Roman Fever Study Guide

Roman Fever by Edith Wharton

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Introduction

"Roman Fever" is among Edith Wharton's last writings and caps off her noteworthy career. "Roman Fever" was first published in *Liberty* magazine in 1934, and it was included in Wharton's final collection of short stories, *The World Over* , in 1936. Several reviewers of this final collection from newspapers and magazines throughout the nation called special attention to "Roman Fever." Since then, however, the story has received little critical attention. The few critics who have written about the story describe it as artistic, complex, and reflective of Wharton's moral landscape.

"Roman Fever," however, is frequently included in anthologies, both of Wharton's work and of American literature, and this may be a better indicator of its value as worthwhile literature than its critical history is. The story, at first, seems to be little more than a tale about the nostalgic remembrances of two middle-aged women revisiting Rome. Yet the tone of both the outer and inner dialogue shows a deep-felt animosity between the two women. The more outgoing Mrs. Slade is envious of Mrs. Ansley's vivacious daughter and jealous of her past love for Mrs. Slade's husband. The final sentence of the story reveals that Mrs. Slade has a valid reason for her feelings of competition with Mrs. Ansley though she only learns of it after years of illfeeling. Some readers may find this final sentence to be a trick ending, on par with those of Saki or O. Henry. But a close reading of "Roman Fever" shows that Wharton carefully crafted her story to lead up to that exact moment of truth. Wharton's fine construction indeed makes "Roman Fever" one of her greater works of short fiction.

Author Biography

Edith Wharton was born on January 24, 1862, to a wealthy New York family. She came from the most exclusive of old New York families, whose names had appeared in Washington Irving's accounts of Hudson River history. At the end of the Civil War, however, Wharton's parents were hard hit by inflation. To save money, the family lived and traveled throughout Europe until Wharton was about 10. By that time, she spoke five languages. After the family returned to the United States, Wharton embarked on a program of self-education, prompted mainly by her extensive reading. Just before her 15th birthday, Wharton finished her first creative work, a novella entitled *Fast and Loose*. It was not published until a century later, in 1977.

In her teens, Wharton again spent several years in Europe, accompanied at times by her fiance. Their engagement broke off in 1885, and Edith married the banker Edward Wharton, who came from the same high social circles as Edith's mother. Shortly afterwards, she began to write stories, which she sold to popular magazines. Her first short story appeared in 1891, when Wharton was 29 years old. Wharton was now independently wealthy, and therefore did not depend on writing for a living. She threw herself wholeheartedly into her work and recognized herself as a professional writer only after her first collection of stories, *The Greater Inclination*, was published in 1899. Around this time, Wharton also developed a lasting friendship with the writer Henry James. He became her mentor, and critics have often compared the two writers' works. Between 1900 and 1914, Wharton produced almost 50 short stories and some of her finest novels. These include *The House of Mirth* and *Ethan Frome*.

In 1910, Wharton returned to France, where she had spent several winters. The next year, she made France her permanent residence; and in 1913, she divorced her husband. Throughout the next two decades, with the exception of the war years, Wharton traveled extensively throughout Europe. In 1931, Wharton visited Rome for the first time in 17 years; she had spent part of her childhood there. Her personal writings from the period show a strong desire to visit old, familiar haunts, much as her characters do in "Roman Fever." Scholars believe that her visits to Rome between 1931 and 1934 inspired the story; "Roman Fever" was one of her last writings about Italy.

Wharton continued to write until her death. In 1934, three years before her death, Wharton published her memoirs, *A Backward Glance*. These evoked old New York and the people who lived there. She was at work on *The Buccaneers* when she died. Her biographer R. W. B. Lewis believed it was her finest piece of work since the 1920s. It was published after her death.

Plot Summary

The story opens with two middle-aged American ladies enjoying the view of Rome from the terrace of a restaurant. Mrs. Slade and Mrs. Ansley have been lifelong friends, thrown into intimacy by circumstance rather than by true liking for each other. They first met as young ladies vacationing in Rome with their families, and they have lived for most of their adult lives across the street from each other in New York. Now, in the 1920s, they find themselves again in each other's company. Both are spending the spring in Rome, accompanied by their daughters, Jenny Slade and Barbara Ansley respectively, who are roughly the same age. Jenny is safe and staid, unlike her mother. Barbara is vivid and dramatic, apparently unlike either of her parents.

When Jenny and Barbara leave to spend the day with Italian aviators, Mrs. Slade and Mrs. Ansley wile away the afternoon on the terrace overlooking the ruins of the Forum and the Colosseum, chatting and remembering old times.

Mrs. Slade and Mrs. Ansley have in some ways led parallel lives. Besides living in the same New York neighborhood, they both became widows at approximately the same time. Mrs. Slade, the widow of a corporate lawyer, finds her new life dull, without the excitement of entertaining and going on business trips. She believes that Mrs. Ansley cannot find life as dull, because her life has never seemed interesting in the first palce. In Mrs. Slade's eyes, Mrs. Ansley and her husband represented "museum specimens of old New York." However, Mrs. Ansley believes that Mrs. Slade must be disappointed with her life.

Toward the end of the afternoon, Mrs. Slade remembers how Mrs. Ansley became sick during the winter that they spent in Rome when they were young. Although at that time of year people no longer caught malaria, or Roman fever, the dampness and cold night temperatures could still make people quite sick. Mrs. Slade recalls how Mrs. Ansley became seriously ill after going to the Colosseum after sunset one evening. Mrs. Ansley seems to have a hard time remembering this event, but Mrs. Slade reminds her of the details.

Suddenly, Mrs. Slade, wanting to hurt her friend, bursts out that she must tell Mrs. Ansley that she knows why Mrs. Ansley went to the Colosseum that night. Mrs. Slade then recites the contents of a letter asking Grace [Mrs. Ansley] to meet Delphin Slade (then the fiance of Alida [Mrs. Slade]) at the Colosseum. When Mrs. Ansley wonders how Mrs. Slade could know the contents of the letter, Mrs. Slade confesses that she had written it. She had been afraid that Grace [Mrs. Ansley], who was in love with her fiance, would win Delphin away from her. She hoped that Grace would catch cold, and so be unable to be involved with Delphin for a few weeks until she (Alida/Mrs. Slade) could be more sure of Delphin's affections. But she never thought that Grace would get so sick.

Mrs. Ansley is upset by the revelation because it represents the loss of a cherished memory; as she says, "It was the only letter I had, and you say he didn't write it?" Mrs.

Slade realizes that Mrs. Ansley still cares for Delphin, although Mrs. Ansley claims to cherish only the memory. Mrs. Slade says that she wishes she hadn't told her friend about the letter, but she defends her actions by saying that she didn't believe Grace (Mrs. Ansley) had taken Delphin so seriously, since, after all, Grace had married Mr. Ansley just two months later, as soon as she left her sick bed.

After a pause, Mrs. Slade says that she sent the letter as a joke; she remembers how she spent the evening laughing at her friend, waiting in the dark by the Colosseum. Mrs. Ansley surprises her companion by saying that she didn't wait, that Delphin had arranged everything and that they were let into the Colosseum immediately. Mrs. Slade accuses Mrs. Ansley of lying, wondering how Delphin would know that Mrs. Ansley was waiting for him. Mrs. Ansley says that she answered the letter, and that she is sorry for Mrs. Slade because Delphin came to her that night. Mrs. Slade responds by saying that she doesn't begrudge Mrs. Ansley one night; after all, she had Delphin for 25 years and Mrs. Ansley had only a letter that Delphin didn't write. Mrs. Ansley has the final word: "I had Barbara."

Summary

The story begins with a description of two wealthy, middle-aged women at a table on a restaurant balcony in Rome. After glancing at one another, both women gaze down at the majestic view with the same mildly disinterested, but content expression.

They hear their daughters laughing to each other as they descend the stairwell to the piazza beneath the restaurant. The first girl urges the second to hurry along and "leave the young things to their knitting." The second girl, "Babs," admonishes her, saying she doubts they'll actually be knitting. Babs says she meant the words figuratively, because, after all, their mothers haven't much else to do.

As the voices trail off, the women on the balcony glance at each other, embarrassed. The smaller, paler woman breathes her daughter's name - Barbara ("Babs") - in a scolding tone, and the fuller lady with the darker hair and complexion laughs, saying that's what their daughters think of them. But the smaller woman defends their daughters: That's not what the girls think of them specifically, she says, but what they think of mothers in general, as a result of the prevailing modern perception. Then, almost guiltily, she pulls a crimson bit of silk and two knitting needles from her purse, admitting that they do have an awful lot of time on their hands these days - so much so, in fact, that she sometimes gets tired of looking, even at beautiful views like the one before them.

Noticing the waiter lurking about, wondering when they are going to leave, Mrs. Slade, the woman of darker color, suggests to her friend that they stay on the balcony. When Mrs. Ansley, the paler woman, agrees meekly, Mrs. Slade calls the waiter over and asks if they can stay. The waiter assures the women staying would be fine, encouraging them to stay for dinner because it will be a full moon night.

As the waiter withdraws, Mrs. Slade and Mrs. Ansley carry on polite conversation about various subjects, including their daughters' destination. Mrs. Slade asks Mrs. Ansley if she knows where they're going, and Mrs. Ansley says she believes they're flying to Tarquinia with the young aviators they met at the Embassy. Mrs. Slade asks her friend if she supposes their daughters are as sentimental as they were. Mrs. Ansley says she has come to the realization that she has no idea *what* their daughters are. Perhaps, she goes on to suggest, at that age, she and Mrs. Slade didn't know much more about each other. Mrs. Slade agrees. Then, Mrs. Ansley says she never thought of her friend as sentimental. Mrs. Slade replies that perhaps she isn't.

Mrs. Slade and Mrs. Ansley then spend a few moments sitting at their table, reflecting on how little they know about each other, visualizing each other "through the wrong end of her little telescope."

Alida Slade's thoughts reveal the women's history. Mrs. Slade and Mrs. Ansley have known each other since they were girls. Twenty-five years ago, Alida Slade thinks, Grace Ansley was exceedingly lovely - far more lovely than Grace's daughter, Barbara,

though Babs does seem to have grown into quite an effective woman, a woman with edge, which, Mrs. Slade thinks, is rather odd, considering her dullish parents. The Slades lived opposite the Ansleys, figuratively as well as literally, on East Seventy-Third Street for years, so Mrs. Slade knows all about them, though Mrs. Slade doesn't think there's much to know. In contrast to the socially savvy and internationally-traveled Slades, the Ansleys are the picture of old New York - perfect, but tame and dull. By the time Mrs. Slade and her husband bought in upper Park Avenue, she had long bored of watching them from across the street.

Years later, however, both Mr. Ansley and Mr. Slade passed away, not very far apart, and the ladies briefly renewed their acquaintance. Recently, they ran across each other by chance in Rome, and found themselves driven together, once again, by their similar situations; although, Alida Slade suspects they are not as similar as one might think. She is sure that she feels the absence of Mr. Slade more acutely than Grace feels the absence of Mr. Ansley. It was a big drop to go from being the wife of a widely-known corporation lawyer, who was always entertaining or dashing off to London, Paris, or Rome, to being his widow. Because her son, who seemed to have inherited much of his father's wit and charm, died in boyhood, all Mrs. Slade has left to do now is watch over her daughter, Jenny, who is such a perfect daughter that she needs very little watching. In contrast, Mrs. Ansley has Babs to look after--scheming, daring, brilliant Babs, and Mrs. Slade is almost envious.

Grace Ansley's mental portrait of Alida Slade is much less articulate and drawn with a lighter touch: "Alida Slade's awfully brilliant but not as brilliant as she thinks." Alida was quite dashing in her youth, much more so than Alida's daughter, Jenny, who - though a very pretty girl and somewhat clever even - has none of her mother's liveliness. It seems to Mrs. Ansley that Mrs. Slade is almost disappointed sometimes, and Mrs. Ansley feels sorry for her. Her friend has had a difficult life, she knows, full of failures and mistakes.

Later that evening, the two widows sit without speaking for a long time. This slightly embarrasses Mrs. Ansley because it seems to indicate a new stage in the ladies' intimacy; they have never before had the occasion to sit together in silence. Then, the five o'clock bells rings, Mrs. Ansley tells Mrs. Slade that a game of bridge is scheduled at the Embassy at five. Mrs. Slade replies that Mrs. Ansley is quite free to go by herself, but she doesn't think she will. At this, Mrs. Ansley says she didn't want to go anyway and surreptitiously pulls out her knitting. Mrs. Slade's hands remain motionless on her knees as she starts talking.

She says she has been thinking how difficult a job their mothers had of protecting them while they vacationed in Rome. They had, it seemed, a much more difficult job than their grandmothers had. When their mothers visited Rome as young women, all their grandmothers had to do was remind their daughters that the Roman fever was about, and the girls would come home, no doubt, at the danger hour. But when Mrs. Slade and Mrs. Ansley visited Rome, there was no such disease to threaten their lives; there was no true danger their mothers could remind them of to keep them in after sunset, and their mothers had quite a time keeping them in - didn't they?

Mrs. Ansley, focused on her knitting, recites the stitches she's making aloud, before agreeing. Mrs. Slade, shocked at first that Mrs. Ansley would focus on her knitting at a time like this, realizes after a moment that it is just like her. Mrs. Slade leans back, gazing at the ruins below her, thinking about their daughters. Babs Ansley is out to catch one of the aviators, she is sure, and Jenny has no chance beside her. In fact, Babs is probably using Jenny as a foil, she thinks and laughs out loud.

Mrs. Ansley drops her knitting and turns to her friend. Mrs. Slade explains that the Campolieri boy is one of the most eligible bachelors in Rome, insinuates that Babs is after him, and says she wonders how Grace and Horace, who had always exhibited such exemplary character, managed to produce such a daughter.

Mrs. Ansley quietly says she thinks Mrs. Slade is overrating her daughter. Mrs. Slade says she doesn't think so. In fact, she says, she appreciates her. She doesn't understand how she got such an angel for a daughter - she always wanted one more like Babs. Mrs. Ansley says Babs is an angel, too, and goes back to her knitting.

As the sun sets, Mrs. Slade watches her friend knitting calmly, thinking that she has nothing to worry about. No doubt, Babs would come back from the trip to Tarquinia engaged to Campolieri, and Mrs. Ansley would sell her house in New York and move to Rome, so she could be close to her daughter and spend her lovely golden years with her grandchildren. At this thought, Mrs. Slade stops, disgusted with herself. She hates how envious she has always been of Mrs. Ansley. She stands up and looks out at the sky. The sun has set. She puts her hand on Mrs. Ansley's arm and asks her if she is afraid. Mrs. Ansley is not quite sure of what she should be afraid.

Mrs. Slade explains - of Roman fever or pneumonia. Doesn't Mrs. Ansley remember how ill Mrs. Ansley became the winter Mrs. Slade was engaged to Delphin. Or the story Mrs. Ansley told her then, about her wicked great aunt, who sent her little sister out after sunset to pick a nightblooming flower because they were in love with the same man, and the little sister got sick and died? That story made quite an impression on her, Mrs. Slade continues, and at the time she thought that, although the Roman fever wasn't about any longer, the Forum got quite chilly after sunset, and the Colosseum even colder: "It wasn't easy to get in after the gates were locked for the night. Far from easy. Still, in those days it could be managed; it was managed, often. Lovers met there who couldn't meet elsewhere. You knew that?"

Mrs. Ansley says she doesn't remember. Mrs. Slade asks, doesn't she remember going to visit the ruins just after dark and catching a bad chill? People said that was what caused her illness, though it seemed strange to her friends; she was usually so careful because of her delicate throat...

Mrs. Ansley replies that the prudent girls weren't always so prudent, and asks her friend what made her think of this now. Mrs. Slade explodes saying she can't stand it any longer; she has to tell her friend: Mrs. Slade always knew why Mrs. Ansley went out that night. Mrs. Ansley had gone to meet Delphin, Mrs. Slade's fiancy, because of the letter

he sent, which, Mrs. Slade says, she can repeat, word for word. Mrs. Ansley stares at her as if she were a ghost. Then Mrs. Slade recites the letter.

Afterward, Mrs. Ansley asks Mrs. Slade how she knows the contents of the letter, since she burned it right after she received it. Mrs. Slade replies that she knows the contents of the letter because she wrote it.

As Mrs. Ansley begins to cry, Mrs. Slade explains that she had found out that her friend was in love with Delphin and had become frightened of how pretty her friend was, how quiet, how sweet. In a rage, Mrs. Slade sent the letter. Mrs. Slade has no idea why she's telling Mrs. Ansley now. Mrs. Ansley says perhaps it's because she has gone on hating her. Mrs. Slade says, perhaps - or perhaps she just wanted to come clean. She asks Mrs. Ansley if she thinks her a monster. Mrs. Ansley says she doesn't know. That was the only letter she had from Delphin, she says, and now Mrs. Slade is saying he didn't write it. Mrs. Slade accuses her of still caring for Delphin. Mrs. Ansley says she cared for the memory.

Suddenly, looking down on Mrs. Ansley's fragile form, Mrs. Slade finds herself intensely jealous. For years, she realizes, Mrs. Ansley has been subsisting emotionally on that letter. She must have loved him so much to hold that letter - ostensibly from her friend's fiancy - so dear. Mrs. Ansley was the monster! She bursts out, "You tried your best to get him away from me, didn't you? But you failed, and I kept him." Mrs. Ansley answers yes.

Mrs. Slade rants on. She wishes she hadn't told her friend. She had thought Mrs. Ansley would be amused. She had no reason to believe Mrs. Ansley had taken the affair so seriously, especially since she married Horace Ansley two months afterward. She had written the letter as a joke. She felt bad afterward, especially when she found out how ill Mrs. Ansley had become. But girls can be ferocious, she says, especially when they're in love. She spent the evening in question laughing to herself, imagining Grace Ansley running about in the dark, waiting for a man who wouldn't appear.

But, Mrs. Ansley says, reflecting back, he *was* there. She answered the letter, and he was there waiting for her at the Colosseum. Then, she looks at Mrs. Slade and says she feels sorry for her. Mrs. Slade says she doesn't know why. Mrs. Ansley says, because he was there. She didn't have to spend the night waiting for him. He was there after, all.

Mrs. Slade says that may be true, but she had him for twenty-five years, and Mrs. Ansley had nothing but a letter he didn't write. Mrs. Ansley replies, "I had Barbara," and steps ahead of her friend to walk toward the stairway.

Analysis

In "Roman Fever," Edith Wharton plays with common stereotypes of women and explores several themes. One theme she explores is the often competitive nature of relationships between women, especially when men are involved. But the most predominant theme here is the often stark difference between a woman's appearance

and the reality of her true identity underneath. Irony - the literary term for a significant difference between expectation and reality - plays a crucial role in this story. Gaps between the reader's expectations for characters and their true identities, as well as gaps between the characters' expectations of each other and their true identities, are important.

It is interesting to note the names by which the main characters are referred to throughout the story. During the first seven paragraphs, they remain unnamed, anonymous - Wharton refers to them as the "dark" and "smaller and paler" ladies, respectively. It is not until the eighth paragraph that the reader is informed that the dark lady's name is Mrs. Slade, and not until the ninth paragraph that the reader is told the smaller and paler lady's name is Mrs. Ansley. Wharton's choice to begin the story without naming her characters has the effect of emphasizing their external appearances, and of forcing the reader to draw conclusions about their characters based on those appearances alone, because the characters do not do much in those beginning paragraphs to characterize themselves otherwise.

For example, based on popular female stereotypes, the reader might presume the "smaller and paler" lady to be the more delicate and graceful and less intelligent of the two, and the "dark lady" to be the more cunning and audacious. Wharton even encourages the reader to make these presumptions, confirming these stereotypes with her characters' initial thoughts and behavior. When Mrs. Slade reflects on her friend in part one, she gives an impression of Mrs. Ansley as an exceedingly lovely young girl who has grown into a perfect, tame, and dull specimen of old New York - a contrast to her daughter, Babs, who - despite her perfect, tame, dull parents - has grown into an "effective" woman who has "edge." And when it is Mrs. Ansley's turn to give her impression of Mrs. Slade, Wharton describes Mrs. Ansley as being "much less articulate" than her friend, which should serve to confirm the reader's presumption that Mrs. Ansley is, indeed, less cunning and intelligent.

Nevertheless, Wharton clearly gives the reader several cues that there is more to Mrs. Ansley and Mrs. Slade than meets the eye. The women's reflections on each other at the end of part one are prompted by Mrs. Ansley's statement that she has come to the conclusion that she does not in the least know who their daughters are, and her subsequent suggestion that perhaps she and Mrs. Slade did not know much more about each other at that age, either. Then, as the women fall into silence, Wharton writes that the women are reflecting on how little they know about each other. Furthermore, Wharton's choice not to reveal Mrs. Slade's and Mrs. Ansley's first names before this point hints at the fact that the women are not as intimate as they are pretending to be. Finally, after revealing Mrs. Slade's and Mrs. Ansley's impressions of each other, Wharton ends part one with the statement that the two ladies visualize each other "each through the wrong end of her little telescope," implying that Mrs. Slade and Mrs. Ansley cannot see each other clearly at all.

Wharton's choice to reveal Mrs. Slade's and Mrs. Ansley's first names at the point when they begin reflecting on their pasts is an interesting one. It is almost as if, in marriage, the women became the formal Mrs. Delphin Slade and Mrs. Horace Ansley, completely

assuming the identities of their husbands and making their first names irrelevant, except when discussing the past when the women were still single. The women's use in the present of formal, assumed names and identities not only hints at the fact that they are interacting, only as formal acquaintances, but also hints at the formal and somewhat constrictive social structure women were expected to follow in the time during which the story is set.

The story reveals that several generations of women have taken their daughters to Italy with the apparent purpose of finding them husbands. Mrs. Slade mentions the tale about Mrs. Ansley's "wicked" great aunt, who purportedly sent her sister out to pluck a nightblooming flower for her album with the sole purpose of getting her sick because they were in love with the same man - a purpose which succeeded in her sister's contraction of the Roman fever and death. Mrs. Slade's and Mrs. Ansley's grandmothers took their daughters to Italy to look for husbands; this is implied when Mrs. Slade suggests that in their grandmothers' time it was easier for a mother to look after her daughter - all their grandmothers had to do was tell their mothers that staying out after dark might invite a potentially fatal illness (Roman fever).

Mrs. Slade and Mrs. Ansley searched for husbands in Italy, and during the period of time that the story takes place, Babs and Jenny have flown to Tarquinia with some aviators for tea, perhaps also searching for husbands. Mrs. Slade is convinced that Babs is after the most eligible bachelor, and she is certain that her daughter, Jenny, though clever in her own way, is no match for Babs. Thus, before the end of the story, Wharton prepares the reader for its final revelations, by showing four generations of women competing against each other for husbands - sometimes in a violent, cruel, and desperate manner.

Of course, the most important revelation at the end of the story is not the fact that Alida Slade wrote the letter that sent Grace Ansley out after dark to meet Mr. Slade at the Colosseum, or the fact that Grace Ansley treasured the forged letter, or even the fact that Grace Ansley's unexpected response to the letter brought Mr. Slade out to meet her. The most important revelation at the end of the story, the unexpected twist that makes the entire story sing with irony, is the fact that Grace did not become sick as a result of that night with Delphin, but pregnant.

Mrs. Ansley's final statement that she had more than a forged letter to remember Delphin by, that she, in fact, "had Barbara," is deeply ironic because of everything it explains and implies. It explains Grace's marriage to Horace Ansley so soon after that summer - that marriage did not, as Alida Slade had assumed, mean Grace did not care for Delphin; it was Grace's mother's attempt to save her daughter's reputation. Mrs. Ansley's final statement also explains Babs' nature. Throughout the story, Mrs. Slade has wondered how two such boring and dull parents could manage to conceive such an edgy and effective daughter, while she and Delphin - from whom one might expect such a daughter - ended up with perfect, tame Jenny. But the revelation that Babs was the offspring of Delphin and Grace explains that those qualities were not some kind of genetic fluke; Babs probably inherited them from her father, Delphin. Alternatively, Babs might have inherited those qualities from her mother, Grace - whom Mrs. Slade, by the

end of the story, must realize she has completely underestimated - and Jenny might have inherited her tameness and dullness from her mother.

If Mrs. Slade can so underestimate Mrs. Ansley, she must not, as Mrs. Ansley thought in part one, be "quite as brilliant as she thinks." She may even have underestimated her own daughter, who is likened to Mrs. Ansley throughout the story, and overrated Babs, as Mrs. Ansley suggests early on. Perhaps, at that moment, it is Jenny who is after the most eligible aviator in Tarquinia, Jenny who is using Babs as a foil - because none of the women in this story turns out to be quite as we visualized them in the beginning, through the wrong ends of our little telescopes.

Characters

Barbara Ansley

Barbara Ansley is the brilliant and vivacious daughter of Mrs. Ansley. Barbara and her mother are vacationing in Rome with their neighbors, Mrs. Slade and her daughter Jenny Slade. Barabara and Jenny are away spending time with some Italian aviators during the story's conversation between Mrs. Slade and Mrs. Ansley. Mrs. Slade envies Mrs. Ansley for her brilliant daughter. During the course of this conversation, Mrs. Ansley reveals to Mrs. Slade that Barbara is the daughter of Mrs. Slade's late husband, Delphin.

Grace

Ansley Mrs. Grace Ansley, a middle-aged widow, is a wealthy New Yorker who is vacationing in Italy with her daughter Barbara, and her neighbor Mrs. Slade, and her daughter Jenny Slade. In Mrs. Slade's opinion, Mrs. Ansley has led a staid, uneventful life.Although she presents the picture of the proper middle-aged widow, for instance, knitting and looking at the Roman view, her calm exterior hides a secret past.

As a young lady in Italy, Grace (Mrs. Ansley) fell in love with Alida's (Mrs. Slade's) fiance, Delphin. However, after meeting him one night at the ruins of the Colosseum, she had become quite ill. When she rose from her sickbed, she immediately married Mr. Ansley.

Despite her marriage to Mr. Ansley, she has always nursed the memory of her evening with Delphin, and the letter he had sent her. When Mrs. Slade reveals that she, in fact, sent the letter, not Delphin, Mrs. Ansley's fantasy is destroyed. She, in turn, reveals to her friend an even more devastating secret: that her dynamic daughter, who Mrs. Ansley has long noted is so different from either of her parents, is in fact Delphin's daughter.

Mrs. Ansley

See Grace Ansley

Alida Slade

Mrs. Alida Slade, a middle-aged, wealthy, New York widow, is vacationing in Italy with her daughter Jenny, her neighbor Mrs. Ansley, and her daughter Barbara Ansley. The wife of a famous corporate lawyer, Mrs. Slade found her married days filled with excitement and adventure. She prided herself on being a charming entertainer, a good hostess, and a vibrant woman in her own right. After the death of her husband Delphin,

Mrs. Slade finds life dull, with only her daughter to divert her; however, Jenny is quiet and self-sufficient.

Mrs. Slade feels both superior to and envious of her lifelong friend, Mrs. Ansley. She also has been nursing a decades-long resentment against Mrs. Ansley, for falling in love with Delphin when Mrs. Ansley and Mrs. Slade were both young ladies on vacation in Italy. Afraid that Grace (Mrs. Ansley) would steal away her fiance, Alida (Mrs. Slade) sent Grace a note, signing Delphin's name. When Grace went to meet Delphin, she became quite ill.

During this trip to Italy, Mrs. Slade, wanting to hurt her friend even after all these years, confesses to Mrs. Ansley that she, not Delphin, sent the letter. Mrs. Slade immediately regrets her action, and she can't help but feel sorry for her friend, after she sees how Mrs. Ansley has cherished the memory of that letter. When Mrs. Slade expresses this feeling, however, Mrs. Ansley shocks her with the revelation that Barbara (the daughter of Mrs. Ansley) is Delphin's daughter.

Delphin Slade

Although Delphin Slade is dead at the time the story takes place, he remains a prominent figure in the minds of both his wife and his former lover, Grace (Mrs. Ansley). The story hinges on his past actions. As a young man, while engaged to Alida (Mrs. Slade), Delphin met Grace at the Colosseum one night and fathered Barbara. This secret has been concealed from his wife for the past 25 years.

Jenny Slade

Jenny Slade is the quiet, staid, self-sufficient daughter of Mrs. Slade. She is accompanying her mother to Rome along with Mrs. Ansley and her daughter Barbara Ansley. Jenny and Barbara are away spending time with some Italian aviators during the story's conversation between Mrs. Slade and Mrs. Ansley.

Mrs. Slade

See Alida Slade

Themes

Friendship

Mrs. Slade and Mrs. Ansley have been friends since they first met as young women in Rome, when Alida (Mrs. Slade) was engaged to Delphin Slade. This friendship forms the enduring tie between Mrs. Slade and Mrs. Ansley. However, their friendship is undercut by the deeper, hostile feelings they have for each other, feelings that they hardly dare to admit. Because each has something to hide about the early days of their friendship, they have not been honest with each other in their friendship.

In addition, their friendship has not been very intimate, despite their similar backgrounds and close proximity to each other on same street in New York. Mrs. Slade, in particular, strongly dislikes Mrs. Ansley, because of Mrs. Ansley's love for Delphin. She has made fun of Mrs. Ansley to their mutual friends, and she believes that Mrs. Ansley has led a much duller life than she and Delphin. At the same time, however, she cannot shake her envy of Mrs. Ansley. Mrs. Ansley, on the other hand, believes that "Alida Slade's awfully brilliant; but not as brilliant as she thinks." She also believes that Mrs. Slade must be disappointed with her life, alluding to undisclosed failures and mistakes.

The competitive nature of their friendship reaches a climax one afternoon in Rome. As Mrs. Slade views the ruins of the Colosseum in Rome, she cannot help but remember the anger she felt at Grace's (Mrs. Ansley's) love at the time for her fiance. She confesses, after 25 years, that she had lured Grace to the Colosseum by forging a note from Delphin. Mrs. Ansley's repsonse to this confession that Barbara is Delphin's child completely alters the relationship between the women.

Rivalry

Mrs. Slade and Mrs. Ansley have been rivals throughout their long friendship. Sometimes this rivalry is expressed subtly, as when Mrs. Ansley says that the view upon the Palatine ruins will always be the most beautiful view in the world "to me," as if she alone is privy to the glories of Rome. Sometimes the rivalry is expressed directly through the women's thoughts. For example, Mrs. Slade compares herself directly to Mrs. Ansley. She believes that her widowhood is more difficult than Mrs. Ansley's widowhood, for she had led a full, active life as the wife of an international corporate lawyer, while Mrs. Ansley and her husband were more of "museum specimens of old New York," or in even less kind terms, "nullities." Mrs. Slade also admits to envying her friend, a habit that she developed long ago.

The cause of this barely acknowledged rivalry becomes clear as the story develops. Mrs. Slade has never gotten over the fact that Grace (Mrs. Ansley) had fallen in love with her fiance Delphin Slade, and had gone to the Colosseum to meet him.

The rivalry between these women runs very deep. At one point, Mrs. Slade implies a desire for her friend's death. When she brings up their past adventures in Rome, she refers to Mrs. Ansley's great aunt, a woman who sent her sister to the Forum because they were in love with the same man —the sister caught malaria that night and died.

Love and Passion

Mrs. Slade considers herself more dramatic and passionate than Mrs. Ansley. She believes that she had contributed as much as her husband to "the making of the exceptional couple they were." She also values the quality of being dynamic, and admits that she has "always wanted a brilliant daughter." However, neither Mrs. Slade's words nor her actions seem to reveal great depths of love or passion she felt for her husband or her daughter. Her greatest passion seems to have been for her late son, whose death made her feel "agony." But she blocks out this feeling, because the "thought of the boy had become unbearable." Finally, the life that Mrs. Slade now leads seems to be one of order, even if she does not embrace such order.

Ironically, Mrs. Ansley emerges as the more passionate of the two women. Although she seems to be involved in more mundane activities, such as knitting and playing bridge, her revelation of the night that she spent with Delphin at the Colosseum demonstrates that she is capable of hidden depths of passion. Living across the street from Delphin for twenty-five years and raising his child suggest that she is capable of enduring love as well.

Style

Setting

"Roman Fever" is set in Rome, Italy, around the mid-1920s. On the one hand, the ruins of Rome become the focus of Wharton's skill at descriptive writing. On the other hand, the ruins of Rome remind both women of an earlier time spent in Rome together when their friendship and rivalry both began. More generally Wharton shows the kind of life a woman of independent means could lead in Rome at that time.

The setting of Rome is contrasted with the home neighborhood of the two women on Manhattan's East Side in NewYork. Mrs. Slade and Mrs. Ansley have lived across the street from each other so close that each woman knows all the mundane details of the other's everyday life. But this setting is too confining to allow them to communicate their true feelings. It is only in Rome that Mrs. Slade feels able to reveal the truth to Mrs. Ansley.

Point of View

The story is told from a third-person, omniscient point of view. This means that readers see and hear what the characters see and hear, and that readers are also privy to their thoughts. However, in this case, the interior life, motivations, and reactions of Mrs. Slade are revealed to a greater extent than those of Mrs. Ansley's. For example, readers know that Mrs. Slade decides to tell the truth about the letter Delphin was supposed to have written 25 years ago because she is envious of her rival and dislikes her, though at the same time she believes she is a good person. Readers also know that she regrets her words after she has said them. On the other hand, not much is revealed about Mrs. Ansley's motivation. Readers do not know, for instance, why Mrs. Ansley decides to reveal the truth about Barbara's parentage.

Structure

Although the story is relatively brief, it is divided into two sections. The first section provides the background and history of Mrs. Slade and Mrs. Ansley. The second section develops the theme of the rivalry between the two women, concluding with the truth about Barbara's parentage. The two parts also represent the past and the present.

In the first part of the story, Mrs. Slade notes Mrs. Ansley's odd emphasis on the personal pronoun me when she talks about the view of Rome from the terrace. She also notes Mrs. Ansley's emphasis on the personal pronoun I when she says "I remember" in response to Mrs. Slade's comment about the summer they spent in Rome as girls. Although Mrs. Slade attributes this emphasis to Mrs. Ansley's being old-fashioned, the emphasis really alludes to Mrs. Ansley's fond memories of the time she spent with Delphin.

In the second part of the story, Mrs. Slade's musings show that she is gearing up toward something more significant than a simple conversation about malaria. At one point, she watches Mrs.Ansley knitting and thinks, "She can knit—in the face of *this* !" The reader wonders what *this* refers to, since up to this point the women are simply having a casual conversation about the past.

Symbolism and Imagery

Wharton makes use of a number of symbols and images to reinforce the emotions of the story. The ruins that the two women are gazing at of the Palatine, the Forum, and the Colosseum symbolize the ruins of these women's perceptions of themselves and each other. Mrs. Ansley calmly knits, which would seem to be the staid activity of a middle-aged woman, but what she is knitting is described as "a twist of crimson silk." Her knitting can be said to represent the passionate and more frivolous side of her nature. Also, the women's actions can be viewed symbolically, to indicate their feelings toward the conversation and each other. As soon as Mrs. Slade starts to talk about their shared past, Mrs. Ansley lifts her knitting "a little closer to her eyes," thus shielding herself and her reactions from Mrs. Slade. However, when Mrs. Slade learns that Mrs. Ansley did meet Delphin at the Colosseum, it is Mrs. Slade who must cover her face and hide her deepest emotions. In fact, by the end of the story, the power structure has changed, as shown by Mrs. Ansley's actions. After revealing the truth about Barbara's father, she "began to move ahead of Mrs. Slade toward the stairway."

Historical Context

Old New York

"Roman Fever" was written in the 1930s and is set in the 1920s, but the story's characters and values reflect the attitudes of upper-class society in New York in the last half of the nineteenth century. Mrs. Slade and Mrs. Ansley are the product of that environment of affluence and relative ease. The author Wharton belonged to this circle and was able to make this society come alive in her story. In Wharton's world, families such as the Astors and the Vanderbilts could be found at the height of the social ladder. In addition to this aristocratic class of people who came from old names and old money were the *arrivistes*. These arrivistes had earned their fortunes more recently and were often richer than the aristocrats. These members of high society entertained themselves by attending the theater and opera, by paying and receiving social calls, by attending lunch and dinner parties and house parties, by traveling abroad, and by summering in such fashionable spots as Newport, Rhode Island.

In this society, women were seen as moral judges. But, despite this important role, most families did not believe that girls needed to be educated. Instead, they felt that education should be acquired only for womanly purposes, for instance, to fulfill her future husband's needs. A woman's role in life was to be a homemaker, and her single-minded purpose was to make a good marriage.

American Women in the 1920s and 1930s

The roles and accepted forms of behavior of American women in the 1920s and 1930s changed. After decades of struggling, women had won the right to vote when the 19th Amendment was ratified in 1920. Young women, known as "flappers," exerted their greater independence by wearing shorter dresses, wearing makeup, and cutting off their long hair into bobs. They drove cars, played sports, and smoked cigarettes in public. Young women also increasingly worked outside the home, which brought them greater economic and social freedom. When a woman married, however, she was expected to quit her job and function solely as wife and mother. Thus, despite the achievements of women and changes in society, the homemaker still remained the ideal of American womanhood.

American Writers Abroad

Wharton was not the only American writer to spend a significant part of her life abroad, traveling and writing. Many of the writers known as the Lost Generation, such as Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald, lived in Europe during the 1920s. Gertrude Stein, an American, even hosted a salon in Paris, where some of the greater artistic names of the day met and discussed ideas. Many of the writers of the 1920s were haunted by the death and destruction of World War I. They also scorned middle-class consumerism and

the superficiality of the post-war years. Expatriate writers often chronicled the changes that were rapidly taking place in society and culture, emphasizing the new standards that were emerging.

Italy in the 1920s and 1930s

Italy was undergoing many political and social changes in the 1920s and1930s. Italians felt bitter about their experiences in World War I, particularly as the Versailles peace treaty failed to give Italy the territory it wanted around the Adriatic Sea. In the years following the war, Italy entered a period of economic hardship, rising inflation, and workers' strikes. The government seemed incapable of resolving these problems. Under these conditions, Benito Mussolini emerged as a new and powerful leader. A strong nationalist, Mussolini founded Italy's Fascist Party, which rose to power in the early 1920s. Beginning in 1921, the Fascists and the Communists engaged in violent clashes. The situation in Italy quickly bordered on civil war.

Mussolini soon became the Italian premier. As early as 1925, he expressed his desire to create a complete dictatorship. He gained control of parliament and established a secret police. These measures allowed him to crush all dissenting members of society. Mussolini transformed Italy into a totalitarian state, meaning the government controlled all aspects of society, including politics, the economy, and culture.

Mussolini also expanded the Fascist Party's militia, and in the 1930s, he followed his plan for expanding Italy's territory and making the country an imperial power. In 1935, Italian forces invaded Ethiopia, and the African kingdom fell the following year. Italy also took control of Albania on the Adriatic Sea, and controlled territory in Northern Africa. Italy's increased aggression was coupled with the rise of a totalitarian government in Germany and the rise of militarism in Japan. By 1939, Europe was in the grip of World War II.

Critical Overview

"Roman Fever" was first published in 1934 in *Liberty* magazine; two years later, Wharton included it in her final short story collection, *The World Over*. At the time, a few years before her death, Wharton was a literary star, both in the United States and abroad. As such, the story collection received reviews from newspapers and magazines ranging from the *The New York Times* to the *Saturday Review of Literature*. The majority of reviewers found the collection to be, on the whole, a pleasing and successful representation of Wharton's work. Fanny Butcher pointed out in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* that although many contemporary readers tended to think of Wharton primarily as a novelist, *The World Over* served as a "fresh reminder of her incomparable skill in the short story." Percy Hutchinson, writing for the *New York Times*, found that the collection proved that Wharton's reputation as a "master" of the short story art form could not be tarnished.

Many reviewers also singled out "Roman Fever" for special praise.*Punch* magazine found "Roman Fever" "worth re-reading, after an apparently unproductive first perusal, for the sake of the final sentence on which its every word converges." Butcher declared that of the stories in the collection, "there are three which any writer might envy and which few could equal" "Roman Fever" was one of these. Other publications, such as the *New Statesman and Nation* and *Catholic World*, also agreed that "Roman Fever" was the best story in the collection.

Over the decades, Wharton biographers and critics have made note of "Roman Fever", but have varied in their evaluation of the story. As early as 1959, Marilyn Jones Lyde claimed the story to be one of Wharton's best works. Almost 20 years later, Cynthia Griffin Wolfe, in *A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton*, agreed with this assessment. Neither of these authors explained why she felt the story was so successful. In 1970, Geoffrey Walton expressed a different opinion: "'Roman Fever' is a very light comedy that can be taken as a kind of farewell skit on the decorum of the great days." Yet Walton also found that the story presented a "glimpse of an unexpected kind of sophistication."

More recently, particularly as interest in the works of Wharton has increased, the body of contemporary criticism has grown. However, as Alice Hall Petry points out in her essay, "A Twist of Crimson Silk: Edith Wharton's Roman Fever," "[It] is curious that so widely-anthologized a work has generated such a paucity of critical interpretation." She categorized earlier criticism as "tepid." She then examines in her essay how a minor element of the story, the act of knitting, can be seen as a way of "appreciat[ing] the complex art of 'Roman Fever.'" Petry believed that Wharton used knitting in a particularly "provocative" manner, indicating Wharton's interest in developing a technique that, as stated by the critic E.K. Brown, shows that she cared "about the processes of art."

Another recent essay, Lawrence I. Berkove's "'Roman Fever': A Mortal Malady," explored the angle of the moral landscape represented by Wharton: "the story, besides

being artistic, is a powerful exemplum about the dangerous susceptibility of human nature to the mortal diseases of the passions." Berkove discussed the moral standards evinced by Mrs. Slade and Mrs. Ansley, and concluded by declaring that "Roman Fever" "is a reminder that art as great as [Wharton's] is not only an aesthetic accomplishment but also a way to come to grips with the causes and cures of the maladies of the human soul."

Petry's calls for "serious critical attention" for "Roman Fever" have yet to be answered, but readers seem to view the story as a complex, refined work of art.

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Korb has a master's degree in English literature and creative writing and has written for a wide variety of educational publishers. In the following essay, she discusses how the characters in "Roman Fever" reveal themselves to be not what they seem.

In 1934, the renowned author Edith Wharton, who had been writing for close to 50 years, published her memoirs, *A Backward Glance*. She had attained widespread critical and popular acclaim almost three decades earlier, with the publication of the novel *The House of Mirth*. The book quickly became a bestseller, earning Wharton $30,000 in 60 days and solidifying her reputation as a writer of merit. Wharton enjoyed a rich career, publishing 26 novels and novellas (including two after her death), 11 collections of short stories, nine works of nonfiction, and three volumes of poetry. Wharton's writings were enjoyed by readers in her own day, and in the 1980s and 1990s. Wharton's literary standing rose dramatically as new readers and critics rediscovered her writings.

In 1934, Wharton visited Rome. In many ways, this trip was not a success. Wharton had been hoping to visit parts of Italy she had not seen in 20 years, but when she arrived in Rome, she came down with the flu and had to spend the next two weeks in bed. The trip, however, did lead to what Wharton's biographer R.W.B. Lewis dubbed "another instance of backward glancing." After this trip, Wharton wrote what many critics and readers feel is one of her best short stories, "Roman Fever." The story centers on two middle-aged widows sitting on a hotel terrace overlooking the ruins of the Colosseum. Although they appear to be old friends, their intimacy masks a lifelong rivalry, caused by a love triangle. When they were young women, Grace (Mrs. Ansley) fell in love with Alida's (Mrs. Slade's) fiance, Delphin. Over the years, Mrs. Slade hid her resentment over Mrs. Ansley's love for her fiance, but she has never forgotten it, and her long-suppressed anger finally emerges. She reveals her role in the conflict: she wrote a letter to Grace (Mrs. Ansley), asking her to come to the Colosseum one night, and signed Delphin's name. Mrs. Ansley appears to be broken-hearted by the news, but she reveals a surprise of her own. She wrote Delphin back, and the two young people met that night; their meeting resulted in the conception of Mrs. Ansley's daughter, Barbara.

"Roman Fever" shows that appearances are not what they seem; nearly every preconceived notion the women have of each other, as well as each of the reader's preconceptions, is overturned. At the same time, the story reveals a great deal about the expected roles of women in the early part of the century: that of passive onlookers, content to abide by society's rules and live out prescribed roles. As the story opens, Mrs. Ansley and Mrs. Slade appear to be little more than "two American ladies of ripe but well-cared-for middle age" sitting on a terrace in Rome. The conversation of their daughters, whose voices are overheard from the courtyard below, further emphasizes the role of the older women: "'[Let's] leave the young things to their knitting' and a voice as fresh laughed back: 'Oh, look here, Babs, not actually *knitting*!'' The daughters can conceive of no more engrossing activity that might interest their mothers. Indeed, Mrs.

Ansley almost immediately and "half guiltily" drew her yarn and needles from her bag, thus fulfilling her daughter's prophecy.

Although the two women are seemingly content to wile away the afternoon peacefully on the terrace, their private thoughts are less tranquil. Mrs. Slade considers her friend a "nullit[y]" and a "museum specimen," while Mrs. Ansley believes Mrs. Slade to be "brilliant; but not as brilliant as she thinks." These private thoughts indicate both that the woman are not truly such good friends and that they are capable of keeping long-held secrets. The interior thoughts also show Mrs. Slade to be resentful of what the world has offered her. After her husband's death, she found life had become a "dullish business." Without the dynamic and successful Delphin, an international corporate lawyer, Mrs. Slade finds her role in the world to be greatly diminished. Instead, she now exists merely as "mother to her daughter." That daughter, Jenny, is yet another source of discomfort, for she is a quiet girl, one "who somehow made youth and prettiness as safe as their absence." Although she does not admit it, Mrs. Slade would prefer to have a daughter like Mrs. Ansley's Barbara, who is vivacious and vibrant.

This brief interlude, Part I of the story, shows how an older woman in the 1920s, who did not have the freedom allowed to younger girls, was defined primarily by her interactions with her husband and children. Although Mrs. Slade had compared herself to her husband "as equal in social gifts," without him, she is relegated to sitting on a terrace in Rome, or in New York, for that matter, watching others go on with the adventure of their lives. Barbara and Jenny, members of the younger generation, are embarking for an afternoon with eligible Italian aviators; and other travelers, who have also been lunching, demonstrate an interest in the Roman environment by "gathering up guidebooks." For Mrs. Ansley and Mrs. Slade, however, the primary diversions are knitting, a potential bridge game, and conversation, all activities that could be carried out at home in New York City. Mrs. Ansley even verbalizes their feelings of doing nothing new. "'[S]ometimes I get tired just looking even at this.' Her gesture was now addressed to the stupendous scene at their feet." Mrs. Ansley, however, rejects her own challenge, merely returning to her thoughts.

In Part II of "Roman Fever," Mrs. Ansley's and Mrs. Slade's true feelings about each other are revealed. The two are not as good friends as they would appear. Mrs. Ansley (then single) was willing to destroy the bonds of friendship by developing, and following up on, romantic feelings for the fiance of Mrs. Slade (also then single). Mrs. Slade recognizes the enormity of this transgression when she prods Mrs. Ansley, "But I was the girl he was engaged to. Did you happen to remember that?" When Mrs. Ansley admits to remembering this, Mrs. Slade reiterates her point with the words, "And still you went?" Clearly, Mrs. Slade cannot understand why Mrs. Ansley made such a choice. What is more surprising is their pretense for all these years, when both of them know how Mrs. Ansley broke the rules of friendship in pursuing a relationship with Delphin.

Mrs. Slade shows that her hatred toward Mrs. Ansley took on murderous proportions that summer long ago when she brings up Mrs. Ansley's greataunt Harriet, who sent her younger sister to the Colosseum because they were both in love with the same man. The younger sister caught malaria, more romantically known as Roman fever, and died,

and the tale became family folklore used to frighten children. "'And you frightened *me* with it, that winter when you and I were here as girls. The winter I was engaged to Delphin.'" The *obvious* reason that Mrs. Slade would be frightened would be of getting sick. But if she did not go out at night, when the cold air could dangerously chill the body, she would have no cause to fear for her health. Thus, the *implied* reason for her fear is that she would use this knowledge against someone else. This is exactly what she does, when she lures Mrs. Ansley to the Colosseum one night with a note falsely signed by Delphin.

Mrs. Slade's actions indicate that holding on to her man was more important than holding on to her friend. While she could be justified in making such a decision, particularly because Mrs. Ansley held no scruples in pursuing a relationship with Delphin, she takes risks with Mrs. Ansley's health and life. Although she claims that she had no idea Mrs. Ansley would get so sick, Mrs. Slade, in her own words, acted out of a "blind fury." Reasoning knew no bonds when it came to protecting her engagement from the "quiet ways," "the sweetness," of Grace (now Mrs.) Ansley. In so doing, Alida (now Mrs. Slade) also protected her future prosperity, for Delphin proved himself to be an extremely capable provider.

Mrs. Ansley's response to Mrs. Slade's provocation is more astonishing. She reveals that she had an affair with Delphin that night. Although she married soon afterwards apparently taking to her bed not because of illness but because of her precarious and embarrassing condition: the child she gave birth to, Barbara, was Delphin's. In revealing this information, Mrs. Ansley shows that since that moment she has lived out her life as a lie. It can be fairly assumed that Mrs. Ansley did not share this news with anyone; Mrs. Ansley's mother's rush to get her daughter married demonstrates the importance of keeping the pregnancy secret. Wharton had also previously dealt with the issue of illegitimacy in stories in which the true parentage of the child was covered up. As R.W.B. Lewis put it, "The situation of Grace Ansley's whole lifetime is revealed in a single phrase."

Mrs. Ansley's confession, presented in an assertive manner and accompanied by the assertive action of "mov[ing] ahead of Mrs. Slade toward the staircase," profoundly alters Mrs. Slade's perception of her. Not only has Mrs. Ansley betrayed a friendship (though Mrs. Slade had already done so), she has acted in a manner that completely defies societal codes. Mrs. Ansley's confession also gives Mrs. Slade more pause for thought. For there is also the implication that Jenny's lack of brilliance comes not from Delphin, who produced Barbara, but from Mrs. Slade.

In her book *Edith Wharton's Women*, Susan Goodman maintains that the rivalry between Mrs. Slade and Mrs. Ansley feeds their sense of intimacy. Because both women define themselves through their relationship with the other and through their competition for Delphin, their identities are "collaborative" and "interdependent." For the complex relationship between Mrs. Slade and Mrs. Ansley alone, "Roman Fever" could well merit the appreciation of decades of readers. As Margaret B. McDowell points out, "Those who have re-read the story many times are still startled by the force and power

of its compressed narrative as the women suddenly see beyond their familiar assumptions."

Source: Rena Korb, for *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Berkove asserts that "Roman Fever" is much more than a "satire on the manners of the American upper class," claiming that the various "violations" of decency and social custom are far more important.

"Roman Fever," judging from the frequency with which it is included in anthologies of short stories and American literature, is undoubtedly one of Edith Wharton's most respected stories. Edith Wharton, too, has been the subject of a recent revival of interest. It is therefore surprising that the story has received so little critical attention. First published in *Liberty* magazine in 1934 and subsequently collected in her anthology, *The World Over* (1936), it is generally considered one of the finest achievements of her "remarkable final creative period". In one of the most recent articles on it, Alice Hall Petry demonstrates evidence of the story's artistic composition, but surprisingly little was done before her article and nothing has been done since to suggest what "Roman Fever" is artistic *about*. Wharton's genius, it turns out, is moral as well as aesthetic; the story, besides being artistic, is a powerful exemplum about the dangerous susceptibility of human nature to the mortal diseases of the passions.

To think of "Roman Fever" as a satire on the manners of the American upper class—more particularly as an expose of the bitter rivalry that cankered the lives of two society matrons beneath their veneers of supposed gentility—is to see Edith Wharton as a critic of manners, but there are even greater depths in both the story and the author. Far more central to the story than who comes out on top in the viciously catty final encounter of the two women are the moral issues at stake. The offenses committed are serious. Not only do the women violate standards of decency and social custom, but in the course of their lifetime of silent combat against each other, they also negate their marriage vows, poison their lives with hatred and deception, and—even more importantly—verge upon murder.

One clue to the ominous level of immorality in the story is implicit in its title. "Roman Fever" refers, in part, to a local term for malaria. Before the disease was scientifically understood, it was believed that malaria was caused by exposure to "bad air" such as was thought to gather around marshes at night when the wind died down. Rome encompassed some marshland, including the ground on which the Forum and the Colosseum were built, and such places were regarded as dangerous, even deadly, after sunset during malarial seasons.

Another, related clue is quietly presented with seeming irrelevance in the story when Alida Slade reminds Grace Ansley of her great-aunt Harriet—a "dreadfully wicked" woman "who was supposed to have sent her young sister out to the Forum after sunset to gather a night-blooming flower"—with the result that the girl caught "Roman fever" and died. Aunt Harriet's real motive, confessed years later, was murder. Both she and her sister were in love with the same man, and Harriet maliciously deceived her sister/rival into going to the Forum, hoping to get her out of the way with malaria. Although the incident was a familiar part of Grace's family history, Alida knew of it when

both women were young and single and living in Rome, and both remembered it on the fateful night recalled in the story.

The clues add up to attempted murder on Alida's part when several apparently independent incidents are linked in their proper chronological sequence and the reader is able to reconstruct the true picture. First, immediately after reminding Grace of Aunt Harriet, Alida admits that her own passionate love for Delphin Slade—then her fiance and later her husband—"was why the story of your wicked aunt made such an impression on me. And I thought: 'There's no more Roman fever, but the Forum is deathly cold after sunset.... And the Colosseum's even colder and damper.'" Alida, it turns out, was aware that Delphin and Grace were attracted to each other, so to get her rival out of the way, she forged a note from Delphin to Grace asking her to meet him alone at the Colosseum after dark. More than twenty-five years afterward, Alida is able to repeat every word of the letter, but there is no need because Grace has also memorized it. For Alida, the memory of the letter is sweet because it accomplished its purpose: "People always said that expedition was what caused your illness." Alida feels no guilt, however, because "you got well again—so it didn't matter."

This statement is grimly ironic. "[S]o it didn't matter" blurs the fact that Alida, having sent Grace to a place more than "deathly cold," directly purposed murder. Later, Alida confesses her awareness of what she was doing, although she couches it in a defensive protest: "Of course, I never thought you'd die," but this is contradicted by her active and longstanding hatred of Grace as well as by her action. Alida consciously and deliberately repeated the act of Aunt Harriet and hoped at the time for the same consequence to result. That Grace did not die does not exculpate Alida; the malicious intention was there. It mattered a lot.

The statement is also ironic in light of the outcome of Grace's "illness." Until the story's climactic moment of mutual confession, both women have kept secret certain parts of the episode that, when put together, reveal and explain essential aspects of their lives since. Grace does not know until Alida tells her that it was Alida and not Delphin who wrote the letter appointing a meeting place. Alida does not know until Grace tells her that Grace's "illness" was not malaria but pregnancy. Grace, assuming that Delphin had written the letter, had sent him a note in reply. The next-to-last thing Grace tells Alida in the story is that she "didn't have to wait that night"—Delphin came.

With this, Alida recognizes that her victory over Grace was not quite as full as she had supposed, but she still believes that she came out ahead: "After all, I had everything; I had him for twentyfive years. And you had nothing but that one letter that he didn't write." This provides the opening for Grace's final retort: "I had Barbara."

In the context of the story, this admission has to be devastating to Alida on multiple levels. Alida feels that her daughter, Jenny, has an excess of virtue. She is too nice, too boringly straight-laced, too angelic. All her married life, Alida has envied the two "nullities," Horace and Grace Ansley, their attractive and vivacious daughter. But now she knows that Grace's daughter is also Delphin's daughter. That has to be a terrible shock. She also must realize that inasmuch as Jenny and Barbara have the same

father, the genetic difference has to have come from her. If Jenny is less "brilliant" than Barbara, this reflects—negatively—on her own contribution to Jenny. Finally, and perhaps worst of all, it means that her victory over Grace was hollow.

Thus far, Alida Slade appears the villain of the story and Grace Ansley the innocent victim, but Grace, despite her name, is not entirely virtuous, either. Alida "fears" Grace for her quiet ways and "sweetness," but Grace's final retort to Alida is vengeful, and Grace has to have known how deadly it would be. That she might have been, in a measure, driven to the remark by Alida's pressure does not alter the fact that it reveals a capacity and even a talent for malice. It also reveals the fact that her ladylike appearance is only a veneer; at heart, she is proud of having been attractive to Delphin and having had his child, even out of wedlock.

This in turn reveals what kind of lie Grace has lived for a quarter of a century. She was two months pregnant when she married Horace Ansley under pressure from her mother. There is no mention of love for Horace. On the contrary, it is obvious that Grace has never stopped loving Delphin. Were she and Horace married under false pretenses? Indeed, one wonders what sort of man he was either not to have been aware somewhere along the line that a seven months' pregnancy was suspicious, or not to have minded being drafted to marry Grace for appearance's sake. Grace has also kept from her own daughter the secret of her true father—another lie to match the cover-up of her own illicit romance with another woman's fiance. One must also wonder what sort of man Delphin Slade was to have agreed to a tryst with his fiancee's friend, to have succumbed so quickly to her charms, and to have kept this a secret from his wife. How much had he really loved Alida? Finally, one must wonder again at Grace's character, not just for having been infatuated with Delphin but also for having kept from him the truth about his relation to Barbara, for having lived as a wife with a man she does not love, and for having cherished for twenty-five years her dirty little secret about why her daughter outshines Alida's.

"Roman Fever" opens with two "American ladies of ripe but well-cared-for middle age" looking down upon the "outspread glories of the Palatine and the Forum." Several pages later, the same scene is described as a "great accumulated wreckage of passion and splendour." In light of the later description, the earlier one must be regarded ironically. Only sentimental minds would deny the wreckage and think only of the glories of ancient Rome. The central action of the story takes place in the Colosseum, a place where gladiators fought. Unbeknown to themselves, Alida and Grace continue the gladiatorial tradition. They have been relentless and unscrupulous, using their bodies, their husbands, their daughters, and their lives of lies as weapons to score on each other. In the name of love, they have been rivals for twenty-five years and sought to kill each other, one literally and the other figuratively.

Edith Wharton not only reveals these women to be little better than savages at heart but also reveals what makes them so: the primitive motives and crude pride that serve them for morality. At this point, "Roman fever" acquires another, ironic, and dark connotation: the moral disease of pagan Rome. Rome was the center of a pagan as well as a Christian culture; it remains in the story a place where a choice is made between the

two extremes of pagan self-indulgence and fevered passion, on the one hand, and Christian submission to God's laws and institutions, on the other. Nominal Christianity, Wharton shows, is no Christianity at all. In not governing their passions, the two women merely revert to becoming gladiators—sophisticated, perhaps, but pagan. Attempted murder is the ultimate step in their moral degradation, but it does not occur out of the blue; the way Alida and Grace have conducted their entire lives prepares the way. In selecting two such women to be the protagonists of "Roman Fever" Wharton demonstrates her distance from the position that women are by nature morally superior to men. She also conveys her seriousness about the moral standards that women as well as men must obey to rise above the natural human tendency to savagery.

There are moral depths in Edith Wharton's fictions that have yet to be examined. Beneath her social criticisms lies another level of values, a surprisingly traditional Christian one. "Roman Fever" is not at all an isolated instance of how Wharton's sense of morality may surface in her stories; rather, it is a reminder that art as great as hers is not only an aesthetic accomplishment but also a way to come to grips with the causes and cures of the maladies of the human soul.

Source: Lawrence I. Berkove, "'Roman Fever': A Mortal Malady," in *The CEA Critic*, Vol. 56, No. 2, Winter, 1994, pp. 56-60.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Petry explores the significance of knitting in "Roman Fever."

Probably Edith Wharton's best-known short story is "Roman Fever," the product of a 1934 trip to Rome, and the most enduring tale from her uneven late collection entitled *The World Over* (1936). It is curious that so widely-anthologized a work has generated such a paucity of critical interest, and even more curious that the few appraisals which it has received have been so tepid: Geoffrey Walton, for example, simply dismisses it as "a very light little comedy that can be taken as a kind of farewell skit on the decorum of the great days." More appreciative are Cynthia Griffin Wolff and Marilyn Jones Lyde, both of whom — without explaining the bases of their appraisals — find the story to be one of Wharton's best works. But "Roman Fever" is considerably more substantial than Walton's remark would suggest, and Wolff's and Lyde's appraisals can — and should — be explored at length. One way that we can begin to appreciate the complex art of "Roman Fever" is to examine Wharton's handling of what might at first appear to be a minor element in the story: the act of knitting.

That knitting will occupy a special position in "Roman Fever" is signified at the outset by the simple fact that it is the first matter to receive attention in the story. Grace Ansley and Alida Slade overhear their young daughters discussing them:

". . . let's leave the young things to their knitting"; and a voice as fresh laughed back: "Oh, look here, Babs, not actually knitting —" "Well, I mean figuratively," rejoined the first. "After all, we haven't left our poor parents much else to do. . . ."

Since Wharton had asserted in the brief introductory paragraph that Grace and Alida were "two American ladies of ripe but well-cared-for middle age", it is apparent that their daughters' appraisal of them as "young things" is mocking. The implication clearly is that the ladies are physically, emotionally, and intellectually capable of nothing more than the traditionally passive, repetitive, and undemanding task of knitting. By having the daughters patronize their mothers in this fashion, Wharton is predisposing the reader to perceive the ladies as stereotypical matrons; and the rest of the story will be devoted to obliterating this stereotype, to exposing the intense passions which have been seething in both women for more than twenty-five years.

A major rupture in the stereotype is the simple fact that (the daughters' remarks notwithstanding) Alida Slade does not knit at all. This unexpected situation focuses the reader's attention more intensely on Grace Ansley, whose apparently passionate devotion to knitting ultimately will enable us to probe the psyches of both women and to reconstruct the remarkable events of a generation before. The complex relationship between Grace and knitting is evident in her first action in the story: "Half-guiltily she drew from her handsomely mounted black handbag a twist of crimson silk run through by two fine knitting needles". The sentence presents two distinct aspects of Grace's character. The phrase "half-guiltily" is in keeping with the persona she has presented to the world throughout her adult life. "Smaller and paler" than the assertive Alida, Grace is

"evidently far less sure than her companion of herself and of her rights in the world". The "evidently" is eloquent, for although Grace may seem embarrassed by her hobby, the physical objects themselves tell a far different story about her: she has chosen "crimson" silk, an insistently passionate color; and the skein has been "run through" by needles, a startlingly assertive image. The sensuality and forcefulness suggested by her knitting materials will help to render plausible her passionate moonlight tryst with Delphin Slade twenty-five years earlier, as well as her capacity to stand up to the vicious taunts of Alida, the "dark lady" of the piece.

Quite early in the story, then, knitting has ceased to be a general symbol of complacent middle-age: it is rapidly becoming a complex personal emblem for Grace, and in fact one may gauge Grace's mental state according to how she manipulates her knitting materials. This element first becomes obvious in the second portion of the story, wherein Grace recognizes instinctively that she and Alida have reached, "after so many years, a new stage in their intimacy, and one with which she did not yet know how to deal". That intimacy is far from positive: both women recognize that Alida is very much in control of the situation, steadily steering the conversation to the matter of the love triangle in which they had been involved so many years before. Grace's response to Alida's catty remark that Rome is "'so full of old memories'" is to begin knitting: "She settled herself in her chair, and almost furtively drew forth her knitting. Mrs. Slade took sideway note of this activity, but her own beautifully cared-for hands remained motionless on her knee". The aggressive Alida needs nothing to occupy her hands, but the guilt-ridden Grace —predisposed to "fidget"—uses her knitting as a physical means of containing her growing stress, of maintaining some semblance of order in a situation not in her control. As Alida continues to press her advantage, ironically lamenting how much modern girls were "missing" out on in disease-free, twentieth-century Rome, Grace "lifted her knitting a little closer to her eyes"— not simply because "the long golden light was beginning to pale", but also because it serves as a physical barrier behind which to protect herself from Alida's probing. Closely aligned with this, the knitting offers Grace an ideal excuse for responding neither immediately nor extensively to Alida's painful interrogation. Further, it enables her to avoid making eye contact with her tormentor:

"When Roman fever stalked the streets it must have been comparatively easy to gather in the girls at the danger hour; but when you and I were young, with such beauty calling us, and the spice of disobedience thrown in, and no worse risk than catching cold during the cool hour after sunset, the mothers used to be put to it to keep us in — didn't they?"She turned again toward Mrs. Ansley, but the latter had reached a delicate point in her knitting. "One, two, three — slip two; yes, they must have been," she assented, without looking up.

Alida Slade's reaction to this is noteworthy:

Mrs. Slade's eyes rested on [Grace] with a deepened attention. "She can knit — in the face of *this*!"

Alida's palpable annoyance suggests that Grace's knitting is more than just an evasion tactic: those needles are effective psychological weapons against a woman who is deliberately tormenting her for having once loved Delphin Slade. In fine, the fact that Grace knits under duress indicates that she is vastly different from the pale, cringing matron of the story's opening paragraphs.

As the strength of character of which the knitting is an emblem becomes more insistent, Grace gradually begins to rely less upon it. Alida's "hardly audible laugh" over Grace's imagined use of drab Jenny as a foil for lovely Barbara causes Grace, for the first time, literally to drop her knitting. Her "'Yes —?'" is virtually an offer of an open confrontation, and Alida seems to back down: "'I — oh, nothing'"; but Alida's painful questioning of how the "exemplary" Ansleys could have produced the exquisite Barbara is momentarily too much for Grace: "Mrs. Ansley's hands lay inert across her needles. She looked straight out at the great accumulated wreckage of passion and splendor at her feet". Instinctively, Grace then attempts to regain her composure by knitting — an act which Alida ironically misinterprets:

Mrs. Ansley had resumed her knitting. One might almost have imagined (if one had known her less well, Mrs. Slade reflected) that, for her also, too many memories rose from the lengthening shadows of those august ruins. But no; she was simply absorbed in her work.

The temporarily thwarted Alida accelerates the process of steering the conversation to the winter evening twenty-five years earlier when the letter brought Grace to the Coliseum; and it is the fact that Alida can "'repeat every word of the letter'" which causes Grace to stand up: "Her bag, her knitting and gloves, slid in a panic-stricken heap to the ground". To a certain extent, Grace's mental state (panic) is being projected onto the physical objects with which she has been associated throughout the story; but more importantly, her anxiety — like her knitting — is falling away. Alida Slade is frankly stunned by Grace's emotional strength: "Mrs. Ansley met the challenge with an unexpected composure"; "' I shouldn't have thought she had herself so well in hand,' Mrs. Slade reflected, almost resentfully". For the first time in the story, Alida is at the disadvantage, waiting "nervously for another word or movement," and Grace's revelation that she had indeed met Delphin at the Coliseum causes Alida to cover her face with her hands — just as Grace had once hid behind her knitting. As the story closes, Grace realizes she has the upper hand, having not only slept with Delphin, but also given birth to the daughter whom Alida so covets. Grace's newly dominant status is signified by changed body language (previously, Alida always stood above — and looked down upon — Grace; now, Grace "began to move ahead of Mrs. Slade" toward the stairway; but more importantly, Grace is no longer associated with knitting. She departs the restaurant terrace apparently without bothering to pick up her dropped knitting materials. Further, she wraps her throat in a scarf — not a knitted scarf, but one of sensuous fur. And as a subtle underscoring of the reversal of the two women's roles, it is the defeated Alida who picks up her hand-bag — presumably to do some knitting (of the usual, mundane sort) of her own.

In its way, the act of knitting is as vital to "Roman Fever" as is, say, the pickle dish to *Ethan Frome*. That so seemingly benign an activity can be utilized in so provocative a fashion is indicative of Wharton's particular interest in technique — "an interest which makes . . . her shorter pieces of fiction suggestive to the reader who cares, as she did, about the processes of art." Far from being "a very light little comedy," "Roman Fever" is a complex work of art, richly deserving serious critical attention.

Source: Alice Hall Petry, "A Twist of Crimson Silk: Edith Wharton's 'Roman Fever,'" in *Studies in Short Fiction*, Vol. 24, No. 2, Spring, 1987, pp. 163-6.

Adaptations

"Roman Fever" is a one-act opera based on Wharton's short story; the music is composed by Robert Ward and the vocal score is written by Roger B. Brunyate. It was published by ECS Publishing in 1993.

Topics for Further Study

Investigate the effects of malaria in the early 20th century and how scientists have worked to combat this life-threatening disease.

What can you determine about the role of wealthy Americans in the early 20th century? What social position did they occupy? How would you define their position abroad?

Conduct research on the Roman ruins mentioned in the story. What role do you think their history and presence have in the unfolding drama?

Read one of Edith Wharton's novels, such as *The House of Mirth or The Age of Innocence*. How do the characters and the social framework in the novel compare to those in "Roman Fever"?

Although "Roman Fever" was written in the 1930s, it is set in the mid-1920s. Which decade does the story more accurately reflect? What changes took place in society between these two periods?

An opera was based on "Roman Fever." Pick another art form, such as a play, a musical, or a mural. How would this art form depict the themes, actions, and characters of "Roman Fever"?

Imagine that you are a literary critic. How would you assess "Roman Fever" in terms of artistic composition and message? (Be sure to use the text to support your argument.) Create an outline for your essay.

Compare and Contrast

1920s: Malaria is a life-threatening, infectious disease. For instance, in 1914, around 600,000 Americans died after contracting malaria, primarily in the Mississippi River valley and along the East Coast. However, some of these fatal cases of malaria arose because doctors used the disease to treat another fatal disease, syphilis.

1990s: The World Health Organization estimates that there are 300 to 500 million cases of malaria reported each year, resulting in 1.5 to 2.7 million deaths. In developing countries, malaria is one of the leading causes of sickness and disease. The occurrence of malaria has actually risen in many countries in the last half of the 20th century. However, malaria poses little threat to western countries, such as the United States and Italy.In 1992, the United States reported 910 cases of malaria, but only seven of these were acquired in the country. Many of these cases occur among immigrant populations.

1920s and 1930s: Italy's government is based on totalitarianism, meaning the government controls all aspects of society, including the economy, politics, and culture. Benito Mussolini rules Italy with dictatorial power.

1990s: Italy practices a parliamentary republic. The prime minister of Italy is the head of the ruling party, while the president functions largely as a ceremonial figure. Throughout the decade, Italy's government has been somewhat unstable, changing ruling parties numerous times.

1920s and 1930s: Although figures are not available for the number of children conceived out of wedlock in the 1920s and 1930s, social stigma was attached to illegitimacy. In the early 1920s, Wharton wrote a story about a woman who conceived a child out of wedlock. This story was rejected by almost every magazine to which it was submitted, because the subject matter was too unpleasant. The number of births to unmarried women has steadily increased from 5.3 percent of the population since the mid-1900s, so perhaps the number of illegitimate births in the 1920s and 1930s was around or less than 5.3 percent of the U.S. population.

1990s: Of U.S. women giving birth, 28 percent, or 1,165,384, are unmarried. The number of illegitimate births has grown by 60 percent since 1980. While some people still attach stigma to illegitimacy, illegitimacy has become an accepted part of American culture, as witnessed by the number of famous single women who have children and by the willingness of people to talk about such matters, for instance, on talk shows.

What Do I Read Next?

Wharton's House of Mirth (1905) brilliantly depicts the ruthless and destructive nature of New York society.

A Backward Glance is Wharton's autobiography, published in 1934, three years before her death.

The Collected Short Stories of Edith Wharton (1991), introduced and edited by Wharton's biographer R. W. B. Lewis, presents her finest works of short fiction.

Ellen Glasgow's short story, "The Difference" (1923), shows one woman's reaction to finding out about her husband's unfaithfulness.

Daisy Miller (1878) by Henry James tells of a young girl in Rome during the height of the malaria epidemic.

Lost New York (1971) by Nathan Silver describes old New York society and surroundings.

Nathalia Wright's *American Novelists in Italy* (1965) discusses a number of American writers and their relation to, and the influence of, Italy.

Edith Wharton and Henry James: The Story of Their Friendship (1965), by Millicent Bell, uses the correspondence of the two writers to understand their relationship.

Further Study

Bloom, Harold, ed. *Edith Wharton*, New York: Chelsea House, 1986.

A collection of critical essays on the works of Wharton.

Dwight, Eleanor. *Edith Wharton, An Extraordinary Life*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994.

An overview of the life and times of Wharton. Includes personal correspondence and photographs.

Lewis, R. W. B. *Edith Wharton, A Biography*, New York: Harper & Row, 1975.

A comprehensive work about the life and literature of Wharton.

McDowell, Margaret B. *Edith Wharton*, Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991.

A critical overview of Wharton's writing.

Nevius, Blake. *Edith Wharton: A Study of Her Fiction*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953.

Discounts prevailing critical thought and presents insightful criticism of Wharton's work.

Wharton, Edith. *Collected Letters of Edith Wharton*, edited by R. W. B. Lewis and Nancy Lewis, New York: Scribner's, 1989.

Collection of 400 annotated Wharton's letters.

Wolff, Cynthia Griffin. *A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1977.

Presents a psychological biography of Wharton, as well as criticism.

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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.

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