Robert Kennedy Saved from Drowning Study Guide

Robert Kennedy Saved from Drowning by Donald Barthelme

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Introduction

Donald Barthelme was one of a number of experimentalists writing in the 1960s, and he was heavily influenced by earlier experimental writers, from the eighteenth-century novelist Laurence Sterne to James Joyce and Jorge Luis Borges in the twentieth century. Barthelme and such Writers as John Barth, Joseph Heller, Ken Kesey, Vladimir Nabokov, Thomas Pynchon, Ishmael Reed, Kurt Vonnegut, and Tom Wolfe played with fictional forms, language, representation, and established literary norms. Their work was given a variety of labels-black humor, metafiction, surfiction, superfiction, irrealism-that attempted to describe the ways that the authors used language. "Robert Kennedy Saved from Drowning," a story in Barthelme's 1968 collection of short fictions *Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts,* consists of twenty-four scenes, or Vignettes, that concern Robert Kennedy, a then-powerful political figure. These vignettes are less "story-like" than they are like the work of Karsh of Ottawa, a famous portrait photographer, who explains in the story's ninth scene that in each portrait sitting there is only one shot that is "the right one." What Barthelme appears to offer, therefore, are a series of disconnected portraits. Indeed, throughout his career, Barthelme was deeply concerned with the fragmentary nature of everyday living, and the extent to which it consisted of so much "dreck" (garbage). Early reviews of his work were mixed. Critics who were searching for grand themes and who were used to more linear, plot centered works had a difficult time understanding the seemingly fragmentary and often mundane representations that characterized so much of Barthelme's work. Later critics have found his work to be highly representative of ordinary living in the late twentieth century, so much so that he has even been called a realist, despite the oddities and strange constructions he presents throughout his work.

Author Biography

Donald Barthelme was born in Philadelphia in 1931. His family moved to Houston two years later. Barthelme served in the U.S. Army in Japan and Korea before working as a newspaper reporter for the *Houston Post.* In 1962, at the age of thirty, he moved to New York City, where he edited *Location,* an avant-garde literary magazine. The following year, his first published story appeared in the *New Yorker.* In addition to regular contributions to the *New Yorker,* he published subsequent fiction in *Atlantic, Harper's,* and other noted magazines and journals. His first collection of short stories, *Come Back, Dr. Caligari,* was published in 1964. He followed this with the short novel, *Snow White,* in 1967.

In addition to *Snow White,* Barthelme wrote three other novels: *The Dead Father, Paradise,* and *The King.* But the short story was Barthelme's specialty. These stories were collected in eleven volumes, including: *Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts* (in which "Robert Kennedy Saved from Drowning" appeared); *City Life; Sadness; Guilty Pleasures;* and *Forty Stories.* Barthelme won a National Book Award and was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship. He taught at the State University of New York at Buffalo, and at City College of New York. Barthelme died of cancer in Houston on July 23, 1989, at the age of 58.

Barthelme's interest in film, architecture, philosophy, and the arts led him to apply principles from these disciplines in his fiction. Collage-the artistic principle of combining unrelated items to create a new, unsuspected harmony-is one such technique found in the story "Robert Kennedy Saved from Drowning."

Plot Summary

The story consists of twenty -four vignettes, or short scenes. What the reader learns about Kennedy is filtered through what the narrator and Kennedy's acquaintances say about the man, as well as what Kennedy says about himself and about his views on the world. The story opens with a description, given by the narrator, of Kennedy at work. The description sets the tone for the rest of the story: these scenes will be brief and will often present contradictory ideas. K., as Kennedy is referred to throughout, is neither abrupt nor kind, or he is abrupt and kind, says the narrator. He uses the telephone both to dominate and to comfort those at the other end.

There is no plot in the traditional sense of the concept. The vignettes are not arranged by a sequence of events that build to a climax and resolve themselves in the falling action. Instead, the vignettes are arranged much as collages are. Therefore, some of their import depends upon what scenes are next to each other. For example, in one scene readers find one of Kennedy's friends speaking about Kennedy's solitary nature and how difficult he is to get to know. The next scene offers Kennedy's own commentary on his relationships with crowds of people. Often, like the narrator's comments in the opening scene, these juxtapositions offer contradictory Views of the man.

Many scenes are concerned with the ordinary things that Kennedy does. At a party, he goes behind the bar to make himself a drink only to be asked by the bartender to leave. He receives twelve newspapers a day. He travels through unnamed towns in France and Germany. Later, he wanders unnamed in towns in what is presumably the United States and sees the young people of the country. He reacts emotionally to music on the radio, or to stories he has read in the newspapers. He comments on art. He fails to understand his children. He dreams. He struggles in the water, nearly drowning, though without any emotional reaction whatsoever.

Five of the twenty-four scenes offer direct quotes from Kennedy's friends and employees. His secretaries and administrative assistants, for example, recount stones of his actions. One secretary tells how he personally delivered tulips to her when she was in the hospital; the assistant tells how he resolved a mounting (but unidentified) crisis with a single phone call his former teacher identifies compassion as perhaps Kennedy's most distinguishing quality.

The remaining scenes introduce Kennedy's own comments on the world and his role in it. Like the narrator's descriptions, these comments are often contradictory, or give multiple facets of the man. He speaks about how he responds to and manages crowds of people. In another, he speculates that he has no effect on the world at all. In all cases, however, Kennedy identifies with what he calls the "Marivaudian being," a person who is always in the immediate present.

In the final scene, the narrator finds Kennedy in the water, drowning. The narrator throws a rope to him and pulls him to safety.

Characters

K

See Robert Kennedy

Robert Kennedy

Robert Kennedy, known in the story by the first letter of his last name, .. K," is the subject of the story. The character is drawn from the public figure of Senator Robert Kennedy, brother of President John Kennedy, and is presented in a variety of contexts that might be expected to give a well rounded portrait of the man. Kennedy dreams, works at his desk, resolves crises, reads to his children, and talks about art in this story. He also gives extended monologues on a French writer, on his role in the world, on how to monitor situations, and on the crowds of young people that are his constituency. Although the story consists of numerous sketches of the man, a fully fleshed portrait never emerges.

Narrator

The unnamed narrator of the story controls what is seen and heard about Kennedy. This narrator recounts the events in half of the scenes with an apparently objective presentation of facts. The selection of facts, however, is often bizarre. In the other scenes, the narrator does not speak, but presents the voices of Kennedy's friends and colleagues or of Kennedy himself. Twice in the story, the narrator comes forward in the first person. The first time, he or she indicates what a "notoriously poor observer" he or she is, thereby undermining much of what is presented, especially considering the oddities upon which he or she has focused. The second time the narrator appears in first person is in the final scene when he or she throws a drowning Kennedy a rope. The distance between the narrator and Kennedy begins to collapse when the narrator offers direct descriptions of Kennedy's dreams and thoughts, especially when Kennedy's thoughts repeat what the narrator has just reported.

Others

Barthelme devotes five scenes to characters who are known only by their voices (in most cases, the titles indicate who is speaking). Secretaries, an aide, an administrative assistant, a friend, and a former teacher tell brief anecdotes about Kennedy, anecdotes that highlight something special about him. Often, they stress Kennedy's emotional effect on the people around him. The teacher recalls Kennedy's compassion as his defining and unusual characteristic. One secretary lauds Kennedy's ability to remember his employees and their personal problems, exemplified by his bringing her tulips when she was in the hospital. The administrative assistant tells how Kennedy resolved both a

mounting crisis and the general nervousness of his staff with a single phone call. Kennedy's friend explains how difficult it is to know Kennedy, because he does such unexpected things. Ironically, the friend reports, Kennedy has an unshakable faith that things will do what they are expected to do.

Themes

Public vs. Private Life

Robert Kennedy was a very public figure. He came from an important political family, was the brother of President John F. Kennedy, and was himself a candidate for president when Barthelme wrote the "Robert Kennedy Saved from Drowning." One of the questions that emerges from the story is: How much do people know about this man?

The question itself is difficult, for it doesn't specify what kinds of knowledge people are interested in. For those who are interested in the political campaign and whether or not they should vote for Kennedy for President, the knowledge they seek is partially public. They want to know what domestic and foreign policies the man advocates, where he stands on the Vietnam War, or on the civil rights movement, the death penalty-any number of issues. These issues are decidedly absent from the story and reduced to a single mention of "matters" in the scene titled "Matters (from an Administrative Assistant)." In fact, Kennedy's public presence is barely mentioned by the narrator. In "With Young People," Kennedy walks the street, in public, in his public persona. After the opening sentence of the scene, however, Kennedy is no longer mentioned. Nor is his effect on the young people, who are his constituency, mentioned. The narrator notes where the yonng people gather, what they have with them, and the fact that they are staring, but there is no mention of how or if they react to Kennedy specifically. On policy matters, the story offers even less information. In the scene titled" As Entrepreneur," the narrator reports cost overruns of the North Sea pipeline. Kennedy's response, "Exceptionally difficult rock conditions," serves merely as a description, one that anyone might reasonably make. In "K. on His Own Role," a scene where one might expect something of a policy statement, the subject talks about the need for "careful, reasoned and intelligent action" on the problems in the world. Yet, there is no identification forthcoming from him on the nature of the problems other than the cryptic "In Latin America, for example." Kennedy has merely identified a location of a problem, not the problem itself.

At the other extreme lies the private life. Again, what counts as private is difficult to assess, but there are a couple of moments where the narrator presents such information. Most notably, there is the dream sequence in four images. It is difficult to know someone by his or her dreams alone. Better would be to know his thoughts. But the narrator refuses to enter Kennedy's mind in the story. The closest we come to thoughts is what Kennedy himself has to say. Like his utterances about public policy, his utterances about his private life are often vacuous.

Perhaps the middle ground between the public and private lives is the ground most aptly mined by the narrator. This area includes the realm of the interpersonal relationships and what his friends and acquaintances know about the man. It is also a ground that is full of contradictions. Secretaries report that he both forgets and

remembers things. He asks questions like "Which of you has the shirts?" He orders food in restaurants. He is compassionate, says an old teacher. He believes that anchors are anchors, and that they will serve as anchors. His children cry. This area between the public and the private Kennedy is an area that is so ordinary as to be unremarkable.

In the end, the distinction between public and private collapses into this middle ground. Robert Kennedy is neither the mythological superhero that some segment of the public believes he is, nor is he a private person. He is, like everyone else, a human who goes about an ordinary 1ife. How much do people know about the man? Answer: as much as they know about themselves.

The Marivaudian Being

One section in the story finds K. discussing the concept of the Marivaudian Being, a hypothetical character who has no past or future, living only in the present moment. This hypothetical character was invented by the French Writer Poulet, based on his reading of the plays of the French playwright Marivaux. The Marivaudian Being, because he has no past experience from which to draw upon, is constantly surprised by events, "overtaken" as K. describes it. This gives the Marivaudian Being a certain fresh quality which Poulet admires. But it also makes the Marivaudian Being inconsistent and sometimes overwhelmed. Barthelme's character K. is presented as a land of Marivaudian Being who lives his life in brief, unconnected scenes and whose personal characteristics are unstable and contradictory.

Style

Point of View and Narration

The vignettes are presented by a dispassionate first or third-person narrator who only uses the pronoun "I" twice. The difficulty in describing the point of view is compounded by two features. First, there are times when the narrator has access to Kennedy's dreams and thoughts, access that only Kennedy or a third-person omniscient narrator would have. Moreover, the narrator's observations are usually neutral; they don't offer much commentary on the events and characters. Instead, these observations are most often declarative statements or descriptive phrases. In what should be the most dramatic scene of the story, how the narrator saves Kennedy from drowning, the sensory and emotional contents are muted in favor of a distanced, intellectual engagement with the scene. This muting is especially remarkable given that the scene is one of two where the narrator appears explicitly in the first person. Readers might normally expect a more direct involvement with the action, but the narrator refuses to offer personal reactions to the near drowning. The narratorial access to information is also undermined in the other scene where the narrator appears in the first person. There, after describing Kennedy's wife's clothing, the narrator says "but then I am a notoriously poor observer." This comment calls into question the narrator's reliability as an observer. If he or she cannot adequately describe an outfit, how can he or she possibly represent Kennedy's dreams or thoughts about the world?

The second difficulty in describing the point-of-view lies in the fact that twelve of the twenty-four vignettes present the voices of Kennedy or his acquaintances without any narratorial presence other than the scenes' titles. Although they are marked with quotation marks, which *suggest* that someone (the narrator) selected and arranged these quotes, fully half of the story is "told" by persons other than the narrator. Readers might legitimately wonder, therefore, how much control the narrator has in developing and describing the events, settings, characters, and themes of the story.

Setting

Many of the vignettes have no setting at all. They are merely the reporting of what people, including Kennedy, have to say about themselves and the world. When there are settings, they are usually so generic that they are stripped of any potential local import. It doesn't matter, for example, whether these scenes take place in Massachusetts or Iowa or Oregon. In the short section subtitled "With Young People," Barthelme deliberately withholds the names of the town or towns, as though they are unimportant to the story. Similarly, the names of the places in "France or Germany" remain unspecified. The generic nature of the settings is also indicated by such subtitles as "K. at His Desk" and "Behind the Bar." It matters little where the desks, or bars, or towns are. What matters is Kennedy's relationships to these things, what he does with them or when he is near them.

The lack of importance of the specific settings of the story is mirrored by a similar lack in specific actions. In a scene titled "Matters (from an Administrative Assistant)," for example, the assistant reports a series of increasingly more impending problems, yet they are referred to simply as "matters."

Structure

One of the most important devices that Barthelme plays with is the structure of the story. Traditional stories tend to follow a sequence of actions through time, through a rising action to a climax. They might involve flashbacks that disrupt or clarify the linear nature of the story, but the basic linearity remains intact. Barthelme rejects this structure in "Robert Kennedy Saved from Drowning" by presenting a sequence of scenes that are related to each other neither by a continuity of actions nor by time. This means that there is little opportunity for other literary devices, such as foreshadowing, subplots, or suspense. The structural technique he uses is pastiche, or collage. This technique asks the reader to bring a different set of interpretive strategies to the story. Scenes become important for how they might be associated or related to other scenes. These associations might be symbolic, or they might be topical. In the final scene, the narrator saves Robert Kennedy from drowning The story's title points to this action

Postmodernism

Postmodernism describes a period of literary creativity extending roughly from the end of the Second World War to the present day. During this time, many writers have explored types of fiction which dispensed with such traditional elements as plot, character, and narrative structure. These experimental writings focused particularly on how language works to create fictional meaning. The writings were often playful, employing conventional story elements in odd ways and using characters from popular culture, history or the great works of literature. Barthelme, for example, uses the character of Robert Kennedy, an actual politician running for office at the time his story was written, as a fictional character in "Robert Kennedy Saved from Drowning." By using an actual person well known to the public as a fictional character, Barthelme draws attention to how fictional such celebrities actually are and raises questions about the reality of the people and events one finds in the media.

Historical Context

The 1960s saw more social and cultural upheaval in the United States than any other decade this century, with the possible exception of the 1930s. A major war, race riots, street demonstrations, student protests, greatly expanded federal social programs, the popularization of drug use among the young, and several political assassinations mark the period. A host of people and organizations in the political and popular arenas, including John F. Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, Barry Goldwater, Richard Nixon, Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcom X, Betty Friedan, the Black Panthers, the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, and Bob Dylan, deeply influenced the nation and served as catalysts for change.

The United States was embroiled in the Vietnam War and saw more and more of its young men drafted to fight in a seemingly endless war in which no clear goals or strategies were defined. Resistance at home to the military draft and a growing division in public sentiment over the conduct of the war led to increasing political tensions, protests and division. At the 1968 Democratic National Convention, television viewers watched as thousands of young protesters confronted Chicago police in bloody street battles. The event saw the birth of the Weather Underground, a factional spin-off of Students for a Democratic Society, which began a campaign of bombings, including attacks on the Pentagon and Congress, on behalf of a revolutionary agenda. On May 4, 1970, the National Guard opened fire on a group of Vietnam war protestors at Kent State University, killing four and wounding nine. With the rise of political violence and the widespread popularity of drugs among the counter cultural youth, the so-called "Silent Majority" saw a breakdown of the very values they believed had made America great, values that had seen the country through two world wars and the Great Depression.

The decade seemed fraught with division. By the late 1960s, race riot shook many of America's major cities. President Lyndon Johnson launched the Great Society series of social programs to expand the federal government's role into public housing, school integration, medical care, and welfare. Launched at the same time the government was waging the Vietnam War, the increased spending led to a radical rise in the inflation rate. Women's liberation, the woman's movement for equality in all facets of political, social, and personal life, divided the country along gender lines. Various student movements, with rallying Cries not to trust anyone over thirty, divided the young from the old. The passage of the twenty-sixth amendment gave the youth of the nation the right to vote, but not until 1971.

Against this background, Barthelme chooses one of the more celebrated political figures of the time, Senator Robert Kennedy, a man who was brother of the president of the United States, who served as his brother's Attorney General, and who was in the heat of a presidential bid of his own at the time Barthelme wrote the story. (Shortly thereafter, Kennedy was assassinated.) Barthelme patently refuses to mention anything about the political or social climate of the time, except for the cryptic mention of "matters" by his administrative assistant and an oblique reference to the youth movement that

contributed to Kennedy's rising popularity. The youth are strangely silent, a far cry from the rallies and protests that characterized the late 1960s.

Critical Overview

Although responses to Barthelme's fictions have been usually positive, John W. Aldridge wrote a particularly severe critique of authors of black humor in general and Barthelme in particular. Titled "Dance of Death," Aldridge's article reviews the 1968 short story collection in which "Robert Kennedy Saved from Drowning" appeared, *Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts,* as well as the earlier *Come Back, Dr. Caligari,* and states: "The stories are quite literally verbal immersions in dreck, the evacuated crud and muck of contemporary life, and they very effectively dramatize the sensations of being suffocated and shat upon and generally soiled and despoiled in soul and mind which accompany our daily experience of contemporary life."

Aldridge represents an extreme reaction against Barthelme and his fellow experimenters, and picks upon what one of Barthelme's dwarves' says in *Snow White,* which was published a year earlier: , 'We like books that have a lot of *dreck* in them."

Clearly, Aldridge does not appreciate dreck as much as his fellow critics do. These early critics praised Barthelme' s playfulness with literary forms and his so-called metafictional impulses. (Barthelme himself denied that he wrote metafiction, or fictions about the status of fiction as fiction.) Later critics recognized that Barthelme was up to something more serious than mere play. Both William Gass and Raymond Carver (themselves fiction writers) have remarked upon Barthelme's innovations with the short story form, but find that the formal experiments are part of a larger investigation into the conditions of how we know the world. One of these conditions is language itself, says Barbara Roe. She reminds us that "Characters, setting, action, and viewpoint are, after all, creations of language. If language 'alters when inspected closely,' so do its ostensible referents."

Although these later critics might agree that Barthelme was up to something more than mere play, they do not always agree upon precisely what it was. Charles Molesworth challenges the idea that Barthelme's short story structures are merely rejections of earlier structures, and offers two alternatives: that they reflect the fragmented world and its values, and that they reinstate those same values. A story like "Robert Kennedy Saved from Drowning," therefore, would affirm the values found in the story, assuming they might be discovered amidst the numerous contradictions. Alan Wilde would agree with Molesworth's basic premise when he argues how deeply concerned with morals Barthelme was throughout his writings. Other critics have tried to reconcile the apparent disjunction between the emphasis Roe places on language and its tenuous status, and the affirmations of values and morals asserted by Molesworth and Wilde.

Wayne Stengle offers one solution. He argues that the audience of the story "contains all those readers who attempt to do as the narrator does in the last of the story's many, short, disconnected segments. There, the narrator tries to rescue Kennedy from the sea of publicity that always threatens to submerge him." Here, Stengle appeals to the readers of the story and their responses for the rescue.

Rather than commenting upon what is in the story, Thomas Leitch looks at what is not "Perhaps the most striking feature of Donald Barthelme's fiction is the number of things it gets along Without." From a traditional standpoint, this list is long. There may be characters, but they are flat, rather than round. There is little to no plot, in the traditional sense. Setting remains in the background. And yet, Leitch finds Barthelme's work compelling. In an essay written a couple of months after Barthelme' s death, John Barth praises the author's minimalism.

Contrary to Aldridge's early assessment, Barth honors Barthelme for how he made every word count in his short stories and novels, and for the "exhilarating" displays of his verbal art.

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Richard Henry is *an Assistant Professor of English at the State University of New York at Potsdam. In the following essay, he discusses the collage structure of Barthelme'* s *story "Robert Kennedy Saved from Drowning" and argues that It comments on the fictional nature of Kennedy's image.*

"Robert Kennedy Saved from Drowning" consists of twenty-four scenes, or snapshots, of Robert Kennedy, a once powerful political figure. These snapshots are less story-like than they are like the work of Karsh of Ottawa, a famous portrait photographer, who tells us in the ninth scene in the story that in each sitting there is one shot that is "the right one." With this interpretation, the entire story becomes a roll of film, twenty-four exposures, with the hope that one of them is the shot that best captures Kennedy.

Oddly enough, if Karsh of Onawa is correct, that there is only one "right one," then "Karsh of Ottawa" has to be the one "right scene" in the story. Ironically, this is the one scene in which we learn next to nothing about the man-it is Kennedy's people, not Kennedy himself, who want the sitting and who don't know what his schedule is. In short, Kennedy is *absent.* This absence might be precisely what interests Barthelme in the story.

Only one shot is *the* shot, the rest are reduced to what the author has elsewhere called "dreck. " If so, why read, unless the point of reading is the search for the one tidbit of importance. Fortunately, a host of other interesting observations arise if we abandon the single shot theory, and examine the entire roll as a series of scenes that have particular content and that are arranged in very specific ways. A better description of the construction of the story and how it means what it does might be "collage." In a collage, a variety of images, or voices, or characters, or events are juxtaposed; meaning is revealed by their juxtapositions. In this story, the juxtapositions serve to highlight a series of cancellations that leave the reader unable to say she or he knows much more about the Robert Kennedy character (let alone the actual Robert Kennedy) upon completing the story.

The opening scene, indeed, the opening sentences, set up some of these contradictions. Kennedy is working at his desk. The narrator begins with: "He is neither abrupt with nor excessively kind to associates. Or he is both abrupt and kind." Such contradictions can easily be traced through the story. They are revealed not only within scenes, or within sentences, as in the opening two sentences, but between scenes. For example, among the details readers learn about Kennedy at his desk in the opening scene is that he spends his time sending and receiving messengers (a line initiated by the narrator and repeated by Kennedy himself). The second scene introduces two descriptions by his secretaries. They are seemingly about his memory: Secretary A tells how her boss forgets things, and even does so intentionally; Secretary B recalls how he remembered her when she was sick in the hospital by arriving, smiling, behind a mass of tulips. As in the opening sentences, Kennedy's contradictions are displayed: he neither remembers nor forgets; he both remembers and forgets, as the narrator might

say. Equally as important as these secretarial observations, however, is the function Kennedy plays in Secretary B's story. In the first scene, Kennedy sends and receives messengers. Here, Kennedy is the messenger, as he delivers, in person, yellow tulips to his secretary. Without the close juxtaposition of the two scenes, this connection might be lost.

The fourth. fifth, and sixth scenes-"K. Reading the Newspaper," "Attitude Toward His Work," and "Sleeping on the Stones of Unknown Towns (Rimbaud)"-reveal a series of contradictions about Kennedy and his relationship to language. Taken individually, and taking their clues from the titles, readers will find three scenes that are about apparently disparate things: a narrator recounting how Kennedy reads newspapers. Kennedy speaking about how he gets things done, and the narrator showing Kennedy in France or Germany where he wanders the towns. streets, and shops. In the first of the three, however, Kennedy is presented as a master of the language and of the stories that the newspapers tell. He is able to read twelve newspapers a day, to clip important stories, and to memorize what he reads. Moreover, he is able to act decisively upon them. The next scene undermines this positive and active relationship with language and stories. Kennedy says of himself that sometimes he *cannot read:* "I can't seem to get the gist of it, it seems meaningless-devoid of life." The reason for this inability is precisely the opposite of what the narrator said in the previous scene. There, his ability to concentrate was strong, here, his "mind is elsewhere." This either/or proposition, one that shows him both able and unable to master language, is undermined in the third scene in this language sequence. Here, it is language itself that is incomprehensible and changing. Even were Kennedy to focus upon it, he would not be able to master it: "The shop signs are in a language which alters when inspected closely, Mabel becoming Meubles," intones the narrator This third possibility, that of incomprehensibility, suggests that in the previous two scenes language was comprehensible to Kennedy, even if it might be meaningless. Strangely enough, the possibility that Kennedy might be master of an incomprehensible language emerges as one of the possibilities in the either/or, neither/ nor scheme that the narrator has established. It is the juxtaposition of these three scenes that calls attention to Kennedy and his contradictory relationships with language.

Once one realizes that many of the significant aspects of the story result from reading scenes against each other, one can begin to contrast noncontiguous scenes. In the scene titled "K. Puzzled by HIS Children," Kennedy reads to his children from a German reader. Another relationship with language is advanced here-can Kennedy make something happen With it? The answer in this scene is a resounding no. His children are crying both at the beginning of the scene and at the end, despite his attempts to placate them with reading. Two scenes earlier, in "K. on Crowds," however, we find Kennedy talking about how one must speak to a crowd depending upon its mood. Although he asserts his ability to do this, he fails utterly when faced with his children He has not able to adjust what he says according to the mood of his children. Apparently, Kennedy is neither able to adjust his discourse to the mood of his audience, nor unable to adjust his discourse. He is both able and unable to have an effect on his audience.

There are other points of contrast developed in addition to Kennedy's varied relationships to language. His relationships to crowds is advanced in scenes other than the one entitled "K. on Crowds." In "Behind the Bar," Kennedy reveals his own tendency to consider himself apart from the crowd as he wanders behind the bar. The bartender recognizes the danger. If one person wanders behind the bar, everyone will, so the bartender sends him back to the other side. His ability to manage crowds highlights his separateness from the ordinary people, a separateness that the bartender refuses to recognize. In "A Friend Comments: K 's Aloneness," Kennedy's friend remarks how much Kennedy is distinctly separated from the rest of the world. But this quality depends on how well one knows the man. The friend suggests that it is Impossible to know him; yet others, secretaries, the old teacher, aides and assistants, show that It *is* possible to know something of the man. In many cases, the either/or, neither/nor distinction falls to hold because there is too little attention to the gray areas in between those descriptions that are advanced by the variety of commentators. To the bartender, Kennedy is simply one of the crowd, in part because the bartender knows almost nothing of him. To the friend, Kennedy is always distinct from the crowd because the friend knows so much about him.

One of the most curious juxtapositions occurs with the two final scenes. In the next to last scene, Kennedy discusses a twentieth-century French (actually Belgian) writer and critic, Georges Poulet, who himself was deeply influenced by an eighteenth-century French novelist and dramatist, Pierre Carlet de Chamberlain de Marivaux. The discussion itself is slightly ironic, for in it, Kennedy embraces Poulet's description of the Marivaudian being: "a pastless, futureless man, born anew at every instant. The instants are points which organize themselves into a line, but what is important is the instant, not the line. The Marivaudian being has in a sense, no history. He is constantly being *overtaken* by events. This freshness Poulet, quoting Marivaux, describes very well."

Part of the irony lies in Kennedy's embrace of the "freshness" of the Marivaudian being through another Writer who quotes Marivaux. (Attentive readers might recall Kennedy's preoccupation with a different kind of freshness in the short scene titled "Dress.") That is, Kennedy might have come to Marivaux directly, but doesn't. The quotes Poulet offers his readers are by no means fresh, both because they are nearly two hundred years old, and because they are *quotes,* or the words of another. The entire business of quotation is rooted in repetition, in earlier speaking events, and, therefore, rooted in history. This is especially the case when a quote is attributed, that is, when the original source is cited, for the attribution insures the connection to other points in history Barthelme further plays with the irony of calling something fresh that might indeed be "stale," by putting Kennedy's observations in quotation marks. The narrator quotes Kennedy, who is representing Poulet, who is representing Marivaux. This series of representations have a history and it is highlighted by Barthelme' s series of attributions What is Important is the "line," or attributions, that connects these instants or points.

Also ironic is Kennedy's relationship to the "line" as we see it in the final scene. In the Poulet section, Kennedy appears to reject lines in favor of instants, or moments. We see this earlier, as well, when the narrator describes Kennedy in an art gallery. There, Kennedy views geometric paintings and comments, "Well, at least we know [the artist]

has a ruler." With the comment comes a dismissal, a rejection of rulers and lines and geometry. (Readers might note that in the laughter that follows, the narrator tells us that people "repeat the remark," that is, they quote Kennedy.) In the final scene, it is Kennedy, perhaps as a Marivaudian being, who is being overtaken by events as he flails in the water. The narrator throws him "a line" to rescue him. After missing it, Kennedy "grasps the line." Once he has "both hands on the line," the narrator begins to haul bun out. "Line" is mentioned three times in this short section (not counting the two times it is referred to as "it"). What the narrator has done in this section is made the connection between events, a connection that is unimportant to the Marivaudian being, and a connection that has been unimportant, apparently, to Kennedy. Yet it is this connection that saves him from being overtaken, that saves him from drowning.

Barthelme uses the collage as a structure for his short story precisely because it highlights the moment that each scene describes. The fact that Kennedy needs to be saved, and that the narrator does so by making a connection, challenges the breathlessness and dazzlement that surrounds Kennedy. His friends, acquaintances, and aides are themselves overtaken by their momentary encounters with the man. The narrator reminds readers that connections must be drawn. If not, they, too, will be overtaken by the story. The narrator gives a hint; the astute reader will follow his line.

Source: Richard Henry, "Making Connections: Collage as Structure in 'Robert Kennedy Saved from Drowning' ," for *Short Stones for Students,* Gale, 1998

BOOKRAGS

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Trachtenberg discusses the "Marivaudian being" as it relates to "Robert Kennedy Saved from Drowning." The "Marivaudian being" is a term invented by the eighteenth-century French dramatist Pierre Marivaux.

Art proves. . . disappointing as a means of interpreting its subject in "Robert Kennedy Saved from Drowning," in which the narrator records his observations about Kennedy, describes episodes in his life, and provides snatches of conversation or statements he is supposed to have made. Each of the segments is given its own heading; none is accorded more importance than any of the others. They do not build toward some definitive revelation or in their totality establish a definitive portrait. Collectively they serve more as a catalog than a coherent perspective from which to view their subject. . . . Kennedy proves more various, more surprising, even mysterious, finally capable of wide ranges of behavior which seem impossible to reconcile. Gracious as an employer, attentive as a husband and father, compassionate even as a child, he can be abrupt and insensitive, both assured and vulnerable. Though partial to soberly cut suites in dark colors, he is pictured, at length, with a mask, black cape, and sword. This romantic notion is reinforced by Kennedy's large-scale ambitions which, however moral, seem hopelessly naive. "The world is full of unsolved problems," he is quoted as saying, "situations that demand careful reason and intelligent action. In Latin America, for example." The example is so arbitrary, so unfocused, above all so inadequate in its lack of specificity that Kennedy's pronouncement along with the flat, terse assertions he is constantly quoted as uttering make him seem almost a cartoon like figure of authorial mockery

Yet Kennedy himself provides a paradigm for responding to the fiction in his erudite discussion of the French Writer Georges Poulet's analysis of the eighteenth-century French dramatist Pierre Marivaux. Quoting Poulet, Kennedy identifies a figure he terms the Marivaudian being:

A pastless futureless man, born anew at every instant. The instants are points which organize themselves into a line, but what is important is the instant, not the line The Marivaudian being has in a sense no history. Nothing follows from what has gone before He is constantly surprised. He cannot predict his own reaction to events. He is constantly being *overtaken* by events. A condition of breathlessness and dazzlement surrounds him In consequence he exists in a certain freshness which seems, If I may say so, very desirable.

Frustrating linear definition, the historical understanding of what follows from the knowledge of what has gone before, the Marivaudian figure perhaps best describes the story itself; yet part of the disturbing effect the story has is the dissatisfaction it projects with its own approach. Reducing Kennedy to the Kafkaesque near invisibility of the letter *K,* the narrator in the manner of overstuffed biographies in which the subject is figuratively drowned also includes such trivial information as the exact dishes he has ordered in a restaurant or the word-for-word text of an alphabet lesson he read to his

children and includes a digressive passage describing the indifferent young people who line the streets along which Kennedy walks.

Source: Stanley Trachtenberg, in his *Understanding Donald Barthelme,* University of South Carolina Press, 199O, pp 64--6.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Molesworth describes "Robert Kennedy Saved from Drowning" as an example of meta fiction, a work whose theme is the conventions of writing itself.

Barthelme's fiction raises many of the questions that plague current literary theory and that seem to be involved in a fitful but widespread feeling of cultural crises. Is there a stable subject, an authorial identity that anchors meaning and intention, or is writing a transpersonal process so involved with models and transgression of models as to be completely without stable reference, let alone verisimilitude? We can easily enough identify Barthelme as a writer of metafiction (I choose this term over other contenders such as *surfiction* and the *newfiction),* as one who Writes less obviously about the tradit1Onal subjects-love, fame, death-than about the conventions of writing itself. But tills easily made identification can serve to blur other issues, issues that have been drawn up by opposing camps and have more or less calcified in the last twenty years or so. Art should deal with life, with ethical values, with people's felt needs and shared experiences, and do so in a common language and with conventional means. So says the traditional camp. No, says the innovative side, fiction's first duty is to show us ourselves; and since we have so utterly changed, in order for fiction to be true or even dutiful, it must also be changed. The problem could easily be transformed into a question of deciding if we have indeed changed, and if so, in what ways. But to pose the question that way is to become too general, too "extraliterary," too far removed from fiction itself. The problem then will be addressed in and through fiction: this is about the only thing on which the two camps agree. . . .

Barthelme's stories, as objects, operate in a realm neither completely objective nor completely subjective, though they implicitly claim the authority associated with both modes. They also rude behind the excuses that each mode implicitly offers: "it speaks for itself," and "I was only playing."

One way to show this is to turn to "Robert Kennedy Saved from Drowning," from *Unspeakable Practices,* one of Barthelme's best-known stories. The theme of this story remains ambiguous, but it involves in part the way a public figure is an invention of public needs and fantasies, and so the public's knowledge of such a person is always imperfect, because partial and factitious, yet perfect, because answerable and cathartic. The story creates, re-creates, and exposes a variety of presentations, using a series of short passages in which the main character, K., is shown in several situations. In the story's title a real-life, historical individual is named; throughout the story proper, he is called only K., as if a character in a Kafka novel. So from the beginning, history and fiction are conflated. The paragraphs variously try to "humanize" K., showing him at home with his children, for example, and to mythologize him, by showing how he exists in the imagination of others. And both attempts are themselves subject to parody.

Here is one paragraph, in which K. can be seen as either human, because he is vulnerable, nervous, and yet witty, or inhuman, because the whole incident sounds like a press agent's gossip item.

Gallery- going K enters a large gallery on fifty-seventh Street, in the Fuller Building HIs entourage includes several ladles and gentlemen. Works by a geometricist are on show K looks at the immense, rather theoretical paintings. "Well, at least we know he has a ruler."
The group dissolves in laughter. People repeat the remark to one another, laughing. The artist, who has been standing behind a dealer, regards K. with hatred.

K.'s remark objectifies the paintings, turns them into mere exercises in construction and the use of tools (some would say the paintings invite just such a response). But then the remark itself is turned into an object of sorts as it is repeated, "passed around," serving as a marker of K.'s wit. The paragraph ends with the irruption of "genuine" emotion, but it remains concealed. In fact, the physical position of the hate-filled artist would almost suggest he is cowering, ironically enough behind the dealer who serves to publicize his work. The Fuller Building is a real building on Fifty-seventh Street, and does in fact house several galleries. The incident has been described by Barthelme as the only "real" fact in this story.

What, then, are we to make of the following item, from *The New York Times* of May 1, 1981 (about thirteen years after the Barthelme story first appeared), entitled" A Wisecracking Prince Charles Tours Washington"? The item begins like this:

Sipping orange juice, the Prince of Wales stood studying a modernistic bronze sculpture titled "Icarus" at the National Air and Space Museum. Finally, he turned away from the oddly misshapen work of art "I'd love to have seen it," he remarked dryly, "before it melted."

Is Barthelme ghostwriting for the House of Windsor as he once did for the president of a Texas university? Or has Prince Charles been dabbling in metafiction? This would seem to prove one point that metafictionists want to impress on us: no matter how much artificial structure exists III a work of fiction, "real life" is equally ridden with formulae, stances, rehearsed material and borrowed motifs. Less grandly, we can at least notice that Lynn Rosellini, the reporter whose by-line appears on this item, has read enough fiction to use phrases like "remarked drily" with apparent ease. But what of the apparently parodic bits in this item, how intentional are they? Did the artist create a work for the Air and Space Museum and call it *Icarus* with any but an air of homily and moral irony directed at technological pride? And did Prince Charles know the piece's title before he made his condescending remark? Yet if the artist meant such a warning against pride to those who commissioned the statue, was an abstract sculpture the best way to get his point across? And what are we to make of the overdone phrase "oddly misshapen"? Either modifier would have done, so both together can indicate anxiety on the author's part to vindicate the Prince's reaction, or perhaps it could serve as ironic exaggeration and so reflect against the Prince. (The noun in the phrase after all is "work of art," not "heap of metal" or "thing.")

What such a witticism does is to vindicate the entire situation. Otherwise we would have been left with the "simple" truth that society's leaders don't comprehend modern art, a safe enough "fact," or that their condescension toward such works expresses the

otherwise guarded dismissal many people feel in the face of art that doesn't readily declare itself. Effectively the remark reaffirms the' politician's or celebrity's identity as one who is baffled but who has the skill to pull through, and it expresses for us a sense of occasion in which our leaders, for a change, accurately speak for us. In either case, the fictional or the real incident, an object signifies (or attempts to signify) some complex cultural experience and the person involved dismisses the signification. But in doing so the person acts mechanically, like an object, responding to the pressures of an entourage and the "dynamics" of a situation in a manner that seems scripted. Both art work and public figure are "on show," and both play out their functions to the evident satisfaction of all viewers. It's easy to dismiss this example (and there are others like it in Barthelme, though none so pointed) by saying that reality has stylizations and fiction can, if it wishes, imitate them. But building up an aesthetic on such an easy formulation still raises questions about fiction's status.. .. The Barthelme paragraph also recalls the structures of fabulation-the character called by his initial, the glowering spectator revealed at the close of the scene-in such a way as to suggest a genuinely playful exercise in tale-telling, . . .

Self-referential fiction traces its lineage back at least to Cervantes and Sterne. If one of the functions of metafiction is to challenge or undercut realist fiction, it has failed, since realism has flourished since Sterne. But there do remain the general lineaments of realism against which metafiction is not only judged but against which it operates. A recent article, besides offering a useful survey of theories of realism, suggests one chief characteristic of the highly developed realism of the later nineteenth century. Characters in such realist fiction are driven not only by outside, heterogeneous forces, but also by an inner necessity. Inner necessity for individual characters is revealed, even defined, by other characters' perception of them, as well as what they are in themselves. This process of revelation, . . . presents an ordering of things that enables us to see "the individual neither dissolving into its other by the ironic play of reflections nor succumbing to forces from outside but being overmastered by something from within." What Barthelme's parody of realism suggests is that if people are overmastered by something from within, that "something" is a lack, an absence, an awareness of their own frustrated desires.

Barthelme's characters are often on the verge of dissolving into the other *and* being overmastered by outside forces, as "Robert Kennedy Saved from Drowning" exemplifies. The very structure of the story reinforces the notion that K.' s inner necessity is totally mysterious. We are forced to see him only as he is reflected in the consciousness of others, and only in reaction to outside forces. He has, in effect, no clear inter-subjective reality, or at least none that allows us to see his destiny being revealed. In one paragraph called" A Friend Comments: K.'s Aloneness," we read that this "terrible loneliness. . . prevents people from getting too close to him ..

He says something or does something that surprises you, and you realize that all along you really didn't know him at all." Then as If to illustrate this principle, the friend tells the story of K. acting as captain in a small boat beset by rough weather. The friend raised the question of whether or not the anchor would hold. And K.'s reaction is in some ways the metonymic reduction of his character: "He Just looked at me Then he said: 'Of

course it will hold. That's what it's for.'" This absolute trust in things, their reliability and functionality, is a kind of Weberian rationalism in which means and ends are in perfect accord. Presumably we are to read this incident as showing how K.' s relation to people and events in general is essentially that of an absolute pragmatist, or perhaps more accurately, an *apparatchik.* Yet other paragraphs in the story portray just the opposite sort of character, for example in the "Childhood of K. as Recalled by a Former Teacher," where we are told "what was unusual about K. was his compassion. . . . I would almost say It was his strongest characteristic." The story is parodying the media-constructed biography of a celebrity-a form especially noticeable today every time there is an assassination, an election campaign, or a national scandal-but its method of collage is suggesting something further.

The collage of viewpoints presents a jumble of cliché structures and fantasy items (e g., "A Dream" and "He Discusses the French Writer, Poulet") which effectively parodies each and so calls into question whether our knowledge of K. (or his of himself) can ever be adequately represented. Yet at the same time the skill, the glibness of presentation in each paragraph indicates that the need to fictionalize is endemic III our society (and in human nature?) . We might carry this one step further and say K.' s unknowability is necessary for the endless variety of fictions to continue. The story even suggests that the object of the fictions must be a blank, that the signified must be absent, for the necessary processes of fiction making to occur. In this way, K. himself becomes an "anxious object," in that he serves both as the center of all concern and the completely expressive absence. And he also serves as the source of the "blanketing effect" in language, for it is his unknowability that causes people to continue, "filling in" what would otherwise be only isolated data of perception and representation.

I would suggest that K. is in many ways the paradigmatic Barthelme character. Although his story is one of the best of the entire corpus, the way he exists as a creation of parodic strategies makes him typical. At the heart of the matter, so to speak, is an ambiguity blended out of romance and anti-romance elements. As K. himself puts It, paraphrasing Poulet's description of the French author Marivaux, the character is "a pastless futureless man, born anew at every instant. . . . He is constantly surprised. He cannot predict his own reaction to events. He is constantly being *overtaken* by events. A condition of breathlessness and dazzlement surrounds him." The medieval romance hero and the Little Man of urban mass culture have merged into one person, one object. Perhaps this is the most antirealist of all of Barthelme's strategies, for this character denies the rock of linear chronology on which realist narrative erects its faith. But notice that the character is not simply an object among other objects, for in some sense he reflects, even epitomizes his environment. This reflection is one of the main characteristics of the realist hero. In fact, the syntax of the last sentence quoted is ambiguous, since we can't be sure if the dazzlement is directly the nature of the events, or if it's the character's reaction to those events that overtake him. It can be argued that the character is at one with his environment, or completely victimized by it, and this brings us back to the ambiguity of tones in Barthelme, that mixture of nostalgia and disdain. Also it recalls the mix of total freedom and total determinism brought about by the ambiguous authorial control in Barthelme's metafiction.

Source: Charles Molesworth, in Ins *Donald Barthelme's Fiction The Ironist Saved from Drowning,* University of Missouri Press, 1982, pp 1,64□70.

Topics for Further Study

Select a current political figure and collect newspaper and magazine articles about him or her from several sources. After reading the articles, do you feel as though you know the *person* any better than you did before? Select one paragraph from each article and cut it out Arrange your paragraphs in different orders. How does that affect what you know about the person?

Investigate the social and political issues of the 1960s and what Robert Kennedy's policies were on these issues. Is it necessary to know them to understand Barthelme's story? Why would Barthelme fail to mention the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Vietnam War, poverty, racism, or any of the other important Issues of the day?

Read Barthelme's essay "Not Knowing." What relationship between language and the world does Barthelme argue? Write down what you and your friends say to each other. What things do you do with language besides represent the world? Does language ever get in the way of what you are trying to do?

Investigate art movements that flourished in the 1950s and 1960s: Abstract Expressionism, minimalism, constructivism, and pop art. Does Barthelme's story share any of the qualities of these movements and their art works?

Compare and Contrast

1968: Robert Kennedy is assassinated on June 5 after giving a campaign speech in California Sirhan Sirhan is convicted of the crime and sentenced to life in prison.

1995: Israeli president Itzak Rabin is assassinated in November after giving a speech at a peace rally.

1968: Many American young people become active in protest causes. College students, in particular, stage many campus protests of the Vietnam War. The voting age is lowered to eighteen in 1971, in response to those who criticize the fact that teenagers are old enough to be drafted into war, but not old enough to vote.

1990s: In 1994, only 12 percent of 18 and 19year olds voted. In the presidential election of 1996, only about 49 percent of the country's eligible voters cast ballots, and only 17 percent of those voters were under 30 years old.

1960s: As Attorney General under his brother, President John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy is actively involved in decisions that result in the Cuban Missile Crisis, an event that leads the world to the brink of nuclear war in October, 1962.

1990s: As Attorney General under President Clinton, Janet Reno is widely criticized for her decision to use force to end the siege of the Branch Davidian religious compound in Waco, Texas. The resulting fire on April 19, 1993, claims the lives of more than eighty people.

What Do I Read Next?

Snow White (1967) by Barthelme. Barthelme wrote only four novels during his career, though they might better be called novellas for their brevity. This, his first, is a rewrite of "Snow White and the Seven Dwarves" that challenges the structure of fairy tales.

Sadness (1972) by Barthelme. This is a collection of stories, often parodies, that play with emotions and boredom.

The Dead Father (1975) by Barthelme. Barthelme's second novel concerns the father/ son relationship, and is deeply involved in the play of words and their representative functions.

Yellow Back Radio Broke Down (1971) by Ishmael Reed. Reed is a satirist and a parodist who often targets literature and literary forms. In this novel, he parodies the Western novel

Slaughterhouse-Five, or, The Children's Crusade (1969) by Kurt Vonnegut. Vonnegut's novel plays with the premise that its protagonist,

Billy Pilgrim, travels back and forth randomly in his own past, present, and future, experiencing

episodes from his hfe as a prisoner of war in Germany during World War II, an optometrist in suburban 1960s America, and an exhibit in a zoo on the planet Tralfamadore

Gravity's Rainbow (1973) by Thomas Pynchon. Lieutenant Tyrone Slothrop spends the end of World War II monitoring V2 rockets, but begins to suspect a variety of potentially worldwide conspiracies, including secret governments, a series of secret experiments that were conducted upon him when he was a child, and African tribesmen trained as rocket technicians by the Germans during the war.

The Atrocity Exhibition (1969) by J. G. Ballard. A collection of stories structured in collage fashion and telling of a scientist suffering a nervous breakdown, in the process of which media figures from the 1960s play symbolic roles.

Further Study

"Donald Barthelme," in *Short Story Criticism,* Vol. 2, edited by Sheila Fitzgerald, Gale, 1989, pp. 24-58.

Reprinted criticism on Barthelme's short stones.

Gordon, Lois. *Donald Barthelme,* Twayne, 1981.

Gordon gives an overview of Barthelme's stones and novels published through 1979. She includes his thenunpublished stones, as well as an annotated bibliography of criticism.

Kennedy, Robert F. *Robert Kennedy, in his Own Words The Unpublished Recollections of the Kennedy Years,* edited by Edwin O. Guthman and Jeffrey Shulman, Bantam, 1988.

Sponsored by the John F Kennedy Library, tins book contains oral interviews With Robert Kennedy conducted from 1964-1967, in which he speaks of his brother John Kennedy's presidency.

Patteson, Richard F., ed. *Critical Essays on Donald Barthelme,* G. K. Hall, 1992

Patteson has assembled eight reviews of Barthelme' s collections and novels and thirteen essays by critics. Also included is an introduction by novelist John Barth examining Barthelme's work.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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

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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Short Stories for Students

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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

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