arms down to his side and the palms tucked up behind him" in "his very own style"; this is a style which contrasts with Squeaky's running, arms "pumping up and down," and is very much Raymond's "own," but it is also subtly reminiscent of the "private" image of Mr. Parker's relaxed-arm racing prowess. Squeaky has always accepted her duty to mind Raymond, she has monitored him and even fought for him, but at the end of the story she ventures a step further: rather than simply knowing him as her brother, she accepts and *acknowledges* him as such—a child, like her, of the same father. She renders this explicitly when she declares him "my brother Raymond, a great runner in the family tradition".

When Squeaky outlines her idea to make Raymond "her champion" she adds,

After all, with a little more study I can beat Cynthia and her phony self at the spelling bee. And if I bugged my mother, I could get piano lessons and become a star. And I have a big rep as the baddest thing around. And I've got a roomful of ribbons and medals and awards. But what has Raymond got to call his own?

This constitutes both full consciousness of Raymond and a catalogue of the relativities of their relationship. There is a sense in which the whole tale works similarly: while in her own unmistakable voice it undoubtedly and overtly tells the reader much of Squeaky's life, including her insistence on her own identity and authenticity (especially in comparison, say, with Cynthia's "phony self"), it is also, as its title indicates, the story of *Raymond's*run, Raymond's life.

Running, in fact, has an attested pedigree as a metaphor for life's passage, as in such semi-folk sayings as "life's race well run, life's work well done." Interestingly, this usage often includes an injunction to live the good life; thus Isaiah's prophe- sy that "they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength: they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary." [Isaiah, XL, 31] Saint Paul, as might be expected, was fiercer: "let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us" [Epistle to the Hebrews, XII, I]—a sentiment that the famous Victorian hymn "Fight the good fight" rendered into cliche: "run the straight race through God's good grace."

The May Day fifty-yard dash signals the childrens' situations precisely: as Squeaky zooms towards the tape, "flying past the other runners," Raymond runs alongside, level with her, but literally "on the other side of the fence". Just before Squeaky resolves to "retire as a runner and begin a whole new career as a coach with Raymond as [her] champion", Raymond is imaged as "rattling the fence like a gorilla in a cage like in them gorilla movies", and the reader intuits that Squeaky's determination is complex: she wants to bring him over the fence and into the race of life; she hopes to lay aside his impediments and grant him the good life; she also seeks to free him from his anthropoid but King-Kong-like status and enter him into the *human* race. Hence, too, the subliminal logic in the deft inclusion of the detail of the means by which Raphael Perez "always wins" the thirty-yard dash. "He wins before he even begins by psyching the other runners," Squeaky discloses, "telling them they're going to trip on their shoelaces, etc.". Raymond merely imitates his sister's performance— before the race, for instance, he bends down "with his fingers on the ground just like he knew what he was doing"—because, until the hope at the very end of the story, *he* has been "psyched," psyched out of his own authentic identity and out of the race altogether. This narrative of Raymond's "first run" and his climbing of the fence "nice and easy but very fast" towards Squeaky is the story of a humanizing love; its double focus takes in both of its two protagonists.

Yet just as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*—which, with its mischievous young narrator, is structured similarly—ends ambiguously, so Raymond's Run has its further ironies. When on the last page of the book Mark Twain's youthful protagonist tells the reader that he is going to "light out for the Territory ahead of the rest," the reader knows that Huck's perspective, however fresh and truthful, is limited: even if he gets there "ahead," civilization, with all that it entails, *will* catch up with him.Bambara's young speaker's aspirations must be seen as likewise shot through with doubts—perhaps more so. It may be, for example, that "with a little more study" Squeaky could "beat Cynthia" at the spelling bee, but even after the hoped for piano lessons it would be a very chancy business for her to become, in line with her stated ambition, "a star." One of the most telling effects of present tense first person narratives is the creation of such ironies: the reader must always question the teller's version of things. Seen in this light, Squeaky's ambitions may *all* be wishful thinking. The reader knows, too, that Squeaky's blackness will also be made to militate against her in the world beyond Amsterdam Avenue. Thus, for her, this year's May Day fifty-yard dash could well prove not the initiation but the apex of her achievements, the climax of her life's run. And, of course, if this is so, Raymond will never be coached to become a champion. The present tense—which by definition precludes a known future—is relentless: the story tells of his "first run"—and it is his first and only run.

Then again, perhaps such a fraught perspective does not grant enough credence to Squeaky herself, especially to her voice. The first words of William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, given to Benjy, include repeated references to fences: "Through the fence, between the curling flower spaces, I could see them hitting.... I went along the fence.... They [the golfers] went on, and I went along the fence . . . and we went along the fence . . . and I looked through the fence.... 'Here, caddie.' He hit . . . I held to the fence and watched them going away." Benjy, the idiot Compson brother, clings to

the fence, moaning and weeping for his lost sister, Caddy, whose image has been invoked by the golfer's call for his caddie. That sister had truly "minded" Benjy, had been his monitor, refuge and source of warmth. Caddy, indeed, was the representation of love for each of her three brothers. But, in that she was granted no narration of her own, she was also, as at least one critic has put it, the "absent center" of the novel [Carey Wall, *Midwest Quarterly*, 1970]. In "Raymond's Run" by contrast, Squeaky is not only very much present for her brother, but possesses a powerful voice of her own. Squeaky's voice—as is so often the case with Bambara's protagonists—is notable for its vibrancy and verve. The idiosyncrasy and sheer insistence of Squeaky's voice impinges on, even hustles, the reader in a triumphant exhibition of will. Interestingly, that will is expressed most explicitly in Squeaky's description of her usual pre-race "dream":

Every time, just before I take off in a race, I always feel like I'm in a dream, the kind of dream you have when you're sick with fever and feel all hot and weightless. I dream I'm flying over a sandy beach in the early morning sun, kissing the leaves of the trees as I fly by. And there's always the smell of apples, just like in the country when I was little and used to think I was a choochoo train, running through the fields of corn and chugging up the hill to the orchard. And all the time I'm dreaming this, I get lighter and lighter until I'm flying over the beach again, getting blown through the sky like a feather that weighs nothing at all. But once I spread my fingers in the dirt and crouch over the Get on Your Mark, the dream goes and I am solid again and am telling myself, Squeaky you must win, you must win, you are the fastest thing in the world, you can even beat your father up Amsterdam if you really try. And then I feel my weight coming back just behind my knees then down to my feet then into the earth and the pistol shot explodes in my blood and I am off and weightless again, flying past the other runners.

This fleeting vision takes in much. In terms of space, the evocation here of beach and country gently reminds the reader of Squeaky's actual situation, one in which she may lie on her back, "looking up at the sky," but can only try "to pretend" she is "in the country." Because, as she sees, "even grass in the city feels hard as sidewalk, as there's just no pretending you are anywhere but in a 'concrete jungle'." (The notion of the "concrete jungle," which she has heard her grandfather use, further energizes the image of Raymond's entrapment in terms of "them gorilla movies.") Also, young as Squeaky is, the dream is reminiscent of a more innocent time (perhaps primordially so, with its Edenic apples) of "choochoo" trains and cornfields—before, that is, she took over the particularly heavy responsibility for Raymond from an older brother and before, in general, she became conscious of the burdens of humanity. And here, as it is in the verse of Isaiah quoted earlier ("they shall mount up with wings as eagles"), flying is an exalted form of running in which, as Saint Paul phrased it, "every weight" is laid aside. Indeed, she can "kiss the leaves of the trees" as she soars by. But if flying constitutes a glorified version of running, running itself serves Squeaky, "a little girl with skinny arms and a squeaky voice"—and may well serve damaged Raymond—as the most practical form of exaltation. And, when celebrated, tongued—embodied—in that thrusting, vital voice of Squeaky's, running becomes its own exultation.

Source: Mick Gidley, "Reading Bambara's 'Raymond's Run,'" in *English Language Notes*, Vol. XXVIII, No. 1, September, 1990, pp. 67-72.

Critical Essay #3

Hargrove is a professor of English at Mississippi State University and author of Language as Symbol in the Poetry of T. S. Eliot.*In the following excerpt, she offers her interpretation of the characters Hazel and Raymond in Bambara's "Raymond's Run," particularly with regard to the theme of childhood and initiation.*

In reading Toni Cade Bambara's collection of short stories, *Gorilla, My Love* (1972), one is immediately struck by her portrayal of black life and by her faithful reproduction of black dialect. Her firstperson narrators speak conversationally and authentically: "So Hunca Bubba in the back with the pecans and Baby Jason, and he in love . . . there's a movie house . . . which I ax about. Cause I am a movie freak from way back, even though it do get me in trouble sometime". What Twain's narrator Huck Finn did for the dialect of middle America in the mid-nineteenth century, Bambara's narrators do for contemporary black dialect. Indeed, in the words of one reviewer, Caren Dybek, Bambara "possesses one of the finest ears for the nuances of black English" ("Black Literature"). In portraying black life, she presents a wide range of black characters, and she uses as settings Brooklyn, Harlem, or unnamed black sections of New York City, except for three stories which take place in rural areas. Finally, the situations are typical of black urban experience: two policemen confront a black man shooting basketball in a New York park at night; young black activists gather the community members at a Black Power rally; a group of black children from the slums visit F.A.O. Schwartz and are amazed at the prices of toys. Bambara's stories communicate with shattering force and directness both the grim reality of the black world—its violence, poverty, and harshness—and its strength and beauty—strong family ties, individual determination, and a sense of cultural traditions. Lucille Clifton has said of her work, "She has captured it all, how we really talk, how we really are" [quoted on the book jacket of *Gorilla, My Love*], and the *Saturday Review* has called *Gorilla, My Love* "among the best portraits of black life to have appeared in some time."

Although her work teems with the life and language of black people, what is equally striking about it, and about this collection particularly, is the universality of its themes. Her fiction reveals the pain and the joy of the human experience in general, of what it means to be human, and most often of what it means to be *young* and human. One of Bambara's special gifts as a writer of fiction is her ability to portray with sensitivity and compassion the experiences of children from their point of view. In the fifteen stories that compose *Gorilla, My Love*, all the main characters are female, thirteen of them are first-person narrators, and ten of them are young, either teenagers or children. They are wonderful creations, especially the young ones, many of whom show similar traits of character; they are intelligent, imaginative, sensitive, proud and arrogant, witty, tough, but also poignantly vulnerable. Through these young central characters, Bambara expresses the fragility, the pain, and occasionally the promise of the experience of growing up, of coming to terms with a world that is hostile, chaotic, violent. Disillusionment, loss, and loneliness, as well as unselfishness, love, and endurance, are elements of that process of maturation which her young protagonists undergo....

"Raymond's Run," . . . [a] story of initiation, centers on Hazel Elizabeth Deborah Parker, perhaps the most appealing and lovable of Bambara's young narrators, and concerns two discoveries she makes on the way to growing up. One has to do with her retarded older brother, for whose care she is responsible, and the other with her rival in the May Day races. As in the two previous stories, both discoveries reveal the value of human solidarity, of love for family and friends.

Hazel is a totally engaging character. In a narrative style entirely free of the strong language used by most of the other young narrators, she reveals a refreshing honesty as well as a dedication to hard work and a dislike of phonies. She clearly knows who and what she is. Her life centers on two things: caring for Raymond and running. At the story's beginning she indicates that the former is a large and consuming task, but one which she accepts stoically and with love: "All I have to do in life is mind my brother Raymond, which is enough.... He needs looking after cause he's not quite right. And a lot of smart mouths got lots to say about that too.... But now, if anybody has anything to say to Raymond, anything to say about his big head, they have to come by me."

If Raymond has her heart, running has her soul. She tells us honestly, but not arrogantly, "I'm the fastest thing on two feet. There is no track meet that I don't win the first place medal." She works hard to improve her skill, and she illustrates her disgust with those who pretend they never practice by describing Cynthia Procter, who always says, after winning the spelling bee, "'I completely forgot about [it].' And she'll clutch the lace on her blouse like it was a narrow escape. Oh, brother."

She is also determined to be herself, rather than what others want her to be. Rebelling against her mother's desire for her to "act like a girl for a change" and participate in the May Pole dance instead of the fifty-yard dash, she insists that "you should be trying to be yourself, whatever that is, which is, as far as I am concerned, a poor Black girl who really can't afford to buy shoes and a new dress you only wear once a lifetime cause it won't fit next year." Although when she was younger she had once been a "strawberry in a Hansel and Gretel pageant," she now asserts, "I am not a strawberry. I do not dance on my toes. I run. That is what I am all about."

The May Day race, the central episode of the story, is thus of tremendous importance to Hazel. She is determined to win again, especially because she has a new challenger in Gretchen, who has recently moved into the neighborhood. Her descriptions of her feelings before and during the race are superb in their realism, revealing her great intensity and concentration. Yet, as she is running, she notices that Raymond is running his own race outside the fence. Suddenly she realizes that she could teach Raymond to run and thereby make his life more meaningful; thus, whether or not she herself has won the race now becomes secondary: "And I'm smiling to beat the band cause if I've lost this race, or if me and Gretchen tied, or even if I've won, I can always retire as a runner and begin a whole new career as a coach with Raymond as my champion.... I've got a roomful of ribbons and medals and awards. But what has Raymond got to call his own?" Her sincere love for her brother and her excitement at discovering something that he can learn to do well are so intense that "by the time he comes over I'm jumping up and down so glad to see him—my brother Raymond, a great runner in the family

tradition." Ironically, everyone assumes that she is elated because she has again won first place.

Almost simultaneously she realizes that, far from disliking her rival or feeling superior to her, she admires her for her obvious skill in and dedication to running: "And I smile [at Gretchen]. Cause she's good, no doubt about it. Maybe she'd like to help me coach Raymond; she obviously is serious about running, as any fool can see." The story ends with the two girls smiling at each other with sincere appreciation for what the other is.

Hazel represents the best of youthful humanity in her unselfish desire to make her brother's life more significant, in her determination to be herself, and in her honest admiration of the abilities of a rival. But it is perhaps her wise understanding of what is most to be valued in "being people" that makes her such an appealing character. "Raymond's Run" is a story rare in this collection, and in modern literature, in that everyone wins in one way or another, and yet it is neither sentimental nor unrealistic, but sincere and believable.

Thus, with compassion, understanding, and a warm sense of humor, Bambara portrays in many of the stories in *Gorilla, My Love* an integral part of the human experience, the problems and joys of youth. Told from the viewpoint of young black girls, they capture how it feels as a child to undergo the various experiences of loneliness, disillusionment, and close relationships with others. Bambara's short fiction thus belongs to the ranks of other literary works portraying youth, such as Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*. Furthermore, because her protagonists are female, black, and generally pre-adolescent, these stories, like the works of several other contemporary black female writers, contribute a new viewpoint to the genre.

Source: Nancy D. Hargrove, "Youth in Toni Cade Bambara's *Gorilla, My Love*, " in *Women Writers of the Contemporary South*, edited by Peggy Whitman Prenshaw, University Press of Mississippi, 1984, pp. 215-32.

Adaptations

"Raymond's Run" was adapted as a film for the American Short Story Series of the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) in 1985.

Topics for Further Study

In an interview, Bambara has said that "An awful lot of my stories . . . were written, I suspect, with performance in mind." With a group of classmates, construct a staging and performance of Hazel's role and voice for your class. Ask the audience to write about what performing the story contributes to its meaning and impact.

Consider "Raymond's Run" in light of social and economic conditions for African American women at the time. Research the historical attitudes toward black women and social conditions for women such as education, position in the family, employment, availability of community services, and average family incomes in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Consider the depiction of Raymond as a mentally challenged character by comparing him with other such characters in literature and film, such as those portrayed in John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* and Daniel Keyes' *Flowers for Algernon*, or in movies such as *Rain Man* and *Forrest Gump*.

Research attitudes toward mentally challenged people in the early 1970s and discuss how "Raymond's Run" reflects or challenges those attitudes. Have attitudes significantly changed today?

Compare and contrast Bambara's portrayal of Hazel Parker with the portrayal of young black women in other works of literature such as in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* or in Alice Walker's short story "Everyday Use."

Compare and Contrast

1970s: With the backdrop of the sexual revolution as well as the feminist, civil rights, and Black Power movements, African-American women come to the forefront of American literature.

1990s: The success of such African-American women authors such as Toni Morrison and Alice Walker signal the appreciation of the perspective of African American women in society.

1970s: The Women's Movement (also known as the Feminist Movement) makes significant differences in the way women are treated and perceived in American society. Women avail themselves of a myriad of opportunities, including professionally and personally.

1990s: Inequality and discrimination still persist, but women have more opportunities and legal support than ever before. Critics of the Women's Movement point to the breakdown of the family unit as an inevitable result. But women make significant contributions in every walk of life and continue to make progress.

1970s: Viewed as a sign of progress, 4,000 black officials were elected to public office. This number represented a larger number than had ever held office, but were still only 0.5% of all American elected officials.

1990s: African Americans constitute less than 2% of all elected officials.

What Do I Read Next?

Gorilla, My Love (1972), Toni Cade Bambara's first collection of short stories, contains "Raymond's Run" and places the story within a context of others in which Hazel Parker plays a part. In eight of the fifteen stories in the collection, young children and adolescents play central roles.

Toni Cade's *The Black Woman: An Anthology* (1970) collects poems, short stories and essays discussing and reflecting a wide range of concerns of black women in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions (1996), an important posthumous selection of Toni Cade Bambara's writings, provides the most current context for Bambara's work, including a preface by Toni Morrison, and several important recent interviews, and Bambara's writings about film. The selection also includes previously unpublished short stories.

Daughters of the Dust: The Making of an African-American Woman's Film (1992), by filmmaker Julie Dash, is prefaced by Toni Cade Bambara writing in her capacity as filmmaker, who sees the film as marking the coming of age of independent black cinema.

Paula Giddings' *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* is a highly accessible narrative history of Black women and their concerns from the seventeenth century to the 1980s.

The anthology *Black-Eyed Susans/Midnight Birds* (1990) combines two collections of stories by Black women writers originally published in 1975 and 1980, with an updated commentary on each author by the editor Mary Helen Washington. It contains stories by Toni Cade Bambara, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison and Paule Marshall, among others.

Further Study

Bambara, Toni Cade. "Salvation is the Issue," in *Black Women Writers (1950-1980):A Critical Evaluation*, edited by Mari Evans, Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1984, pp. 13-38.

In this article, Bambara discusses the creative process and her political and artistic concerns with stimulating honesty and wit.

—. Interview: "Toni Cade Bambara," in *Black Women Writers At Work*, edited by Claudia Tate, New York: Continuum, 1988, pp. 13-38.

A wide-ranging interview in which Bambara discusses her life, her crafts (writing and filmmaking) and her views on art and politics from the 1960s to the 1980s.

—. *Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions*, edited by Toni Morrison, New York: Pantheon Books, 1996.

Bambara's most recent work, published posthumously after her death in 1995, collects important interviews and short fiction never previously published.

Chevigny, Bell Gale. "Stories of Solidarity and Selfhood," in *The Village Voice*, April 12, 1973, pp. 39-40.

This early review emphasizes the collection's insightful study of the black community and of adolescent girls, as well as its innovations in style.

Deck, Alice A. "Toni Cade Bambara," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol. 38: *Afro-American Writers after* 1955, *Dramatists and Prose Writers*, Detroit: Gale Research, 1985, pp. 12-22.

Overview of Bambara's life and literary career.

Hargrove, Nancy. "Toni Cade Bambara," in *Contemporary Fiction Writers of the South: A Bio-Bibliographical Sourcebook*, edited by Joseph M. Flora and Robert Bain, Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1993, pp. 32-45.

A useful survey of major themes in Bambara's writings and literary criticism of her work. Includes a short biography and an excellent bibliography of writing by and about Bambara.

Johnson, Charles. *Being and Race: Black Writing since 1970*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988.

Contains a short but illuminating discussion of Bambara as a humorist and writer of "highly energetic prose."

Polatnick, Rivka M. "Poor Black Sisters Decided for Themselves: A Case Study of 1960s Women's Liberation Activism," in *Black Women in America*, edited by Kim Mari Vaz, Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, 1995, pp. 110-30.

An interesting discussion regarding the participation of two key black women's groups in the women's movement which looks at the differences and similarities between their concerns and those of white women.

Van Deburg, William L. *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture*, 1965-1975, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.

A comprehensive and accessible discussion of the Black Power movement, its precursors, leaders, ideologies, and cultural impact and legacy.

Vertreace, Martha M. "The Dance of Character and Community," in *American Women Writing Fiction: Memory, Identity, Family, Space*, edited by Mickey Pearlman, Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1989, pp. 155-71.

Contains a brief but illuminating discussion of Hazel's relationship to the community. Includes a useful bibliography of Bambara's writings.

Willis, Susan. "Problematizing the Individual: Toni Cade Bambara's Stories for Revolution," *in Specifying: Black Women Writing the American Experience*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987, pp. 129-58.

An interesting analysis of political issues in Bambara's story is included in a longer analysis of stories from *Gorilla, My Love*, *The Seabirds Are Still Alive* and Bambara's novel *The Salt Eaters*.

Bibliography

Bambara, Toni Cade. "Salvation is the Issue," in *Black Women Writers* (1950-1980): A Critical Evaluation, edited by Mari Evans, Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1984, pp. 13-38.

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Morrison, Toni. Preface to *Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions*, by Toni Cade Bambara, edited by Toni Morrison, New York: Pantheon Books, 1996.

Vertreace, Martha M. "The Dance of Character and Community," in *American Women Writing Fiction: Memory, Identity, Family, Space*, edited by Mickey Pearlman, Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1989, pp. 15-71.

Willis, Susan. "Problematizing the Individual: Toni Cade Bambara's Stories for Revolution," in *Specifying: Black Women Writing the American Experience*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987, pp. 129-58.

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Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

Research
Michelle Campbell, Nicodemus Ford, Sarah Genik, Tamara C. Nott, Tracie Richardson

Data Capture
Beverly Jendrowski

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Mary Ann Bahr, Margaret Chamberlain, Kim Davis, Debra Freitas, Lori Hines, Jackie Jones, Jacqueline Key, Shalice Shah-Caldwell

Imaging and Multimedia
Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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

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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Short Stories for Students

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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

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