Shame Study Guide

Shame by Annie Ernaux

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Contents

Introduction

When she was twelve years old, Annie Ernaux witnessed her father threatening to kill her mother. This dramatic childhood experience changed Ernaux in ways that she could not fully comprehend. So she committed herself to fully analyzing all the circumstances of her life at the time of the incident, and the results of that examination is Ernaux's eighth published work, the memoir *La Honte* (1997, Paris), translated into English as *Shame* (1998, New York). *Shame* was selected by *Publishers Weekly* as a best book of 1998.

In this book, Ernaux does not attempt to draw any conclusions. She simply gathers as many memories as she can about her town and her school, her extended family and their social standing in the community, her parents' cafe and grocery store, and her mother and father. By searching through news stories and staring at old photographs, she recalls as closely as possible the emotions she experienced in the summer of 1952, when her father lifted a scythe in his hand and threatened her mother. Who she was before that incident and who she became after it are the driving forces behind this story.

However, the memoir is not just about the author. It is also about the small Normandy town in which she grew up and the social structure that was in place there. Ernaux explores the awkwardness of puberty, the inflexibility of the Roman Catholic Church, and the narrow-mindedness of the smalltown sentiment that decreed that everyone should strive to be like everyone else. Ernaux's shame is that she felt she had to keep a secret. She believed that she must never reveal what she witnessed between her father and mother for fear of being ostracized. She must never reveal that she, or her family, was in any way different.

Author Biography

Annie Ernaux plays a dominant role in contemporary French literature. Her minimalist style of writing and her presentation of women and people of the working class have endeared her to French readers for many years. The manner in which she blurs the lines between fiction and autobiography have earned her credit as one of France's avant-garde contemporary authors who is changing the face of literature. In the past decade, Ernaux's work has won readership in countries outside of France, as her books are being translated into English. The topics of all of her books somewhat resemble one another as Ernaux returns to her childhood and early adult memories to search for the most honest and objective observation of the events that have molded her life.

Ernaux was born September 1, 1940, in Lillebonne, France, the daughter of Alphonse and Blanche Duchesne. Her parents were simple country folk who worked their way up the social ladder through their success as small business owners. Ernaux's parents, intent on giving her a better education than they themselves had received, saved their money so they could afford to send their daughter to private schools, a privilege usually reserved for the upper-class citizens of their small town. Ironically, it was her education that would eventually create a wedge between Ernaux and her parents, creating a gap that Ernaux would later try to understand through her writing.

When Ernaux graduated from high school, she enrolled at Rouen University, outside of Paris, an area where she has remained ever since. Upon earning her college degree in teaching literature, she became a high school teacher and then a professor at the Centre National d'Enseignement par Correspondence. In addition, she has worked as a visiting instructor at U.S. colleges, where she taught French literature, conducting her classes in her native tongue.

Ernaux has published fourteen books, with eight of them translated into English. Her most critically acclaimed works include her first novel *Les armoires vides* (1974), translated in 1990 as *Cleaned Out*, which recounts an illegal abortion that her protagonist undergoes while a college student. Two memoirs that she wrote, *La place* (1984), translated as *A Man's Place* and *Une femme* (1987), translated as *A Woman's Story*, focus on her relationship with her father and, in the second book, on her memories of her mother. In 1984 *A Man's Place* won the Prix Renaudot, one of France's most important literary awards. The publication of these books solidified her success, winning her much critical attention and a wider readership. Ernaux's book *La Honte* (1997), translated as *Shame* (1998), reviews Ernaux's relationship with her parents through very specific childhood memories that took place one day in the summer of 1952. Two more recent books return to the theme of her mother and Ernaux's abortion.

Ernaux was married to Philippe Ernaux in 1964 but divorced him in 1985. She has two sons, Eric and David, and currently lives outside Paris.

Plot Summary

Part 1

Ernaux opens her memoir *Shame* with the sentence "My father tried to kill my mother one Sunday in June, in the early afternoon." She then proceeds to recall the incidents around that particular day. She had just recently come home from church; her parents had an argument; her father threatened her mother with a scythe.

She next explains how she has often related the opening sentence from the book to several men in her life but later realized that was a mistake. This was her way of showing she was "crazy about them," but her declaration only made them shy away from her.

After writing the memoir, Ernaux states that she realized her father's threat was probably not so unique. These things happen, maybe in all families. However, before she fully explored the incident in words, she tells her readers, "that Sunday was like a veil that came between me and everything I did."

Ernaux has two photographs of herself that were taken around that same time period, one before the incident and one shortly after it. She looks at them as objectively as she can and describes what she sees. She states that if she had never seen the photographs before, she would "never believe that the little girl is me." The first photograph was taken after she received her First Holy Communion, a time of innocent childhood. The second was taken with her father on their trip to Lourdes, a time, she states, that marked an era "when I shall never cease to feel ashamed." To further stir her memories, she describes some mementoes she has saved, each imbued with fragments of her experiences as a young girl.

She visits the archives in Rouen, a small city outside Paris, to study old newspapers of 1952, and although the events are familiar, she knows them only as an adult who has read history, not as a child of that day, except for a cartoon she recognizes. She has subconsciously been searching for details of her own story, she confesses, for that is the only event of the day that is real to her.

Part 2

In the beginning of part two, Ernaux describes the area around her hometown, a place from which in 1952 she had never ventured. She lived in northern France, which is referred to as Normandy, in a small town "squeezed in between Le Havre and Rouen." Most of the year is spent in her hometown, but on occasion, her mother takes her to one of the larger cities to buy things they need. She discusses how the inhabitants of her hometown refer to the larger cities, how they dress when they go there, and how differently they feel about themselves when they are surrounded by people who are better educated and more sophisticated.

Ernaux contrasts city life with the general feeling of comfort of being in her small town, where everyone knows her. Then she more carefully describes her town, the city center, and the various neighborhoods—how they differ from one another and how they change as she walks further away from the heart of the city. The movement from the heart of the city to the outskirts implies a "social hierarchy" from rich to poor. Next she focuses on her specific house, which includes the groceryhaberdashery- cafe that her parents own. The family's living quarters are contained somewhere within the business quarters, offering little privacy.

From here, Ernaux becomes more detailed in her description of her parents' work, stating when the store is open, who the customers are, what her parents do all day. She also includes stories about some members of her extended family, where they live, where they work, and how she and her cousins pass the time of day. Once again, she focuses on the social hierarchy of her town, only this time she refers to it in terms of language. At the heart of the city, proper French is spoken, but by the time one travels into her neighborhood, people speak a different dialect. She then lists familiar gestures that her family knew well, such as how to clean oneself without wasting water and how to "express silent contempt: shrugging one's shoulders, turning round and vigorously slapping one's a—." Conversation amongst adults mostly concerns memories, Ernaux writes. "People are forever remembering," she says. The major topic is World War II, with dialogues describing what life was like before the war, during the war, or after the war. The war is the epic event around which everything else is measured.

Children are considered to be naturally "malicious," Ernaux relates. Corporal punishment is not only the norm, but according to Ernaux, parents talked about the spankings with a sense of pride in how hard they hit their children. If parents were not disciplining their children, they sat around and gossiped. In order to gather information on one another, the adults resorted to spying.

Ernaux concludes this section with more commentary about the socialization process in her community. She tells about how people are judged by their ability to be social, which involves more than just the talent for communicating. One must also know all the local customs, such as never asking another villager about his or her personal life; reciprocating gifts; and being aware of when it is proper to greet one another on the street and when it is not. She also lists a set of rules that she had to follow when she welcomed customers in the cafe.

Part 3

In part three, Ernaux describes her life at school. She attended a private boarding school, although she did not sleep there as many of the children did. She was the only child in her extended family and the only child in her neighborhood who did not attend public school. The private school was run by the Roman Catholic Church, and a long list of rules that governed behavior was strictly enforced. Ernaux lists some of the more mundane rules: children were never allowed to touch the handrail on the stairways; they must always line up for five minutes, in complete silence, before reentering the building

after lunch; they were not allowed to make eye contact with their teachers; and no one was allowed to leave the classroom to go to the bathroom. Being a religious school, prayer and other rituals such as confession, were intertwined in the all school lessons. As a matter of fact, Ernaux states, "The observance of religious practices . . . appears to take precedence over the acquisition of knowledge."

In 1952 Ernaux was in fifth grade. She had not yet begun puberty but was fascinated with the older girls who had. She lamented the fact that they had blouses that "billow out," and she did not. She felt inferior to these girls, resenting the fact that they were progressing toward adulthood, in her opinion, quicker than she was. She studied fashion magazines and tried to look older, but between her mother's strict disciplines and the rules of her school, her choices were limited.

Part 4

Ernaux ends her memoir by discussing how her father's attempt to murder her mother changed her life. When she felt as if she did not fit in society, or within any special youth group of her own, she blamed it on that event. "I feel that all the events of that summer served only to confirm our state of disgrace," she says of her family. She then lists some of the sadder moments of that summer: her grandmother died; her uncle beat his wife in public; Ernaux contracted a bad cold and cough that lasted most of the summer; and in another fit of anger, her father pulled her glasses from her head and threw them to the ground, shattering them. She also discusses a trip that she and her father took to Lourdes.

While on the Lourdes trip, Ernaux realized her family's lack of social status outside of her village. Her father was constantly suspicious about everything; Ernaux's clothes did not match up to those of the only other young girl on the trip; and Ernaux recognized her father's lack of knowledge of more sophisticated social customs. Her father's complaints about the city food (the more refined presentation was distasteful to him) made Ernaux feel as if she and her family lived in a separate world, one that was below the sophistication of city life. She also believed, at that time, that she was destined to live out her life in that lesser capacity, in which she would never enjoy the luxuries of indoor plumbing, fresh sheets on the bed, more than one pair of good shoes, and the other extravagances she experienced on the Lourdes trip.

Ernaux ends her book with the comment, "There is no point in going on. My shame was followed by more shame, only to be followed by more shame."

Characters

Father

The focus on this work is on Ernaux, the narrator, as she examines her past. However, it is her father who has created the one event that stirs her memories. In a fit of anger, her father threatened to kill her mother. It was the kind of anger that Ernaux witnessed only once, but once was enough. Her father's attempted (or threatened) murder of her mother went against the major morals of the church, of her society, of her family. No one outside the family would ever know about it (as far as Ernaux knows), and no one inside the family would ever talk about it. Because of her father's assault, Ernaux felt isolated.

Ernaux's father was a hardworking man who was gentle with his daughter. One of the few photographs that Ernaux has saved, and from which she tries to remember her childhood, is of herself with her father on a trip to Lourdes. Her father was an uneducated and unworldly man who embarrassed Ernaux outside of their familiar neighborhood. He did not understand city culture. He did not have the means to treat his daughter cosmopolitan wares. Back home, however, her father was sociable and commanded respect because of his small-town prosperity, where he indulged his daughter by providing a private-school education.

Mother

Ernaux speaks less of her mother than of her father. In some ways, she sees her mother as victim. In other ways, she understands that her mother provoked some of the hardships (and her father's murderous threat). She knew that her mother had a bad temper and was often the source of her parents' arguments. Her mother was also the disciplinarian in the family, demanding that Ernaux finish her chores and keep up her studies. It is also her mother who takes her on annual trips to the city to purchase the extra comforts of life that cannot be found in their hometown. Although the trips are exciting, Ernaux senses her mother's uneasiness, because in the city her mother knows no one, unlike in her own community in which everyone knows everyone else's business, from childhood through old age.

Her mother is also religious. However, Ernaux points out that her mother practices religion for other reasons than spiritual insights. She goes to church and prays as a way to ensure material and social success, and as a way to gain personal perfection.

Narrator

It can be assumed that the narrator of this book is Ernaux, as she recounts the details of the day in 1952 when her father threatened to kill her mother. The narrator recounts that event as honestly as she can, looking back some forty years to her childhood. In an attempt to understand her father's anger and how her mother provoked it, as well as to

understand her own role in the event, the narrator tries to recreate all the surrounding circumstances that led up to that moment and all the consequential feelings that came after it.

The narrator, in the process of trying to understand her childhood, offers a sociological view of her small town in provincial France, almost a decade after the destruction and trauma of World War II. It was a time of reconstruction, but through the narrator's rendering, it is her generation that most wants to build a new future, escaping the old, rigid forms of social status and the confines of patriarchy and religious rule.

Ernaux uses old photographs, microfiche newspapers, and souvenirs from childhood to help her recollect that tumultuous year. She is often disappointed when she does not find direct connections between these objects and her memories, wondering (through a child's eyes) why there was no account in the newspapers, for instance, about her father's threat. This single event was so upsetting, and yet she does not find a glimpse of the emotions she remembers, not even in the photographs of herself. The goal of everyone in her small town, Ernaux explains, is to be like everyone else. The traumatic incident between her parents has made this impossible, in Ernaux's mind. Therefore, the event brought shame to her, a shame that continues to plague her in her adult life; and in the end, she can find no way out of it, no way to explain or relieve it.

Themes

Shame

The title of the book delineates the main topic of Ernaux's work. In the small village in which she grows up, to be different is to be shameful. Success is determined as much by fitting in as by accruing wealth. The disreputable secret that the narrator of this work must keep to herself is not so much that her father attempted to kill her mother but that by his actions he has marked the family as being different. Shame begins from this event and grows as Ernaux notices the lack of education that is prevalent in her extended family, demonstrated by their colloquial language, their small-town customs, and their disregard of sophistication. She is also shamed by her late arrival into puberty, far behind other girls her own age. Her flat chest, her scanty wardrobe, her private education, and her living on the outskirts of town all make her feel set apart from one group of people or another. When she is at school, she is shamed by her body and clothes. When she must leave school, which is in the heart of the small town, and walk home to the more rustic part of the village where she lives, she is shamed by her heritage. When she uses the knowledge that she has gained from her private schooling, she is shamed by her parents and family, whose minds are clouded by uneducated misconceptions. Everywhere she turns, she finds that she does not fit in and is therefore constantly reminded that by the traditional assessment of her village, she is shamefully regarded as a failure.

Social Hierarchy

The town in which Ernaux spent her childhood was laid out in such a way that the richest structures were built within the center of town, and as one walked toward the outskirts, the houses and buildings slowly declined in value. If one were wealthy, one lived in the heart of town. Anyone who lived along the outskirts was not only poor but belonged on the lowest rung of the social ladder. Traveling from a small town to the larger cities also marked a transition. People in the larger cities dressed differently, talked differently, and ate different kinds of foods. When someone from a smaller town went into the larger cities, a change in attitude and dress was imperative in order not to make a fool of oneself.

Likewise, within the small town, anyone who did not talk the local dialect, whether they were from another country or from a city that was too far away to be known, was labeled a foreigner and was not to be trusted. People were judged either good or bad by their actions. For example, women who drank, had abortions, or lived together with a man without being married were considered bad, as were divorces, communists, and women who did not keep their houses clean.

Childhood Memories

Ernaux writes this book from a vantage point of at least three decades removed from the events she writes about. She tries to remember as objectively as she can what happened on a day in the summer of 1952. It is this day that not only robbed her of her childhood but affected the rest of her life. The event was her father's attempted murder of her mother, or at least that is how Ernaux remembers it.

In order to envision this day and its circumstances, Ernaux tries to remember everything about that time of her life. She recalls her experiences in school: how she felt about her teachers, her classmates, and her own body and clothes; how she regarded her education; how she felt about walking to school and studying at home; and how her family reacted to the knowledge she was gaining. She describes the building in which she lived, relating where she spent most of her time, how she greeted customers who came to her parents' store, where she went to the bathroom, and how little privacy she had. She recounts the various relationships in her family. She tells of trips that she made with her mother and with her father, and she describes souvenirs that she has retained.

In order to jog her memory, Ernaux examines two photographs taken of her during that summer, trying to recall who she was at that time. She wonders what she was thinking, what she was feeling, and how she saw the world. She also tries to see the difference in stance or attitude between the two images, one having been taken before her father's angry outburst and one taken later. She is surprised to find that when she goes to the library and studies copies of newspapers of that specific year, there is no mention of her own personal events. The stories in the papers are of things that she slightly recalls but are of no significance to her personal drama.

Religion

Catholicism is prevalent in Ernaux's book. She attends a Catholic school, which incorporates Catholic philosophy and religion throughout all school lessons. Catholic ceremonies are also part of her education. Of her two parents, her mother is the more religious, but Ernaux states that in her mind, her mother's religion was practiced not for spiritual but for practical reasons. Religion was a hedge for her mother, Ernaux believes, against poverty and hunger, and toward social acceptance. An important aspect of that year was Ernaux's trip with her father to Lourdes, a place sacred to Catholics. A miracle reportedly had happened at Lourdes, and annual visits to the place were supposed to guarantee good health.

Style

Point of View

Shame is written in the first-person point of view, which is a natural form for the memoir. The narrator is an adult, looking back to her childhood and attempting to understand through a re-creation of the summer of 1952 who she was and what she was feeling. Although Ernaux uses a first-person narrator, she insists that she is retelling the events with the cold objectivity of a reporter. She accomplishes this by offering no analysis of her feelings or the events that stirred them. Rather, she describes things, makes lists of things, and breaks down things into their most elementary parts. It is as if she is writing what she sees, not what she feels.

Journal Writing

Shame is written as if Ernaux were keeping a journal. It is a form of writing that Ernaux often uses, whether she is writing fiction or nonfiction. In this way, she pulls her reader into her story as if offering a secret glance of her most private thoughts. The book also reads as if the author were writing only for herself; as if she were on a journey through her memories, trying to make sense of them. She is not writing to tell a story; although in the end a story is told, however unconventional it may be. It is bits and pieces strung together on a fine cord that Ernaux cleverly ties together in the process of examining the contents of her mind.

Lists

In the midst of her narrative, Ernaux often breaks away and offers her readers lists of things. At one point, she lists the contents of a box she has saved from childhood, a box in which she finds souvenirs. In another section, she describes the provincial customs of her village through a long list of what so-called proper members do. She also offers a list of definitions that describe when a child matures into adulthood. Through the use of lists, Ernaux simplifies her narrative. She does not have to make up stories that explain the phrases contained in the lists. She merely introduces them with a few words such as "it is good form to," and then she makes a list of characteristics that apply. Readers draw their own conclusions and fill in the gaps.

Memories Invoked through Photographs

Throughout Ernaux's memoir, she refers to two photographs she has in her possession, taken within a few months of each other during the summer of 1952. One photograph was taken before her father assaulted her mother; the other was taken shortly after. By looking at the photographs, Ernaux accomplishes many different things. First, she

provides the reader an image of her adult self looking at herself as a child, which reminds the reader that Ernaux is examining memories from an adult point of view, reflecting on a time that happened long ago. It also emphasizes her personal mandate to remain as objective as possible. When she looks at the pictures, she relates that she hardly knows the little girl in them. She remembers the incident of the picture-taking but not what the young girl was feeling.

Another thing that the photographs achieve is a launching point for Ernaux. One of the pictures was taken after her First Holy Communion, an important religious ceremony in the Catholic Church in which young children participate. The ceremony is signifi- cant, so the picture jars memories, opening up pathways to other connected events. The same is true of the second photo, which was taken when she and her father traveled to Lourdes, another important event in her life.

The photographs are also symbolic of the kind of writing that Ernaux attempts. She presents the entire memoir as if she were taking pictures. She describes her town, her parents, her school, her extended family, her parents' store, and her trips with her mother and father. *Shame* is like a scrapbook of collected photos that Ernaux presents through words.

Historical Context

Modern French Literature

In the 1950s, while Annie Ernaux was still a teenager, the theater of the absurd was created, through which playwrights attempted to emulate their sentiment of the meaninglessness of life. This same concept was present in literature and was espoused through a philosophy called existentialism, of which writers Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus were two strong proponents. There was also the birth of the so-called New Novel in which writers attempted to distance themselves from the traditional storytelling techniques and focus their writing on merely describing events as seen by their invented characters. Time sequences were not always chronological and settings were often surreal. Some of the better-known writers of the New Novel included Alain Robbe-Grillet and Michel Butor. Younger writers such as novelist Nathalie Sarraute searched for new ways to express themselves and did not bother to use identifiable characters or plots in their stories, while author Marguerite Duras emphasized the importance of creating a mood.

By the 1970s the feminist movement began to affect French literature. Simone De Beauvoir had written *The Second Sex* (1953), which initiated books on feminist thinking. It was during this time that literary critics began analyzing the writings of women of this decade as well as female authors of the past. By the 1990s Helene Cixous and Marguerite Duras were considered the two main feminist writers in French literature. Language was often a main focus of feminist writers, many of whom tried to break away from what they referred to as a masculine vocabulary and attempted to create a language of their own. Ernaux has been cited as a writer who examines language and social conventions, as she uses her work to explore the differences between lower- and middle-class populations and the lives of women.

Normandy

Ernaux was born in Lillebonne, France, which is located in northern France in a territory referred to as Normandy. Celtic tribes inhabited this area in ancient times, and it was later conquered by the Romans. Most of the people of Normandy were Christianized during the third and fourth centuries, with Catholicism remaining the primary church in modern times. Although Roman Catholicism is the major religion, there are Protestant enclaves closely associated with the cities of Rouen, Caen, and the village of Luneray. The dominance of the Catholic Church, however, is seen in the grand cathedrals, the art, the traditions, and many of the festivals.

The long and accessible Normandy coastline brought much of Normandy's wealth, as well as much of its warfare, beginning with the Vikings and continuing with the Allied Forces in 1944, in their attempts to take back France from the German stronghold. Allied Forces landed in Normandy on June 6, 1944. The region experienced heavy

bombing during the war, causing the destruction of many lives and many historical buildings.

The capital of Normandy is Rouen, with Cherbourg and Le Havre being the major port cities. In past times, most of the population was concentrated in large villages amidst farmlands, but in contemporary times mass migration to the cities occurred. Much of Normandy's geography is flat grasslands and farmland, explaining its economic dependency on agriculture.

Normandy's provincial language reflects Nordic, Anglo-Saxon, and Frankish influences. However, as the younger generations received higher educations, a more standardized form of French was spoken, and the Norman dialect is quickly declining.

In terms of modern politics, Normandy, like the rest of France immediately following World War II, was ruled by General Charles de Gaulle, who formed a provisional government after the Germans were ousted in 1944. He became the president a year later. In October 1945 there was a vote to create a new constitution, which eventually created the Fourth Republic. This marked the first time that French women had the right to vote. In ensuing years, the United States offered aid to France to rebuild its cities and industries, but this did not end France's financial or political difficulties. The Communist Party remained strong in France after the war, controlling most of the labor unions. Costly strikes often interrupted production. During the late 1940s and into the 1950s, France also witnessed revolutions in many of its colonies, first in Indochina. There was also a war in Algeria that lasted into the early 1960s, a war that was heavily supported by many French, especially after the Algerians turned to terrorism tactics when they became disenfranchised with the declaration of peace. President de Gaulle remained in power until 1969, when he resigned after the people of France turned down his bid to reform the constitution.

Critical Overview

Critics often preface their remarks about particular works by Ernaux by first stating that her writing reads like a confessional of personal experience and of the emotions that were derived from it, and that it is difficult to distinguish between her novels and her memoir, as she blurs the lines between fiction and nonfiction. Her ability to bare her soul and the language that she uses to do so are usually highly complimented. For instance, Donna Seaman, writing for *Booklist*, calls *Sham* "a terse and powerful memoir." Seaman compares Ernaux's ability to investigate her emotions to the "precision of a scientist." She commends the author's "beautifully crafted and unsettling narrative" for its descriptions of the intimate details of living in a small town in France in the 1950s.

Ernaux's writing follows a minimalist style, which on a grammatical level eliminates most adjectives and adverbs and on a meaningful level strips away redundancy and gets right to the point of her topic. Phoebe-Lou Adams in *Atlantic Monthly* praises Ernaux's style for its precision, its detachment, and its lack of "ornament." She describes *Shame* as a "cool, factual, ironic study of life . . ."

In a review for *Publishers Weekly*, Jeff Zaleski also commends Ernaux's simplistic style. He states that other writers might brood "endlessly over the personal significance" of the focal event of Ernaux's memoir—her father's assault on her mother—but "Ernaux is much too cool-headed for that." Zaleski then points out details of Ernaux's style, noting the various lists she employs in the book, thus stripping "herself and her memories of any comforting myth." Due to this objective view of her childhood, Zaleski finds that Ernaux's essay makes the reader "face the jarring facts of being human."

Ernaux's writing tends to read like journal entries, whether it is based on truth or on her imagination. Robert Buckeye praises this technique in the *Review of Contemporary Fiction*. "It has been the particular strength and virtue of her writing," Buckeye writes, "to refuse to make this story a story; to make it literature would be to falsify it, distance ourselves from it, give it a drama it does not have." Claire Messud in the *New York Times* also focuses on Ernaux's refusal to tell her story in conventional form. She "defies the contemporary demands of her genre," Messud observes, refusing to satisfy the "desire for melodramatic intimate revelation and the smoothness of fictional taletelling." The results of Ernaux's diary-like writing gives *Shame* "a searing authenticity and reveals the slipperiness of much that we call memoir," Messud states.

Ernaux, in her attempt to remain objective, offers little analysis of her experiences. She presents the events much as a reporter might, with only the facts of her experience offered. However, most critics approve of this style. As E. Nicole Meyer notes in *World Literature Today*, "Ernaux's talent lies in her distinctive style, characterized by its simplicity. . . . In the space of a few pages, she captures the reader, who is seduced by the economy of her prose." Or as Julia Abramson, also writing for *World Literature Today*, states, Ernaux's simplistic and honest style represents her "yearning toward perfection."

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Hart, with degrees in English literature and creative writing, focuses her published works on literary themes. In this essay, Hart concentrates on the theme of alienation that weaves its way through Ernaux's memoir, looking for clues to define its cause.

In the memoir *Shame*, Annie Ernaux examines what she remembers of her childhood, the social customs of her village, and her overall feelings of shame. Over and over again in her recollections, whether she writes of her family's social status and the customs of her immediate and extended family or of the village in which she lives, she demonstrates her sense of not fitting in. Her description of the scene of her father threatening her mother with a scythe expresses another form of alienation because, she concluded, that this event would forever mark her family as being different from every other family in her small town. As a matter of fact, almost everything that Ernaux describes in her memoir is done so with an overtone of alienation.

In writing her book, Ernaux exposes more than just the details about her father's anger and her mother's role as victim, and she relates more than just a historic record of her village life. The book also brings to light details about the author's personality, things which are bared not just in what she writes but also in what she does not write. Underneath the details is a story about a young girl who lives in isolation in almost every facet of her life. Although Ernaux attempts to blame her father's actions for her loneliness, it is dubious that all her feelings of alienation have their foundation in the one focal event that has caused her the most shame.

Ernaux begins her memoir with a description of the scene between her father and mother. Her father is filled with rage. Her mother does not seem to realize that her nagging is pushing him to the edge. He suddenly erupts. A struggle ensues, and Ernaux's father drags her mother to the basement and threatens to cut her throat with a scythe. At least, this is how the youthful Ernaux remembers it. The scene is a moment, a terrible moment from which Ernaux has trouble releasing herself. She becomes stuck there, she believes, unable to develop any further, at least on a psychological level. There is no one to release her from the painful secret that she feels compelled to keep. Her parents will not discuss it; so for them, it is as if it never occurred. If she mentions it to anyone in her extended family, she fears she will disgrace her parents and therefore herself. She would never dream of mentioning it to anyone at school. Later in life she does tell certain men whom she dates that her father tried to kill her mother. This statement is offered to them as a gift, as a way of showing them that she is willing to open her heart to them. Her present, however, is often misunderstood and rejected.

Basing her memoir on this incident when her father threatened her mother, Ernaux implies that the alienation that subsequently defined her life was the result of her father's act. The fact that she felt forced to maintain this secret could explain a certain distraction that she experienced that summer. For example, her performance at school took a turn for the worse after the incident. While she once prided herself for her quick

intelligence, she later all but failed a national exam. This is easy enough to link to the traumatic event, but can she rightfully connect all her other lonely feelings to this too?

Blaming everything on this incident seems to be pushing the matter a bit too far. The event was traumatic, for sure. It was so disturbing that when Ernaux studies photographs of herself taken during the summer of 1952, she barely recognizes the young girl who is pictured there. The emotional energy that it must have taken to try to understand her mother and father's relationship, as well as to suppress the horrific scene between them, could explain the sense of alienation that she believes exists between her adult self and the twelve-yearold girl she once was. That young girl was burdened with an event that scared her. When Ernaux searches through old newspapers, she half expects the story of her parents to be written in bold headlines. Because it was such an important part of her life, she cannot imagine how the newspapers could have ignored it. As an adult, of course, Ernaux realizes that other families experience similar, or even worse, tragedies. That is the difference between Ernaux, the adult, and Ernaux, the twelve-year-old child. That is also why it is hard for the adult Ernaux to fully recognize the child in the photograph. It is too difficult to relive those childhood memories, not only because they were complicated but also because the adult Ernaux understands so much more about life. Her father's threat could explain Ernaux's alienation from her parents and maybe even from her extended family. However, it does not completely explain other gaps she experienced between herself and her classmates and her community.

For instance, Ernaux devotes a large section of her book to her relationship with children her own age. She states that she felt secluded from them because she was a late bloomer. While other girls showed signs of puberty, Ernaux remained flatchested. Although she desperately wanted to cultivate a friendship with the girls whose blouses were "billowing out" or who were wearing stockings on Sundays, signs that they were going through "the gradual metamorphosis" from youth to adolescence, she did not gain access to them. She desired to befriend these girls because she felt left out and wanted to learn more about sexual matters, about things that the adults in her life would never tell her. She believed that the girls held the answers to the secrets she most anxiously sought to understand.

In an attempt to appeal to the older girls, Ernaux dreamed about wearing makeup to give herself a more mature look. She begged her mother, to no avail, to buy her a wide elastic belt, a summer fashion that emphasized the maturing figures of the girls who wore them. No matter how hard she tried, or how hard she fantasized, she could not find a way to impress these girls, to demonstrate that she was ready to learn the mysterious facts of life that only they could convey. Her body did not follow her dictates—her desires to be a woman—and this made her feel ashamed. Worse yet, when she was forced to make a presentation in class, in front of the senior students, she expected them to laugh at her, to make fun of her. Instead, they barely noticed her, an even worse shame.

Failing to earn the attention of the girls who were showing signs of puberty, Ernaux then focused on a classmate more like her, in an attempt to make a friend. The girl was an

outsider like Ernaux, coming from the outer edges of the village, from the farmlands rather than from the inner, more sophisticated heart of the small town where most of the other girls lived. When Ernaux describes this young girl, however, she does so in unflattering terms. She portrays the girl in this way: "She worked desperately hard to achieve mediocre results." However, this girl was the best that Ernaux could find; the one girl who would talk to her, although most of their conversations centered on food. Their relationship did not go very deep. They walked to and from school together but never invited one another inside their respective homes.

The shame Ernaux cultivated from her father's attack on her mother surely could have influenced Ernaux's shyness. She might have felt that she could not open up her thoughts to anyone for fear she might tell them things that would impact her family's social standing. She could have feared that she would give away the big secret she felt compelled to hold onto. However, it does not seem fair to blame her father's act for the pubescent awkwardness and introverted personality that seemed to haunt her. Her alienation from children of her own age was a powerful force of its own, possibly based on a lack of self-confidence or fear of rejection. Although it seems to have thwarted her, in many ways it is no different from many other teenagers' reactions to the strange and mysterious changes and challenges that occur in puberty.

Ernaux's education was, in general, another source of alienation. She was the only child in her extended family and the only child in her neighborhood who attended private school. So she finds herself isolated during school because of her shyness and after school because she does not share the same experiences with the neighborhood children. It is also her education that, at times, separates her from her father. Although he has made a special effort to send her to the Catholic school because he appreciates the fact that this will allow her opportunities that he never had, he also makes fun of her when she attempts to use the skills she has learned. For example, he does not understand her need to use so-called proper French, while he is more comfortable speaking in his local dialect.

"To be like everyone else was people's universal ambition, the ultimate dream," Ernaux writes. It was a dream that Ernaux could never attain. In the privacy of her own home, she was constantly reminded of her parents and their strange connection to, and revulsion toward, one another. She believed at the time that her parents were different from all other parents in her town. Since her town was her world, she felt as if her difference marked her and would continue to set her apart for the rest of her life. At school, she was undeveloped, unsophisticated, and unsupported financially in the ways that the other girls enjoyed. This again made her stand out as a unique person, which in her mind was exactly the opposite of what she wanted to be. In her neighborhood, she was again the odd person out, the only child whose parents took her education seriously enough to send her to private school. When she traveled outside her small town to Rouen, a nearby larger city, she was the outsider there too. She talked and dressed differently from the people she saw on the street. When she and her father visited Lourdes, they were the only ones without enough money to spend on expensive souvenirs. Everywhere she went, Ernaux felt isolated.

Her stated reason for writing this memoir is to better understand her childhood, especially the event of her father's assaulting her mother; but even in her attempt to do this, she realizes the huge gap between the incident and the words with which she tries to remember it. In her effort to comprehend this most memorable scene of her childhood, she declares, "The words which I have used to describe it seem strange, almost incongruous. It has become a scene destined for other people." In other words, the more she explores the circumstances of her childhood, the more distant they become, so removed from her that it is as if the event happened to someone else. The result is that in the end, she even feels alienated from herself. The irony here, however, is that as much as she would like to distance herself from her past, she cannot do so. It is a part of her. So she does the next best thing. She writes about it.

Critical Essay #2

Holm is a freelance writer with speculative fiction and nonfiction publications. In this essay, Holm notes the elliptical and subtle ways that Ernaux touches on the topic of shame.

A reader picking up Annie Ernaux's memoir would expect the content to reflect the title. Such a reader might think that the book dealt directly with the shame that the twelve-year-old narrator experienced on a day in June 1952 when her father tried to kill her mother. But Ernaux is too skilled and unusual a writer to hit the reader over the head with a straighton examination of shame. Instead, Ernaux examines shame by coming at it through a number of interesting angles: class, the dynamics of a small town, memory, and the context of the processes she uses to capture her feelings about the event. Ernaux is a strategic writer who accomplishes much with her sparse and unusual approach. The haunting, precise, and often distant tone of the language gives the memoir an emotional punch that works more effectively than talking directly about the topic of shame.

Ernaux dives in, right on the first page. Following the unflinching first sentence—"My father tried to kill my mother one Sunday in June, in the early afternoon"—Ernaux proceeds to follow this with a recitation of the day's events leading to the incident. The cool, matter-of-fact prose contrasts nicely with the horror of the event at home and makes it doubly effective for the reader, rather than an overly emotional presentation.

Ernaux continues to use this technique—the juxtaposition of the horrid with the everyday, and all of it presented in cool, casual language—immediately after the incident.

My father wasn't his normal self; his hands were still trembling and he had that unfamiliar voice. He kept on repeating, "Why are you crying? I didn't do anything to you." . . . My mother was saying, "Come on, it's over." Afterward the three of us went for a bicycle ride in the countryside nearby . . . That was the end of it.

It's a typical denial of a dysfunctional incident that should be recognized as important. After it occurs, the family acts as if the threat to kill never occurred. The little girl takes her cue from her parents. It makes sense that she'd have a difficult time dealing with the incident later in life; denial has been modeled for her at an early age.

Ernaux admits that the process of writing about the incident may help her achieve some necessary distance from it. It almost sounds as if she is trying to convince herself that the incident was less momentous than it should be.

In fact, now that I have finally committed it to paper, I feel that it is an ordinary incident, far more common among families than I had originally thought. It may be that narrative, any kind of narrative, lends normality to people's deeds, including the most dramatic ones . . . It has become a scene destined for other people.

In the narrative that follows, Ernaux describes her way of coping with everyday life after her father's attack on her mother. Again, the author doesn't come straight out and say that she purposefully distanced herself to protect her emotions, but she gives readers enough hints so that they suspect that this is likely. For Ernaux, the existence of this event in her personal history creates a barrier that she perceives the rest of her life through. She refers to that infamous Sunday as an impermeable "veil." The author continued to go through the motions of life: "I would play, I would read, I would behave normally but somehow I wasn't there. Everything had become artificial."

A psychologist might describe this behavior as dissociation, but it's much more effective, for us, the reader, to experience the echoes of Ernaux's dissociation through her cool concise language use and the honest look at what was actually going on inside her mind as a child. The author continues in the same vein, to try and examine the event objectively, without attaching emotion, when she says, "it was no one's fault, no one was to blame."

Only occasionally, and very sparingly, Ernaux admits to the reader the full impact of that Sunday incident. At one point, she refers to "the indescribable terror" that she will always associate with the date.

The "shame" of the title refers not only to the horrendous, surreal incident that pierced Ernaux's life on a Sunday afternoon. Other aspects of the author's life conspire to create a sense of shame for the young girl of the memoir. Ernaux lives in a world of spoken and unspoken rules. The unspoken rules encompass a knowing she has about her social class in life; she and her family are poorer than some, and are aware of it. There is shame associated with this, but again, Ernaux shows us this with effective anecdotes, rather than subjecting the reader to an overly obviously "telling" of the fact. In one case she describes a photo of her and her father:

I imagine I kept this snapshot because it was different from the others, portraying us as chic people, holidaymakers, which of course we weren't. In both photographs I am smiling with my lips closed because of my decayed, uneven teeth.

Decayed teeth likely imply that a family is unable to afford dental care, but Ernaux lets us figure this out for ourselves and infer the origins of shame, which is rewarding and interesting for the reader.

Ernaux examines her father's attack on her mother in subtle, unusual ways that could be called elliptical or tangential. Not content to tell us directly of the incident, she relates how it continued to affect her over time, even many years later. The results are interesting, unexpected, and completely human, but they reveal an author who truly understands the workings of her own mind. Many people probably have thoughts like the following, but they are so fleeting and subtle that if not captured at once, they are quickly overpowered by more obvious and basic mental processes. For example, Ernaux looks at the incident using the context of two photos, one taken at her First Communion (a Catholic celebration), the other taken in the summer of the year her father tried to kill her mother. Of the photos, Ernaux notes, "one shows me in my

Communion dress, closing off my childhood days; the other one introduces the era when I shall never cease to feel ashamed." With very few words, Ernaux effectively shows the reader how these photos represent two milestones in her life. We can all relate to the memories—good or bad—that a photo may invoke, though it's difficult to capture the essence, or impact, in words, as has Ernaux.

In another unusual look at the incident, Ernaux examines the use of the simple phrase "that summer." Says Ernaux,

to write about "that summer" or "the summer of my twelfth year" is to romanticize events that could never feature in a novel . . . I cannot imagine any of these days ever belonging to the magical world conveyed by the expression "that summer."

This is an interesting and unexpected look at the incident. Ernaux tells us, with the skilled use of few words, that the words "that summer" will never conjure for her the typical events of a childhood summer. We can fill in the blanks, imagine the happy times she never experienced, even though she's given us nothing but a cool reference to an idea—what a child's ideal summer should be like.

Ernaux admits that she's used the event between her parents as a kind of milestone; a way to measure the impact of other experiences. No other event has come close to having the impact that the 1952 attack has had: "I have never ceased to compare the other events in my life in order to assess their degree of painfulness, without finding anything that could measure up to it." This is an example of something that we commonly do— compare events against one defining event—but it's something that we may not even think about doing. Because Ernaux so aptly captures these almost unconscious thought processes, she is able to talk about shame in unusual and elliptical ways, and avoid getting caught in the trap of overdone or overobvious sentimentality.

Ernaux, in her musings, seems to have transcended the obvious. This is illustrated when she expresses a complete disinterest in psychotherapy to help her describe the incident. She has a more concise, effective description:

I expect nothing from psychotherapy or therapy, whose rudimentary conclusions became clear to me a long time ago—a domineering mother, a father whose submissiveness shattered by a murderous gesture. . . . To state "it's a childhood trauma" or "that day the idols were knocked off their pedestal" does nothing to explain a scene which could only be conveyed by the expression that came to me at the time: to breathe disaster. Here abstract speech fails to reach me.

We, as readers, believe that the explanations of therapists fail to capture the event for Ernaux. But cleverly, she's slipped the information in for us, since her simpler expression is not enough for those of us who need to be told of the intricacies of her family relationships. We've now been given alternate descriptions and explanations for the incident. And we can also infer a sense of the narrator's personality—a possible impatience with simple, too-obvious explanations. Ernaux has accomplished a lot in one short paragraph.

Again, the author tries to approach the problem from a new angle—she looks at newspapers to try to get a sense for that day. She expects to "breathe disaster" again, and when readers hear that loaded phrase, they are plunged into the horrific, not-quitedefinable but effective mood that Ernaux created with those two words. What she realizes, with her newspaper perusal, is that she expected to find coverage of her father's attack on her mother. Ernaux realizes that "not one of the billion events that had happened somewhere in the world that Sunday afternoon could stand the comparison without producing the same feelings of dismay." Yet again, with very few words, the reader has been treated to her feelings of dread as she goes through each dated newspaper in 1952, fearing to reach the date in June. We feel the impact the event still has on her life in the 1990s, even though she refers back to it in the most elliptical ways possible.

Ernaux's world is shaped by rules, and an astute reader can conclude that these rules could only have exacerbated the shame that she felt as a child. For example, the author grew up in a small town, with a small town's typical lack of anonymity and unwritten, complex social norms. Ernaux is well aware of how her town measures up, or doesn't measure up, to the nearest larger city, Rouen. Says the author, "In Rouen, one always feels slightly 'at a disadvantage'—less sophisticated, less intelligent, and generally speaking, less gracious with one's body and speech."

A small town, on the other hand, has intense relationships and all the interconnectedness that this implies. Ernaux notes, when at home, that "in the street I pass men and women whom my mother and father almost married before they met." The impact of such a place can be powerful. Ernaux notes that when she returns to her hometown, she succumbs to a "state of lethargy that prevents me from thinking or even remembering, as if the place were going to swallow me up once again." The author leaves it to the reader to discern whether these feelings have to do with the 1952 incident, or the invisible constraints of a small town, or both. Ernaux's eye misses nothing: the intricacies of small town communication, the rituals at home, enforced politeness, conformity, required ways to act in the family store or at school. Though these aspects might initially seem disparate and unrelated, Ernaux succeeds in showing how they played a part in the shame she felt as a child, and how all these aspects conspired to give the incident between her parents its lasting power.

A *Publishers Weekly* reviewer notes that "with unsparing lucidity," Ernaux strips herself and her memories of any comforting myth, and in the process, she forces us to face the jarring facts of being human." Because of the approach Ernaux uses, she provides a subtle and satisfying read, giving the reader endless new ways to examine the topic of one person's shame.

Critical Essay #3

DeFrees has a bachelor's degree in English from the University of Virginia and a law degree from the University of Texas and is a published writer and an editor. In the following essay, DeFrees discusses author Ernaux's use of time to show how a single, seminal event in a person's life can shade and contour the way that individual looks at life.

What is shame? What does it mean to be ashamed? Shame can be clearly labeled and worn on the sleeve or it can be internal, like a shameful secret, invisible but for the ways it leaks into a person's responses to other people and events. Both are fraught with sorrow and regret, but it is the insidious nature of private shame that may be the more devastating, for there is no release, and thus, no escape. In Annie Ernaux's memoir *Shame*, the author deals with her hidden shame through the genre of memoir, allowing furtive glimpses into the mind of a young girl facing the often brutal transition from adolescence to adulthood. Ernaux manipulates time to inspire her refracted memory; by careening back and forth between three specific sets of events, she allows the reader to follow the jarring experience of trying to relive events that are difficult, and sometimes impossible, to comprehend. Ernaux uses the present tense to recall a specific period of her adolescence, distilling her past into discrete memories that provide the reader with an objective skeleton of Ernaux's life, upon which the author subtly and devastatingly expounds.

There is shock value to the memoir's commencement: "My father tried to kill my mother one Sunday in June, in the early afternoon." Ernaux drains the suspense from the story in the very first sentence, giving away the climax as the narration begins. However, by taking away the seminal suspense, she actually infuses the book with a renewed vigor. Having learned of this big, shocking event, the reader is compelled to know more. Human beings are, in fact, in a constant state of assessment, running over the particulars of our quotidian lives, adjudging the effects that some or another act on our parts might have on ourselves or others, reassessing the past in order to better understand our present actions, as well as to avoid pain or mistakes in the future. Life is a fractured whole, full of pieces that refuse to fit neatly together and reveal a clear, whole reflection of a person's existence and its larger meaning. Instead, the pieces meet jaggedly—and sometimes not at all. In the end, what is left is a partially realized portrait, full of questions, misunderstandings, mysteries, and gorgeous, intermittent moments of clarity. Ernaux's *Shame* is a pristine rendering of the jagged picture.

Shame is laid out as a triptych. The story begins with Ernaux's description of her father attacking her mother with a scythe, which introduces Ernaux's descriptions of the summer of 1952, when the attack took place. The second story line describes a series of events in the author's life, both at school and at home, that led up to that climactic summer. Finally, Ernaux describes memories from a bus trip she took to Lourdes, France, with her father in the year following the attack. A beginning, a middle, and an end—a seeming adherence to conventionality. But the storytelling is anything but conventional. Ernaux weaves the three sets of memories intricately and seamlessly

through one another with a sense of stream-of-consciousness writing, similar to the way in which individuals recall the past, wherein memories simply flow in rapid, random succession. But here again, Ernaux fools the reader with seeming simplicity, for although the story weaves in and out of memories, the order is carefully planned and presented; there are no extraneous or gratuitous thoughts falling across the pages of this spare text: "Naturally I shall not opt for narrative, . . . [n]either shall I content myself with merely picking out and transcribing the images I remember; I shall process them like documents, examining them from different angles to give them meaning."

Throughout the story, Ernaux recognizes that it is impossible to tell a history unstoried by the bias of time and personal reflections on the events. Thus, Ernaux interjects her current opinions in parenthetical statements, freely allowing herself a judicial voice of reflection. Outside the parentheticals, she mainly keeps to the facts (though she sometimes recalls her childhood opinion on how she may have felt at the time an event occurred), sparing the reader from didactic interpretation and thus allowing the reader to form his own opinion of the story being told. Ernaux's innovative style of interjecting commentary through parenthetical statements stems from necessity. She tells the story as a series of recollections shorn of explication because she cannot explain the events—because, finally, she cannot explain what she does not understand:

(After evoking the images I have of that summer, I feel inclined to write "then I discovered that" or "then I realized that," words implying a clear perception of the events one has lived through. But in my case there is no understanding, only this feeling of shame that has fossilized the images and stripped them of meaning. The fact that I experience such inertia and nothingness is something that cannot be denied. It is the ultimate truth.)

Ernaux's writing style is loose yet vigorous, casual yet exact. In only 111 double-spaced pages, she pours forth a vivid sampling of an adolescent girl whose mind is being concretized by the events happening in her life. It is fairly obvious that adolescents are impressionable and that the events and emotions that they experience during those impressionable years will affect the way that they look at and live their lives. But it is rare to get a first-hand look at the events themselves, as opposed to commentary on how the events shaped the person. By providing lists of events and keepsakes, Ernaux allows the reader to draw his own conclusions as to how the events leading up to and following that summer day when Ernaux's father attacked her mother affected Ernaux's life. She lists a litany of actions condemned by the nuns who ran her school; she relays lists of items she has saved or salvaged from 1952; and she lists a series of violent or shameful events that occurred to her or her family in the immediate aftermath of her father's attack on her mother. She writes to the point of exhaustion; her list-making ends when a redolent redundancy sets in, seemingly enveloping her in shame. "There is no point in going on. My shame was followed by more shame, only to be followed by more shame." By the end of the book, Ernaux is almost apologetic for the seeming shortcomings of a book that cannot answer its own questions. In writing *Shame*, she had hoped to write "the sort of book that makes it impossible for me to withstand the gaze of others." Her goal proved unattainable—what degree of shame could possibly be conveyed by the writing of a book which seeks to measure up to the events experienced

in my twelfth year"—but the book remained. Herein lies the book's greatest strength: by attempting to examine a part of her life and "get to the bottom of things," and then failing to come to any conclusion, Ernaux reveals an unerring, universal truth: that life holds no hard and fast answers, that events occur, and that there is no certainty that we can ever truly know why or how they affect us, but only that they do.

Shame is a shockingly bare tale; it tells not by telling but rather by transposing scattered events of her life and re-ordering them in a list-like fashion. However, Ernaux's simplicity of style is, in fact, anything but. It is a depiction of family ties, desperation, and the intangible relics of memory that grow and change, haunting a life. In Catholic, small-town France in the 1950s, little was left to chance, and little was kept secret, and it is therefore all the more astonishing that the seminal, shocking event in Ernaux's life would, even after dissection through time, remain such a little-understood event. It speaks volumes about the unspeakable nature of tragedy. And it leads people in myriad directions: toward recovery, toward penitence, toward anger, toward shame. Ernaux's experience of watching her father try to choke her mother, and her memories that preceded and followed it, are select for the very reason that all of our memories are select: we remember what we can, what time allows, and what our heart is able to bear. Sometimes, the whole truth is too much, or else too little. The reader cannot know what transpired between mother and father before and after the fight that altered Ernaux's perception of her place in society and solidified her sense of shame, and in the end, it is immaterial, for it is one's perception, and not objective truth, that ultimately matters.

Topics for Further Study

Although the major focus of this book is the author's relationship with her mother and father, there is an undercurrent of class relationships. Explore some of these elements. Write a paper about how Ernaux represents the various class structures in her hometown and where she places her family in that social hierarchy.

Ernaux mentions her trip with her father to Lourdes. Research this city. What is the signifi- cance of this place? Find related sites in other parts of the world and present your findings to your class, explaining where the sites are located; why they are considered sacred; what religion, if any, they are related to; and how popular they are today.

Read Ernaux's *A Man's Place*, a book about her father. Then write a one-act play representing a dialogue between father and daughter. Use the scene of their bus trip to Lourdes. Demonstrate the gap between them through a discussion of a particular event that both of them experience.

Research the economic structure of your town (or if you live in a large city, restrict your research to a specific community within the city). What percentage of the population is living in poverty? What percentage is considered middle class? Upper class? Find a map of the area and color code the neighborhoods that are considered the poorest and those considered the richest. Visit at least one representative section from each group. What are the differences you find?

Research the area of France in which Ernaux grew up. Describe the geography, history, and culture. How was it affected by World War II?How has it changed since then?

What Do I Read Next?

Ernaux wrote *A Woman's Story* (1991, translated edition) after witnessing her mother's death. In it she weaves a tale between fact and fiction about her mother's experiences before, during, and after World War II in France. The book was named a *New York Times* Notable Book.

In *A Man's Place* (1992, translated edition), Ernaux reveals the disparities that existed between her father and herself. He was raised in the country and knew only of country ways. Ernaux ran to the city and an urban existence as soon as she was old enough to do so. Ernaux was as eager to get away from the country life as her father was to cling to it.

For a male perspective on growing up in Europe both during and after World War II, *All Rivers Run to the Sea: Memoirs* (1996), by Elie Wiesel, relates the story of his youth in Romania, his imprisonment at Auschwitz during the war, and his discovery of his writer's voice while living in France. Wiesel subsequently became an American citizen. He was appointed chair of the President's Commission on the Holocaust and is the recipient of the Congressional Gold Medal of Achievement and the 1995 Nobel Peace Prize.

Emmanuele Bernheim, a French contemporary of Ernaux whose style of writing is often compared to Ernaux's, wrote *Sa Femme: Or the Other Woman* (1995), a story about a doctor who becomes obsessed with the man with whom she is having a clandestine sexual relationship. Bernheim's novel is similar to Ernaux's *Simple Passion* (1993), which is also about a woman obsessed with her relationship with a married man.

Ian McEwan won the Booker Prize in 1998 and narrowly missed the same prize for his novel *Atonement* (2002), in which he tells the story of Briony Tallis, a thirteen-year-old girl who will eventually grow up to be a writer. As a child in the summer of 1935, Briony accuses a young boy of assault, which causes him to spend time in prison. Through this story, McEwan explores the psychological stress of untold secrets.

W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* (2002), winner of the Berlin Literature Prize and a *Los Angeles Times* book award, recounts the story of Jacques Austerlitz, a melancholy youth who believes that due to some great error in his past he is being forced to live out a life that is not his. The story is told through conversations between Austerlitz and an unnamed narrator over a thirty-year period of coincidental meetings.

Further Study

Gavronsky, Serge, *Toward a New Poetics: Contemporary Writing in France*, University of California Press, 1994.

Avant-garde French poetry and prose have been changing quite liberally in the late twentieth century. Gavronsky's collection of twelve interviews with some of France's most important writers explores these developments. The interviews include writers discussing their own creative processes as well as an overview of current literary theory.

Hollier, Denis, and R. Howard Bloch, eds., *A New History of French Literature*, Harvard University Press, 1994.

A recent collection of essays by both American and European literary scholars, this book discusses various movements, genres, and circumstances of French literature from the ninth century through the twentieth century.

McIlvanney, Siobhan, *Annie Ernaux: The Return to Origins*, Liverpool University Press, 2001.

This book is literary criticism of Ernaux's extensive body of work.

Solomon, Andrew, *The Noonday Demon: An Atlas of Depression*, Scribner's, 2001.

Solomon, an award-winning novelist, began suffering from depression as a senior in college. His condition worsened after his mother's death, a time when he considered suicide. In an attempt to understand his condition and its treatment, he researched various worldwide practices. He also examined depression as it affected other literary figures such as Virginia Woolf, George Eliot, John Keats, John Milton, and Samuel Beckett. His book has been credited with providing an illuminating view on this topic.

Thomas, Lyn, *Annie Ernaux: An Introduction to the Writer and Her Audience*, Berg Publishing, Ltd., 1999.

Thomas's depth of understanding of Ernaux's work is very visible in this study. It includes a survey of Ernaux's books as well as a prediction of how future critics will view her life's work.

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Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

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Imaging and Multimedia
Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Nonfiction Classics for Students (NCfS) 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, NCfS 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 NCfS 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 NCfS 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 NCfS 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 NCfS 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

NCfS 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 Nonfiction Classics 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 NCfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NCfS 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 Nonfiction Classics for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Nonfiction Classics 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 NCfS 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.□ Nonfiction Classics for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

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

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Nonfiction Classics 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 NCfS, 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 Nonfiction Classics 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 NCfS, 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 Nonfiction Classics 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:

Editor, Nonfiction Classics for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535