# Say Yes Study Guide

## Say Yes by Tobias Wolff

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# Contents

# Introduction

Tobias Wolff is perhaps best known by the American reading public for his memoir *This Boy's Life,* which was later made into an acclaimed movie, but his literary reputation was first established on the merit of his short stories. He is still primarily known for these short stories, in which he depicts many characters' voices and a wide range of emotions. Since the early 1980s, Wolff has produced several collections of short stories. These fictions focus on the important relationships and the moral choices in everyday people's lives: men and women, husbands and wives, parents and children. As scholar Marilyn C. Wesley writes in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography,* Wolff writes "about the basic needs of Everyman, written with a respect that Everyman deserves."

Wolff has often been likened to other writers of his generation such as Raymond Carver and Richard Ford. In his short stories, Wolff practices a direct, even nondramatic, style of writing. This is certainly the case in his story "Say Yes," which takes as its backdrop an average evening in the life of a married couple. When the conversation delves into an issue on which the couple do not agree, the relationship experiences a newfound rockiness. The husband's reaction to this argument demonstrates the secret undercurrents that run through relationships.

# Author Biography

Tobias Wolff was born in 1945 in Alabama. His parents divorced when he was a boy. Wolff's mother retained custody of him, while his brother Geoffrey— who also became a writer—lived with their father. As a child, Wolff traveled with his mother, Rosemary, to the Pacific Northwest, where she remarried. This period of Wolff's life is recounted in *This Boy's Life: A Memoir,* which was later made into a film.

Wolff briefly attended preparatory school on the East Coast, but he was expelled. From 1964 through 1968, Wolff served as a lieutenant with the U.S. Army Special Forces (Green Berets) in Vietnam. He later recounted his wartime experiences in the memoir *In the Pharaoh's Army: Memoirs of the Lost War.*

Wolff earned his B.A. in 1972 and then his M.A. from Oxford University three years later. That year, his first book, *Ugly Rumours,* was published in London. Also that year, he won a prestigious Stegner Fellowship from Stanford University. From 1975 through 1978, he worked as a Stegner lecturer at Stanford, and in 1978, he received a second M.A.

Wolff began publishing regularly with the 1981 appearance of the short story collection *In the Garden of the North American Martyrs.* Over the next four years, Wolff published two more short story collections. His stories also appeared in numerous magazines, and several have been selected for inclusion in the O. Henry Prize Stories series. Wolff has also been awarded numerous grants, such as those from the National Endowment for the Arts, and has won national prizes.

In 1980, Wolff and his family moved to New York State, where he became a writer in residence for Syracuse University. Wolff remained there for seventeen years, until he was offered a position at Stanford University as the head of the graduate writing program. Wolff has lived in northern California since then, where he continues to work primarily on short stories.

# Plot Summary

The unnamed husband and his wife, Ann, are washing and drying the dishes when they begin to discuss interracial marriages. The husband says that he thinks it is a bad idea for African Americans and whites to marry. His wife wants to know why he thinks so, and the narrator immediately believes that she is implying he is a racist. She responds that she doesn't think he is racist, but she just doesn't see what is wrong with interracial marriage. The husband says that whites and African Americans come from different cultural backgrounds, so they can never really know and understand each other. He also believes that foreigners should not marry Americans, because they come from a completely different background.

Ann, clearly upset by the conversation, cuts her hand when she plunges it back in the water to continue washing dishes. The husband runs to the bathroom to get first-aid equipment. He cleans out the cut, which turns out to be shallow and fairly superficial. He feels he has done something good by reacting to the accident so quickly, and he hopes that she will return the favor by not picking up the conversation again. Ann, however, states that he wouldn't have married her if she were African American. The husband avoids answering by telling her that if she were, in fact, African American, the two probably wouldn't have even met because they would have traveled in different social circles. Ann persists in her line of hypothetical reasoning, imagining that she were African American, and they did meet, and they did fall in love. The husband responds with what he considers to be reason: that if Ann were African American, she wouldn't be her. Ann acknowledges this to be true but continues with her questioning, wanting to know if he would still marry her if she were African American. The husband says he is thinking about it, but Ann says that she knows he won't marry her. When pressed, he admits that he wouldn't marry her. Ann thanks him for answering and then goes to the living room and reads a magazine.

The husband knows that his wife is angry, and her feigned indifference to him hurts him. He decides he must show his own indifference to her, so he cleans up the kitchen and takes out the garbage. Outside, looking at the lights of the town, he feels ashamed that he let his wife get him into a fight. He thinks about how close they are and how well they know each other. He even does not bother to throw rocks, as he usually does, at the dogs that had knocked over the garbage can.

When he goes back inside, the house is dark, and Ann is in the bathroom. He stands outside of the door and apologizes, promising he will make it up to her. She asks how he will do that. Not expecting this question, he whispers that he will marry her, knowing he had to come up with the right answer. She says, "We'll see," and tells him to go on to bed. He gets into their bed, and then hears her say from the hallway to turn off the light. He does so, and the room goes dark. He hears Ann move across the room, but he can see nothing. The room is silent, as he listens for another sound—the sound of a stranger.

# Detailed Summary & Analysis

## Summary

The story begins as an unnamed husband is in the kitchen helping his wife, Ann, with the dishes, as he does every night. In fact, he is happy to help with the dishes because it lets him show how his wife how considerate he is, proving that he is sensitive to her needs. As well, as they go through their normal chores, they talk and, as they do, the conversation turns to interracial marriage and the fact that the husband is against it.

The wife is rather surprised at the husband's response and wants to know why he thinks that black people should not marry white people. The husband's explanation is that white people and black people come from different cultures and they would not be able to know each other truly in their marriage. However, the wife continually asks him to clarify the fact that he is saying that they would be different and "Not the same, like us." (2) This leaves the husband flustered, since he is not sure what she is driving at.

Their conversation is cut off when the wife accidentally stabs herself on a knife that was lying in the dirty dishwater, but the husband quickly comes to her aid. He immediately helps her stop the bleeding, and he gets the cut cleaned and bandaged very quickly. Then, despite the husband's wishes, the wife picks up the conversation right where the left it off, and she asks him if he would not have married her if she had been black.

The husband immediately tries to avoid the question, but the wife will not have it. She wants an answer as to whether he would have married her if she had been entirely the same, except black. Thus, backed into a corner, the husband admits that, no, he would not have married her if she were black.

The wife is not happy about this, and she storms off into another room, where she angrily flips through a magazine, hurting him with her indifference. Of course, the husband cannot do anything but get back at his wife by showing his indifference to her, so he finishes the dishes, then scours the entire kitchen until it is spotless.

After cleaning the kitchen and taking the garbage out, the husband returns to the house to find that his wife has gone into the bathroom. Eager to get back on his wife's good side, the husband walks outside the door and promises to make it up to her. When she asks how, he says, "I'll marry you." (6) However, she merely responds, "We'll see," (6) and tells him to go to bed.

Once he is in bed, the husband waits for his wife to come. However, instead of entering the room, she tells him to turn off the light. Then, once the light is out, she quietly walks across the room and, as she does, the husband realizes that she sounds like a stranger.

# Analysis

The title "Say Yes" is actually an instruction to the husband when the wife asks him if he would marry her if she were black. The correct answer to that is, of course, 'yes,' but instead the husband says, 'no'. Thus, the husband is not doing the right thing because he refuses to give the obviously correct, if untrue, answer.

In this story, the husband is showing the difference between 'seeming' and 'being.' The husband enjoys it when he seems to be caring and concerned, such as he does when he does the dishes or takes care of the cut on his wife's hand. However, when it comes to actually being sensitive, such as when he should tell his wife that he would marry her even if she were black, he is incapable of making that small leap for the sake of his wife.

This story is, essentially, a story about communication. The husband and wife are discussing interracial marriage and, when the husband says he does not agree with it, the wife comes up with a hypothetical example in which the husband is forced to choose between sticking to his ideals and making a simple, hypothetical leap of faith. Thus, the wife is speaking in terms of ideal hypothesis and the husband is speaking in terms of ruthless truth. Furthermore, the husband refuses to communicate with his wife on her terms while the wife refuses to communicate with the husband on his terms. Through this lack of communication on the same terms, they find themselves at odds because both of them refuse to play the game by either person's rules.

When the husband cleans the kitchen until it is as clean as it was before they moved in, it is symbolizing the rift that he has put between himself and his wife by telling her that he would not marry her if she were black. They have cleared the air about this issue, but it has set their relationship back, just as the kitchen is now cleaned to the point that it is as clean as it was before they moved into the house. Cleaning the kitchen has become a symbolic regression in their marriage.

# Characters

## Ann

*See* Wife

## Husband

The husband in the story is generally an unsympathetic character. He appears to have racist feelings and seems to be dishonest with himself. He claims to appreciate the stability his life with Ann provides him, but he still makes efforts to undermine it. He refuses to take responsibility for his actions. Throughout the evening, he is seen to be less than a genuine person; he does things for effect rather than out of a genuine, sincere desire. Within the confines of the story, his most significant trait is his rejection of his wife, which she takes quite seriously, much to his surprise. By the end of the story, the husband demonstrates yet another shift in mood: excitement as he realizes that, in certain ways, his wife is unknowable to him. The final scene has him awaiting his wife in their darkened bedroom, imagining that she is a stranger—a fact that he seems to embrace, as demonstrated by the excited pounding of his heart.

## Wife

The wife in the story, Ann, gets angry at her husband when he says he would not marry her if she were an African American. Ann demonstrates what she feels and thinks through her actions. When she is angry at what she perceives to be her husband's racism, her discomfort shows as she thoughtlessly plunges her hands into the dishwater and cuts her thumb. After she retires to the living room, after her husband says he wouldn't marry her, she makes her feelings clear by deliberately scrutinizing the pages of her magazine. When she goes to bed, she makes clear the deep wound her husband has inflicted upon her by refusing to answer his knock on the bathroom door and not responding to his subsequent apology. By the end of the story, though he has said he would marry her, she does not commit to forgiving him. She even indicates that she might not accept "his offer" of marriage. She does venture into their bedroom, where her husband is already in bed, but only on the condition that her husband turn off the light. This request seems to indicate her alienation from him: she may not want him to see her, since he can't *truly* see her; or she may not want to see the man she married.

# Themes

## Racism

The idea of racism is a theme in the story, for the implication of the husband's racism is what causes the couple to quarrel. The wife dislikes her husband's beliefs that African Americans are different from whites. He maintains that it is not that he is prejudiced against African Americans, but that they come from a different culture than white people — "they even have their own language." His protestation that "I *like* hearing them talk"— because it makes him feel happy—reveals much about his personality: his belief that African Americans are inherently foreign to whites, his condescending attitude, and his sense of otherness from himself— he needs something completely unlike himself to bring him pleasure.

The husband's negative response to Ann's question of whether he would marry her were she African American indicates the pervasive and destructive nature of his racism. Though the story provides no other context against which to view his relations with people who are not white, his instance of refusing to marry his wife shows that he thinks that African Americans are not like he and his wife, but perhaps more importantly, that for him, love does not go deeper than skin color□deeper than the superficial. Though he claims that he can only love her if she is white because otherwise "you wouldn't be you," the implication is that he wouldn't love a black Ann. The husband's actions successfully negate his pretensions to their close relationship. They also show that the narrowness of looking at people through eyes that only register exteriors, such as skin color, can cut people off from others.

## Love and Marriage

The husband in the story believes that he and his wife enjoy a close relationship, one based on years of being together. As the story opens, they appear to be working compatibly in the kitchen, she washing the dishes and he drying; they seem to be partners. The husband's self-congratulations about helping his wife, however, indicate that he is not truly comfortable in this role. The husband also is culpable of getting them involved in the discussion that leads to the argument, for he sees that she is getting upset, yet he keeps pushing the issue. Indeed, the conversation about African Americans and interrelationships calls into question the crux of their marriage. The husband's refusal to marry his wife if she were African American shows how little true affection is involved in this relationship. That the reader does not see the couple make up further affirms the relative isolation that people can live in even within a supposedly secure marriage.

The fact that the husband, in all of his ruminations on the fight, never mentions his love for his wife is significant. Instead, he thinks about "how close they were" and "how well they knew each other." When he apologizes to his wife, and tells her he would marry

her, even then he does not speak of love. Only Ann mentions the word *love* during the conversation. When Ann says, "'Let's say I am black and unattached and we meet and fall in love,"'the husband does not even respond to the idea of the emotion; instead, he repeats, "'If you were black you wouldn't be you.'" His response shows that he is more attached to the *idea* of Ann— what Ann represents for him—than to being in love with Ann.

## Alienation

Although he does not recognize it, the husband depicted in "Say Yes" is alienated both from his wife and from himself. He perceives that they have a close relationship, yet he cannot even imagine marrying his wife if she were African American because then she would not be the same woman he first met. That he sees his feelings for his wife as intrinsically linked to skin color demonstrates that he does not appreciate her as a complete, whole being—rather, he cares for those aspects of her that he believes he can understand. Under such circumstances, it is not possible for the husband to have a full and truly loving relationship with his wife.

A suggestion is made at the end of the story as to from where this inability to embrace his "complete" wife stems: his own desire for that which is strange and unknown. Lying in bed, in the darkness, he hears his wife move through the room. He reacts to these auditory cues in the same way he would react if he heard a noise echoing in the house —the noise of an intruder. The excitement he feels at hearing his "unknown" wife shows his alienation from himself, for he has not even readily acknowledged his own desire for something or someone different; it takes a bad argument to point out this facet of himself.

# Style

## Narration and Construction

The story is told chronologically, and the story takes place over a brief period of time: the space of one evening. The narration is relatively straightforward; the narrative voice does not delve into the thought processes of the characters. Readers never even learn the name of the husband, and only learn the wife's name after she has cut her hand, almost halfway through the story.

The story's construction is relatively simple: A husband and wife engage in an argument about a specific topic. The problem of the story, in part, however, derives from the fact that what they are arguing about is an important issue: Do you love someone for what they are or who they are? While the husband would argue that he does both, that his wife would not be who she is without being what she is, the ending shows that even his perception of his relationship with his wife is not as simple as he pretends. As the husband is excited to welcome the "stranger"—his wife—to his bed his reactions bring a new complexity to their relationship and to the story itself.

## Point of View

The point of view of "Say Yes" is the thirdperson, limited point of view. Jonathan Penner writes in the *Washington Post* that such a "narrative mode permits an exterior view of even the central figure, which seems to be why Wolff employs it. He's disinclined to tell stories from the inside out, to present a world through the thoughts and feelings of a viewpoint character. Instead, Wolff tries to create windows on the soul through speech and action."

The husband's point of view is made clear by what he says: that he believes that people of different races are different from himself, a white man. This revelation, around which the story centers, indicates a great deal about the character of the husband, as does the ways he expresses these ideas. His wife's reactions to his declaration that he would not marry her were she African American are also clear, although even less about her is revealed than about the husband. Her anger is apparent through her measured turning of the magazine pages, and her feeling of disconnection from her husband is made clear when she wants him to turn the light off before she enters their bedroom.

## Imagery

The story is quite short and straightforward, yet it still contains a few important images. When the husband squeezes Ann's injured thumb, "a single drop of blood welled up, trembling and bright, and fell to the floor"; this drop of blood stands for the tears that Ann does not shed. When the husband goes outside, he sees two "mutts" who live down the street knocking over his garbage can. The dogs, who are not fighting, still are portrayed

with an edge of violence: "One of them was rolling around on his back, and the other had caught something in her mouth. Growling, she topped it into the air, leaped up and caught it, growled again and whipped her head from side to side." The controlled intensity of the scene mimics the one that has just taken place between the husband and the wife. The husband seems to recognize this truth, for instead of heaving rocks at them, like he usually does, he lets them go away unharmed.

# Historical Context

## The Republican Years

The 1980s was a decade led by Republican thinking and policy. Ronald Reagan took office as president of the United States in 1980, and he served two terms, after which his vice president, George Bush, was elected to the nation's top office. Reagan held conservative political beliefs, both on the domestic front and when it came to foreign policy. Although his economic programs brought the national inflation rate down, they also seemed to favor the wealthy. During the Reagan era, many middle class Americans saw their personal income shrinking, while the richest of Americans increased their wealth.

By the 1980s, the cold war, led by superpowers the United States and the Soviet Union, had been ongoing for almost forty years. Reagan, an ardent opponent of communism, encouraged his administration to greatly increase military spending. As the United States and the Soviet Union built up a stockpile of nuclear weapons capable of destroying the earth several times over, many Americans came to fear the possibility of a nuclear war. By the end of the 1980s, however, U.S.-Soviet relations had thawed dramatically, primarily as the Soviet government began to initiate greater political and economic freedoms. As countries throughout Eastern Europe also renounced or rebelled against their communist governments, cold war tensions dissipated.

## A Changing America

During the 1980s, Americans were increasingly spending more money on leisure and entertainment activities, such as sporting events, movies, and health clubs. However, although many sociologists had proclaimed their belief that people would have more leisure time, this did not come to fruition; instead, most people worked more hours but had less money to show for it.

In the 1980s, more blue collar workers were slipping through to the lowest layers of the middle or even to the lower class. Unemployment reached as high as twenty percent among factory workers. African Americans and Hispanics had a harder time getting and keeping jobs than did white Americans; they were often the last hired and the first fired. More than thirty percent of African Americans—or nine million people—were classified as poor.

In contrast, the 1980s saw the rise of the Yuppie—young, urban professionals. Yuppies were usually white men and women between college age and forty. They often worked in middle management, banking, the law, or the high-tech fields. They had extraneous income to spend on household extravagances. Books such as Tom Wolfe's *Bonfire of the Vanities* satirize and depict these Yuppies, portraying them as leading spiritually empty lives.

The 1980s was also when the fatal disease AIDS first came to public awareness. It had surfaced in Central Africa in the mid-1970s, but was not discovered in the United States until early the next decade. The number of reported AIDS cases rose dramatically throughout the 1980s, reaching over 50,000 by mid-decade.

## Race Relations

During the 1980s, civil rights policies and legislation from previous years were attacked and sometimes reversed. Many African Americans became discouraged, and a *Newsweek* poll conducted in 1988 showed that seventy-one percent of the African Americans surveyed believed that the federal government was doing "too little" to help African Americans.

The 1980s were riddled with racial incidents. The decade opened with riots in Miami, following the acquittal of four white police officers in the beating death of an African-American man and ended in 1989 with the fatal shooting of a sixteenyear- old African-American boy by young white men. In between these incidents came attacks by Neo-Nazis and members of the Ku Klux Klan. In the 1980s, David Duke, a former grand wizard of the Klan, also won a seat in the Louisiana legislature, elected by a virtually all-white suburb of New Orleans. This victory was a disgrace to the Republican Party, as Duke ran on that ticket. The decade also saw a rise in racially motivated incidents on college campuses.

## The 1988 Presidential Elections

African-American leader Jesse Jackson ran for president in 1984 and again in 1988. He sought to unite a "Rainbow Coalition"—a diverse group of voters representing all races, classes, and creeds. His candidacy drew many African-American voters to the polls. Although Jackson won more votes in the 1988 Democratic primary than any other candidate, Massachusetts' governor Michael Dukakis won more delegates, and he ran for president against George Bush. Race issues played into the campaign, as Bush's campaign focused on an African-American convicted murderer who had attacked a couple while out of jail on a weekend pass under a Massachusetts prison program; some critics charged that the ads were racist, that they played on white America's fear of black criminals.

# Critical Overview

Wolff's first short story collection, *In the Garden of the North American Martyrs,* was published in 1981. When *Back in the World,* which collected "Say Yes," was published four years later, many reviewers commented on how it differed from its predecessor. Mona Simpson writes in the *New Republic* that she finds the second batch of stories to be "in a more somber mode." They "feel omniscient," she says, "universal, with biblical resonance." She continues, "In these new stories, Wolff works with the same thematic concerns, the same passion for moral questions, but his fictional canvas is sparer and simpler. . . . He has chosen more dramatic, emblematic characters." These characteristics, according to Simpson, add a new power to Wolff's work. She sums up *Back in the World* as a collection of "stripped-down moral fables."

Geoff Dyer, writing for the *New Statesman,* finds this collection far superior to the first, calling the stories "better and more expansive than those in Wolff's impressive but uneven first collection." Dyer proclaims that this collection lifted Wolff to the top ranks of American writers; "With this new volume," Dyer writes, "he rivals Raymond Carver as the finest male short story writer now working in America."

Many critics focused on Wolff's eye for detail, or in the words of *New York Times* critic Michiko Kakutani, "his gift for meticulous observation." In a review for the *Los Angeles Times,* Richard Eder praises Wolff's "lavish display of skill." Matthew Gilbert, writing for *Boston Review* notes the depth to which Wolff pays attention to the details of his stories; "Wolff also invests the settings of these stories with a life of their own. They embrace the main action and subtly become essential to the story. In 'Say Yes,' the kitchen utensils seem to participate in the argument between husband and wife."

David Montrose of the *Times Literary Supplement* generally liked the collection, finding that Wolff "excels at creating people and moods," which he does "by showing, accreting detail, rather than telling." At times, however, some critics felt that this technique stifled Wollf's voice. Writes Jonathan Penner for the *Washington Post,* "Not even a writer as good as Wolff can eschew *he thought* and *he felt* forever," and concludes that "only a partial humanity percolates through action and speech."

Not all reviewers, however, lauded the collection. Russell Banks, in his review for the *New York Times Book Review,* states that the collection was "a considerable falling off for Mr. Wolff," and that it did not "measure up" to his previous published works. "Whereas the earlier stories used digression to build a dialectic, to make something *happen,* these seem to meander into narrative cul-de-sacs." The criticism of Thomas DePietro, of the *HudsonReview,* was similar to Banks's; DePietro finds fault with the "minimalist" mode in which Wolff works, noting particularly a "conspicuous absence of subject matter" in the stories. DePietro finds the shorter stories to end in a "pseudo-epiphany" and the longer stories to end "washed out and proud of it." Banks, however, demonstrates a keen awareness of Wolff's writing talent, noting the "brilliant moments" scattered in the stories, which made him "await Mr. Wolff's next book with all the more eagerness." Kakutani, who admits that there "is not a lot of hope" for Wolff's characters,

nevertheless finds in their presentation "the promise of some kind of redemption in their fumbling efforts to connect with one another."

Since its publication, "Say Yes" has appeared in several anthologies. In many ways, it is highly representative of Wolff's short fiction, which tends to center on the human relationships and their inherent instability. As Marilyn C. Wesley states in her article on Wolff for the *Dictionary of Literary Biography,* Wolff's "is a genuinely humanistic Fiction—both human and humane." Over the years, Wolff's reviewers have generally perceived this leaning. Relatively little explicit criticism about the story exists, however, one of its few specific references was negative: Montrose writing in the *Times Literary Supplement* believes that "Say Yes" was among the "least noteworthy" among Wolff's "generally admirable" collection of stories. Dyer, writing in the *New Statesmen,* states that "Wolff's characters never feel quite sure what's happening to them," a statement that seems to apply to "Say Yes," in which the husband reacts with bewilderment about the argument he finds himself in with his wife: "His stories are about people who don't know how they're going to end." Indeed, the closing lines of *"Say Yes"* demonstrate that uncertainty, as the husband listens for the sounds of his wife moving through their dark bedroom the same way he would listen to a stranger moving through their house.

# 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 well the husband and wife truly know each other.*

In writing an introduction to the short story collection *Matters of Life and Death,* Tobias Wolff, in his role as the editor, attempted to explain why he chose the stories for inclusion: "They [these writers] speak to us without flippancy, about things that matter. They write about what happens between men and women, parents and children. They write about fear of death, fear of life, the feelings that bring people together and force them apart, the costs of intimacy. They remind us that our house is built on sand. They are, every one of them, interested in what it means to be human." As Marilyn C. Wesley points out in her article on Wolff in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography,* with these words, Wolff "provided a definition of the guiding principles behind his own stories." She continues, "What his reviewers have consistently understood, and what Wolff himself implies, is that his is a genuinely humanistic fiction—both human and humane."

Wolff's short story "Say Yes" is very brief— only a few pages long—yet it takes place at a key moment in the relationship between a couple. They are given the opportunity to face each other and their truest feelings. After a chance conversation, one that comes about when they "somehow got on the subject of whether white people should marry black people," the couple get into an argument that will have repercussive effects in the important issues it raises between them: how much do they really know about each other, and more importantly, how much do they want to know?

While these questions cannot be fully answered based on such a brief text, the night in question does illustrate the deliberate "lies" under which a marriage can function. The husband has an image of himself that can best be defined as that of the "good" husband□one who helps out his wife, wants to understand her, and tries to make her happy. This image, however, does not hold up against the evidence of the husband's actions and motivations. For instance, the story opens with the husband and wife doing the dinner dishes but the husband immediately undercuts their partnership when he admits that for him "Helping out with the dishes was a way of showing how considerate he was" rather than an action undertaken sincerely. Similarly, the husband's later act of scouring the kitchen derives from his desire "to demonstrate his indifference" to his wife —in response to her indifference to him. The husband takes what should be acts of genuine kindness and turns them into statements about the marital relationship.

In addition to this duplicitous behavior, the husband, with deliberation and cognizance, provokes his wife into the argument. During the conversation, he notices his wife's reaction to his statement that white people and black people should not intermarry: "Sometimes his wife got this look where she pinched her brows together and bit her lower lip and stared down at something. When he saw her like this he knew he should keep his mouth shut, but he never did. Actually it made him talk more. She had that look now." These words show that the husband has a history, a pattern even, of bringing up

and pursuing topics that his wife finds distasteful—most likely distasteful in their reflection upon her husband. After the fight, he denies any personal responsibility as he muses that he "felt ashamed that he had let his wife get him into a fight." Although in this instance he demonstrates remorse, he also erroneously blames his wife for initiating the quarrel. While these thoughts strengthen his claims of knowing his wife so well, they also reinforce that such awareness of another person can have a negative outcome: clearly, the husband understands that the expression he sees on her face derives from her dislike at his words and beliefs.Despite this comprehension, he continues to pursue the conversation.

Why he does so is unexplained by the text, but what is significant about the ensuing argument is the complete fallacy upon which he builds his side of it. According to the husband, marriage should be a union between people who think alike and can thus know each other well, and his argument against interracial marriage rests on the assumption that people of different races are quite dissimilar and thus do not belong together. "'How can you understand someone,'" queries the husband, "'who comes from a completely different background?'" This question takes on an ironic quality, though he doesn't understand it as such, for he and his wife evidence quite dissimilar opinions on the subject of interracial marriage. The husband's logic, then, would imply that he and his wife don't really belong together. As he tells his wife of African Americans and whites, "'A person from their culture and a person from our culture could never really *know* each other,'" but their disagreement aptly demonstrates that although people can come from a similar cultural background, they still might not be able to understand each others' viewpoints or belief systems.

The husband's insistence on sticking with his side despite the clear lack of logic suggests that, if, as he claims, he is not a racist, there is something else at stake in this argument. The most obvious suggestion is that the husband is deliberately, although perhaps subconsciously, trying to subvert the companionship that he claims he and his wife have built. As already mentioned, he is at fault for prolonging the argument, and once involved in it, he seems to make no effort to get himself and his wife to gracefully acquit themselves. The wife eventually forces her husband to answer this question: "'[Say] that I'm black, but still me, and we fall in love. Will you marry me?'" Here Ann, the wife, gives her husband the perfect opportunity to opt out of the argument; she is laying down the conditions that although she is black she is the same Ann he now knows. Under such circumstances, her husband has no reason not to marry her, but he still "thought about it" before turning her down. The husband refuses to use Ann's choice of words to allow him to salvage the evening and satisfactorily close the argument. This action strikes an incongruous note for a character who congratulates himself on acting out the role of the model husband.

The husband comes to regret this decision, recognizing that "[I]n another thirty years or so they would be both be dead. What would all that stuff matter then?" This moment of reflection leads him to apologize to his wife. But she doesn't react as he expected. Instead of forgiving him, she wants to know how he will make his rejection up to her. He realizes "from a sound in her voice, a level and definite note that was strange to him . . . that he had to come up with the right answer," so he says that he will marry her, which

may or may not be a truthful answer. The tone of her voice is apparently the husband's first inclination that he cannot accurately read or predict his wife.

This distancing on the part of his wife has another effect, however, whether desired or not: she has become an unknown quantity. As the husband waits in their bed for his wife to come, he hears her moving across the room and suddenly his "heart pounded the way it had on their first night together." This sexual memory is then surrounded with fear and alarm and even a threat to personal safety as the husband further extends the metaphor, comparing the beating of his heart to the way it pounded "when he woke at a noise in the darkness and waited to hear it again—the sound of someone moving through the house, a stranger." The husband's likening of his wife to an intruder indicates how unexpected and potentially damaging is her behavior to him. He finally understands that he does not understand her as well as he has always believed he does. He also feels excitement, wanting to hear the noise again because it reminds him of his wife's otherness.

The husband's behavior at this moment adds support to the idea that he may have attempted to create a rift between them, or at least welcomed it. In part because of the brevity of the story, a reader cannot hope to fully understand the husband's reactions to the argument or his complicated feelings after it. However, the text indicates that the couple does not truly know each other as well as the husband would claim□despite "the years they had spent together, and how close they were." Further and perhaps more importantly, the story shows that sometimes it is best to not know another person fully. The conversation of the evening, for Ann, has the effect of making her feel estranged from and rejected by her husband. In contrast, her husband is excited by the realization that his wife still is capable of surprising him. Ironically, if he knew her as well as he claimed, he would not feel this good anxiety that he does at the end of the story. The ending lines of the story indeed affirm the positive aspects of what Marilyn C. Wesley has called a "healthy defamiliarization," a "bit of unknowability in even the most intimate relationships."

**Source:** Rena Korb, in an essay for *Short Stories for Students,* Gale Group, 2001.

# Critical Essay #2

*Lynch is a freelance writer living in northern New Mexico. In the following essay, she discusses the disparity between ideas of normalcy and actual events.*

Characteristic of the work of Tobias Wolff, "Say Yes" displays an everyday event and turns it inside out, illustrating the machinations of normalcy. In the course of an argument between a married couple, he makes explicit the disparity between the individual's idea of what is happening and actual events. Rather than dissect the human self-concept, Wolff displays the gap between self-image and behavior. He achieves the effects of both intimacy and simple directness through his use of lean, simple subject-verb sentence construction (in which the verb follows the subject) and few adjectives, adverbs, and descriptions. The simplicity of the sentences precludes explicating causal relationships; these are left to the reader to deduce, demanding active participation on the part of the reader. Surface normalcy is viewed through the lens of a thirdperson narrator who has limited access to the protagonist's thoughts, feelings, and sensations. The narrative takes place from a middle distance, which takes into account a limited amount of reaction and motivation on the part of characters, but provides enough distance from them so that the reader recognizes the absurdity inherent in the seemingly normal. Through such narrative, Wolff explodes preexisting ideas of normalcy and reveals the craziness in everyday life.

"Say Yes" opens with a conversation between a man and his wife while they wash and dry dishes, told with an eye to the man's point of view. Although at one point the man, effectively the protagonist, calls his wife Ann, they are essentially he and she, and in their anonymity they are any married couple, in their familiarity every married couple. Washing and drying the dishes and a series of other domestic evening tasks map the course of the evening, and reveal both the man's self-concept and the relationship between the couple. In the first sentence, the man is drying dishes while his wife washes. In the following sentence, it is reported that the husband washed dishes the previous evening. No causal relationship is made explicit between the two sentences through use of a word such as "because," but it is implied that the man is drying this evening because he washed the night before. From these first two sentences in the story, it is clear that the narrator has an emotional investment in being fair and doing what he thinks right. He refers to a time when his wife's friend congratulates her on having such a considerate husband, and his response is "*I try*." In his own estimation he is "considerate," and his goal in helping out with housework is to show it. From this first paragraph, it is evident that the narrator is invested in being a nice guy; he seeks approval as much out of self-image as good intentions. Thus, his character is open to scrutiny from the beginning of the story.

Because of the narrator's self-proclaimed consideration, it comes as somewhat of a surprise when the narrative moves from his account of their conversation to the actual dialogue. Put on the defensive when his wife questions why he thinks black people and white people shouldn't marry, he tells her not to infer he is racist. Because he responds this way rather than answering her question, he comes across as defensive and

hotheaded, in contrast to his self-image introduced a half page earlier. As the dialogue continues, he does answer her, reasoning that people from different cultures can never really know each other. His argument relies upon his conviction that he and his wife, apparently both white and from the same culture, know and understand each other in a deep way. His wife repeats his assertion to call it into question, suggesting that she does not share his conviction that he knows her so well. As the argument escalates, her husband notices that she washes the dishes carelessly, leaving many of them dirty. His attention to the domestic task at hand illustrates his displaced focus; he wants to be the good husband, do all the right things, but his attention is on the dishes when they are having a discussion that is clearly important to his wife. In her distraction and haste the wife cuts her thumb on a knife, interrupting the task which ties the argument together.

When the narrator's wife cuts herself, her husband rushes to her aid, running upstairs for alcohol and a Band-Aid. He asserts to himself that "He'd acted out of concern for her, with no thought of getting anything in return, but now the thought occurred to him that it would be a nice gesture on her part not to start up that conversation again, as he was tired of it." Clearly, he is attached to the idea of coming to his wife's rescue, and despite his disclaimer, wants to be rewarded for his behavior, again seeking approval. Rather than acquiesce, however, his wife chooses to dry dishes, throwing off the pattern of fairness established at the opening of the story, and increasing the tension. Ann poses the central question of the story, wondering whether her husband would have married her if she had been black. As he sidesteps the question, he washes the silverware with nearly antiseptic care, his urgent cleaning a counterpoint to the metaphoric mess created by this argument with his wife. As she presses him, Ann's eyes get bright, then brighter, as if with excitement, and although "He had won the argument . . . he still felt cornered." A shift takes place in the dialogue as the tension between the two builds; although the conversation is theoretical, their speech shifts to make it immediate. She asks, "Will you marry me?" and he responds, "Let's not move too fast on this. . . . We don't want to do something we would regret for the rest of our lives." The immediacy of the language lends urgency to the conversation, and an importance greater than a theoretical discussion, as if their marriage is truly at stake in this moment. Ann's stimulation, as indicated by her brightening eyes, and the mention of winning, lend themselves to the sense that this is a game, with high stakes. When her husband finally answers "No," his answer is as much about their mutual antagonizing as the question.

Once she receives this answer, Ann withdraws to the living room, and her husband feels punished by what he sees as her deliberate show of indifference. He feels he has "no choice but to demonstrate his own indifference to her" by continuing to clean the kitchen. The obligatory nature of the couple's behavior supports the image of a game with a prescribed set of rules. "Quietly, thoroughly," the husband finishes the dishes, wipes the counters, cleans up the blood from Ann's cut, and mops the entire floor. His cleaning demonstrates not only a show of indifference, but also his effort to show upright character, and to clean up what feels like a mess between them. When he is finished he notes that the kitchen looks new, as it did before they moved in. The implication is that it looks the way it did before they knew each other as well as he asserts they do now, and that their argument has pushed them back to a time of

strangeness. He goes outside to empty the trash, and considers his relationship with his wife. Rather than taking responsibility for his defensiveness, he feels "ashamed that he had let his wife get him into a fight." He ruminates on his ideas about how "close" they are and all the time invested in their relationship, and he reacts physically to these thoughts, his neck tingling and chest tightening in a welling of emotion. This examination of his history and the ideas he has invested about himself and his wife, accurate or not, reverse the destabilizing effect of the argument, and he feels returned to himself. When he encounters two neighborhood dogs in the trash, he chooses not to throw rocks at them the way he normally would, but lets them go, returned to his self-concept as a nice, considerate guy, but alerting the reader to the disparity between his real and imagined selves.

In the last scene in the story, the husband contritely apologizes to his wife and says, "I'll make it up to you, I promise." Again, the words don't quite correlate with the argument, and suggest a greater urgency than the situation merits. When she responds with "How?" he "knew he had come up with the right answer," reinforcing the sense that this is, on some level, a game. He submits when he whispers "I'll marry you," again making the dialogue more current by using the present tense, and in so doing, heightening the tension between them. She responds with "We'll see. . . . Go on to bed." Her resistance is clearly an extension of the argument, but since they are already married, her reply has an element of flirtation, and the tension between them is clearly sexual. The man undresses and gets into bed, and his wife tells him to turn off the light before she comes in. There is a long pause before he hears her move in the dark across the room, a further extension of what is now explicit sexual tension between them. When he hears a movement and then nothing happens, his response is physical; his heart pounds the way it did the first time he was intimate with his wife, and the way it still does when he hears what sounds like an intruder in the house. In fact both are true in this closing scene; his excitement, which borders on fear, is his response to the strangeness between his wife and himself, and in the moment, in the course of what has become their game, she is a stranger. The moment recalls his assertion during their argument that people from other cultures can't really know each other the way they do. The conviction that they are close restores his sense of stability when he takes the trash out; it is fundamental to his identity that he and his wife know each other well, and when he reminds himself of this, he has a strong physical response. Now, at the end of the story, that assertion is inverted in such a way that although his wife is like a stranger to him in the moment, he has a similar physical response of excitement. Ultimately, she wins the evening's power struggle by making her husband "say yes" and, in the course of this sexual configuration, she demonstrates that much unknown goes between married partners. At the same time, the familiarity of the struggle indicates a game that is anything but new.

The argument between the man and his wife in "Say Yes" serves as a means of momentarily reinventing themselves, creating a strangeness which makes for both excitement and a threat to identity. The characters are never explicit about this; they appear to be unaware of it. They do not recognize the difference between what they believe is happening and what actually takes place. On the surface, they engage in an argument, but their shifts in language make the argument bigger than it actually is to

either of them. They participate in a power struggle that, although familiar, allows them to temporarily become strangers and manifest sexual tension. "Say Yes" makes public the protagonist's private attachment to his identity and to ideas about the way his wife and his marriage are; in the course of the story, normalcy is turned on its head in what amounts to a game.

**Source:** Jennifer Lynch, in an essay for *Short Stories for Students,* Gale Group, 2001.

# Critical Essay #3

*Brent has a Ph.D. in American Culture, specializing in film studies, from the University of Michigan. She is a freelance writer and teaches courses in the history of American cinema. In the following essay, Brent discusses symbolic expressions of marital conflict in Wolff's story.*

The 1985 short story "Say Yes," by Tobias Wolff, describes an argument between a husband and wife over the course of one evening during which they wash dishes, clean the kitchen, take out the garbage, and get ready for bed. As these chores are being carried out, the couple quarrel over the issue of whether or not he would have married her had she been black (they are both white). The way in which Wolff describes the carrying out of these chores expresses the subtle tensions building between the couple over the course of the evening.

As the story opens, the couple stands at the kitchen sink doing the dishes. The evening chore of dishwashing represents the level of equality in their relationship. Particularly, the husband takes pride in helping with the dishes as a demonstration that he consciously "tries" to be "considerate" of his wife.

They were doing the dishes, his wife washing while he dried. He'd washed the night before. Unlike most men he knew, he really pitched in on the housework. A few months earlier he'd overheard a friend of his wife's congratulate her on having such a considerate husband, and he thought, *I try*. Helping out with the dishes was a way of showing how considerate he was.

This opening passage illuminates several elements of this couple's relationship. It describes a marriage that is specifically structured on a principal of equality, as demonstrated through a very organized system for sharing the burden of domestic chores. She washes, while he dries. The previous night, he washed while she dried. In addition, the husband takes special pride in the extent to which he consciously "tries" to be "considerate" of his wife through such efforts as "helping out with the dishes." However, the two begin to disagree over the issue of whether or not they approve of mixed race marriages between black and white people. The husband asserts that he does not approve of such unions, maintaining that this is not due to racism but because of what he believes to be the insurmountable cultural differences between black and white people. The wife, however, severely questions this stance. As the tension between them builds, during the course of this discussion, the manner in which she goes about washing the dishes becomes an outward expression of her growing anger and resentment toward her husband. As soon as he states that he thinks interracial marriage is "a bad idea," he observes a change in her facial expression that demonstrates her initial disapproval of this opinion, and indicates that she is prepared to pursue the matter. She asks "why" he feels this way, and he notices that "Sometimes his wife got this look where she pinched her brows together and bit her lower lip and stared down at something. When he saw her like this he knew he should keep his mouth shut, but he never did."

The husband's detailed observation of this change in his wife's facial expression in part indicates how well he knows her; he can accurately read the subtlest changes in her facial expressions, and is familiar with exactly the state of his wife's mind indicated by this change. When she again asks "why," her husband makes note of the precise manner in which she holds the bowl she has been washing: "she . . . stood there with her hand inside a bowl, not washing it but just holding it above the water." From this factual, almost photographic, description of how the wife holds the bowl, the narrative conveys a strong emotional response on her part. She is so deeply angered and disturbed by her husband's statement, and so concentrated on interrogating him about it, that she is momentarily paralyzed—her emotional reaction is so strong and her thoughts so intensely focused that she cannot even continue to carry out such a simple task as washing a bowl. The husband then tries to explain his opinion, telling her that "'I don't need you coming along now and implying that I'm a racist.'" With the wife's response that "'I didn't imply anything,'" she begins washing the bowl again, "turning it around in her hand as if she were shaping it." This image suggests that of a potter, shaping a bowl out of clay as it spins on a potter's wheel. It implies that, at this point, the wife is in control of the argument, "shaping it" to conform to her own opinions and emotional state. As the argument between husband and wife heats up, the wife's movements in washing the dishes change again. As she becomes more angry and resentful, she begins to wash the dishes more and more rapidly, neither looking at her husband nor paying careful attention to her task: "She was washing faster now, not looking at him. . . . She was piling dishes on the drainboard at a terrific rate, just swiping at them with the cloth. Many of them were greasy, and there were flecks of food between the tines of the forks." At this point, the increasing speed with which she washes the dishes is an expression of her growing fury toward her husband. She is angry with him, and so will not look at him as they talk. Her anger is also expressed through the violence with which she merely "swipes at" the dishes, as if hitting them in punishment. Her anger toward her husband is thus taken out on the dishes. In addition, the husband's detailed critical observation that the dishes she has supposedly cleaned are still "greasy," and that "there were flecks of food between the tines of the forks," expresses his own critical attitude toward her, at this point. His intense focus on the dishes, in the midst of this marital conflict, is also a way of attempting to focus his own anger upon inanimate objects, rather than directly at his wife.

When the wife cuts her thumb on a knife in the dishwater, the discussion is temporarily halted. However, the cut, and the couple's response to it, further expresses the tensions that have mounted between them. What began as light conversation in the course of performing a routine household task takes on a sharper edge that cuts deep into the relationship. The wife cuts herself when she "plunged her hands under the surface" of the dishwater. Likewise, she has plunged "under the surface" of the conversation, to its deeper implications for the marital relationship. After the husband runs to the medicine chest to doctor her cut, he returns and squeezes the cut on her thumb, "to see how deep the wound was," symbolically assessing how "deeply" the rift between the two of them has "wounded" his wife. When he does so, "a single drop of blood welled up, trembling and bright, and fell to the floor." Likewise, their disagreement has caused a small rift (or cut) between them, by touching on feelings deep within the wife which "welled up" momentarily, like the drop of blood from her thumb. Nonetheless, the wife

seems to blame her husband for the cut, as if the argument itself had "wounded" her: "Over the thumb, she stared at him accusingly." Like a minor knife wound to the thumb, the "wound" incurred by the wife over their disagreement, while momentarily intense and upsetting, "trembling and bright," is not very deep, and will heal by the next day. The husband tells her, "'It's shallow. . . . Tomorrow you won't even know it's there.'" This statement expresses the husband's hope that the argument has not, in fact, caused any "deep" rift between them, and that they will both have forgotten it by the following day. And although the husband's consideration in coming to her aid is out of genuine "concern," he hopes that it will serve as a "gesture" for which she will reward him by dropping the argument: "He hoped that she appreciated how quickly he had come to her aid. He'd acted out of concern for her, with no thought of getting anything in return, but now the thought occurred to him that it would be a nice gesture on her part not to start up that conversation again, as he was tired of it."

However, the wife continues the discussion while the husband washes and she dries. At this point, the way in which the husband washes the dishes becomes an expression of his feelings toward his wife. As he begins rewashing the silverware that she had not adequately washed the first time, he does so, "giving a lot of attention to the forks." By being particularly meticulous in rewashing the forks, the husband indirectly expresses criticism of his wife□she had done a bad job of washing the forks, and so he attempts to prove himself in the right by doing an especially good job of it. But when he rinses the forks with the rinsing nozzle, the "heat" of their anger toward one another becomes manifest: "The water was so hot that the metal darkened to a pale blue, then turned to silver again." It is as if the "heat" of their temporary conflict has caused the nature of their relationship to turn from its usual high quality of closeness, as symbolized by the "silver," to a "darker," "bluer" (as in sadder), mood. However, the fact that the metal just as quickly retains its silver tone symbolizes the expectation that the relationship between husband and wife will be restored to normal before long.

Nonetheless, as the wife pursues discussion of the topic, the tension between the two comes to a head. She finally asks him the hypothetical question: would he have married her if she were black. After much protest, he finally responds "'No,'" he would not. Clearly upset by his answer, she merely says, "'Thank you,'" and walks from the kitchen to the living room. Whereas before she had expressed her anger through the manner in which she washed the dishes, she now expresses it through the manner in which she flips through a magazine while sitting in the living room. Again, the accuracy with which the husband can interpret what she is expressing through her behavior, even just hearing her from another room, demonstrates how well these two know each other: "A moment later he heard her turning the pages of a magazine. He knew that she was too angry to be actually reading it, but she didn't snap through the pages the way he would have done. She turned them slowly, as if she were studying every word. She was demonstrating her indifference to him, and it had the effect he knew she wanted it to have. It hurt him." The husband and wife thus communicate much of their conflict merely through the manner in which they perform menial tasks and handle inanimate objects. They are so effective at communicating to one another in this manner that she can successfully "hurt" her husband merely by the speed with which she turns the pages of a magazine.

The husband likewise responds to this hurtful magazine-page flipping through a retaliatory cleaning of the kitchen. Just as she sends him a message of "indifference" through the manner in which she turns the pages of the magazine, he responds with a message of "indifference" by giving the kitchen a quiet and thorough cleaning: "He had no choice but to demonstrate his indifference to her. Quietly, thoroughly, he washed the rest of the dishes. Then he dried them and put them away. He wiped the counters and the stove and scoured the linoleum where the drop of blood had fallen. While he was at it, he decided, he might as well mop the whole floor." Although he is intending to send her a message of "indifference," he is also symbolically attempting to clean up the emotional mess caused by their argument. He is especially careful to clean up the blood that had fallen from her thumb as he "scoured the linoleum where the drop of blood had fallen." In other words, to the extent that she has symbolically shed blood in the course of their conflict, he attempts to symbolically repair the damage by cleaning up the blood.

After thoroughly cleaning the kitchen, the husband takes out the garbage. Outside, he watches two dogs that have tipped over a garbage can. The dogs, one male and one female, though companions, tussle over the garbage, symbolic of the husband and wife in the midst of a quarrel: "The two mutts from down the street had pulled over the garbage can again. One of them was rolling around on his back and the other had something in her mouth. Growling, she tossed it into the air, leaped up and caught it, growled again and whipped her head from side to side." The husband and wife, through raising the unexpectedly volatile topic of interracial marriage, have symbolically tipped over a can of marital garbage. Like the dogs, they wallow in their own emotional garbage for a time. From the hus band's perspective, watching the dogs, it is the female who is most aggressively attacking and struggling with a piece of trash, while the male lies on his back. The husband feels defeated, identifying with the seemingly harmless male dog that merely lies on his back in the garbage. He associates the female dog with his wife, as it more aggressively attacks and plays with a piece of garbage, growling in an intimidating manner. Likewise, whereas he had been willing to drop the whole messy matter between himself and his wife, she had rather aggressively pursued the topic—in the process creating an even greater emotional mess between them. Nonetheless, like the cut on her finger, the discoloration of the fork, and the drop of blood on the kitchen floor, the overturning of a garbage can by neighborhood dogs represents a relatively minor, temporary, and easily corrected problem. Likewise, the conflict between husband and wife in this story, while momentarily intense, is ultimately a minor glitch in an otherwise close and harmonious relationship.

The ultimately positive resolution to the con- flict between husband and wife is expressed through the symbolic remarriage of the couple. As he hears her preparing for bed through the bathroom door, he leans close and whispers, "'I'll marry you.'" Although the wife is not immediately placated, the words indicate a reaffirmation of the relationship, which will no doubt survive numerous minor injuries and scatterings of emotional garbage over the course of a lasting and intimate marriage.

**Source:** Liz Brent, in an essay for *Short Stories for Students,* Gale Group, 2001.

# Topics for Further Study

How do you think the husband and wife will resolve their situation? Do you think they will resolve it? Write a scene that takes place the following day.

Analyze the husband in terms of whether or not he is a racist character.

Unlike many stories, "Say Yes" lacks any significant interior drama. What do you think the characters are thinking while their argument is taking place and afterwards? Write a paragraph on this topic.

Write a counterargument to the husband's statement that African Americans "don't come from the same culture" as whites.

The husband says to his wife in defense of his position on interracial marriages, "'Don't take my word for it. Look at the statistics. Most of those marriages break up.'" Conduct research to find out statistics of how many interracial marriages versus same-race marriages break up. Can you come up with a hypothesis for your findings?

# Compare and Contrast

**1980s:** At the beginning of the 1980s, nine percent of all United States households are made up solely of a married couple. There are over forty-eight million married couples in the United States.

**1990s:** At the end of the 1990s, only three percent of all United States households are made up solely of a married couple. There are close to fifty-five million married couples in the United States.

**1980s:** In 1980, 67.2 percent of the white American population is married, and 51.4 percent of the African-American population is married.

**1990s:** While more than half of the American population continues to marry, the percentages for both whites and African Americans has decreased in the past ten years. In 1997, 62.1 percent of the white American population is married, and 42.4 percent of the African-American population is married.

**1980s:** In 1980, there are 651,0000 interracial couples in the United States. Of these couples, 167,000 are made up of a white and a black American.

**1990s:** The number of interracial couples has risen a great deal in the past ten years. In 1990, there are 1,264,000 interracial couples in the United States. Of these couples, 311,000 are made up of a white and a black American.

**1980s:** In 1980, of a total of just over forty-nine million married U.S. couples, almost half do not have children under the age of eighteen.

**1990s:** In 1997, of a total of almost fifty-four million married U.S. couples, close to twentynine million do not have children under the age of eighteen.

**1980s:** In 1980, the marriage rate in the United States is 10.6 per 1,000 people, and the divorce rate is 5.2 per 1,000.

**1990s:** In the mid-1990s, both the marriage and divorce rates have fallen over the past ten years. In 1995, the marriage rate in the United States is 9.7 per 1,000 people, and the divorce rate is 4.4 per 1,000.

# What Do I Read Next?

Wolff's *This Boy's Life: A Memoir* is a riveting, autobiographical account of the author's teen years. Brought to the Pacific Northwest by his divorced mother, young Toby soon is forced to endure life under his strict and cruel stepfather. Toby's efforts to get away from his stepfather lead to his self-transformation.

Wolff's second memoir, *In the Pharaoh's Army,* and his novella, *The Barracks Thief,* both evoke his experiences in the Vietnam War.

Wolff's brother, the novelist Geoffrey Wolff, wrote a memoir of his childhood with the boys' father, *The Duke of Deception* (1979).

Ann Beattie's short story "Weekend" (1978) explores the relationship between a husband and wife after the husband's repeated affairs.

Short story writer Andre Dubus's "The Fat Girl" tells about the important relationships in a woman's life: to the food she eats and the people she loves. In the story, Louise, the fat girl, fights against her weight but also comes to accept that most people will judge her for how she looks on the outside, not for who she is on the inside.

Richard Ford's collection of three novellas, *Women and Men,* depict turning points in the relationships of their central characters and explore universal truths and questions about how men and women—and people in general—get along.

Raymond Carver is credited as a major force in the revitalization of the short story in the late twentieth century. His 1976 collection *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* established his reputation. In the title story of his 1988 collection *Where I'm Calling From,* Carver tells the story of a man searching for a meaningful connection.

Annie Dillard, an American writer best known for her reflective essays, has written her autobiographical narrative, *An American Childhood*(1987).

# Further Study

Bailey, Peter J. "'Why Not Tell the Truth?': The Autobiographies of Three Fiction Writers," in *Critique,* Summer, 1991, p. 211.

Bailey's essay compares the autobiographical writings of Tobias Wolff, Philip Roth, and John Updike.

Lyons, Bonnie, and Bill Oliver, "An Interview with Tobias Wolff," in *Contemporary Literature,* Spring, 1990, pp. 1-16.

This text details a lengthy and in-depth interview with Wolff.

"Tobias Wolff," in *Current Biography,* January, 1996, p. 55.

This material offers a biographical account of Wolff's life, including his childhood and his education.

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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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