Stones in My Passway, Hellhound on My Trail Study Guide

Stones in My Passway, Hellhound on My Trail by T. Coraghessan Boyle

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Introduction

"Stones in My Passway, Hellhound on My Trail," one of the collected pieces in T. Coraghessan Boyle's *Greasy Lake and Other Stories* (1985), has been singled out as one of his best stories. It centers on a blues musician named Robert, a fictionalized version of the famous blues artist Robert Johnson, during the final night of his life. The tale incorporates the myth that surrounded Johnson's life: the story that has been passed down for generations is that Johnson sold his soul to the devil so that he could play the blues better than anyone else. Robert does, in fact, play better than anyone else does, but by the end of the story his talent cannot save him from his fate. Boyle weaves an intricate and lyrical portrait of the artist's last hours with glimpses of his troubled past. This well-crafted story explores questions of determinism, free will, and choices and their consequences as it traces one man's inability to clear the stones from his passway or shake the hellhound from his trail.

Author Biography

T. Coraghessan Boyle was born Thomas John Boyle in Peekskill, New York, to Irish immigrant parents, on December 2, 1948. When he was seventeen, he changed his middle name to Coraghessan and adopted the initial "T" for his first name. Boyle admits that much of his youth was spent consuming drugs and alcohol and rebelling against authority. He started out his college career as a music major at the State University of New York at Potsdam, and after earning his Bachelor of Arts degree in 1968 he took a position teaching high school English to avoid being sent to serve in the Vietnam War. He began writing short stories while in college, and in 1972, one of his early stories, "The OD and Hepatitis Railroad or Bust," was published in the *North American Review.* This publication inspired him to apply to the famous University of Iowa Writer's Workshop, where he later would earn an Masters in Fine Arts and a Ph.D.

His first novel, *Water Music* (1981), reinforced his reputation as an up and coming American humorist. The novel was praised for its wit and invention but criticized for what some considered its lack of depth. His next novel, *Budding Prospects* (1984) received similar reviews. With the publication of *World's End* in 1988, critics determined that Boyle had finally lived up to his artistic promise. Boyle has also earned praise for his short story collections including *Greasy Lake and Other Stories* published in 1985, which contains "Stones in My Passway, Hellhound on My Trail." *The Road to Wellville* (1993), his most popular novel, was made into a movie starring Matthew Broderick and Anthony Hopkins.

Boyle received a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship in 1977, the PEN/Faulkner Award in 1988 for *World's End* (1987), and the 1990 and 1999 PEN Award for a short story. He has been teaching creative writing at the University of Southern California since 1977.

Plot Summary

Part One

Boyle prefaces "Stones in My Passway, Hellhound on My Trail" with an excerpt from a song titled "Stones in My Passway" by blues composer and singer Robert Johnson. The story opens with the main character, identified only as "Robert," playing blues at the House Party Club in Dallas on a Saturday night. "His voice rides up to a reedy falsetto that gets the men hooting and then down to the cavernous growl that chills the women." The club, "dingy and brown" with cigarette smoke, is full of working class black men and women, drinking and dancing the evening away. The men concentrate on Robert's intricate picking while the women "look into his eyes." It is 1938, moving toward the end of the depression and the beginning of World War II, but Robert seems oblivious to anything but his music. He has not eaten in two days.

The narrative flashes back to an incident when Robert was fifteen involving a poisoned dog. While working out in the field one day, someone shouted that a dog named Loup had gone mad. They all ran to watch the frenzied dog "howling death until the day was filled with it, their ears and the pits of their stomachs soured with it." Crazed with pain, the dog began to dig at his poisoned belly until it opened, spilling intestines on the ground. Then one of the men killed it with a shovel blow to the head to end its suffering. Afterward, Robert came close to take in every detail of death amid "the litter of bottles and cans and rusted machinery."

Back in the present of the club, between sets, Robert goes out back with a girl named Beatrice under Ida Mae Doss' disapproving stare. Ida Mae is the proprietor's daughter and cooks for the club's patrons. When he comes back to the stage, he feels Ida Mae's "cold, hard," razor sharp eyes on him, and he sheepishly shrugs as if to say that he cannot help himself. Beatrice then "steams in" and requests Robert play "something sweet," and Robert begins to play "Phonograph Blues," a song that suggests the singer is sexually worn out. As Ida Mae continues to "look daggers," Beatrice moves to the center of the floor and dances seductively to the music.

Part Two

The narrative at this point flashes back to when Robert was a teenager and was beginning his career as a blues musician. The narrator notes that no one is really sure when exactly Robert started playing. He left his job as a field laborer when he was sixteen, and a year and a half later he walked into the Rooster Club in Mississippi with a new guitar and listened to Walter Satter's performance. After Satter finished playing, Robert approached him and asked if he could sit in on the performer's next set. Robert's guitar work so dazzled Satter that the man stayed on stage with him for only a short while before he stepped down and let the younger man play on his own.

Back at the House Party Club, the evening wears on. Most of the patrons have quieted, slowed down by the alcohol they have consumed, except for Beatrice, who is still gyrating to the music. When she falls, Robert stops playing, picks her up off the floor, and leads her to a stool. After Beatrice starts to snore, Robert turns to the bar and a moist-eyed Ida Mae, asking her for some food.

The narrator then lists the towns Robert has played along with the names of several different women he has been with, noting that people are saying he has been "driving too hard" and so he's "got to stumble." Boyle then places the story in its historical context by citing important events that occurred in 1937, including Robert's series of recordings for Victrix Records. Robert appears as if he has been oblivious to historical events, attentive only to the music he makes and his life of women and alcohol. Sometimes, however, his lifestyle got in the way of his music. In one recollection, Walter Fagen from the recording studio sent him money for a ticket to New Orleans, but Robert quickly spends "the bills whispering in his palm."

Soon after, Robert made it to New Orleans with a nonrefundable one-way ticket. Fagin gave him money and instructed him to show up at the Arlington Hotel the next morning. Yet that night, Fagin was called to bail Robert out of jail where he was being held for disorderly conduct. The bruised and guitarless Robert "had nothing to say" about the incident until later when he admitted to Fagin, "I'm lonesome." He explained that he was "a nickel short" for a woman who will sell him her favors.

Back in present time in the bar, Robert is playing his last set. The narrator notes that earlier a patron was stabbed in the neck during a fight and an old, drunken woman had cut her head in a fall but "now things are winding down." As he begins his final song, Robert's stomach cramps. While he sings "got to keep moving, / Hellbound on my trail," he shivers in agony. Finally he falls to the floor, and as he dies, he looks up and sees Ida Mae's "cold hard features." The final image of Robert snarling like a dog links him to the earlier story of the poisoned dog, suggesting that Ida Mae has poisoned him.

Summary

"Stones in My Passway, Hellhound on My Trail" is T. Coraghessan Boyle's short story about the last night of Blues musician Robert Johnson's life in a bar in Dallas in 1938.

The story begins on a Saturday night in 1938 at a bar called the House Party Club in Dallas where a man named Robert plays the guitar and sings, his voice affecting both the men and women patrons of the club. The House Party Club, owned by a man named Huddie Doss, is dark, dingy, and filled with rowdy field hands and other laborers who slip on the spit and tobacco juice on the floor. Robert sits on a stool at the opposite end of the room from the bar made from a wooden plank stretched across two barrels. Robert lives for his music, traveling around the south, and sometimes forgetting to eat, as he has for the past two days.

The story transitions to a memory of fifteen-year-old Robert, who watches a mad dog tear out its own intestines. Robert works with other men in a field when someone yells that a dog named Loup has gone mad. Robert runs with the other men toward the sound of the howling dog pacing and dragging its hindquarters along the ground. One of the men directs a boy to find a man named Turkey Nason and tell him to bring his gun. Turkey never arrives, though, and the dog begins wildly tearing at its gut with a hind leg. The dog's actions break through the skin and the canine is now free to bite out his own intestines. As the dog's actions increase in intensity, one of the men steps forward and kills the dog by hitting it on the head with a shovel. Robert remembers looking at the bared teeth and pink entrails of the dead dog lying on the road.

The story reverts to the Dallas club where Robert spends time outside with a girl named Beatrice during breaks in his music sets. When Robert returns from one of these interludes, he catches the eye of Ida Mae Doss, Huddie's daughter, who is not happy that Robert has been with Beatrice. Robert smiles back at Ida Mae but is interrupted by Beatrice, who requests a sexually suggestive song. Robert complies and sings the song. Ida Mae begins to dance alone in the center of the floor to the rhythm of Robert's song.

The story moves back in time once more, this time explaining the beginning of Robert's musical career at the age of eighteen. It is not known how Robert obtained a new guitar but one night he enters the Rooster Club in Robinsonville, Mississippi, to listen to a man named Walter Satter play guitar. During Walter's break, Robert tells him that he had heard Walter's record, which taught Robert quite a bit about playing guitar. Satter is flattered and asks Robert to join him in playing the next set of songs. Robert is so talented that Satter eventually leaves the stage to let Robert play solo.

The action returns to the House Party where Beatrice still dances seductively in the center of the floor. Suddenly Beatrice falls to the floor, the glass in her hand breaking as she lands. The room falls silent as Robert stops playing and rushes to rescue Beatrice and move her to a chair along a wall where she falls asleep in her drunken state. When the patrons realize that there is no serious injury, the noise level once again picks up in

the crowded room. Robert walks to the bar to speak to Ida Mae, who has a polished guitar pick hanging on a chain around her neck. Robert gets another drink and asks Ida Mae what she has been cooking in the back room and she replies that she has eggs and beans.

The plot reverts again, this time to the prior year of 1937 when Robert had made some recordings for Victrix Records. Robert had been in Biloxi, and a representative from the company, Walter Fagen, sent him train fare to New Orleans to record. Robert was so excited about the money, though, that he spent it on women and liquor and did not make the trip to New Orleans until the man from Victrix sent a one-way nonrefundable ticket. Fagen meets Robert at the train station, deposits him at a boardinghouse, and tells him to come to the Arlington Hotel the next morning. A few hours later, Fagen is called to bail Robert out of jail where he is being held for disorderly conduct. Fagen once again deposits Robert at the boardinghouse giving him thirty-five cents for tomorrow morning's breakfast. Not long after this, Fagen receives a call from Robert requesting a nickel so that he can pay a prostitute who charges forty cents.

Now, Ida Mae works frantically in the back room preparing a plate of food for Robert, who had told her that he has not eaten for two days. As Ida Mae fries the eggs and stirs the beans, she notices the can of rat poison on the shelf overhead.

Robert is now playing his last set and the club is calming down with the late-evening lull, which follows a typical night of raucous behavior. Robert's voice is low and melancholy as he sings a song about a woman, a suitcase, and a train station. The crowd shows its appreciation with clapping and whistles. When Robert begins the chords of his final song, he is suddenly cut off by stabbing stomach cramps. Robert tries to sing again, but collapses to the floor, his intestines writhing in fiery pain. Someone teases Robert about eating too much Mexican food but Robert cannot hear and looks up to snarl at Ida Mae staring back at him and holding the silver necklace.

Analysis

The story is told from the third person narrative point of view, which means that Robert's story is related as events occur or have occurred in the past. The author provides no insight into the thoughts or emotions of Robert or any of the other characters. The author transitions frequently from current action to events from Robert's past and then back to the present again. This style is the only way that Robert's past is described and his character is developed. It is not defined in the story, but Robert is the famous Blues musician, Robert Johnson, born in Mississippi and considered one of the finest Blues musicians of all time. The author provides only one clue to Robert's identity with the two lines from one of Robert Johnson's songs, which precede the story. "I got stones in my passway and my road seems black as night. I have pains in my heart, they have taken my appetite."

The author provides small interjections of current events and people such as the mention of FDR, the dust bowl, Amelia Earhart, and Jesse Owens to provide a backdrop

of the historical context of Robert's life. Robert, however, seems to be oblivious to everything except music and women. The author writes, "Another time he spent six weeks in Chicago and didn't know the World's Fair was going on. Now he plays his guitar up and down the Mississippi, and in Louisiana, Texas, and Arkansas. He's never heard of Hitler and he hasn't eaten in two days."

The significance of the story's title is that "Stones in My Passway" and "Hellhound on My Trail" are titles to two of Robert Johnson's most famous songs. Robert's short life of twenty-four years was bleak, and his having been born in poverty in Mississippi lends itself to the lyrics, "I got stones in my passway and my road seems black as night." The song "Hellhound on my Trail" has significance also because of the legend surrounding Robert that he had sold his soul to the devil so that he could play guitar better than anyone else could in the world. A hellhound is a demonic creature and perceived by Robert to be always in pursuit.

The author uses the literary device of foreshadowing with the incident of the mad dog, which claws at its poisoned guts just as Robert will writhe in agony when Ida Mae poisons him at the end of the story. To add to the dramatic effect, as Robert dies, he even looks up at Ida Mae and snarls like a dog would. There is also foreshadowing when the author describes the guitar pick hanging on a silver chain around Ida Mae's neck, the same necklace she holds in her hands as she watches Robert writhing in pain from the poison.

Ida Mae's necklace symbolizes her relationship with Robert, given that it is fashioned with a guitar pick most probably presented to her by Robert after an intimate encounter. This helps the reader to understand that Ida Mae's fury has some basis as opposed to a random fit of jealousy over Robert's attentions to Beatrice. The author reinforces Ida Mae's intent to poison Robert when he writes, "Agamemnon, watch out!" as Ida Mae prepares Robert's dinner. This is in reference to the Greek mythological hero, Agamemnon who was also killed by a jealous woman Clytemnestra. Robert clearly loves the company of women but has no sense of discretion and behaves indiscriminately, which is his ultimate undoing.

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loves the company of women but has no sense of discretion and behaves indiscriminately, which is his ultimate undoing.

Characters

Beatrice

Beatrice is a young patron of the House Party Club. After a sexual encounter with Robert in back of the club, Beatrice spends the rest of the evening dancing seductively to Robert's music before she falls asleep, drunk, in a chair. Robert's obvious attraction to Beatrice enrages Ida Mae and prompts her to poison him.

Huddie Doss

Doss is proprietor of the House Party Club in Dallas where Robert plays and sings the blues.

Ida Mae Doss

Ida Mae is Huddie's daughter and the cook at the House Party Club. Her actions during Robert's last night at the club suggest that she and Robert have a romantic relationship. She wears a silver chain with a guitar pick, probably Robert's. Her jealousy emerges as she watches Robert with "cold, hard ... eyes like razors" as he goes outside with another woman during a break from one of his sets. When they return, and Beatrice begins to dance slowly and seductively to Robert's music, Ida Mae "looks daggers" at the two of them. When Robert asks her to cook him something, it becomes apparent that she has been crying. The narrator suggests that Ida Mae poisons Robert because of his infidelity. As he writhes in agony after eating the food she has prepared, he looks up and sees her "cold hard features" staring down at him as she holds her necklace with the guitar pick in her hand.

Walter Fagin

Walter Fagin, from Victrix Records, tries to help Robert's career. Robert, however, carelessly spends the money Fagin gives him and often misses his appointments. One night, Fagin has to bail Robert out of jail where the musician is being held for disorderly conduct.

Robert

The narrator never reveals Robert's last name, but since the story opens with a passage from a song by Robert Johnson, with the same title as the story, we can assume he is a fictionalized version of the blues artist. Robert's masterful playing of the blues "gets the men hooting" and "chills the women." Robert lives fully in the moment. He is oblivious to everything around him except for his music and the women he cannot seem to keep

away from. When he knows Ida Mae has seen him go out back with Beatrice, he understands that he has been caught, but he offers her only a sheepish grin and continues to watch the younger woman bump and grind to his music.

The narrator chronicles Robert's irresponsible past. The musician spends money as soon as it "whispered in his palm" on women, alcohol, and Cuban cigars and sometimes finds himself having to be bailed out of jail. His behavior often causes him to miss important playing and recording dates. Robert's self-destructive lifestyle catches up with him when Ida Mae poisons him because of his infidelity with Beatrice.

Walter Satter

Satter is a blues musician. Robert's first public performance is at the Rooster Club in Mississippi one night when Satter is playing. Robert asks the older man if he can sit in on his set, and Satter agrees. After playing with him for a while, Satter recognizes Robert's talent and lets him perform on his own. This session begins Robert's career.

Themes

Determinism and Free Will

In "Stones in My Passway, Hellhound on My Trail," Boyle plays with the myth that when he was a young man, Robert Johnson sold his soul to the devil to be able to play the blues better than anyone else. The story' s title suggests that Robert is fighting a losing battle to avoid paying the devil his due. The hellhound, Cerberus in Greek mythology who guards the gates of the underworld, chases him while stones impede his escape route. In the story, Robert's destiny does seem predetermined, but Boyle suggests that Robert's self-destructive tendencies, rather than the devil, are the culprits. Ever since Robert started his career as a blues performer, he has figuratively placed stones in his own path. He continually misses recording dates and performances due to his penchant for alcohol and women. While clearly no one but Robert is controlling his destiny, Boyle questions how much free will Robert has, given his obvious weaknesses.

Strength and Weakness

Robert does display strength of character with regard to his music. Without ever having made a public performance, he has the courage to come up to an established blues artist and ask him if he can sit in on one of his sets. Robert so dazzles the older man with his playing, that he walks off the stage and lets Robert take the spotlight. He has also had the perseverance to learn his craft so well that when he plays, he "gets the men hooting" and "chills the women." His skillful playing always compels listeners to "pound over the floorboards like the start of the derby."

His weaknesses, however, overpower his strengths. Throughout his life, he never seems to be able to act responsibly. He appears to be oblivious to what is happening around him and concentrates only on his music and his fast-paced life style. On his last night, he has not eaten for two days.

Robert has been able to establish relationships with women, but he has never been able to sustain them. It is apparent that he had forged some kind of bond with Ida Mae because she wears his guitar pick on a silver chain around her neck and because he looks sheepishly at her after being with Beatrice. Yet he does not have the strength to resist his desire to live constantly in the moment, without any regard for the consequences of his actions.

Choice and Consequences

When Robert's weaknesses prompt him to make the wrong choices, he must suffer the consequences. When he gets involved in fights, usually over a woman, he lands in jail. His final choice, to go out in back of the House Party Club with Beatrice, proves fatal. Robert understands that he has betrayed Ida Mae but only shrugs sheepishly in

response. His inability to stop his roving eye or even to try to persuade Ida Mae that he will in the future stay faithful to her unleashes her wrath, and she poisons him. Ironically, by the end of the story, Robert sings the title song but with one important word change. "Hellhound on my trail" has now become "Hellbound on my trail," suggesting that Robert is the only one to blame for his tragic end. He has been bound for hell from the beginning.

Growth and Development

In most literary works, the main character goes through a period of growth and development when he or she learns important lessons about himself or herself and the world. This change is often triggered by a moment in the story when the main character experiences an epiphany that matures him or her. Robert, however, is a static character throughout the story. He never learns any lessons as a result of the problematic situations he continually finds himself in. Each time Robert finds himself in trouble with a woman or the law, he never appears remorseful or makes any attempts to change his destructive behavior. Ultimately, he is destroyed by his inability to grow and develop from his experiences and to stop placing stones in his own path.

Style

Structure

Boyle rejects a traditional chronological structure for a more fragmented form that juxtaposes vignettes from Robert's past with the story of Robert's present to illustrate his self-destructive lifestyle. This structure also suggests the inevitability of Robert's death at the end of the story.

Foreshadowing

Boyle uses foreshadowing to hint at what will happen to Robert on his last night at the House Party Club. Near the beginning of the story, the narrator goes back into the past to the time when Robert was fifteen, and he watched a poisoned dog named Loup die. Loup suffered a slow, agonizing death, as he tore at his cramped stomach until his intestines spilled out onto the ground. Boyle uses the dog's death to forecast Ida Mae's poisoning of Robert and his subsequent death.

Postmodernism

Postmodernism is a literary period that is generally considered to have begun after World War II. Postmodernist literature carries modernism's experiments with traditional literary forms and content to an extreme. Literary works in this period subvert conventional ideas of thought and experience in an effort to illustrate the meaninglessness of existence. "Stones in My Passway, Hellhound on My Trail" fits into this literary mode in its refusal to force the main character to a moment of self-knowledge and thus to perhaps save himself. The sum total of Robert's experiences provides no meaning for him. In this sense, Robert becomes an antihero, the typical protagonist of postmodernist fiction.

Historical Context

Robert Johnson

Robert's life in "Stones in My Passway, Hellhound on My Trail" parallels that of the famous blues artist Robert Johnson. Contemporary blues artist Eric Clapton called Robert Johnson "the most important blues musician who ever lived." Clapton insisted that Johnson was "true, absolutely, to his own vision," and the most "deeply soulful" musician he had ever heard. He adds that Johnson's music "remains the most powerful cry ... you can find in the human voice." Like the Robert in the story, Johnson became a successful recording artist. During the late 1930s, he recorded several songs for Vocalion Records.

According to historian Stephen C. LaVere, Johnson "had very little trouble making himself popular with the girls. In fact, he had more trouble keeping his hands off them." LaVere suggests that Johnson's lifestyle "eventually ... would be his downfall." The historian also notes that Johnson "couldn't handle his liquor at all" and as a result would often get into fights.

Johnson died under slightly different circumstances than did his fictionalized counterpart. When he was playing at a country roadhouse called Three Forks, located deep in the Delta in Greenwood, Mississippi, Johnson started seeing the wife of the manager. One night, after he finished a set, he drank from an open bottle of beer. Shortly afterwards, he collapsed, clutching his stomach in agony. Johnson's friends who were there that night determined that the manager had poisoned him. Johnson survived the incident; however, in his weakened condition, he contracted pneumonia and died soon after on August 16, 1938.

The Great Depression

The story is set in the deep South during the Great Depression that held America in its grips during the 1930s. The depression was a severe economic crisis that occurred in the United States after the stock market crash of 1929. The impact on Americans was staggering. In 1933, the worst year of the depression, unemployment rose to sixteen million people, about one third of the available labor force. During the early years, men and women searched eagerly and diligently for any type of work. However, after several months of finding no sustained employment, they became discouraged and often gave up. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal policies, which offered the country substantial economic relief, helped mitigate the effects of the depression, but the recovery was not complete until the government channeled money into the war effort in the early 1940s.

Dust Bowl

During the 1930s, parts of the United States' prairie states were struck with severe dust storms that smothered crops and injured the health of those who lived on the land. The most devastating effect was the blowing away of topsoil, crucial for the farming industry. The Dust Bowl resulted from the severe overuse of the land.

The depression and the Dust Bowl serve as the backdrop for "Stones in My Passway, Hellhound on My Trail." Although Robert seems oblivious to his surroundings, Boyle's inclusion of this historical context could suggest that Robert's self-destructive behavior is a result of his desire to escape the reality of his historical moment.

Critical Overview

"Stones in My Passway, Hellhound on My Trail" appears in Boyle's *Greasy Lake and Other Stories* (1985), a collection that was well received by critics. Most felt that the promise Boyle displayed in his earlier work is more fully realized in this collection. The stories have been applauded for their diverse subject matter as well as Boyle's innovative style and wit. Larry McCaffery, in his review for *The New York Times Book Review,* calls the stories in the collection "brilliant," even though, he argues, they exhibit some unevenness in execution. McCaffery applauds the stories thematic focus, commenting that they "display a vibrant sensibility fully engaged with American society and with the wonder and joy that defiantly remain a part of our culture as well." Denis Hennessy, in his article on Boyle for the *Dictionary of Literary Biography,* praises Boyle's "never-ending supply of surprises and ironies" in the stories.

McCaffery singles out "Stones in My Passway, Hellhound on My Trail," suggesting that the story "may be the collection's most powerful piece." He especially praises the ending that, he insists, contains "a passage of extraordinary beauty that illustrates Mr. Boyle's feel for human passions and sensuous evocative prose."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4

Critical Essay #1

Perkins is an associate professor of English at Prince George's Community College. In this essay, she considers how the structure of "Stones in My Passway, Hellhound on My Trail" reinforces the story's theme.

Traditionally, literary works focus on a main character who is presented with a problem to solve. This problem centers on one or more conflicts that occur between the main character and another person, an act of nature, a social institution, or the character him/herself. Authors typically subject their characters to experiences in which they gain knowledge about themselves and the world around them and then, in turn, use that information to resolve the conflicts in their lives. Often a character will gain this knowledge through an epiphany, a moment of revelation when a certain truth is immediately understood. The epiphany may come too late to save the protagonist, but he or she will have at least come to an understanding of their personal tragedy.

Some contemporary writers, however, like Tom Robbins, Thomas Pynchon, and John Barth, have challenged this traditional structure in their work. These writers, often called postmodernists, reject the notion that experience always presents itself in a way that we can understand, accept, and then act upon. T. Coraghessan Boyle has also been included in this group of writers. Scholars have noted that often Boyle's characters find themselves in positions where they could gain a better understanding of themselves and their world; however, they often miss or ignore the opportunity to do so.

Maril Nowak, in her article on Boyle for *Contemporary Popular Writers,* notes that Boyle's main characters, always male, are "awash in American humor's traditions—brawn, bravado, and ineptitude" and "sideslip every chance to be a hero." They sideslip their chances because they are unable to recognize or to understand crucial elements of their experiences and to learn from them.

One such character appears in Boyle's critically acclaimed short story, "Stones in My Passway, Hellhound on My Trail." In this piece, Boyle's main character Robert, an accomplished blues musician, fumbles the opportunity to gain knowledge about himself and his world and, as a result, is destroyed. Boyle's innovative narrative structure highlights his focus in this story on the stones we often find in our path to self-knowledge.

Boyle effectively weaves together myth, biography, and historical reality to highlight Robert's problematic experiences and the difficulty he has in learning from them. He introduces myth and biography in the story's title, alluding to the tale passed down through the generations that one dark night when Robert Johnson found himself at a crossroads in the heart of the Delta, he made a pact with the devil. He agreed to give up his soul for the ability to play the blues better than anyone ever had or ever would. Boyle suggests that Robert is a fictionalized version of Robert Johnson by opening the story with an excerpt from Johnson's song, "Stones in My Passway," and by patterning much of his character's life after the blues singer's.

Boyle's humanization of this myth provides one possible reason for Robert's tragic end. The title, which Boyle has cobbled together from two of Johnson's songs, suggests that Robert's life has been determined by an outside force and thus that he should not be held accountable for his actions or for his ultimate destruction. When the narrator later admits that "no one knows how Robert got his guitar," Boyle reinforces the sense of myth, implying that there might have actually been a hellhound chasing him while the devil placed stones in his passway. Yet Boyle's intricate weaving of historical and personal reality proposes an alternate, more logical hypothesis: Robert's own actions coupled with his inability to understand or accept the consequences destroy him. Boyle's inclusion of myth serves to point out how theories of determinism can be used erroneously to excuse an avoidance of responsibility.

Nowak points out that Boyle's characters "seem always to be backing toward the crumbling cliff, pushing the envelope of possibility, and refiguring the odds of survival. This would be heroically grim if they weren't such clowns and bumblers." Robert pushes the envelope of possibility through his music and his destructive lifestyle, which Boyle highlights through historical vignettes that he inserts into the story.

Robert's music helps him and his listeners transcend the harsh reality of existence during the depression years. The beauty of the music becomes a temporary outlet for his passion and energy and creates a community of listeners in the House Party Club, all profoundly moved by his performance. The self-destructive behavior that he is too weak to avoid also, however, pushes the envelope of possibility and results in his death.

The first hint that Robert lives in a world of his own that he refuses to examine occurs when Boyle places Robert's story in its historic context. The narrator describes the events that are taking place in 1938 at the time when Robert is playing at the House Party Club. Americans are in the grip of the depression, and in the South, the Dust Bowl. These details could suggest that Robert's inclination for alcohol and women could be a result of his efforts to escape the reality of his environment. Yet, the narrator also notes that positive changes are occurring: Franklin Delano Roosevelt has enacted New Deal policies that will help alleviate the hardships of the depression, and Jesse Owens, a black athlete who broke records at the 1936 Olympics, is becoming a household name. Robert, however, is oblivious to these events as well as to his own health. The narrator notes that he hasn't eaten in two days.

Boyle's narration then pulls readers into the past with an incident Robert observed that serves as a foreshadowing of his fate. When he was a boy, working in the fields of a southern farm, he becomes fascinated with the sight of a poisoned dog, dying a slow agonized death. Crazed with pain, the dog eviscerates itself. This event foreshadows Robert's poisoning and suggests that, like the dog, he was an accomplice in his own death.

The main event in the story, Ida Mae's poisoning of Robert, results from his infidelity with Beatrice, a young patron of the House Party Club. Boyle's continuous breakup of the narrative's chronology reveals that Robert's behavior that night was not an isolated incident. As Boyle tells the story of that night, he juxtaposes it with glimpses of similar

incidents when Robert has acted irresponsibly. Robert has continually missed recording dates and sessions, has found himself in jail, and too often his dreams are "thick with the thighs of women." When he gets caught, he offers excuses that reveal his inherent weakness. For example, when he spends all of his money on a woman, he admits that he did it because he was lonely.

His inability to recognize the effects of his behavior results in his final act of irresponsibility. When Ida Mae catches him with Beatrice, Robert offers no explanation, only a shrug, suggesting that he will probably betray her again. It is apparent that Robert has established a relationship with Ida Mae since she wears a guitar pick on a silver chain around her neck. The pick's seed-like shape, coupled with Ida Mae's offering of eggs to Robert, suggests that the two have been intimate and perhaps that Ida Mae is pregnant. The narrator reinforces this probability when he describes Ida Mae, "cracking eggs, a woman scorned." He then notes that the eggs "stare up at her like eyes. Tiny embryos." Robert, however, refuses to acknowledge her pain or her anger or his responsibility to her.

In the final paragraph, which Larry McCaffery praises for its "extraordinary beauty" in its presentation of "human passions and sensuous evocative prose," Boyle weaves into the narrative the words to Johnson's "Hellhound on my trail," as Robert sings his final song. Boyle, however, makes one important change in the lyrics. As the poison flows through Robert's system, he sings "Got to keep moving, / Hellbound on my trail." When Boyle changes "hellhound" to "hellhound," he notes that Robert himself, and not some outside menacing force, has created his own fate.

Boyle's creative structuring of "Stones in My Passway, Hellhound on My Trail" presents a portrait of a man who has been "hellbound" on a destructive path his entire life. The promise of his greatness, evidenced in his powerful blues performances, has been shattered by his inability to recognize or understand the reality of his world and his actions within it. Boyle's masterful short story reveals the tragedy of a man who places stones in his own passway, hellbound on his trail.

Source: Wendy Perkins, Critical Essay on "Stones in My Passway, Hellhound on My Trail," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

Hamilton is an English teacher at Cary Academy, an innovative private school in Cary, North Carolina. In this essay, she explores how Boyle's short story illustrates how individuals can become trapped by their desires.

The myth of capitalism is that anyone with talent can make a better future for himself. Through hard work and taking advantage of opportunities that arise, so the myth goes, an ambitious person can find success and happiness. To accomplish such a change in fortunes entails a metamorphosis, as the successful entrepreneur adapts to a more affluent society. In most "rags-to-riches" stories, this is the easiest part of the journey because the character simply uses his newfound riches to buy the things that will transform him into the image of success. But what happens when the person cannot adapt to a new society, when he fails to develop the right tastes and habits? "Stones in My Passway, Hellhound on My Trail" demonstrates what happens when an individual fails to change his habits and desires when the opportunity arises to escape the poverty of his social class. His story is a tragedy of failed potential.

Robert is a black blues singer who earns a meager living singing and playing his guitar and in run-down bars in the late 1930s, when black people in America had limited career opportunities. Racism, while not the focus of Boyle's tightly constructed story, can be inferred ultimately as to blame for his tragic end, yet it is not his race but Robert's social surroundings and habits that lead to his downfall. Robert's life conditions limit his life choices. His desires, as shaped by his economic status and cultural surroundings, hold him back. Even though he has a highly marketable talent that could make him a wealthy man, once a white agent discovers him, Robert is unable to take advantage of this opportunity. He fails at one of the essential mechanics of capitalism, which requires that desires keep pace with production, and stay in balance.

On a societal level, a healthy capitalist economy maintains a balance between production and desire. Production cannot exceed desire, or else there will be too many goods and not enough people to pay for them. By the same token, too much desire and not enough productions equals insufficient supply for the demand. On a personal level, each person in a capitalist society must individually balance what he can produce with what he desires; otherwise, he will either be unhappy (working for no gain) or destitute. In addition, capitalist society provides opportunities for those in lower economic classes to rise to higher levels if they offer something of value to that class level. Then, as an individual moves up from one class to another, he will prosper if his desire and production stay in balance at the new level. In capitalist terminology, Robert has a promising means of production (his singing and guitar playing) that could allow him to move into a higher class, but his vulgar desires are obstacles that thwart his ambition.

Robert begins his career at his own social level, playing in the local bar. The pay is not good, and he spends every penny he earns on women and liquor. Because of his carousing, he cannot accumulate enough money (capital) to advance. He might find stability by marrying Ida, the woman who serves drinks at the bar, but his excessive

desires destroys that relationship, too. Had his talent not been noticed by someone from another class, he would have been destined to remains in this vicious cycle for the rest of his life. However, an agent from Victrix Records offers him a contract to make records. The recording contract represents a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for Robert to escape his impoverished life and better himself. Robert is excited about the opportunity and celebrates by getting drunk. Ultimately, however, he proves unable to take advantage of the offer the agent extends him. He fails not because he does not have the talent the agent seeks but because of his limited view of the world and of his own place in it. His desires have been shaped by his community to fit its own circumstances, and he has no way of re-shaping his desires to fit the expectations of the agent's world, so that he can escape from poverty. In fact, Robert is totally unaware of what kind of transformation he will have to undergo to rise above his status at the lowest rung of capitalist society. He has no control over his destiny because he has no control over his desires. Like the coonhound, Robert's desires and actions are not self determined but are imposed by those around him.

The bar in which Robert plays and sings is a microcosm of capitalist society. Here, field hands and laborers waste their paltry wages on cheap, homemade liquor, cigarettes, and Mexican food. They, like Robert, earn just enough to support their desires, therefore, their desires and production are in balance. A balanced capitalist society offers financial security when desires match production. Capitalist society provides social security to those who accept the social roles that have been shaped for them and who limit their desires to products available in their own social class. Even within his own class, Robert is out of balance both financially and socially. He is out of balance financially because he cannot produce enough to accommodate his desires, and he is out of balance socially because his inability to curb his appetite prevents him from being able to sustain an intimate relationship.

That he cannot curb his appetite for women and liquor offends the woman who loves him, Ida Mae. She wants him to settle down with her, to fulfill her working-class community role. Her desire is symbolized by the guitar pick "in the shape of a seed" on a silver necklace that dangles between her breasts. The symbolism of the guitar-pick seed and the reference to her breasts represent a conjugal union between Robert and her, following the normal path of marriage and family. However, she cannot fulfil her familial role with Robert because he shows no restraint in his desire for women. He consumes women in the same way that he consumes alcohol. He dances with Beatrice right in front of Ida, flaunting his excess, while she glares at him. He remains oblivious to her anger, blindly and selfishly pursuing his own desires. He does not recognize the potential danger of failing to conform to the social roles expected of him. He further offends her by asking her to cook for him, despite the fact that he has failed to satisfy her desires: he tries to consume without "producing." When Ida retaliates by poisoning him, her act carries significance because it strikes back at him through consumption. Her act hearkens back to the coonhound at the beginning of the story that also was poisoned. In both cases, consuming indiscriminately proved fatal.

Robert would not have died at Ida's hands had he not failed to take the opportunity to escape his world. But he cannot escape his own world because he has limited

knowledge of the world outside of his own. He has never heard of Hitler because he cannot read and apparently does not listen to or comprehend the news on the radio. Furthermore, he knows nothing of the World's Fair, which took place during the six weeks that he visited Chicago, in one of his few ventures away from home. The World's Fair is the epitome of a cross-cultural marketplace of desires and producers. That Robert remains ignorant of it indicates his unreadiness to enter that market. Constrained by the state of things into which he is born, Robert cannot imagine the world of social and economic exchanges that keep him on the bottom rung of society. His sight is limited by the boundaries of his present social landscape.

"Stones in My Passway, Hellhound on My Trail" graphically illustrates the difficulty of escaping from the lower stratum of society to a higher social level when the subject cannot adjust to new desires and ways of producing. Robert does not know how to advance within the capitalist hierarchy of social structures. At the top of the hierarchy, the richest people have many options available to them while at the bottom of the hierarchy, poor people have fewer opportunities. Within this hierarchy, each social class has its own unique way of desiring and producing. Affluent classes desire expensive goods and disdain to consume the goods that are the mainstay of lower classes. Poorer groups develop tastes for the goods that are available to them, and a market thrives in providing these goods. These tastes become habitual. Therefore, it will be difficult, if not impossible, for Robert to escape his sordid surroundings and adjust his desires and production to meet the expectations of the agent's world. Motivated by profit, the agent wants to use Robert to satisfy the white cultural group's desire for blues music. Ideally, Robert, too, would benefit from the white culture's desire for his music. In a balanced exchange, Robert could produce music that appeals to the white culture, a culture that can afford to pay more for his music than his own society does. He would simply have to "fit in" to a different kind of society and learn to develop new tastes and desires in addition to producing music for which they already have a taste. His desires would then be balanced with his new production environment. However, Robert stays stuck in his own desires and is unable to participate in the proffered exchange.

To move from one class to another entails a kind of metamorphosis that can only be accomplished through adjusted desire and consumption. This transformation occurs while the subject has a foot in both worlds as he crosses the threshold to the new conditions. Robert's threshold experience proves a dismal failure. The Victrix Records agent tries twice to take him across the threshold to record his music in New Orleans. The first time, Robert spends his advance without buying a train ticket. The second time, the agent gives him a ticket, but Robert loses his guitar on a drinking binge with his two-dollar food and lodging advance. When Robert encounters the means by which his metamorphosis might have been triggered, his dysfunctional desires take over.

Robert's difficulties are further aggravated by his inability to control his desires. When the agent from Victrix Records lodges Robert at a black boardinghouse (as evidenced by the detail of the "kerchief-headed" concierge), he himself stays at the upscale Arlington Hotel sipping gimlets to pass the evening before going to the recording studio in the morning. Unfortunately for the agent and for Robert, the world of recording and contracts, of acting with decorum and fulfilling obligations to meet someone at a certain

time and place, are as alien to Robert as life on another planet. Indeed, the society of the Arlington Hotel exists as a kind of parallel universe that can only be reached by crossing a social warp. Although within reach, to Robert, this other society is not reachable. The agent does not manage Robert's evening activities, and Robert inevitably lets his desires get him into trouble; Robert gets "lonely" in the boardinghouse and desires a woman. The anxiety of leaving his home ground antagonizes his desire in such a way that he seeks his usual nourishment of liquor and a woman's body. In satisfying this need, he ties himself tighter to his own roots, making it the more impossible to escape. He is trapped in a Catch-22 in that he cannot enter the white man's world until he demonstrates his ability to survive in it, and yet he cannot practice belonging to it because he barely knows it exists. The agent takes Robert physically out of his element, but does not disentangle him from his state of things, a landscape of junkyard dogs, cigarette smoke, ironed hair, and Mexican rum. These are the "Stones in [his] Passway," that block his exit.

Robert's production of blues music could have satisfied a market that existed in the white culture, had he been able to cross the threshold and tailor his desires to the new community. That he does not is a tragic failure for him, and also the tragic flaw of capitalism. As Boyle's story illustrates, culture is impoverished when art takes a back seat to the demands of desire and production.

Source: Carole Hamilton, Critical Essay on "Stones in My Passway, Hellhound on My Trail," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #3

In the following review, Shack says "Boyle often dwells on images which are then etched on the sensibility and made vital. "

T. Coraghessan Boyle's new collection of stories displays an impressive craftsmanship. His method, seamless and well-turned, gives him great scope for working the right tone of flippancy into his burlesques, as well as pathos into his personal diagnoses. There is never a hint of sentimentality about his depictions of losers in trouble. People are left alone with their own visions, sometimes ridiculous because of their stupidity; self-awareness being in shorter supply than luck.

"Ike and Nina" posits a love affair between President Eisenhower and Mrs. Khrushchev, hilariously proof against the seething enmity of the Cold War. The narrator, Paderewski, a minor functionary in the White House with special responsibility for discreet assignations, tries to tell the tale as dispassionately as possible. He marvels at the intense emotions felt by the two protagonists during the Khrushchevs' visit to America. Circumstances couldn't be more bathetic, given the backdrop of a grand state occasion, particularly when Paderewski is charged with the task of secretly chauffeuring the couple around the streets of Washington. The whole notion of a private face behind glaringly public events is being sent up—"I alone knew by how tenuous a thread hung the balance of world peace". This solemn manner unfailingly produces comedy through deadpan documentation.

Boyle's skill at imaginative dramatization of a clichéd Western view of life in Moscow itself is demonstrated in "The Overcoat II". The small ambitions of a small conformist, Akaky, seem to be extended fantastically when he acquires a stylish coat. Every received tabloid opinion about the grinding tedium of Russian life finds its way in here, third-hand impressions turned into wicked fancies on the page. So there are lengthy food queues, shabby clothes and all the patient sufferings of an exemplary citizen of the Soviet Union who inhabits a room which is stated, quite factually, to be perhaps half a size larger than the one that drove Raskolnikov to murder. The satire in this piece does more than simply poke fun at bullying Russian officialdom and its hypocritical view of Western consumer culture. The irreverence is seasoned, the caricature absurd but not extravagantly so.

Boyle often dwells on images which are then etched on the sensibility and made vital. "Whales Weep" takes one man's very amateurish and shortlived interest in the giant mammal of the deeps; his own tacky sentiments and the scale of his world-weariness are dwarfed, as you would expect, by contact with Leviathan itself. The nerve-ends of Boyle's prose sting at the encounter. "Stones in My Pass way, Hellhound on My Trail" is a rendering of episodes in the doomed life of the legendary bluesman, Robert Johnson. Here the whole mood is built up out of a composite of powerful fragments, dream-like pictures and everyday ones in alternation. "Greasy Lake", the title story, centres on a fairly godforsaken place, fit for nothing more than a violent set-to and heaps of detritus. The correlatives in this diseased landscape are masterfully exploited, while the general

grotesque effect is registered in the first-person narrative; all-too immediate experience through the pores of the skin.

In "Rupert Beersley and the Beggar Master of Sivani-Hoota", Boyle sportively cracks the mould of a sub-genre of Anglo-Indian detective stories. The numerous children of an Indian ruler are disappearing one by one, and the bumbling Beersley is brought in to solve the mystery. Almost predictably, he loses himself down alleyways of self-indulgent speculation. The lampooning works so well—and this is true of the whole volume—because the foibles of an essentially asinine figure are exaggerated to just the right degree. Boyle can also find plenty of straightforward lively entertainment in playing about with trifles, making them graphic, but still managing to tune everything to the demands of a constructive riotousness.

Source: Neville Shack, "Fecklessness and Fiasco," in *TLS: Times Literary Supplement,* January 31, 1986, p. 112.

Critical Essay #4

In the following review, McCaffery says that while Boyle's short stories in Greasy Lake *are somewhat uneven, they "display a vibrant sensibility fully engaged with American society."*

For the assorted politicians, teen-age toughs, baseball players, whale lovers, blues singers and ordinary suburbanites who speak to us in T. Coraghessan Boyle's brilliant new collection, *Greasy Lake,* life in contemporary America is pretty much a roller coaster ride, filled with peaks of exhilaration and excitement but also fraught with hidden dangers and potential embarrassments. One moment they're clutching a bottle of stolen bourbon, up higher than they ever thought possible. From up there the vista is enormous, gorgeous; the adrenaline is pumping; escape velocity from all that weighs them down is nearly achieved. But just a second later the inevitable descent has begun, and something has gone terribly wrong, the seat belt has disengaged, they're hurtling to a crash landing amid laughter, sawdust, plastic cups, stale generic beer.

Mr. Boyle used variations of this tragicomic trajectory to wonderful effect in an earlier story collection, *Descent of Man,* and two novels, *Water Music and Budding Prospects,* all widely (and justly) praised for their manic wit, lush, baroque language and narrative invention. What hasn't been sufficiently emphasized, however, is that beneath its surface play, erudition and sheer storytelling power, his fiction also presents a disturbing and convincing critique of an American society so jaded with sensationalized images and plasticized excess that nothing stirs its spirit anymore. As a Presidential candidate in one of Mr. Boyle's new stories puts it, "The great, the giving, the earnest, energetic, and righteous American people had thrown in the towel. Rape, murder, cannibalism, political upheaval in the Third World, rock and roll, unemployment, puppies, mothers, Jackie, Michael, Liza: nothing moved them." It is into this world that Mr. Boyle projects his heroes, who are typically lusty, exuberant dreamers whose wildly inflated ambitious lead them into a series of hilarious, often disastrous adventures.

The story "Greasy Lake," whose title and epigraph are borrowed from Bruce Springsteen, shows off his irreverence, his gifts for social satire and slapstick humor, and most of all his razzle-dazzle verbal energy. It's a warm June night, and three male spirits are driving around looking for the heart of Saturday night. Bored, drunk, clad in torn-up leather jackets ("We were bad"), these suburban teen-agers are anxious to stir up some action. But what's a fella to do when Thunder Road leads only to more housing developments and shopping malls? They wind up out at Greasy Lake, a mythic spot once known by the Indians for its clear waters but now littered with broken glass, beer cans and contraceptives. "This," the narrator explains, "was nature."

And it's here that all the really "bad" kids come, hoping "to snuff the rich scent of possibility on the breeze, watch a girl take off her clothes and plunge into the festering murk, drink beer, smoke pot, howl at the stars, savor the incongruous full-throated roar of rock and roll against the primeval susurrus of frogs and crickets." On this particular night, however, the rich scent of possibility turns sour in a hurry—a vicious thug is

mistaken for a buddy, car keys are lost, a fight ensues, a tire iron emerges, skulls are rattled, and soon the narrator retreats into the primal ooze of Greasy Lake itself. There, covered with slime and utterly humiliated, he has a grisly encounter with the corpse of a dead biker and is forced to endure the whom-whomp sounds of his family station wagon being demolished.

The problem of these youths, frustrated in their efforts to find a suitable outlet for their passions and energies in America's shiny new suburban jungles, is echoed in a number of the other stories, but Mr. Boyle's control of a wide range of narrative styles and voices insures that nothing ever really seems predictable here. These styles include literary pastiche in "The Overcoat II" (an updated, Soviet version of Gogol's surreal classic) and "Rupert Beersley and the Beggar Master of Sivani-Hoota" (a clever spoof of the detective yarn), as well as myth and fantasy in "The New Moon Party" (where a Presidential candidate is swept into office by promising to replace our old, pockmarked moon with a glittering manmade replacement) and "The Hector Quesadilla Story" (an aging Mexican ballplayer is inserted into a baseball game that apparently will go on forever).

Even the most realistic stories seem bizarre, partly because of Mr. Boyle's emphasis on quirky narrators and unusual personal relationships. In "Caviar," for example, a childless couple, under the guidance of an unscrupulous doctor, bring a surrogate mother into their home to bear a child for them with disconcerting results. In "All Shook Up," a lonely abandoned husband gets involved in a doomed affair with the young wife of an aspiring Elvis Presley imitator. And in "Not a Leg to Stand On" (one of the collection's real triumphs), a senile old man, still full of spirit despite his confusion and the loss of a leg, takes up residence in an utterly depraved household of drunks and thieves.

Interestingly enough, what may be the collection' s most powerful piece—"Stones in My Passway, Hellhound on My Trail"—is one of the few whose effect is not comic. It describes the last engagement of Robert Johnson, the blues singer and guitarist of the Great Depression, destined to die at 24. The story concludes with a passage of extraordinary beauty that illustrates Mr. Boyle's feel for human passions and sensuous, evocative prose: "His bowels are on fire. He stands, clutches his abdomen, drops to hands and knees. 'Boy's had too much of that Mexican,' someone says. He looks up, a sword run through him, panting, the shock waves pounding through his frame, looks up at the pine plank, the barrels, the cold, hard features of the girl with the silver necklace in her hand. Looks up, and snarls."

Mr. Boyle's literary sensibility, like that of Robert Coover and Stanley Elkin, thrives on excess, profusion, pushing past the limits of good taste to comic extremes. He is a master of rendering the grotesque details of the rot, decay and sleaze of a society up to its ears in K Mart oil cans, Kitty Litter and the rusted skeletons of abandoned cars and refrigerators. But if such fiction often makes us squirm, it also impresses us with its use of a broad variety of cultural, historical and literary erudition to illuminate and focus specific moments. Mr. Boyle is a writer who alludes to a Verdi opera in one breath andtoDevo's "Satisfaction" or the Flying Lizards' version of "Money" in the next—or who

might cite Shakespeare, Screamin' Jay Hawkins and George Romero's "Night of the Living Dead" in a paragraph.

This rapid-fire modulation between high and low culture is sure to put off some readers (and it has led to the inevitable comparisons to Thomas Pynchon and Tom Robbins). But more important is the fact that Mr. Boyle's perception of what is happening in contemporary America seems remarkably sure and accurate. He is probably at his best in his novels, where his exuberant imagination has more room to roam. But despite some unevenness in execution, the stories in *Greasy Lake* display a vibrant sensibility fully engaged with American society—and with the wonder and joy that defiantly remain a part of our culture as well.

Source: Larry McCaffery, "Lusty Dreams in the Suburban Jungle," in *New York Times Book Review,* June 9, 1985, pp. 15, 30.

Adaptations

Hellhounds on My Trail: The Afterlife of Robert Johnson was produced in 1999 by Winstar Home Entertainment and directed by Robert Mugge. This film includes performances of Johnson's songs by blues performers like Alvin Youngblood Hart, Guy Davis, Joe Louis Walker, David "Honeyboy" Edwards, and Robert Lockwood Jr. (Johnson's stepson) and interviews with musicians about Johnson's artistry.

Topics for Further Study

Study the form of a blues song. Write a song in this form describing what happens to Robert in the story.

Read one of the other stories in Boyle's collection *Greasy Lake and Other Stories,* and compare its style and themes to that of "Stones in My Pass way, Hellhound on My Trail." What similarities and differences do you find? Report on your findings.

Research the causes and consequences of self-destructive behavior. What kind of counseling could Robert have received that might have helped change his behavior?

Investigate the lives of African Americans in the South during the depression. Was life harder for them than it had been prior to this period? How do their experiences compare to those of white Americans?

Compare and Contrast

1930s: America is in the grip of a severe economic depression.

Today: Economic policies, like unemployment compensation, are in place to help prevent the country from falling into a severe depression that would devastate the lives of American citizens as in the 1930s.

1936: Black American Jesse Owens enters the Olympics, which are held in Nazi Germany. Hitler's intention for these games is to prove to the world the dominance of the Aryan race. Jesse, however, wins an impressive and record-breaking four track and field gold medals in one day.

Today: Black athletes continue to win major awards in athletic competitions.

1939: Germany invades Poland and World War II begins. Many African Americans will enlist or be drafted into the services.

Today: While all able-bodied American men are required to register with the military, the American armed forces are entirely voluntary and integrated.

1930s: Blues artists like Robert Johnson become popular performers in African-American communities.

Today: Black blues performers like B. B. King are popular with both white and black fans.

What Do I Read Next?

Boyle's most well-known novel, *The Road to Wellville,* published in 1993, has been praised for its innovative structure and wit.

Boyle's "Greasy Lake," which appears with "Stones in My Passway, Hellhound on My Trail" in the collection *Greasy Lake and Other Stories* (1985), presents a different view of self-destructive young men and the consequences of their actions.

Searching for Robert Johnson (1998), by Peter Guralnick, offers a comprehensive biography of the blues artist.

Stomping the Blues (1989), by Albert Murray, presents an excellent analysis and history of the blues.

Further Study

Adams, Elizabeth, "An Interview with T. Coraghessan Boyle," in *Chicago Review,* Vol. 37, Nos. 2-3, 1991, pp. 51-63.

In this interview, Boyle talks about his work, including writers who have influenced him and critics' responses.

Friend, Tad, "Rolling Boyle," in *Rolling Stone,* December 9, 1990, pp. 50, 64-66, 68.

Friend analyzes Boyle's career and includes commentary from friends and critics as well as from Boyle himself.

Peabody, Richard, "Wisecracking with T. Coraghessan Boyle," in *Gargoyle,* Nos. 17-18, 1981, pp. 36-39.

In this interview, Boyle focuses on humor and music in his works.

Pinsker, Sanford, "T. Coraghessan Boyle: Overview," in *Contemporary Novelists,* 6th ed., edited by Susan Windisch Brown, St. James Press, 1966.

Pinsker explores the dominant themes and characterizations in Boyle's work.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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

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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Short Stories for Students

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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

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