The Replacement Study Guide

The Replacement by Alain Robbe-Grillet

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Introduction

"The Replacement" by Alain Robbe-Grillet was collected with other sketches and published in 1962 under the title *Instantanes* (translated as *Snapshots).* "The Replacement," along with the other sketches in *Snapshots,* is a classic text of the New Novel movement, which originated in France in the 1950s. The movement was made up of a group of writers that included Nathalie Sarraute, Claude Simon, Robert Pinget, Marguerite Duras, and Michel Butor. These writers rejected literary traditions of plot, action, narrative, and characterization in their works, and created a new literary form that presented an objective record of objects. As the movement quickly became popular throughout the literary world, Robbe-Grillet became its most famous writer and spokesperson.

"The Replacement," an intricate interweaving of three plot lines, continually confounds readers' efforts to piece together a coherent and definitive explanation, which is exactly the goal of the writers of the New Novel movement. Their point is that authors should not impose meaning on a literary work, that instead readers should be left to decide for themselves how to come to an understanding of it.

The plot of "The Replacement" centers on the interaction between a frustrated teacher and his bored students, the story they are reading in class, and a schoolboy just outside the classroom window. Seen as a whole, the sketch becomes a fascinating statement on the philosophy of this innovative movement, offering an exploration of how to "read" a text.

Author Biography

Alain Robbe-Grillet was born on August 18, 1922, in Saint-Pierre-Quilbignon, France, a municipality that is now part of Brest in Brittany. His parents were Gaston Robbe-Grillet, a manufacturer, and Yvonne Canu Robbe-Grillet, the daughter of a navy petty officer. Robbe-Grillet attended schools in Brest and Paris. Jeanine P. Plottel, in her article on Robbe-Grillet for *European Writers,* notes that while his parents were not well off economically, "they were particularly arrogant, convinced that they were more intelligent, capable, and talented than the world-at-large." Plottel also characterizes them as right-wing anarchists, "[f]illed with contempt and hatred for French democratic institutions." His father received several citations for his service during World War I, but his experiences during this period left him mentally unbalanced. Robbe-Grillet's mother has suggested that her son turned his father's mental instability into genius.

World War II interrupted Robbe-Grillet's schooling, as the Germans forced him to work in Nuremberg for the STO, their labor camp system. He worked there for a year as a lathe operator in a tank factory. He was able to complete his education at the Institut National Agronomique in 1945. After graduation he worked for the Institut National de la Statistique et des Etudes Economiques and later as an engineer and an agricultural scientist. Ill health, however, prevented him from continuing his career in agriculture, and during his convalescence he turned to writing.

Plottel suggests that Robbe-Grillet's experiences during the war left him ambivalent about politics, and so he discarded the anarchist philosophy of his parents. Thus, he refused to incorporate politics into his writing. Plottel writes that he "sought to write from the perspective of modernity. The revolution he wanted had to be expressed in the shape and texture of the work itself and not in the expression of partisan politics."

Robbe-Grillet could not find a publisher for his first novel, *Un régicide,* written in the late 1940s, and so began a second, *Les gommes* (translated as *The Erasers),* which was published in 1953 and subsequently won the Prix Fénéon. During this period, he also wrote literary reviews for*L'Express,* a daily newspaper, that were eventually reprinted in 1963 in *Pour un nouveau roman* (translated as *Towards a New Novel* and *For a New Novel: Essays on Fiction).*

His third novel, *Le voyeur* (translated as *The Voyeur),* published in 1955, won the Prix des Critiques and cemented his reputation as one of the creators of a new narrative form, later dubbed the "New Novel." *La jalousie* (translated as *Jealousy)* and *Dans le labyrinthe* (translated as *In the Labyrinth),* his next two novels, gained popular and critical success and insured his position as one of the most important literary figures in France. His acclaimed short story "The Replacement" was collected with other sketches and published in 1962 under the title *Instantanes* (translated as *Snapshots).* In 1960 he began a successful career as a screenwriter and director of films, including the highly acclaimed *L'Année dernière á Marienbad (Last Year at Marienbad,* 1961) and*L'Immortelle (The Immortal One,* 1963).

Robbe-Grillet has received several awards for his literary and cinematic achievements. In 1955 he won the Prix des Critiques for *Le Voyeur,* and in 1961 *L'Année dernière á Marienbad* won the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival. In 1963 *L'Immortelle* won the Prix Louis Delluc, and in 1969 *L 'Homme qui ment* (The liar) won the prize for best screenplay at the Berlin Festival.

Plot Summary

The narrative weaves together three separate scenes. The first involves a schoolboy who is standing by a tree, peering intently at something in the branches. He repeatedly tries to reach a branch that seems within his grasp. After failing to grasp it, he lowers his arm, appears to give up, and continues to stare at something in the leaves. He then returns to the foot of the tree and resumes the same position he took at the beginning of the story. The narrator describes the position of the boy's body as he peers up at the branches. He holds a book satchel in one hand while the other hand is obscured, probably because he is using it to balance himself against the tree. His face is pressed to the tree and turned in such a way that it would not be visible to an observer. The boy scrutinizes something unidentifiable about a yard and a half above the ground.

The narrative then shifts to the second scene, which is inside a classroom. There a boy who has been reading aloud suddenly pauses, probably, the narrator concludes, because he has come to a period. The boy makes an effort, which is not described, to indicate that he is at the end of a paragraph. Here the narrative abruptly shifts to a one-sentence description of the schoolboy outside changing his position so that he can "inspect the bark of the tree higher up."

Back in the classroom, the other children are whispering. When the schoolmaster looks at them, he notices that most of them are not following the reading in their books, but are instead looking toward his desk "with a vaguely questioning, or fearful, expression." He then asks the reading boy in a severe tone, "What are you waiting for?" The boy resumes his reading "with the same studious voice, expressionless and a bit too slow." The narrator shifts again to the schoolboy, this time linking the two scenes together by indicating that he is across the street from the classroom peering at the leaves on the lower branches of the tree. Immediately the reader is pulled back into the classroom as the teacher slaps the desk with his hand, correcting the boy's reading of the story and telling him to pay attention to what he is reading.

The boy starts reading again in the same monotone but stops abruptly in the middle of a sentence. The other students, who had been looking at a paper puppet hanging on the wall, immediately return their eyes to the book. As the teacher angrily instructs the boy to continue reading, the boy looks behind the teacher at the paper puppet. When the teacher demands to know whether the boy understands what he is reading, the boy pauses, glancing around the room, and then replies that he does. Yet when the teacher asks him the definition of one of the words he is reading, he cannot respond.

The teacher enters into a discussion with another pupil about the story and its meaning. The student understands that the characters "wanted to go somewhere else and make people think they were still there." The narrator then relates part of the story that is being read in the classroom.

The teacher concurs with the boy's assessment and asks him to summarize the story for the rest of the students, which he does "almost coherently." Yet he does not hit all

the main points of the story, stressing instead minor details. The boy also does not discuss the motives behind the characters' actions. As he speaks, the teacher looks out the window and apparently sees the schoolboy, who has returned to his spot below the tree branch and is "jumping up and down, stretching one arm upward" to the leaves. When the schoolboy fails to reach the leaves, he again stands motionless staring at them.

The narrator again inserts a part of the story being read in the classroom, noting that all of the students are staring at the puppet. The teacher stops the boy reading and finds a new reader, who reads with a similar lack of interest as the children return their attention to the text. As the reading resumes, the teacher again looks out the window where the boy is gazing intently at the bark. The students glance up at the teacher as he looks out the window, but they cannot see out of the frosted glass and so their attention turns back to the paper puppet.

Summary

"The Replacement," by French author Alain Robbe-Grillet, is a short sketch, or vignette, which touches on multiple plots simultaneously. This sketch was gathered with others and published in the 1962 book *Instantanes,* or *Snapshots.*" The title is an accurate description of this type of short story, which does not contain a typical beginning or ending, only a middle, a moment of time captured in words.

The story begins with a young boy walking up to a tree that has caught his eye. He reaches for the lowest branches of the tree, trying several times to stretch his arm to meet the branch. After several attempts, he stares at the tree, contemplating something unknown. The boy examines the bark of the tree very closely, with the intensity of a scientist studying a slide.

The next paragraph of the story begins with a description of a boy who has been reading aloud but has now paused. The boy at the tree continues to inspect the bark, moving to a higher position as if he has discovered something new. The teacher notices that the students are not following along with the reading. Even the boy who is supposed to be reading aloud is frequently glancing at the front of the room. The teacher harshly tells him to continue reading, which causes the rest of the class to bend their heads down toward their books. The boy continues reading awkwardly and without emotion. The schoolmaster criticizes him frequently for not pausing in accordance with the punctuation.

The focus of the story moves from the schoolboy outside to the activities in the classroom. While the boy outside studies the bark of the tree, the boy inside the classroom is criticized for his reading ability. Up until this point it is not clear where the boy outside is in relation to the class or if he and the boy reading are one and the same.

As the schoolmaster criticizes and questions the boy who is reading, the boy's attention is pulled toward a large puppet cut out of paper. The other students in the class also glance frequently at the white puppet hanging on the wall. As another student summarizes the passage that was just read, the teacher's attention drifts to the window and the boy across the street studying the tree. The boy outside has moved his attention from the bark of the tree to one of the leaves. After a few minutes of intense study, he tries once again to touch the leaves by stretching his arm up and leaping as far into the air as possible; however, he is still unable to get his hands on the object of his affection.

As the boy in the classroom summarizes the text, the rest of the students turn their attention, once again, toward the large, white paper puppet hanging from the front wall. The puppet is quite rudimentary, with a large head and no feet or hands. Still, it captivates the attention of the students until another young boy picks up the reading, and they are forced once again to follow along in their books.

When the students are once again looking at their books, the teacher's attention shifts to the window with the view of the boy examining the tree bark. The students' attention wonders once more, and soon the entire class is looking at their teacher. They too look out the window, but they are unable to see the boy outside since the bottom half of the window is frosted. Collectively, they turn toward the front of the room to stare at the paper puppet.

Analysis

The story begins with the introduction of a young boy fascinated by a tree. The boy is examining the tree as if it is the first one he has seen. He is carrying a book bag, and so the obvious question is why the boy is not in class. It may be assumed, at first, that he is outside with the rest of his class for recess or perhaps that school time is over. With the beginning of the next paragraph, the story becomes more confusing instead of clearer.

A boy is described pausing in his attempt to read aloud to his classmates, and the pause causes the pupils to look up from their books and start to whisper. Has the classroom gathered outside for an afternoon of reading? Is the boy who is examining the tree the very one who is supposed to be reading or are his activities the cause of his classmate's pause? These are both reasonable questions, since no effort is made to distinguish between the boy reading and the boy examining the tree.

Finally, with the introduction of the bored, frustrated teacher, the story begins to flesh itself out. There are indeed two separate boys. One is outside by himself during school hours, and the other is inside a classroom reading aloud. The three separate plots of the sketch begin to come to life. The author weaves these three plots together in such a brief vignette through the reoccurring theme of replacement. The plots seamlessly replace each other, as do the characters and their actions. The three plots, or stories within the story, are of the boy outside examining the tree, the frustrated, angry teacher and the bored and fearful students.

The first story line is that of the frustrated teacher. He moves the story between the boy outside and the classroom inside. Each time his focus moves between the two settings, the three different plots intertwine. The schoolmaster, like his students, is bored with his work. His students are not paying attention and are not picking up the material as quickly as he would like. The schoolboy outside, whom his attention keeps drifting toward, symbolizes two distinct things for him. First, he sees in the boy the qualities he wishes to see in his own students. The boy outside has genuine interest and curiosity in the subject that he is studying, the tree. His attention is focused, and he is unrelenting in his quest for more information and knowledge about this tree and its characteristics.

Secondly, the young boy outside symbolizes the schoolmaster's own lost youth. He sees the same characteristics that he held as a youth in the boy outside. Before he became a teacher, he probably had a thirst for knowledge and a high level of enthusiasm toward learning. Now, however, he is stuck in a dead-end job and is unwilling or unable to motivate his students accordingly. The only time the teacher

focuses on his own students is to criticize them. Otherwise, he is distracted by the activities outside.

The second plot line centers on the school children in the classroom. They are extremely bored and unmotivated. This is a result of the interweaving of the schoolmaster's plot line. Since the schoolteacher is unwilling or unable to give his students praise and positive feedback, the students are in turn unable to show enthusiasm for the subject that they are learning. This is shown in the complete lack of emotion present in the voices of the boys who have been chosen to read aloud. These children are just going through the motions of learning but not really absorbing anything. They are also extremely fearful of their schoolmaster. In addition, an ominous feeling surrounds the white paper cutout at the front of the classroom.

The students' attention is repeatedly pulled back toward that white paper cutout of a man. It symbolizes to them the authority of their schoolmaster and indeed almost serves as his replacement. To the students the white paper puppet has many of the same characteristics that their teacher expresses in their presence. For one, the white paper puppet is devoid of emotion. It is flat and lifeless. This symbolizes not only the teacher's attitude toward teaching and his pupils, but also the students' own attitudes toward being in his classroom.

The final plot line is the lone schoolboy outside examining the tree. There remain many unanswered questions surrounding the boy, such as what he is doing outside of class during school time and why he is so fascinated by the tree. Despite these unanswered questions, the boy and his story are very symbolic. The fact that he is alone and yet does not appear to be nervous or afraid represents his independence. On the other hand, the fact that he is cut off from the other schoolchildren, physically separated by the pane of the window glass, symbolizes that he is alone in the world, without peer or friends. The boy is his own teacher in the world, and nature is his classroom.

The plot line of this boy carries emphasizes similarities and dissimilarities between the boy and the students in the traditional classroom. The boy and the pupils in the classroom are both students of approximately the same age, and considering that the boy is directly outside of the class window, he probably attends that school. By being similar to the boys in the classroom, this boy symbolizes what the students could become if not for the oppressive nature of the teacher. Ironically, the boy exemplifies what the teacher himself wants the students to become. The dissimilarities between the boy outside and the boys inside show this vision of what students should be. As previously explained, the boy is not confined to the classroom, and he is learning about a subject that he is truly interested in. He shows true passion for acquiring knowledge about the bark and the leaves of the tree, while the students inside the classroom express only boredom and disinterest. The students cannot see the boy. They cannot understand their own potential or their teacher's desires for them.

The story ends not how a short story is expected to, with a conclusion or resolution of conflict, but rather as a vignette or sketch does, with nothing resolved but the picture of the moment thoroughly examined. The lasting impression that "The Replacement"

leaves is of the teacher turning his attention toward the boy outside, while the students inside focus on the looming white paper puppet and the boy outside contentedly studies his tree. The fate of these characters and the continuation of the three plots are left unfinished, only to be imagined.

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Characters

The Children in the Classroom

The children in the classroom all exhibit similar behavior. Most of the time they reveal their inattentiveness. While the first boy is reading, they whisper among themselves instead of following along in the text. They also spend a lot of time staring at a paper puppet hanging at the front of the class. They apparently fear the teacher, as noted when they look toward the teacher and reveal "a vaguely questioning, or fearful, expression." As soon as the first boy stops reading, their attention immediately returns to the book.

First Boy

The first boy is one of three boys in the classroom to whom readers are introduced. At the beginning of the sketch, he reads aloud. As he is reading, he suggests that he is obedient as he has been following the teacher's rigid directions about pauses for punctuation. When the boy suddenly pauses, the narrator concludes the boy has come to a period and states "he gave the impression that he was making an effort to indicate the end of a paragraph."

The boy's actions suggest boredom as he reads each passage "with the same studious voice, expressionless and a bit too slow." Perhaps it is this boredom that causes him to appear inattentive, even a bit rebellious, when the teacher confronts him. When the teacher demands that he continue reading, the boy looks behind the teacher at the paper puppet before beginning again. At another point, when the teacher criticizes him, the boy pauses, glancing around the room before he tries to defend himself. The narrator does not make clear the motives behind these actions.

The Schoolboy

The schoolboy is standing by a tree outside of the classroom. He is described as peering intently at the tree, exhibiting a tremendous degree of concentration as he alternates between staring at the branches and the bark. He also shows determination as he continually attempts to reach the leaves that are just outside of his grasp. He is periodically watched by the teacher.

Second Boy

The teacher calls on the second boy after the one who was reading first could not answer a question. The second boy appears intelligent, providing a correct answer to the question posed, but he also shows the same boredom and possible rebellion as did the first boy. When the teacher asks the second boy to summarize the entire passage

they have been reading, he pauses and looks out the window. Like the first boy, he clearly has not been thinking very much about the passage, since when he summarizes the story, under orders from the teacher, for the rest of the students, he does it "almost coherently." He does not hit all the main points of the story, stressing instead minor details.

The Teacher

The teacher shows his impatience and his shortness of temper when, in "a severe tone," he asks the first boy who has stopped reading, "What are you waiting for?" Later, he slaps the desk with his hand, correcting the boy's reading of the story and telling him to pay attention to what he is reading. Like his students, the teacher also appears bored with the lesson, frequently looking out the window, apparently at the schoolboy who is peering at the tree.

Third Boy

The third boy starts to read after the teacher interrupts the second boy's summary. The third boy reads with the same bored attitude as the others.

Themes

Knowledge

The main theme in "The Replacement" focuses on the attainment of knowledge. The story is about how people perceive the world and how they often become confused when they try to interpret it. Robbe-Grillet reveals this theme through the interweaving of three plot lines. The central story, that of the interaction between the teacher and his pupils, centers on communication problems. The teacher apparently has instructed the students on how to read a text by pausing for the punctuation. Yet when the students do this, the teacher is not satisfied, due to their monotone readings. The teacher has not been able to communicate his idea of how one should read a story.

The students' lack of understanding could be due to their apparent boredom in the classroom. Every chance they get, they whisper among themselves and glance around the room, especially at the paper puppet that hangs in the front, instead of actively concentrating on the text.

The second plot line, of the schoolboy peering intently at the tree, does not seem to relate to the first. The boy is outside, across the street from the classroom, but he does not interact with anyone in the room and it is not clear whether the teacher is looking at him when he glances out of the window. The third piece, the story that is being read in the classroom, also appears to have no relation with the other two plot lines. Thus, it is confusing to try to piece the plot lines together by determining a relationship between the scenes in order to arrive at an understanding of the whole story.

This theme reflects the main focus of the writers of the New Novel movement, who discarded traditional literary structures, which they found to express unrealistic views of experience. They construct their works, instead, to promote the idea of the indeterminacy of existence and so refuse to impose on the reader any subjective points of view. They try to achieve objectivity by fragmenting the text, as Robbe-Grillet does in "The Replacement," so that readers can reconstruct the pieces of descriptions of objects and direct experiences, and therefore the reality, for themselves.

Imagination

Another theme that relates to the problem of gaining knowledge is the use of the imagination. One possibility for interpreting the relationship between the stories of the students and the schoolboy looking at the tree is to suggest that the schoolboy is a figment of the teacher's or the students' imagination. Everyone inside the classroom is bored by the material and upset by the obvious tension between the teacher and the students. As a result, they could have escaped by conjuring up the figure of the schoolboy, unencumbered by the classroom walls and the demands of the teacher or the curriculum, focusing intently on something that interests him. The narrator, however,

does not impose this interpretation on the story, and so the reader is left with only a tentative conclusion.

Perseverance

One way the two stories could be linked is through the theme of perseverance. The schoolboy exhibits this quality as he intently gazes at the tree, trying to extract some information from it, and as he repeatedly tries to reach the leaves. The children in the classroom persevere with their studies, trying but failing to respond to the work in the way the teacher demands. The teacher, however impatient, also refuses to halt his efforts to communicate his directions to the students. The narrator never offers insight as to why all persist in such dogged ways.

Style

Plot

Robbe-Grillet constructs a nontraditional plot in "The Replacement." He interweaves three fragments: the interaction between the teacher and the pupils in the classroom, the schoolboy peering intently at the tree, and the story that is being read aloud in the classroom. Robbe-Grillet continually moves among the three, which disrupts chronology and subverts readers' understanding of the elements in the story.

The narrator does not make clear the relationship between the schoolboy looking at the tree and what is happening in the classroom. Readers are not sure whether the teacher periodically looks out the window to observe the boy or something else. Thus the schoolboy could be a figment of the teacher's imagination, or the students' imagination, as the students cannot see out of the frosted windows.

Robbe-Grillet again confounds readers' expectations for an understandable plot with his inclusion of a bit of the story that is being read aloud in the classroom. The first line that is read is, "Therefore, that evening, Joseph de Hagen, one of Philippe's lieutenants, went to the Archbishop's palace on the pretext of paying a courtesy call." A few more passages are read until the final passage, which ends with that same sentence. The narrator does not clear up confusion as to whether the boy reading made a mistake at this point or whether the narrative moved back in time to the beginning of the story, making it difficult for readers to arrive at a conclusive interpretation.

Characterization

The characterizations in the sketch are as enigmatic as the plot. The third-person narrator reports actions objectively, never allowing readers to see the motives behind actions. For example, no motivation is provided as to why the schoolboy is so fascinated with parts of the tree or why he is so desperate to grab some leaves. The interaction between the characters provides some clue to their personality but no definitive analyses. The narrator does not name the characters or their specific location, instead providing brief, surface descriptions of objects, actions, and dialogue. This lack of characterization makes it difficult to make distinctions between the pupils, especially since they all act in the same manner.

The narrator instead repeatedly describes the same actions, making it unclear whether the children are actually repeating actions or whether the plot is returning to the same scene over and over again. This occurs with the schoolboy who shifts his gaze to the branches and then to the bark of the tree. This pattern occurs several times during the sketch. The children also repeat certain movements. Their attention repeatedly shifts from the teacher to the book to the paper puppet hanging at the front of the classroom.

Occasionally, however, the narrator offers glimpses of what characters are feeling. The description of the teacher's actions and words suggest he is angry and frustrated, and the children as a group regard their teacher with a "vaguely questioning or fearful expression."

Historical Context

The New Novel

The term New Novel *(nouveau roman)* became associated with a group of French writers in the 1950s, most notably Nathalie Sarraute, Claude Simon, Robert Pinget, Marguerite Duras, Michel Butor, and Robbe-Grillet, who rejected literary traditions of plot, action, narrative, and characterization, and created a new novelistic form that presented an objective record of events. Robbe-Grillet coined the term New Novel in his published essays on the nature and future of the novel, later collected in his *Pour un nouveau roman* in 1963.

Originally this group of writers was referred to as *romanciers du regard,* "novelists of the glance." Jeanine Plottel, in her article on Robbe-Grillet for *European Writers,* explains, "When the accuracy of this term came to be questioned and the diversity of these writers became more and more obvious, their novels more and more puzzling," the term *nouveau* was adopted.

Initially the French literary world rejected this new form. Its popularity grew as a result of the reestablishment of the *decades,* or ten-day conferences, a French literary tradition. These conferences were run at the Centre Universitaire de Cérisy-la-Salle in southern Normandy by Mme. Heurgon-Desjardins, and attended by leading writers and intellectuals, including Andre Gide, Thoman Mann, and Paul Valery. The conference held in 1970 cemented acceptance of the New Novel as an important part of contemporary French literature. Robbe-Grillet's prominence in this group of writers was reinforced during a 1975 conference that focused on his novels and films.

John Fletcher, in his article on Robbe-Grillet for *Dictionary of Literary Biography,* argues that the impetus for the creation of this new literary school lies in how Robbe-Grillet and his contemporaries responded to the occupation of France during World War II. Fletcher insists that the occupation "humiliated" an entire generation of French and "led them to question the grounds of the commitment to radical politics preached by intellectuals of the preceding generation, particularly by Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and their associates." According to Fletcher, Robbe-Grillet became a spokesperson for this disaffected generation in the mid 1950s, when he began "to cast doubt on philosophical concepts such as meaning and identity which the elders still took for granted."

The structure of most novels prior to this period expresses a belief in an intelligible universe. The intelligible universe of *Pride and Prejudice,* for example, assumes that all young women should find husbands. Even in the absurd world depicted by the French existentialist authors, humans could find meaning in their own existence if they accepted personal responsibility for their lives. The new writers, however, found this humanistic philosophy false. Robbe-Grillet and other authors associated with the New Novel would not accept the firm tenets of previous writers, claiming texts presented not truth but indeterminacy. Writers of this genre wanted to represent reality without any

imposed interpretations. One way they try to achieve this objectivity is by fragmenting the text so that readers can reconstruct the descriptions of objects and direct experiences, and therefore the reality, for themselves.

Fletcher characterizes their writing as expressing "a new realism, a new attitude to time, a new conception of plot, and a new approach to character in literature, all of which had to be tougher, harder, and more transparent" than in the works of more traditional authors. This new school refused to provide recognizable geographical, historical, or psychological contexts for characters. They confounded readers' perceptions and understanding by breaking up the chronology of the plot, often cutting back and forth between different periods of time and between memory and imagination. Through these methods, the writers do not allow readers to rely on traditional methods of interpretation.

Surrealism

Scholars, like Laurent Dechery in his article in *Mosaic* on Robbe-Grillet's use of language, have compared elements in works by writers in the New Novel school to those of surrealist artists. The surrealism movement originated in France in the 1920s. Surrealists rejected traditional, rational artistic renderings and instead promoted expressions of the unconscious mind.

Surrealism was an extension of Dadaism, a nihilistic movement in art and literature started in 1916 in Zurich by Romanian poet Tristan Tzara, along with Hans Arp, Hugo Ball, and Richard Huelsenbeck, in response to the widespread disillusionment engendered by World War I. The founders meant Dadaism to signify total freedom from ideals and traditions concerning aesthetics and behavior. The most important concept of Dadaism is the word "nothing." In art, Dadaism produced collage effects as artists arranged unrelated objects in a random fashion. Dadaism in literature produced mostly nonsense poems consisting of meaningless, random combinations of words, which were read in public cafes and bars.

These constructions in art and literature stressed absurdity and the role of the unpredictable in the creative process. This group came into vogue in Paris immediately after the First World War. Tzara carried the school abroad where its influence became apparent in the poetry of Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot and in the art of Max Ernst and René Magritte. By 1921 Dadaism as a movement was modified into surrealism.

Critical Overview

The literary scene in France did not at first accept the radically new form of Robbe-Grillet's works. However, with the reestablishment of the *decades,* or ten-day conferences (a French literary tradition), and a study of Robbe-Grillet's works by theorist Roland Barthes, Robbe-Grillet soon became a dominant literary figure. Two different critical approaches have been taken in analyses of Robbe-Grillet's works, including the sketches in *Snapshots.* The first, promoted by Barthes, focuses on the author as *choisiste* ("thingist") as he reproduces the surface reality of things in his texts. Barthes argues in his *Essais critiques* that Robbe-Grillet's novels and stories confound the reader because they illuminate the problems inherent in gaining absolute knowledge about the world because they refuse to present any specific point of view. Critic Bruce Morrissette, however, takes a different approach to the analysis of Robbe-Grillet's work. In his book *Les Romans de Robbe-Grillet,* Morrissette insists it is possible to approach the texts from a psychological perspective, since, he argues, the narrators present subjective, emotional points of view.

Like Barthes, Robert Kanters insists in his review "The School of the Look" on the objectivity of the text in his critique of *Snapshots.* He notes the "powerful" collection of sketches "summarizes reasonably well the program or the intention of the New Novel according to Alain Robbe-Grillet." Kanters argues that the sketches present "pure objective observation, a simple list of particulars." Robbe-Grillet's goal, he concludes, is "the situation, and especially the material situation, must speak for itself and, without being interpreted through the consciousness of the author, impose on us a vision and if possible a sensation."

John Fletcher echoes Morrissette's interpretation in his article on Robbe-Grillet for the *Dictionary of Literary Biography,* when he writes that the sketches "portray a state of unease, even of ill-contained hysteria, masked by meticulous, apparently dispassionate and objective description." Ben F. Stoltzfus, however, in *Alain Robbe-Grillet and the New French Novel,* combines the two theories in his conclusion that the author "alternates passages in *[Snapshots]* between purely objective descriptions and subjective involvement." This pattern, Stoltzfus claims, "reinforces. . .his basic theme of the fundamental separation between man and things."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Perkins is an instructor of English and American literature and film. In this essay, Perkins considers Robbe-Grillet's story as a statement on the philosophy of the New Novel movement.

Prior to the twentieth century, writers structured their works to reflect their belief in the stability of character and the intelligibility of experience. Traditionally, novels and stories ended with a clear sense of closure as conflicts were resolved and characters gained knowledge about themselves and their world. Many writers during the twentieth century challenged these assumptions as they expanded the genre's traditional form to accommodate their characters' questions about the indeterminate nature of knowing in the modern age, a major thematic concern for these writers. Through their works they raised the epistemological question, "how do we know we really know what we think we know?"

Alain Robbe-Grillet continues this inquiry in "The Replacement" as he explores different methods of gaining understanding of an experience or an object. Through his meticulous shaping of the story, he presents an intriguing metaphor for the act of reading a text. As a result, the story becomes a statement on the difficulties inherent in the process of gaining absolute knowledge not only of a literary work, but also of human experience.

"The Replacement," an intricate interweaving of three plot lines, continually confounds readers' efforts to piece together a coherent and definitive exegesis, which is exactly the goal of the writers of the New Novel movement. These writers challenged traditional notions of meaning and identity and so created texts that reflect the indeterminate nature of reality and the difficulties inherent in coming to a clear understanding of that reality.

John Fletcher, in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography,* notes that as a result of this philosophy, Robbe-Grillet creates literature "that is all 'on the surface,' postulating nothing about what may or may not lie behind phenomena." He does this by refusing to place characters in a historical moment or to identify them by name, and by disrupting the chronology of the text. Fletcher concludes that, as a result, Robbe-Grillet produces narratives that are not "afraid of being inconsistent and reflecting a reality that has its own recurring bafflements."

Laurent Dechery in "Turning Words into Colors: Robbe-Grillet's Visual Language," comments that Robbe-Grillet's subversion of conventional narrative structures in all of the sketches in *Snapshots* reveals the author's "attempt to achieve the ultimate transgression while staying within the traditional framework of verbal text." As a result, Dechery concludes he "leaves readers in a situation of undecidability concerning their own status as readers and the cognitive process which takes place while reading the story." They also become confused about "the status of the author, the narrator, the plot, and the characters."

In his *Pour un nouveau roman* (translated as *For a New Novel: Essays on Fiction),* Robbe-Grillet writes, "The world is neither significant nor absurd. It simply is." In addition, "our concept of the world around us is now only fragmentary, temporary, contradictory even, and always disputable. How can a work of art presume to illustrate a preordained concept, whatever it might be?" In "The Replacement," Robbe-Grillet illustrates his concept of the indeterminate nature of reality as he focuses on a class full of students struggling to read a story.

Robbe-Grillet, however, does not begin with the main story; he instead starts with an objective description of an unnamed schoolboy trying and failing to reach a tree branch. The narrator does not place him in any specific setting or suggest any motivations for his actions. Nor does he appear to be linked to the main plot line, other than through the fact that he is identified as being across the street from the school. At a few points in the story, the teacher looks out the window, but it is not clear whether or not he sees the schoolboy.

The third plot line, the unfolding action of the story the students read in the classroom, also appears not to have any relation to the other two plots other than the fact that the students are reading it. Yet Robbe-Grillet does link the three plot lines in a figurative sense. The interweaving of fragments of each plot line becomes an adept illustration of the problematic nature of gaining knowledge, especially in regard to understanding a text.

In the main plot, everyone in the classroom struggles with the story they are reading. The first boy reading the story aloud pauses at punctuation marks, "making an effort to indicate the end of the paragraph," but he does not appear to understand what he is reading. Perhaps his inability to understand results from his obvious and complete lack of interest in the material.

His boredom becomes apparent in his monotonous reading of the text and his pause, at one point, to study a paper puppet hanging at the front of the classroom. Yet his problems with the text could also have resulted from the teacher's instructions on how to read. When the boy stops reading in the middle of a sentence, the teacher demands, "All right, go on! There isn't any period there. You don't seem to understand what you are reading." He may have thought a pause was necessary there, even though there was no punctuation, based on the instructions the teacher had given him. Readers cannot make a clear judgment on his motive since the narrator does not offer any insight into his character. Later, the boy reveals that he has not understood the reading when the teacher questions him about specific words.

The next boy who reads appears to have a better understanding of the text, but it is not complete, at least according to the teacher. He knows the meaning of the word "alibi," but when the teacher asks him to give a summary of what they have read, the boy does so "almost coherently." The narrator notes that he "stressed unduly a number of secondary matters, while hardly mentioning, or even omitting, certain crucial events." The narrator also does not include an analysis of the characters' motives, a traditional tool for readers to gain understanding of a text.

The rest of the students seem to have difficulty understanding the text as well, since the next boy chosen to read does so in the same monotonous tone as the others, "although conscientiously indicating the commas and the periods." All of the students express their boredom openly as their attention continually shifts to the paper puppet rather than their books.

Robbe-Grillet's interweaving of lines of the story into the main plot line also illustrates the students' lack of understanding. The first line of the story read by the boy early in the sketch is, "Therefore, that evening, Joseph de Hag en, one of Philippe's lieutenants, went to the Archbishop's palace on the pretext of paying a courtesy call." A few more passages are read periodically throughout the sketch until the final passage, which ends with that same sentence. The repetition of the line could have been caused by the student's confusion about his place in the text, or from a memory of another class, or from an imaginative creation of a class. Robbe-Grillet does not provide a motive, which confounds the reader's effort to understand the story.

The narrator suggests that part of the problem lies with the teacher, who cannot understand why his students are having so much difficulty with the story. The students alternate between boredom and another emotion that the narrator identifies as "vaguely questioning or fearful." The classroom is filled with obvious tension, evidenced by the teacher's anger over the students' inability to read "correctly." He apparently has spent time showing them how he wants them to read the text, but they have not been able to satisfy him. During the teacher's outbursts, the children quickly return their attention to their books, suggesting that they are afraid of further reprimands.

Robbe-Grillet adds a new dimension to this scene when he introduces the description of the schoolboy studying the tree. This description—which includes precise, objective, and often repetitious details—presents a situation that starkly contrasts that of the students in the classroom. This boy cannot take his attention away from the tree, parts of which continually fascinate him. He struggles to "know" the tree and even tries to grasp the leaves so he can study them more closely. However, repeated attempts to reach the leaves end in failure. The narrator notes that the leaves are "inaccessible" to him. Robbe-Grillet links the two plot lines as he notes that, just like the children in the classroom, the schoolboy ultimately fails to completely understand what he is "reading."

The story of the schoolboy and the tree works as a metaphor for indeterminacy on another level. When Robbe-Grillet weaves this plot into the others, he declines to show readers any temporal or spatial links between them. The teacher could be watching the schoolboy out of the window to alleviate his frustration over his students' inability to properly read and understand the story, or the schoolboy could be a memory or an imaginative creation for the teacher or for the students. At one point, the narrator notes that the students cannot see out the frosted windows. Perhaps the schoolboy is their imaginative rendition of what is on the other side.

This last interpretation could be supported by one of the boy's explanation of how "alibi" is used in the story that is read aloud. He determines that the main characters "were really there . . . only they wanted to go somewhere else and make people think they

were still there." Perhaps he, or the other children, created the schoolboy as an alter ego, imagining what it would be like to be experiencing something truly interesting, while his physical self remains in the classroom as an "alibi" for the teacher.

Ultimately, readers are left with no clear understanding of what exactly is occurring in the story or what motivates the characters' actions. Like the students in the classroom, readers of "The Replacement," have failed to "read" the story in the traditional way. But the reader's lack of understanding stems from Robbe-Grillet's intentional disruption of narrative conventions. His goal in "The Replacement," like that of others associated with the New Novel movement, is to force readers to arrive at their own understanding of a text without being influenced by the author's intentions. His achievement in "The Replacement" has been to present a compelling illustration of the indeterminate nature of texts and of the world.

Source: Wendy Perkins, Critical Essay on "The Replacement," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2002.

Topics for Further Study

Read Robbe-Grillet's short sketch, "The Wrong Direction" and compare its style and themes to that of "The Replacement."

Read a work by another author associated with the New Novel movement—such as Nathalie Sarraute, Claude Simon, Robert Pinget, or Marguerite Duras—and compare and contrast that work to "The Replacement." Do the two works share similar themes and construction?

Write a short sketch of something you have observed, using the same style as Robbe-Grillet does in "The Replacement." Try to fragment the sketch, weaving together pieces of real scenes with memory and/or imagination.

Robbe-Grillet rejected the political point of view of writers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. Research those views along with biographical details of Robbe-Grillet's life and try to determine what turned the younger writer against them.

Compare and Contrast

1960s: The New Novel is one of the most popular literary genres.

Today: The confessional narrative gains a prominent position in the literary world.

1960s: France is just coming out of a period of political instability. During the twelve-year rule of it's post-war government, the Fourth Republic, there are roughly twenty-six changes in prime minister. General Charles de Gaulle founds the Fifth Replic in 1958.

Today: France has enjoyed a relatively stable government since the founding of the Fifth Republic.

1960s: A literary movement called poststructur-alism dominates literary theory in Europe and the United States.

Today: Cultural studies have become the most popular form of literary criticism.

What Do I Read Next?

Scholar Harry T. Moore's preface in *Alain Robbe-Grillet and the New French Novel* critiques Robbe-Grillet' s work along with other writers included in this genre.

Robbe-Grillet's *For a New Novel: Essays on Fiction* is a collection of his critical essays about the New Novel, the innovative form Robbe-Grillet helped establish in the 1950s.

Robbe-Grillet's highly acclaimed novel *Jealousy* presents a traditional love triangle in the author's unique New Novel style of writing.

Robbe-Grillet's "The Wrong Direction" is a short sketch in the "Three Reflected Visions" section *of Snapshots.* Like "The Replacement," it presents enigmatic images with little commentary.

Maguerite Duras's *The Lover* tells a partially autobiographical story of a young girl growing up in French Indochina. Duras is another proponent of the New Novel style of writing.

Further Study

Harger-Grinling, Virginia, and Tony Chadwick, eds., *Robbe-Grillet and the Fantastic,* Greenwood Publishing Group, 1994.

This collection of essays focuses on Robbe-Grillet's unique style.

Hellerstein, Marjorie H., *Inventing the Real World: The Art of Alain Robbe-Grillet,* Susquehanna University Press, 1998.

Hellerstein explores the links between Robbe-Grillet's fiction and films.

Ramsay, Raylene L., *Robbe-Grillet and Modernity: Science, Sexuality, and Subversion,* University of Florida Monographs. Humanities, No. 66, University Press of Florida, 1992.

As she studies the dominant themes in Robbe-Grillet's fiction, Ramsay places his work in a historical context.

Smith, Roch Charles, *Understanding Alain Robbe-Grillet,* University of South Carolina Press, 2000.

Smith presents a comprehensive overview of Robbe-Grillet's work.

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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

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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Short Stories for Students

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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

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