The Scarlet Ibis Study Guide

The Scarlet Ibis by James Hurst

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

□The Scarlet Ibis,□ by James Hurst, was first published in the July 1960 issue of the *Atlantic Monthly* magazine. The story is also available in *Elements of Literature: Third Course* (published by Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1997). The story focuses on the troubled relationship between two young boys: the narrator and his mentally and physically disabled brother, Doodle. It explores the conflicts between love and pride and draws attention to the effects of familial and societal expectations on those who are handicapped. The narrative unfolds against the background of the carnage of World War I, with its associated themes of the dangers of attempting to make others over in one?s own image, the brotherhood of all mankind, and the waste of life resulting from a lack of love and compassion. In the course of the story, Doodle becomes symbolically identified with a rare and beautiful scarlet ibis which, finding itself in a hostile environment, dies. The ibis's story resonates not only with Doodle's own fate but with the fate of those from the United States and other countries who died in the war.

□The Scarlet Ibis□ was the first and only work of Hurst's to achieve widespread recognition. It quickly achieved the status of a classic, being reprinted in many high-school and college literature text books. Its value to students of literature lies in its rich use of such devices as foreshadowing and symbolism, its sensitive use of setting to comment on the action, and its compassionate treatment of universal human values and limitations, as well as its compelling, character-driven plot. In an interview with this reviewer, Hurst said that he wrote the story as part of a process of coming to terms with the failure of his early singing career, but that the work has no direct autobiographical relevance and is a □work of imagination.□

Author Biography

Nationality 1: American

Birthdate: 1922

James Robert Hurst was born in 1922 on a farm by the sea near Jacksonville, North Carolina, the youngest of three children of Andrew and Kate Hurst. He attended North Carolina State College and served in the United States Army for three years during World War II. Though he had studied to become a chemical engineer, he realized that he preferred music and became a student at the Juilliard School of Music in New York. Aiming for a career as an opera singer, he traveled to Rome, Italy, for further study, living there for four years. On his return to the United States, he soon decided that he lacked operatic talent and abandoned his musical ambitions. In 1951 he began a career in the international department of Chase Manhattan Bank, New York, where he continued to work until he retired in 1984.

During his first ten years at the bank, Hurst wrote in his spare time. He published short stories and a play, mostly in small literary magazines. □The Scarlet Ibis□ was his first story to appear in a national magazine. It was first published in *The Atlantic Monthly* in July 1960 and won the magazine's Atlantic First Award for fiction that year. The story, as Hurst said in a telephone interview with this reviewer, □took on a life of its own.□ It was quickly granted the status of a classic and has been published in many high-school and college literature textbooks since the late 1960s. None of Hurst's other stories achieved similar recognition.

Plot Summary

□The Scarlet Ibis□ opens with the narrator, Brother, reminiscing about a remarkable event that took place when he was a young boy at his family home at the end of the summer of 1918. A scarlet ibis, an exotic bird that does not belong in the narrator's region, landed in a tree in the family garden. This memory sparks off another in Brother's mind: the birth of his mentally and physically disabled brother, Doodle, when Brother was six years old. Nobody expected Doodle to live except Aunt Nicey, who delivered him. Doodle is a disappointment to everyone, particularly to Brother, who had wanted a brother who could run, jump, and race with him. A sobbing Mama believed he would never do these things and warned that he may not be mentally □'all there.'□ Brother, appalled by the prospect of having a mentally retarded brother, plans to kill him. But one day, Doodle grins at Brother, and Brother decides that he is □'all there.'□

By the time he is two, Doodle can only lie in bed or crawl backwards like a doodle-bug (hence Brother's choice of nickname, which sticks). Daddy builds a go-cart for him, and Doodle and the rest of the family press Brother into pulling him along with him everywhere he goes. Brother takes Doodle to Old Woman Swamp, where they pick flowers and make garlands for themselves. Doodle cries at the beauty of the place.

However, Brother is sometimes cruel to Doodle. He shows him the coffin that Daddy ordered after Doodle's birth and stored in the barn loft and makes him touch it, threatening to leave him there if he does not. Doodle calmly declares that the coffin is not his but reacts with terror to the threat of being left alone, crying, □'Don't leave me.'□

When Doodle is five, Brother feels embarrassed at having a brother who cannot walk and decides to teach him in secret. Doodle believes that he cannot walk and, indeed, does not see the need to. But Brother takes Doodle to Old Woman Swamp and laboriously works with him until he succeeds in learning to walk. On Doodle's sixth birthday, the boys reveal Doodle's new ability to the family. They all delightedly embrace Doodle, and when Doodle tells them that Brother taught him, they hug Brother too. Brother cries with unspoken shame, in the knowledge that his real motive was not love, but pride. Doodle's go-cart joins the coffin in the loft.

Not content with his success in teaching Doodle to walk, Brother begins to teach him to run, swim, climb trees, and fight. In May and June 1918, the cotton and corn crops fail due to drought and a hurricane. People begin to talk of places in France where their men have been killed in the war. Brother worries that school will be starting soon and that Doodle is not ready. He pushes him harder. Doodle begins to decline in health, but Brother ignores the warning signs.

One day, the family is eating lunch when a strange croaking noise is heard in the garden. Doodle is the first outside to investigate; the rest of the family follows. They find a large red bird sitting in the bleeding tree. It flutters and falls from the tree, landing dead at their feet. Daddy identifies it as a scarlet ibis, a native of the tropics. He believes a storm must have blown it off course. Doodle wants to bury the bird, but Mama forbids

him to touch it as it may carry disease. While the rest of the family goes back inside to continue eating, Doodle finds a way to bury the bird without directly touching it. When he comes back into the house, he looks pale and says he is not hungry.

After lunch, Brother takes Doodle to Horsehead Landing to continue his rowing lessons. Storm clouds gather. Doodle is tired and frightened. When he gets out of the boat, he collapses in the mud. He has failed and both boys know it. They start for home, with Brother walking faster and faster to try to outpace the storm. A tree is shattered by a bolt of lightning. Doodle, who has fallen behind, cries out, □'Brother, Brother, don't leave me! Don't leave me!'□ Brother, feeling bitter at Doodle's failure, cruelly runs as fast as he can until he can no longer hear Doodle's voice. Finally, Brother grows tired and waits for Doodle, but he does not appear. Brother goes back and finds Doodle dead. He has been bleeding from the mouth, and his neck and the front of his shirt are red with blood. The position of his body is reminiscent of that of the scarlet ibis. Brother recognizes the link between the ibis's fate and Doodle's. He weeps, sheltering Doodle's body from the rain with his own.

Characters

Brother

Brother is the lead protagonist of the story and also the narrator. He is not given a name but is referred to by Doodle, his brother, only as □Brother.□ He is six years old when Doodle is born. Brother has a high opinion of his own ability to run, jump, and climb, and wants a brother with whom he can share these activities. When it becomes clear that Doodle is capable of little more than lying on a rubber sheet and crawling backwards, Brother grows ashamed of Doodle's limitations and regularly taunts him. Though Brother loves Doodle, the love is tainted with cruelty and embarrassment.

At the urging of Doodle and his parents, Brother reluctantly allows Doodle to accompany him on all his expeditions, pulling him along in his go-cart. Driven by shame at having a crippled sibling, Brother forms a plan to secretly teach Doodle to walk. Eventually, he succeeds. This initial success is not, however, enough for Brother, who is determined that Doodle will not shame him by being seen as different when he starts school. Brother pushes Doodle to do more and more strenuous activities until one day, he breaks into a run, leaving Doodle trailing. Doodle overstrains himself trying to keep up and dies of a heart attack. Brother weeps over his fallen brother and recognizes the symbolic link between Doodle and the beautiful and rare scarlet ibis that had fallen dead from a tree in the family garden earlier that day.

Daddy

Daddy, the father of Brother's family, has a coffin built for Doodle soon after his birth, in the belief that he will die. When Doodle survives, Daddy builds a go-cart for Doodle so that Brother can pull him around.

Doodle

Doodle is the mentally and physically retarded younger brother of the narrator, Brother. His family initially calls him by his given name, William Armstrong, but Brother nicknames him Doodle (after a doodle-bug, because of his habit of crawling backwards) and the name sticks. From the first, Doodle is a disappointment to his family, especially to Brother, because Doodle can only lie on a rubber sheet and crawl backwards. Everyone expects Doodle to die, but he defies them all and survives, becoming a loving boy with a strong attachment to Brother. Doodle is pulled around in a go-cart by Brother until Brother teaches Doodle to walk. This achievement, however, seems more important to Brother than it does to Doodle.

Doodle's real strengths lie not on the level of his physical prowess, but on a more subtle inward level, to which Brother seems blind at the time the action takes place. From the beginning of his life, Doodle defies death and refuses to recognize the coffin that Daddy

builds for him as his own. He shows a sense of wonder and respect for the natural world, crying with wonder at the wild beauty of Old Woman Swamp. He is the first to notice the visiting ibis and honors the bird by giving it a careful burial while finding a way of respecting his mother's orders not to touch it. The fact that Doodle is the only member of the family to care for the scarlet ibis enough to bury it shows his compassionate heart and emphasizes a symbolic link between boy and bird. This symbolic link is confirmed when Doodle dies on the same day as the bird and in a way that mirrors its fate.

Doodle's greatest fear is of being left behind by the impatient Brother on their expeditions together. When this happens one day, he dies of a heart attack while trying to keep up with Brother.

Mama

Mama, the mother in Brother's family, despairs of Doodle's future from the beginning. She tearfully predicts that Doodle will never run or climb with Brother and believes that he might not be mentally normal. When the scarlet ibis drops dead from the tree, Mama forbids Doodle to touch the bird in case it is diseased. Mama's attitude to Doodle is reflected in her attitude to the bird: in both cases, she fails to see the beautiful and miraculous and expresses only fear and anxiety.

Aunt Nicey

Aunt Nicey is aunt to Brother and Doodle. She delivers Doodle and is the only person who believes that he will live. She has a religious nature, giving thanks to God when Doodle shows everyone that he can walk. Because Doodle is born with a caul, traditionally believed to be Jesus' nightgown, Aunt Nicey warns that he should be treated with special respect since he may turn out to be a saint. Though prompted by superstitious belief, the comment shows an appreciation of Doodle's spiritual qualities and foreshadows a suggested symbolic link between Doodle, the ibis, and Christ.

Themes

Conflict between Love and Pride

□The Scarlet Ibis□ explores the conflict between love and pride in Brother's relationship with his physically and mentally disabled brother, Doodle. Brother loves and appreciates Doodle, as can be seen in the incident when the brothers fantasize about living in Old Woman Swamp, when Brother is overwhelmed by the beauty of the images that Doodle conjures up.

Love is accepting and compassionate in its nature. But Brother's love for Doodle is challenged by two very human failings: pride, and the cruelty that results from it. Brother feels embarrassed and ashamed of Doodle's limitations and obvious differences from other people. They threaten his sense of pride. He decides to make Doodle do all the things that other people do in spite of the fact that Doodle himself sees no need to conform. Teaching Doodle to walk is Brother's first success. When Brother's family congratulates him on his success, he cries with shame, because he knows that he acted not out of love but out of pride, □whose slave [he] was.□ Brother's pride again triumphs over love when he continues to push Doodle to harder physical feats in spite of Doodle's obviously declining health. In the end, Doodle's heart fails under the strain, a victim of Brother's insistence. Well might Brother reflect, □I did not know then that pride is a wonderful, terrible thing, a seed that bears two vines, life and death.□ In this case, the □life□ aspect is the undoubted progress that Doodle makes under Brother's demanding tutelage, and the □death□ aspect refers to the fate of the fragile boy.

The Desire to Make over Others in One's Own Image

All of the family, except Brother, accepts Doodle as he is. However, their acceptance is not portrayed as entirely positive, as it comes with a heavy dose of resignation and hopelessness about Doodle's prospects. Mama and Daddy are so convinced that he will die soon after birth that Daddy orders a coffin for him. When Doodle does not die, Daddy makes the go-cart, accepting that Doodle will never walk. The consignment of coffin and go-cart to the loft are signs of the progress that Doodle makes in being like his older brother.

Brother's impatience with Doodle's limitations is as ambiguous as the rest of the family's acceptance of them. But Brother's attitude is the more dangerous because it forces change on a body that is not equipped to deal with it and on a mind that does not desire it. Brother's success in re-making Doodle in his own image is greeted as wonderful progress by everyone except Doodle. When Brother tells him that he must learn to walk, Doodle asks, □'Why?'□ Neither does Doodle understand why he should struggle to avoid being different from everybody else at school. Because the story is told from the point of view of Brother and not Doodle, it is not clear how much Doodle's life is improved by his new skills. But it is certain that after the initial success of the walking

project, Brother's attempts to push Doodle further are destructive to Doodle's health and eventually contribute to his death.

Brother tells us several times that his efforts with Doodle are motivated by pride: he is ashamed of having a disabled brother. There is a suggested parallel here with the background theme of World War I (1914-18), and many readers see an implied critique of the war in the story of Doodle and Brother. Significant numbers of American troops were sent to fight in Europe in the summer of 1918, when □The Scarlet Ibis□ is set. Anti-war movements, like those gaining ground in 1960 when the story was written, point out that wars fought against other nations necessarily involve attempts to make over other nations in the aggressor's image. Prerequisites to such attempts, say these movements, are pride and arrogance: the aggressor nation has a conviction that it is in some way better than the victim nation and has a right to re-make the victim nation in its own image. This is generally as destructive and pointless in the long term as Brother's attempts to remake Doodle. World War I, far from being the □war to end all wars,□ as was claimed at the time, was soon followed by World War II (1939-45). Though leaders claimed at the time that war was the only option, many modern scholars question this view. Hurst does not shy away from emphasizing that the war's main legacy in the United States was the deaths of many men, a fact that he drives home in his references to American war graves and deaths.

People who are Different

Both Doodle and the scarlet ibis stand out as different; indeed, they are unique in the environment in which they find themselves. □The Scarlet Ibis□ dramatizes the ways in which people respond to those who are different or disabled. At one end of the spectrum, Doodle's family believes that any meaningful quality of life is impossible and expects the boy to die. At the other end, Brother is determined to re-make Doodle so that he conforms to the norm and no longer embarrasses Brother. Doodle fails to identify with either expectation, refusing to die or admit that the coffin made for him is his, and remaining oblivious to Brother's insistence that he should not be different from the other children at school. In a sense, Doodle floats above the expectations of others like the winged beings of his fantasies. But finally, he succumbs in the face of the pressure of Brother to try to become the same as everyone else.

Brotherhood

It is significant that the lead protagonist of the story is known only by his relationship to Doodle: □Brother.□ This detail alerts readers to the fact that brotherhood is a major theme. Brother's love for Doodle is bound up with cruelty and shame. Doodle, for his part, is strongly attached to, and reliant upon, Brother and his main fear is of being left alone by him. He is terrified at Brother's threat to leave him in the barn loft if he does not touch the coffin, and cries, □'Don't leave me.'□ He echoes these words with greater intensity on the day he dies, as Brother, bitter at Doodle's failure to perform the physical feats he has set for him, runs ahead of him in the rain. This time, Doodle cries,

□Brother, Brother, don't leave me! Don't leave me!□ Brother does leave him, if only temporarily, and the result is Doodle's death.

Because the story takes place against the background of World War I, Doodle's words and the theme of brotherhood suggest a wider resonance. Brotherhood among soldiers fighting in appalling conditions in mud-filled trenches was a frequent theme in war literature and even on war memorials. Loyalty to one's fellow soldiers was seen as vital; if a soldier was injured, the loyalty or betrayal of his colleagues could mean the difference between his living or dying. There are many stories of heroism involving men risking their own lives to save a fallen colleague and equally stories of horror involving wounded men being left to die. In a more universal sense, the carnage of the war brought home the need to embrace the ideal of the brotherhood of all mankind regardless of differences in nation of origin, race, or religion.

Style

Setting

□The Scarlet Ibis□ is set in and around Brother's family home in the American South. The story is laden with rich descriptions of the natural environment, in the family garden and the nearby countryside. Hurst never describes the setting for its own sake; it always comments on the action. For example, the description of the □blighted□ summer, with the hurricane bringing down trees and ruining crops, is introduced immediately after Brother recounts his intensification of Doodle's learning program. These images of devastation emphasize the destructive effects of Brother's pushing Doodle beyond his limits.

Moreover, the nearby Old Woman Swamp embodies nature's abundance and beauty. For Brother and Doodle, it seems to signify a world of infinite possibilities and the glory of life. Doodle cries with wonder when he first sees it, and the boys gather wild flowers and make garlands and crowns with which to bedeck themselves. The suggestion is that this is a place where they feel royal, beautiful, and wealthy (the flowers are referred to as □jewels□). Old Woman Swamp is also where Brother teaches Doodle to walk, which, in spite of its disastrous outcome, represents a widening of Doodle's horizons. Doodle fantasizes about living a blissful existence in Old Woman Swamp.

Foreshadowing

Hurst frequently uses foreshadowing to suggest an upcoming event. This technique creates suspense as the reader waits for the resolution of a certain narrative thread. The first paragraph is an example: □It was in the clove of seasons, when summer was dead but autumn had not yet been born.□ This image of death is reinforced by the reference to the □untenanted□ oriole nest that rocks □like an empty cradle.□ Cradles usually contain babies, a sign of new life, but this one is empty, suggestive of a dead child. Next follows a reference to □the last graveyard flowers,□ which speak □the names of our dead,□ evoking the image of men who have died in the war. These images combine with other elements, like the doctor's warning about Doodle's weak heart, to foreshadow the death of Doodle.

Symbolism

The scarlet ibis is a carefully chosen symbol. To understand why, it helps to know a little about the bird. A native of the South American tropics, the scarlet ibis is vivid red. Its color derives from the shrimps that form the bulk of its diet; if there are no shrimps, it loses its color. It needs a particular habitat in order to thrive as it only feeds in shallow waters along the coast, in mud flats and lagoons. The scarlet ibis is an endangered species which has not bred successfully in its natural habitat since the 1960s. Reasons for this include development of coastal areas, water pollution, and depletion of food

sources. Scarlet ibises are colonial nesters, meaning that they nest in large flocks; they rely on the presence of other birds of their own species.

The ibis in □The Scarlet Ibis□ is symbolically linked with Doodle from the beginning of the plot, as the memory of the ibis's arrival triggers in Brother's mind the memory of Doodle, and Doodle immediately feels a bond with the bird. Like the ibis, Doodle is a being alone, different, singled out, with no flock, out of his natural environment. Like the ibis, he does not thrive in the environment in which he finds himself: he is delicate, sickly, and fragile. But while the ibis's beauty is obvious to Doodle, Doodle's beauty of spirit is hidden inside an unattractive exterior; thus, the bird externalizes Doodle's inner nature. Doodle is associated with winged and divine beings, just as the bird is literally a winged creature. Both boy and bird are characterized by sacred imagery. It could be argued that both are symbolically linked with Christ.

Narrative Technique

The story is told as a first-person reminiscence by Brother, who looks back from some time in his maturity to events that took place in his childhood. Thus he is able to imbue the raw events with his reflections on the lessons he learned from them. For example, Brother as a boy would not be able to explain that the reason he cried after his family congratulated him for teaching Doodle to walk was his shame at having acted from pride, □whose slave [he] was.□ This is the reflective adult speaking. The narrative technique of reminiscence also enables Brother to foreshadow events before they are described in the narrative, as in □I did not know then that pride is a wonderful, terrible thing, a seed that bears two vines, life and death.□ This statement suggests that Brother will at some point realize this truth, apparently through some catastrophic event, as indeed happens.

That readers only observe the other characters through Brother's eyes might suggest that their sympathies lie with him. However, many readers will sympathize more with Doodle because of the emotional honesty of the adult Brother. He has had time to reflect on events and he lays bare the less admirable aspects of his character and of his feelings for Doodle, showing us the □knot of cruelty borne by the stream of love.□ If Doodle has a harsh side to his character, it is not presented; he comes through as an innocent.

The adult Brother remains closely in touch with the negative emotions that many children feel for their close relatives. Children tend to be more open than adults about having mixed emotions for those close to them. They will declare that they hate their mother, brother, or best friend, only to show minutes later the love and devotion that they also feel. Adults tend to suppress such negative emotions because they are more able to see the consequences of expressing them. The adult Brother, however, does not gloss over his negative feelings for Doodle, and this candor increases readers' sympathy for the younger boy, the target of those feelings.

Historical Context

World War I and the Growth of the Anti-war Movement

By July 1918, the United States was sending over 3,000 troops every month to Europe to fight in World War I (1914-18). By the end of the war in November 1918, total U.S. combat deaths numbered 51,000; U.S. non-combat but war-related deaths numbered 62,000.

Though the horrors of World War I led to its being dubbed □the war to end all wars,□ this hopeful prediction did not become fact. World War II began in 1939 and continued until 1945. Virtually all countries that participated in World War I were involved in World War II. Over 405,000 Americans were among the approximately 50 million people who died as a result of the war. This 50 million includes those who died in the Holocaust, the name given to the Nazis' program of extermination of peoples they deemed genetically inferior, and the United States' atomic bombings of civilians in the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan.

Though the United Nations was set up in 1945 to prevent the outbreak of another world war, peace proved elusive. By 1961, the year after the publication of □The Scarlet Ibis,□ in response to a perceived Communist threat, the United States had deployed 4,000 troops in South Vietnam. The cold war was reaching its height, with tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union running high. In February 1960, France tested its first atomic bomb; the Soviet government had determined by 1959 that any future war would be nuclear and worldwide. In October 1960, U.S. presidential candidate John F. Kennedy first suggested the idea of the Peace Corps, which would promote understanding between the United States and the rest of the world. U.S. involvement in Vietnam and the cold war marked a significant rise in the peace movement, which first become organized after World War II. The peace movement advocated the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Vietnam on the grounds that this would lessen tensions in the region and result in less bloodshed and that other nations should be allowed to work out their problems without foreign military intervention. Though by April 1970, approximately 115,000 U.S. troops had been withdrawn from Vietnam, complete withdrawal only took place in 1973.

Eugenics

It is difficult to read □The Scarlet Ibis□ without a consideration of the history of the philosophy of eugenics. Eugenics (from the Greek for □good breeding□) aimed to improve human hereditary traits through social interventions: for example, selective breeding; enforced sterilization of people seen as genetically inferior; and genetic engineering. Selective breeding was suggested by the Greek philosopher Plato (c. b.c. 427-c. b.c. 347), but the modern eugenics ideology, which developed from the growing discipline of genetics, was formulated in 1869 by Sir Francis Galton (1822-1911), a

British anthropologist and cousin of the founder of evolutionary theory, Charles Darwin (1809-1882).

Eugenicists of a religious frame of mind fused Galton's scientific arguments with the biblical injunction: "I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me" (Deut. 5:9). In this light, enforced sterilization of those considered to be degenerate was seen as a moral duty. The Supreme Court upheld eugenic sterilization in 1927, with the pronouncement of Judge Oliver Wendell Holmes (1841-1945), as quoted in Trent's book *Inventing the Feeble Mind*, that "three generations of imbeciles are enough."

Eugenics was supported in the early twentieth century by many prominent thinkers but became discredited after World War II, when it was seen to be the key idea justifying genocide by the Nazis (it was still practiced, however, by many national and regional governments into the 1970s and has as of 2005 been taken up by proponents of human genetic engineering). The Nazis had decided that anyone who did not conform to the so-called Aryan ideal (tall, blond, of Nordic appearance, and intelligent) should be eradicated. This objectionable group included people who were different from the norm, such as gypsies, homosexuals, intellectuals, dissidents, and the disabled, as well as all of European Jewry.

While the vocal proponents of eugenics have traditionally been drawn from the educated elite, an unofficial form of genocide of disabled people was practiced by ordinary families well into modern times. Acting from the standpoint that a disabled child was a financial burden and that such a child was likely to have a poor quality of life and would be better off dead, families would simply allow such a child to decline and die. This neglect happened in hospitals as well as private homes, showing that at least some of the medical community shared this view.

In "The Scarlet Ibis," the family loves Doodle and would never countenance deliberately allowing him to die. Nevertheless, they fully expect him to die and are even receptive to this outcome by providing him with a coffin before the event. Brother, on the other hand, favors a more aggressive course of forcing Doodle to fit into his preconceived notion of what a brother should be. While Doodle's family expects him to become invisible through death, Brother expects him to become invisible by conforming. When Brother fails, he runs off and leaves Doodle, which leads to his death. Both the family's and Brother's attitudes toward Doodle raise uncomfortable questions about society's attitudes toward disability.

Disabled Persons' Rights

Before the middle of the nineteenth century, it was common in American and European societies for mentally or physically disabled people to live within their families and to be integrated into society to whatever extent possible. However, in the 1870s, there arose an attitude that a disabled child posed a serious financial burden on members of the laboring class and should be placed for life in an institution funded by the state. Families

often did not object, since there was a great social stigma attached to having a disabled child, perhaps due to the widespread belief that such an event was God's judgment for bad behavior on the part of the parents or their ancestors or even evidence of immoral inbreeding between relatives. Frequently, families who institutionalized their children did not visit them or talk about them to other people.

Institutionalization remained the favored approach to disability in many countries as recently as the 1970s. Conditions in the institutions varied from good to appalling. With the growing prosperity after World War II, however, activism grew among parents on behalf of their disabled children. This activism was partly inspired by a return to belief in human rights after the Nazi genocide. A desire grew for disabled children to remain within their families and receive the same care and services, including education, as so-called normal children. Deinstitutionalization followed, and in 1975 Congress in passing the Education for All Handicapped Children Act guaranteed free public education to children with disabilities.

Critical Overview

□The Scarlet Ibis□ was the first story by James Hurst to appear in a national magazine. It was first published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in July 1960 and won the magazine's Atlantic First Award for fiction that year. The magazine's introduction describes □The Scarlet Ibis□ as a □touching story of a boy and his crippled brother.□

Soon after its publication, the story, as Hurst said in a telephone interview with this reviewer, □took on a life of its own.□ It was quickly granted the status of a classic and has been published in many high-school and college literature textbooks since the late 1960s.

Beginning in 1951, Hurst wrote other short stories and a play over a ten-year period, some of which were published in small literary reviews. None achieved the recognition accorded to □The Scarlet Ibis.□ Despite the story's undoubted quality, the fact that it was not followed by any work of comparable stature means that neither the story nor Hurst attracted the attention of reviewers or critics. Thus this reviewer was unable to find any reviews or academic criticism relating to the story or its author. However, one textbook in which □The Scarlet Ibis□ is reprinted, *Elements of Literature: Third Course* (1997), and the Internet give many examples of classroom assignments on the story, testifying to its popularity within school and college literature courses.

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Robinson is a writer and editor. In the following essay, Robinson analyzes how the story of the life and death of a disabled child is explored by Hurst's use of symbolism.

In James Hurst's □The Scarlet Ibis,□ the arrival of the scarlet ibis is mentioned in the first sentence, suggesting that it has major significance. The memory of the ibis's visit triggers the memory in Brother's mind of his brother Doodle. The bird's red color, combined with the fact that it alights in the bleeding tree, combines to create an image of blood, foreshadowing later events in both the ibis's and Doodle's lives. The link between the ibis and Doodle is further developed later in the story, when the ibis's arrival is described in detail. Doodle is the first to notice the bird and the first outside to investigate further. He is wonder-struck by the sight. At that point, the bird falls dead out of the tree. Daddy goes to get the bird book and establishes that it is a scarlet ibis, a native of the tropics that must have been separated from its flock and blown in by a storm. Readers understand that the bird is out of its natural environment, alone, weakened, and fragile. Doodle, too, is a creature out of his natural environment, too weak to do the things Brother expects of him, with a skin too sensitive even to bear the sun's rays, and expected not to survive at the beginning of his life. In □The Scarlet Ibis,□ James Hurst establishes a symbolic link between the bird and the disabled boy that illuminates the significance of the boy's life and death.

The bird's arrival on the wings of a freak storm raises the questions: What is Doodle's natural environment? Where is his flock? The answers are not given explicitly but are suggested symbolically. Doodle is frequently characterized by images of winged beings. There is the ibis itself, to which Doodle is symbolically linked; there are the people who inhabit his fantasies who have wings and fly wherever they want to go; and there is Brother's comment that giving Doodle the name William Armstrong is □like tying a big tail on a small kite.□ Finally, there is Doodle's favorite fantasy of a boy with a golden robe and a pet peacock who spreads his magnificent tail. This boy's robe is so bright that the sunflowers turn away from the sun to face him. The only light that could be brighter than the earth's brightest source of light, the sun, would have to be of divine origin. Winged beings include earthly birds but also heavenly angels.

Other images in the story link Doodle with a divine level of existence. Aunt Nicey, the spiritual conscience of the family, remarks that Doodle was born in a caul and explains that □cauls were made from Jesus' nightgown□ and that caul babies must be treated with respect because they might be saints. She also compares his learning to walk with the Resurrection. Aunt Nicey's reverent and deeply spiritual appreciation of Doodle reflects his own attitude toward the ibis, particularly when he solemnly conducts a burial service for the bird.

Aunt Nicey's view of Doodle and Doodle's view of the ibis show readers there is another way of responding to beings who are different, other than expecting them to die (Doodle's family) or forcing them to become the same as everyone else (Brother). It is possible to love, honor, and respect a being for its uniqueness. This possibility is

suggested in Doodle's vision of the boy with the golden robe and the peacock. The vision is a wish-fulfillment for Doodle's own life: that instead of being singled out for his perceived inadequacies, he is singled out and adored even by the flowers for his glorious and shining appearance. However, it is significant that saints, the scarlet ibis, and boys with peacocks do not live in the everyday world: a saint only becomes a saint after his or her death; the ibis lives in the far away tropics and when taken out of its natural environment, dies; and the boy with the peacock is only a fantasy. There is a sense in the story that the rough, ordinary world is not ready to receive and nurture such rare beings as Doodle or the blown-in ibis.

The story shows readers that the response of the world to special beings is sadly, all too often, to cut off their wings, to remain oblivious to their uniqueness and to confine them in a prison of limited expectations. Two symbols of the limited expectations that the family have for Doodle are the coffin and the go-cart. Daddy has the coffin made when he believes that Doodle will die soon after birth. When it is clear that Doodle will not die, Daddy has the go-cart made so that Brother can pull the otherwise immobile Doodle around. Daddy acts out of love, but the symbolism tells an uncomfortable truth. Both items that he makes for Doodle are small wooden boxes. The family's expectations of him fit into a small wooden box. What would a beautiful bird or a winged person, or a boy with a golden robe and a peacock, do in a small wooden box? On one hand, Daddy's actions can be seen as acceptance of his condition, but on the other hand, they shut out the possibility of change. Doodle is serenely certain that the coffin is not his□he intends to live. Both coffin and go-cart are consigned to the barn loft when it becomes evident that Doodle has grown beyond the family's limited expectations.

Brother, too, in spite of his obsession with having a sibling who will not limit him or hold him back in his activities, also puts Doodle into a box of sorts. He claims that □Renaming my brother was perhaps the kindest thing I ever did for him, because nobody expects much from someone called Doodle.□ Until then, Doodle had been called by the grand-sounding name of William Armstrong. Brother renames him after a lowly bug. The word □doodle□ also means a hastily done, unfinished drawing, so the nickname may carry a suggestion of Doodle's disability. Brother's act in renaming his brother seems anything but kind. It is as limiting and dismissive as the family's determination that Doodle will die soon after birth. Readers are alerted to this point by Aunt Nicey's disapproval of the renaming, on the grounds that it would not befit a saint.

The ibis, like Doodle, carries the touch of the divine, its death being suggestive of that of Christ. The ibis alights in a bleeding tree, and Christ is said to have bled from his wounds on the cross. The tree may be a symbol of the cross, for Christ is said to have been crucified on a tree. The ibis dies and falls from the tree, as Christ died on the cross. The colors of the dead ibis (scarlet plumage and white veil over the eyes) are those seen in many churches at Easter. They are the symbolic colors of the Passion of Christ, evoking respectively earthly suffering and spiritual serenity, humankind and the Godhead. Doodle's kneeling before the dead ibis and reverent burial of the bird while other members of his family continue their lunch is reminiscent of those loyal disciples of Jesus who cared for his body after his death, while, presumably, the sinners and unbelievers were preoccupied with their grosser needs.

Doodle has a spiritual awareness of the course of his life. After burying the ibis, Doodle returns to the house pale, quiet, and not interested in finishing his lunch. Just as he knows that the coffin his father made for him is not his, he now seems to know that the death of the scarlet ibis foreshadows his own death. He is proved right the same day.

That Doodle, through the ibis, is symbolically linked with Christ implies that he has a transformative function in others' lives. This point is borne out in the story. Doodle creates visions of beauty and oneness with nature in Brother's mind, such as his picture of their living together in Old Woman Swamp in a house built from whispering leaves and his vision of the golden-robed boy with the peacock. This vision moves Brother to an ecstasy beyond words, so that all he can do is whisper, □Yes, yes.□ More importantly, Doodle provides an opportunity for Brother to learn and exercise the Christ-like virtues of unconditional love and compassion. Though Brother fails to absorb this lesson while Doodle is alive, his penitent tears over Doodle's dead body and his reflections elsewhere in the story on the dangers of pride show that he has learned at last, albeit at the cost of Doodle's life. This is another suggested link between Doodle and Christ: both had to die so that those left alive could learn the gospel of love and compassion. In sheltering Doodle's body with his own from the □heresy of rain□ (another Christian reference), Brother finally gives Doodle the selfless love and protection that proved so elusive while he was alive.

Source: Claire Robinson, Critical Essay on □The Scarlet Ibis,□ in *Short Stories for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Critical Essay #2

Goldfarb has a Ph.D. in English and has published two books on the Victorian author William Makepeace Thackeray. In the following essay, Goldfarb discusses religion and duality in The Scarlet Ibis.

□The Scarlet Ibis□ is a deceptively straightforward story, apparently about the guilt the narrator feels over the death years ago of his little brother, Doodle. On the surface, the story is about not forcing people to do things beyond their abilities, about recognizing people for their own individual talents and not forcing them to fit a common mold. The unnamed narrator, known only as Brother, seems to suggest that he should not have pushed Doodle to do the normal, everyday things other little boys do: running, swimming, climbing trees, rowing a boat. Doodle, delicate and physically handicapped from birth, was not able to do these things, and pushing him to do them killed him.

Yet there seems to be so much more in the story. For one thing it bristles with imagery, allusions, and symbols. There is the symbol of the scarlet ibis, the dead red bird to which Doodle is compared at the end. There are all the references to flowering and dying plants, especially in the opening paragraph, in which the narrator talks of □rotting brown magnolia petals□ and □graveyard flowers□ and a □bleeding tree.□ Moreover, there is the strange reference at the very end of the story to □the heresy of rain.□

What might □the heresy of rain□ mean? A heresy is a belief opposed to orthodoxy, especially orthodox religion. In the story, Brother tries to shelter Doodle's body from □the heresy of rain,□ though Doodle is dead and one would think beyond need of sheltering. The sheltering is clearly an action of guilt, and perhaps of belated love, and it also seems to be an attempt to preserve Doodle's similarity to the scarlet ibis. In death, Doodle is covered with blood, creating a resemblance to the scarlet bird which died earlier that day. Perhaps □the heresy of the rain□ stems from the fear that the rain may wash away the blood and destroy the resemblance.

But if rain is the heresy, is the orthodoxy the notion that Doodle in some way is like the scarlet ibis? The ibis, as the children's father determines, is native to the tropics, far south of the family's home, which appears to be somewhere in rural North Carolina near Raleigh (given the reference in the story to Dix Hill, a mental institution in Raleigh). In North Carolina, the ibis is exotic and out of place. It is also full of □grace,□ a term which may simply mean charm but which is also a Christian term for the divine love through which human beings may obtain salvation. When the ibis arrives, it lands in a □bleeding tree,□ which literally means a tree oozing sap but which also suggests an allusion to the Cross on which Christ died.

Perhaps both the ibis and Doodle are meant to be Christ figures, dying for others' sins and somehow bringing them grace. Or if that is reading too much into this sad little story, then perhaps it is just about a brother's remorse. Yet the odd use of the word □heresy□ at the end, along with several other references to religion, implies more meaning.

In the most triumphant part of the story, when Brother manages to teach Doodle to walk, Aunt Nicey comments that the big surprise the two boys keep promising had better be as □tremendous . . . [as] the Resurrection,□ and it is in a way. Raising Doodle to his feet, getting him to stand and then walk when everyone had said it was impossible seems almost akin to raising someone from the dead. Interestingly, the person who performs this resurrection is not Doodle, but Brother. It is Doodle in a way, of course, for he is the one who stands and walks, but really the work was Brother's. Brother pushes Doodle to do it, putting Doodle on his feet at least a hundred times a day and picking him up when he falls. In a telling remark, Brother says that the enterprise seemed so hopeless that □it's a miracle [he] didn't give up.□ This comment about working a miracle makes Brother seem like a Christ figure, having the power to work miracles and perform a resurrection.

Proud of his achievement, Brother begins to believe in □[his] own infallibility,□ another Christian term especially associated with the Catholic Church, which holds the pope in his exercise of his office to be infallible. Of course, in the story Brother turns out to be seriously fallible, so perhaps his association with miracles and resurrection should not be taken to mean that he is God-like, or perhaps he is some sort of false god; after all it is Doodle who is compared to the magical or sacred scarlet ibis. Aunt Nicey suggests that Doodle might turn out to be a saint, and certainly Doodle has some saint-like attributes. He is the compassionate one who goes out to bury the dead ibis while the others laugh at his awkwardness; the one who seems most inspired by nature, crying with wonder because the swamp is so pretty; and the one with a mystical imagination, conjuring stories about boys in golden robes, people with wings, and magnificent peacocks with ten-foot tails.

Perhaps Hurst is pointing out the duality of religion, especially the duality in Christian religion. Jesus, after all, can be thought of as the crucified meek and mild martyr, but also as the powerful worker of miracles who raised others and himself from the dead. Certainly, the dualities in this story suggest religious duality. On the one hand, Brother, a fairly conventional boy, is □pretty smart□ at things like □holding [his] breath, running, jumping, or climbing the vines.□ On the other hand, Doodle can hardly do any of those things, but he has a gift for storytelling, loves to talk, and is compassionate and full of wonder at natural beauty.

Unfortunately, even years later Brother does not seem to recognize Doodle's talents. Doodle's storytelling Brother calls □lying□; his talk is ignored by the rest of the family; and his compassion for the dead ibis is scorned by them. Only by comparing Doodle to the ibis does Brother seem to suggest that Doodle was at all special. More typically, Brother refers to Doodle as crazy, though he does say Doodle was not □a crazy crazy,□ just □a nice crazy, like someone you meet in your dreams.□ This last comment indicates that there may have been something magical about Doodle, but mostly what Brother seems to express is his guilt over forcing Doodle to do things that were beyond him. Brother seems unaware that there was something that Doodle could do that was beyond the others.

The story itself, though, does seem to bring this message home, as if to say that, in a world of dualities, dualities are needed. There is a need for the active side of life, the running and the jumping and the climbing, and also for the more contemplative and mystical side, the Brother side and the Doodle side. Moreover, it is important that everyone has at least a little of each: even Doodle wants to be able to move around a little; on his own he strives to crawl, not content to remain motionless on his stomach on the bed in the front room. When he learns to walk, he is happy; the whole story is happy, with □Hope no longer hid . . . but . . . brilliantly visible□ and Doodle and Brother crying for joy while they lie on the soft grass smelling the sweetness of the swamp.

Of course, that the sweetness is in a swamp may give readers pause; with every positive there comes a negative, it seems. The very opening of the story is about bright flowers which seem full of life but which are also dying. Life and death exist together, and in Brother's feelings for Doodle both affection and cruelty exist, as he says himself when explaining why he forced Doodle to touch the little coffin.

It would be easy to interpret the story as a condemnation of Brother and his ordinary way of life, with praise for Doodle's contrasting mystical qualities. The story does seem to suggest that special qualities such as Doodle has should be respected and that someone like Doodle, who has talents of a certain type, should not be forced to ignore those talents in favor of running and climbing and jumping. But the story does not reject these activities outright. When Doodle expresses reluctance about learning to walk and says he just □can't do it,□ when he says that instead of practicing they should just make honeysuckle wreaths, the story does not seem to agree with him. It turns out that he can learn to walk and is happy to do so. If there is magic and godliness in the spiritual life, so there is some too in the life of physical activity. The world needs both, the story seems to say.

The danger comes when one side of life crushes out the other: when Brother pushes Doodle to become just like an ordinary boy, he pushes too hard. He does not allow for differences. To Brother it is a horrible thing to be □different from everybody else,□ and he is especially worried that his little brother will leave him open to shame if he is still different when he starts school. At some level Brother has thought that it would be better to have no brother at all than a brother who might shame him. When Doodle was first born and it seemed that he might be mentally as well as physically handicapped, Brother even thought of smothering him. When it becomes clear that Doodle is □all there,□ Brother gives up his overt plan to kill him, but in some sense he kills him still, all because Doodle is different.

The effect is sadness, not only at the end of the story, when Brother cradles his dead brother, but at the very beginning when Brother describes his life years later. Instead of a garden of riotous flowers, some rotting and rank but others blooming, instead of a wild, living land, Brother now has a □prim□ garden, a house that is gleaming white, and a □pale fence□ standing □straight and spruce.□ It sounds clean and neat, but also sterile, and instead of the bleeding tree there is a grindstone, something mechanical instead of natural, something lifeless, something that never had life in it.

Ultimately a question remains about □the heresy of rain.□ For Brother, the rain attempts to kill the magical ibis quality of his little brother, Doodle. If having the grace of true religion in this story means being scarlet like the ibis, then the rain that washes away the scarlet blood is the enemy. But it was Brother's own shame that killed Doodle, and the true heresy seems to be the fear of difference, the fear of dualities, the fear of accepting contrasting aspects. True religion, this story seems to say, consists in acknowledging and accepting both sides of life, the active and the spiritual. When one side destroys the other, the result is death or worse than death, a lifeless existence of grindstones, prim gardens, and pale fences instead of the joyous experience of death-in-life in the swamp.

Source: Sheldon Goldfarb, Critical Essay on □The Scarlet Ibis,□ in *Short Stories for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Critical Essay #3

Remy is a freelance writer in Warrington, Florida. In the following essay, Remy examines the ways in which Hurst's narrative strategies control time and influence the story's interpretation.

Though laden with symbolism, □The Scarlet Ibis□ is a story that combines elements of biblical fable, romance, and mystery to capture the reader's interest. It is the way in which the story is told, rather than its symbolic content, however, that makes the □The Scarlet Ibis□ linger in the reader's imagination. Part of this attraction derives from Hurst's creating a narrative structure that is as anomalous as the bird itself, for he incorporates narrative techniques that are not traditionally found in the short story. Nevertheless, the narrative moves at a pace that makes the reader want to know what happens and why, the reader's sense of time and causality influenced by the narrative point of view. Through narrative techniques that illuminate the brothers' relationship as the story moves from present to past, the narrator, Brother, manipulates time to create an air of mystery, arousing the reader's suspicion that, indeed, Doodle's death, unlike that of the scarlet ibis, may have been the result of design rather than accident.

By using a first-person narrator to tell the story, Hurst immediately establishes rapport between the reader and the narrator, whose voice remains personal and convincing from beginning to end. Moreover, the narrator, Brother, is always at the center of the story's action. It is through his eyes that the reader understands Doodle's character and the sequence of events that leads to the story's melodramatic climax. However, one of the limitations of the first-person narrator is that he or she can only express his or her thoughts and perceptions. Despite having a strong even domineering character, Brother lacks omniscience.

The benefits of using a first-person narrator far outweigh the detriments, however, for Brother elicits the reader's sympathy from the outset, shaping causality and structuring time to enhance his account of events. As the narrator, Brother determines *when* the reader receives information. The story's chronology, which moves from the present to the past, with compressed periods of time omitted in between, influences the reader's understanding of how the story unfolds. The order of events is structured so that it supports Brother's beliefs and perceptions, his way of viewing the world. Therefore, Brother establishes an emotional and temporal distance as he looks upon his younger self, a narrative stance that invites the reader to identify with the wiser, more mature adult he has become.

Although not commonly found in the short story form, a circular narrative allows Brother to record the movement of time and evoke a bygone era. The seasons and the school year serve as guideposts for the trials and tribulations, the successes and failures that mark a boy's coming of age. There is a cyclical movement of time associated with these traditional beginnings and endings, a rhythm closely tied to nature and to the expectations Brother places upon himself and Doodle. Now, many years after the

□clove of seasons,□ the present meets the past to close the circle, raising the reader's curiosity about why Brother chooses this particular time and place to tell his story.

Another narrative technique not traditionally found in the short story is the flashback, which, because the short story form usually emphasizes a particular moment in time rather than several periods extended over a longer period, is better suited for narrating events that occur within a novel. Nonetheless, Hurst uses flashback to great effect in □The Scarlet Ibis□ because of the story's focus on the sweep of personal history and the transformation that has apparently occurred within the narrator. Brother evokes the past to help the reader understand the present, especially as it relates to the narrator's sense of loss. The opening paragraphs are suffused with images of death and decay, and, in this respect, the use of flashback establishes a vivid contrast between the present and Brother's vision of his childhood life in and around Old Woman Swamp.

The image of the revolving grindstone signals the beginning of the flashback, transporting the reader to a more innocent time that Brother remembers with a mixture of fondness and regret. Here the reader pauses to wonder if, perhaps, Brother is embarking on a type of confession story, one that will account for the narrative's melancholic tone. Regardless, that tone soon dissipates as Brother tells the reader about his success in giving his baby brother a name that is not only appropriate given his handicaps but which is actually preferred by the family. The tone becomes proud and almost defiant when Brother tells of how he, through sheer will and perseverance, was able to work a miracle in making Doodle walk. The flashback records Brother's triumphs as he dominates his younger brother. Each test that Doodle passes leads to yet another, more difficult test of his loyalty. Normally, a flashback ends when the present intrudes upon the past, thus bringing the narrative full circle, yet Brother never returns the story to the present moment. Instead, he remains focused on the past, making the reader wonder why.

Hurst introduces a different kind of time by introducing parallels to the archetypal brothers in conflict, the biblical story of Cain and Abel. This parallel Hurst helps the reader identify the roles his characters play. Brother and Doodle's relationship to each other becomes clearer against the backdrop of history or fable. Thus, this parallel functions like a narrative □shortcut,□ a way of establishing for the author a mythopoetic context in which the story's action occurs. In □The Scarlet Ibis,□ the archetypes of the good, obedient brother and the proud, covetous one stand outside time, for the essential qualities of each character have remained intact through the ages. The relationship between the brothers represents a moral flaw inherent to human nature□namely, that even the best of intentions can lead to deadly rivalry when pride becomes too strong.

Since Brother is the story's narrator, he becomes the author's obvious choice for bearing the weight of the biblical parallel. From the very beginning of the flashback sequence, Brother tells the reader that he wants a brother, someone □to race [with] to Horsehead Landing, someone to box with, and someone to perch with in the top fork of the great pine behind the barn, where across the fields and swamps you could see the sea.□ Brother desires a companion against whom he may measure himself and with

whom he may share nature's beauty. Yet, instead of having a brother who is his equal, someone who could push him to greater heights of achievement, Brother finds himself having to care for Doodle, whom he refers to as a □disappointment□ and a □burden.□ Like Cain, Brother *is* his brother's keeper; hence, his name resonates with biblical□and moral□significance.

Hurst extends the similarity in sibling rivalry by bestowing upon Brother traits that are associated with Cain, whom the Bible records as the first person to commit murder. Rather than focusing on this aspect of Cain's biography, however, Hurst establishes other parallels. Like Cain, who was a farmer, a man who tilled the soil and harvested its yield, Brother possesses an extensive knowledge of plant life, especially that found in the swamp. Indeed, Brother's childhood knowledge of botany is extraordinary. But Cain's dominion over the earth does not last forever, for the soil becomes cursed once he spills Abel's blood upon the ground. Similarly, Brother views nature as dead and decaying years after the □clove of seasons□:

The flower garden was stained with rotting brown magnolia petals and ironweeds grew rank amid the purple phlox. The five o'clocks by the chimney still marked time, but the oriole nest in the elm was untenanted and rocked back and forth like an empty cradle. The last graveyard flowers were blooming, and their smell drifted across the cotton field and through every room of our house, speaking softly the names of our dead.

Brother's sense is that time has been suspended, separated from nature's recurrent nurturing elements, though the reader does not yet understand why.

Another character trait that clarifies and develops the correspondence between Brother and Cain is pride. When asked by God where Abel is, Cain, who has recently murdered his brother in a field, is proud enough□and defiant enough□to respond to God's question with one of his own: □Am I my brother's keeper?□ Cain's pride and defiance fuel his capacity for violence. When God learns of Abel's murder, he places a mark on Cain so that no one may seek vengeance, and thus Cain wanders the earth forever like a vagabond. Though his whereabouts for the past several years remain unknown, Brother also possesses the potential for violence, which is the biblical legacy that has been handed down to him. Brother's violent tendencies are perhaps more shocking when the reader realizes that he regards life and death matter-of-factly, as though his being inconvenienced is of paramount importance: □It was bad enough having an invalid brother, but having one who possibly was not all there was unbearable, so I began to make plans to kill him by smothering him with a pillow.□ Whether Brother tries later to act out this impulse remains unclear.

Brother's cruelty toward Doodle, however, is not impulsive, erupting in brief flashes of anger that dissipate quickly and are soon forgotten; rather, Brother's cruelty is sustained like an undercurrent of malice, for the tests he makes Doodle endure are both a product and a measure of Brother's self-aggrandizement. Brother is able to control his cruelty only because his pride□and the adulation that he seeks from adults□needs reinforcement. This need for reinforcement and a narcissistic love temper Brother's actions, though his penchant for understatement reveals that he never fully

comprehends the extent of suffering he causes his brother: □There is within me . . . a knot of cruelty borne by the stream of love, much as our blood sometimes bears the seed of our destruction, and at times I was mean to Doodle.□ This cruelty first appears when Brother takes Doodle up to the loft to touch his coffin, a scene in which Doodle's cry□□Don't leave me. Don't leave me.□□foreshadows the story's ending. When Brother finally expresses his sincere remorse, it is from a moral and emotional viewpoint tempered by the passage of time: □I did not know then that pride is a wonderful, terrible thing, a seed that bears two vines, life and death.□ Unfortunately for Doodle, Brother's realization arrives too late.

Hurst combines narrative elements to create an air of mystery and suspense in the story, revealing an outcome that is far from certain. The use of a circular structure and the tone of the story's narration inform the reader that Brother has survived some traumatic and life-altering event, for he cannot look at nature in the same way he did before. The paradise he enjoyed as a boy is gone forever. Obviously, this loss is connected to Doodle, but Hurst leaves the reader to decide the extent of that association. Furthermore, the story's first-person narration makes the reader question whether Brother is an unreliable narrator. This is a conceit that Hurst develops later in the story, though from the outset Brother's narrative style causes the reader to wonder what information, if any, he may conceal. Parallels to Cain and Abel compound a sense of impending violence, one that is satisfied rather anticlimactically at the story's end.

Hurst, however, carries the Cain and Abel parallel only so far, forcing the reader to adjust his or her expectations. Although the reader knows that Brother will not accept Doodle's failure to attain the desired skills and level of fitness before the school year begins, the question remains about how cruel Brother will be when he confronts his disappointment, for he takes Doodle's failure personally. Brother has already shown, in the scenes involving Doodle's casket and his various tests of physical endurance, that he can be merciless in making his younger brother conform to his ideal of normal health and physical agility. Doodle is aware that he will bear the brunt of his brother's anger and disappointment. Brother acknowledges as much when he says, □I knew he was watching me, watching for a sign of mercy.□

However, just as Hurst builds the story's suspense to an almost unbearable level, Brother casts doubt in the reader's mind about the sequence of events that have transpired and which are to follow. The story builds to a climax, yet not all of the pieces of the story lead to a satisfactory conclusion. With first-person narration, the reader knows only the version of events that the narrator chooses to tell, and it is important to remember here one aspect of the story that, until now, seems out of place, not only with regard to the narrative but also with regard to Brother's character.

By Brother's own admission, the only thing Doodle was good at was □lying,□ which is, the way Brother describes it, merely the exercise of a child's imagination. Doodle's □lies,□ which are never uttered by him directly but are told from Brother's point of view, are fanciful tales, not malicious acts of gossip. However, in telling the reader that Doodle was a good liar, thus indicating, by implied comparison, that he, the narrator, is a bad one, is Brother himself engaged in the act of lying? Given his pride and his competitive

nature, it seems improbable that Brother would be willing to make such a concession if it did not suit his purposes somehow. Thus, Hurst creates suspense by making the reader question the veracity of Brother's story. The unreliable narrator is one of the most popular characters in fiction because, during the course of reading the story, the reader acquires a wider range of knowledge than does the narrator. There is an element of surprise when contradictions reveal themselves. Because the narrator is unreliable, events described within a story may lead to moments of dramatic irony, which appears to be Hurst's authorial intent.

As the story nears its end, it seems ironic that Brother, who has kept Doodle within his sight almost from the moment he was born, should not be present during his brother's moment of greatest need. This contradiction indicates more than just a lapse in character; it indicates a narrative gap which raises a question about how Doodle actually died. Was it death by misadventure, suicide, or murder? Did Doodle possess enough knowledge of plant life to choose the deadly nightshade as his instrument of release? The only character who could possibly answer these questions is Brother, who, as both character and narrator, has proven himself to be less than trustworthy.

Throughout the story, Hurst employs a combination of narrative techniques that imbue □The Scarlet Ibis□ with an air of intrigue and mystery. The story's open-ended conclusion ensures that the characters and events retain a timeless quality long after Brother finishes telling his sad tale of loss and regret.

Source: David Remy, Critical Essay on □The Scarlet Ibis,□ in *Short Stories for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Topics for Further Study

In □The Scarlet Ibis,□ Hurst uses natural elements of the setting to comment on the action or the characters. These include plants, birds, insects, and weather phenomena. Make a list of some of these natural elements and write a paragraph on each, explaining how they comment on the action or the characters. Where appropriate, research the habits, habitat, behavior, appearance, symbolic value or other aspects of each natural element and use your findings to elucidate your answers.

Research the lives of two disabled people: one who is alive today, and one from history (born at any time before 1920). Write an essay on the lives and achievements of each. Include in your composition the following: the problems they faced and how they responded; society's and their family's attitudes to, and treatment of, them; and how the life and achievements of each may have been affected if they had been born in the other's time period.

Write a short story in which the main character has a disability, or imagine that you have a particular disability and write a □day-in-the-life□ diary entry. If you have a disability in real life, choose a different disability for this exercise. Take into account in your story or diary entry how your disability will affect your feelings, actions, perceptions, relationships and choices.

Research the history of eugenics from its scientific beginnings in the nineteenth century to the present day, considering aspects such as selective breeding, enforced sterilization, human genetic engineering, and the use of eugenics to justify genocide. Write a report giving some arguments that have been made for and against each of these aspects of eugenics. Bear in mind that different sectors of society, such as disabled people, scientists, doctors, the non-disabled population and governments may well have different views, so try to gather your arguments from a variety of sources to reflect the full range of opinion. In each section, give your own view based on what you have learned.

Research the experiences of a person who participated in World War I. This could be a person in active military service, or a nurse, journalist, ambulance driver, etc. Imagining that you are that person, write a letter to your family at home telling them about some of your recent experiences and your reflections on them.

Compare and Contrast

1910s: By July 1918, the United States has sent one million troops to Europe to fight in World War I (1914-1918), a force augmented by an average of 200,000 men per month until the armistice is signed on November 11, 1918. After the war ends, certain works of literature and people in wider society ask whether the war was necessary.

1960s: In 1961, in response to a perceived Communist threat, the United States deploys 4,000 troops in South Vietnam. By July 1965, some 75,000 U.S. troops are in Vietnam. The figure continues to climb to more than 510,000 early in 1968. Opposition to U.S. involvement in the war begins in 1964 on college campuses. Protests against the draft begin in 1965, when the student-run National Coordinating Committee to End the War in Vietnam stages the first public burning of a draft card in the United States.

Today: Between 2003 and 2005, many global protests are held worldwide against the U.S./British-led invasion of Iraq. These protests include several said to be the biggest peace protests before a invasion actually began.

1910s: Many prominent thinkers support eugenics, which aims to improve human hereditary traits through social interventions such as selective breeding and enforced sterilization of mentally or physically disabled people. In the United States, the Eugenics Record Office (ERO) opens in 1910. In years to come, the ERO collects many family pedigrees and concludes that those who are mentally and physically unfit come from poor backgrounds.

1960s: Eugenics is widely discredited after it becomes clear that during the 1930s and 1940s the Nazis forcibly sterilized hundreds of thousands of people whom they viewed as mentally and physically unfit and killed thousands of disabled people through compulsory euthanasia programs. However, enthusiasm for eugenics quietly continues in some parts of the scientific community and within some national and regional governments, which pursue enforced sterilization of disabled people.

Today: Human genetic engineering to bring about higher intelligence and fitness and to eradicate disability is advocated by some scientists. The Human Genome Project, which aims to map the human genetic makeup, makes modification of the human species seem possible again. The legalization of the patenting of genetic discoveries means that in theory, profits can be made from human genetic engineering, and corporations become involved in eugenics.

1910s: Unofficial euthanasia, in which disabled children are allowed to die, is practiced within families and sanctioned by members of the medical profession. In the event that the child is kept alive, institutionalization for life, funded by the state, is the favored approach.

1960s: The civil rights and women's rights movements add momentum to an activist movement for disability rights that begins after World War II ends in 1945. For disabled

persons to remain within the family as children and to have independent lives as adults instead of being institutionalized are major goals of this movement.

Today: The Americans with Disabilities Act is signed into law in 1990 by George H. W. Bush. It is a wide-ranging civil rights law that prohibits discrimination based on disability. It includes a section obliging public services to embrace service for people with disabilities.

What Do I Read Next?

The novel of German author Erich Maria Remarque *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929) is a grimly realistic portrayal of experiences of ordinary German soldiers during World War I. Remarque's stance is staunchly anti-war. This novel has become the major classic fiction text relating to World War I for high-school and college students.

In 1915, during World War I, the French Red Cross asked American novelist Edith Wharton to make a tour of military hospitals near the frontline to publicize the need for medical supplies. Wharton's articles about these visits to the frontline were collected and published in her book *Fighting France from Dunkirk to Belforte* (1915; reprinted by Greenwood Press in 1975).

Mental Retardation in America: A Historical Reader (The History of Disability) (2004), edited by Steven Noll and James W. Trent, features essays by a range of authors who approach disability from differing points of view. It covers topics ranging from representations of the mentally disabled as social burdens and threats; the relationship between community care and institutional treatment; historical events such as the legalization of eugenic sterilization; the evolution of the disability rights movement; and the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990.

Joseph P. Shapiro's book *No Pity: People with Disabilities Forging a New Civil Rights Movement* (1994) reviews how society's relations to disabled people has been affected by the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act. He draws on the stories of disabled people, including polio-afflicted activists, athletes, armed services veterans, and elderly people who owe their survival to medical and technological advances. While the author cites encouraging progress in disabled rights, he notes that disabled people still struggle to be accepted on equal, independent terms.

Further Study

Keegan, John, *The First World War*, Vintage, 2000.

This book is a vivid account of the causes and progress of World War I, drawing on diaries, letters, and action reports of the time. Keegan concludes that the war was unnecessary.

Keller, Helen, *The Story of My Life*, Bantam Classics, 1990.

Born deaf and blind, Keller refused to be crushed by her disabilities and went on to become an effective suffragist, pacifist, social reformer, and author. She helped start several foundations that in the early 2000s continue to help the deaf and blind. This joyful, perceptive, and beautifully written autobiography is credited with helping to change social attitudes toward the disabled.

Nies, Betsy L., *Eugenic Fantasies: Racial Ideology in the Literature and Popular Culture of the 1920s*, Routledge, 2001.

Nies draws on psychoanalytic theory, anthropology, and literary theory to argue that the rise of eugenics served as a palliative for anxieties over war-torn bodies and a means of repairing the loss of belief in the white male as defender of the nation.

Trent, James W., *Inventing the Feeble Mind: A History of Mental Retardation in the United States*, University of California Press, 1995.

Trent traces the U.S. history of treatment of disabled people, including institutionalization, neglect, sterilization, medical abuse, and mistreatment. The book is illustrated with disturbing photographs.

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Ebor, Donald, ed., *The New English Bible with Apocrypha*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1972, pp. 4-5.

Hurst, James, Telephone conversations with author, July and September 2005.

□□□, □The Scarlet Ibis,□ in the *Atlantic Monthly*, July 1960, pp. 48-53.

King James Bible, Deuteronomy 5:9.

Trent, James W., Jr., *Inventing the Feeble Mind: A History of Mental Retardation in the United States*, University of California Press, 1994, p. 199.

BOOKRAGS

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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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