Silver Water Study Guide

Silver Water by Amy Bloom

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Introduction

Amy Bloom's first collection of short stories, *Come to Me,* brought her immediate acclaim. Critics lauded her skill in drawing her characters, many of whom were, as Jeanne Schinto dubbed them in *Belles Letters,* "psychological anomalies." Bloom evocatively portrays these disturbed individuals amidst backgrounds rich with love, familial relationships, and essential humanity.

"Silver Water," one of the stories in the collection, was chosen for inclusion in 1992's *Best American Short Stories.* It tells about a teenager, Rose, who has a psychotic break. After ten years of fighting schizophrenia, Rose kills herself. Her struggle with the illness, the unspeakable anguish it brings to her entire family, and her eventual suicide are all hauntingly brought forth through the understated voice of Violet, who narrates her older sister's life with precise, alive words and luminous imagery. Victoria Radin wrote of the collection in the *New Statesman and Society,* Bloom's "stories are suffused with the sensual pleasures of colour, sound, scent, and love." "Silver Water" radiates with such touches, but its deeper power draws from Bloom's creation of an immensely painful situation and the love that attempts to conquer it, and yet finally has no choice but to submit to it.

Author Biography

Amy Bloom was born in 1953. She spent her childhood in Great Neck, Long Island. According to the author, she started writing stories when she started reading, but she stopped when she was sixteen. At that time, she found it difficult to write about her life when she could not even understand it.

Bloom, however, maintained her lifelong fascination with other people's stories, which perhaps explains the pull of the theater when she was younger. Bloom eventually attended graduate school and embarked upon a career as a psychotherapist. She later recalled that as she drove home after her first meeting with her training analyst, the urge to write suddenly resurfaced. By the time she reached her home, she had an entire plot for a story worked out.

Despite the interest in writing, Bloom continued to work full-time as a psychotherapist. Bloom has always been careful to completely maintain the privacy of her patients, however, and she has stated that she draws the material for her stories primarily from her own life and that of her friends and family.

Her short stories began to draw national attention in the early 1990s in such works as *Antaeus* and *Story*. Her work also appeared in *The Best American Short Stories* of both 1991 and 1992. In 1993, Bloom published the short story collection *Come to Me*. The book was a finalist that year for the National Book Award.

After her demonstrated success as a short-story writer, Bloom turned to longer works, and she published the novel *Love Invents Us,* excerpts of which originally appeared in such magazines as *The New Yorker*.

As Bloom's literary reputation has grown, she has reduced her practice. Today, she continues to divide her time between her writing, her patients, and her family, with whom she resides in Connecticut.

Plot Summary

Violet's sister, Rose, starts experiencing schizophrenia as a teenager. Violet remembers Rose before the mental illness hit her, as a beautiful, wonderful older sister. When Rose is fifteen, she has her first psychotic break. Rose's mother, a musician, realizes that Rose is "going crazy," even though the father, a psychiatrist, does not realize this. The mother takes Rose to a hospital that day, beginning Rose's ten-year odyssey back and forth to one hospital or halfway house after another.

Rose has many bad therapists and only a few good ones. The family—Violet; the mother, Galen; and the father, David—also participate in family counseling. Violet recalls the best family therapist they had, a doctor named Dr. Thorne. Under Dr. Thorne's care, Rose does much better and gains more control of her compulsive behaviors. She is able to move into a halfway house, loses weight, continues to take her medication, begins singing with a church choir, and is able to be brought back more easily when she "goes off."

After five years, however, Dr. Thorne dies, and Rose begins to lose all the progress she has made. She stops taking her medication and she gets thrown out of the halfway house after she throws another patient down the stairs. Rose's new psychiatric coverage doesn't start for forty-five days, so she comes home to live with her parents.

At that time, Violet is living an hour away from her parents. Her parents tell her that although it is hard taking care of Rose, they are managing. Violet comes home on Sunday, however, and she realizes how difficult the situation has been when she discovers that Rose broke their mother's piano bench. Her father confesses that he doesn't know how they will make it through the next twenty-seven days with Rose at home. Unfortunately, he can't put her in a psychiatric hospital, even if he and Galen pay for it themselves, because Rose's insurance policy says she must be symptom-free before her coverage begins.

Rose and Galen come home from the lake. When Galen tells Rose to go upstairs and change her wet pants, Rose begins to bang her head against the kitchen floor. Galen tries to prevent her from doing this, but Rose throws her off physically. Violet positions her body under Rose so Rose cannot hit her head anymore. This makes Rose realize what is happening. She apologizes and runs up to her room. When David comes in, Violet does not tell him what really happened or how her mother got the bruises on her face.

Throughout the evening, Rose tries unsuccessfully to control herself. Finally, Rose gets to sleep. That night, Violet wakes up at three o'clock in the morning. She goes to Rose's room, but her sister is not there. Violet goes outside and sees Rose's footprints heading into the woods. Violet finds her sister in the woods, lying on the ground, holding a bottle of pills in her hand. Violet believes that Rose says, "Closing time." Violet sits with her sister until the sun comes up. She goes back to the house, imagining how badly her mother will react to Violet's letting her sister—the "favorite"—die. Galen, however, only

calls her a "warrior queen," and says Rose was one, too. Then she goes into the woods, alone, to be with Rose. When she returns, she wakes David, who calls the police and the funeral parlor. At the funeral, while her mother plays the piano, Violet closes her eyes and sees her sister at fourteen years, in the opera house parking lot with head thrown back and lovely notes rising in the air.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

"Silver Water" is a first-person narrative account of Violet's relationship with Rose, her mentally ill sister. At the story's opening, Violet recalls being with her sister after going to see *La Traviata* when they were teenagers. In the parking lot, Rose belts out a song with such a pristine voice that passersby stopped in the parking lot until she was finished and then applauded. It is a tale she shares with various psychiatrists over the years and it is the way she prefers to remember her sister. She remembers her as vibrant and lovely, not as a fat, sedated blob in sweatpants.

Rose had her first psychotic break at the age of fifteen after a long period of mood swings. She quit coming home after school, opting to go into the woods behind the house until Galen, her mother, would come and get her. This went on for three weeks, after which the mother told David, the father, that Rose was going crazy.

David is a psychiatrist and, at Galen's request, he talks with Rose, but she is preoccupied with licking the hairs on her arms. Galen observes, having already accepted the inevitability of Rose's situation – that she will be hospitalized. Three of David's psychiatrist friends offer free consultations, but Galen has already packed Rose's belongings. The parents tell Violet that they will return later that evening, but without Rose. Galen also reassures Violet that what is happening to Rose will not happen to her. This reassurance is, deep down, something that both Violet and Galen need.

Over the next ten years, Rose is in and out of varying hospitals, exploring different treatments. Galen refuses to leave her daughter in one particular hospital because it does not have windows or pictures on the walls. At another hospital, Galen, who is a pianist, arranged for a piano to be donated to the facility. Through it all, the family goes to family therapists, something they all despise. Mr. Walker, the seventh and worst of the family therapists, sized up the family while Rose massaged her breasts and sang; this is Rose's typical greeting for new therapists. Violet and Galen react with laughter, even David is amused.

Mr. Walker asks why the family is entertained by Rose's outlandish behavior. He poses the question to Violet who responds by stating that perhaps Rose does not care much for being talked about in the third person, with which the rest of the family agrees. The meeting lasts all of fourteen minutes, setting the stage for the family to go to yet another family therapist.

The family then meets with Dr. Thorne, a giant-sized Texan, who, in response to Rose calling him "Big Nut" retorts "Little Nut." He subsequently identifies the rest of the family as "the good Doctor nut, and Madame Hickory Nut, 'cause they are the hardest damn nuts to crack, and over here in the overalls and not much else is No One's Nut" (pg 90-

91). The family immediately connects with Dr. Thorne and they forge a good working relationship. Rose eventually moves into a halfway house where she suddenly becomes very promiscuous. Dr. Thorne explains to Rose that until she finds a nice man who will treat her well, she should settle for nothing less. Surprisingly, this works.

With Rose in the halfway house, the rest of the family returns to some semblance of normality. David starts seeing patients again; Galen returns to her music; Violet goes back to college; and Rose starts taking her medication, loses fifty pounds, and begins singing with the choir at the A.M.E. Zion Church.

After five years of care from Dr. Thorne, Dr. Thorne dies of an aneurysm. Shortly afterwards, Rose stops taking her medication and is thrown out of the halfway house after pushing another patient down the stairs. Meanwhile, David gets a new insurance policy for Rose with better psychiatric coverage, but the benefits are only available after Rose has been symptom-free for forty-five days. While waiting for the coverage to begin, Rose moves back home. She is ever bit as bad as she was before and refuses to take her medication. Because she does not want to take her meds, but her mother negotiates a deal that if she wants to be able to use the car, she will have to take her medication. Rose agrees, but does not obey.

Violet is now living about an hour away from the family home. She is teaching English during the day and writing at night. Every few days she comes home and stays in touch via the telephone. Clearly Rose's presence is causing strain at home, but the family is managing. Rose quits the church choir and refuses to return even after a visit from Addie, a friend from the church.

The mother tells Violet that despite the challenges, they are maintaining a schedule and getting through it one day at a time. Violet accepts what her mother says and follows Galen's advice when she tells Violet that she should live her life because Rose is.

Violet goes home the next Sunday. She helps her father in the garden, which is something they often did together and enjoyed. When Violet goes inside, she discovers that someone has broken Galen's piano bench. Galen rationalizes that at least it was not the piano. However, David knows that this kind of behavior cannot continue much longer. There are still twenty-seven days left before the insurance kicks in, and despite his willingness to pay the out-of-pocket expenses to put Rose in the hospital, but Rose is still within the forty-five day, symptom-free period.

During this time, Rose and her mother are down at the lake. They come back to the house and Galen tells Rose to change out of her wet clothes; Rose refuses and turns violent. She begins to bang her head on the floor. Galen tries to stop her, but Rose throws her across the room. Violet quickly puts her body between Rose's head and the floor to try and keep Rose from hurting herself too badly. Rose stops, suddenly sorry, and apologizes profusely.

David has been outside through this episode. When he comes in, he knows that something bad has happened. He checks to see if Galen is okay. He asks what

happened, but Galen does not say anything. Violet lies for her sister, saying that she simply got upset and ran upstairs.

At dinner, the family sits down together. Rose hums to herself, sings a strange song, and then goes upstairs to bed. Galen and David go up to check on her. They return downstairs and tell Violet that Rose is asleep.

In the early morning hours, Violet wakes with a chill. She goes for a blanket and, in doing so, checks in on Rose; she is not in her bed. Violet gets dressed and then goes out to look for Rose. She finds her in the woods, her breath slow, a bottle of pills near her hand. Violet stays with her until dawn. She then goes up toward the house to find Galen standing on the porch. Galen kisses her daughter and then goes into the woods alone. Later she wakes David, who is unable to go into the woods, and then she calls the police and funeral home.

At the funeral, Galen plays the piano and Addie sings. Violet listens recalling her sister at fourteen singing in the parking lot after *La Traviata.*

Analysis

Amy Bloom's "Silver Water" is a carefully crafted story of one woman's memory of her sister who suffered from schizophrenia. From the opening scene, the reader is made sure of one thing, that in spite of all of Rose's problems, her sister loves her unconditionally. She also wants to make the audience see Rose in a positive light, showing her talent and free spirit.

Bloom's writing is easily accessible and her prose is honest and straightforward. She treats both sisters equally in their depiction. For all of Rose's outbursts and outlandish behaviors, Violet is the polar opposite, sane and reserved. Certainly, Violet and Rose are the most well developed characters in the story, in part, because of their relation to one another. They balance each other out and keep the story together.

Vivid windows are given into the personalities of both parents. David's characterization seems to rely on what most would assume about a psychiatrist, but he is a thoughtful man who genuinely cares for his family. He is a nurturer, looking after Galen after Rose attacks her, taking care of his garden and sharing that time with Violet. He is also optimistic, if not entirely realistic. He knows that he needs to get the best medical coverage he can for Rose, but in order to do that, he makes an unrealistic expectation of Rose. He knows that Rose will not remain symptom-free for forty-five days (especially since she won't take her medication), but he is hopeful that the family can endure the period anyway.

Galen is described as an eccentric pianist. Though Galen's eccentricities are never fully explored, they are dully noted. In a way, Galen is a hybrid of both sisters, both the sane and insane. Violet comments on her mother's calm demeanor, particularly when Galen tells Violet that she does not need to come home frequently. She calls it a "harsh calm" (pg. 95). This quality may have frustrated Violet when she was younger, but now she is

grateful for it. In telling the story, Violet, as the narrator, employs the same harsh calm of her mother.

The only other notable character is Dr. Thorne. When he is first introduced, he seems to be a broadly drawn caricature, rather than a fleshed out character. Yet, ultimately winds up being a nice compliment to Rose. After witnessing some of Rose's more erratic behavior, it easy to see why these two would compliment each other. While the family, or even other therapists, appears normal in comparison to Rose, Dr. Thorne is just as outlandish and this leads to progress in Rose's therapy.

The setting of the story is suburban. It takes place in a family home, hospitals, and doctor's office. The settings are closed rooms and the walls are ever present. This confinement permeates the story, further illustrating how Rose's condition puts strain on the family; this situation is inescapable.

Only twice is the reader taken completely outside. The first is in the opening scene when Rose belts out her song in the parking lot. The second is when Rose commits suicide in the woods behind the house. In both of these instances, the reader views Rose as free. The fact that Violet is with her in both scenes anchors their relationship; Violet wants her sister to be free.

"Silver Water" is, undoubtedly, a heart-breaking story that does not shy away from hard choices. Yes, Rose's suicide is tough to take, but at the same time, it is the natural end of the story. As disturbing as it may seem, it is the best outcome for Rose and her family.

Characters

David

David is Rose and Violet's father. He is, in the words of Violet, a "kind, sad man." David is also a psychiatrist, yet he doesn't recognize the signs of mental illness in his own daughter. He cares for his wife and his daughter, yet he doesn't outwardly demonstrate the same emotional attachment to Rose that his wife does and, according to Violet, has less of an ability to calm her down when she "goes off." He is the one who speaks in practical terms, for instance, how it is impossible to take care of Rose after Dr. Thorne's death, and he is the one who takes care of the arrangements after Rose's suicide.

Galen

Galen is Rose and Violet's mother. She is a musician who is regarded by people in their town as eccentric. Galen is the first person to realize that Rose is suffering from a mental illness. Galen plays the piano in the countless hospitals, institutions, and halfway houses that are Rose's homes over the next ten years. Galen is very close to her daughter, and Violet even thinks that Rose is the favored child.

Addie Robicheaux

Addie sings contralto in the church choir, along with Rose. She and Rose become close, and Addie is able to help Rose when she is experiencing mental breakdowns. Addie comes over to be with the family after Rose's death.

Rose

Rose is Violet's older sister. Until her first psychotic breakdown, at the age of fifteen, she led a normal life. She was well-liked at school, showed musical talent, and was idolized by Violet. With the onset of mental illness, however, Rose's behavior grows erratic. Rose, and her illness, quickly become the focus of the family. Difficult to deal with, Rose is in and out of institutions and therapists' offices.

While under the care of Dr. Thorne, Rose makes great improvements. During this five-year period, she is able to live in a halfway house, make a friend, and sing in a church choir. After Dr. Thorne's death, Rose begins to fall apart. She stops taking her medication. She gets thrown out of the halfway house for her violent behaviors and must return home to live with her parents. There she lashes out at her family. Eventually, Rose commits suicdie with a bottle of pills. Violet finds Rose outside, dying, but she does not call for help. Instead, she remains with her until dawn.

Dr. Thorne

Known to Rose as Big Nut, Dr. Thorne is the only therapist to whom Rose responds. With his help, Rose is able to move into a halfway house, stay on her medications, lose weight, stop behaving compulsively, and join a church choir. Rose and the whole family love Dr. Thorne for the way he helps Rose. After five years of treating her, however, Dr. Thorne dies of an aneurysm, and Rose quickly loses the control he helped her gain.

Violet

The narrator of the story, Violet, is two years younger than her sister Rose. At the time she relates the story, Violet is an adult, looking back at the life and death of her sister.

As a child and preteen, she had always looked up to Rose, her beautiful, talented sister. Despite Rose's continued mental breakdowns, Violet continues to remember Rose as she once was. However, she does not ignore Rose's present condition, and when necessary, protects Rose from herself. As an adult, she lives on her own but near enough her family to continue her involvement in Rose's saga and treatment. Despite Rose's illness, the sisters share a close bond throughout their lives. It is Violet who finds Rose dying. She chooses to not save Rose from her suicide attempt. She expects that her mother will be angry with her for not saving Rose's life, but this turns out not to be the case.

Mr. Walker

Mr. Walker is the worst family therapist the family ever visits. He talks about Rose in the third person and thinks the family reacts to Rose's illness inappropriately.

Themes

Illness

The theme of illness—specifically mental illness— and how that affects everyone it touches is one of the most important themes in "Silver Water." After Rose's first schizophrenic breakdown at the age of fifteen, the illness virtually controls her life, and as the narration makes clear, it also takes over the lives of her family. The illness is seen as a family problem. Not only does the entire family participate in group counseling to help Rose, but the mother and father try to help Rose's fellow patients, as if saving others similarly afflicted will save their daughter. David, a psychiatrist, donates time to work in the hospitals and clinic that currently treat Rose, while Galen, a musician, offers salvation and peace through the only method she knows: through her music.

David and Galen, however, try to minimize Violet's involvement; they want her to be free to lead a normal life. Thus, after Dr. Thorne's death, when Rose is to spend a month and a half at home, David and Galen discourage Violet from returning home too often; her weekly Sunday visits will be enough, they say. Galen, in particular, does not want to confess to Violet just how difficult these weeks with Rose have been. Throughout the story and up through Rose's final stay at home, Violet's contribution to Rose's illness and attempted recoveries is not immediately clear, yet at the end, she provides Rose with the greatest gift of all: release from her pain.

Death

Rose's death, the event upon which the story turns, is crucial in "Silver Water." Only in death can Rose escape the terrible effects of her illness. As she tells her family the night before her suicide, she does not want to do the things she does, such as shoving her mother into the refrigerator, but she simply cannot control herself.

Violet tacitly approves of Rose's suicide, and even sits besides her sister as Rose dies, as revealed by the words she uses: "I sat with her, uncovering the bottle of white pills by her hand, and watched the stars fade." It is not revealed whether Violet makes no attempt to save her sister more for her sister's sake or for her family's sake. She strongly wants to think that Rose has a very real cognizance of and culpability for her actions; "'Closing time,' she [Rose] whispered. I believe that's what she said." The story, however, seems to say that Violet's actions stem from a combination of reasoning: Rose is in pain and unhappy, and the family is in pain and unhappy. Crucially, Violet's parents do not fault her for her role in Rose's death. Her mother even evidences approval in her labeling of both of her daughters as "warrior queens." The story's final image is at Rose's funeral, yet instead of being a depressing scene, Violet concentrates on the positive. The story ends on the uplifting word "rising."

Family

One point that the story raises is the affect one member of a family has on the rest of the family. Rose's illness does not only hurt her: it hurts her mother, father, and sister. The members of this family are so inextricably intertwined. They work together to try and save Rose, and when that is no longer possible, some of them work together to help her leave the world.

Despite their closeness, each member of the family has a specific role and chooses what he or she will reveal to others. David is the one who tells Violet the truth about how difficult life is with Rose at home, while Galen wants to hide it from her younger daughter. Violet tells only the second lie of her life to her father when she does not tell him that Rose pushed Galen into the refrigerator. Violet also reveals that she has lived her life under the belief that Rose was always her mother's "favorite," to which she does not admit until the very end of the story, after she has already clearly demonstrated her love for her sister.

The story further affirms that people outside the family boundaries can cross over and truly become as close as family members. Thus, Rose's final breakdown is predicated by the death of her beloved therapist. Also significant to this point is the inclusion of Addie, Rose's choir friend, in the story's final paragraph. This elevates Addie's status more to a family member than a friend.

Style

Point of View

The story is told from Violet's first-person point of view. This means that the reader is privy only to Violet's thoughts and observations. However, this filtering does not detract from a solid understanding of Rose's life. Through Violet's eyes, the readers see Rose's overwhelming pain, sadness, and beauty. Violet chooses those details that most demonstrate what her sister goes through in the tenyear course of her illness, but she also reflects on what her sister had been: "before her constant tinkling of commercials and fast-food jingle there had been Puccini and Mozart and hymns so sweet and mighty you expected Jesus to come down off his cross and clap . . . there had been the prettiest girl in Arrandale Elementary School, the belle of Landmark Junior High." Because of Violet's clear love for her sister, the reader feels comfortable in trusting her words and her interpretations. Violet chooses fewer, yet still relevant, details to make her parents' reactions to Rose's tragedy poignant. Violet renders her parents as believable and sensitive, yet very distinct people.

Narration and Structure

Violet chooses to tell this story after her sister has died. This decision allows her greater flexibility than a straight-forward narrative would. Violet is able to include details and ideas that she might not have been aware of at the time the action was taking place. For instance, she acknowledges that the lie she told to her father about Rose's outburst in the kitchen was the second of three lies she had ever told in her life; readers thus cannot overlook its significance and will more closely reflect on the action that led to the lie in the first place.

The act of looking back on Rose's life also allows Violet to condense it. She picks out what she considers to be the more significant events and characteristics. The added perspective that Violet has because of the distance between the events and the telling of the events allows her to better shape the story, and thus better reach the reader. She can compare the outbreaks of the illness, the various doctors' treatments, and the way that the family reacts to the different episodes. In so doing, Violet highlights the changes that Rose has gone through over the years and demonstrates what a precarious hold she has on her own life and actions. This narrative style further underscores the precariousness of life itself; every change in Rose's ailment has an equivalent effect on all the members of her family.

Violet also chooses to talk about Rose as she was before the illness struck. Structurally, the story completes a full circle. Violet opens with the memory of her sister's "crystalline" voice rising in the parking lot outside of the opera house, and ends at Rose's funeral, remembering her fourteen-year-old sister, one year before her first breakdown, "lion's mane thrown back and her eyes tightly closed against the glare of the parking lot lights."

This structure not only reminds the readers of the fragility of the human experience—how quickly what a person takes as the core of their life can change— but also underscores the cyclical nature of life and death.

Symbolism and Imagery

Music provides the greatest opportunities for the use of symbolism and imagery in the story. The first line of the story reads, "My sister's voice was like mountain water in a silver pitcher; the clear, blue beauty of it cools you and lifts you beyond your heat, beyond your body." Although Violet places her sister, in these opening paragraphs, in a brightly lit parking lot, her images choose to align Rose with those of nature. Thus Rose is presented like that voice itself, like that mountain water: pure, true, beautiful, and undamaged. This link is further emphasized in the scene in which Rose dies. She chooses to go out to the woods behind the house, where Violet follows her "wide, draggy footprints darkening the wet grass."

The silver water of the title evokes the wet grass upon which Rose dies, as well as the purity of the water and the purity of Rose's voice and soul. Like rushing water, "the sweet sound [of Rose's voice] held us tight, flowing around us, eddying throughout our hearts, rising, still rising."

Historical Context

America in the Early 1990s

The decade opened with George Bush in the Oval Office. One of the most significant events of his term was the Persian Gulf War undertaken by several countries belonging to the United Nations— most notably the United States—against Iraq after its 1991 invasion of neighboring, oil-rich Kuwait. The UN forces quickly defeated Iraq, and Bush enjoyed great popularity and international praise.

At the same time, however, his administration was drawing criticism on the domestic front. A recession hit in 1990, and as the economy faltered, unemployment rose. The number of Americans living below the poverty line grew by more than 2 million in 1990. The United States was also experiencing a trade gap, particularly with Japan, and Bush and other U.S. business leaders were unable to persuade the Japanese to import more American goods. The 1991 federal deficit also surged to $282 billion. The Persian Gulf War and the bailout of the savings and loan and banking industries contributed to this deficit.

In 1992, Bill Clinton was elected president, beating incumbent George Bush and independent Ross Perot. Clinton was the first democrat in 12 years to hold the nation's top office. By the end of the year, the U.S. economy was well on the road to recovery. By the middle of the decade, Americans, on the whole, enjoyed a comparatively high level of prosperity. The United States also continued to enjoy the world's largest economy. Clinton experienced other major triumphs in the early years of his presidency, particularly balancing the federal budget and reducing the national debt. Unemployment began to go down, and the stock market boomed.

Health Care Changes?

When Clinton ran for president, many middleclass Americans felt that health insurance was out of their reach; wealthier Americans could afford high premiums, and poorer Americans were covered by Medicaid, but there was no assistance for middleclass families. One of Clinton's campaign promises was to bring affordable health care within the reach of all Americans. A bill that would support changes to this effect never even came to a vote in Congress, however. Opponents charged that such a sweeping reform would be too expensive and would also limit Americans' ability to make their own decisions. Health care has been the subject of great debate throughout the decade, particularly with the rise of HMOs and increasing costs for health care. By 1993, the United States was spending around $884 billion on health care each year.

Mental Illness in the United States

In the mid-1800s, Dorothea Dix was instrumental in the founding of mental hospitals in the United States, where ill people could get the help that they needed. Prior to her efforts, many mentally ill people were put in prisons along with criminals. These mental hospitals have remained in place through the beginning of the 21st century, however, funding for these institutions has been diminishing throughout the 1990s. Some reformers and legislators began to focus on the issue of caring for the mentally ill, both to protect them and to protect U.S. citizens. In the 1990s, a schizophrenic man in New York City pushed an innocent woman into the subway tracks, just as a train came into he station, killing her. It was later discovered that the man had been in and out of mental institutions for years and that he should have been taking medication to help control his hallucinations and dangerous impulses.

Critical Overview

Before becoming a successful author, Bloom worked full-time as a psychotherapist, and numerous critics have pointed out that her understanding of human foibles and quirks and her respect for the power of love shines through in her fiction. Bloom's collection of short stories and her first published book, 1993's *Come to Me,* was noted for its sensitivity as well as its collection of characters, many of whom suffered from some kind of pathology. Her stories focus on, among others, a transvestite, a schizophrenic, a voyeur, a delusional wife, an incestuous relationship, and a pedophiliac; as Jeanne Schinto writes in her review in *Belles Letters,* Bloom writes about characters who "exhibit all the symptoms for which people might seek psychotherapy." Indeed, therapists appear in a number of Bloom's stories. However, as Robert Phillips also notes in *The Hudson Review,* Bloom is "comfortable with the odd, the perverse, even the forbidden. Her deviants are basically people like you and me, only their needs to be loved or appreciated are more open or more extreme."

However, as Schinto points out, Bloom is as equally concerned with "the beauty beneath the bizarre," which her fine writing highlights. Another key concern for Bloom is the dynamics of family, which Anne Whitehouse of the *New York Times Book Review* notes, she writes about "with insight, sympathy and verve." Whitehouse further contends that in *Come to Me*, Bloom "has created engaging, candid and unorthodox characters, and has vividly revealed their inner lives. . . . Her voice is sure and brisk, her language often beautiful." Sally S. Eckhoff, writing for the *Village Voice Literary Supplement,* further finds that in her stories Bloom "shyly puts forth the idea that love is the religion of family life, and family life, far from being an elaborate cell from which we dream of the rest of the world, is heart's blood and inspiration."

In Bloom's exploration of family, she focuses three of her stories on the family that appears in "Silver Water." Thus, in reading the entire collection, the reader also becomes acquainted with the father as a young boy and the mother as an unhappy wife. While Daniel McGuines subtly critiques Bloom in *Studies in Short Fiction* for not writing a novel about this family, in lieu of these short stories, other reviewers were kinder to Bloom on the subject. As Whitehouse writes, the inclusion of different glimpses of the same people suggests a "complex web of relationships and concerns and how they have changed over time."

"Silver Water," which appeared in 1992's *Best American Short Stories* volume, has been called out by reviewers and readers for its many qualities. Schinto called it a "luminous story" and certainly one of Bloom's "best." Richard Eder's, of the *Los Angeles Times Book Review* called the story "stunning" and one of the collection's "small masterpieces." Victoria Radin, reviewing the collection for the *New Statesman and Society,* went a step further in calling this story of a schizophrenic who commits suicide with the aid of her sister, "ghastly." Radin also notes in an aside that the story serves as a condemnation of the psychiatric industry and the health insurance business.

In discussing the story, several critics have focused on the scene with Rose's therapist Mr. Walker—who is her therapist for all of 14 minutes— as pivotal, both for the story's rise and for the writing. Eder finds that "[T]his passage, with its breezy voice, its insights, ironies and dead-on details, is typical of Bloom at her best." Eckhoff also notes that Bloom demonstrates both "an insider's special disdain" for the offensive therapist, as well as "a writer's sense of timing."

Critics have also pointed out Bloom's drawing on images, colors, sounds, and scents. Eckhoff finds that "Silver Water" "turns on the lovely singing voice of Rose . . . whose loving little sister, Violet, craves the comfort of her music."

All of these elements make "Silver Water," and the collection from which it is taken, an engaging yet disturbing work. Wrote Eckhoff, "In *Come to Me* . . . the rare abilities she [Bloom] brings to her common ingredients make sad stories with airy spans and remarkable tensile strength. The result is a book as musical as its contents are mercurial."

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 examines the web of complex family relationships and explores the connotations of Violet aiding Rose's suicide.

"In the tradition of Anais Nin and Sigmund Freud, Amy Blood is a practitioner of both the talking cure and of fiction-writing," writes Victoria Radin in her *New Statesman and Society* review of Bloom's first book, the short story collection Come to Me. Bloom had been practicing psychotherapy for eight years before she returned to her childhood love of writing and began working on fiction in her spare time. "*Come to Me* is so rich, moving and gracefully written," extols Richard Eder in the *Los Angeles Times Book Review,* "it's hard to believe she hasn't been doing this all her life." Today, Bloom, who has also published the novel *Love Invents Us,* divides her time between her therapy practice, her fiction writing, and her family. These different but equally important parts of the author manifest themselves in her stories, which maintain finely drawn characters and demonstrate a clear-eyed comprehension. As Bloom acknowledges, "all the roles affect my writing. I see a lot of different points of view because I live a lot of different points of view. Understanding has always mattered more to me than assessing, and my writing reflects that."

"Silver Water," which was chosen as one of 1992's *Best American Short Stories,* is the last in a series of three linked stories, all of which are in her collection. The stories span nearly half a century in the lives of the Silverstein family. The first story, "Hyacinths," focuses on David Silverstein as a boy; the second story, "The Sight of You," depicts the affair Galen Silverstein had when her children were young; and "Silver Water" is told from Violet's viewpoint and centers on her sister Rose, who committed suicide after suffering from schizophrenia for more than ten years.

As narrated, the story illustrates the close, and sometimes difficult, bonds of family. Rose resides at the center of the Silversteins, for she is the neediest. Reflecting both the love Violet has for Rose, as well as the loss that schizophrenia inflicted on Rose and the entire family, "Silver Water" opens and closes on the same image of Rose: a fourteen-year-old girl, throwing her head back in the parking lot of an opera house and letting her lovely voice free. "She opened her mouth unnaturally wide and her voice came out, so crystalline and bright that all the departing operagoers stood frozen by their cars, unable to take out their keys or open their doors until she had finished, and then they cheered like hell." Violet, who recounts her sister's life, treasures this image. "That's what I like to remember, and that's the story I told to all of her therapists," Violet says. "I wanted them to know her. . . . That before her constant tinkling of commercials and fast-food jingles there had been Puccini and Mozart and hymns so sweet and mighty you expected Jesus to come down off his cross and clap." Violet's memory also provides the aching reminder that, whereas once Rose drew attention for her positive attributes, now she draws attention for her abnormal behavior.

Violet briefly yet hauntingly portrays her sister before and after she became schizophrenic. Before, Rose was talented and beautiful, according to Violet— " the prettiest girl in Arrandale Elementary School, the belle of Landmark Junior High." Later, she turned into a "mountain of Thorazined fat." Still, Violet and her parents search for the old Rose inside. Indeed, elements of the old Rose do emerge from time to time, especially during the five years that Rose is under the care of Dr. Thorne. During that period, she lives in a halfway house and sings in a church choir, actions that signify a partial return to the things that had once been of most importance to her: living in a more familial environment (as opposed to an institution) and her music. Although Rose does "go off from time to time," she exhibits much greater control.

The bonds between the members of the Silverstein family are sincere and true. Even such close relationships are not perfect, and deceptions do exist, but primarily in the name of love and the desire to protect one another. Violet lies to her father about Rose roughly shoving their mother in the kitchen, only the second of "three lies in my life." Galen lies to Violet about how difficult their life is with Rose at home, telling Violet they don't need her help and she should only come home on Sunday for her regular visits (though David tells here the truth: "We're not doing all that well"). Even more crucial, Violet does not try and bring Rose back from her suicide attempt. She remains by her sister's side as Rose dies. These actions, however, are committed in the name of love. Violet does not want her father to know how Rose hurt their mother. Galen does not want Violet to feel she must give up her own life to her family's and her sister's needs. And Violet allows Rose to kill herself because that is what Rose wants. "'Closing time,' she whispered. I believe that's what she said," is Violet's summation of Rose's final words.

The difficulty of living with Rose over the years cannot be denied, thus an alternate reading of Violet's motivation points to a more selfish justifi- cation. For ten years, Rose's illness has been the focal point of the family, a focus that has been hard on Violet. The family constantly works together to help Rose, and the scene with the therapist Mr. Walker clearly demonstrates the way the family is centered on her. For awhile—during the good years with Dr. Thorne—the family does maintain some semblance of normality. Violet reveals the great gift he gives them when at college she finds a "wonderful linebacker from Texas to sleep with." The young man calls her "darlin'," just as Dr. Thorne— also from Texas—calls Rose. Essentially, however, all that work is to no avail, for after all the manageable years, Dr. Thorne's death causes Rose to revert back to lose control over herself once again.

When Rose has her first breakdown, at the age of fifteen, Violet's only recorded reaction is signifi- cant. "My mother hugged me and told me that they would be back that night, but not with Rose. She also said, divining my worst, 'It won't happen to you, honey.'" Indeed, at times, Violet's very nor malcy sets her apart. When the family first meets Dr. Thorne, Rose calls him Big Nut. Dr. Thorne responds by naming all the Silversteins as nuts. Violet becomes "'No One's Nut'—a name that summed up both my sanity and my loneliness." It is difficult to fathom Violet's perception of her role in the family, as well as how much, if any, bitterness she holds toward Rose for usurping all the attention. She

only gives one clue to her innermost secret: that she firmly believes that Rose is their mother's favorite.

By the time of Rose's final breakdown, Violet allows the reader to truly see how her parents' lives are taken over by the care they must give their daughter. As always, Rose draws all the attention. "Dinner was filled with all of our starts and stops and Rose's desperate efforts to control herself." Further, Rose's more extreme behavior has left Violet outside of the family dynamic. Her mother does not want to admit how hard living with Rose really is, and while her father willingly unburdens himself, after the discussion he retreats from Violet; "He stayed outside and I stayed inside until Rose and my mother came home." Violet's strongest sense of isolation, however, manifests itself in the scene that takes place in the kitchen after Rose lashes out at her mother, a scene that Rose has already departed. David "made my mother a cup of tea and all the love he had for her, despite her silent rages and her vague stares, came pouring through the teapot, warming her cup, filling her small, long- fingered hands. He stood by her and she rested her head against his hip. I looked away."

Violet reveals her truest feelings about her place within the family structure as she returns to the house after Rose's suicide: "My mother was standing on the porch, wrapped in a blanket, watching me," Violet says. "Every step I took overwhelmed me; I could picture my mother slapping me, shooting me for letting her favorite die." These revelations are, in a sense, undercut by Galen's denial of their truth, yet coming so close to the end of the story and pivoting around such a crucial moment, they express some measure of truth, at last as perceived by Violet.

Violet, however, is not the only member of the family to feel isolated from the others after Rose's death. Galen "went into the woods by herself," and then takes to her bed until the funeral. David "picked out Rose's coffin by himself." Most significantly, he is left out of the final trinity—Galen, Rose's choir friend Addie, and Rose herself, whose music, voice and piano, rise together in Violet's mind's eye.

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

Critical Essay #2

Bussey holds a Master's degree in Interdisciplinary Studies and a Bachelor's degree in English Literature. She is an independent writer specializing in literature. In the following essay, she provides a character study of Rose, the schizophrenic sister.

Amy Bloom's short story "Silver Water" is a portrait of a family struggling to cope with the mental illness of one of its members. The mother, Galen, is a somewhat eccentric musician; the father, David, is a poised psychiatrist; the younger daughter, Violet, is an English teacher by day and a poet by night; and the older daughter, Rose, is the focus of their sorrow. It is from Violet's perspective that the story is told, and although it spans only eleven pages, the story relates scenes ranging from the time the girls are adolescents through their adulthood. This perspective allows the reader to see the girl Rose was before she became mentally ill. Consequently, the reader feels the family's heartbreak as the vibrant, talented, and beautiful girl descends into psychosis. Most of the story, however, is about Rose's hospital stays and psychiatric treatments, with emphasis on the deepening sorrow of her family. As Rose sinks further into her illness, she becomes elusive both to her family and to the reader. An attentive reading of the story, however, reveals four significant facets of Rose's character: She is a foil for her parents' strengths, highlighting them but also proving their impotence in the face of her illness; she is an innocent; she is an extremely overweight woman whose obesity matches the enormousness of her problems; and she is an extremely ill person who nevertheless retains the ability to make choices.

First, Rose demonstrates that her parents' talents and abilities are powerless to help her. As a result, Galen and David are reduced to simply reacting to Rose's outrageous behavior. Never knowing what to expect creates a highly stressful environment that is an outward manifestation of Rose's unpredictable inner world.

Galen is an accomplished pianist, and Rose has a beautiful voice. The story opens with Violet's statement: "My sister's voice was like mountain water in a silver pitcher; the clear blue beauty of it cools you and lifts you up beyond your heat, beyond your body." Violet then recalls an experience from her adolescence, when the family was leaving the theater after seeing *La Traviata*. Fourteen-year-old Rose decided to show off for her sister by singing as if she were performing in an opera. Rose's voice was so magnificent that the "departing operagoers stood frozen by their cars, unable to take out their keys or open their doors until she had finished, and then they cheered like hell." When her mental illness set in one year later, however, Rose reverted to humming commercials and advertising jingles. Music is an art form built on order, yet music cannot save Rose, cannot order her mind. Despite her gift for music (inherited from her mother), there is no order in her life, and this comes to represent her mother's inability to "rescue" her from her disturbed state.

Similarly, David is a practicing psychiatrist, yet his profession is ultimately unable to save his daughter. Rose submits to seeing therapists, and the family undergoes family therapy, but neither does anything for Rose's condition. Her medications help her to

keep calm, and they help quiet the voices in her head, but Rose never experiences a lifechanging breakthrough.

Rose's lack of responsiveness to therapy is evident when she manipulates therapists. Her schizophrenia does not render her completely unable to understand what is happening around her, and she initiates new therapists by singing to herself and massaging her breasts. She does this with full awareness of the inappropriate nature of the behavior. It is her way of thumbing her nose at the efforts of psychiatric professionals. Her father's profession, for all its science and research, does not have the answers that will bring Rose back to normality. The only positive outcome of David's being a psychiatrist is that he has contacts who are willing to help him as he seeks the best treatment centers for his daughter.

The second significant aspect of Rose's character is that she is essentially innocent, in spite of some episodes of lewd behavior acted out for effect. Throughout the story, she is depicted as an innocent young woman trapped by her tragic situation. Violet remembers her sister in junior high school: "To me, Rose, my beautiful blond defender, my guide to Tampax and my mother's moods, was perfect." Rose's name suggests perfection, purity, and frailty, and she has been given the gift of a beautiful voice. When she sings, especially when she sings with the church choir, her gift gives her an angelic quality. When Rose approaches the church choir, the director is uncertain what to make of this "big blond lady, dressed funny and hovering wistfully at the door," but when he hears her sing, he feels "God's hand" and sees "that with the help of His sweet child Rose, the Prospect Street Choir was going all the way to Gospel Olympics." Rose's angelic gift brings comfort to those around her (as expressed in the story's opening line), yet it brings her no relief from her illness.

Rose's innocence is emphasized when she has her first "psychotic break." The family is alerted that something is wrong by her retreat into the woods behind the house. Violet explains:

She would go out into the woods behind our house and not come in until my mother went after her at dusk, and stepped gently into the briars and saplings and pulled her out, blank-faced, her pale blue sweater covered with crumbled leaves, her white jeans smeared with dirt.

The imagery in this scene is highly symbolic. The innocent fifteen-year-old goes into the woods, a standard literary metaphor for the unknown and dangerous world (which is why woods are so prominent in fairy tales). Because Rose is frozen in place, her mother comes to rescue her among the briars (painful thorns) and saplings (pliable young trees). Rose's clothing is pale blue and white, colors that signify innocence and purity, and it is soiled by the leaves and dirt of the woods. During the evening before Rose kills herself, Galen is clearing the dinner table and humming a lullaby about the woods that she used to sing to the girls when they were very young. The reintroduction of the forest imagery reminds the reader of the contrast between Rose's innocence and the eerie woods, perhaps to prepare the reader for Rose's final scene. At the end of the story, Rose is once again found in the woods, only this time she has gone there to take her

life. Again, she is a white figure in the dark woods, and even the pills she takes are white. Despite her considerable size, she seems as innocent and powerless as she was at fifteen. Violet describes finding her sister in the woods late at night: "Huge and white in the moonlight, her flowered smock bleached in the light and shadow, her sweatpants now completely wet. Her head was flung back, her white, white neck exposed like a lost Greek column." When Violet finds her sister, she is barely alive, and Violet sits with her as her life slips away. Violet says, "I sat with her . . . and watched the stars fade." The image of the stars fading attests to Rose's innocence; as her spirit leaves her body, the pinpoints of light made by the stars are outshone by the greater light of the sun.

The third significant element of Rose's character is the symbolic meaning of her weight. One of the drugs she takes is Thorazine, commonly prescribed to patients suffering from schizophrenia. A side effect of Thorazine is weight gain, so the reader can reasonably conclude that the drug intended to help Rose is responsible for her considerable size. Besides presenting a realistic depiction of a person on Thorazine, Rose's substantial weight is a visual cue offered by the author. As a teenager, Rose was thin, but as her treatment progresses, she becomes larger, just as her presence in the family becomes larger. Although many people gain weight as they get older, Rose is still a young woman, and she is the only one in the family to become grossly overweight. Her immense size is a symbol of the overwhelming challenges faced by Rose and by the family as they seek to help her. Violet describes Rose's obesity in passing, and in almost comical terms ("a mountain of Thorazined fat, swaying down the halls in nylon maternity tops and sweatpants"), but Rose's size is the physical form of all the invisible problems with which they all struggle.

The fourth important aspect of Rose's character is that she retains the ability to make decisions, despite her psychiatric problems. While she has episodes in which she is unable to control herself, there are instances in which the reader sees Rose making conscious choices about her behavior. Although the choices are not necessarily healthy, they are acts of will. When she massages her breasts in front of each new therapist, for example, she is making a conscious choice to test the new person and to entertain herself and her family in the process; it is a way to reclaim power. The reader knows she is doing this willfully for three reasons. First, Violet remarks, "This was Rose's usual opening salvo for new therapists." Second, after Rose stops massaging her breasts in front of Dr. Walker, she continues to behave inappropriately, but in ways that indicate that she is engaged in her surroundings. For example, she calls the doctor "Ferret Face," and Violet notices that his features do, in fact, resemble a ferret. Third, when Rose sees Dr. Thorne, a new doctor who is a huge man, she stops massaging her breasts immediately. Later, when Rose goes through a period in which she has sex with everyone she can, she propositions Dr. Thorne. His response is sensitive and bolsters her self-esteem, and she stops having random sex. This is a conscious decision to respond to Dr. Thorne's words with a new pattern of behavior.

Rose's final choice is her suicide. Her intentional retreat into the woods to take the pills represents an act of will, not of uncontrolled psychosis. Her suicide is not an accident, which Violet knows. Because Violet knows her older sister is doing what she really wants to do by taking her life, she does not stop her. Bloom is not clear about why Rose

chooses to end her life, but the story seems to suggest that Rose truly loves her family and understands what a burden she has become to them. She understands her situation well enough to know that she will never be able to function independently. In the scene in which Rose is banging her head on the kitchen floor, she only stops when Violet throws her body down to the spot where Rose is hitting her head. This causes Rose to snap out of her repetitive act because she sees that continuing will hurt her sister. Having already hurt her mother without realizing it, she breaks down in emotional apologies. Clearly, Rose loves her parents and her sister deeply, and perhaps her unwillingness to be a strain on them leads her to her final choice.

Although Rose is a schizophrenic character, she is drawn with realism and complexity. Bloom shows the reader that even though Rose is elusive and puzzling, she is still knowable. By allowing the reader to see the very human side of the character, and the heartbreaking effects her condition has on the family, Bloom creates an affecting tragic figure in Rose.

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

Critical Essay #3

Semansky publishes widely in the field of twentieth- century culture and literature. In the following essay, he examines the idea of sympathetic identifi- cation and describes how it relates to the narrator's behavior.

The central mystery to be solved in Amy Bloom's story "Silver Water" is why the character of Violet allows her sister Rose to commit suicide. "Silver Water" attempts to realistically depict a family strained by the mental illness of their oldest child. It is told through the point of view of Violet, the younger sister who witnesses Rose's decline and ultimately decides her fate. The point of view is a significant choice, since the sisters are so close. Both are named for flowers, reflecting the fragile, ephemeral qualities of those objects. Violet shadows Rose, and is shadowed by her; and their fates, interwoven and dependent on each other, determine one's death and the other's responsibility. Because the story of Rose's life is threaded through with mental illness and ends in death, she is untenable as a narrator. By telling the story from Violet's point of view, Bloom offers as faithful and exact a version of Rose's story as possible.

The narrative voice begins by explaining that Rose was not always ill. Violet remembers a time before the "constant tinkling of fast food jingles," and the "mountain of Thorazined fat," when there was a voice "like mountain water in a silver pitcher," capable of lifting the spirits of anyone who heard it. Rose was a girl both beautiful and competent, Violet's seemingly infallible "guide to Tampax and my mother's moods." In these passages, narrated retrospectively after Rose's death, we see Violet's insistence that there was a time before—that there was more to Rose than the many therapists and doctors ever saw. In this way Violet establishes herself as the keeper of Rose's wholeness, not allowing the self that Rose was in her sicknesses to eclipse other, stronger, happier versions of Rose. As the person perhaps most responsible for Rose's death, Violet's commanding remembering of all that was good about her sister strongly indicates that Violet feels no guilt or uncertainty about her actions on the night of Rose's death.

When Rose is taken away, at fifteen, after her first episodes of psychosis, the merged nature of her and her sister's identities is made explicit. Violet's mother, divining Violet's adolescent fears, says, "It won't happen to you, honey. Some people go crazy and some people never do . . . not even when you want to." Violet's fears that she will become psychotic like Rose stem from the simple proposition that in some sense Violet cannot separate her own fate from Rose's—the most obvious eventuality to Violet is that what happens to her sister will necessarily happen to her as well. The last part of what her mother says to her on this occasion is also signifi- cant. By implying that Violet might someday *want* to go crazy herself, her mother speaks directly to the tendency toward deep identification that Violet feels with Rose. Because Rose has "gone crazy," Violet might feel that she might like to go too.

Most revealing is a scene early in the story when Violet describes an unsympathetically drawn family therapist who, unable to make heads or tails of the parents, turns his

attention to Violet and asks her for an explanation of Rose's behavior. With vehemence, Violet defends her sister's obscene tactics during the session, telling the doctor that she suspects Rose's ritual rubbing of her breasts during the session has a specific goal: "Maybe she's trying to get you to stop talking about her in the third person," Violet says. In these lines it is possible to decipher that Violet's anger might be as much about the necessity of speaking about Rose in the third person as it is with the therapist. As Violet tells the story, she too must speak of Rose in the third person, no matter how strongly she identifies with her. In "Silver Water" the word "I" always refers to Violet—a narrative fact that Violet withdraws from as running counter to her feelings of identification with Rose. The therapist serves as a person on whom Violet can project her anger about the limitations of identifying too closely with her sister.

Violet's connection to her sister can also be seen in the scenes with Dr. Thorne, the Texan therapist the family loves. He is affectionate with and flattering of Rose, and Violet returns to college, feeling that Rose is at last in good hands. But on beginning classes, Violet finds, "a wonderful linebacker from Texas to sleep with. In the dark I would make him call me darlin'." She moves geographically, but psychically is still going through Rose's life with her. By taking the linebacker from Texas as a lover, Violet recreates a bulky, Texan-like Dr. Thorne that she can call her own, again mirroring her sister's life.

The tension rises in the story when an uninsured Rose comes back to live with her family until her mental health coverage begins again. Violet says that she went home every few days and called each evening, increasing her presence in her parents' home and mimicking Rose's increased presence there. Her father "quietly" gives Violet a measured and sad accounting of how they are managing. Her mother "emphatically" tells her that everything is fine, and says, "You don't need to come home so often, you know. Wait 'til Sunday, just come home for the day. Lead your life, Vi. She's leading hers." This reminder to Violet that her life need not be troubled because her sister's is again speaks to the mother's understanding that Violet loses herself when she identifies too strongly with Rose. The specificity of her words focuses the issue: the sisters' lives are separate and can function independently, if only Violet can remember that. She does not need to act in tandem with Rose.

The climax of the crisis in identity comes when Rose begins violently banging her head on the kitchen floor and throws off her mother, who is desperately trying to stop her. The mother calls to Violet to help, but Violet throws herself onto the floor, "becoming the spot that Rose was smacking her head against." This metaphor resounds. Violet, always struggling to hold her own identity in the face of Rose's overbearingly powerful impulses and actions, has now become simply a thing—a spot on the floor—against which her sister bangs. Violet's loss of self has ebbed to its lowest point, and she is utterly dispossessed.

That night Violet wakes, feeling Rose's absence in the house. She goes outside, looking for her, and almost stumbles over her, "Huge and white in the moonlight, her flowered smock bleached in the light and shadow . . . her head flung back, her white, white neck exposed like a lost Greek column." The choice of the Greek column as a simile for

Rose's neck is a fascinating one, indicating the length of the sister's history together, from the time when Rose was the "belle of Landmark Junior High" through the heart-wrenching initial episodes of madness to this moment, when Rose's despair has brought her to swallow a bottle full of pills and wander out into the woods to die. The word "lost" used to describe the column is purely meant, for now Rose herself is truly lost and Violet must decide what to do next.

What Violet does is wait for Rose to die without intervening in her suicide attempt: "I sat with her, uncovering the bottle of white pills by her hand, and watched the stars fade." Significantly, Violet turns her attention away from her sister and towards the stars, referencing their potential as indicators of the destinies of individuals, each destiny different from the next—and their remote, cold, unresponsive nature. Violet regards the stars, not her sister, and although she sits with Rose as Rose dies, Violet is separating from Rose in an act of great complexity. She lets Rose die because Rose has suffered so profoundly, and because there is no longer any place for Rose to be that is comfortable for her, that succors her and rises up to meet her. Rose has come to her last foothold and Violet lets it be her last, does not insist that Rose take another step. But the power of "Silver Water" is that it admits another reading— Violet lets Rose die because she herself must live, must move out into the world as a whole and separate being, unencumbered and disentangled, and must move past Rose to do so.

The final words in the story are a description of a pre-psychotic Rose, singing mightily in the parking lot after having attended an opera performance with her family. People getting into their cars stand frozen, listening to her voice, and Violet claims the memory and the young woman at the center of it: "I closed my eyes and saw my sister, fourteen years old, lion's mane thrown back and eyes tightly closed against the glare of the parking lot lights. That sweet sound held us tight, flowing around us, eddying through our hearts, rising, still rising." The image is vivid, the weight it carries is momentous. Violet loved Rose, saw her great power and beauty, saw her shaken off track by the senseless hand of fate, and accepted, ultimately, that she herself was not to be dealt the same blow—that her fate was separate from her sister's, and that Rose's death was the necessary act to free them both.

Source: Chris Semansky, in an essay for *Short Stories for Students,* Gale Group, 2001.

Topics for Further Study

Do you think that Violet's actions at the end of the story are justified? Why or why not?

Find out more about schizophrenia, such as who it affects, when its onset begins, how it is treated, and how treatable it is. Then write up a few paragraphs summarizing your findings.

Violet says that Rose enjoys art therapy, and Galen often plays piano for the patients hospitalized along with Rose. How do you think these therapies would work on people with mental and emotional disorders? Conduct research to answer the question.

Violet believes that Rose is her mother's "favorite"? Do you find evidence of her statement in the story? Explain your answer.

What is your reaction to the family therapy session with Walker? Explain your answer.

Do you know or have you read about somebody with problems similar to Rose's? How is this person like Rose? How is this person different from Rose?

What Do I Read Next?

Life Size (1992), a novel by Jenefer Shute, tells of a young woman who has been hospitalized for another mental illness: anorexia nervosa. The novel switches between the past and the present, detailing the woman's recovery while showing the factors that led to her eating disorder.

Bloom's collection *Come to Me* features beautifully rendered stories about people suffering from any myriad of problems and mental illnesses. "Hyacinths" tells the story of a childhood incident in which the father in "Silver Water" accidentally shoots his cousin. "The Sight of You" details the mother's affair with a handsome neighbor who wants to marry her.

Bloom's novel *Love Invents Us* chronicles the lifetime of a woman named Elizabeth, from her abusive childhood to her dissatisfied adulthood. Along the way, Elizabeth grapples with all the typical things that make up a life, but she also steadfastly determines to keep a hold on what is important: love.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" depicts a woman's descent into madness. Bound by the strict rules of 1890s society, Gilman's narrator finds herself unable to deal with the reality of her life, which would deny her creativity.

The Dark Sister (1993) by Rebecca Goldstein tells of the relationship between two sisters. One of them, a feminist writer, is currently writing a novel about two sisters, both of whom seem to be going mad.

William Styron's *Lie Down in Darkness* (1992) tells the story of a troubled southern family in the mid-1900s. The Loftis family experiences irreparable dysfunction as they lack the ability to forge meaningful, solid bonds with one another. The pressure of growing up in such an environment takes its toll upon a daughter, who flees to New York, where she commits suicide.

Further Study

Brophy, Beth, "A Writer's Eye and a Psychotherapist's Ear," *US News and World Report,* January 27, 1997, p. 69.

A discussion of how Bloom draws upon her work as a psychotherapist to create her fiction.

Towers, Sarah, "Inventing Euphoria," *Mirabella,* JanuaryFebruary, 1997, p. 24.

An interview with Bloom focusing on her career and how she became a writer.

Tsuang, Ming T., et. al, *Schizophrenia: The Facts,* 2d ed., Oxford University Press, 1997.

This is an introductory text on the current understanding of schizophrenia and is aimed at lay-level readers.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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

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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Short Stories for Students

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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

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