The Sheriff's Children Study Guide

The Sheriff's Children by Charles W. Chesnutt

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

"The Sheriff's Children" was one of Charles Waddell Chesnutt's first pieces of fiction exploring the insidious effect of racism on America. Collected in *The Wife of His Youth, and Other Stories of the Color Line*eleven years after its initial magazine publication, even at the turn of the century "The Sheriff's Children" stood out for its indictment of white society in contributing to the problems faced by African Americans.

Many of the other stories in the collection dealt with internal "African American" issues—that is, how African Americans dealt with the problems of race, skin color, and prejudice among themselves. Such stories, including the title story, were generally more well received at the time of the collection's initial publication, in 1899. Such issues as racial intolerance, racial violence, and particularly racial intermingling did not sit well with the American reading public or its white reviewers. Only a handful of white Americans—though esteemed literary figures—publicly praised Chesnutt's work. The majority criticized him for bringing such issues as miscegenation to the forefront and implied he would do better to return to the folktales he had previously written to such acclaim.

Chesnutt did not do so; his later works, novels, treated race issues in an even more blatant manner, and in consequence, sold fewer and fewer copies. Six years after *The Wife of His Youth* had been published, Chesnutt had officially retired from his writing career. After decades of lingering forgotten in archives, his work was rediscovered. Today, Chesnutt is widely praised as one of the most important African-American writers of his period.

Author Biography

Charles Waddell Chesnutt was born in 1858 in Cleveland, Ohio, the son of free African Americans who had left the South a few years previously. Chesnutt spent his early childhood in the North, but after the Civil War, his family moved back to Fayetteville, North Carolina, where his father ran a grocery store.

As a boy, Chesnutt enjoyed reading at a private library and browsing in bookstores. Chesnutt dreamed of becoming a professional writer, and his first story was published in a local paper when he was only fourteen. The following year, he was forced to drop out of school and go to work as a teacher in order to supplement his family's income. Four years later, he began to teach at the Colored Normal School in Fayetteville, and he became principal of that institution in 1880. Despite his successful career, he still worked toward his long-cherished dream, partially as a means to improve racial situations in the United States.

Worsening racial conditions in the South compelled Chesnutt to move his family north to New York City in 1883, where he started a new career as a court stenographer and reporter. Soon, the Chesnutts relocated to Cleveland, Ohio, where Chesnutt had relatives and friends. He began to study law, and passed the Ohio bar exam in 1887 with the highest grades in his group.

Two years earlier, in 1885, his first story was purchased for publication. In 1887, *The Atlantic Monthly,* at the time the nation's most prestigious magazine, purchased his story "The Goophered Grapevine"; Chesnutt was the first African-American writer to be published in that magazine. Chesnutt, however, was light-skinned with "Caucasian" features, and he made no mention of his race when he submitted the story. The characters in Chesnutt's early fictions were generally white, as magazines limited their acceptance of stories with African- American characters. Chesnutt also wanted to save his treatment of African-American characters until he was a more skilled and better known writer.

Throughout the 1890s, Chesnutt continued to publish short stories. In 1899, two collections were published, as well as a biography of Frederick Douglass. *The Conjure Woman* was a collection of folktales, but *The Wife of His Youth, and Other Stories of the Color Line* featured African-American protagonists, such as middle-class African Americans in Ohio, as well as the character Tom in *"The Sheriff's Children."*

Literary successes encouraged Chesnutt to give up his business as a court reporter. The following year, Chesnutt published a popular novel, *The House Behind the Cedars,* as well as a series of controversial essays on the race issue. In 1900, Chesnutt embarked on a southern lecture tour, and his work in the early part of the century was instrumental in raising issues of race and exposing prejudices.

His predominantly white audiences, however, did not respond well to the increasing criticisms of racial prejudice expressed in his next two novels. He reopened his court

reporting business, and by 1905 had retired from the writing profession. He continued, however, to work on novels, publish short fiction occasionally, and produce articles, essays, and speeches.

Throughout his life, Chesnutt remained a firm supporter of racial equity, working toward the goal of ending racial prejudice. He was elected to a membership in a previously all-white literary group and was cited by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People for his pioneering work depicting African Americans.

Plot Summary

The story opens up with a description of its setting, Branson County, North Carolina. Branson County is a typical rural southern community in the post- Civil War era. The Civil War has a pervasive effect on all aspects of present-day life, but in reality, had little physical affect on the area, and its inhabitants were generally apathetic to the defeat of the South.

The biggest town in the county is Troy, a village of 400 or 500 people. Troy is a sleepy town, with little going on, until one day the villagers are shocked by the news of a murder in their midst. The victim is the widely liked Captain Walker. Some of the villagers have seen a "strange" mulatto near Captain Walker's house the previous night, and it is immediately assumed that the African-American man must have committed the crime. The sheriff organizes a posse and apprehends this man.

When the news of the capture spreads through the town, the men are still not happy. They feel that "ordinary justice was too slight a punishment for such a crime." The gathered crowd decide to lynch the prisoner, and arrange to meet at five that afternoon to take action.

Close to five, an African American who overheard the talk runs up to the door of Sheriff Campbell's house to inform him of the planned lynching. The sheriff is an educated, wealthy, and respected man. He vows to go the jail and protect his prisoner, as is his duty. His daughter, Polly, pleads with him not to go, but he remains resolute. He leaves a pistol with his daughter in case anyone disturbs her.

The sheriff has hardly locked the jail when the crowd of men appear. They demand entrance into the jail, but when the sheriff refuses, they say they will bust the door in. The sheriff warns them that if they try, he will do his duty—he will shoot them. The men in the crowd and the sheriff all acknowledge that most likely the prisoner will be found guilty of the murder and be hanged, but the sheriff is determined to fulfill his job. While the leaders converse, the sheriff enters the prisoner's cell. The scared man pleads with the sheriff to save his life and declares that he didn't kill the captain. The sheriff unshackles the man and tells him if the men get in the jail, to fight for himself.

The men, surprised at the sheriff's resistance, decide to give up the idea of lynching the prisoner. The mob departs, and the sheriff watches them through the cell window. He does not notice the prisoner steal his revolver, and the prisoner soon levels the gun at him. The prisoner declares his intention of escaping. The sheriff says that this is little gratitude for saving his life, and the prisoner admits that while the sheriff saved him, it is only momentary; soon he will hang on the order of the court. The prisoner says he didn't kill the captain but knows he will not be able to prove it.

Under orders from the prisoner, the sheriff unlocks the doors of the jail, then the men return to the cell. The man then reveals that to get away, he will have to kill the sheriff. When the sheriff reveals his utter surprise that the prisoner would "kill the man to whom

you owe your own life," the prisoner says indeed he owes his life to the sheriff—in fact, he is Tom, the sheriff's illegitimate son, born to him of the sheriff's former slave. The sheriff remembers them now. Angry with the mother and financially worried, the sheriff had sold Tom and his mother down South, to Alabama. He had been sorry for his actions many times since. The sheriff gasps, saying in surprise, "'you would not murder your own father?"' Tom counters with logic: what "father's duty" has the sheriff done for him; he also points out that other white owners gave their African- American children freedom. He lashes out at the sheriff for giving him "a white man's spirit" in a black man's body. Then he asks if the sheriff will promise to not raise the alarm if he does not shoot. The sheriff hesitates, not knowing if he could ignore his duty. Tom declares his intention to shoot the sheriff—he could not trust him even if he gave his word to keep silent.

The two men are so deep in discussion that they don't notice Polly's entrance. Worried when her father didn't return, she had come to the jail to see if he was wounded. Seeing the gun pointed at her father, she shoots Tom with the pistol. The sheriff binds up the prisoner's wound and promises to send a doctor the next day. He also says he will not reveal that the injury came while Tom was attempting to escape, knowing that would make the prisoner's situation worse.

That night, the sheriff has trouble falling asleep. He decides that he has a duty to his son, a responsibility. He comprehends how he has failed Tom, that he may have been able to restrain the younger man, that he might have freed him and sent him North, providing him with an opportunity to make something of his life. Believing in Tom's innocence, the sheriff decides the best thing he can do for his illegitimate son is to investigate the crime and attempt to discover the real criminal. He raises the idea of letting Tom go free, but his sense of duty will not permit him to do this.

The next morning, the sheriff goes to the jail. He finds Tom sleeping on his pallet, and unresponsive. The sheriff enters the cell, where he discovers Tom's dead body. He had torn the bandage off his wound and bled to death, alone, during the night.

Characters

Sheriff Campbell

Sheriff Campbell is the protagonist of the story. He is a man of social standing and wealth, and he is respected in his community. The sheriff is strongly ruled by his sense of duty; it leads him to defend the prisoner from the mob, even at a threat to his own life; it leads him to refuse to allow Tom to escape, even when he believes Tom is innocent. Through the conversation between the sheriff and the prisoner— the father and son— more is revealed about the sheriff's background and personality than had been previously. The reader learns that the sheriff is a passionate, bullheaded man, and also that despite his seeming morality in defending the prisoner, he has acted in ways that might seem unacceptable and surprising; that is, in selling his son and the boy's black mother instead of securing his son's freedom. This neglect of his son directly implicates him in the way the son turned out in life. Yet, as a counterpoint, the sheriff has also raised a daughter who is loyal, courageous, and independent. Thus, the children of the sheriff serve as a means to demonstrate two very distinct sides to his personality.

Polly

Polly is the sheriff's white daughter. She is courageous and independent, as indicated by her actions in saving her father's life.

Tom

Tom is the illegitimate mulatto son of the sheriff. He instantly recognizes his father, but his father does not recognize him. Tom has led a life of waste; he is clearly intelligent, yet he suffers from the lack of opportunities the white world affords. He is wise to the ways of the world, acknowledging that although he didn't kill the captain, it is almost assured that he will be found guilty of the crime. In many ways, Tom emerges as the voice of reason, acknowledging that he owes his father nothing, for his father was less than a father to him. Tom's suicide at the end of the story indicates his understanding that he has lost any minimal control he ever had over his own life.

Themes

Race and Racism

The themes of race and racism are integral to "The Sheriff's Children."The story takes place in the postbellum South, when African Americans, although free, were hardly considered equal to whites. The mulatto Tom is brought in as a suspect for the murder of a white man on circumstantial evidence; ironically, only after his capture does it emerge that there actually is evidence linking him to the dead man—a coat that he stole. Tom claims not to have killed the man, but he also recognizes that the society in which he lives will condemn him unfairly. The white men who make up the lynching mob also recognize this truth, as does the sheriff; they all acknowledge that there is no actual need to lynch Tom at the present time, for almost certainly he will be sentenced to hang for the murder.

The story reveals more about the pervasive nature of racism than just its fatal consequences. Tom's history demonstrates how African Ameri cans were regarded even when they are no longer slaves. The fact that Tom views himself as a black man with the spirit of a white man shows that there was little conception that an African American of that period could have the same yearnings and hopes for bettering himself as a white man.

The insidious nature of prejudice is also evident in Tom's self-loathing. He knows that he looks African American on the outside, yet he feels that he belongs to the race of his father far more than that of his mother. He feels this way because there is little opportunity open to African Americans. Thus, Tom is willing to degrade his own race, as he does when he blames the sheriff for giving him a black mother.

Responsibility and Morality

The story raises issues of responsibility and morality—and to whom these are owed. The sheriff considers himself to be a responsible person; he bases his life decisions on what he believes to be his "duty." Yet, his actions show that his sense of morality is connected to the person to whom he feels his duty derives. For instance, he takes his job as the sheriff seriously—even willingly risks his own life to protect his African American prisoner from the lynching mob—because that duty derives from the white community. However, he completely disregards his job as a father to Tom, taking no responsibility for the boy's well-being and by making his situation worse in selling him further South; he feels little responsibility toward Tom, for Tom is only an African American—at the time, regarded only as a piece of property—and thus not deserving of his careful duty.

The sheriff's sense of morality is also tied up in what is right according to the rules of society, not what should be done. After he regains control of the prisoner, he wonders

what he can do to help Tom and "hypothetically" thinks that he could free him, but his mind does not even process this as an option. Instead, the sheriff resolves to follow the legal channels; he will attempt to prove that Tom is not the murderer, a nearly impossible task. The sheriff does not have the slightest comprehension of the prevailing southern white morality, which does not care if the African American is guilty or innocent, only that some African American be made to suffer because a white person has also had been made to suffer.

In contrast, Tom regards responsibility more on a personal level. When he says he will kill the sheriff to ensure his escape, the sheriff claims that Tom has a responsibility to him because of their blood tie. Yet Tom denies this because the sheriff has not acted like a father in any sense, not even in "name only." Tom's reasoning shows his belief that sometimes responsibility must be earned, that it is not owed.

Identity

The theme of identity is important in "The Sheriff's Children." The two protagonists in the story—Sheriff Campbell and his mulatto son Tom— both undergo crises of personal identity. The sheriff derives his identity from his society; he is described at first as his neighbor might perceive him: "The sheriff of Branson was a man far above the average of the community in wealth, education, and social position," the narration begins and then continues to describe his accomplishments. The narration, however, does not delve into any personal aspects of the man's personality. Such information is only revealed through Tom when the younger man confronts the sheriff with the truth of his parentage. Through his son, the sheriff begins to see himself aside from the roles of his job: "He knew whose passions coursed beneath that swarthy skin and burned in the black eyes opposite his own. He saw in this mulatto what he himself might have become had not the safeguards of parental restraint and public opinion been thrown around him." Yet, once Tom is subdued, the sheriff turns his back on that part of himself that recognizes the more emotional level, and he again embraces the personality that only follows duty. He then decides not to set Tom free although he is convinced of his innocence.

Tom is also trapped between two identities, yet he never has the chance to confront them and make his own decision about his own identity. On the outside, he is African American but his passions lead him to believe he has the spirit of a white man. In so defining himself, Tom negates his own blackness and buys into the common belief of the time that whites and blacks are inherently different, with whites being superior.

Style

Structure and Setting

The structure of the story emphasizes the intermingling of the story and the setting, showing that one could not occur without the other. The story begins with an overview of the setting. The early description of the county demonstrates the importance of the Civil War to the life and perception of its inhabitants. As the narration states, "the war is the one historical event that overshadows all others." Although the inhabitants' perception of African Americans is not mentioned, the emphasis on the Civil War—a conflict taking place, in part, because of the fight over slavery—brings the idea of African Americans place in southern society to mind. At the time Chesnutt published the story, readers were aware, or had the capacity to be aware, that the postbellum South was a place rife with prejudice and discrimination, sometimes fatal, against African Americans.

Point of View and Narration

The point of view in "The Sheriff's Children" shifts several times. At the beginning of the story, the tale is told from an omniscient point of view; the narrator's voice is that of an editorial commentator, someone who understands the county, its history, and its inhabitants. Early on, the narrator is even self-referential: "At the period of which I write, no railroad had come to Troy." The omniscient point of view is maintained through the first two-thirds of the story. The narrator makes decisions of what details to include and which are "immaterial to this narrative."

After the prisoner levels the gun at the sheriff, however, a new element is added to the point of view, as suddenly the omniscient narrator is getting into the mind of the sheriff, revealing his thoughts; "The sheriff mentally cursed his own carelessness for allowing him to be caught in such a predicament," the narration reads. From that point on, all events are mainly funneled through the sheriff's point-of-view. The all-knowing narrator, however, still applies to facet's of the story of which the sheriff is unaware, as when Polly, unseen by him or Tom, creeps up through the jailhouse.

The narrator, however, steadfastly avoids getting involved in Tom's interior thoughts. Everything that Tom feels or thinks is revealed through his actions or his words. This narrative tactic allows the narrator not to be involved in Tom's suicide and bring it up at the end of the story as a surprise for the reader. This ending gives the story added punch.

Dialogue

The dialect and speech patterns of the different characters in the story reveal information about their backgrounds. The sheriff, as befits a man who has been college educated, speaks with grammatical correctness. He is a sharp contrast to the men who

make up the lynch mob, men who do not enunciate their words ("purlim'nary), drop the final sounds of their words ("hearin'"), and use improper grammar ("Hangin' air too good fer the murderer"). These speech patterns indicate the social and educational backgrounds of the speakers, and also serve as a divider between those who misinterpret their duty and the person who is committed to upholding his duty, which is the sheriff.

The African Americans, aside from Tom, speak in stereotypical dialogue, for instance, with "axe" for "ask" and the man and the woman identifying each other as "Brer" ("Brother") and "Sis'" ("Sister").

Tom speaks elements of both dialects. When he is afraid for his life and appeals to the sheriff for help, he deliberately takes on an inferior speech pattern; "don't let 'em lynch me," he murmurs from a cowering position. As soon as he is safe and in control of the situation, he speaks as an educated person. Even the sheriff notices his fine language, comparing it favorably to that of most of the residents of the county.

Historical Context

Post-Civil War Southern Society

After the end of the Civil War, the United States government embarked on a plan called Reconstruction to rebuild the South and reunite the nation. Reconstruction lasted from 1865 to 1877. Under Reconstruction, the southern states set up new governments and revised their constitutions. By 1870, all of the former Confederate states had been readmitted to the Union. However, the new legislatures often restricted the freedoms of African Americans, a practice to which many northern Republicans objected. On a positive note, Reconstruction governments founded new social programs and organizations, such as public school systems. Southern states also spent a great deal of money repairing their infrastructure, that is railroads, bridges, and public buildings, which had been destroyed during the war.

At first, African Americans were optimistic about their future. The Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments gave equal citizenship to African Americans and guaranteed their right to vote. Many African Americans took part in government, serving in Reconstruction legislatures. As early as 1866, however, southern governments began passing Black Codes, which were laws that limited the freedom of African Americans. Many African Americans also remained tied to the land through the system of sharecropping, by which a sharecropper worked a parcel of land in return for a share of the crop. Under this system, most African-American sharecroppers (as well as white sharecroppers) remained in poverty. African Americans had few economic opportunities to better their lives. Many were also threatened by the Ku Klux Klan, which opposed African Americans obtaining civil rights and used violence to discourage them. As Democrats regained control of southern state governments, they began to overturn the Reconstruction reforms. For instance, they devised methods of keeping African Americans from voting by implementing poll taxes and literacy tests. Southern states also passed Jim Crow laws, which called for the segregation of African Americans. By the late 1800s, many African Americans felt the New South was beginning to look very much like the Old South.

In response to such prohibitory measures, African Americans built their own social institutions and adopted different approaches to fighting discrimination. African American leaders carried their message to African American and white audiences. In his Atlanta Compromise speech of 1895, Booker T. Washington spoke of his desire for peaceful coexistence and suggested that African Americans and whites should cooperate for economic progress. His views that African Americans should concentrate on economic advancement, and not protest discrimination, angered some other African Americans.

Ida Wells-Barnett and W. E. B. DuBois both brought greater attention to racial prejudice. Wells- Barnett urged African Americans to leave the South for the North, where there was less discrimination and violence perpetrated against African Americans. She also

was a leader in the anti-lynching crusade. In *A Red Record* she printed the name of every one of the 197 African American men lynched in the United States in 1894, the reason they were lynched, and the place. Her efforts helped show that one third more African Americans were killed that year by lynch mobs than were legally executed.

Other American Minorities

Other minorities also found life difficult during this period. In 1871, the Indian Appropriation Act made all Native Americans wards of the federal government and nullified all treaties with them, thus Indian tribes lost any remaining traces of national sovereignty. Then in 1887, the Dawes Act broke up reservation lands, dividing them into individual family plots. Tribes were forced to sell any leftover land to the federal government for its resale to non- Indians. The Dawes Act proved devastating to Native Americans. Not only did they end up losing control of two out of three acres of land they had held, but under this act, the land allotment acreage was not large enough to sustain families. Many Native Americans ended up leasing or selling their land to whites.

Prejudice also rose against those Americans who were not Protestant. As more and more immigrants arrived in the country in the mid- to late 1800s, there was a rise in hate groups. Nativists— people who disliked anyone who came from another country or ethnic background—urged laws prohibiting emigration. Violent attacks were also perpetrated against Catholics and Jews.

The American Economy

The American economy was undergoing significant changes towards the end of the nineteenth century. A mining boom in gold and silver drew many Americans out West, and others chose to settle in the Great Plains, where they could find inexpensive land and rich soil for farming. The Second Industrial Revolution, which began in the late 1800s, led to a period of explosive growth in U.S. manufacturing. By the mid-1800s, the United States was the world's industrial leader. Big business grew, as did the number of new factories. Many of the immigrants who were increasingly coming to the United States in the late 1800s were hired to work at these factories. As the United States population kept growing—doubling from 1860 to 1900— the number of farms tripled. Modern machines allowed farmers to produce crops much faster than they ever had before. However, the combination of more farms and greater productivity led to overproduction and lower crop prices. By 1893, because of a stock market panic, the United States had entered a depression.

Critical Overview

"The Sheriff's Children" first appeared in the *Independent* in 1888. Eleven years later, it was included in Chesnutt's second collection of fiction, *The Wife of His Youth, and Other Stories of the Color Line.* This collection blatantly raised issues more generally left untouched, such as racial miscegenation, the divided racial identity of mixed-blood Americans, and the racial barriers that kept African Americans from fully participating in American life. The Nashville *Banner* even outright accused Chesnutt of being an "advocate of miscegenation."

Although the collection was not as well-received as Chesnutt's previous volume of folktales, W. D. Howells, the well-known literary editor and writer, praised it in *The Atlantic Monthly.* Both Howells and fellow editor Hamilton Wright Mabie declared Chesnutt a first-class realist. Wrote Howells, "It is not from their racial interest that we could first wish to speak of [Chesnutt's stories], though that must have a very great and very just claim upon the critic. It is much more simply and directly, as works of art, that they make their appeal, and we must allow the force of this quite independently of the other interest." Howells, however, recognized that this task "cannot always be allowed," and for many readers, that was indeed the primary focus.

Such was the case with Nancy Huston Banks, another early reviewer. In *Bookman,* she praised the story *"The Wife of His Youth"* but found the others "hardly worthy of mention." Her gravest criticism fell on "The Sheriff's Children" for its "shocking instance of [Chesnutt's] reckless disregard of matters respected by more experienced writers." Despite her criticism, Banks recognized the importance of Chesnutt's message: "there is no intention to deny the too probable truth of the untellable story, nor any wish to dispute its tragic importance as legitimate literary material. On the contrary, it is the recognition of that terrible truth and its might weight which cause the protest. Had the author recognized these things, it would seem that he must either have left them alone or approached them more carefully, and with greater strenuousness; that he must have felt the need of laying hold of them with far surer, firmer, larger grasp, if he touched them at all." Whereas white reviewers often focused on the diffi- cult issues raised in the collection, particularly of sexual relations between African Americans and whites, reviewers in African-American periodicals often thanked Chesnutt for depicting the image of educated, intelligent African Americans, an image with which many white Americans were not familiar.

Chesnutt's racial message was even more apparent in the novels he published in the early 1900s, and by 1905, he had ceased writing as he failed to find an audience among the American reading public. Chesnutt's work was largely forgotten, until a new edition of *The Conjure Woman* came out in 1929. But again, the writer drew mixed opinions as reviewers looked back on his literary career. Although John Chamberlain, writing for *The Bookman,*declared that "Negro fiction in America properly commences with [Chesnutt], he still prefers the more innocuous *The Conjure Woman to The Wife of His Youth;* according to Chamberlain, he can accept the "queer twists" in the former collection because they come from an "old Negro Machiavelli, Uncle Julius," but he

cannot accept such plot machinations in the latter collection. He did, however, find "The Sheriff's Children", which he calls "a story of North Carolina," to be "effective as melodrama."

By the end of the decade, reviewers had begun to make note of the importance of Chesnutt's prevailing message of the problems facing African Americans. While Sterling Brown pointed out certain faults of Chesnutt's in *The Negro in American Fiction*—such as a reliance on mistaken identity or the upstanding behavior and language of his "better class Negroes"—Brown recognized the "great use" Chesnutt makes of his mixed-blood characters. Brown also praised Chesnutt's decision to show even those unpleasant scenes, such as mob riots and lynching mobs. "He knew a great deal," wrote Brown, "and all things considered, he told it well." Two years later, in 1939, J. Saunders Redding wrote in his book *To Make a Poet Black* that Chesnutt's was "the most worthy prose fiction that the Negro had produced." Redding showed an appreciation for Chesnutt's mixed-blood heroes and heroines: "They represent a new approach to the Negro character in fiction," he wrote. "They argue artistically and not too obviously . . . of the way of life to which the Negro might attain were it not for the bugaboo of color."

However, Chesnutt was largely overlooked until the mid-1970s when *The Short Fiction of Charles W. Chesnutt* was published. It included most of his short stories, including some that were previously uncollected. Contemporary critics continued to appreciate Chesnutt's work. Many modern critics have focused on the theme of identity and how racial beliefs affect personal identity, which Chesnutt raises through his characterization. They also concern themselves with Chesnutt's ideas of racial miscegenation. Arlene A. Elder, in her book *Charles Waddell Chesnutt: Art of Assimilation in the 'Hindered Hand': Cultural Implications of Early African- American Fiction,* posits that this "probing examination of the ironies of miscegenation" might shed some light on Chesnutt's self-image.

Overall, the publication of *The Wife of His Youth* contributed to the rise in Chesnutt's literary stature. Today, it continues to add to his reputation.

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Korb has a master's degree in English literature and creative writing and has written for a wide variety of educational publishers. In the following essay, she explores some of the racial issues raised in Chesnutt's short story.

In 1880, while he was still working as a schoolteacher in North Carolina, Charles W. Chesnutt wrote in his journal, "The object of my writing would not be so much the elevation of the colored people as the elevation of the whites—for I consider the unjust spirit of caste that is so insidious as to pervade a whole nation, and so powerful as to subject a whole race and all connected with it to scorn and social ostracism—I consider this a barrier to the moral progress of the American people: and I would be one of the first to head a determined, organized crusade against it. . . . The work is of a two-fold character. The Negro's part is to prepare himself for recognition and equality, and it is the province of literature to open the way for him to get it—to accustom the public mind to the idea; to lead people on, imperceptibly, unconsciously, step by step, to the desired state of feeling." Chesnutt stayed true to his stated mission; in much of the fiction he wrote after the folktales collected in *The Conjure Woman,* Chesnutt attempted to make white America see a new, more positive image of black America. He also asked blacks to confront their own problems and responsibilities with the question of racial issues.

"The Sheriff's Children," asserts William L. Andrews in *The Literary Career of Charles W. Chesnutt,* "constitutes Chesnutt's boldest arraignment of the South, both Old and New, for its sins of omissions against black people." Published in 1888, it was one of the first stories in which Chesnutt shifted from the folktales and local color tales that had made up his previous fictions. In writing to Albion Tourgée, a northern writer who wrote sympathetically about African Americans in the South, Chesnutt called his newest work "a southern story," but noted that its subject was "dealing with a tragic incident, not of slavery exactly, but showing the fruits of slavery." He admitted that the story "has a moral" but denied that he took a moralistic stance: "I tried to write as an artist, and not as a preacher." Indeed, he later expressed concern that his 1899 collection, *The Wife of His Youth, and Other Stories of the Color Line,* might read too much like a sermon, but he hoped that "it might have its influence in directing attention to certain aspects of the race question which are quite familiar to those on the unfortunate side of it." Chesnutt's comments, written before the collection's publication, proved prophetic: many black reviewers praised him for showing "educated, intelligent, and refined" African Americans to white America, instead of the expected stereotypes; while the majority of white reviewers objected to his stark racial themes, and particularly to the specter of miscegenation.

Chesnutt, however, does not begin "The Sheriff's Children" on such racial topics, though they ultimately arise as the crucial aspect. Instead, Chesnutt describes the county in North Carolina where the story takes place. Even though the text focuses on the physicality, evidence is presented of the prejudice that resides so particularly in the South, for according to the narrator, "Most of the white people own the farms they till," but no mention is made of African Americans. Until a scapegoat is sought for a crime,

the only mention of African Americans in the story comes with a stereotypical, idyllic description of "the yodel of some tuneful negro on his way to the pine forest." In contrast, the tragedy of the Civil War, now ten years over but still "the era from which all local chronicles are dated," is sharply evoked.

The narration then hones down its vision to the individual town of Troy. An unprecedented event has taken place, the murder of a white gentleman, a former soldier in the Civil War. A "strange mulatto" had been sighted in the vicinity and soon a sheriff's posse has caught him and brought him to prison. Although a trial is impending, for many of the residents of the town, the promise of almost certain punishment is not enough, for "a white man had been killed by a negro," and that required vengeance. They determine to lynch him that afternoon— and then the heart of the story begins.

The only man willing to stop such a crime is Sheriff Campbell. He is "a man far above the average of the community in wealth, education, and social position." He is also a man of duty with "a high sense of responsibility attaching to his office." Because of this, he "with no uncertainty in regard to his course" goes forth to defend the prisoner. The sheriff confronts the unruly, ignorant mob—one man against many—and he prevails. The mob disperses and the prisoner is safe. As Andrews writes, this scene provides "a preliminary climax" for the reader: "For once, the forces of law and decency prevail over those of racial enmity and violence."

This sense of relief, however, is short-lived. The prisoner, Tom, has picked up the sheriff's gun, and now aims it at the sheriff. Tom is determined to flee, even though it means killing the sheriff—the man who has saved his life—to ensure no alarm will be raised. The sheriff is aghast when he hears Tom's plan. "'Good God!' exclaimed the sheriff in involuntary terror: 'you would not kill the man to whom you owe your own life.'" This is when the sheriff gets an even greater surprise: Tom is his illegitimate son, born to a slave once owned by the sheriff. In a fit of anger at the mother, he one day sold her and the boy to a speculator on his way to Alabama. It seems that the sheriff has thought of his son little, despite his assertion that he had been sorry for selling the boy and his mother "many times since," for he evinces no recognition of him even though Tom points out that "You gave me your . . . features— no man need look at us together twice to see that." Such an exchange demonstrates the sheriff's failure to "see" Tom as a man, for up to that moment, he was only a "cowering wretch," a man with the stain of "yellow" skin.

The sheriff responds to the news of his own parentage by calling on Tom's sense of duty: the sheriff gave him life, thus Tom owes it to him not to take his life. Tom, however, sees the issue differently. The sheriff, he contends, has performed no "father's duty" for him. "'Did you give me your name, or even your protection?'" he asks. "'Other white men gave their colored sons freedom and money, and sent them to the free States. *You sold me* to the rice swamps.'" Worse than that, the sheriff gave him "'a white man's spirit, and you made me a slave, and crushed it out.'" Such words are telling, for Tom shows that he buys into the common myth of the era: that whites and African Americans are inherently different, that whites have a certain spirit— perhaps a longing for independence, education, refinement, or even passion—that is lacking in African

Americans. Tom further denigrates his own mother and his own race in this soliloquy when he accuses the sheriff: "'you gave me a black mother.'" In the same breath, however, Tom valorizes the woman. "'She died under the lash,'" he says, "'because she had enough womanhood to call her soul her own.'" Tom does not comprehend that he is, in essence, attributing to his mother some of those prideful traits he had only reserved for white people.

Tom does not equate his own defiance and passion with his black mother, only with his white father. Thus he allies himself with the white race because of his inner nature—best seen in the story as passionate, fiery, and individualistic. He sees himself as "'Free in name, but despised and scorned and set aside by the people to whose race I belong far more than to my mother's.'" Although Tom's statements seem to imply a sort of reverse racism— the same dislike of African Americans that white people have—his subsequent words make it clear that part of his longing to be recognized as part of the white race is the opportunities that come with such membership. For instance, he has been educated, but what he learned at school did not help him form a career or make a better life for himself. Instead, the lesson he took with him was "'that no degree of learning or wisdom will change the color of my skin and that I shall always wear what in my country is a badge of degradation.'" Where there is shame—either internal or external—there is little chance for the individual to better his condition in life.

After Polly saves her father by shooting and wounding Tom, the sheriff spends the evening pondering Tom's words. He comes to realize that "he had owed some duty to this son of his—that neither law nor custom could destroy a responsibility inherent in the nature of mankind." With these thoughts, the sheriff acknowledges that in the South—Old and New—whites owe nothing to African Americans. Laws do not legislate equality or fair treatment, nor do the customs and accepted practices of the land. All that could cause a man like the sheriff to treat an African American—be it his son or otherwise—fairly would be his own conscience. The sheriff had turned a blind eye to any conscience, and now that it has been raised, he must deal with the consequences. However, the text also indicates that the sheriff is not to blame for his moral lapses to this point: "But the baleful influence of human slavery poisoned the very foundations of life, and created new standards of right. The sheriff was conscientious; his conscience had merely been warped by his environment." Still, other men had clearly developed their own more enlightened con- science, as indicated by Tom's comparison of his father's behavior to other former slaveowners' treatment of their illegitimate mixed-blood children— men who freed or otherwise "saved" their children.

Although the sheriff vows to help Tom, he is still so bound by the law and custom of his society. He puts these elements above human compassion. Although he is now fully convinced of Tom's innocence, he rejects letting Tom escape, and instead vows to "investigate the circumstances of the murder, and move Heaven and earth to discover the real criminal." He believes that "he could employ counsel for the accused, and perhaps influence public opinion in his favor." At this point, the sheriff is merely invoking a fantasy. The text has already made clear the fate of African Americans involved in a crime against whites—even if they were not truly involved. The sheriff's denial of reality is further demonstrated by his proposed appeal to public opinion. The sheriff, of all

people, should understand the improbability of such a shift, for he faced the rabble that very afternoon and understood the mind set of the people who most wanted Tom's death.

Tom alone understands the impossibility of any positive action resulting from his interaction with the sheriff. His decision to commit suicide by taking off his bandage emerges as a strong indictment of the society in which he lives. As he said earlier, "'When I think about it seriously I do not care particularly for such a life. It is the animal in me, not the man, that flees the gallows.'" The man in Tom—by implication, the "white" part of Tom— knows that he can never lead the life he wants to lead. He will never be free, never be respected, never be above quick and discriminatory judgment. That Tom should want to die is not surprising at this point, for he believes, perhaps rightly so, that his life has no hope.

"The Sheriff's Children" stands out among Chesnutt's fiction for its grim and unusual exploration of a serious racial issue. According to Andrews, "What makes *'The Sheriff's Children'* . . . unique among Chesnutt's race problem stories . . . is its redirection of the southern color question, so that the problem of the black man's presence in the South is laid before the southern white man, who, as *'The Sheriff's Children'* argues, must recognize his past complicity and present responsibility if 'the problem' is ever to be solved." Sheriff Campbell, however, shows himself unequal to this task. He is cursed with an insufficient conscience, lacks spirit, and too quickly takes up the reigns of his assigned duty instead of carving out a new duty—one based, not on law or social code, but on what is right and just, what is humane.

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

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Delmar examines "the theme of the mask"— "how both whites and blacks are constrained to hide their true personalities and, often, their true racial identities from themselves and each other"—in "The Sheriff's Children."

The third and sixth stories in *The Wife of His Youth,* "The Sheriff's Children" and "The Passing of Grandison," illustrate the mask-theme and the maskstructure in Chesnutt's fiction, and the fact that they do so in markedly different ways makes them worthy of separate consideration here. "The Sheriff's Children" uses his mask theme negatively: hiding one's true soul leads to tragedy. "The Passing of Grandison," on the other hand, like "Her Virginia Mammy," apparently argues that maskwearing can be a virtue if it is directed toward virtuous ends. "The Sheriff's Children" uses techniques of subtle foreshadowing to screen its conclusion. In "The Passing of Grandison," however, Chesnutt succeeds with a bold, dangerous ploy. Though he uses almost no foreshadowing, he succeeds in a nearly complete masking of the story's surprise ending.

The two major figures of "The Sheriff's Children," Sheriff Campbell and his mulatto son, are both plagued by crises of personal identity; their reactions to these crises both exploit the theme of the mask and exemplify Chesnutt's structural use of the mask concept. These achievements make a powerful story of one which might without them have degenerated into a naive, run-of-the-mill treatment of the long-lost son plot. Had Chesnutt made the revelation of the relationship between the Sheriff and the son whom he had abandoned as a child its focal point, his story would never have attained any particular significance. Chesnutt instead uses the Sheriff's parenthood as the starting point for an examination of its tragic results.

Campbell is a man who wears the mask of duty and morality. Ronald Walcott stated the case quite well when he argued that while Campbell appears to be free of the primitive impulses which seem to motivate his neighbors, he "possesses his own inhibiting personal code before which all else must pay obeisance, his Southern gentleman's concept of duty" . . . The point is that the Sheriff is not free of primitive impulses; the concept of duty which he has adopted has only hidden them. In his youth, he had fathered a child with a Black woman; later, in a fit of anger, he had sold them down the river. As the crisis of the story unfolds with his "child" standing before him—a prisoner accused of murder whom an unruly mob wants to lynch—Campbell begins to see himself for the first time without a mask, re- flected in his son's eyes: "He knew whose passions coursed beneath that swarthy skin and burned in the black eyes opposite his own. He saw in this mulatto what he himself might have become had not the safeguards of parental restraint and public opinion been thrown around him." Campbell had always lived by the code of the Southern aristocracy, one which sanctioned his behavior toward his lover and child. But he had never consciously realized that he was using the code to mask his instincts from himself. Whether the passions which coursed within him were noble or not, they were his, and he should have come to terms with them. When he

learns who his prisoner is, Campbell begins to get an inkling of the existence of the mask which he has worn so long.

The prisoner, though, does not really come to grips with who and what he is. He feels trapped between two racial worlds. As Mr. Ryder says, in a story which satirizes this viewpoint, persons of mixed blood "are ground between the upper and the nether millstone." They may be accepted by either the white race or the black but the former does not want them, and acceptance by the latter would be a disgrace. Ryder would prefer acceptance into the white world, and, here with Chesnutt's apparent sympathy, Sheriff Campbell's son has also selected that goal. The prisoner cries that he is "despised and scorned and set aside by the people to whose race [he belongs] far more than to [his] mother's." The mulatto rejects his Blackness, but the rigidity of white society prohibits him from taking up the white man's mask. Essentially, the Sheriff's son feels robbed of his birthright; he has grown rebellious as a result of his inability to wear a mask which appears to him to be not a mask at all but rather his true spirit. He feels that he is being forced to wear a mask of Blackness.

Whatever the merits of Chesnutt's point about the proper sphere of the mulatto, it is clear that the Sheriff's mask of duty and the mulatto's mask of Blackness are evil forces; they cause the prisoner's death and the father's failure to atone for his past misdeeds. This outcome, tragic because both figures are basically noble men whose personalities reveal weaknesses which lead to their downfall, is a part of the story's mask-structure. Two elements of the work are crucial here—the Sheriff's daughter's wounding of the prisoner and his subsequent suicide— and both are well disguised.

The first event occurs after the prisoner asks the Sheriff at gunpoint to let him escape. Paralyzed by his sense of duty, the Sheriff cannot agree to what Chesnutt unmistakably feels is a proper course of action: "It may seem strange that a man who could sell his own child into slavery should hesitate at such a moment, when his life was trembling in the balance. But the baleful influence of human slavery poisoned the very fountains of life, and created new standards of right. The sheriff was conscientious; his conscience had merely been warped by his environment." In all justice and mercy, as Chesnutt suggests, Campbell should let his son go. Even if he were guilty of murder, his chances of escaping the lynch mob are minimal at best; should he somehow escape its rage, his chances of receiving a fair trial in Troy are even worse. Although Campbell is now beginning to understand these truths, he cannot break through the barriers thrown up by years of tradition. He hesitates, and his son declares that he must die.

A reader might expect such a tragic result of the Sheriff's personality since hesitation is often a mark of a tragic figure, and Chesnutt does carry Campbell to the brink of catastrophe: the prisoner "raised his arm to fire, when there was a flash—a report from the passage behind him." Just as he was about to pull the trigger, he was shot by the Sheriff's daughter. This type of masking is well known to viewers of Westerns. Whenever the hero is in danger of being bushwhacked, an unseen marksman brings the villain down. One's expectations are keyed to an "anticipated event" (the death of the hero), but the event which actually occurs (the death of the villain) is its exact opposite. Such a situation is intended to shock the viewer momentarily, and Chesnutt

intends a similar effect here. Of course, the tactic can be abused. In the worst examples of grade-B Westerns, the viewer is given no hint that the hero will be saved. In better examples, though, some foreshadowing hints at the truth; the film might show the hero's sidekick riding to the rescue, then leave him until he fires the mysterious shot.

"The Sheriff's Children" provides such foreshadowing just before the girl wounds her halfbrother: "So absorbed were the two men in their colloquy and their own tumultuous thoughts that neither of them had heard a light step come stealth ily up the stairs, nor seen a slender form creep along the darkening passage toward the mulatto." Without this suggestion—which only makes sense after the reader learns that the Sheriff's daughter has shot the prisoner—the "actual event" would come as a complete surprise to the reader; the anticipated event (Campbell's death) makes sense, and nothing would cause the reader to doubt its probability. So great a surprise would shock the reader too much; it would tend to annoy, rather than satisfy. If the foreshadowing were too heavy, on the other hand, there would be no surprise at all. In this case that charge cannot be made. There are 162 words heavily charged with emotional energy between the foreshadowing element and the prisoner's wounding, so the foreshadowing itself does not receive too much emphasis when the reader first encounters it. Moreover, the foreshadowing passage does not necessarily suggest the shooting, since "slender forms" do not generally carry horse-pistols.

The second crucial situation in the story, the mulatto's suicide, is equally masked. After the prisoner is injured, the Sheriff bandages his arm and tells him to lie about his escape attempt if he is questioned further. These are acts of kindness which apparently bode well for the Sheriff and his son, and they are followed by almost four pages which reveal Campbell's ruminations on his past life. When the Sheriff finally decides to "atone for his crime against this son of his—against society—against God," the reader feels that the story might end on a positive note. Even though a tragic atmosphere has been already established, a happy conclusion is not completely unlikely because of the inherent nobility of the characters. The qualities which make a tragic fall tragic could also be used to avert the tragedy. Campbell is basically a good man, and his son is not inherently evil. However, Chesnutt soon lifts the mask and reveals the actual ending. The tragedy is not averted because the mulatto kills himself while his father, still hesitating, slowly arrives at the decision to aid him.

This turn is clearly plausible, and, even more important, Chesnutt foreshadows it while he establishes his false trail. First, the mulatto had spoken of death as something he did not fear when he denounced his existence as a non-white, non-Black man: "When I think about it seriously I do not care particularly for such a life. It is the animal in me, not the man, that flees the gallows." Secondly, after he is wounded the mulatto's attitude of defiant rebellion transforms itself into sullen dejection; he simply gives up. Finally, the Sheriff himself tells his son how to die. The injury is described as a "flesh wound," something normally not very serious. However, as Campbell warns his son after bandaging him, "I'll have a doctor come and dress the wound in the morning . . . It will do very well until then, if you will keep quiet." If he does *not* keep quiet . . . the conclusion is left unsaid, but the prisoner knows what his father meant. During the night, the mulatto tears his bandage off and bleeds to death. The suicide does not come as a

complete surprise to the reader, then; it does fit the tragic atmosphere of the story, and Chesnutt has shown it to be a reasonable occurrence without focusing upon it as an obvious ending.

"The Sheriff's Children" uses both mask-theme and mask-structure. The Sheriff and his son fail because they cannot accept their true identities or, perhaps in the case of the mulatto, because he cannot achieve recognition for what he perceives to be a true identity. And by the use of foreshadowing Chesnutt is able to hide the story's tragic outcome, increasing its emotional impact when readers fi- nally recognize the truth.

Source: P. Jay Delmar, "The Mask as Theme and Structure: Charles W. Chesnutt's 'The Sheriff's Children' and 'The Passing of Grandison,'" in *American Literature,* Vol. LI, No. 3, November, 1979, pp. 364-75.

Critical Essay #3

In the following excerpt, Selke offers an extended analysis of the short story "The Sheriff's Children," which contains what he identifies as Chesnutt's characteristic literary themes.

Charles Waddell Chesnutt vies with Paul Laurence Dunbar in being the first Afro-American author to be accepted by major American publishing houses and to win national recognition and fame. Both authors, in order to be published at all, had to come to terms with the literary forms and conventions of the Plantation Tradition whose chief exponents were Joel Chandler Harris, Thomas Nelson Page, James Lane Allen and Harry Stillwell Edwards. This literary convention stipulated that the black characters be presented as living contentedly in an Edenic South, that they be quaint, childlike and docile, tellers of exotic yarns for the entertainment of massa's children or for massa himself. It is this tradition which gave rise to the literary stereotypes of the "Contended Slave," the "Wretched Freeman," who, being deprived of the paternal care of his master, is unable to provide for himself, the "Comic Negro" and the "Local Color Negro."

Since the black writer, who wanted to break into print with his accounts of the black experience in America, had to adapt his work to the prevalent tastes of the day and to present his characters in a pastoral, harmonious setting, the only freedom left to him was that of choosing "the genre or the countergenre," as Robert Bone points out . . . . By pastoral genre is meant the "idyllic posture toward experience," by countergenre the "ironic posture."

Whereas Dunbar by and large conformed to the limitations of the idyllic posture, wearing, as it were, "the mask that grins and lies," [the line is from Dunbar's poem "We Wear the Mask," *Majors and Minors,* 1895] Chesnutt never did, even when he made use of the established forms, as for example in his "conjure" stories, in which he subtly undercut the submissive message apparently inherent in the very form. . . .

Among the themes treated most often in Chesnutt's works are (1) the inhumanity of the system of chattel slavery, (2) the incongruities of the color line as drawn within the black society itself, (3) the dual themes of passing and the ordeal of the double identity and (4) the injustices that Southern blacks have to suffer even after Emancipation, particularly during the restoration of white supremacy after Reconstruction.

At first sight, "The Sheriff's Children" might seem to be a treatment of the theme of the tragic mulatto. However, this is only one and, as shall be demonstrated, not the dominant theme of the story.

"The Sheriff's Children" was first published in the New York weekly magazine *Independent* in November 1889. The *Independent* then catered to an educated, liberal white audience. The first readers of the story were unaware of it, author's racial identity. Earlier that year Chesnutt had moved into his own, rather spacious home in Cleveland. Yet, the other stories published or written during that year evince the same sombre and

combative note that characterizes "The Sheriff's Children." In "The Conjurer's Revenge" (June 1889) the narrator, Uncle Julius, denounces slavery with unwonted explicitness, calling the slavetraders stealers and sellers of men and thus seeming to invoke the Biblical punishment for the manstealer.

"Dave's Neckliss" (October 1889) is also an Uncle Julius story, although not a "conjure" story in the narrow sense. Like "The Sheriff's Children," this gruesome story exposes "the baleful influence of human slavery." Indeed, the story bears close resemblance to "The Sheriff's Children": punished unjustly by an otherwise "kind" master (this fact is peculiarly insisted on in the story), Dave is driven to insanity and suicide. The "kind" master's recognition of his own guilt and his repentance come too late to undo the wrongs wrought by a system of chattel slavery. The third story, of which Chesnutt completed the first draft in 1889, was the often revised "Rena Walden." It deals with the problem of the tragic mulatto, which is also touched upon in "The Sheriff's Children."

Chesnutt's sombre outlook may be explained by the fact that at that time he was butting his head against the restrictions imposed by the tastes of the reading public and of magazine publishers. This went so far that he even toyed with the idea of migrating to Europe. In a letter written some six months after the publication of "The Sheriff's Children" he confided [in a letter to George Washington Cable]:

If I should remain idle for two weeks, at the end of that time I should be ready to close out my affairs and move my family to Europe. The kind of stuff I could write, if I were not all the time oppressed by the fear that this line or this sentiment would offend somebody's prejudices, jar on somebody's American-trained sense of propriety, would, I believe, find a ready sale in England.

Ten years after its original publication, "The Sheriff's Children" reached a wider audience through its inclusion in *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line.* Whereas in the first collection of stories the superficial white reader could easily be deluded by Chesnutt's apparent adherence to the conventional forms of the Plantation Tradition, this second volume, at least in some of the stories, more openly strikes a note of poignant protest against the Afro-American's social and psychological predicament in the South.

In a letter to his publisher, in which he discussed promotion strategies for the volume, Chesnutt wrote:

The book was written with the distinct hope that it might have its influence in directing attention to certain aspects of the race question which are quite familiar to those on the unfortunate side of it; and I should be glad to have that view of it emphasized if in your opinion the book is strong enough to stand it; for a *sermon* that is labeled a sermon must be a good one to get a hearing.

Whereas the book was well received in the North, Southern critics, as was to be expected, did not fail to discover the elements of "crusade" and "sermon" and berated Chesnutt for his impropriety. One critic wrote: "'The Sheriff's Children' furnishes,

perhaps, the most shocking instance of his reckless disregard of matters respected by more experienced writers" [Nancy Huston Banks, in a review in *The Bookman,* New York, X, February 1900]. Criticism seems to have been directed primarily against "The Sheriff's Children" with its bold treatment of the tabooed subject of miscegenation, and not against "The Passing of Grandison," which effectively explodes the myth of the happy, docile slave, or against "The Web of Circumstance," which undermines Booker T. Washington's accommodationist contention that the acquisition of skills and property would automatically ensure recognition for the Afro-American even in the South.

The story opens with a description of the sleepy village of Troy, county seat of Branson County in North Carolina, a district so isolated that the war seems to have passed it by, had it not been for the tribute of one generation of young men that the great conflict demanded. Some ten years after the war, the citizens of Branson County are shocked to learn that Captain Walker, an old soldier, "had been foully murdered." A mulatto, a stranger in the area, is suspected of the crime and quickly apprehended. While the prisoner is awaiting judgment in the county jail, the citizens decide to lynch him. The sheriff is informed of the plan by a Negro and determines to do his duty and resist the lynch mob. He proceeds to the jail where he locks himself into the prisoner's cell. After having warded off the lynching party and having fired a shot in reply to a sniper's bullet, he is disarmed by the prisoner who then reveals his identity. The mulatto is Tom, the sheriff's son, his mother is a slave woman whom the sheriff had sold to a speculator. The son demands that the sheriff release him or else he will shoot him. At the very moment when Tom decides that he cannot trust his father and prepares to shoot him, the sheriff's daughter, Polly, who had worried about her father's long absence, comes up from behind and fires at the mulatto, wounding his arm. The sheriff dresses his son's wound, telling him that he will call a doctor on the following morning. He spends a restless night, passing his life and his failings in review and finally deciding to "atone for his crime against this son of his." When he goes to the jail on Sunday morning, he finds that his son has committed suicide by tearing off the bandage and bleeding to death.

Chesnutt's story may be read simply as a carefully wrought suspense story, which moves in steadily increasing crescendo from the opening description of the dull and somnolent community to the final twist at the end of the story. As the plot develops, the scene narrows: the first two pages are devoted to the county, the following six to the village of Troy and its inhabitants, the next seven focus on the sheriff's house as the sheriff is informed of the plot by Sam. The scene then moves to the captive's cell in the jail. The next shift back to the sheriff's house seems to suggest that there is a break in the development delineated above. [In a dissertation] William L. Andrews sees in this supposed break a flaw of plot development: "The story . . . lapses into argument and introspection which fail to sustain the tenseness of the action in the first half of the story." However, this lapse into introspection is no more than a further narrowing of the scene along the pattern of the rest of the story, only this time to the sheriff's consciousness. The constant narrowing of the scene from the "sequestered district" of Branson County to the "hamlet" of Troy, from there to a prison cell and finally to the sheriff's mind conveys a feeling of claustrophobia, of inescapability.

This gradual restriction of space has its parallel in the gradual resolution of the question of identity, which was posed at the beginning of the story. The question is first raised in the speculations "upon the identity of the murderer." But at that point in the story everything is vague, ill-defined. A "strange mulatto" is suspected of the crime. The second central character, the sheriff, is only introduced at the beginning in his function as a public officer whose duty it is to arrest the suspect.

This vagueness is carried over into the next scene. As the design to lynch the prisoner assumes shape, the townspeople remain anonymous: no names are mentioned. Naturally, a major function of this scene is to demonstrate the genesis and anonymity of mob violence. By their very speech the townspeople are characterized as dumb-witted backwoods people whose dull minds are helped along by illegally distilled whiskey and vague notions of "honor" to give birth to the dastardly plan.

The heavy hand of the omniscient narrator who edits and comments on his material makes itself felt particularly in this scene, driving home a point that does not stand in need of such commenting. The planned lynching is to the townspeople's minds "a becoming way in which to honor [Captain Walker's] memory." Their perverted notion of justice is re- flected in the mocking solemnity of the narrator's language as he describes the plan: "By agreement the lynchers were to meet at Tyson's store at five o'clock in the afternoon, and proceed thence to the jail . . . ".

The following scene at the sheriff's house marks a first departure from the aura of anonymity which had characterized the first pages. The reader is informed of the sheriff's name and of his appearance. Sheriff Campbell is a "tall, muscular man," he has "keen, deep-set gray eyes" and "a masterful expression." His very stature and "attitude of a soldier" as well as his language bespeak his determination and his superiority over the rest of the townspeople. Additional information provided by the omniscient narrator corroborates this first impression. Campbell is a cultivated man, "far above the average of the community in wealth, education, and social position. . . . He had graduated at the State University at Chapel Hill, and had kept up some acquaintance with current literature and advanced thought."

The members of the lynch mob, too, are given a semblance of identity when the sheriff asks Sam who is coming. They are an array of self-styled doctors, majors and colonels: "'Dere's Mistah McSwayne, en Doc' Cain, en Maje' McDonal,' en Kunnel Wright, en a heap er yuthers.'" But even this identity is fleeting, as well befits a mob setting out with this purpose in mind. It is wiped away by the sheriff who declares them all to be "strangers" to him because he "did not think it necessary to recognize anybody in particular on such an occasion; the question of identity sometimes comes up in the investigation of these extrajudicial executions."

The question of identity comes up again in the confrontation between Campbell and his prisoner after the lynch mob has withdrawn. It is no longer the detective story question as to who was the murderer, a question which persists only as a vague hope of extricating the prisoner from his hopeless situation. In the course of the story every

suspicion against him is dispelled in the reader as well as in the sheriff: "he no longer doubted the prisoner's innocence."

Alone in his cell with the sheriff, the prisoner undergoes an almost miraculous transformation from a "cowering wretch" who provokes the sheriff's "contempt and loathing" to a "keeneyed, desperate man . . . a different being altogether from the groveling wretch" of only a few minutes before. This transformation is possible only because Tom, the prisoner, is exclusively seen through the sheriff's eyes. He is never presented, except in his own utterances, in his own right, but remains a reflection in his father's eyes. Before the prisoner had gained control of the situation, he had remained a mere abstraction to the sheriff, a well-defined quantity that fitted into a prefabricated category. It is this refusal to look upon the prisoner as an individual human being that prevents him from recognizing his son sooner than he does.

As Tom points out to him, they have the same features: "no man need look at us together twice to see that . . . ". It is obvious that the sheriff had never looked at his son. Instead he had seen "the negro" in him: "He had relied on the negro's cowardice and subordination in the presence of an armed white man as a matter of course." It is only this unwonted behavior that "caused the sheriff to look at him more closely." Even then, however, he does not recognize the prisoner, and it is only after the question "Who are you?" that the latter's identity is revealed to him.

This revelation initiates a new movement. It is the beginning of yet another question of identity. The confrontation with "this wayward spirit" who had come "back from the vanished past to haunt him" forces the sheriff to see himself as he truly is, to explore his own smug identity.

This new and central theme of the story is prepared by a change of the point of view. The first two thirds of the story bear the mark of the omniscient narrator whose presence as editorial commentator is constantly felt. This is particularly true of the three-page introduction which leads up to the action proper. Here the author even appears in the first person, explaining his materials to the reader: "At the period of which I write . . . ". In what follows, the omniscient narrator as editorializing agency is also felt, at times very directly, as in his remark that something "is immaterial to this narrative," at times less so, as in the choice of scenes which are presented in the dramatic mode. In the last third of the story these editorial interventions do not cease altogether—they are particularly obvious in the description of Poll's stealthy approach, unnoticed by both the protagonist and Tom, in the authorial comments on the sheriff's character and in the imperative addressed to the reader: "Let no one ask what his answer would have been"—but a new dimension is added. Starting with the sentence, "The sheriff mentally cursed his own carelessness for allowing him to be caught in such a predicament," all subsequent events are mainly seen and evaluated through Campbell's consciousness. From now on, to apply Henry James' words to the sheriff, "It is *his* vision, *his* conception, *his* interpretation . . . He therefore supremely matters; all the rest matters only as he feels it, treats it, meets it" [*The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces,* 1950].

This change of perspective is a necessary prerequisite for the soul-searching that is about to follow. The sheriff, who had hitherto appeared an impeccable character, now realizes that he "had yielded" to the temptations of an evil system when he had sold his son and his lover to a speculator. This also throws a new light on a remark made earlier in the story. Yielding to his environment, to the force of circumstances, even against his better judgment, seems to be the sheriff's particular weakness: "At first an ardent supporter of the Union, he had opposed the secession movement in his native State as long as opposition availed to stem the tide of public opinion. Yielding at last to the force of circumstances, he had entered the Confederate service rather late in the war . . . ".

This weakness also accounts for the sheriff's decision in favor of his sense of duty and against his human instincts, both when his own life is in danger and when he asks himself how he can extricate Tom from his predicament and make up for his own previous shortcomings: "It occurred to him, purely as a hypothesis, that he might permit his prisoner to escape; but his oath of office, his duty as sheriff, stood in the way of such a course, and the sheriff dismissed the idea from his mind."

It is only after the initial shock of the confrontation has worn off that the full impact of the experience becomes clear to the sheriff. "Alone with God," he again experiences "a kind of clarifying of the moral faculty . . . a state of mind in which one sees himself as God may be supposed to see him." Seeing himself as he is, the sheriff decides to atone for his sin. It is interesting to note that neither Tom nor himself see his sin in the fact of miscegenation itself, but rather in the fact that he has neglected his parental duties, his moral obligations in depriving his son of a true identity of his own: Tom has "no name, no father, no mother—in the true meaning of motherhood."

The tragedy of the story lies in the fact that the circumstances are such that the father's recognition of the son comes too late. The sheriff's personal tragedy is that his attempts at atonement are only half-hearted and incomplete and that he is finally deprived of the "opportunity for direct expiation."

As quoted above, Chesnutt had thought of *The Wife of His Youth* in terms of a sermon. "The Sheriff's Children" preaches a sermon in the sense that it induces the enlightened white reader, to whom it is addressed, to identify with the sheriff who is presented in very positive terms as a courageous, law-abiding, conscientious and educated man. The sheriff's qualities make his moral shortcomings appear in an even cruder light, and the reader, who had come to identify himself with him, is made to share in his fall and to experience a purging similar to that "clarifying of the moral faculty" that the sheriff feels. Chesnutt's is a fire-and-brimstone sermon which shows no way out of the moral dilemma. The attempt to make amends comes too late. Injustice has been done and it seems irremediable. The impact on the reader who is required to go to task with himself, is all the greater.

Yet, even after the sheriff's failings have been revealed, the sympathetic narrator speaks out in his behalf in an authorial comment: "But the baleful influence of human slavery poisoned the very fountains of life, and created new standards of right. The sheriff was conscientious; his conscience had merely been warped by his environment." Without

denying any of the sheriff's guilt, he thus places it in a broader perspective, indicting a system to which Campbell has fallen prey. Again, the reader may be led to ask himself if the influence of the environment is truly a valid attenuating circumstance for Campbell and for himself.

By choosing the sheriff's point of view in the last third of the story, Chesnutt has diverted the reader's attention from Tom, the mulatto. The narrator does not perform the role of advocate for him, trying to explain his motives and soliciting compassion or understanding, as he had done in the case of the sheriff. Seen only from outside except in his own utterances, Tom's story remains untold, although the narrative offers some hints as to the dramatic potential of the theme.

[Gerald W.] Haslam detects one of the strong points of the story in the absence of this theme, which is indeed fraught with grave dangers: "By emphasizing the white father rather than the mulatto son, he [Chesnutt] partially avoided the melodramatic stereotypes which marred so much of his work".

The theme which Chesnutt partially subdued in this story is that of the tragic mulatto, which came out of antislavery fiction, as Sterling A. Brown has shown [in introductory comments to the Chesnutt entry in *The Negro Caravan,* 1969]. The mulattoes in fiction "are the intransigent, the resentful, the mentally alert, the proofs of the Negro's possibilities." The theme harbors the danger of presenting the material, in such a way that the Afro-American's humanity is measured in proportion to the "white" blood in his veins.

Upon the completion of his second draft of "Rena Walden" only a few months after the publication of "The Sheriff's Children," Chesnutt wrote to Cable on the subject of mulattoes in fiction:

There are a great many intelligent people who consider the class to which Rena and Wain belong as unnatural. . . . [a] gentleman remarked to me in substance that he considered a mulatto an insult to nature, a kind of monster that he looked upon with infinite distaste. . . . I fear there is too much of the same sentiment for mulattoes to make good magazine characters.

Chesnutt was doubtless prompted by these sentiments when he made the sheriff's moral dilemma the central concern of his story instead of choosing the equally available theme of the tragic mulatto. Tom's major function in "The Sheriff's Children" seems to be that of the spark which sets off the crisis.

Yet, there is more to him. When Tom first appears in the story, he is ambiguously called "a strange mulatto," an epithet which is reminiscent of Chesnutt's letter. Tom is not only a stranger in his own land, unrecognized in all senses of the word and by everybody including his father, he is also an abomination in the eyes of the whites.

The dilemma of the double-consciousness as defined by W. E. B. DuBois is particularly obvious for the mulatto. DuBois wrote:

One ever feels his twoness, —an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife, —this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge this double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. . . . He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face.

Tom is obviously an individual who does not possess this dogged strength and who is torn asunder by the magnitude of the conflict. He is a tortured, warped character who has come to turn his aggression against the race that the custom of the country makes him a part of, and thus finally against himself. His attitude toward his mother, who, to his mind, has become synonymous with the black race, is highly ambivalent. While he pities her and admires her for having "had enough womanhood to call her soul her own," he is at the same time ashamed of her blackness: "You gave me your own blood . . . and you gave me a black mother. . . . You gave me a white man's spirit, and you made me a slave, and crushed it out." Tom has sought to flee his blackness, as by acquiring an education, but has found that his blackness stays with him as "a badge of degradation."

Commenting on the inappropriately refined language used by Tom, Haslam asks himself "if Chesnutt has not, in this one respect, fallen again into his habit of trying to demonstrate that mulattoes are more white than Negro." Similarly, Bone feels that "the story does not wholly escape from the stereotype of the tragic mulatto" but is redeemed by its pervasive irony. Tom does indeed seem to conform to what Brown had called the present image of the tragic mulatto: "The mulatto is a victim of a divided inheritance; from his white blood come his intellectual strivings, his unwillingness to be a slave; from his Negro blood come his baser emotional urges, his indolence, his savagery." We should, however, ask ourselves if Chesnutt did not intend to criticize Tom for his own interpretation of his situation, for his inability to turn his talents and his education to some good purpose, for his self-pitying despair.

Tom, then, is vaguely related to [Albion] Tourgée's mulatto characters towards whom Chesnutt had no charitable feelings. In the above quoted letter to Cable he writes: "Judge Tourgée's cultivated white Negroes are always bewailing their fate and cursing the drop of black blood which 'taints'—I hate the word, it implies corruption— their otherwise pure race." The only difference seems to be that Tom, distorted beyond recognition by the force of circumstance, is more sordid, his fate more sordid than that of Tourgée's characters.

This makes him very different from the saintly figures created by younger authors, figures who die a Christlike death on the cross, as in W. E. B. DuBois' story "Jesus Christ in Texas" or in Langston Hughes' poem "Christ in Alabama." Rather, Tom dies by his own hand, and the pattern of Crucifixion and Resurrection is thoroughly perverted. Yet, there is an obvious parallel in the story. The action takes place at a weekend, starting with a death on Friday morning (one page) and ending with another on Sunday

morning (one page). The bulk of the story is devoted to the abortive attempt to lynch the prisoner and to the sheriff's soul-searching, which might be likened to a descent into the "hell" of his own mind where he has to face and overcome his own sinful self. But the parallel is not sustained by the characters. The whole story is pervaded by murder, near parricide, fratricide and, finally, suicide. The father cannot save the son. Instead of a resurrection, we witness the confirmation of death, of hopelessness. The Biblical allusion might be even further pursued. The death of the old soldier might be assumed to represent the sacrifice made by the nation as a whole—we are told that Branson County was robbed of "the flower of its young manhood." The redemption of the nation, however, fails miserably, ending with the death of him for whom the sacrifice has ostensibly been made.

Tom's only triumph might be that he dies of his own free will and thus in a way asserts his manhood, but it is not much of a triumph. "The Sheriff's Children" is the first sign of an angry strain in Chesnutt, more often than not subdued by his gradualist, even accommodationist, philosophy. Tom, though not possessing any of the greatness, vaguely foreshadows a later Chesnutt character, Josh Green in *The Marrow of Tradition*, who would rather die like a man than live like a dog.

The choice of the title "The Sheriff's Children" seems to be at odds with the point of view used in the story, which clearly favors the sheriff as the central character. However, the relationship between the sheriff's children opens the way to a deeper, parabolical reading of the story. It is important for this parabolical meaning that they should have no knowledge of each other's existence, or, to put it more precisely, that Polly should have no knowledge of the existence of a black half-brother. Tom and Polly do not come fully alive in the story precisely because they are made to represent more than themselves alone. They are both the heirs of a father who, by virtue of his ambivalence—he is torn between allegiance to the Union and the Confederacy— very much resembles Thomas Jefferson who managed to reconcile his authorship of the Declaration of Independence with his status of slaveholder and progenitor of mulatto children. Tom, the Afro-American, is as much an heir to the political and cultural heritage left by Campbell, the Founding Father, as is Polly, the Anglo-Saxon. But whereas nobody will dare question the legitimacy of the latter's claim, the former's is generally denied. The original sin is the father's failure to recognize his son as his heir, his having left him out of the masterplan. Polly acts out a tragic role by being instrumental in the destruction of somebody who is in reality her brother. . . .

Source: Hartmut K. Selke, "Charles Waddell Chesnutt: 'The Sheriff's Children' (1889)," in *The Black American Short Story in the 20th Century: A Collection of Critical Essays,* edited by Peter Bruck, B. R. Gruner Publishing Co., 1977, pp. 21-38.

Topics for Further Study

Conduct research to find out more about the trials of African Americans in the post-Civil War South. Do you think an African American stood a chance of getting a fair trial?

Imagine that Tom had not died and that he and Polly were able to meet the next day. What conversation do you think would take place between the sheriff's children?

What moral stance do you take on the sheriff's actions throughout the story and throughout his life, specifically, on his treatment of his illegitimate son and his mother, his chasing away the mob, his final decision about how to help Tom?

Most of the sheriff's actions are determined by his sense of duty. To which cause do you think he has the greater duty: to help Tom or to uphold his position? Do the sheriff's past actions—those during his time as a slaveholder—demonstrate his sense of duty?

Reread the section on Point of View in the story. Do you think this point of view helps or hinders the telling of the story? Explain your answer.

Do you find Tom to be a believable character? Explain your answer.

Compare and Contrast

Late 1800s: In 1880, the African American population of North Carolina is 531,000 out of a total population of 1.4 million. African Americans comprise almost thirty-eight percent of the state's population.

1990s: In 1997, North Carolina's total population is just over 7.4 million. Of this figure, close to 6 million North Carolinians are white and just over 1.6 are African American. African Americans comprise almost twenty-two percent of the state's population.

Late 1800s: Between 1899 and 1909, lynchings become an increasingly southern and racial phenomenon. In 1888, 137 Americans are lynched; 68 of these are white people and 69 are African Americans. By 1899, of the 106 lynching victims, only 21 are white and the remaining 85 are African American. In North Carolina, between 1882 and 1903, 15 whites and 48 African Americans are lynched.

1990s: No lynchings take place in the 1990s, or in the several decades preceding it. However, hate crimes do persist and seem to be on the rise. Hate crimes are not restricted to African Americans, but tend to include other racial minorities, non-Christians, and homosexuals. Illustrious instances of hate crimes in the 1990s include the fatal beating of a young gay man in Wyoming and a shooting at a Jewish Community Center in Los Angeles.

Late 1800s: In 1870, the United States prison population is 33,000 out of total population of 39,818,449—.08 percent of the U.S. population is incarcerated.

1990s: In 1996, there are 518,492 inmates in prison out of a total population of over 265 million—almost 2 percent of the American population. Of these inmates, 228,900, which is approximately half, are African American.

Late 1800s: In 1880, the African-American population of the United States is 6,581,000, or 13.1 percent of the total United States population. Within 10 years, that percentage has dropped to 11.9.

1990s: In 1997, the African-American population of the United States is nearly 34 million or 12.7 percent.

1890s: Cotton is the primary crop for many southern farmers. Its price fluctuates between a high of 12 cents a pound down as low as 5 cents a pound. Cotton production, however, is on the rise, and by the mid-1890s, more than 20 million acres of cotton is harvested.

1990s: The price of United States cotton fluctuates between 47 cents a pound up to $1.13 a pound. In 1997-98, the United States produced just under 19 million bales of cotton, of which close to 7 million will be exported.

1890s: By the time Chesnutt writes *"The Sheriff's Children,"* slavery has been outlawed by the Thirteenth Amendment. In the antebellum years, however, the majority of African Americans in the South were enslaved. In 1860, slaves made up thirty-four percent of the southern population, while free African Americans—around 260,000—made up about two percent of the southern population.

1990s: Most nations throughout the world have abolished slavery although it is still practiced in some parts of Africa, Asia, and South America. The Anti-Slavery Society for the Protection of Human Rights in London estimates that forms of servitude affect more than 200 million poor people.

What Do I Read Next?

Kate Chopin's *Desiree's Baby,* written in the same period as Chesnutt's fiction, also deals with the subject of racial miscegenation. Desiree, the adopted daughter of an upstanding Louisiana family, marries the son and heir to another plantation family. The couple are blissfully happy until Desiree gives birth to a son whose features show evidence of African-American heritage.

Mark Twain's 1894 novel *Pudd'nhead Wilson* is a story about miscegenation in the antebellum South. A light-skinned slave switches her baby with her white owner's baby, with unexpected results for the entire household. The novel is noted for its grim humor and its reflections on the nature of racism.

Charles Chesnutt's story "The Wife of His Youth" (1899) examines color prejudices among middle-class northern African Americans. The so-called Blue Blood society—made up of African Americans of light skin—isolates itself from those people of its race with darker skin until a stranger comes into their midst.

Zora Neale Hurston's second novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), was both widely acclaimed and highly controversial. Hurston's lyrical prose shows the influence of African- American folklore as she tells the story of one woman's burgeoning self-reliance and identity.

A Lesson Before Dying is a wrenching novel by Ernest J. Gaines. In the novel, a young African- American teacher grudgingly befriends an ignorant, uneducated African American who has been sentenced to execution for a crime he may not have committed. The teacher instills in the doomed man a new self-respect and learns about himself in the process.

Albert French's novel *Billy* depicts the lynching of a young African-American boy in the rural south. Written in dialect, it presents a realistic and chilling portrayal of this vicious crime.

Cane (1923), an experimental novel by Jean Toomer, expresses the experience of being African American in the United States. The novel is comprised of a variety of literary forms, including poems and short stories. It draws on the South's rural past and on African American folklore.

Richard Wright's novel *Native Son* (1940) addresses the repression of African Americans by white society. It focuses on a man imprisoned for two murders—one accidental and one purposeful— who reflects on how the African American can fight submission to white society.

Further Study

Chesnutt, Helen M., *Charles Waddell Chesnutt: Pioneer of the Color Line,* University of North Carolina Press, 1952.

This book is a biography of Chesnutt written by his daughter.

Heermance, J. Noel, *Charles W. Chesnutt: America's First Great Black Novelist,* Archon Books, 1974.

Heermance's book is a study of Chesnutt's work in association with the culture in which he lived and worked.

Render, Sylvia Lyons, *Charles W. Chesnutt,* Twayne Publishers, 1980.

Render's text provides a solid and entertaining overview of Chesnutt's life, work, and critical reception.

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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:

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