# A Spinster's Tale Study Guide

## A Spinster's Tale by Peter Taylor

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# Introduction

First published in the *Southern Review* in 1940, Peter Taylor wrote "A Spinster's Tale" while he was still an undergraduate at Kenyon College. A rich and complex story, "A Spinster's Tale" touches on Taylor's recurring themes: family dynamics, gender conflicts, and, most importantly, life in the American South in the early twentieth century.

"A Spinster's Tale" is considered one of Taylor's finest short stories and is often praised for its honest depiction of growing up in the America South. Yet because it was published so early in Taylor's career, some critics believe that the story tends to be overlooked in favor of his later works.

# Author Biography

In 1917 Peter Taylor was born in Trenton, Tennessee. His mother, Katherine, was a daughter of Tennessee Governor Robert Taylor; his father, Matthew, was descended from a prominent western Tennessee family. Not surprisingly, much of Taylor's short fiction, including "A Spinster's Tale," depicts the lives of upper-middle-class residents of Tennessee.

Taylor's fiction reflects the changing environment of the American South. Southern culture revered tradition, but it was nonetheless changing rapidly during Taylor's youth: new, modern cities were replacing the largely rural landscape of the past, the established roles of men and women seemed to be destabilizing, and African Americans were challenging laws of racial separatism. Taylor's fiction reflects all of these subjects, though sometimes in only the most indirect way.

Taylor spent a year in England after high school and then returned to America. He attended several colleges in the late 1930s. His story, "A Spinster's Tale," was his first story to appear in a major literary journal, the *Southern Review,* edited by Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren.

By the late 1940s, Taylor was teaching and writing fiction. He published his first book of stories in 1948.

Through the 1950s and 1960s, Taylor published regularly in the *New Yorker.* He was a visiting professor at Harvard and received an O. Henry prize for short story excellence. In 1969 Taylor's *Collected Stories* was published. In 1986 he won the prestigious PEN/Faulkner Award for his short fiction collection *The Old Forest*.

His only novel, *A Summons to Memphis,* won the Pulitzer Prize in 1987. A year later, Taylor was a founding member of a new group called the Fellowship of Southern Writers, which was dedicated to promoting Southern literary efforts. He died in 1994.

# Plot Summary

The first line of *"A Spinster's Tale"* reveals several important facts: "My brother would often get drunk when I was a little girl, but that put a different sort of fear into me from what Mr. Speed did." The author reveals (as the story's title also suggests) that his narrator is older now, that drinking played an important role in her family life, and that there is a menacing character named Mr. Speed.

The narrator, Elizabeth (named after her late mother), discusses her vague obsession with Mr. Speed, the town drunk. Elizabeth's father dismisses him as a "rascal," yet Elizabeth suggests that she will eventually confront Mr. Speed.

Elizabeth reveals some of her fears when she stands before a mirror, craving escape, whispering "away, away," until she bursts into tears. She then sees Mr. Speed "walking like a cripple" down the street. Elizabeth remembers her late mother and tries to forget about Mr. Speed.

One evening, Elizabeth stays awake until her brother returns home. He offers her candy, but she reenters her bedroom. He follows and she smells the "cheap whiskey" on his breath. Crying and hugging him, she exclaims, "I'm always lonely." The narrator recounts:

He kept his face turned away from me and finally spoke, out of the corner of his mouth, I thought, "I'll come home earlier some afternoons and we'll talk and play.""Tomorrow."When I had said this distinctly, I fell away from him back on the bed. He stood up and looked at me curiously, as though in some way repelled by my settling so comfortably in the covers. And I could see his eighteen-year-old head cocked to one side as though trying to see my face in the dark. He leaned over me, and I smelled his whiskey breath. It was not repugnant to me. It was blended with the odor he always had. I thought he was going to strike me. (Excerpt from "A Spinster's Tale")

Later Elizabeth confesses "something like a longing for my brother to strike me," and she wishes that she had said to him languidly, 'Oh Brother,' (as if) we had in common some unmentionable trouble." But Elizabeth then says "I would not let myself reflect further on my feelings for my brother—my desire for him to strike me and my delight in his natural odor"; she wants to be "completely settled with Mr. Speed first."

Her brother comes home early the next day and Elizabeth acknowledges to herself that she has "come to accept (Mr. Speed's) existence as a natural part of my life." Sure enough, Mr. Speed appears, and Elizabeth's brother even helps him retrieve his hat, which is blown off by the wind. "Mr. Speed is very ugly, brother," Elizabeth says, but he responds "You'll get used to him, for all his ugliness."

One afternoon her brother and his friends stop by the house. One of the boys, only a year older than Elizabeth, asks her why she doesn't wear her hair up as young women did at that time. Elizabeth blushes at this remark and bursts into the closed parlor where

her father and uncles had been visiting, not heeding the boy's pleas to leave the doors shut. Later, Elizabeth is glad that "I was a bold, or at least naughty, little girl."

She is then lightheartedly accused of "flirting" with the youngest visiting boy and told "if you spend your time in such pursuits you'll only bring upon yourself and upon the young men about Nashville great unhappiness."

At this moment, Mr. Speed appears. Elizabeth tries to express her fear of Mr. Speed to her father, who tells her that she must shut her eyes against some things then says "'After all . . . you're a young lady now.'"

At the story's climax, Mr. Speed runs onto Elizabeth's porch to escape the rain. The maid mistakes him for Elizabeth's father and opens the front door for him. After he drunkenly enters the house, Elizabeth stares at him while the servant begs her to run upstairs to safety.

Part of Elizabeth longed "to hide my face from this in my own mother's bosom," but another part wants to "deal with Mr. Speed, however wrongly, myself." Elizabeth phones for the police, who come and take Mr. Speed away. "I was frightened by the thought of the cruelty which I found I was capable of, a cruelty which seemed inextricably mixed with what I had called courage."

Elizabeth's father is angry when he learns that she called the police. That was the last time she ever saw Mr. Speed, but even in her old age Elizabeth is still clearly affected by him. The story ends: "It was only the other night that I dreamed I was a little girl on Church Street again and that there was a drunk horse in our yard."

# Summary

The protagonist in *A Spinster's Tale* is a young girl named Elizabeth. Elizabeth lives with her father and brother after her mother passes away. The narrator tells the story of her encounters with a frightening drunk old man called Mr. Speed. Elizabeth recalls when her brother first started coming home drunk when she was little. He began drinking when he was sixteen. Her brother's inebriation frightened her because she knew he would "burn" for it. She remembers her mother telling him that she would rather see him in the grave than in that state. When her brother was drunk he seemed sillier to her. He would bounce up the staircase, giggling. It made him seem like he was Elizabeth's age. In contrast, Mr. Speed terrified Elizabeth. Drunken, he would stumble past their house on Church Street two or three afternoons every week.

Elizabeth is named after her mother. The narrator's mother passed away in the spring of the same year that Elizabeth first spots Mr. Speed walking past the house. Her first encounter with Mr. Speed takes place in October. After talking a bath with the help of her maid, Lucy, Elizabeth wanders into the parlour room. She looks around, lights a fire in the hearth, and stands before one of the full-length mirrors by the parlour window. She thinks of Alice, from Alice in Wonderland, who walks through the looking glass. She stares at her own reflection, trying to see if she bears any resemblance to Alice. She chants the word "Away" to herself, over and over. Elizabeth bursts into tears. She sees Mr. Speed walking by. In his drunkenness he walks with one foot on the curb and one on the street. She can hear him faintly as he curses the trees and swings at them with his cane. She stops crying out of fear. Once Mr. Speed passes from view, Elizabeth closes the drapes over the window. She stands in silence in front of the fire in the hearth and recalls a memory of her mother.

Seeing Mr. Speed causes Elizabeth to recall a memory of her mother in April, three days before there had been a funeral for a stillborn baby. Elizabeth's mother had sent for her "sick chair" to be brought to the parlour and asked for Elizabeth to be brought into the room. The nurse helps the mother out of bed and over to the chair. Elizabeth rolls her mother's chair over to the window so she can look out into the yard. Elizabeth stands beside her mother self-consciously. She is maturing and looks awkward in her little girl's dress. Elizabeth and her mother look out at the yard together, cheek-to-cheek. Elizabeth remembers the comfort in this moment, and the sense of her mother's protection of her.

During the months after her mother passed away, Elizabeth sits in the parlour waiting for her brother and father to return home. She listens to them argue with each other, moving from one topic to the next, like it was nothing. On the afternoon that Elizabeth sees Mr. Speed for the first time, her father speaks of the possibility of war. Elizabeth asks him to change the subject. He changes the subject by asking about the Benton school. At dinner her brother often teases her. Her father joins in, but when he notices Elizabeth getting upset, he often blames his son, saying that he always took things too far. On this particular evening Elizabeth's brother is talking about a Benton meeting he is

attending after dinner. He tells Elizabeth that he saw horses running away down the street while little girls were riding them. This frightens Elizabeth.

During the first week after Elizabeth sees Mr. Speed pass by the window, she spends her time tidying her room and helping Lucy with her chores and stays away from the parlour room. She only enters the parlour room when her brother and father are there. But eventually she becomes curious about Mr. Speed and one afternoon she sits in the parlour and waits for him. Her heart beats every time she catches a glimpse of something moving up Church Street and sighs with both relief and regret when it is not Mr. Speed. She is ready to see him again and knows that if he does not appear today, he probably will the next day. Mr. Speed is something she feels she had to deal with. She has intuitive knowledge of this. The next day Mr. Speed does pass by the window. Elizabeth stares directly at him. He has a heavy face and red eyes that are fierce like his body. He walks with a stagger, carrying his topcoat over his arm and holding his cane in his other hand. When he passes Elizabeth recalls the same memory of her mother again, but this time dwells upon it less. Now she can only think about watching Mr. Speed each time he passes by.

The third time Elizabeth sees Mr. Speed it is winter. Mr. Speed sits down in the snow. Elizabeth feels a strange anxiety that something could drive him into her house. Elizabeth watches Mr. Speed for the rest of the winter. She keeps these encounters a secret from her family. In the meantime, her family life goes on as usual. At evening meals her father and brother still fight over every possible topic. Elizabeth thinks about what response she would have to these same topics. She is disturbed by the way that they shift topics so indifferently and the equal indifference they express to the terrors each topic suggests. She wonders if this is something they taught themselves to do and is curious about whether she can apply the same indifference to her voyeuristic encounters with Mr. Speed. She must prepare for the day she will meet him at closer range. She also realizes that she cannot keep this a secret any longer.

Elizabeth wakes up when she hears her brother coming home drunk and stumbling up the steps. When he sees her standing in her doorway he always tosses her a piece of candy as a bribe to keep her quiet. One night, near the end of February, she stays awake intentionally, waiting for her brother. Her brother sees her as he walks up the stairs and smiles. He reaches into his pocket for some candy. He notices the serious look on her face asks her what could be wrong. They walk into Elizabeth's room and sit down on her bed. He asks if she is lonely. She cries and says she is always lonely. He tells her that he will come home early the next day so they can spend time together. But Elizabeth doubts that he will do this. When he exits the room she thinks about her mother's words and how her brother will be punished for drinking.

The following afternoon Elizabeth sets up a chessboard in front of the parlour window for her and her brother to play. She is sure that Mr. Speed will pass by because it is a Thursday and he always passes by the window on Thursdays and Saturdays. She leads her brother into the parlour and they sit down at the chessboard. Elizabeth fakes her interest in the game while secretly trying to terrorize herself by imagining Mr. Speed coming right up to the window. He does come walking down the street but, after so

many months spent watching him, Elizabeth is not as afraid of him anymore. She accepts him as a part of Church Street. Mr. Speed wears a grey suit jacket instead of an overcoat, although it is winter. He stomps against the wind, "like an enraged blind man." The wind pulls his hat off. He grabs it and holds it on with one hand, using the other hand to keep his jacket closed. Elizabeth's brother spots him just as the wind carries Mr. Speed's hat away again. The drunken man yells and stumbles after his hat. Elizabeth has not noticed that her brother has left the room until she sees him outside with Mr. Speed, helping him chase the hat. Elizabeth is shocked at her brother's indifference to Speed's oaths and curses.

Her brother steps back inside the house and Elizabeth scrambles to lock the door. She tells him that Mr. Speed is always drunk. Her brother does not respond at first but then asks if she is afraid of people who are drunk. He tells her that she shouldn't be afraid of such things. He warns her that when she is older there will be real things to be afraid of. Things she can't avoid. He tells her that Speed threatened to beat him with his cane when he tried to help him. Her brother is familiar with Mr. Speed. In fact, the whole town knows about his antics. He says that sometimes the police take Speed away. Elizabeth's father walks in and comments negatively about Mr. Speed's behaviour.

Elizabeth's brother is now eighteen and she is thirteen. Since the day that she chanted "Away" to herself in the mirror, after her mother's death, she has matured. She tries to stop herself from childish daydreaming and tries to attach symbolic meaning to her nightly dreams. She attempts to eradicate the fantasy element in her life and replace these feels with cold, hard logic. In early March she awakes on a Saturday morning to the sound of her father's voice down the hall. He is ordering a carriage and will return later with his brothers. Elizabeth is determined to sit with her father and uncles in the afternoon when Mr. Speed walks by the window. The men come home and retire to the parlour for a drink while Elizabeth sits in the library. Elizabeth wonders if her father ever thinks of her mother. She is unable to remember how he treated her when she was alive. She can hear her father and his two bachelor brothers speaking in the parlour. She cannot muster up the courage to enter the room. Elizabeth realizes that she and her father see something in common between her brother and Mr. Speed that extends beyond their desire to drink.

At four o'clock Elizabeth's brother arrives home with some of the boys from the Benton school. The boys walk into the hall. Their voices are high and excited. Two of them appear in the hallway. The youngest, Henry, is thirteen or fourteen. Elizabeth stands up and smiles at them. Henry tells her that they are going to drive the Carlton's "machine," referring to an early automobile. Elizabeth's brother goes upstairs to get his hunting cap because he has no motoring cap. Henry tells Elizabeth that she should wear her hair down. She blushes. The other boys are listening to Elizabeth's father and uncles through the parlour door. Elizabeth steps between them and opens the door. Henry cautions her not to do it. But she wants to impress him by making herself seem mature, or at the least, naughty. Elizabeth's father stands up, sets his drink down, and invites the boys in. They tell him that they are going driving. When the men inquire as to whom will be driving, the boys offer an insincere invite. The father declines but the uncles accept. They decide to get the car and come back for the uncles. Elizabeth shakes hands with

the guests as they leave and expresses her regret that she is not allowed to go with them. Henry smiles as though he knows what Elizabeth is up to and she replies strangely, "games are so much fun."

Elizabeth stands at the parlour window and watches them leave. Her father and uncles return to their seats in silence. She knows she is not welcome in the room but stays anyway. One of her uncles says that Elizabeth was flirting with Henry. Her father comments that he wouldn't know what to do if she started such a thing. Elizabeth shouts to her father that Mr. Speed is outside. Her father jumps up to see and she exclaims that he is drunk. After she blushes in embarrassment of her own outburst. Her dad comments, "poor old Speed" and the uncles shake their heads. One of the uncles asks whatever happened to Speed's spinster sister. Elizabeth's father replies that she still lives with him.

Mr. Speed is more sober than usual. His stagger is barely noticeable. The movement of his lips as he curses to himself is the only sign of his intoxication. Elizabeth is angry at the irony of Speed's good behaviour on this day. She thinks that if she had been younger she would have suspected a conspiracy among the men, but now that she is older she believes no one is interested enough in her to plot against her. Elizabeth shouts out that she is afraid of Mr. Speed because he is always drunk. At this moment the car pulls up to pick up the uncles and they go outside. Elizabeth hears the sound of the car fading as it drives up Church Street. Elizabeth sits with her father. She tells him how fearful she is but he does not allow her to continue. He says she has no business watching Mr. Speed. She should shut her eyes to some things because she is a young lady now. She must not seek things to fear in the world. He tires to make her less afraid by telling her that Speed only walks by, he will not come to the house.

Less than two months later Speed does come to the house in extreme drunkenness when Elizabeth is alone in the house with Lucy. Elizabeth, who is now fourteen, has prepared herself the best she could for this event. She was sure it would happen one day. Watching Mr. Speed has given Elizabeth a more mature view of her own restraints and her relationship with the world. She now looks at every aspect of household life with a more discerning eye. She closely scrutinises events that repel or frighten her. During the daytime she would venture to forbidden spots such as the men's or servant's bathrooms. The servant's bathroom becomes a means to study their nature, instead of an object of disgust.

One morning Elizabeth sees a boy hurrying to their doorway with a pail. He was taking buttermilk with the permission of the cook. Elizabeth jumps out at him, frightening him and causing him to drop the milk. He does not return after that day. Another day Elizabeth hears the cook threatening to cut the houseboy with a butcher knife. She takes it upon herself to fire the cook, while threatening to call her father and the police. She is no longer frightened when her brother mentions things like runaway horses. She only feels depressed by these anecdotes. She is still curious about the subject matter of her brother and father's discussions. The world seems larger to her than she can comprehend. But she has learned not to concern herself with general problems and, instead, to focus on more real and immediate problems.

During the two months that lead up to Speed coming to the house, Elizabeth notices a difference in the way her father talks to her uncles about Mr. Speed and the way he talks about him in front of her brother. To the uncles he is sympathetic in his description. To his own son, he is disapproving and cautionary in his comments about Speed. The afternoon that Speed comes to the house, a heavy rain drives him to their porch for shelter. Speed falls in the mud than struggles to his feet again. When Elizabeth sees him she feels like a child again. This is the last time she experiences this kind of fear. Elizabeth hears Speed beating at the front door. Lucy comes downstairs thinking it is Elizabeth's brother. Lucy opens the door and Speed steps into the hallway. He throws his cane down and swears profanities with slurred speech.

Lucy runs to the stairs and beckons Elizabeth to follow. Elizabeth stands there silently and in shock for a moment before moving. Speed swears at Lucy. Elizabeth goes to the phone and calls the police. She asks the police to come fetch Speed. Mr. Speed hears her make the call. He breaks into tears and chants the word "child" over and over. Elizabeth is worried she acted wrongly, perhaps with courage but not wisdom. Lucy runs downstairs and calls Elizabeth's father. Elizabeth watches Speed cross the porch. He turns and shouts one more oath. Then he slips on the steps and falls unconscious. He lies on the steps in the rain as the police arrive. As Elizabeth watches him she is afraid of her own cruelty. The police carry Mr. Speed away as Elizabeth's father arrives. He argues with the police. Lucy and Elizabeth go back inside the house to wait for Elizabeth's father. When he comes inside he says he regrets that the police were called. Then he walks into the parlour alone and closes the door.

Elizabeth never talked to her father about that day afterward and she never saw Mr. Speed again. Despite her brief feeling of pity for Speed, the hatred and fear she had that day never left her. Not a week went by that it did not cross her mind. As an adult Elizabeth has a dream that she is a young girl on Church Street again. In the dream there is a drunk horse in her yard.

## Analysis

*A Spinster's Tale* by Peter Taylor tells the story of a girl's transition from childhood to young womanhood. The story recounts the events that influence the transition for the protagonist, Elizabeth. Beginning with the death of her mother and continued throughout several encounters with a scary old drunk named Mr. Speed, Elizabeth is forced to grow up too early. At the beginning of the story Elizabeth is quite fearful about a number of things. But watching Mr. Speed, whom she fears at first, desensitizes her to her fears.

Elizabeth comes from a devotedly religious family. Taylor uses symbolic imagery to reveal this; for example, the family lives on Church Street. Also, comparisons build between the old drunk Speed and Elizabeth's teenage brother, who also develops a taste for drinking. The narrator reveals that Elizabeth's mother would rather see her son in the grave than coming home drunk. There are several connections made between the brother and Mr. Speed. The father has a different way of commenting on Speed if his son is present. In these instances the father's comments reprimand Speed's

behaviour. One of Elizabeth's uncles mentions Speed's spinster sister. This statement is juxtaposed in the story with imagery of Elizabeth being a shut-in. When the Benton boys visit, Elizabeth hears the sound of the car fading as it drives up Church Street when they leave. This imagery is symbolic of her isolation. But perhaps the most important of these comparisons shows itself in the father's reaction to Speed getting taken away from his house by the police. He argues with the police, and afterward expresses his regret to his daughter that the police were called. Finally, he retreats to the parlour in solitude. His defence of Mr. Speed is really symbolic of him trying to protect his son. He sees early signs of Speed's illness in his son.

The first encounter with Speed connects Elizabeth to a memory of her mother. When she wants to see Speed again it is as if she is trying to reconnect with the memory of her mother. But even upon this second encounter the memory is already weakened. This memory describes a feeling of Elizabeth being protected. When the girl sees Speed the second time her sense of external protection begins to vanish. This symbolises the way that Speed helps Elizabeth desensitize herself to what she fears. Speed himself is symbolic of the horrors in the world that Elizabeth will have to confront. Her brother cautions her to this on the afternoon that he tries to help the drunken man. Elizabeth chooses to watch Speed because, in this act, she forces herself to become immune to the things that frighten her. Later in the story she says she has come to accept him as a part of Church Street, connecting the man's presence to her path toward maturity.

When Elizabeth's father and brother fight with each other, they act like she is not there. At first this seems like it has to do with her age but it become evident that this is a symbol of her gender status and the oppression of women. This is clarified when Elizabeth's father tells her she must shut her eyes to terrors in the world because she is a young lady now. On the first day that Elizabeth sees Speed while her father is present, she tells him how fearful she is. Her father does not allow her to express her feelings. This repression is a symbolic indication that her father feels it is time for her to grow up.

Elizabeth's encounter with young Henry marks the first time she feels like a young women. The thirteen-year-old boy comments that she should wear her hair down. She wears her hair up as was fashionable for girls, not young ladies, of this time. During the same day Elizabeth is angry at Speed's good behaviour when her father and uncles see him. She says that if she had been younger she would have suspected a conspiracy among the men, but now that she is older she believes no one is interested enough in her to plot against her. Once again this symbolises the role of women as secondary citizens during this time period.

As Elizabeth grows older she stops herself from daydreaming, seeing it as childish. She also tries to give symbolic meaning to her nightly dreams. She attempts to eradicate the fantasy element in her life and replace these feels with logic. But once she lets go of this and takes over as housemistress, she becomes less sensitive. Realizing her possible error after calling the police to get Speed, she says she fears her own cruelty. Ironically, she has replaced one fear with another. She used to be scared of externalities and now she scared of the internal. This is an interesting commentary on the part of the author

that explores the way unexpected temperaments form during the transition to adulthood. It symbolises the way that personas form unconsciously.

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# Characters

## Betsy

*See* Elizabeth

## Brother

Elizabeth's brother is intelligent and kind. In one scene with incestuous overtones, Elizabeth hugs her brother in her bedroom, crying but also wishing that he would strike her. He tells Elizabeth that she will get used to Mr. Speed "for all his ugliness."

## Elizabeth

The narrator of the story, Elizabeth is an elderly spinster recalling her adolescent years. As a youth she lived with her brother and father in a comfortable, large house. She is also repulsed by, but strangely obsessed with, the town drunk, Mr. Speed.

Various critical readings exist regarding Elizabeth: first, she is searching for a feminine maternal presence in her life; second, that the grotesque Mr. Speed introduces the harshness of adult life to young Elizabeth; third, Elizabeth's only view of sexuality comes from intimidating male figures. All of these readings, and others, imply that the events of these critical years cause Elizabeth to become a spinster later in life.

## Father

A widower, Elizabeth's father is an important male presence; she feels affection for him yet connects him with the grotesque Mr. Speed. In the end, Elizabeth's father is displeased with his daughter's decision to turn Mr. Speed over to the police.

## Lucy

Lucy is the African-American housekeeper at Elizabeth's house. She also appears at the critical moment of the story's conclusion, pleading with Elizabeth to stay away from Mr. Speed. Elizabeth defies Lucy and chooses to confront him, suggesting that perhaps Mr. Speed and Lucy represent opposite emotions, such as security and fear.

## Narrator

*See* Elizabeth

## Old Speed

*See* Mr. Speed

## Mr. Speed

Although he never speaks an entire sentence, Mr. Speed is nonetheless a critical character in this story. He intimidates and repulses the young Elizabeth, and she is alarmed to find similarities between Mr. Speed and her brother and father. The story's climax occurs when he bursts into Elizabeth's house. She calls the police, and he is arrested.

Mr. Speed may represent many things to Elizabeth, among them masculinity, the consequences of alcoholism, and the deterioration of Southern society. Even his name suggests that he "speeds" Elizabeth's maturation or "speeds" her toward some unpleasant sexual initiation or toward spinsterhood.

# Themes

## Growth and Development

That Elizabeth recalls so vividly the events recorded in "A Spinster's Tale"—in particular her discovery of Mr. Speed as well as her ultimate confrontation with him—indicates that these are pivotal moments in her youth. It can also be inferred that these events affected Elizabeth for the rest of her life.

Coming to terms with her family—including her late mother—as she is growing up seems to be Elizabeth's unspoken mission throughout this story. She recalls suggestive, ambiguous scenes with her brother (in her bedroom when she pleads loneliness, then wishes he would strike her) and father (when he tells Elizabeth to close her eyes to Mr. Speed) that describe her attempts to understand them.

When Elizabeth reports Mr. Speed to the police, it seems her father's disapproval of this act is as important as the act itself. It suggests (along with Elizabeth's spinsterhood) that growing up was confusing for Elizabeth, and these events may have stunted her, sexually and socially, for life.

## Sex Roles

One way to read "A Spinster's Tale" is to view it as Elizabeth's unsuccessful search for a proper female role model. A young girl raised in a house of men, it is apparent from her odd dreams and her vivid descriptions of Mr. Speed's drunkenness that Elizabeth is fearful of masculinity—especially in light of her own budding femininity. However, she has a strong attachment to her father and brother— who both drink, (although considerably less than Mr. Speed does)—and is concerned how alcohol affects them.

She also seeks an answer to the crucial question: what is the appropriate way for a young woman to act in a male-dominated household? At times she is coquettish, even alluring (the bedroom scene with her brother); or cute and defiant (when she bursts into the parlor and "flirts" with a young boy); or assertive (threatening to report the family cook to the police); and finally, sometimes powerless and scared (revealing her loneliness and her fear of Mr. Speed).

Nonetheless, Elizabeth's final act—reporting Mr. Speed to the police—seems to be her most significant one. Because Elizabeth has become a spinster, this final action, reveals that Elizabeth never learned how to act appropriately in her father's eyes.

A feminist reading of "A Spinster's Tale" might even suggest that since women are expected to be silent and demure, Elizabeth's ability to assert authority made her unattractive to men, who expect women to act in a more subservient way.

## Sex

Several critics have noted the importance of sexual issues in "A Spinster's Tale." Given Elizabeth's confusion over masculinity, it is not surprising that at different times she seems both attracted and repelled by sexuality. This is consistent with the passive-aggressive nature of her behavior.

Mr. Speed represents negative male attributes: he is ugly, clumsy, and forceful. Furthermore, Taylor highlights the prominence of his cane, which could be perceived as a phallic symbol. Elizabeth's ultimate fate as a spinster suggests that she never was able to fully discard her fearful view of masculinity— or perhaps her fear of sex—since her mother died after giving birth to a stillborn child, directly linking both sex and birth to death.

Still, throughout the story there are times when Elizabeth is attracted to men. For example, Elizabeth seems sexually assertive when she bursts into the parlor and is then accused of "flirting." Some critics have pointed out the importance of doorways in this story, which could be seen as a simulation of the sexual act of penetration.

More disturbing are the incestuous overtones in the scene with her brother in the bedroom. Elizabeth's desire to be struck could be viewed as a desire for some form of sexual contact; however, since in her youthful confusion she cannot discriminate between sexual violence and gentleness, or family love and sexual love, she seeks to combine them. Taylor's details—the way he describes Elizabeth's hair, up or down, or her speech, as languid or fearful—also support a reading of Elizabeth as conflicted over sexual matters.

# Style

## Setting

Peter Taylor's fiction is set in the American South. His "A Spinster's Tale" is set in Nashville, where the Taylor family lived for several years. Another autobiographical aspect is socio-economic status; Taylor's and Elizabeth's families are wealthy and privileged. Elizabeth's home is comfortable and staffed with several "Negro" servants and cooks. The use of the word "Negro" provides insight into the setting, as well as the era, since this is what African Americans were commonly called in the early part of the twentieth century.

At that time, discriminatory practices limited opportunities for African Americans in the South. One of the few jobs available was as domestic help. Racial segregation is obvious when Elizabeth reveals that her father's secretary lives in an area she casually refers to as "nigger town." This indicates how widespread views of racial inferiority were, as does Mr. Speed's constant refrain "nigger, nigger," during the story's climax.

## Point of View

Since "A Spinster's Tale" is told exclusively from Elizabeth's point of view, it can be assumed that these events have affected her in a profound way and that she might not be aware of certain motivations. Therefore we cannot depend on Elizabeth to explain certain events objectively.

For example, many critics have noted that the scene in which she hugs and cries to her drunk brother in her bedroom appears to have certain sexual overtones. ("I stood straight in my white nightgown with my black hair hanging over my shoulders. . . . I beckoned to him.") Yet Elizabeth, even in her old age, (which is when the story is being told) can't be relied upon to point out such suggestive facts. So what she does not reveal, and does not remember, should be examined as closely as what she does.

## Symbolism and Imagery

Taylor's symbolism and imagery may be the richest, most revealing aspect of "A Spinster's Tale." For example, Mr. Speed's role in the story is symbolic. Some critics suggest that he represents a grotesque exaggeration of Elizabeth's brother and father, a personification of her fears of male sexuality and masculinity. Others read the story from a Freudian psychological standpoint and perceive phallic symbols in Mr. Speed's walking cane, which Taylor makes references to several times.

Alcohol is also a symbol that links Elizabeth's father and brother with Mr. Speed. Early in the story Elizabeth recalls her mother telling her son that she would rather see him in his grave than see him drunk. When the men are drunk, they become belligerent and

unmanageable. Some critics also link the loosened inhibitions that alcohol consumption causes with possible sexual abuse in "A Spinster's Tale".

Imagery is also important in "A Spinster's Tale." Specifically, Taylor makes many references to light and warmth, which often precede important scenes which depict either fear or escape. Early in the story, Elizabeth sets some logs in the hearth on fire and watches the flames until her face gets hot. Then she looks into the mirror, seeking to disappear into it. Soon afterwards, Mr. Speed makes an appearance.

Several references are made to Elizabeth's mother. These references are often made at frightening moments for her. Since her mother is dead it appears Elizabeth sorely misses the security of her mother.

One final important technique Taylor uses to convey important symbols is dream memories. Elizabeth's dreams (of a drunken horse, of men flocking to see a girl with big hands, who hides them under her skirt) also convey a fear of sexuality and masculinity. The large hands in the dream may be her father's, representing the possibility of his having sexually abused Elizabeth. The hands under her skirt may be her own, as Elizabeth is confused and blames herself for the abuse.

# Historical Context

## Racial Attitudes

With the story set fifty years before the Civil Rights movement, "A Spinster's Tale" provides insight into the racially segregated South of the first half of the twentieth century. This can be seen in the abundance of "Negro" (the accepted term for African Americans at the time) domestic servants. Often deprived of the opportunities to work challenging, lucrative jobs, many black women and men worked as servants. Lucy, the family servant, is the most visible black character in the story.

In the early part of the twentieth century, when the events in "A Spinster's Tale" take place, most African Americans resided in Southern states such as Tennessee. Yet, it is clear that none live in Elizabeth's middle- to upper-class neighborhood. Elizabeth even makes reference to "nigger town," which tells us not only of the racial separation that kept the races apart, but also the casual way in which a young girl would use what has today become an offensive racial slur.

Mr. Speed also repeats the word "nigger" during the story's climax. This passing reference shows how deeply ingrained certain racial attitudes were, when "A Spinster's Tale" takes place, and even when Taylor published it, in 1940.

## The Automobile

"A Spinster's Tale" is also historically specific in its vague references to what Elizabeth calls a "horseless carriage." This is a reference to an early model automobile. Its novelty is evident by the way the automobile is discussed: when it is revealed that someone owns such a "machine," it is considered an event to ride in it. The car is not used just to get from one place to another, simply driving in it is adventurous enough.

Taylor also provides us with additional insight into the types of profound questions the advent of the automobile raised. Elizabeth recalls that automobile owners had to proceed with some tact, because they were often "uncertain of our family's prejudices regarding machines." As is the case with many inventions throughout history, as the automobiles garnered more and more attention, some people felt obliged to oppose the impact that it might have on society. The automobile could have offended Elizabeth's father—it does not, and several of the boys eventually go for a ride. This fairly minor scene is a fascinating glimpse into a world without the traffic jams, red lights, and highway accidents which are viewed as so common today.

## Southern Life

Taylor often focuses on the changes that occurred in Southern life over the decades of the early twentieth century, specifically in the changing lifestyles and forgotten traditions

that resulted from the rapid urbanization of the region. Such changes are not so evident in "A Spinster's Tale," though some critics have spotted it. For example, Mr. Speed may represent the utter breakdown of civilized society, and the refusal of Elizabeth's brother and father to see this acknowledges their complicity in this breakdown.

There are also suggestions of a cultural clash in the parlor scene when Elizabeth's uncles are portrayed as somewhat tactless, accepting "with-thegreatest- of-pleasure what really had not been an invitation at all" to ride in the car. This suggests that Elizabeth's uncles, in their fascination with the automobile, are not as refined as the machine's owners.

"I thought how awkward all of the members of my own family appeared on occasions that called for grace," Elizabeth reports, again suggesting that while her family is wealthy, they lack a certain style. This signifies their position as a traditional family tied to the past, facing the future with a mixture of uncertainty and clumsy wonder.

# Critical Overview

In 1948 the great American author, Robert Penn Warren, wrote an introduction to *A Long Fourth, and Other Stories,* Taylor's first collection of short fiction. In the essay, Warren places "A Spinster's Tale" within the context of Taylor's fiction, highlighting both the importance of family as well as the presence of a first person narrator.

Taylor's best work, Warren writes, employs "a natural style, one based on conversation and the family tale, with the echo of the spoken word, with the texture of some narrator's mind."

In a review in the *New York Times Book Review* that same year, the reviewer also lauds Taylor's short fiction, commenting that "A Spinster's Tale" mirrors "the deterioration of family life . . . through a girl's developing neurosis. . . ."

In a lengthy essay which appeared in the *Sewanee Review* in 1962, the writer and critic Ashley Brown found in Taylor's first collection of stories "the thematic unity of (James Joyce's) *Dubliners:* childhood, youth, marriage, and maturity. . . ."

Brown also explores the "dissolution of the family" theme in "A Spinster's Tale," and notes that Elizabeth's plight is that of "a motherless child . . . misplaced in a masculine household. Her gentle father and her amiably drunken brother and her uncles cannot replace the balance lost by the death of her mother. The equilibrium of this family, where old-fashioned courtly manners still prevail . . . is deceptive, simply because the masculine courtesy has no true challenge from the other sex, and Elizabeth, being young, is discouraged by this masculine indirection."

Brown views Mr. Speed as a symbol of "the breakdown of civilized behavior," which the men in the story choose not to acknowledge. "Thus Mr. Speed becomes to Elizabeth the symbol of brutality and indifference which she finds in all men."

By the 1970s, some critics began to view Taylor's work as skilled, but limited in scope; they suggested that the Southern themes he is so concerned with have been explored by too many other writers. One critic wrote, "[E]nough of the eccentric or incestuous families tending to their faded houses and lives."

But critic Jan Pinkerton countered such criticism, contending that there are important universal themes in Taylor's short fiction, which transcend strictly Southern interpretations. Pinkerton uses "A Spinster's Tale" to illustrate the fact that Taylor's work is not bound to the South, writing that the story "is a tale of frigidity and of the inevitability of spinsterhood, a subject, incidentally, that has been more frequently associated with New England than the South. Region, in other words, is secondary here. . . ."

Pinkerton, in a later essay published in *Kansas Quarterly, focuses* specifically on "A Spinster's Tale," acknowledging that some of the themes in the story may no longer be

considered noteworthy, and that critics "reject as outdated" certain aspects of the story which may be associated with "Victorian" fiction from a century earlier.

Nonetheless, Pinkerton finds aspects of "A Spinster's Tale" not only relevant, but also "modern," particularly the way Elizabeth's assertiveness is discouraged. "Her feminine lifestyle . . . can be preserved not by ignoring or avoiding the dreaded opposite lifestyle, but by learning how to defend against it."

She later asks rhetorically: "So do we have here . . . the story of the rise of a no longer fearful, but rather, fear-inducing female?" By applying what could be viewed as a feminist reading to "A Spinster's Tale," Pinkerton is hoping to preserve the story's relevance for an age when women in general are more assertive, and to perhaps illustrate the changes that have occurred only in recent years.

Still, Pinkerton acknowledges that this story "despite skillful telling, may well be headed for oblivion."

Critics continue to interpret "A Spinster's Tale" from a psychological point of view. In 1988, Roland Sodowsky and Gargi Roysircar Sodowsky, using models set forth by the prominent psychologists Sigmund Freud and Alfred Adler, are able to interpret Elizabeth two distinct ways: she may be seen as trapped by sexual fears and the constraints of a relationship between child and parent; or alternatively, she can be perceived as controlling her role in her family.

These separate readings suggest a basic diffi- culty in interpreting "A Spinster's Tale": is Elizabeth a victim of her various problems or does she conquer them?

The author has stated that "A Spinster's Tale" is one of his favorite stories. It "may be one of my best," Taylor stated in a 1973 interview, "but I hate to admit it. It was written right at the beginning, and no one likes to think he hasn't gotten better."

# Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4
- Critical Essay #5
- Critical Essay #6

# Critical Essay #1

*Deignan has been a teaching assistant in American Cultural Studies at Bowling Green State University. In the following essay, he argues that sexual conflict is the primary theme of "A Spinster's Tale."*

Critics tend to focus on the sexual themes in Peter Taylor's "A Spinster's Tale," especially as it relates to the budding femininity of young Elizabeth. This discussion seems pertinent when the reader learns that Elizabeth grew up without a mother, has a difficult time with men, and never marries.

It is clear that Elizabeth loves her father and brother, but at the same time she seems to fear certain aspects of their personalities; specifically, she is concerned with similarities between her father and brother and the repugnant Mr. Speed. "As their voices grew louder and merrier, my courage slackened," Elizabeth recalls. "It was then I first put into words the thought that in my brother and father I saw something of Mr. Speed. And I knew it was more than a taste for whiskey they had in common."

Such comments, when combined with other aspects of "A Spinster's Tale"—Elizabeth's growth into a young women, her irrational fear of Mr. Speed (who, some critics note, is associated with several sexual symbols, such as the phallic cane), and her curious desire to be struck by her brother— make it clear that sexual conflict is one of the major themes of this work.

It is also possible that not only is such a conflict *the* most important theme in "A Spinster's Tale," but that something much more horrific has taken place. Perhaps "A Spinster's Tale" is a tragedy about a father's sexual abuse of his young daughter, who is vigorously attempting to repress her memory of these acts.

Such an interpretation may seem far-fetched. Elizabeth's father, after all, may be clumsy at times, but he seems to be a likable character, hardly one to commit such an awful crime. And yet, the very aspect of the story which makes any sexual reading so uncomfortable—Elizabeth's youth—may begin to point in the direction of repressed molestation. Such a reading makes Elizabeth's resulting spinsterhood and her inability to connect with men much more dramatic and painful.

Early in the story, Elizabeth makes an important distinction: her brother's drinking frightens her, yet "those nights put a scaredness into me that was clearly distinguishable from the terror that Mr. Speed instilled by stumbling past our house. . . ." So Mr. Speed, for an unknown reason, is clearly more threatening than her brother.

Elizabeth then notes that "by allowing him the 'Mr.'" she seeks to "humanize and soften the monster that was forever passing our house. . . ." In this way, Elizabeth both eases her fear of Speed, and transforms him into a deformed authority figure.

The next sentence is important: "My father would point him out through the wide parlor window. . . ." Elizabeth later notes that her father, while drinking with her brother and uncles, would refer to Mr. Speed "in a blustering tone of merry tolerance: 'There goes Old Speed, again. That rascal!'" Elizabeth is annoyed at her father's "tolerance," and prepares for the "inevitable day when I should have to speak of (Mr. Speed) to someone."

Elizabeth reveals that it is her father who first points Mr. Speed out to her, that she doesn't care for his tolerance of Mr. Speed's behavior, and that Mr. Speed represents something profoundly unsettling to her. This could be an indication that Elizabeth has shifted her mixture of love and loathing—which her father's sexual violation has inspired—onto Mr. Speed. This may begin to explain her intense fear of him. His ugliness symbolizes and personifies Elizabeth's repressed knowledge of her father's acts. This may be one reason she uses the authoritative "Mr." to refer to Speed.

It also may explain the curious scene before the mirror, when Elizabeth craves to be taken "A-waya- way. . . ." Here, the sexual and emotional confusion caused by her father's sexual violation has overwhelmed her. And whom does Elizabeth see at that moment, gazing out the window? "I beheld Mr. Speed," she reports. He was walking, "cursing the trees as he passed them, giving each a lick with his heavy walking cane." Elizabeth is scared, her "breath came short, and I clasped the black bow at the neck of my middy blouse."

Many important elements suggest that Elizabeth is repressing sexual abuse: her confused desire for escape but inability to articulate why, the presence of the hateful Mr. Speed and his phallic cane, her inexplicable movement to cover up her blouse. Also, it seems that Elizabeth's defenses—denial and repression—are starting to crack.

Indeed, it is important to note that Elizabeth is maturing constantly throughout the story. (She notes at one point, "my legs had got too long this summer to stretch out straight on the settee.") Thus, she may only now be becoming aware of the unacceptable nature of her sexual relationship with her father; her behavior suggests that she is confused. After all this is her father, a man she is supposed to love unconditionally, regardless of what he might be doing to her. That he seems a loving father can only complicate things more—for Elizabeth, as well as for the reader.

Elizabeth's ambivalence is clearly illustrated in the bedroom scene with her brother. He is drunk, suggesting a loss of inhibition. Elizabeth's mother despised drinking, as Elizabeth does. Furthermore, it is drinking that initially raises questions about Mr. Speed's relation to her father and brother. As the most persistent drunk in the story, Mr. Speed embodies the least inhibited, most threatening potential of men—such as a sexual relationship with one's own daughter.

In the bedroom scene, Elizabeth wakes up when her brother comes home drunk. She "smiled at him and beckoned," as he stumbles up the stairs. Twice, Elizabeth notes (as she does always with Mr. Speed) the redness of her brother's face. "I stood in my white nightgown," Elizabeth says, "with my black hair hanging over my shoulders. . . ."

He asks if she's "been reading something you shouldn't," before she throws her arms around him, confessing, "I'm always lonely." The scene is quite tender up to this point, as Elizabeth's brother attempts to conceal his drunkenness and offers to play with her the next day.

Then he "stood up and looked at me curiously, as though in some way repelled by my settling so comfortable in the covers." Elizabeth's demands seem to have shaken her brother, which matches a pattern through the story: when Elizabeth is assertive, she is encouraged to be more passive.

This can suggest any number of things. Regarding the thesis of this essay, perhaps Elizabeth, at this moment, believes acting in a sexual way with family members is somewhat normal. She even says that she smells her brother's whiskey, but that it "was not repugnant to me." She then expresses a desire to be struck and wishes she had indicated to her brother "that we had in common some unmentionable trouble."

Many critics have written of the "incestuous overtones" of this scene. It appears her brother's look of shock has jolted Elizabeth into realizing such sexual behavior around family members is not appropriate. And yet, she cannot deny her love (sexual or otherwise) for her brother. Indicating her intense confusion, Elizabeth simply combines affection and punishment. She wants contact with her brother but seems, on some level, to comprehend the forbidden nature of such behavior.

For Elizabeth, getting hit by her brother at that point would be not only a way to express love, but also a punishment for her feelings. That she desires to share an "unmentionable trouble" with her brother suggests not only that something intense is being repressed, but also that Elizabeth is perhaps starting to comprehend the roots of her confusion—her father's violation of her and her brother's silent complicity.

Indeed, later she admits that she "had come to accept (Mr. Speed's) existence as a natural part of my life." Since Mr. Speed represents a displaced awareness of Elizabeth's father's sexual violation, this may be one of the saddest lines in the entire story. Elizabeth has resigned herself to living with this horrible abuse. And her brother is not innocent either, for he also says of Mr. Speed: "You'll get used to him, for all his ugliness."

It is additionally important to note that Elizabeth shares her mother's name; moreover, she maintains that "from day to day, I began to take my place as a mistress in our motherless household." This suggests that Elizabeth seems to have become a sort of surrogate mother/wife in this house. As the sole female family member in the house, perhaps her father viewed his desire for her as almost normal— especially now that his wife (and natural sex partner) is dead.

Elizabeth's own warm (warmth is a key image) affection for her mother can be seen, then, not only as affection for a lost mother, but also a desire for protection from her father that is no longer available. "I remembered only the warmth of the cheek and the

comfort of that moment," Elizabeth says recalling her mother. This is contrasted with the perverted love of her father.

Also, it should be noted that after pleading to the mirror for escape, then seeing Mr. Speed, "a sudden inexplicable memory of my mother's cheek and a vision of her" strikes Elizabeth. At moments when she is forced to confront her father's abuse, symbolized by Mr. Speed, Elizabeth always seems to call upon an image of her mother to delay confrontation.

Elizabeth's dreams also suggest serious sexual violations; in one dream, some men come to see a girl with big hands and the girl decides to hide them under her skirt. The big hands may, in fact, be Elizabeth's father's, but guilt and confusion forces Elizabeth to blame herself for the violation. Thus, she believes the hands under her skirt are the girl's own.

Yet Elizabeth does not fear her father. In a critical scene near the end of the story, she runs to her father, with other family members in the room, proclaiming of Mr. Speed "I'm afraid of him. . . . He's always drunk!" Elizabeth then confides that she "was eager to tell (her father) just exactly how fearful I was of Mr. Speed's coming into our house." This scene could be viewed as a confrontation. Again, if Mr. Speed represents her own father's deviant sexuality, than Elizabeth is, in a sense, proclaiming her displeasure at the situation. She no longer wants her father to treat her in such unnatural ways.

Her father cuts her off, telling her she "had no business watching Mr. Speed, that I must shut my eyes to some things. 'After all,' he said . . . 'you're a young lady now.'" Elizabeth's father is, in effect, issuing an order here: don't confront this issue (Mr. Speed/sexual violation), repress it.

So Elizabeth's assertiveness has been quashed, and she is now "accustomed to thinking that there was something in my brother's and in my father's natures that was fully in sympathy with the very brutality of (Mr. Speed's) drunkenness." In refusing to hear her concerns about Mr. Speed, both her brother and father refuse to face up to Elizabeth's abuse.

Elizabeth is a bold girl and because she is growing older and more aware, she will continue to explore ways to confront this issue. Her confidence grows during the scene with the kitchen help (which also foreshadows the story's climax) when Elizabeth, at the height of her assertiveness, threatens to call the police. She realizes the power in this threat, and decides that she will use this same threat against Mr. Speed when he comes into the house.

Again, this climactic scene fits a pattern found throughout "A Spinster's Tale." Mr. Speed breaks though the doorway violently. (Many entrances through doorways occur in this story, and many critics have suggested a possible link to the act of sexual penetration.) References are yet again made to his red face and his cane, and Elizabeth realizes that perhaps "it was the last time I ever experienced the inconsolable desperation of childhood."

However, even as she leaves childhood behind with this final overt violation, Elizabeth longs "to hide my face away from this in my own mother's bosom." Yet another part of her "was making me deal with Mr. Speed . . . myself." Indeed, she has called the police station, asserted herself, and, symbolically anyway, confronted her father's mistreatment of her.

It is no surprise, then, that Elizabeth's father is displeased. In his world, acknowledgment of such heinous acts amounts to bad behavior. Elizabeth has confronted her father, and indeed, he has sealed off the doorway, suggesting perhaps an end to his sexual abuse of her.

The fact that Elizabeth becomes a spinster is significant. In dealing with the effects of a lost, abused childhood, perhaps the following passage provides a terrible, conclusive insight. "'What ever did happen to Speed's old-maid sister?' my uncle the doctor said. 'She's still with him,' Father said."

As an old maid herself, the terrible actions and memories that Mr. Speed represents have remained with Elizabeth and always will. "It was only the other night that I dreamed I was a little girl . . . again and that there was a drunk horse in our yard," the story's last line reads.

As they have throughout the story, such dream images prove the fact that Elizabeth is still haunted by the scary, violent images of her childhood.

**Source:** Tom Deignan, "Overview of 'A Spinster's Tale,'" in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2000.

# Critical Essay #2

*At the time this article was published, Gargi Roysircar Sodowsky was a pre-doctoral Intern in Counseling Psychology at Iowa State University, and Roland Sodowsky was Associate Professor of English at Sul Ross State University, Alpine, Texas. In the following excerpt, the critics present two differing psychological interpretations of Betsy.*

Several critics have noted the depth and richness of the characters in Peter Taylor's work, a complexity which makes his stories particularly apt for psychological interpretation. An especially good example is "A Spinster's Tale," in which the protagonist, Betsy, may be seen from a Freudian point of view as being trapped by the forces of parent-child relationships and sexual fears or from an Adlerian point of view as choosing and controlling the unsocial direction of her life.

Set in an upper-class home in Nashville around 1900, "Spinster's Tale" is narrated by an unmarried woman named Elizabeth who recalls events beginning with her mother's death and ending about a year later, shortly after her fourteenth birthday. Her mother has died a few days after bearing a stillborn child. Elizabeth, called Betsy by her eighteen- year-old brother, lives with her father, brother, and several servants. During a moment of grief one afternoon about six months after her mother's death, the girl observes an old man passing the house, redfaced, drunk, stumbling and cursing. Seeing this man, Mr. Speed, causes her to become "dry-eyed in my fright" and to remember vividly the burial of the stillborn infant and a few minutes spent with her mother just before her death. Betsy recognizes Mr. Speed as a "permanent and formidable figure in my life which I would be called upon to deal with," and thereafter she observes him from the parlor window each time he passes, even though the sight of him makes her teeth chatter. Much of the rest of the story consists of variations of this basic pattern in which the terrified girl watches the old man, anticipating the day when he will come to her door.

In one variation, Betsy stands at the door of her bedroom late at night while her drunken brother, whom she intuits as a less menacing version of Mr. Speed, climbs the stairs. With apparent incestuous intent, she entices him into her bedroom. Thinking about the encounter later, she wishes she had made him aware of "some unmentionable trouble" they have in common. In another variation, she learns the unwelcome lesson that her brother and Mr. Speed are more alike than she had thought. In another, just after the girl's father and uncles jokingly accuse her of flirting with a boy, Mr. Speed appears outside and she becomes hysterical.

In the final variation, Mr. Speed, caught in a rainstorm, actually enters the house, frightening both Betsy and Lucy, a maid. After letting him in, the maid flees up the stairs, but Betsy calls the police. The old man tries to leave but falls from the porch and is knocked unconscious. The police find him thus a few minutes later and take him away.

"Spinster's Tale" is replete with objects and actions for which, in his discussion of dream symbols in *The Interpretation of Dreams* [in *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud*,

trans. and ed. A. A. Brill, 1938], Sigmund Freud assigns various sexual meanings. A study of Betsy's reactions to these symbols suggests that despite the lonely girl's desperate attempts to deal with the phenomena these symbols represent, she cannot adjust to them. Instead, she projects her unacceptable, frightening sexual impulses to external dangers. Thus she fears maleness and male sexuality and thereby copes projectively and unconsciously with her fears, although in a deviant manner.

Except for a flashback to the burial of the stillborn infant, the girl is never seen outside the house, which she repeatedly describes as "shadowy," the dream-like setting thus making an interpretation in Freudian terms especially appropriate. Although her father, brother, and the servants also occupy the house, she persistently calls it "my house," "my door," to which Mr. Speed will eventually come, reminding one of Freud's symbolization of persons as male organs, of the house as body, doors as apertures, and rooms as female; churches too are equated with the vagina, and Betsy's house is on Church Street. Mr. Speed carries a top coat, a later version of the cloak, one of Freud's phallic symbols, and a heavy walking cane, also phallic, with which he beats the trees or pokes at the "soft sod along the sidewalk." When the March wind blows off his hat, another male genital symbol, it rolls across the lawn toward the house. And when he finally does come to the door, he raps on it with his cane. Once inside, however, he throws the cane on the floor in an apparent gesture of defeat.

Betsy unconsciously defends herself, displacing her guilty, fearful attraction for Mr. Speed upon her brother, a safer target. She remembers her brother in terms of phallic images. He shows her "a box of cigarettes which a girl had given him"; he chases after and returns Mr. Speed's hat, thus identifying himself more closely in Betsy's eyes with the old man; in her white nightgown, symbolizing chastity, she watches her brother from her bedroom doorway as he comes up the stairs, stumbling like Mr. Speed, "putting his white forefinger to his red face"; after he has climbed the stairs, an act symbolizing coitus, and entered her room, she remembers "something like a longing for my brother to strike me," but since he does not and therefore does not symbolically enter her, she presumably has failed to cope with her fears.

She also remembers the box, a female symbol, containing the stillborn infant when it is buried, and she associates it in a rapid sequence of images with Mr. Speed, who apparently epitomizes maleness, with her last moments with her mother, and with her mother's death, which her "memory did not dwell upon." When Mr. Speed finally enters the house, one assumes Betsy cannot help but react as she does. The maid Lucy, who could be but is not Betsy's surrogate mother, pleads with Betsy to climb the stairs, that is, to perform, in Freudian terms, a symbolic coital act. Instead, she reacts unconsciously, circling defensively behind Mr. Speed to telephone the police, thereby repressing her desire for the male "invasion." A few minutes later Mr. Speed's "limp body" is taken away.

Betsy sees herself as having acted with a mixture of cruelty and courage, and instead of being fearful of or attracted to Mr. Speed, she both despises and pities the old man lying unconscious in the mud. In the last paragraph the narrator says, ". . . my hatred of what he had stood for in my eyes has never left me . . . not a week has passed but that he

has been brought to my mind by one thing or another." The child Betsy may appear to have been victorious, but in Freudian terms the adult Elizabeth is the regressing victim of the girl's failure to overcome her terror.

An Adlerian point of view leads to a different conclusion. According to Alfred Adler [in *The Individual Psychology of Alfred Adler: A Systematic Presentation in Selections from His Writings,* ed. H. L. Ansbacher and R. R. Ansbacher, 1956], the biological and environmental "givens"—for example, Betsy's plain looks, adolescent stirrings, and isolation in a discouraging male world—are recreated by a person with her "private logic" to attain "success": "Experiences, traumata, and sexual developmental mechanisms cannot yield an explanation, but the perspective in which they are regarded . . . which subordinates all life to the final goal, can do so." In *Superiority and Social Interest* [1965] Adler sees the neurotic as striving toward a goal of superiority in order to overcome past and current feelings of inferiority. Rather than reacting automatically to events which determine her to be a spinster, Betsy is actively carving out her niche in the world, a niche that in her eyes is inferior to none. Betsy's fear of heterosexual intimacy, for example, may express the direction she is taking to attain her goal of superiority over men.

From this point of view, the incidents from her puberty that the narrator recalls are important not in themselves but because she remembers them and because of the way the girl Betsy chooses to respond to them. In *Individual Psychology* Adler says, "There are no chance memories. Out of the incalculable number of impressions which meet an individual, he chooses to remember only those which he feels, however darkly, to have a bearing on his situation." The narrator's selective *re*-collection of pubescent experiences mirrors her present biases and view of life, and, as the story's title suggests ("A Spinster's Tale"), her reconstruction of events does not necessarily correspond to the historical truth. The purposeful delving into the past has the power of repetitive rehearsals or of a self-fulfilling prophecy, expressing the narrator's intention of continuing with the symbolic, spinster-like life of her youth. These memories, Adler says, a person " . . . repeats to himself . . . to keep him concentrated on his goal, and to prepare him by means of past experiences, so that he will meet the future with an already tested style of action."

When Betsy is frightened by Mr. Speed, her ultimate symbol of maleness, for example, she construes the image of her dead mother, whom she remembers as wan, smiling, gentle, and religious— the opposite of the stumbling drunk. By symbiotically escaping into this idealized memory, Betsy sidesteps a social problem—confrontation with the old man and thereby with males in general—thus avoiding possible defeat or humiliation in a relationship. In choosing "not to dwell upon" the memory of her mother's death, Betsy thus denies it, as well as the challenges of adolescence, i.e. the stepping toward new freedom and adult responsibilities. Betsy calls her memories of her mother "sudden and inexplicable" but they are neither: they manifest her preference for nonexistence, passivity, and social withdrawal. After seeing Mr. Speed the first time, Betsy stands "cold and silent," a metaphorical and literal expression of her chosen life style.

Betsy recalls that her mother severely condemned drinking before her death, an attitude not shared by her brother or by her father, who has toddies with her uncles every Saturday afternoon. Her father calls "Old Speed" a "rascal" with "merry tolerance," but simultaneously warns her brother of the consequences of drinking by using Mr. Speed as a bad example. Betsy cannot identify with her father's contradictory attitude and the welldefined masculine pattern he establishes in the house. She wonders whether he ever thinks of her mother, since he never mentions her. She seems to accuse him of indifference, saying " . . . in a year I had forgotten how he treated her when she had been alive." Unable to establish satisfactory alliances with her brother or father, she replaces the human tendency for *gemeinschaftsgefühl* with an attitude of distrust and poor regard for her surviving family members and, ultimately, the world at larg

The development of this attitude appears clearly in the sibling rivalry between Betsy and her brother. Sober, he teases her mercilessly. Drunk, he tries to make her a conspirator by offering the passive, watchful girl candy, but she sees him as "giggling," "bouncing," and "silly" and refuses to compromise the attitude about drinking that she has adopted from her mother. Rudolf Dreikurs, the popularizer of Adler in the United States, says [in *Psychodynamics, Psychotherapy, and Counseling,* 1967] such sibling differences indicate competition and the development of different personalities. Betsy, feeling intellectually ignored by her father and class-valedictorian brother, sees her brother as the "boss" and herself as inadequate. To compete with her brother's ruling style, she chooses the feminine avoiding style, a typical example of familial confrontation between two Adlerian types. She requests, for example, her father and brother "not to talk about war, which seemed to [her father] a natural enough request for a young lady to make." While father and son argue on a vast diversity of male-oriented topics, Betsy quietly observes her brother or slips away because she finds the contentious dialogue unbearable.

Dreikurs points out that where one sibling succeeds, a competing sibling gives up; and where the sibling fails (the brother's intemperance, for example), the competitor moves in, thus finding a place and significance in the family. Betsy's behavior fits this pattern. Adler says a woman feels equal to a man she perceives as superior if she can experience herself in her "masculine protest" to be "equally superior" to him. This striving for compensatory superiority reflects an exaggerated perception of male power and recognition such as Betsy sees in her small world on Church Street. Not being brave enough to confront them, Betsy resorts to what Adler calls "depreciation tendency" (the neurotic's tendency to enhance self-esteem by disparaging others) in order to maneuver her brother and Mr. Speed, to sneak into power struggles with them, and to inflict sly revenge in their weak moments. Betsy's nearly incestuous encounter with her brother, for example, in which she appears uncharacteristically confident and well-rehearsed, may be an attempt to compromise him and thus gain a "victory" and revenge. Her desire for him to strike her could be seen as her search for confirmation of suspected male violence and cruelty.

Betsy has long been preparing for the "eventuality" to settle completely with Mr. Speed. The narrator recalls, "And the sort of preparation that I had been able to make [was] the clearance of all restraints and inhibitions regarding Mr. Speed in my own mind and in my

relationship with my world. . . ." The "restraints" and "inhibitions" that Betsy rids herself of are the foundations of Adler's *gemeinschaftsgefühl .* Instead of giving the drunk Mr. Speed shelter in her house from the rain, Betsy, in a tone of pretended innocence, calls the police. She is keenly aware that she deals with Mr. Speed, "however wrongly," all by herself, that is, unsocially. Her father's curt remark, "I regret that the bluecoats were called," underscores the disparity in father and daughter's life attitudes.

The passive-aggressive Betsy begins to find her place and power in her family by her success in hurting others through her one-upmanship games. She discovers a way to supervise her father's household staff by snooping around, springing out upon the unsuspecting servants, and intimidating them by threatening to call her father or the police. The narrator recalls, "In this way, from day to day, I began to take my place as mistress in our motherless household."

Betsy's life-style is that of a cautious, contriving busybody. Even in her nightly dreams she allows no mysteries or loose ends and "pieces together" these dreams into a "form of logic." The fearful Betsy grows into the controlling Betsy who says, "I would complete an unfinished dream and wouldn't know in the morning what part I dreamed and what part pieced together." In one such dream a "big" Betsy, in control of everything, watches "little" Betsy "trembling and weeping." Betsy then makes a "very considerable discovery" about herself—that instead of being fearful she can be feared. Betsy is not the victim of causality, but rather the pilot of her dreams and of the direction of her life as well. In her own terms, she has achieved "equal superiority" over Mr. Speed, her brother, and therefore all men. Just as the pubescent Betsy pieces together her dreams into patterns which suit her, the adult narrator continues to piece together her life in ways that, according to her private logic, reveal her to be superior and successful.

That "A Spinster's Tale" can sustain two such disparate interpretations of its protagonist demonstrates, we feel, the profundity of Taylor's characterization. We see in the story the dynamics of familial relationships, and little else, either shaping a girl and the woman to be or being used by the girl to shape the woman she chooses to be. The ambiguity in Taylor's fine story is satisfying, like truth.

**Source:** Roland Sodowsky and Gargi Roysircar Sodowsky, "Determined Failure, Self-Styled Success: Two Views of Betsy in Peter Taylor's 'Spinster's Tale,'" in *Studies in Short Fiction,* Vol. 25, No. 1, Winter, 1988, pp. 49-54.

# Critical Essay #3

*In the following excerpt, Pinkerton offers a new interpretation of "A Spinster's Tale."*

# Critical Essay #4

Egon Schwartz, demonstrating how the vagaries of Hermann Hesse's reputation have depended on place and time [in "Hermann Hesse, The American Youth Movement, and Problems of Literary Evaluation," *PMLA,* Vol. 85, 1970], suggests that literary scholarship, even when presuming to be value-free, is constantly reflecting its temporal situation, that it "is replete with unreflected values and engages in indirect evaluation all the time." The example of Hesse, that belatedly acclaimed guru, is surely dramatic; yet, beyond even the unknowntoday, adulated-tomorrow (or vice versa) stereotype, there are many other, more subtle, manifestations of temporal influence on literary scholarship and evaluation.

I shall speak of two. There is, first of all, the simple matter of subject matter. Critics have not sufficiently acknowledged the important role that "subject" plays in determining the literature that they praise or, more subtly, that they choose to write about. Secondly, there is the critical urge toward consistency, an urge which denies the established author the right to "minor" efforts. The tendency of literary scholarship is to deal with the totality of a man's work, and thus an unimportant work by a nevertheless important writer is often given special attention and even unmerited praise. A leveling effect results: a leveling, in this case, upward.

In order to illustrate these temporal influences on literary criticism, I should like to build a demonstration case around a story that has been generally undiscussed, even though the author is a respected American contemporary (although not sufficiently "established" to require the investigation of the entire canon): Peter Taylor's "A Spinster's Tale." The story is undiscussed probably because it is woefully old-fashioned—old-fashioned in subject matter, which constitutes an objection that critics are not likely to admit as an objection. I should like to formulate a hypothetical rehabilitation of the story—the sort of rehabilitation that would become necessary if Taylor were to be given establishment status. We must first look at the problem of his outof- date subject matter and then see how, in conformity with the practice of contemporary critics, the story might be redeemed. The redemption would involve upward leveling, to bring all of the writer's work to "classic" status—a process that takes place constantly in literary journals.

# Critical Essay #5

Taylor's "A Spinster's Tale" deals with female fear of the male, and immediately we see the problem of subject matter; what is appropriate for *Clarissa* or for Victorian novels seems totally quaint today. A topic far more current, in fact, is male fear of the female, although "the new chastity," which women's lib has been accused of promoting, might represent a topic even newer in fashion. It is true, nevertheless, that such sexually fearful Victorian heroines as Gwendolen Harleth, Isabel Archer, and Sue Bridehead are simply not appropriate for reincarnation by a contemporary writer.

So how do we react to a fairly recent story (1940) that focuses on old-fashioned female trembling before the male? The tale, briefly, is of a motherless girl's obsession with what she considers a brutal masculine world. Although she lives with her father and brother, the exemplification of masculinity to her is a drunken Mr. Speed, whom she sees frequently passing by her house; she watches from the safety of her parlor, but she is nevertheless terrified and is convinced that someday she will have to deal with him personally. She begins, then, at the age of thirteen, to prepare herself for an inevitable confrontation with masculinity, and her preparation consists of hardening herself, of making herself cold and formidable. One day Mr. Speed drunkenly stumbles to her steps, and instead of taking pity on his helplessness—as her father or brother would have done—she calls the police and has him taken away, after which she never sees him again. She has conquered her fears of the male world through the assumption of a cruel authority, and, knowing now how to deal with frightening situations, she will obviously lead a life henceforth of both sternness and sterility.

There seems little, then, that is "modern" about this story. Female frigidity, as we have suggested, is no longer considered a noteworthy topic for fiction, and critics will reject as outdated a topic in a contemporary writer that they will admire in a Victorian. Not that they will reject it specifically for that reason; there are still too many critical absolutes that preclude judgments based on subject matter. Yet these judgments are made, if only unconsciously. As a further example, critics today would be likely to find naïve—and therefore "popular"— a contemporary story exalting war or praising those who die for their country. Such topics are staples of literature of other eras, but at the moment, in America, this kind of expression is not encouraged. We do give heed, in other words, to the specifics of subject matter.

So what can we do with "A Spinster's Tale" ? Let us say that we wish to bestow true establishment status on Taylor and that therefore we must find relevance in this story, as we must in the whole canon. If the heroine's sexual problem is no longer relevant, then there are other ways in which we can deal with this story. We can look for other, perhaps more subtle, nuances that do not seem quite so distant from our sensibilities. It is patronizing, perhaps, to do so, but the practice is nevertheless standard; it is a version of the old search for universals in human nature—or, to be more accurate, for the particular concepts that are accepted as universal at a particular time. Let us turn this story, then, into a hunting ground for the concepts that happen to please us; literary criticism has rarely done otherwise.

# Critical Essay #6

For an initial example of the story's "modernness," we can point to its case-history approach. Contemporary readers are sufficiently clinically oriented to respond to a story of how-she-got-thatway; the title indicates what she is—a spinster—and the narrative documents the process. The heroine first becomes aware of Mr. Speed, for instance, only after her mother dies, when she can no longer withdraw into feminine protection against the opposite sex. And we see that she had been taught already to think of the opposite sex with less than charity; one recollection of the mother is her words to her son who had come home drunk: "Son, I'd rather see you in your grave." Moreover, the mother had died after a stillbirth; her death, then, is associated with her sexual function, or with what might be considered male imposition on the female. The mother had been defeated by the male world, for in succumbing to an illness connected with or exacerbated by childbearing, she had clearly not been able to deal with masculine imposition. That is one matter that the daughter would learn. She knew intuitively, in fact, that "Mr. Speed was a permanent and formidable figure in my life which I would be called upon to deal with." Her main tie to the masculine world had been her older brother, but in him, too, as he develops into manhood, she sees what she must defend against. She realizes that "in my brother and father I saw something of Mr. Speed. And I knew that it was more than a taste for whiskey they had in common."

So, as she grows up, she prepares herself. She ventures into the servants' and men's bathrooms, finding even a fascination in filth and in "wet shaving brushes and leather straps and red rubber bands." She assumes a more domineering role in the household than previously and manages to fire the cook completely on her own. And her fears now diminish: "I could no longer be frightened by my brother with a mention of runaway horses"; she has long associated runaway animals with Mr. Speed, with drunkenness, and with masculinity, but now she feels that she can deal with them. She has grown up, become "mature"—but her maturity, her womanhood, is formidable and cruel.

We have traced, then, the case history of a spinster. But we have also found a psychological matter more "modern" than sexual hysteria—an insight into the connection between fear and cruelty; this is a subject highly congenial to current discussion. The girl's father, we realize, has no fear of Mr. Speed, and he never would have taken the step of calling the police, an action which apparently resulted in drastic consequences for Mr. Speed. She, however, acted from fear, and her deed was one of personal cruelty and what might be called— since Mr. Speed's civil liberties were undoubtedly curtailed or suspended—"political" repression. She admits, "I was frightened by the thought of the cruelty which I found I was capable of," and yet, "my hatred and fear of what he had stood for in my eyes has never left me." Here, in the connection made between fear and cruelty and between fear and repression, is an insight which appeals to readers today; we always delight in the expression of one of our very own "universals." The story, then, is "relevant" after all.

There are further insights that come close to the sexual problems of the girl and yet approach contemporary issues as well. If, as seems true today, the distinction between

male and female roles has been diminished, this story, on the other hand, shows the roles in their full flowering—which is a cause, of course, of the heroine's problems. In this story of how-she-got-that-way, her fears of the male result from the great gulf she has been taught to observe between masculine and feminine values and behavior, and from the widely differing roles that are assigned as a result of this gulf. Her father speaks of "Old Speed" to her brother in terms of a bad example, and to her uncles in terms of amusement; yet in her mind, "these designations were equally awful, both spoken in tones that were foreign to my father's manner of addressing me." Her father, in other words, speaks to people in terms of their roles; and his manner toward men, even though it varies from person to person, is far different from his manner toward women. At another time her father discusses the possible coming of war and recalls the troops that gathered before the Spanish-American conflict—"hundreds of men in the Union Depot." The girl reacts as we might expect:

Thinking of all those men there, that close together, was something like meeting Mr. Speed in the front hall. I asked my father not to talk about war, which seemed to him a natural enough request for a young lady to make.

She feels threatened by the thought of such unmitigated masculinity, but her request to her father is considered natural for much more general reasons—because it is inappropriate for ladies to be exposed to anything serious or unpleasant. The great distinction in sexual roles is seen as axiomatic at this time and in this society, and the story tells the consequences.

Indeed she begins to conceive her role *vis-à-vis* men even more drastically. She feels that she must actively learn to handle situations involving masculinity. Her feminine life style, as she sees it, can be preserved not by ignoring or avoiding the dreaded opposite life style, but by learning how to defend against it. The battle of the sexes—the rigid distinguishing of roles and the resultant impasses and irreconcilabilities—is shown in full force in this story.

So do we have here—as a final "modernism"— the story of the rise of a no longer fearful but, rather, fear-inducing female? Does this story coincide with a point in a psychological model that indicates the shift from female fears of the male to male fears of the female? Has not the heroine come to resemble the formidable and threatening woman that is found in much current literature? Might not Taylor's exemplum of how-she-got-that-way be considered an historical landmark on the road to how-*he*-got-that-way?

All these interpretations are perhaps too facile— and patronizing—in the attempt to fit a story to currently fashionable notions. For the story ends, after all, with the heroine obviously on the path to spinsterhood. The story has approached a seemingly modern subject, but the final sentence nevertheless seems rather dated: "It was only the other night that I dreamed I was a little girl on Church Street again and that there was a drunk horse in our yard." This makes a neat symbolic summary of the story, but the symbol is quaint; the dream and the drunken horse are too patently Freudian, too out-of-date for a

contemporary society that has rejected Freud's dicta on women and that finds female fear of the male a little preposterous.

So have readers unconsciously evaluated this story on the basis of its subject matter? Is it true that Henry James, because he was born seventy-five years earlier than Peter Taylor, can say things that Taylor cannot? Must Taylor automatically find a different topic? The answer is, in part, yes. This story, despite skillful telling, may well be headed for oblivion, even though a certain recognition for it has been granted the author. There are many reasons for the burying of thousands of stories published in our periodicals of the last quarter-century, but—our critical absolutes notwithstanding—an important reason is the vagaries of our taste in subject matter and in treatment.

**Source:** Jan Pinkerton, "The Vagaries of Taste and Peter Taylor's 'A Spinster's Tale,'" in *Kansas Quarterly,* Vol. 9, No. 2, Spring, 1977, pp. 81-5.

# Topics for Further Study

Watch the 1942 Orson Welles film *The Magnificent Ambersons* or read John Cheever's short story "The Fourth Alarm." These two works, like "A Spinster's Tale," make references to the advent of automobiles and to the general themes of changing technology and changing times. Compare and contrast how each work addresses changes in society or technology.

View D. W. Griffith's 1915 film *The Birth of a Nation* or the classic 1939 film *Gone With the Wind.* How do these films depict the South? How do these films depict women and African Americans? What similarities are there between the character Scarlett O'Hara, in *Gone With the Wind* and Elizabeth in "A Spinster's Tale"? What are the major differences?

Read Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings,* a nonfiction memoir of growing up in Arkansas from an African American perspective. Compare some of Angelou's experiences with Elizabeth's. Despite their racial differences, are there any similarities between Elizabeth and Angelou?

# Compare and Contrast

**1914:** At the time the story is set, the American South is strictly segregated. African Americans are denied opportunities to work challenging, lucrative jobs; as a result, many work as servants.

**Today:** As a result of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s, many discriminatory laws and customs are challenged and eliminated. For example, laws that support segregation no longer exist; African Americans have every legal right and opportunity to pursue jobs and housing.

**1914:** The automobile is a rare sight outside of major cities. Yet with the growing popularity of automobile travel, people are able to move around faster and more efficiently.

**Today:** Automobiles have become prevalent in American society. With the car culture comes the traffic jams, red lights, suburban sprawl, and highway accidents.

**1914:** American culture dictates that women marry and have children; because Elizabeth never marries, she is considered strange and outside of the norm. In general, to be a spinster is something to be avoided.

**Today:** Many traditional values do not carry the social stigma they once did. For example, the marriage rate has dropped consistently throughout the decade; cohabitation is accepted and even encouraged. The concept of spinsterhood is considered archaic and outdated.

# What Do I Read Next?

Considered a masterpiece, *The Diary of Anne Frank* is an actual diary written by a young Jewish girl before she was taken away by the Nazis during World War II. Some of the more memorable passages in the diary are about the difficulties of growing up and dealing with family members.

William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) depicts the changing landscape of the American South in the early 1900s.

*Conversations with Peter Taylor,* published in 1987, is a collection of interviews with the author of "A Spinster's Tale." These pieces provide insight into Taylor's thought processes as an artist. Also, *Parting the Curtains* (1994) is a book of interviews with many Southern writers, including Taylor, Eleanor Ross, Shelby Foote, Maya Angelou, Pat Conroy, and William Styron.

There are many studies of Taylor's life and work, including most recently, *Critical Essays on Peter Taylor* (1993). Another critical study, *Southern Accents: The Fiction of Peter Taylor,* written by Catherine Clark Graham, was published in 1994.

# Further Study

Brown, Ashley. "The Early Fiction of Peter Taylor," in *The Sewanee Review,* Vol. LXX, No. 4, Autumn, 1962, pp. 588-602.

Brown perceives Mr. Speed as a symbol of both Elizabeth's fear of men and the breakdown of civilized behavior, and considers family dissolution as a key theme in "A Spinster's Tale."

Creekmore, Hubert. Review in *The New York Times Book Review,* March 21, 1948, pp. 6.

An early review praising Taylor's first collection, particularly his depiction of the deterioration of urban family life.

Pinkerton, Jan. "The Non-Regionalism of Peter Taylor," *The Georgia Review,* Vol. 24, No. 4, Winter, 1970, pp. 432-40.

Pinkerton argues that Taylor's story possesses universal themes that transcend its Southern setting.

Robison, James Curry. "The Early Period," in *Peter Taylor: A Study of the Short Fiction,* Twayne, 1988, pp. 19-31.

Robison focuses on the character of Betsy in "A Spinster's Tale" and her rejection of sex, death, and the passage of time. He also examines the relationship between narrative technique and theme in the story.

Warren, Robert Penn. Introduction to *A Long Fourth, and Other Stories,* Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1948, pp. vii-x.

Warren praises Taylor's first collection, maintaining that "A Spinster's Tale" is a superior example of Taylor's attempt to depict Southern family life through a first-person narrator.

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**Introduction**

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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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