

Snapshots of a Wedding Study Guide

Snapshots of a Wedding by Bessie Head

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Introduction

"Snapshots of a Wedding" was published in 1977 in *The Collector of Treasures and Other Botswana Village Tales*, Bessie Head's first collection of short fiction. Though this particular story has not received a great deal of critical attention, Head's short stories are well known for their portrayal of African village life and its traditions and customs. Head presents in her stories a world that is as rich in conflict and oppression, however, as it is in tradition.

"Snapshots of a Wedding" focuses on the wedding of Neo, a young educated woman living in an African village, and Kegoletile, a young man "rich in cattle." Kegoletile has impregnated both Neo and another woman, but can marry only one of them. The second woman, Mathata, is old-fashioned in her lack of education and contentment with village life. Neo, by contrast, is a "new" woman: well-educated and anxious to embark on a career that will allow her to improve her economic situation. Neo is also arrogant, proud of her education, and often condescending toward others, who accordingly resent her. The differences between these two women comprise the story's major conflict. Though Kegoletile plans to marry Neo, he continues to find himself attracted to Mathata. He must choose between a happiness whose cost is the sacrifice of advancement, and an economic progress whose cost is the likely sacrifice of marital happiness and tradition.

Author Biography

Bessie Head was born Bessie Amelia Emery in a South African mental hospital in 1937. She was the daughter of a black father and white mother whose wealthy family had sent her to the institution upon learning of her pregnancy. The baby was briefly taken in by foster parents who gave her up due to the color of her skin, and then was raised by white missionaries. While Head was still a child, her mother committed suicide.

After teaching elementary school for several years in South Africa, Head spent two years as a journalist for Drum Publications in Johannesburg. She married fellow journalist Harold Head in 1961, but they soon divorced. In 1964, she moved from South Africa to Botswana with her son, saying that she would no longer live under apartheid, South Africa's institutionalized system of racial discrimination. In Botswana she lived in poverty as a refugee on the Bamangwato Development Farm, tending a garden and selling its products and homemade jam to earn money.

Head is the author of three novels: *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1969), *Maru* (1971) and *A Question of Power* (1973). The last was inspired by her own earlier nervous breakdown. After 1973 she published no more novels, but did publish several collections of shorter works, including the short story collection *The Collector of Treasures and Other Botswana Village Tales* (1977), and two historical chronicles, *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind* (1981) and *A Bewitched Crossroad: An African Saga* (1984). Though she is best known for her exploration of racial oppression of blacks by whites, Head's work also analyzes issues of gender and class. She gained international recognition near the end of her life, representing Botswana at international writers conferences at the University of Iowa in 1977 and 1978 and in Denmark in 1980. When she died in Botswana in 1986 of hepatitis she was in the process of preparing her autobiography. In 1990, a volume of autobiographical writings was posthumously published as *A Woman Alone: Autobiographical Writings*. Head continues to be remembered as a bard of African village life, as well as of the injustices—racial, sexual, and economic—of the larger societies of which those villages are a part.



Plot Summary

"Snapshots of a Wedding" is a succinct account of the wedding day of Kegoletile and Neo, a young man and woman who live in a small African village. It is also an account of the circumstances surrounding their wedding. The story begins with a description of the dawn of the wedding day and of the figures stirring who are to be a part of that day: "ululating" women, an ox who does not realize that he is to be slaughtered, and the four men who tend to him. For all of these signifiers that point to a traditional village wedding, the wedding that is to take place this day is anything but traditional, as is revealed by the comment of one of the villagers:

This is going to be a modern wedding." He meant that a lot of the traditional courtesies had been left out of the planning for the wedding day; no one had been awake all night preparing diphiri or the traditional wedding breakfast of pounded meat and samp; the bridegroom said he had no church and did not care about such things; the bride was six months pregnant and showing it, so there was just going to be a quick marriage ceremony at the police camp.

"Oh, we all have our own ways," one of the bride's relatives joked back. "If the times are changing, we keep up with them." And she weaved away ululating joyously.

The narrator turns from this hint at the story's central conflict between tradition and progress to a description of the circumstances leading up to the wedding. Kegoletile, a well-to-do young man, has fathered children with two women, Neo and Mathata. Neo is an upwardly mobile young woman, educated and anxious to make a good living that, combined with her husband's income, will provide her with a life beyond the means of most others in the village. She wears her education like a badge and is often arrogant and condescending toward others, for which they secretly dislike her. Mathata, on the other hand, is not educated and is content with the monthly stipend Kegoletile provides for the care of their child.

Kegoletile chooses to marry Neo, but continues to bring gifts to Mathata and to spend time with her when he has completed his daily work in preparation for the wedding. He still has feelings for Mathata, but he resists them in order to concentrate on the sensible reasons—money and an improved future—for marrying Neo. Others notice that Kegoletile continues to spend much time with Mathata. On a visit one day to her aunt, Neo learns how others in the village feel about her. Her aunt tells her that Kegoletile "would be far better off if he married a girl like Mathata, who though uneducated, still treats people with respect." This stuns Neo, and she quickly becomes pregnant again to cement her hold on Kegoletile.

The narration then turns again to the wedding day, describing the rituals performed by the families of the groom and bride. The story ends with the reappearance of Neo's aunt, who falls at Neo's feet, exhorting her to "Be a good wife!"



Summary

Snapshots of a Wedding is one of a collection of stories by Bessie Head about life in Botswana. This story, set in a tiny tribal village, begins at dawn and ends later the same day. An impartial narrator describes the heat rising in shimmering vertical waves from the arid plain. Semi-nomads, whose herds of precious cattle mow the grass low and dust the nearby mud-and-dung huts with a sandy mix, inhabit the isolated area. Among the few villagers stirring at this hour are four relatives of Kegoletile, the bridegroom.

The four relatives herd an ox into the yard of MmaKhubu, where the bride, Neo, lives. The ox will provide meat for the evening's wedding feast, and women in the yard, who ululate and perform a wedding dance, greet the animal's arrival. Although these age-old rituals seem to indicate a respect for tradition, one of the bridegroom's relatives remarks that this will be a modern wedding because some traditional courtesies have not been extended. Among the reasons for this is that the couple about to be wed are not especially spiritual and the bride is six months pregnant and showing. One of the bride's relatives responds that the times are changing, and they are keeping up with them.

The bride's relatives have participated in quite a bit of pre-wedding gossip, but they have kept to themselves their delight in getting rid of Neo, who they consider haughty, arrogant, and disrespectful of her less-educated family members. They believe Neo's ways will bring her down one day, they doubt that she deserves Kegoletile, and they question the way in which Neo landed him.

Kegoletile got Neo and another girl, Mathata, pregnant at about the same time. Neo's aunt tells the girl that her own family thinks Kegoletile would be better off marrying a respectful, uneducated girl than the bad-mannered rubbish she has become. That is when Neo secures Kegoletile by becoming pregnant. When confronted by both girls' families, Kegoletile proposes to Neo and agrees to pay court-ordered child support to Mathata. Neo's relatives believe he might love Mathata, but he chooses Neo because her advanced education gives her better job prospects and ensures Kegoletile a better lifestyle.

There is no room in the day's festivities for any of this conflict as the relatives perform the ancient rituals. Neo's aunts sit in the yard all day and are served hand and foot. At sunset, they are joined by Kegoletile's aunts, and their conversation is punctuated with traditional questions and responses, including requests from the bride's aunts that the bridegroom supply them with corn each year and from the bridegroom's aunts for water, a reminder that a bride's chore at her in-laws' house is to carry water. It is a formality, as is the greeting Neo receives as she arrives at Kegoletile's house. An old woman runs toward her and chops the ground with a hoe, indicating that Neo will be expected to help her husband cultivate the land.

Neo sits on a traditional animal-skin Tswana mat. A shawl is draped around her shoulders and the kerchief is tied around her head, symbols that she is now a married woman. As guests greet the bride in a receiving line, two girls begin to ululate and



dance for the bride. As they bend over to shake their buttocks in the air, they bump into each other and fall over. Neo and her wedding guests laugh.

Then the aunt who scolded Neo for her bad manners drops to her knees before the bride, clenches her fists, and pounds the ground on either side of the bride as she commands: "Be a good wife! Be a good wife!"

Analysis

The theme of this story is the conflict between traditional and modern ways, and it permeates this story at every level of plot and characterization beginning with the title that implies a modern camera, which is nowhere to be found in this primitive setting, and ending with an older aunt's traditional admonishment that the educated, professional Neo "be a good wife." This statement has different meanings for the one who delivers it and the one who receives it, just as the day's traditional rituals and modern methods are viewed differently by the generations in this community.

Cattle are of utmost importance in this community. The gift of an ox is considerable. The ox led to slaughter for the feast is also a time-honored ritual that symbolizes the husband's role in providing for his family. In modern times, the ox or lamb being led to slaughter has also become a euphemism of what happens to a man who marries. However, Keogetile's modern bride will be delivered to his home as if she is little more than chattel. In less contemporary times, that is all she would be, bargained and paid for.

While the family members may be disdainful of the bride and her modern ways, Neo's wedding provides them this opportunity to practice the ancient rituals that have bound this community together for hundreds of years. Despite the relatives' lack of respect for the bride, the mood of the day is one of respect for tradition and shared joy.

It is ironic that the sophisticated Neo, frightened by her plainspoken simple aunt, resorts to the time-honored method of ensnaring a man by becoming pregnant with his child. The climactic moment in this story also belongs to Neo's aunt, who pronounces Neo rude and unworthy of marriage but later performs the last symbolic ritual of the wedding day, pounding fiercely on the ground and ordering her niece to "be a good wife."

This last symbolic gesture, like the chopping of the ground with the hoe, has the potential to be passed off as just another formality, but because this particular member of the wedding party performs it becomes the climax of the story. The order carries with it a world of duty the old aunt understands well, and the reader is left to wonder if Neo will ever learn.

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Characters

Kegoletile

Kegoletile, a young man "rich in cattle," has fathered children with two different women, Mathata and Neo. He can only marry one of them, and he chooses to marry Neo because her educational background means that she will probably earn more money than Mathata. Nevertheless, Kegoletile supports Mathata and her child with a monthly stipend, and continues to behave kindly toward her, by bringing her gifts and regularly spending time in her yard. He is still quite attracted to Mathata, who is "always her own natural self," but he realizes that Neo is the kind of woman he should marry, in spite of her "false postures and acquired, grand-madame ways." He appears to be torn between his emotional desire for Mathata and his practical desire for Neo, but he keeps this to himself. Ultimately, Kegoletile marries Neo, who is six months pregnant with their second child.

Mathata

Mathata is one of two women in the village with whom Kegoletile fathered a child. Unlike Neo, the other woman, Mathata is simple, uneducated, and humble. She is not career-minded like Neo and cannot bring the additional income to the household that Neo is expected to provide. Mathata is as content and easygoing as Neo is ambitious and arrogant. She is the kind of woman who "offered no resistance to the approaches of men; when they lost them, they just let things ride." Kegoletile agrees to pay Mathata a monthly stipend for the support of their child. Though he will marry Neo, Kegoletile continues to bring Mathata presents and spend a great deal of time with her.

Neo

Neo is to marry Kegoletile—the father of her child who has also fathered a child with Mathata—because she is educated and can potentially earn a wage that, added to his own, will make the two wealthy. Neo is excessively proud of her accomplishments, so much so that she is disliked by her own relatives, who consider her "an impossible girl with haughty, arrogant ways." Because of her strong ambition and feelings of superiority, Neo is not concerned about a rivalry with Mathata until her aunt chastises her for being arrogant. Her aunt claims that Kegoletile "would be far better off if he married a girl like Mathata." Beginning to doubt herself, Neo conceives another child with Kegoletile in order to ensure his commitment to marry her. At the wedding, her aunt repeatedly reminds her to be a good and obedient wife.

Neo's aunt

Neo's aunt, as well as many of her relatives, are critical of Neo because of her arrogance. When Neo comes to visit her one day, treating her in a typically condescending manner, Neo's aunt puts her in her place, telling Neo that she is "hated by everyone around here." Neo's aunt is a woman of "majestic, regal bearing" who accosts Neo at the wedding ceremony, instructing her, as she beats the ground with her fists, to "Be a good wife!"



Themes

Tradition vs. Modernization

Kegoletile's choice between Neo and Mathata is essentially a choice between tradition and modernization, the past and the future. The past includes the traditions of the village, symbolized not only by the rituals surrounding the wedding ceremony, but also by the economic stagnation and lack of educational opportunity in the village. The hoped-for future is one of economic prosperity and educational opportunities, of wealth and privilege. But the future cannot happen in a vacuum; it must draw from, and build upon, the past. While Kegoletile and Neo forego most of the rituals surrounding the wedding ceremony, they do allow some to take place, such as the exchanges between the maternal aunts and members of the bridegroom's family. Head implies that the future must slowly wean itself from the past, rather than divorcing the past outright.

Man vs. Woman

Kegoletile, though he marries Neo and provides for Mathata, is nevertheless in an adversarial relationship with both of them. They each have a claim on him, due to his impregnating them, and he must marry one of them. The women have no authority in this decision, however, even though it will affect both of their lives immensely. The decision is Kegoletile's alone, and the women can only accept their fates, or work in subtle ways to change them.

Woman vs. Woman

Neo and Mathata are placed in an adversarial relationship to each other when they are both impregnated by Kegoletile. Neo is confident that her education and future promise will secure Kegoletile, but when she learns that he has been visiting Mathata, she begins to take Mathata seriously as a threat to this security. She becomes pregnant again to make sure that Kegoletile will marry her and not Mathata. Mathata does nothing to encourage such a competition; she is content with the stipend Kegoletile gives her to provide for their child. Nevertheless, it is Mathata's gentle, easy-going nature that makes her attractive to Kegoletile and the other villagers, especially when compared with Neo's cold ambition.

Poverty vs. Prosperity

The fear of poverty and the yearning for prosperity underlie the choices made by the characters in Head's story. Neo's choice to become educated and Kegoletile's choice of Neo as a wife are motivated by a desire to achieve prosperity and thus throw off the

economic fetters of uneducated village life. Through the character of Mathata, however, Head implies that prosperity is not always a prescription for a better life: Kegoletile still harbors feelings for Mathata.



Style

Point of View

"Snapshots of a Wedding" features a third-person narration, told from the point of view of someone who is not a character in the story but who nevertheless knows of the circumstances surrounding Neo, Kegoletile, and Mathata and their situations. This point of view, often called "omniscient," allows a narrator to be in more than one place at the same time, and to relate the feelings and inner conflicts of the characters presented. For instance, a reader can know not only Neo's experiences, but the internal conflict of Kegoletile as well.

Symbolism and Imagery

Head employs a number of powerful images and symbols in "Snapshots of a Wedding." The "ululating" relatives of Neo, with their "fluid, watery forms" symbolize the naturalness of the ceremony of which they are to be a part, while the ritual signifies the past from which Kegoletile and Neo are determined to emerge more prosperous. One may see the poor ox as a symbol for Kegoletile: just as the ox will be led to the slaughter, he will be led to the altar to wed, an event that will alter his life forever. Neo's aunt symbolizes the voice of tradition, admonishing Neo for her arrogance while implicitly exhorting her not only to "Be a good wife," but never to forget the tradition from which she has come. As the representative of history, she is "regal," but as Neo and Kegoletile wed and their prosperous lives are about to begin, she can only offer advice, not influence events.

Structure

Head employs a complex narrative structure in "Snapshots of a Wedding." While the title might lead one to expect the story to be about the events of a wedding, Head quickly turns to an exploration of circumstances and events surrounding and leading up to the wedding. In fact, most of the story recounts the individual stories of Kegoletile, Mathata, and Neo and their relationships with each other and with the community of which they are a part. This information is necessary, however, in order to understand the significance of the wedding event and the rituals, or lack of rituals, that accompany it. When the narrator returns to the wedding to close the story, the reader cannot help but understand the wedding in a new way, having been given access to the intrigue and conflict surrounding the wedding from day one.

Setting

The story is set in a small African village in Botswana, given the title of the collection in which it is published. The narrator never makes it clear when exactly the events of this

story take place. One can assume, however, from hints such as Neo's ability to become a "typist" or "secretary" that the events take place in the mid-twentieth century or later. The story's theme of conflict between progress and tradition, future and past, however, is one that has been the subject of literature for centuries.

Historical Context

"Snapshots of a Wedding," published in 1977 in *The Collector of Treasures and Other Botswana Village Tales*, presents a story of young people in an African village dealing with forces of tradition and change in the latter part of the twentieth century.

Botswana is a republic in central southern Africa, located north of South Africa. It became independent in 1966. Much of its territory consists of the Kalahari region, an area of desert and grassland. Cattle-raising, the traditional source of wealth and sustenance, continues to be a mainstay of the economy. The Tswana people who make up most of the population tend to reside in large villages in which extended families live together in their own compounds. Tribal institutions and customs remain strong.

Nonetheless, as in the rest of Africa, modern ways are beginning to disrupt the traditional way of life. Beef exports and the developing mining industry have brought considerable wealth into the country and have helped create a class of educated, middle-class city-dwellers with salaried jobs. On the whole, however, few people complete their secondary education, and for those who do, employment opportunities are fairly limited. The attractions of wealth and a more modern way of life are causing young people to desert the villages for the cities and in many cases to seek work outside the country, particularly in neighboring South Africa.

In "Snapshots of a Wedding," Head dramatizes the conflicts that these forces cause between tradition and modernization and the ways in which they affect individual lives and social relationships.



Critical Overview

Compared to some of her African contemporaries, such as novelists Chinua Achebe and Alan Paton, Head has not received a great deal of critical attention. Her novels are often hailed by feminists, while her short fiction has received some attention for its portrayal of village life and tradition. "Snapshots of a Wedding," from Head's 1977 volume of short stories *The Collector of Treasures and Other Botswana Village Tales*, has received critical attention along both of these lines.

In his *Bessie Head: An Introduction*, Craig MacKenzie writes that *The Collector of Treasures and Other Botswana Village Tales* "goes on to explore in a more outward-reaching way the life of Head's adoptive village. The short story as a genre—particularly in Head's use of it—seems singularly able to cope with the material yielded by the author's more objective interest in episodes of village life." Just as the short story allows for the presentation of "snapshots" of village life—intense moments of clarity or truth about the nature of that existence—"Snapshots of a Wedding" provides in particular an examination of the roles of tradition and progress in contemporary village life and of the institution of marriage. In an interview with Linda Beard in *Sage: A Scholarly Journal on Black Women*, Head said that in *The Collector of Treasures and Other Botswana Village Tales*, "all [she] . . . did was record stories that had happened and that had been told to me and described to me." The stories, according to Head, are "not inventions.... [though] they are decorated; they are interpreted. But there's a basis there in fact, in reality." Head's stories back this claim of veracity through the narrator's sympathy for the plight of her characters. In "Treasures of the Heart: The Short Stories of Bessie Head," Michael Thorpe writes that most of the stories "read, once one becomes aware of Head's concerns, like subtle inducements to her African readers to learn again to choose between good and evil. While evil is easily recognizable as a constant—witchcraft, human sacrifice, the abuse of women—the storyteller shows her hand most plainly in her efforts to provide models of the good."

The narrator's sympathy manifests in the *presentation* of the conflicts surrounding the story's events, not necessarily in their resolution. Huma Ibrahim, in her book *Bessie Head: Subversive Identities in Exile*, looks at Head's fiction from a feminist perspective, addressing issues of gender and identity in Head's novels and short fiction. She says of "Snapshots of a Wedding" that "there is no criticism at all from the village toward Kegoletile for having polygamous relationships or for succumbing to the greater ability of one of his partners to earn money because of the education she has." Earlier, Ibrahim discusses the stories in *The Collector of Treasures and Other Botswana Village Tales* as examinations of the evils of polygamy, noting, "there is not criticism for Mathata for being uneducated or getting pregnant out of wedlock." Mathata is not the only woman, however, bound by her place in society. Ibrahim notes that the aunt's final comments to Neo indicate "the ultimate double message to Neo: no matter how educated you are, your primary task is to be polite to everybody in the community and to be a good wife to your husband. Implicit in this ideology is that education will help you in the race for a husband but it will not help you after that." Similarly, Sara Chetin views Neo as a sympathetic figure. In *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* she writes that "[a]s

outsiders we can't trust the villagers' hostility to Neo . . . and perhaps end up feeling sorry for the young bride, exiled as much by traditional insecurities as by her education, an education that could not reconcile itself to a society's disregard of women." What Head accomplishes, critics seem to agree, is a dramatization of these tensions between the past and present, men and women, and of the circumstances that produce them.

Criticism

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



Critical Essay #1

Berg has taught English at Lehigh University, Raritan Valley Community College, and Allentown College of Saint Francis de Sales. In the following essay, she examines how Head, in "Snapshots of a Wedding," portrays the effect of education on women and on traditional practices in an African village.

In her collection of short stories entitled *The Collector of Treasures and Other Botswana Village Tales*, Bessie Head explores the effect of education on both women and the Botswanan village. The short story that ends the collection, "Hunting," for example, leaves the reader with perhaps the final and indeterminate position of the educated woman. Thato, a farmer's wife, tells us "in an exact, precise way" that "Uneducated women . . . are just there to be misused by men. The men all want to marry educated women, and still they treat them badly. Those women work for them and support them and get no happiness out of marriage." Whether or not a woman in Bessie Head's fictional Africa is educated, she is likely to find little satisfaction in marriage, but the fact of her education is a complicated matter; the educated woman is both valuable, and disruptive to the community. This dilemma that education introduces into a woman's life and the lives of those around her is best illustrated in "Snapshots of a Wedding," the tenth of the thirteen stories in the collection. In this story, Head focuses on the events leading up to and including the marriage of Neo and Kegoletile. The educated woman, Neo, is not a favorable character, and the women in the village dislike both her and the way in which her education challenges their traditions. Modern and traditional ways intersect as Head locates Neo in one of the most joyful, if not important, village ceremonies: the wedding ritual.

The question of the value of education in traditional cultures has captured the imaginations of other writers as well, in particular Alice Walker, in "Everyday Use," and Merle Hodge, in *Crick Crack Monkey*. The central figure in each of these works is a young, black female who is eager to learn and, at the same time, susceptible to the influences of education. Walker's Dee betrays her family and her heritage when, having procured a college education, she returns home to mock what she perceives as ignorance in her mother and sister:

She used to read to us without pity; forcing words, lies, other folks' habits, whole lives upon us two, sitting trapped and ignorant underneath her voice. She washed us in a river of make-believe, burned us with a lot of knowledge we didn't necessarily need to know. Pressed us to her with the serious way she read, to shove us away just at the moment, like dimwits, we seemed about to understand.

Satisfied with the response she elicits, Dee wields her education over her mother and sister. Similarly, Tee's education, in Merle Hodge's *Crick Crack Monkey*, causes her to separate herself from the home and family to which she belonged. Significantly, she chooses not to return to her home as she rejects her past: "To think that I had once been like them.... That seemed to have been a long time ago. It seemed almost never to have happened. If only it *had* never happened." While the process of gaining an



education arouses in each woman a newly de-fined sense of self and a determination to succeed, it ultimately strips a layer of humanity from them; they turn mean, and ironically, in distancing themselves from their heritage both physically and intellectually, they forsake the very sense of self they believe they have secured. Bessie Head's "Snapshots of a Wedding" offers a warning against the possibilities of such betrayal. Although the story at first appears to be simple, Head conveys a complex web of reactions of the Botswanan village people to Neo's marriage. Ultimately, Neo's education poses a threat to the community, and the boundaries between modern and traditional ways are tested.

From the beginning, Neo's relatives believe that education has made Neo something of a snob:

They were anxious to be rid of her; she was an impossible girl with haughty, arrogant ways. Of all her family and relatives, she was the only one who had completed her 'O' levels and she never failed to rub in this fact. She walked around with her nose in the air; illiterate relatives were beneath her greeting-it was done in a clever way, she just turned her head to one side and smiled to herself or when she greeted it was like an insult.

As the only member of the family with an education, Neo certainly deserves credit for her accomplishment, but like Walker's Dee she uses her newfound knowledge to create a superior position for herself in the community and to remind others-particularly other women-of their inferiority. Her behavior undermines her achievement, though her immediate family seems to remain proud of her: "Only her mother seemed bemused by her education. At her own home Neo was waited on hand and foot. Outside her home nasty remarks were passed. People bitterly disliked conceit and pride." Neo's relatives especially "dislike conceit and pride" when it is clearly one of the effects of education.

Neo's wise aunts understand the extent to which gaining an education is becoming a new method of gaining status in the village, but they also see how education, paradoxically, robs Neo of more humane qualities:

"That girl has no manners!" the relatives would remark. "What's the good of education if it goes to someone's head so badly they have no respect for the people? Oh, she is not a person." Then they would nod their heads in that fatal way, with predictions that one day life would bring her down.

Respect for both the people and the traditions in the village is essential; Bessie Head is calling into question the function of education when it jeopardizes that balance of respect in the village.

Like Neo's relatives, Kegoletile, too, is aware of Neo's unpleasant character. He regards her as "a new kind of girl with false postures and acquired, grand-madame ways." Such falsehood and "acquired" behavior are the accoutrements of an education, which manifest themselves visibly in recognizable differences; they emphasize unwelcome distinctions between members of the community and cast the educated woman as a



kind of outsider. Like Walker's Dee and Hodge's Tee, however, Neo appreciates this difference as an advantage, confident of her new place in (and not outside) the community, confident in the respect that place demands, and confident in her value as a wife. When both she and Mathata are discovered pregnant by Kegoletile, Neo knows that he will choose to marry her. Moreover, Neo becomes pregnant purposefully after learning that her relatives believe Mathata to be a better person for Kegoletile. Educated and pregnant, then, Neo accurately predicts that Kegoletile will not turn her away. Ironically, Kegoletile does love Mathata, "who though uneducated, still treats people with respect." Because of their common background in education, we might expect that Neo would be a more suitable match for Kegoletile. Indeed, in monetary terms, she is; anticipating Thato's comments in the last story of the collection, the narrator here declares that men "all wanted as wives, women who were big money-earners and they were so ruthless about it!" Furthermore, Neo's relatives are certain of Kegoletile's motives: "He is of course just running after the education and not the manners.... He thinks that since she is as educated as he is they will both get good jobs and be rich in no time." Kegoletile, then, is using Neo for her educational worth, in order that they will gain wealth: "The difference between the two girls was that Mathata was completely uneducated; the only work she would ever do was that of a housemaid, while Neo had endless opportunities before her—typist, book-keeper, or secretary." Neo is attractive, in this way, to Kegoletile, and even though he is aware of both his selfish behavior and her lack of manners, he still chooses to marry her.

It is significant that the uneducated Mathata is portrayed as a much more favorable character than Neo and that Kegoletile does not choose her for marriage. Kegoletile's desire for an educated wife costs him a life with Mathata, a "real" person: "She was a very pretty girl with black eyes like stars; she was always smiling and happy; immediately and always her own *natural* self" (my emphasis). By contrast, Neo is deemed "not a person" by her relatives and superficial by Kegoletile. Education affects these characters in very real ways: Neo undergoes a self-willed transformation and is labeled arrogant, disrespectful, and undeserving of Kegoletile; Kegoletile is persuaded to marry Neo and, characterized as greedy, is thus deserving of his "haughty" bride; and Mathata is redefined because of the presence (or intrusion) of the educated woman—she is newly perceived not for the qualities that endear her to others, but for what she is not: she becomes the *uneducated* woman. Already, we see how education intervenes in the characters' lives, whether they are conscious of it or not. However, the introduction of the educated woman into the community has a much more profound effect, for it interferes, more significantly, with established tradition in the village. Throughout the story, Bessie Head catalogues the changes to the ritual wedding ceremony that result when it is Neo and Kegoletile who join together in matrimony.

The story begins with a description of the commencement of the inevitable ritual that the celebration of marriage effortlessly evokes in the villagers, and Bessie Head is careful to underscore, very subtly, the importance of the traditions in the event: "Wedding days *always* started at the haunting, magical hour of early dawn when there was only a pale crack of light on the horizon" (my emphasis). This wedding day holds no exception in that respect; the villagers are awake at this early hour, the ox for the wedding feast is exchanged, and most importantly, "the beautiful ululating of the women rose and



swelled over the air like water bubbling rapidly and melodiously over the stones of a clear, sparkling stream" as the women "began to weave about the yard in the wedding dance." Despite their reservations about Neo's marriage, the women begin the day's celebration, performing this initial and meaningful part of the wedding ritual. However, the first words spoken in the story (which are described as a joke), signal the dilemma with which the story is concerned. One of bridegroom's relatives declares: "This is going to be a modern wedding." Then, having already established the routine beginning of the ritual and the way that the women simply fall into place at the early morning sound of the ox's first bellow, the narrator illustrates the extent to which the ceremony will be altered:

a lot of the traditional courtesies had been left out of the planning for the wedding day; no one had been awake all night preparing diphiri or the traditional wedding breakfast of pounded meat and samp . . . there was just going to be a quick marriage ceremony at the police camp.

Since it is Neo getting married and since she has an education that teaches her "bad manners and modern ways," the traditional method of preparing for and celebrating her marriage to Kegoletile becomes, to a degree, unsuitable. This new kind of wedding day is marked by a certain hastiness—not because Kegoletile is uninterested in a church wedding, not because Neo is six months pregnant, but because some of the traditions have lost their effect on the young and modern couple. Significantly, one of Neo's female relatives "jokes back" with Kegoletile's relative as if to dismiss the severity of the situation. "Oh, we all have our own ways," she responds, and before dancing away, adds: "If the times are changing, we keep up with them." The wedding ritual will not stop because the couple (specifically, the woman) does not fit it; instead, the ritual will accommodate Neo and, by extension, the change in times. Even though the women focus on the joy of the occasion, however, they themselves find their performance of the ritual is rendered less powerful and somewhat inappropriate in the face of modernity, represented by the educated woman. The opening dialogue, then, stages the conflict at the heart of the story—and Neo is the pivotal character.

This conflict—between traditional and modern, between the villagers and Neo—suggests itself throughout the wedding day. Neo's aunts, acting out traditional roles, act in disguise, for they disapprove of Neo, though "[n]o one would have guessed it . . . with all the dancing, ululating, and happiness expressed in the yard." The aunts preside over the wedding ritual because of their prominent collective role: "Their important task was to formally hand over the bride to Kegoletile's maternal aunts when they approached the yard at sunset. So they sat the whole day with still expressionless faces, waiting to fulfill this ancient rite." When Neo's education tests tradition, then, it is these aunts very specifically who are being challenged. It is significant that in their own yard, the "ancient rite" is followed; they see to it that their formal exchange with Kegoletile's aunts is enacted appropriately. The traditional method of counseling the bride and groom to promise their services to each set of aunts is successful. However, once Kegoletile's aunts leave the yard and lead the couple to Kegoletile's own yard for another feast, part of the tradition that remains is falsified because the meaning is lost:



As they approached his yard, an old woman suddenly dashed out and chopped at the ground with a hoe. It was all only a formality. Neo would never be the kind of wife who went to the lands to plough. She already had a well-paid job in an office as a secretary.

Neo's education renders this specific part of the ritual meaningless, and the women feel the break in tradition, their own lack of power as executors of it. The village's traditions are being challenged, then, by a woman whose educational background places her outside of tradition. The wedding ritual presumes that the only opportunity for a wife is in the fields; there is no variation that allows for her possible role in an office. Thus, neither the villagers nor Neo find the necessary symbolic connection between ritual and bride. In fact, Neo remains "stiff, immobile, and rigid" throughout the ceremony, suggesting her strict refusal, perhaps, to partake in the events as well as her uneasiness with and detachment from them.

In the end, Neo does wear the garments that reflect her position as a married woman:

another old woman took the bride by the hand and led her to a smeared and decorated courtyard wherein had been placed a traditional animal-skin Tswana mat. She was made to sit on the mat and a shawl and kerchief were placed before her. The shawl was ceremonially wrapped around her shoulders; the kerchief tied around her head—the symbols that she was now a married woman.

Even if Neo must be instructed to follow it, this final part of the ritual stills holds its meaning. The symbols of marriage are not deflated; secretaries can be married, too. Still, as if to present a final irresolution over the intrusion of education and "modern ways" into village life, Bessie Head leaves us with an compelling image of contradiction: Neo, the educated and modern woman, sits clothed, quite literally, by the traditions of the village. The shawl and kerchief are emblems that the villagers will dignify with their respect—not Neo's arrogance over her completion of her "O" levels.

There is hope that Neo will learn to appreciate this kind of respect, however, as the narrator seems to give Neo one last chance to redeem herself. While greeting the new bride, two girls begin dancing, bump into each other, and fall down. At this, the "wedding guests roared with laughter," the first signs of relaxed pleasure since the women began ululating earlier in the day. And Neo laughs with them, her "stiff, immobile, and rigid body ben[din]g forward and [shaking] with laughter." With her laughter comes a sense of relief and a restoration of community (she is literally "brought down to earth" from her superior position among the others), and the ceremonial event feels like a good one: "The hoe, the mat, the shawl, the kerchief, the beautiful flute-like ululating of the women seemed in itself a blessing on the marriage." It is significant that Neo joins with the others in laughter, especially since her involvement in the ritual that celebrates her own wedding has been marked by a certain tentativeness and remove. Moreover, the two girls at whom the villagers laugh represent, in part, the strength and future of the village traditions, for they are attempting to enact the very dance that the women have been performing throughout the day. They are learning not only the art and importance of the traditions but the pleasure and enjoyment of them as well. Bessie Head might have ended her story with this blessing—its very inclusion does suggest some hope for Neo



—but instead she chooses to linger on the uneasy mix of education and tradition. Just when Neo seems to be most accepted, she is again separated from the other women as one of her aunts, "majestic" and "regal," interrupts the women's enjoyment in the effect of their tradition (the laughter). The women, by the end of the day, have become comfortable in their wedding ritual until Neo's aunt reminds them of the possibility that their traditional blessing will not work for Neo: "She dropped to her knees before the bride, clenched her fists together and pounded the ground hard with each clenched fist on either side of the bride's legs. As she pounded her fists she said loudly: 'Be a good wife! Be a good wife!'" With this resounding admonition and on this note of uncertainty, the story ends. Perhaps because Neo has finally joined with the community (in laughter), the aunt feels that her entreaties on behalf of tradition will be heard; the narrator makes a point of including that she is the same aunt who is able to "[bring] her down a little" when she shocks Neo by telling her that everyone in the village dislikes her. The story ends, then, with words that both suggest that Neo can be a "good wife" and caution her against abandoning tradition too much in favor of her newfound status as an educated woman.

We might argue that Bessie Head, herself, favors cultural tradition over education and "modern ways" for the keen detail with which she describes the wedding ceremony and the delight she finds in the women's ululating in particular. She certainly highlights the beauty and vitality of tradition in "Snapshots of a Wedding." Essentially, though, Bessie Head uses the traditions of the wedding ceremony to illustrate the questionable function of education in the village and the dilemma that the villagers face when old and new intermingle. When a woman is uneducated, like Mathata, she becomes less likely to secure a wealthy and educated marriage partner. When, however, a woman is educated, like Neo, she may be wed only for her educational worth, her ability to contribute to the household wealth. In either situation, a woman is unfortunate, though Mathata is the happier and more easily accepted woman. Neo's only moment of happiness, when she laughs with the others, is cut short by her aunt's warning. Just as the fact of her education disrupts the traditions of the village, so, ultimately, does it interrupt her own happiness. Neo's education results in her loss of respect for the people in her village, though not to the extent that Walker's Dee and Hodge's Tee betray their families and their heritage; also, what has been meaningful village tradition becomes inappropriate for this new kind of wife. But unlike Dee and Tee, Neo is challenged to change in this story, and while the ending is deliberately inconclusive (as the struggle for the village has only just begun with the introduction of formal education), we might look to the power of the "ancient rites" and the awe and respect that they inspire in order to anticipate the ability of ritual ceremony to heal the rift that education brings. For "Snapshots of a Wedding" rests on the powerful voice of one of the older women in the village: She commands attention, demands respect, and warns us about forgetting to honor cultural traditions.

Source: Christine G. Berg, "Bemused by Education: Bessie Head's 'Snapshots of a Wedding,'" in *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 1999.



Critical Essay #2

March is a Ph.D. candidate in English at New York University. In the following essay, he examines ways in which the past reimposes itself on the young couple in "Snapshots of a Wedding," particularly with regard to Neo's future role as a wife.

As its title indicates, Bessie Head's "Snapshots of a Wedding" (1977) is the story of a wedding, in this case that between Neo and Kegoletile, two young people from an African village. But it is not the wedding event itself that is of primary interest in the story. Rather, this is a story not simply of a wedding, but of what this particular wedding represents. The wedding is, at the same time, the site of a breach with the past and a confirmation of the precarious position of women within the tradition of that very past with which Kegoletile and his new wife, Neo, plan to break.

The story begins with an assertion by one of Kegoletile's relatives that this wedding will be a modern wedding, and the subsequent narration of the circumstances that have led to this union would seem at the surface to confirm this assertion. The narrator comments that by a modern wedding, the speaker "meant that a lot of the traditional courtesies had been left out of the planning for the wedding day." It is worth noting that "a lot of the traditional courtesies" have been done away with, not all of them. This is an early indication that the wedding event, though a union of young people who are like-minded in their social and economic ambitions, is still both a product and an agent of traditional values. It becomes clear, as the story progresses, that the traditional elements of the wedding are not merely displays or rituals, but also represent traditional ways of defining personal goals and relationships.

Nevertheless, as the story of the rivalry between Neo and Mathata unfolds, it becomes clear that, for those involved, the wedding represents a break with tradition and the beginning of a new life of economic opportunity. Neo is an educated girl with a bright future ahead of her due to the opportunities her education will make possible. Mathata, on the other hand, is uneducated. As the narrator says, "The difference between the two girls was that Mathata was completely uneducated; the only work she would ever do was that of a housemaid, while Neo had endless opportunities before her—typist, book-keeper, or secretary. So Neo merely smiled; Mathata was no rival." Not considering Mathata to be a threat, Neo is comfortable and confident in her position. Mathata, too, is confident and secure, however; she does not want Kegoletile as her husband: "Mathata merely smiled too. Girls like her offered no resistance to the approaches of men; when they lost them, they just let things ride." When Neo's aunt informs her that Kegoletile has been spending a great deal of time at Mathata's home and tells her that her arrogant ways have led the community to hold her in disfavor, Neo's confidence is somewhat shaken, and she becomes pregnant to secure her hold on Kegoletile. But she need not have bothered. Kegoletile has resolved the conflict between Neo and Mathata, essentially a conflict between ambition and love, firmly in favor of Neo. He may still find himself attracted to Mathata, but "[h]e knew what he was marrying—something quite the opposite, a new kind of girl with false postures and acquired, grand-madame ways. And yet, it didn't pay a man these days to look too closely into his heart. They all



wanted as wives, women who were big money-earners and they were so ruthless about it!"

Kegoletile's choice of Neo over Mathata makes it clear that his motive for the marriage is essentially economic rather than emotional. Before we learn of Kegoletile's reasoning, the narrator has already defined Neo as someone who refuses to fit in with the village's traditional norms of behavior. Her family is "anxious to be rid of her" because she is "an impossible girl with haughty, arrogant ways." Neo's estrangement from her family represents her estrangement from the traditions of the past that she hopes to leave behind by marrying Kegoletile and putting her education to use. The narrator ascribes the following sentiments to Neo's family: "What's the good of education if it goes to someone's head so badly they have no respect for the people? Oh, she is not a person." Neo's being "not a person" signifies the extent of the breach between her and her family and the past of economic powerlessness that the family represents. That is, she is no longer recognized as a member of the community. This emphasis on money over social and emotional ties coincides with the de-emphasis of traditional rituals in the wedding ceremony itself. Neo considers herself fortunate to have Kegoletile, who is "rich in cattle," and he considers himself lucky to have her because she will be able to bring in a comparatively sizable income.

However, to some extent Neo returns to the family and tradition when she learns from her aunt that Kegoletile has been spending time with Mathata and that her own behavior has led others to despise her. Anxious about the security of her position, Neo becomes pregnant in order to ensure Kegoletile's intention to marry her. Neo's confidence has been undermined, and she can no longer rely on her education to elevate her above Mathata or women like her in the eyes of men. At this point the story returns from the narrative of past circumstances and continues the narrative of the wedding event itself, an event richer in the formalities of tradition that one may have expected, given the progressive sentiments of the bride and groom and the economic consideration that is their primary bond. Evidence of this more traditional tone comes in the advice offered to Neo by Kegoletile's aunts: "Daughter, you must carry water for your husband. Beware, that at all times, he is the owner of the house and must be obeyed. Do not mind if he stops now and then and talks to other ladies. Let him feel free to come and go as he likes." It is not to be an equal partnership of like-minded ambitions, but a partnership in which her will is secondary to that of her husband. Similarly, the aunt who has chastised Neo and informed her of Kegoletile's interest in Mathata exhorts Neo, "Be a good wife! Be a good wife!" Neo's defining characteristic will no longer be her education but her new status as wife.

In his essay "Treasures of the Heart: The Short Stories of Bessie Head," Michael Thorpe writes of most of the stories in *The Collector of Treasures* that "the storyteller shows her hand most plainly in her efforts to provide models of the good." One must ask, however, what represents the "good" in "Snapshots of a Wedding." Is it "good" to be a "good wife," as Neo's aunt begs Neo to be? As Huma Ibrahim writes in her book *Bessie Head: Subversive Identities in Exile*, Neo's aunt's final comments to her at the wedding indicate "the ultimate double message to Neo: no matter how educated you are, your primary task is to be polite to everybody in the community and to be a good



wife to your husband. Implicit in this ideology is that education will help you in the race for a husband but it will not help you after that." This is precisely what the wedding scene dramatizes. Neo initially won Kegoletile by virtue of her education and greater earning potential. Even before the wedding, however, by becoming pregnant, she had returned to more traditional ways of securing Kegoletile. This is less the story of a wedding than it is the story of the decline of a woman's power; even if the opportunities afforded to her by her education remain available, she is still obliged to subvert her will to that of her husband, to be his wife first, Neo the educated woman second. It is her education that has made her appealing, but it is her education that at the same time leads to her loss of status in marriage.

In her essay "Myth, Exile, and the Female Condition: Bessie Head's *The Collector of Treasures*," Sara Chetin writes that "[a]s outsiders we . . . perhaps end up feeling a little sorry for the young bride, exiled as much by traditional insecurities as by her education that could not reconcile itself to a society's disregard of women." Precisely because of the inescapability of Neo's fate as a wife, one does pity Neo, as Chetin suggests. Moreover, one sees that tradition has a strength not to be underestimated. It is tradition that determines Neo's role as a wife as well as the limitations of the value her education will have for her as an individual once she becomes a wife. Despite the early claims that this will be a "modern" wedding, it is modern—and only slightly so—in form only. Its implications remain those of the very tradition that its two participants plan to escape by means of their anticipated economic success.

Source: Thomas M. March, "An Overview of 'Snapshots of a Wedding'," in *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 1999.



Critical Essay #3

In the following excerpt, Chetin explores the ways in which Head's "Snapshots of a Wedding," is presented as a series of photographs, and how this style affects the theme of inevitable change.

In "Snapshots of a Wedding," the village narrator asserts "no one is fooled by human nature and implies, indirectly, that despite their ability "to keep up with" changing times, educating females does more harm than good. The narrator accepts, through the gentle and respected bridegroom, Kegoletile, that one should marry "women who were big money-earners" and that "it didn't pay to look too closely into his heart." Kegoletile is about to marry Neo, "a new kind of girl with false postures and acquired grand-madame ways", although he loved the traditional, humble Mathata. The villagers never question their own contradictory attitudes to money and status, a by-product of colonial education, but channel their malaise into an over zealous attachment to traditional ways, their defensiveness exposing their own vulnerability to change. As outsiders we can't trust the villagers' hostility to Neo, just as we couldn't trust the viciousness directed at Mma-Mompatati in "The Village Saint," and perhaps end up feeling a little sorry for the young bride, exiled as much by traditional insecurities as by her education, an education that could not reconcile itself to a society's disregard of women.

These attitudes are exposed in a series of "snapshots" starting with the opening frame that captures the gentle, unreal-like quality of the ritual wedding preparation that has remained unchanged for centuries. The picture is "distorted", having a "fluid, watery form" almost like it is not fully developed. Slowly "a modern wedding" comes into focus that reveals, beneath the orderly ritual facade, a village in a state of anomie. After a series of individual "fixed" poses, out of the deceptively even tempo of the ritual ceremony comes a spark of life, a spontaneous gesture that gives both an ironic significance to the wedding and underlies the very ambiguity of what being a "wife" in changing times actually entails. The "majestic, regal" aunt who clenches her fist and pounds the ground gives her seal of approval by acknowledging the bride and attempting to reinstate her into the traditional folds of the community. But the very violence of her order: "Be a good wife! Be a good wife!" reveals the inherent precariousness of the concept. This precariousness is rooted in the realization that the old ways are no longer inevitable and as the story ends, the audience is left with the final snapshot, a blurred, overexposed picture, distorted by its own vulnerability...

Source: Sara Chetin, "Myth, Exile, and the Female Condition: Bessie Head's 'The Collector of Treasures'," in *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, Vol. XXIV, No. 1, 1989, pp. 114-37.



Topics for Further Study

What motivates Kegoletile to marry Neo rather than Mathata? Are these motivations the same as or different from Neo's motivations in marrying Kegoletile?

What kind of woman is Neo's aunt? Might there be more underlying her attitude toward Neo than simple annoyance with Neo's arrogance? What does Neo represent that upsets her aunt so?

Compare and contrast Neo and Mathata. Is either one happier than the other? Who is more confident and secure? What does each represent in the context of the culture of the village?

Chinua Achebe's short story "Vengeful Creditor" also explores differences between educated and uneducated, traditional and modern in contemporary Africa. Compare the character of Mrs. Emenike in Achebe's story to that of Neo in "Snapshots of a Wedding."

Research the history of Botswana in the mid- to late twentieth century, particularly the large migration of the young people from the village to urban areas. How does Head's story illustrate the anxieties this might cause among those left in the village?

Research traditional Botswanan marriage rituals. Are the wedding rituals presented in "Snapshots of a Wedding" different in any way from these traditions? Why might that be?



Compare and Contrast

1970s: For families who can afford it, it is customary for wives not to work outside the home.

1990s: Influenced by economic pressures and a growing insistence on equal treatment for women, the number of two income households increases.

1970: Approximately 3 million women are enrolled in colleges in United States.

1990: Approximately 7.4 million women are enrolled in colleges in the United States.

1970s: The Equal Rights Amendment, a proposal that would add an amendment to the Constitution guaranteeing gender equity, fails to gain enough support to pass into law.

1990s: Despite a much larger presence in the workforce, women still earn only 70 of what men in similar positions earn.

Further Study

Black Literature Criticism, Vol. 2, Gale Research, 1992.

The entry on Bessie Head in this volume provides an overview of her career as well as excerpts from important critical works on her fiction.

Contemporary Literary Criticism, Vol. 67, Gale Research, 1991.

The entry on Bessie Head in this volume provides an overview of her career as well as excerpts from important critical works on her fiction.

Little, Greta D. "Bessie Head" in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol. 117, *Twentieth-Century Caribbean and Black African Writers*, Gale Research, 1992.

Provides a biographical and critical overview of Head's life and career.

Taiwo, Oladele. "Bessie Head," in *Female Novelists of Modern Africa*, St. Martin's Press, 1984, pp. 185-214.

Taiwo's overview of "Snapshots of a Wedding" concentrates primarily on the inner and social conflicts Kegoletile faces in choosing a wife.

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The picture is 'distorted', having a 'fluid, watery form' almost like it is not fully developed."

Thorpe, Michael. "Treasures of the Heart: The Short Stories of Bessie Head," in *World Literature Today*, Vol. 57, No. 3, Summer, 1983, pp. 414-6.



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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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