Residents and Transients Study Guide

Residents and Transients by Bobbie Ann Mason

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Introduction

Bobbie Ann Mason's short story, "Residents and Transients," initially appeared in the *Boston Review*, and was then included in her first collection of short stories, *Shiloh and Other Stories*. The book received nominations for a variety of awards and earned the Ernest Hemingway Foundation Award in 1983. While not as widely anthologized or reviewed as the title story, "Shiloh," "Residents and Transients" is an important story in the collection. Critics and readers praise the story for its tension between past and present, country and city, and childhood and adulthood.

Mason sets "Residents and Transients" in a region she is very familiar with—rural western Kentucky, the area she grew up in and the site of many of her short stories. As in her other work, she writes with a lean, spare style. Her characters speak in the cadences of western Kentucky, and often find themselves bemused by their situations.

"Residents and Transients" is the story of a woman, Mary, caught in a moment of transition. After a long absence, she has returned to live in the home of her parents who have since moved to Florida. Her husband, a salesman, is in Louisville, searching for a new house. She is supposed to sell the house and move to Louisville, but there is a part of her that wants to remain in her hometown. In addition, Mary finds herself caught between two men: her lover, Larry, and her husband Stephen.She vacillates between two different lives, unable to choose her future.

Author Biography

Bobbie Ann Mason was born in rural Kentucky in 1940. Her father was a farmer, and Mason grew up on the dairy farm he owned. She attended the University of Kentucky and graduated in 1962. Immediately after graduation, Mason moved to New York City where she took a job writing for fan magazines. She earned both a master's degree from the State University of New York-Binghamton in 1966, and a doctoral degree in English from the University of Connecticut in 1972. After a number of years of writing literary criticism and nonfiction, she began to write short stories.

Her story "Offerings" was published in the *New Yorker* in 1980. "Residents and Transients" first appeared in the *Boston Review* in August of 1982 before being included in Mason's first collection of short stories, *Shiloh and Other Stories*. The volume received nominations for a PEN-Faulkner award and the National Book Critics Circle Award. The collection won the 1983 Ernest Hemingway Foundation Award.

The defining characteristic of Mason's fiction is change. Most of her stories are set in rural Kentucky, a region losing its distinctive flavor. Often, her protagonist is a woman at some moment of transition in her life. In the case of "Residents and Transients", her protagonist is at a moment of choice; either she will stay in her childhood home in the countryside, or move to Louisville to live with her "Yankee" husband.

In a conversation with Lila Havens in 1985, Bobbie Ann Mason confirms that one of the themes in her work is that of "residents and transients." She continues, "Some people stay home and others are born to run." Certainly, this describes the situation in the short story, "Residents and Transients."

Since the publication of *Shiloh and Other Stories*, Mason has produced a number of other works. In addition to the short story collection *Love Life: Stories*, Mason has also written a number of well received novels. Perhaps her most famous is *In Country*, the story of a young woman's search for identity and for truth in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. The novel was made into a movie in 1989, starring Bruce Willis and Emily Lloyd.

Plot Summary

"Residents and Transients" is set in western Kentucky. The protagonist, Mary, narrates the story in her own voice. She announces in the first paragraph, "Since my husband went away to work in Louisville, I have, to my surprise, taken a lover." From this surprising opening, Mary explains how she finds herself back in Kentucky, living in her former family home.

Three years before the story opens, Mary had returned to Kentucky (after an absence of eight years) in order to care for her ailing parents. Shortly after returning to Kentucky, she married Stephen, a word processor salesman. At the time of her marriage, she agreed to the frequent transfers his job would require, but now, she is not sure that she wants to move away from home again. Nevertheless, Mary herself feels like an outsider in her home community; her long absence has given her an understanding of the world that the local residents do not have.

Before the story opens, Mary's parents have moved to Florida. At the time of the story, Stephen is in Louisville, looking for a house for them to buy. Mary stays in her parents' house because she is responsible for selling the home. She loves the house and is not sure she wants to move to Louisville. Mary spends her days caring for the eight cats her parents left and visiting with her lover of three weeks, Larry, the dentist.

Larry and Mary have known each other since they were children, having both grown up in the same area. Larry is content with his life, and he wants Mary to stay with him. Mary seems ambivalent about both her husband and Larry.

Stephen calls Mary regularly, urging her to come to Louisville to see the house he has picked out, but she is not enthusiastic. She discusses financial transactions and visits to financial planners instead of her feelings.

In an important passage, Mary tries to explain to Larry the difference between residents and transients in the cat population. Although she is ostensibly discussing cats, it is clear that she is really trying to say something about her own status as a resident or a transient. She is not truly a resident, because of her long absence. However, neither is she a transient, at least while she is here in her parents' home.

After eating at a restaurant in Paducah, Larry and Mary are driving home in Larry's truck. In the road, Mary sees a rabbit with its hind legs smashed, trying frantically with its front legs to get off the road. The sight leaves Mary near hysteria. When the couple get back to the house the phone is ringing, and Larry answers without thinking. It is Stephen. Mary tells him she will be coming to Louisville; but instead of hearing her, he lectures her on the need for flexibility. This lecture upsets her, and she rushes outdoors.

Outside, Mary sees one of her cats walking up the drive. The cat's eyes shine red and green. The story ends with this image, the eyes like the image of a traffic light both red and green.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

As this story begins, the narrator, a married woman named Mary, tells us she has a lover. Her husband, Stephen has started a new job in Louisville, and while Mary originally agreed to the move, she has now changed her mind.

Her lover is Larry, the family dentist. Like Mary, Larry grew up in the area; Mary, however, was away for eight years completing her education. She returned three years ago to care for her elderly parents who have since moved to Florida. Now that she is back, Mary wonders why she ever left in the first place. Larry, on the other hand, stayed in town; he became a dentist and married. He has since divorced.

Mary met her husband shortly after she returned home. He is not from the area; rather he is from the North, and he was transferred to the area by his employer. Even though Mary was born and raised in the area, being away for so long makes her feel like an outsider. She notices that the long-time residents are wary of the many people who have recently been moving to their town and believe they are a negative influence on the town's children.

Despite being away for so long, Mary has grown accustomed to living in her parents' old farmhouse. When her parents left for Florida, Mary agreed to handle the sale of the house and its contents. She has grown fond of the old house and she is reluctant to leave it. She tells her husband that she does not think she can get used to the idea of living on a residential street.

Along with caring for the house, Mary also has charge of her parents' eight cats. She feeds them in her mother's canning kitchen, a place where her mother spent many hours canning fresh fruits and vegetables. Mary finds it ironic that her mother now lives in a mobile home and buys all of her food from grocery stores.

Mary explains that she began seeing Larry shortly after she made a visit to his office for her six-month check-up. While she does not know exactly what prompted him to do so, she was nonetheless happy when he pulled into her driveway one day bringing ice cream. As they sit on the porch eating the ice cream, Larry tells Mary that he believes the area of Kentucky in which they live is the prettiest in the state and that she should not move. Mary agrees and says she remembers a time when she could not wait to leave.

When her husband calls one afternoon to tell her that he found a house, Mary realizes that she misses him. Even so, she is reluctant to go to Louisville to see the house. As she speaks to Stephen on the telephone, she is holding one of her cats, Ellen, who recently lost a litter of kittens after having an x-ray. Mary was sure to provide every detail of what had occurred in a letter to her parents but her parents' return letter

mentions the incident. Stephen then provides Mary with instructions for obtaining a mortgage. While Mary argues that they should pay for the house outright, Stephen insists on applying for a mortgage.

Meanwhile, Larry visits nearly every day. As they lay in bed, the cats surround them. While Mary is accustomed to them always being around, she notices that Larry also does not seem to notice they are there. In fact, she realizes that he rarely comments on them at all.

One afternoon as they are playing Monopoly and drinking Bloody Mary's, Mary tells Larry that her father used to bury her grandmother's savings in the backyard as a means of avoiding inheritance taxes and over the course of ten years, managed to save $10,000 from her social security checks. As she tells the story, she comments that some people have difficulty letting go of things.

As they continue their game, Mary silently thinks about all of the items in the house and barn that will need to be discarded and realizes that she will have a hard time deciding which items to keep and which to get rid of. Suddenly, her thoughts turn to the cats and she tells Larry that she has been doing some reading. She has learned that in the wild, there are two types of cats: residents and transients. While it was originally thought that the residents were the stronger of the two, she says scientists are now wondering if perhaps the natural curiosity of the transients makes them the stronger group. Larry tells her he finds that interesting but does not believe that the findings belong to domestic cats.

One evening, the two go out for dinner. Mary remarks that they are careless about being seen together publicly. As they wait for their food, she notices pictures on the wall that feature various farm tools and she is reminded of her father's tools. Larry is unusually quiet during the meal, and on the way home, he asks Mary if she would like to stop seeing him. He senses she is bored with him and while Mary does not deny this, she says she does not want to go to Louisville. Larry tells her he wishes she could stay and that they could be together. As they drive, Mary sees a rabbit along the side of the road that is frantically trying to move but cannot because its hind end has been smashed by a car.

When they reach Mary's house, she is so inconsolable that when the telephone rings, Larry answers it. Stephen is on the line and Mary realizes that she needs to pull herself together so that Stephen does not suspect anything is going on. She quickly tells him that she is coming to Louisville and Larry is there to drive her there. Stephen apparently does not hear what she has said and begins to scold her for being so attached to her parents' home. Before hanging up, he tells Mary that she needs to be more accepting of change.

When Mary goes outside, Larry is still there. As they stand on the porch, they see Brenda, one of Mary's cats, walking up the lane. In the darkness, her eyes – which are normally different colors – appear to be red and green, like a traffic light. As she looks at the cat, Mary realizes that she is waiting for a light in her own life to change.

Analysis

Bobbie Ann Mason's short story "Residents and Transients" explores the complex set of emotions that often arise when a person contemplates making a major change within their life. The central character in this story is a young, married woman named Mary, who begins an affair while her husband is starting a new job in another city. Although she was born and raised in the same rural Kentucky town in which the story takes place, Mary feels more like a transient than a resident because she spent eight years away completing her education. Even so, she has a newly developed attachment to her childhood home, and she is finding it difficult to leave to join her husband in Louisville.

As we read the story, we discover that transients surround Mary; her parents have abandoned the family home for a new life in Florida – in a mobile home no less, Stephen has moved from city to city for his job, and even the cats have moved from the barn into the house. She also speaks of the negative influences stemming from transients that have found there way to her rural community. Among all of these transients, Larry is the only resident.

This story is rich in symbolism. In Larry's character, we find the safety and comfort one would expect of a long-time resident of a particular town. Given this, it is ironic that he would contemplate – much less act on – having a relationship with a married woman, yet this is precisely what he does. Even Mary finds some irony in her dalliance and wonders what her mother would think if she knew that the tomato juice she had bottled in her prized canning kitchen was being used to mix Bloody Marys being shared by Mary and her lover.

Put in the context of her strong attachment to the family home, however, Mary's decision to begin an affair with Larry becomes easier to understand. Her seemingly ambivalent feelings about the affair being discovered – she admits they are careless about being seen together in public and late in the story, she allows Larry to answer her telephone – tells us that perhaps she wants the affair to be discovered so that the decision regarding the move to Louisville will be made for her.

In Mary and Larry's relationship, we find routine and sameness. It is no accident that Mary chose a "resident" with whom to have an affair; her choice represents her desire to remain firmly tied to the area. The couple seems quite content to remain at Mary's home playing board games or sitting on the porch watching the corn – both routine and safe activities. The board game of choice – Monopoly – is also significant in that it represents the routine and monotony that often comes from living in the same place for a long period. The fact that they spend their time at Mary's house rather than Larry's further illustrates her unwillingness to embrace change. Mary describes Larry's house as modern and her desire not to spend time there represents her reluctance to make a change in her life.

It is also significant that the cats all have "human" names and that Mary uses her mother's prized canning kitchen to feed and care for them. The cats represent the children that Mary would like to have some day. By taking them into the house and

feeding them, she is attempting to build a nest into which she can eventually add children that will help to establish a sense of permanence in her life.

The farm tools that Mary sees on the wall of the restaurant remind her of the tools her father once used, now lying idle and rusting in the barn. As she reflects on this, she becomes emotional. This emotion may stem from the fact that she now realizes that she must accept the fact that like the tools that have become obsolete, she has outgrown her childhood home and it is now time to leave it behind and move on with her life.

The injured rabbit that Mary sees on the side of the road as she and Larry return home from dinner symbolizes Mary's predicament. Recall that the rabbit is furiously trying to run, but its injured hind legs will not allow it to move. As a result, it looks as though the rabbit is running in place. In many ways, Mary is also running in place; she left home to complete her education only to return eight years later to live in her childhood home. She now finds herself emotionally paralyzed and unable to leave behind this part of her life. By having an affair, she is attempting to force change in her life, but still, she is having trouble moving on.

Finally, as the story concludes, Mary sees Brenda, the cat with two different-colored eyes. The cat's eyes seem to have changed color and now resemble a traffic light. With one eye red and one green, they appear to be giving Mary mixed signals and as the story ends, she finds herself no closer to making a decision regarding her future.

Characters

Larry

Larry is Mary's dentist. A friend of Mary's from childhood, he has never moved away. He is a gentle, quiet man, he is quite content with his life. In addition to his dental practice, he owns his own home and a truck. In contrast to Stephen, Larry is slow and relaxed. Although he is sensitive to Mary's moods and wants to make her happy, he believes that he bores her. He tells Mary that he does not want her to go to Louisville, but wants her to remain in town.

Mary

Mary is the narrator of the story. As the story opens, she announces that she has taken a lover. It is revealed that Mary returned to Kentucky about three years before to take care of her sick parents. Since that time, she has married Stephen and her parents have moved to Florida.

Mary is uncertain what she wants in life. She thinks she wants to settle on the farm; however, the farm is for sale. Stephen, her husband, has gone to Louisville to find them a new home. While her husband is away, Mary begins an affair with her dentist, Larry. The affair leaves her paralyzed with inaction; should she pursue the dentist, or move to Louisville with her husband? As the story ends, she is still waiting for something to happen that will help her decide.

Mary Sue

See Mary

Stephen

Stephen is Mary's husband. He met Mary when he came to Kentucky to sell word processors. As the story opens, he is in Louisville, looking for a new house. He is a salesman, but he does not seem to be doing a very good job of selling Mary on their future together. Furthermore, he does not seem to under stand Mary's needs and desires, and often tells Mary how she should feel. Contending that her attachment to her family home is "provincial," he urges her to be more "flexible."

Themes

Change and Transformation

In an interview with Albert Wilhelm, Bobbie Ann Mason maintains that "Literature is principally about textures and feelings, not themes and symbols, which are sort of like lead weights on the bottom of a shower curtain. They hold it in place and give it shape, but they aren't the curtain itself." Certainly, the textures and feelings in "Residents and Transients" are ones of uncertainty and change. While there is potential for transformation, it is unclear at the end of the story what that transformation may or may not be.

The main character, Mary, finds herself in the middle of both emotional and cultural changes. These are signaled, first, by her return to Kentucky, and second, by her reluctance to move to Louisville with her husband. Although she has been a transient for eight years, and agreed to continue this lifestyle when she married her husband, she seems to reject this lifestyle now. In addition, her surprise at having taken a lover suggests that this is not normal behavior for Mary. Her infidelity must be a symptom of a much bigger problem.

Mason presents a larger cultural change in her story as well. Mary tells the reader that Stephen "is one of those Yankees who are moving into this region with increasing frequency, a fact that disturbs the native residents." Furthermore, Stephen sells word processors. The influx of outside influences—technology, transient lifestyles, northerners—will surely bring with it concomitant cultural change to the quaint region.

Although it is clear by the end of the story that the area is undergoing change and transformation, it is difficult to determine how this ultimately will affect Mary. She is receiving (and sending) conflict ing signals, the red and the green lights blinking simultaneously. She is neither resident nor transient, Stephen's nor Larry's. At the conclusion of the story, Mary is still unsure of her future.

Love and Passion

This is a story of a woman who has both a husband and a lover, yet there is little love or passion evident in the story. There is little proof that Mary loves her husband; the closest she comes to even expressing affection for him is when he calls to tell her he has found a house, and she muses, "His voice is so familiar I can almost see him, and I realize that I miss him."

In addition, Mary cannot remember how her affair with Larry began. "I can't remember what signals passed between us, but it was suddenly appropriate that he drop by," she reports. This scarcely seems like the start of a passionate affair. Although "Larry wears a cloudy expression of love," Mary seems to feel only pity for him. Mary's response to the affair is one of surprise, not love or passion. When Larry asks if she wants to stop

seeing him because he thinks she is bored, Mary does not reassure him. Although it is clear she does not want to go to Louisville, it is unclear if this has anything to do with Larry.

The only love Mary seems to feel is for the cats, the corn growing in the field, and her mother's canning kitchen. The conclusion of the story is ambiguous. Although Mary tells Stephen she is coming to Louisville to see the house, she seems to retreat from this position when Stephen tells her how to feel. "'You've got to be flexible,' he tells her breezily. 'That kind of romantic emotion is just like flag-waving. It leads to nationalism, fascism— you name it; the very worst kinds of instincts. Listen, Mary, you've got to be more open to the way things are." Mary's response is to rush out of the house, and watch her cat come up the lane.

Style

Images and Imagery

Generally, images are defined as figures of speech that appeal to the senses of the reader. Therefore, there can be visual, auditory, olfactory, tactile, taste, or kinesthetic images. By appealing to the readers' senses, images help make the literature more immediate and visceral. Images often take the form of metaphors or similes, and are symbolic in nature.

Although Bobbie Ann Mason uses simple language in her stories, her images are nonetheless vivid and clear. Early in the story, she uses visual imagery to establish a clear contrast between the house Mary grew up in and the house her husband Stephen wants to buy. Mary says of the old home stead, "I loved its stateliness, the way it rises up from the fields like a patch of mutant jimsonweeds. I'm fond of the old white wood siding, the sagging outbuildings." When Stephen describes the house he has found, it sounds like anyone one of a hundred tract homes one would see in any suburb: "it's a three-bedroom brick with a two-car garage, finished basement, dining alcove, patio . . ."

Mason contrasts concrete images of the natural world with abstract metaphors of the financial world. For example, she makes several references to the corn growing in the field in front of the house. Stephen, on the other hand, speaks in terms of liquid assets and maximizing their potential. The two images coalesce in Mary and Larry's Monopoly game. Mary says, "I shuffle my paper money and it feels like dried corn shucks. I wonder if there is a new board game involving money market funds."

Perhaps the most terrible—yet most important—image in the story is the rabbit in the road. Mason writes, "In the other lane I suddenly see a rabbit move. It is hopping in place, the way runners will run in place. Its forelegs are frantically working, but its rear end has been smashed and it cannot get out of the road." The image is disturbing to Mary, who experiences it as a "tape loop." The image is also disturbing to the reader who realizes Mary's identification with the rabbit.

Barbara Henning asserts that "When a scene ends in Mason's work, it almost always ends with a focus on a specific image." This is certainly true in "Residents and Transients." The final scene of the story is of Brenda the cat, her eyes shining red and green in the porch light. Although readers are uncertain what Mary will decide, the after-image of the cat's eyes is a haunting one.

Allusions

Allusions are references to other works of literature, pop culture, historical events, or fictional or historical characters. Sometimes writers allude to music, drama, or television to give their works immediacy and cultural currency. Mason is noted for her use of allusions from popular culture. In *In Country*, for example, Sam and Emmett watch

reruns of the television show *M.A.S.H*. and the characters from the television show almost seem to become characters in the novel. What is notable in "Residents and Transients" is the absence of such allusions. Instead, Mason includes an important allusion to a famous poem by Dylan Thomas. The allusion is an important one for readers to grasp, because it reveals the heart of Mary's anxiety.

In the poem, the poet recalls the days of his youth. "And I was green and carefree, famous among the barns / About the happy yard and singing as the farm was home . . ." Like the poet, Mary longs to return to the days of her childhood. Further more, Thomas reflects on the way youths do not care about time and change, although by the last stanza it is clear that he regrets both. As a youth, he did not care that he might "wake to the farm forever fled from the childless land." This is, however, the concern of an adult. Likewise, Mason's use of this allusion suggests that Mary herself has deep anxieties about the sale of her family farm, and that she is leaving the land childless, with no progeny of her own to take over the farm.

Historical Context

Bobbie Ann Mason sets "Residents and transients" in a rural landscape to underscore the changes both the countryside and her characters are experiencing. Mary's parents have retired and moved to Florida, leaving her to supervise the sale of the farm and the auction of their belongings. The house will soon be lost, and it is likely that the new owners will not farm the land. Such situations were common throughout the 1980s and 1990s across the rural areas of Kentucky. More and more acres, formerly dedicated to farming, were converted to housing and shopping malls. In Graves County, Kentucky, for example, forty-two percent of all the homes in the county have been built since the 1970s.

Likewise, the demographics of the region are changing at the time of the story. Stephen represents the influx of businessmen from the North; in his case, he is a salesman, selling new technology that brings about further progress. With word processors, modems, Internet access, and electronic mail, no area is too remote, no area remains untouched by technology.

Mary is unlike other Mason female characters who are generally blue-collar, working-poor women. Moreover, Mary does not fit the demographic pattern of the area, emphasizing her role as an outsider. For example, only eleven percent of Kentuckians had been to college in 1980.The implication is that Mary has had at least four years of higher education, and perhaps more than that. In addition, Mary's family, while not wealthy, own land and a farm. Her parents have enough money to retire to Florida. Given that the per capita income in Graves County, Kentucky (Mason's home county), was only $10,900 in 1985, Mary's financial situation is far better than most of the people around her.

While Stephen and Mary's financial situation seems to be secure, their marriage is not. The divorce rate in the United States peaked in 1981 at 5.3 divorces for every 1000 people. In addition, in the years since Mason wrote her story, the marriage rate has steadily dropped. These figures are in contrast to people the age of Mary's parents who generally married younger and stayed married longer.

In her deft portrayal of the changing country side, Mason has accurately and poignantly captured a Kentucky in transition. The cultural and social changes provide a rich milieu for Mason's characters.

Critical Overview

After initially appearing in the *Boston Review*, Mason's short story, "Residents and Transients," was collected in her first collection of fiction, *Shiloh and Other Stories*, published in 1982. The volume was favorably received by critics and readers and earned nominations for a National Book Critics Circle Award, an American Book Award, and a PEN/Faulkner Award. Mason also won the 1983 Ernest Hemingway Foundation Award. "Residents and Transients" is considered an important story in the collection.

Reviewers noted Mason's understated prose; her characters speak in convincing dialogue, and it is possible to hear the rural Kentucky dialect in their speech patterns. However, some reviewers disliked this style, suggesting that Mason's characters and stories are both unconvincing and insignificant.

Both Gene Lyons and Anne Tyler offered praise for Mason. Lyons found Mason's simple prose to be a positive characteristic of her work, while Tyler deemed Mason "a full-fledged master of the short story...." She also wrote that although *Shiloh and Other Stories* was Mason's first book of fiction, "there is nothing unformed or merely promising about her."

As noted above, Mason's work was not without detractors. Some critics derided the lack of charac ter development in the stories. Patricia Vigderman suggested that the stories end with "a closeness that seems tacked on...." She also charged that "Mason takes us into her characters' new Kentucky homes and then runs a made-for-TV movie. Her people's emotions come across merely as dots on the screen."

In addition, some reviews faulted Mason for the similarity among her stories. Robert Towers, for example, in *The New York Review of Books* wrote, "Individually effective as they are, there is a degree of sameness to the collection...."

In the years since its publication, the collection continues to generate critical interest. John W. Aldrich, in his book, *Talents and Technicians: Literary Chic and the New Assembly-Line Fiction*, concedes that "one encounters in her work such traditional fictive materials as genuine social environment, characters who take on substance through the complex interacting relationship that is created when people actually inhabit an environment." However, he faults Mason for not giving her charac ters greater depth and significance. "But what she somehow does not bring to life is their significance, the manner in which their experience tells us some thing fundamental about the human condition...."

Mason's stories more frequently inspire praise for their portrayal of characters caught in moments of cultural and personal change. Albert Wilhelm writes in *The Southern Literary Journal* that "cul ture shock and its jarring effects on an individual's sense of identity" is the theme that "dominates the sixteen pieces in *Shiloh and Other Stories*." Maur een Ryan, in an essay in *Women Writers of the Contemporary South*, asserts that

Mary is "torn between the serene seductions of an obsolete life style and the intimidating uncertainties of a variable present and future."

Finally, Mason has been classified as a "minimalist," that is, a writer who creates lean, focused prose, filled with concise details. Because of this identification, her work has been compared and contrasted with that of Raymond Carver, Charles Portis, and Ann Beattie. Barbara Henning under takes such a study in her essay appearing in *Modern Fiction Studies*.In this piece, Henning carefully reads the details in Mason's work. She contends that both Mason's and Carver's characters "have man aged to survive without protesting in a world with reduced economic and emotional possibilities. Their anxieties and disappointments are instead displaced through drug and alcohol use and through an even more deadening activity: a steady focus on the random details of everyday life."

Likewise, Richard Giannone, in an article in *Studies in Short Fiction*, focuses on emotional minimalism, suggesting that "the larger themes in the stories arise from the breakdown of intimacy."

BOOKRAGS

Criticism

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Critical Essay #1

Henningfeld is an associate professor at Adrian College who writes widely on literary topics for educational publishers. In the following essay, she examines the protagonist's fear of adulthood in "Residents and Transients."

Bobbie Ann Mason's short story, "Residents and Transients," first appeared in the *Boston Review* in 1982, shortly before its inclusion in the collection, *Shiloh and Other Stories*. The volume received high critical praise and several nominations for awards, as well as receiving the Ernest Hemingway Foundation Award in 1983. Readers and critics alike have praised Mason's blunt, straightforward style as well as the way she develops her characters by saying less, rather than more.

"Residents and Transients" has not been anthologized quite so widely as some of Mason's other stories, nor has the story received as much critical attention as her novels. Nevertheless, the story offers a number of interesting features that are worthy of closer examination. Indeed, the story is considerably more complicated than might be thought on first reading.

One of the first features of the story, apparent to anyone who has read Mason's fiction, is that Mary differs from her other female characters in several important ways. In the first place, she left Kentucky for eight years, "pursuing higher learning." Nearly all of Mason's other female characters make their homes in Kentucky and virtually none pursue high er learning. Mason left Kentucky to earn both a master's degree and a doctorate in English, living in the northeast for twenty-eight years before moving back to Kentucky in 1990. The "higher learning" is in all likelihood an advanced degree in English; not only does Mary stay away for eight years, the length of time usually allowed for the completion of a doctorate, she alludes to a Dylan Thomas poem, "Fern Hill," when she is riding in the plane with Larry.

There are other similarities between the writer and her protagonist. Mason herself grew up on a dairy farm, the same background she gives to Mary. Further, as Mason told Albert Wilhelm in a 1995 interview, "First, you go out into the world in quest of understanding. Then you return to your origins and finally comprehend them. It wasn't until I had pursued my education that I was able to know where the subject of my fiction was. Education has a way of being abstract until you can link it up with experience. I loved the abstractions, but then at some point, I planted a garden, and everything started to come together. Life, art, cats, family, fiction, words, weeds."

Like Mason, Mary wants things to start coming together. She watches the corn grow and she tends to cats. Although it would probably be a mistake to argue too strenuously for an autobiographical link between Bobbie Ann Mason and Mary, certainly Mason has infused Mary with some of her own affection for the land and for cats.

Her story features a series of dichotomies. A dichotomy is a division into two mutually exclusive or contradictory groups. By dividing characters, settings, and ideas into two

opposite groups, Mason is able to reveal more about each by contrasting it with its opposite. The most obvious dichotomy in the story is the one revealed in its title. Mary explains to Larry the difference between the resi dent cats and transient cats. This dichotomy also suggests something important about Mary: it is difficult to determine which camp she is in. She is no longer a resident because of her long absence. But she ceased being a transient when she returned to her parents' home. She is caught somewhere in the middle. By establishing oppositions such as this one, Mason reveals this very important feature about Mary: she frequently finds herself caught between two, mutually exclusive oppositions.

Early in the story, Mason contrasts the Kentucky natives with Stephen who is "one of those Yankees who are moving into this region with increasing frequency, a fact which disturbs the native residents." Mary, however, "would not have called Stephen a Yankee," once again revealing her reluctance to classify people or ideas. Mason also divides financial matters and property owners into two groups as well. There are those who prefer "liquid assets," like Stephen, and those who prefer to bury their money in the land, both literally and figuratively. That is, there are those who choose to borrow money to buy property, leaving their cash available for other uses, and those who do not believe in debt, like Mary's parents.

A less obvious contrast in the story is between verbal and non-verbal communication. Stephen is a master of words. Not only does he sell word processors for a living, he "processes" words when he and Mary talk on the phone or when they visit the financial counselor. His communication is strictly verbal; words are his business and his life. Larry, ironically, who "overhauls" mouths for a living, says very little. He is reticent, quiet and discreet. Again, Mary seems caught in the middle; she is "incoherent" when she speaks to Stephen on the phone, and she falls silent. However, she is also the narrator of the story, the one who relates to the reader what happens. Thus, while she does not "process" words in her conversation with Stephen, she nonetheless is a word processor, someone who links words together to tell a story.

The most important dichotomy in the story, however, is that between childhood and adulthood.There are many clues to suggest that Mary is attempting to return to her childhood. Her allusion to the poem "Fern Hill" by Dylan Thomas under scores this desire. In "Fern Hill," Thomas recalls his own "green" childhood, with longing and nostalgia. Furthermore, Mary is at the moment of transition when she will need to move away from childhood and into adulthood, with all the responsi bilities and cares that such a move entails. She is fearful and resistant to making the change. When the story opens, the reader finds that Mary has moved back to Kentucky, to her childhood home, to care for her failing parents. Yet her parents leave Kentucky shortly thereafter to live in Florida, leav ing Mary metaphorically orphaned. Their absence, however, signals that it is Mary's turn to take on the responsibility of a household.

Perhaps less obvious, but no less important, is the implication that it is time for Mary to start a family of her own. Certainly, Stephen's search for a home suggests his need to settle down and start a family. Mary's resistance to not only moving to Louisville but also

to even visiting Stephen seems to symbolize a deeply rooted fear of sex, pregnancy, and motherhood.

There are many clues pointing in this direction. First, Mary has directed her own maternal instincts toward the cats. She says, "They seem to be my responsibility, like some sins I have committed, like illegitimate children." It would be possible to argue that the sin is her failure to procreate, to carry on her family line. Second, her affair with Larry is essentially immature, as evidenced by Mason's descrip tion of them as children. The first time he comes to the house, Larry brings ice cream and drives a truck with "a chrome streak on it that makes it look like a rocket, and on the doors it has flames painted." While such a truck might be appropriate for a teenager out to see his girlfriend, it seems less appropriate for a divorced dentist pursuing an adul terous affair. Larry does not call her Mary, but Mary Sue, her childhood name. They play Monopoly, and go to eat at a restaurant "where you choose your food from pictures on a wall."

Certainly, nothing in this relationship suggests that two adults are involved. The most obvious absence in the story is any mention of sex. Although Mary and Larry are lovers, the only reference Mary makes to their lovemaking is to note that the "Cats march up and down the bed while we are in it." There are other subtle clues that Mary fears both sex and pregnancy; in some cases, Mason uses phallic symbols to suggest Mary's apprehension about sexual intimacy. For example, when Larry first comes to the house, he frightens Mary by looking in her mouth. Later, she reports that she will not let him get near her mouth. "I clamp my teeth shut and grin widely, fighting off imaginary drills."

While Mary remains in her parents house, away from Stephen, she can avoid pregnancy and motherhood, even though she seems aware of her own biological clock: "I am nearly thirty years old. I have two men, eight cats, no cavities."

Her own anxiety over pregnancy is further revealed by her description of her cat, Ellen, who had a vaginal infection, lost a litter of kittens because of an x-ray, and eventually had to be spayed. Although Mary does not directly relate her worry over the cat to her own body, she nonetheless writes her parents in great detail. She seems unhappy that they do not respond, as if she wants reassurance from them. In the same paragraph, Mary mentions again the house that Stephen wants to buy, indirect ly reminding the reader that playing house and keeping house are two different propositions.

The most graphic image appears near the end of the story. Larry suggests that they break up, assert ing that he thinks she is bored with him. Mary does not deny this. When Larry says that he wants her to stay with him, Mary responds, "I wish it could be that way.... I wish that was right." As s oon as Mary implies that staying with him is not right, and that she should go to Louisville, they come upon a rabbit, struggling in the road. "It is hopping in place, the way runners will run in place. Its forelegs are frantically working, but its rear end has been smashed and it cannot get out of the road." Mary seems to identify with the rabbit to such an extent that she is incoherent when her husband calls. Moreover, there is little doubt that the rabbit will die, reminding the reader of an old euphemism for pregnancy. Years ago, when people said, "The rabbit died," they meant that a woman's pregnancy test had come back positive.

As the story closes, Mary obliviously shreds the Monopoly money in her hand as she talks to Ste phen. Whether or not she will make the next step, from play money to real money, from playing house to keeping house, from illegitimate cats to real babies, is unclear at the end of the story. Like the rabbit, she is caught in the light, neither here nor there, and she waits "for the light to change."

Source: Diane Andrews Henningfeld, for *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

Barden is Professor of American Studies and Director of Graduate Studies at the University of Toledo. In the following essay, he discusses themat ic and stylistic aspects of the story.

The short story "Residents and Transients" is at the center of her 1983 volume *Shiloh and Other Stories* for a reason. Mason confirmed the story's impor tance in an interview with Wendy Smith in *Publisher's Weekly* shortly after the collection appeared. "'Residents and Transients' is a focal point for the main theme of *Shiloh and Other Stories*, which is the tension between hanging on to the past and racing toward the future" (*Publisher's Weekly*, 30 August, 1985). The story is significant in its own right—it is a jewel of finely-crafted language and dense symbolic atmosphere and it develops several themes that are fundamental to Mason's work.

This essay will explore the theme of the tension between the past and future in the story in terms of three symbols—the cats that populate the narrator's farmhouse, the *Monopoly* game she plays with her lover, and a half-crushed rabbit they see in the road. It will connect the past/future theme to the one referenced in the story's title, namely the tension between mobility and rootedness. And it will look at some of the methods Mason uses to bring human emotion and complexity to these matters, which in less talented hands could easily have devolved into impersonal socio-economic musings about the new South.

As is typical of Mason's economy of language, the first sentence of "Residents and Transients" accomplishes a lot in seventeen words. It introduces the three characters: the narrator Mary, her husband, and her lover. In addition, it presents the story's general locale, Kentucky—and, by contrast with Louisville, sets up a rural/urban setting polarity.

Furthermore, it establishes the narrator's oddly passive voice at the outset. She says she is surprised by her own act of having "taken a lover" and seems disconnected from it, at least as she reveals herself to her reader. The rest of the paragraph continues in this vein, introducing Mary's dilemma—her hus band's involvement in the "race toward the future" (he works for a corporation that keeps him constantly moving in an urban world) and her vacillating desire to "hang on to the past" by staying in the rural area where she grew up.

The tension between the past and future is quickly presented and personified in the two men in the narrator's life, her husband and her lover. Her husband Stephen is "one of those Yankees who are moving in;" her lover, Larry, is a local she has known since high school. As a "Yankee" and a native Kentuckian respectively, the two represent the North and the South. This distinction remains significant in Bobbie Ann Mason's contemporary Kentucky because it creates a sense of displacement from 1980s Reagan-era sunbelt America. Mason juxtaposes the local country hicks with people who say "you guys" in a Northern brogue, smoke marijuana, and travel to Europe. Even though the old culture of the "lost cause" South has been overrun by brand names and subdivisions, these locals

feel both cut off from their past and unable to connect with the future that is springing up all around them.

The basic polarity of the story is *past-Southern rural-simple-resident versus future-Northern-urban sophisticated-transient*, and its dramatic core is Mary's need (but inability) to decide which world to commit to. Her affair with Larry, which she suggests occurred almost without her conscious involvement, is a half hearted attempt to resist Ste phen's orbit of job changes, word processors, and investment counseling. Yet she is unable to hide her boredom with Larry and his provincial life of "smocks and drills" and quiet contentment. She, after all, is a world traveler who has pursued "high er learning" and was one of the first female porters on the National Limited railroad. He is a rural dentist who drives a Ford Ranger and is obviously much more in love with Mary than she is with him.

The cats that live in Mary's parents' old farm house constitute the story's major symbol. These eight felines are connected to Mary symbolically, as Mason makes clear when she has her absent-mindedly include herself when she counts them. She reinforc es the connection by having Larry unconsciously link Mary and the cats as well.She has the narrator casually point out that "Larry strokes a cat with one hand and my hair with the other." Knowing each cat by name, Mary's character fits nicely with their feline aloofness, their attachment to the farmhouse, and their lack of attachment to anything else.

The cats came with the farm, which places them with the rural past—but they are also cruel to rabbits and homeless cats, which associates them with the "dog eat dog" world of her husband. The cats gang up on transients after initially making them feel at home. After mentioning this cruel feline trait, Mary tells Larry about reading she has done on cat behav ior in the wild. The story's title comes from this passage. The issue Mary ponders regarding cats is the same as her own—namely whether it is better to establish a permanent residence or to commit to being a transient, whether she should stay in her parents' country farmhouse with Larry or follow her husband into a rootless future of corporate moves and upward mobility.

Mary explains to Larry, who appears to be interested in everything she has to say, that scientists used to think "resident" cat populations that committed to specific territory were the most successful groups in the wild and that the transients were considered "the bums, the losers." But now this theory has been questioned; the new idea being that maybe the transients are the superior ones, at least the more intelligent. The paradox of all this, of course, is that in Mary's case being a "resident" would mean leaving her marriage, because the marriage is based on the "transient" contemporary lifestyle. To stay (geographically) she has to leave (relationship-wise). She is as confused as the scientists. To be a resident or a transient, that is the question—for cats and for Mary. The story takes place during an interlude of avoiding that inevitable decision.

Like the cats, the board game *Monopoly* sym bolically renders the tension between wandering and putting down roots. As a symbol, *Monopoly* aptly combines the idea of

aimless meandering with the world of financial investing, mortgage strate gies, and getting ahead by "playing the game." Mason reserves her sharpest satire in the story for the idea of money management, having Mary recall a session with a financial counselor who used terminology like "fluid assets" and investment "postures that will maximize your potential." The words remind her of a weird sex therapist's advice.

The *Monopoly* game is the subtext of an evening Larry and Mary spend together, the same one in which they have their cat discussion. It is a curious thing for new lovers to be doing; in a sense the game is taking the place of intimacy for them, just as financial talk substitutes for intimacy be tween Mary and her husband Stephen. Their long distance calls are mostly about money and/or their new house in Louisville. (It should be noted here that the use of the common brand name game is also a good example of the popular culture many crit ics have noted as a conspicuous feature of Mason's work.)

While the cats and the *Monopoly* game subtly symbolize the tension Mary feels between follow ing her husband to Louisville and staying with her lover in the country, the wounded rabbit she sees in the road is a blatant and dramatic representation of this conflict. It is an example of what fellow writer Raymond Carver (in the jacket notes to *Shiloh and Other Stories*) called the "aftereffect image" in Mason's fiction—her tendency to create images that, long after one has finished the story, burn in the mind as a vivid and disturbing pictures. Rabbits are mentioned casually earlier in the story—dead ones the cats bring in. Yet in this scene Mary is trauma tized by what she sees. As she and Larry are driving back from a restaurant they come across a rabbit that has been hit. "It is hopping in place, the way runners will run in place. Its forelegs are frantically working, but its rear end has been smashed and it cannot get out of the road."

This image is the closest thing to a climax in this story that, for the most part, carefully avoids the dramatic. The sight of the mangled creature sends Mary into a fit of hysterics. She is inconsolable, and when her husband calls and her lover answers the phone, her whole indecision comes to an abrupt end. Trying to deflect her husband's suspicion about Larry, she hurriedly commits to coming to Louisville, ostensibly ending her affair. In a clever punning reference to the farmhouse felines, Mary says she will have to swear to Stephen "on a stack of cats" that nothing sexual is going on. As she and Stephen discuss her "attachment to place" and her "need to be flexible," Mary finds herself nervously tearing up the *Monopoly* money she holds in her hands.

Mary has not really resolved her quandary, and her frantic need to do something is both triggered and epitomized by the grisly rabbit image—she sees herself as a helpless creature who is hurt, confused, stuck and immobile, but frantically attempting to move. Mason deftly converges the story's symbols here—the cats, *Monopoly*, and the dying rabbit— and then closes with another striking visual image, the night glow of one of her cats' eyes that appear as one red and one green. Both small animal "aftereffect images" combine to make Mary realize the depth of her inner conflict. She thinks of the red and green glow in the cat's eyes as mixed signals from a traffic light, an objective correlative of her indecision.

Mason's artistic achievement in this story lies in her ability to draw such memorable images and symbols out of the mundane stuff of everyday life— cats, board games, and road-kill. But the tone of the story also adds to its success. The flat, emotionless affect of her narrator creates an ambiguity between what is being said and how it is being said. In the mangled rabbit episode, for example, she states that she becomes hysterical. But the reader is never privy to that level of emotion. It is as if the hysteria is happening a long way off. Another example is in the previously mentioned first sentence. Mary says she is cheating on her husband, but she says it as if it were something interesting she read in the newspaper.

Mason has discussed this aspect of her style in an interview in *Contemporary Literature*. "I try to approximate language that's very blunt and Anglo Saxon. A lot of this is not just meaning but the sound of the words and the rhythm of the words" (*Contemporary Literature*, 32, [1991]). Note the phrase "not just meaning" here; that indicates that to Mason, meaning is part of the intent of this style. The flat, "just the facts" tone of the narrator produces an aura of numbness. One gets the impres sion Mary is in a kind of shock, like the mangled rabbit, and that she has ironically separated herself from her own existence. Her experience of college is termed "higher learning." When Larry asks if she is bored with him and if he should stop coming to see her, her answer is "I don't know."

Many critics have noted Mason's use of rock and roll as a reference in her stories, but in "Residents and Transients" she makes one of her rare references to formal literature. The poem the narra tor thinks of, but characteristically cannot recall the name of, is Dylan Thomas's "Fern Hill," a beauti ful lyric of nostalgia for Thomas's Welsh childhood before he realized the fleeting nature of life and joy. Mary is also nostalgic for her lost past, but she is ironic and arch rather than lyrical about it. Another poetic Dylan, Bob, has penned a line that fits Mary's attitude better than the Welshman's. Dylan's song, "The Man in the Long Black Coat," which coinci dentally is also about infidelity, has a line that fits Mary's character to a tee—"people don't live or die, people just float." And it is the flat voicing Mason gives her narrator that so effectively conveys this mood.

Source: Thomas E. Barden, "Symbol and Voice in Bobbie Ann Mason's 'Residents and Transients,'" for *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 2000.

Critical Essay #3

Brent has a Ph.D. in American Culture, with a specialization in American cinema, from the Uni versity of Michigan. She is a freelance writer/editor and film critic and teaches courses in American cinema. In the following essay, she considers the main character's desire to hang onto her memories of her family farmhouse and small Southern hometown way of life, which is rapidly slipping away from her.

Bobby Ann Mason is a Southern writer known for her stories that express a strong sense of *place*. "Residents and Transients," as the title suggests, is about a woman who is torn between her attachment to her hometown and family farmhouse, where she has been a "resident" most of her life, and her attachment to her marriage, which necessitates a "transient" lifestyle, as her husband's job requires that they move every few years.

On one level, Mary, the narrator, is torn be tween the two men in her life, her husband and her lover. At a deeper level, however, each man is associated with Mary's two choices: her lover, Larry, is associated with remaining a "resident" in her home town, while her husband, Stephen, is associated with the "transient" life that comes with his job. At the story's opening, Stephen has gone to Louisville, Kentucky, where he has recently been transferred, to look for a new house.

Mary's attachment to Larry is based on his associations with her hometown, family farmhouse, and childhood memories. The two grew up together, he has never moved out of town (and never will), and he even calls her by her childhood name, "Mary Sue." Larry appeals to Mary's sense of home because he wants her to stay there with him. "'You shouldn't go to Louisville,' he pleads. 'This part of Kentucky is the prettiest. I wouldn't change it for anything.'" This deep-rooted attachment to place is also characteristic of the town's residents: "Most people around here would rather die than leave town."

Mary's attachment to her husband, Stephen, on the other hand, necessitates a more "mobile," "flexible" and modern lifestyle in which one doesn't develop any great attachment to a particular loca tion, but is willing to pick up and move anywhere in pursuit of better professional and financial opportu nities. His job requires "frequent transfers," from one location to another. Mary even describes him as one of the Yankee outsiders, from the North, who have begun to "invade" her community. This "invasion" of the town represents an element of change which threatens to outmode its rustic, "provincial" Southern character. Mary explains that this change "disturbs the native residents," herself included.

In the opening paragraph, Mary expresses her strong desire to be a "resident," to stay where she is, in her family farmhouse, in her hometown. "I do not want to go to Louisville. I do not want to go anywhere." A considerable amount of the story is taken up with Mary's loving descriptions of the land and the house. There is a strong sense of *nostalgia* —a longing for, or clinging to, fond memories of a past that is quickly slipping

way—in these descrip tions. For instance, Mary's description of the farm house is rich with majesty and affection: "I love its stateliness, the way it rises up from the fields like a patch of mutant jimsonweeds." The evidence of decay in Mary's description further expresses a strong sense of nostalgia: "I'm fond of the old white wood siding, the sagging outbuildings."

Mary's attachment to her family home even focuses on particular rooms of the house which evoke images of a simpler, more traditional life style. Her description of the "canning kitchen" ties her nostalgia for the house to associations with childhood memories of her mother's old-fashioned home cooking: "The canning kitchen was my moth er's pride. There, she processed her green beans twenty minutes in a pressure canner, and her tomato juice fifteen minutes in a water bath."

Even the *view* from the canning kitchen is described in panoramic beauty.

From the canning kitchen, Larry and I have a good view of the cornfields. A cross-breeze makes this the coolest and most pleasant place to be. The house is in the center of the cornfields, and a dirt lane leads out to the road, about half a mile away.

The great sense of loss Mary feels in seeing even her parents let go of this traditional, rural lifestyle is particularly poignant. Mary's rich asso ciations with her mother's practice of canning her own food is exchanged for the empty, modern practice of grocery shopping: "Now my mother lives in a mobile home. In her letters she tells me all the prices of the foods she buys."

Yet Mary's husband expects her to leave this countryside, rich with association, in order to live in a neighborhood that she disdainfully describes as having other "houses within view." Stephen's de scription of the new house he has picked out for them in Louisville only intensifies her distaste for modern homes. He describes it as "a three-bedroom brick with a two-car garage, finished basement, dining alcove, patio-"

"Does it have a canning kitchen?" I want to know. Stephen laughs. "No, but it has a rec room."I quake at the thought of a rec room.

Mary clings nostalgically not just to the land and the house, but to many of the *objects* associated with farm life.

"This place is full of junk that no one could throw away," I say distractedly, I'm thinking of the boxes in the attic, the rusted tools in the barn. In a cabinet in the canning kitchen I found some Bag Balm, antiseptic salve to soften cows' udders.

When she and Larry are eating at a cheap diner one night, Mary notices a "framed arrangement of farm tools" hanging on the restaurant wall for decoration. "Other objects —saw handles, scythes pulleys—were mounted on wood like fish trophies." The fact that these farm tools have been framed and hung up on a wall for decoration indicates that they no longer function as *tools*, but have become *arti facts*—remnants of a past way of life no longer useful in the modern world. It's as if they've be come museum pieces. Mary is immediately remind ed of the tools left in the barn of her family farm

house, and wonders what they "would look like on the wall of a restaurant." By making this connec tion between the framed tools on the wall and her father's old tools at home, Mary is faced with acknowledging that the way of life she is clinging to is outdated, a historical relic, no longer a viable option for her in the modern world.

Mary's husband, Stephen, looks down on Mary's attachment to her hometown, telling her it is outdat ed. "Those attachments to place are so provincial," he tells her. The word "provincial" suggests a small-town, ignorant, behind-the-times outlook on the world. He chides Mary for not having a more modern, up-to-date attitude: "Listen, Mary, you've got to be more open to the way things are," he tells her. Rather than a traditional, old-fashioned, small town attitude, Stephen tells her she needs to develop a modern, detached attitude toward where and how she wants to live: "You've got to be more flex ible," he says.

Even Mary's parents seem to have let go of their home town and family farmhouse in pursuit of a more modern, less rustic, lifestyle. The mobile home in which they are living suggests both a temporary residence and the idea of mobility, which suggests a lack of attachment to any particular location. Furthermore, "their minds are on the condominium they are planning to buy when this farm is sold." Yet Mary's sentiments are the oppo site of her parents. "Now they have moved to Florida, but I have stayed here, wondering why I ever went away."

The title of this story, "Residents and transients," refers literally to Mary's explanation of the "two kinds of cats" that live in the wild, "residents and transients." As the central metaphor of the story, Mary's discussion of these "two kinds of cats" provides a key to understanding her funda mental struggles. Interpreting the cats as metaphors allows for an interpretation of the distinction be tween "residents" and "transients" as applying to two kinds of *people*: "Some stay put, in their fixed home ranges, and others are on the move. They don't have real homes."

Mary's dilemma is whether or not to "stay put" in her childhood home, her "fixed home range," or follow her husband, who is always "on the move," and has no "real" home. As Mary goes on to discuss these distinctions, she expresses her ambivalence as to whether "staying put" is or isn't really a better option than being "on the move."

"Everybody always thought that the ones who estab lish the territories are the most successful. They are the strongest, while the transients are the bums and losers."

Mary's description of the "resident" cats char acterizes what people *used to* think was the better, more "successful" way to live—to spend one's whole life in one's home town, maintaining a strong attachment to the land. Likewise, a more traditional attitude maintains the perspective that "transients" are "bums and losers." But, again, applying Mary's description to human beings, one can see that the uncertainty of today's "scientists" as to which type of cat is superior is again an expression of Mary's confusion as to which type of lifestyle is bet ter for *her*.

"The thing is—this is what the scientists are wonder ing about now—it may be that the transients are the superior ones after all, with the greatest curiosity and most intelligence."

Mary ends this explanation with the conclusion that the scientists "can't decide" which type of cat is superior. Again, it is Mary herself who "can't decide" whether to stay where she is or to move on with her husband. In response, Larry inadvertently adds to this metaphor by responding that, "none of this is true of domestic cats." As it is clear that Mary is, by nature, a "domestic cat," Larry's comment that they are "all screwed up" is again indicative of Mary's feelings of being "all screwed up" by her out-dated attachment to the small town farm life of her childhood.

Mary's connection to the cats is indicated in other ways, as well. She even inadvertently catego rizes herself as a cat: "One day I was counting the cats and I absentmindedly counted myself." One night she hears a cat, not one of hers, yowling outside her house. "There's nothing so mournful as the yowling of a homeless cat," she says. Mary herself fears becoming like a "homeless cat" if she loses her family home. In some ways, Mary's story is like the mournful "yowling of a homeless cat," an expression of her own mourning over the im pending loss of her childhood home, and the sense of homelessness it will bring.

A disturbing image toward the end of the story serves as a metaphor by which Mary comes closer to an understanding of the nature of her dilemma. Driving home one night with Larry, Mary notices a rabbit at the side of the road.

It is hopping in place, the way runners will run in place. Its forelegs are frantically working, but its rear end has been smashed and it cannot get out of the road.

Like Mary, the rabbit is stuck in one place, its "forelegs are frantically working," an image which resonates with Mary's "frantic" efforts at moving forward into her future. Yet, despite this effort, the rabbit remains where it is, "running in place." In other words, it is as if Mary were *going through the motions* of preparing to move to a new house in Louisville with her husband, yet, for all her efforts, remains stuck in the old house, as if "running in place." Furthermore, the rabbit's back legs have been smashed, so that it is stuck in the road, and cannot move at all. Again, as a metaphor, this correlates with Mary's situation, as her "back legs," or her childhood memories of her home town, have been permanently damaged, in terms of being a part of a past she will never be able to recover. Yet, the sense of emotional loss she feels in clinging to this past leaves Mary, like the rabbit, in a state of agony and unable to move forward.

Source: Liz Brent, for *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 2000.

Critical Essay #4

In the following excerpt, Morphew examines the qualities of Mason's heroines: their socio-eco nomic status among the rural poor of Kentucky and their feminist struggle to achieve "breathing space in their relationships with their men."

Much has been written about the loss of identity experienced by the characters of Bobbie Ann Ma son's short stories; the people of *Shiloh and Other Stories* in particular seem to be confused by the onslaught of pop culture, the media, and other forces of social change. The males, perhaps, seem the more affected, and more ineffectual in their attempts to seize or to create some new center for their lives. The women, at least most of them, react to their frustration and discontent more forcefully; they are or become downhome feminists, and the degree of their feminist responses within their cul ture is largely determined by education, by econom ic empowerment, and by age, or by some combi nation of the three.

Almost all of Mason's characters come *from* the rural poor. This is not to say they *are* poor, either in a strict financial or cultural sense. The older characters, survivors of the deprivations of the Great Depression, have jobs that afford them a comfortable if not luxurious lifestyle; some, like Bill, the retired farmer of "The Ocean," can even afford a "big camper cruiser," which he proudly captains around the backwaters of America even if it is a far cry from the destroyer he served on as a youth during World War II.

The culture of Western Kentucky, although unsophisticated in comparison to the big cities of the East, where so many of the more ambitious characters go, has a solidity, a sophistication even, of its own. In "Nancy Culpepper," the main char acter, a woman who had fled the unpromising life of her Kentucky youth only to return years later, hears her mother say, "We'll never go anywhere. We've got our dress tail on a bedpost." Puzzled, Nancy asks her mother the meaning of the expression. Her mother gives it, adding, "I guess you think we're just ignorant . . . The way we talk." Nancy re sponds, "No, I don't." And she doesn't, because this folksy saying is exactly one of the little things that richly differentiate her culture, a culture she once dismissed as backward but now the source of an irresistible longing. (She has used the impending move of her grandmother into a nursing home to justify her visiting her relatives, but she is aware this is really an excuse to test her vague desire to move back to Kentucky.)

It is important to see that the downhome femi nists of these stories do not want what their city cousins want: equal legal and political rights, equal access to careers, equal pay, government support of child care, and so on. Mason's women simply want breathing space in their relationships with their men. Sometimes only divorce, always initiated by the women, will provide the degree of change these women seek but sometimes their assertiveness merely aims for a change of pace—casual adultery, for example.

The culture of Mason's Western Kentucky is focused on the lower class, defined by a general lack of higher education, by consumer taste, and, in creasingly, by choice of

leisure activity. Mason's characters have enough discretionary income to buy such big-ticket items as campers and organs, and enough time to take continuing education classes, or, in the case of Shelby, the preacher in "The Retreat," even the flexibility to follow an avocation which does not support him and his family (he is an electrician during the week)....

The most educated women in the book follow a decidely different path in their relationship with their men. Their problems are not as dramatic as their lesser-educated counterparts and their solu tions are more ambivalent. Nancy Culpepper was married in 1967 in Massachusetts, where she had gone for graduate school. Her husband, Jack, a Yankee, set up his photography business near Phila delphia after the wedding. Nancy's marriage has produced both a son and relative happiness yet she can't shake a longing for her Kentucky roots, which, to her consternation, were on her mind even during her wedding night. After the ceremony Jack takes Nancy outside to look for the northern lights. She searches the sky diligently but she "kept thinking of her parents at home, probably watching *Gunsmoke*." *The Joy of Cooking*, a wedding gift, makes her wonder what her parents are eating at that very moment. Clumsily, she dances with Jack to a Beatles album. There are no stopping places in the songs and this upsets her: "She was crying. 'Songs used to have stopping places in between.'"

When Nancy learns that she had an ancestor also named Nancy Culpepper, she begins to go by her maiden name. A few years later she insists on visiting Kentucky to help her parents with her invalid grandmother and to look for some lost pictures belonging to her grandmother. Nancy hopes some of the pictures will be of her namesake. This is the catalyst Nancy has been waiting for because lately she had "been vaguely wanting to move to Kentucky." Thus her feminist search for identity is curiously, even atavistically linked to a search for roots. She is willing to put a strain on her immediate family in conducting this search: both her husband and her son resent her staying away so long. During a telephone conversation Jack says, "We're your family too." And her son hangs up without saying goodbye, much to Nancy's distress; moreover, nei ther husband nor son wants to move to Kentucky.

At the end of the story, the grandmother's photo album is found but the grandmother and Nancy's mother disagree on which person in a group picture is the original Nancy Culpepper. The confusion surrounding the identity of the original Nancy per fectly reflects the confusion of identity of the con temporary Nancy. The ending, with Nancy staring both at the woman her grandmother had thought was Nancy's ancestor and at the woman's husband, emphasizes the ambivalence of Nancy's situation:

This young woman would be glad to dance to "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds" on her wedding day, Nancy thinks. The man seems bewildered, as if he did not know what to expect, marrying a woman who has her eyes fixed on something so far away.

At that moment Nancy's own husband is far away and he is as uncertain as the reader about Nancy's next move.

The main character of "Residents and transients," the first-person narrator, has many things in common with Nancy Culpepper. She, too, left Ken tucky for "higher learning," which in her case took eight years. She also came back to Kentucky on a family matter, specifically because her parents were in poor health. Even after her parents are recovered and moved to Florida and even though she admits she feels like an outsider, the narrator has stayed on because, like Nancy, she felt the tug of her roots. Or, as she puts it, . . . I have stayed here, wondering why I ever went away." And she has a Yankee husband, whom she met when he was transferred by his company into the area.

This woman's story is that she is bored in the absence of her husband, who has been transferred again, to Louisville. He is looking for a house there, while she remains on the farm to oversee the auction of household goods for her parents when the farm is sold. She has taken a lover, her dentist, Larry. That she has been unfaithful to her husband sets her apart from Norma Jean and the others. Although she is somewhat surprised at her behavior, she has the air of a big-city sophisticate, a woman who does what she wants, including what some men have done all along: have a satisfying affair and a satisfying marriage at the same time. The key to her attitude is revealed in a lecture she delivers to Larry about cats:

"In the wild, there are two kinds of cat populations," I tell him when he finishes his move. "Residents and transients. Some stay put, in their fixed home ranges, and others are on the move. They don't have real homes. Everybody always thought that the ones who establish the territories are the most successful—like the capitalists who get ahold of Park Place.". . . "They are the strongest, while the transients are the bums, the losers." "The thing is—this is what the scientists are wondering about now—it may be that the transients are the superior ones after all, with the greatest curiosity and most intelligence. They can't decide."

The narrator decides that she misses her hus band and that she is going to join him in Louisville. However, one gathers, she would be just as happy without him. The risks she takes while having her fling—going out to dinner with Larry where she may be recognized, even allowing Larry to answer her phone—illustrate confidence, a sense of her own superiority. Her identifying with the transient cats is made explicit in the last five lines of the story:

I see a cat's flaming eyes coming up the lane to the house. One eye is green and one is red, like a traffic light. It is Brenda, my odd-eyed cat. Her blue eye shines red and her yellow eye shines green. In a moment I realize that I am waiting for the light to change.

She is a transient and transients are just as likely to leave mates as they are to leave territories.

Bobbie Ann Mason has an uncanny ability to capture the state of mind of the women of rural Western Kentucky in the 1970s. As that culture becomes more homogenized, more integrated with the general American culture, these women will lose their special identity and their special prob lems. They will become more like Nancy Culpepper and the narrator of "Residents and Transients" as they become better educated and more

economical ly independent. They will have more complex rela tionships with their men and families; their lives will be more refined, more introspective—and the trade-off in vigor and earthiness may leave them far less interesting.

Source: G. O. Morphew, "Downhome Feminists in 'Shiloh' and Other Stories," in *Southern Literary Journal*, Vol. XXI, No. 2, Spring, 1989, pp. 41-49.

Critical Essay #5

In the following excerpt, Ryan emphasizes the struggles of Mason's heroines in facing change and their impulses either to cling to the security of the past or to look for something better in a new life.

"Old Things" demonstrates most poignantly the authority of the past in Mason's world. Cleo Watkins is perplexed by the modern predilection for an tiques, for she "has spent years trying to get rid of things she has collected.... She doesn't want to live in the past." Cleo does not perceive that her avoidance of life, her discontent with contemporary society, anchor her in a past that no longer exists. "Kids never seem to care about anything any more," she reflects bitterly when her grandchildren act oblivious to their cluttered surroundings, and "she has put a chain on the door, because young people are going wild, breaking in on defenseless older women." Cleo envies a friend who has just taken a trip out West but maintains that she could not "take off like that" because "now there are too many maniacs on the road."

Although she declares that "there's no use trying to hang on to anything. You just lose it all in the end. You might as well not care," the story's denouement teaches Cleo that some of the past cannot—and should not—be forgotten. At a flea market, amidst the Depression glass and rusty farm tools, she spots a familiar object, a miniature what not in which her husband used to keep his stamps and receipts. At the sight of the small box, with its drawers that form a scene of a train running through the meadow, Cleo's "blood is rushing to her head and her stomach is churning." As the story ends, she pays three dollars (too much) for the piece and, looking at the train, imagines that her happy family is aboard, crossing the valley, heading West: "Cleo is following unafraid in the caboose, as the train passes through the golden meadow and they all wave at the future and smile perfect smiles." Al though the past offers quiet solace from the hectic pace of modern life, Mason is aware of the dangers of ignoring the inexorable changes of society. Cleo, with her refusal to adapt to contemporary culture, personifies another Mason theme—the inordinate fear of life in this strange new world. At fifty-two Cleo feels and acts like an old woman; "everything seems to distress her, she notices." Mack Skaggs is also relatively young (in his late forties), but his agoraphobia and his ineffectual attempts to keep up with his college-student daughter (he struggles with *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* only to discover that she is studying physics) are the pathetic actions and attitudes of a man completely overwhelmed by the world around him. In "Still Life with Watermel on," Louise's husband goes off to Texas without her because, he claims, she is "afraid to try new things." She is initially angry at his accusations and his wanderlust, but at his return her feelings change. "Something about the conflicting impulses of men and women has gotten twisted around, she feels. She had preached the idea of staying home, but it occurs to her now that perhaps the meaning of home grows out of the fear of open spaces. In some people that fear is so intense that it is a disease, Louise has read."

Mary, in "Residents and Transients," has, unlike most of these characters, experimented with various lifestyles, but she has returned to her roots in Kentucky. Now, although her

husband has been transferred and has moved to the city to work and find them a home, she stays behind because, she says, "I do not want to go anywhere." Mary loves her parents' old farmhouse and worries about a world that sends her mother off to live in a mobile home in Florida. She knows that her mother, who loved her canning kitchen, would be appalled to find that her daughter has taken a lover and spends her afternoons with him drinking Bloody Marys made with the old woman's canned tomato juice. An obviously more educated and sophisticated wom an than many of her neighbors in these stories, Mary too is torn between the serene seductions of an obsolete lifestyle and the intimidating uncertainties of a variable present and future. Eventually she recognizes the dangers of stasis: "I am nearly thirty years old," she proclaims. "I have two men, eight cats, no cavities. One day I was counting the cats and I absent-mindedly counted myself." Near the end of the story Mary relates to her lover the perception that will ultimately send her—however reluctantly—to Louisville and a new life with her husband:

"In the wild, there are two kinds of cat populations . . . Residents and transients. Some stay put, in their fixed home ranges, and others are on the move. They don't have real homes. Everybody always thought that the ones who establish the territories are the most successful. . . . T hey are the strongest, while the transients are the bums, the losers . . . The thing is—this is what the scientists are wondering about now—it may be that the transients are the superior ones after all, with the greatest curiosity and most intelligence. They can't decide. . . . W hen certain Indians got tired of living in a place—when they used up the soil, or the garbage pile got too high—they moved on to the next place."

Bobbie Ann Mason's Kentucky is paradigmat ic of the contemporary South, and to an extent of modern America. Overwhelmed by rapid and fright ening changes in their lives, her characters and her readers must confront contradictory impulses, the temptation to withdraw into the security of home and the past, and the alternative prospect of taking to the road in search of something better. There are no easy answers, Mason tells us, a fact that makes her stories all the more satisfying. They are small stopping places, brief, refreshing respites from a complex world.

Source: Maureen Ryan, "Stopping Places: Bobbie Ann Mason's Short Stories," in *Women Writers of the Contempo rary South*, edited by Peggy Whitman Prenshaw, University Press of Mississippi, 1984, pp. 283-94.

Topics for Further Study

Mason, Raymond Carver, and Anne Beattie have been called "K-Mart realists." Read several stories by each writer and a few definitions of realism. Do you think the label "K-mart real ists" fits each of these writers? Why or why not?

Research the changing rural landscape of the United States. How much farmland was lost in the 1980s and 1990s? What was built on this land? How do you think this changed the lives of the people who lived there? If possible, inter view someone who currently lives on a farm or someone who has moved from a farm to find out more about their lives.

Read the Dylan Thomas poem, "Fern Hill." What is the subject of the poem? Why does Bobbie Ann Mason allude to the poem in her story?

Compare and Contrast

1980s: Unemployment is at 10.8 percent in 1982, a record high since the Great Depression of the 1930s. High inflation rates inhibit economic recovery.

1990s: The last half of the decade sees low employment rates, low inflation, and a booming economy. In some sectors, notably technology, corporations struggle to attract qualified workers.

1980s: The divorce rate peaks in 1981 at 5.3 divorces for every 1000 people, before falling off slightly in the next few years.

1990s: While the divorce rate drops slightly, it is still generally thought that one out of every two marriages ends in divorce. The marriage rate continues to drop throughout the decade.

1980s: Many industries move South to take advantage of lower salaries and more favorable tax laws. This leads to a boom across the South and a corresponding slump across the Northeast and Midwest.

1990s: The rush to the South slows, and there is a recovery in Northern industrial states. However, the population of Southern states continues to rise as aging baby boomers begin to retire.

1980s: A recession slows the housing market and makes it very difficult for sellers, prospec tive buyers, and real estate companies to do business.

1990s: Home mortgages reach post-World War II record low rates. Because financing a house is relatively easy, new home construction thrives.

What Do I Read Next?

In Country is Bobbie Ann Mason's 1985 novel that chronicles the struggle of Samantha Hughes to understand her dead father in the aftermath of the Vietnam War.

Bobbie Ann Mason's 1989 collection of short stories, *Love Life*, offers readers another chance to meet the characters that comprise Mason's world.

The American Story: Short Stories from the Rea Award (1993), edited by Michael Rea, presents a superb selection of stories by such authors as Raymond Carver, Joyce Carol Oates, Ann Beattie, Charles Baxter, and Grace Paley.

New Women and New Fiction: Short Stories Since the Sixties is a collection of stories by contemporary women writers such as Cynthia Ozick, Toni Cade Bambara, Anne Tyler, Fay Weldon, and Anne Beattie.

Raymond Carver's *Where I'm Calling From: New and Selected Stories*(1988) is a collection of stories from one of the important short story writers of the 1980s.

The Girl Sleuth: A Feminist Guide to the Bobbsey Twins, Nancy Drew, and Their Sisters (1975) is Bobbie Ann Mason's intriguing glimpse into the heroines of her childhood.

Further Study

Folks, Jeffrey J., and James A. Perkins, eds. *Southern Writers at Century's End*, Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1997.

Offers essays on twenty-one Southern writers, includ ing Mason, Anne Tyler, Alice Walker, and Lee Smith. The lucid introduction speaks to the fresh and new in Southern literature, as well as to "a continuing tradi tion of narrative that draws on the South's cultural and human complexity."

Reisman, Rosemary M. and Christopher J. Canfield. *Con temporary Southern Women Fiction Writers: An Annotated Bibliography*, Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1994.

A valuable resource for any student who wants to find additional critical sources on not only Bobbie Ann Mason, but on a host of other writers as well. The annotations are both thorough and helpful.

Wilhelm, Albert. *Bobbie Ann Mason: A Study of the Short Fiction*, New York: Twayne, 1998.

Written by the leading scholar of Mason's work, the book offers students a comprehensive introduction to her fiction.

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———"Private Rituals: Coping with Change in the Fiction of Bobbie Ann Mason," in *The Midwest Quarterly*, Vol. 28, No. 2, Winter, 1987, pp. 271-82.

———"Making Over or Making Off: The Problem of Identity in Bobbie Ann Mason's Fiction," in *The Southern Literary Journal*, Vol. 18, No. 2, Spring, 1986, pp. 76-82.

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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
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Data Capture
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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