The Slump Study Guide

The Slump by John Updike

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.

Contents

The Slump Study Guide....1

Contents....2

Introduction....3

Author Biography....4

Plot Summary....5

Detailed Summary & Analysis....7

Characters....9

Themes....11

Style....13

Historical Context....15

Critical Overview....17

Criticism....18

Critical Essay #1....19

Critical Essay #2....22

Critical Essay #3....24

Critical Essay #4....26

Critical Essay #5....27

Adaptations....32

Topics for Further Study....33

Compare and Contrast....34

What Do I Read Next?....35

Further Study....36

Bibliography....37

Copyright Information....38

Introduction

In "The Slump," John Updike uses the national pastime, baseball, as the setting to explore one individual's frustration with the world. The story is told by a professional ballplayer who finds himself, for no identifiable reason, unable to hit as well as he once did. He thinks about why this might be, but not very deeply; for the most part, he accepts this slump as his fate and considers what it says about life in general. The story depicts the superstitious nature of athletes in the way that its narrator hopes for better days without having any hope that anything he can do would make his luck return.

Readers can see in "The Slump" the raw talent that has made Updike one ofAmerica's most respected writers for over a half century. The story is meticulously detailed, with sharp observations of even the most seemingly irrelevant actions, raising them to the level of importance. It achieves a philosophical depth that most stories only aspire to. It is, however, very unlike most of Updike's fiction. A typical Updike story plays out in relationships, examining the social expectations that surround most couples. In "The Slump," however, the narrator's relationship with his wife is described, but it is not an integral part of the story. Updike is a master at showing human interaction, and here he shows that he can be just as effective when writing an extended monologue.

"The Slump" was originally published in *Esquire* in 1968. It is currently available in the author's 1972 collection, *Museums & Women,* and is frequently reprinted in anthologies.

Author Biography

John Hoyer Updike was born on March 18, 1932. He was raised inShillington, Pennsylvania, the only child of Wesley Updike and Linda Grace Hoyer Updike. Updike's father was a mathematics teacher at the local high school and supported his family, which included the author's maternal grandparents, on a meager salary. When John Updike was thirteen, his family could no longer afford to live in Shillington and moved to a broken-down farmhouse ten miles outside of town. In 1950, Updike enteredHarvard University on a full scholarship. He was active in the school's literary scene, including being editor of the *Harvard Lampoon.* Before Updike graduated in 1954, he had met and married Mary Pennington, who was to be his wife for twenty-four years, and sold his first story to the *New Yorker.*

Updike was inOxford, England, in 1955, attending the Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art, when he was contacted by the distinguished author E. B. White, who asked him to come to work for the *New Yorker.* He moved his family toManhattan. Though his writing successfully complemented the magazine's cosmopolitan style, Updike feared that living in the big city would drain his talent, so, after less than two years, when his second child was born, he left his salaried position and moved to Massachusetts, continuing to contribute to the *New Yorker* frequently.

Away fromNew York City, Updike's writing career prospered. He published a book of poetry in 1958 that failed to attract any critical attention, but his first novel, *The Poorhouse Fair,* was a finalist in for the National Book Award in 1959. That same year, one of Updike's stories was reprinted in *Best American Short Stories of 1959,* and he was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship. For the next few decades, Updike published at least one book every year and was awarded many major literary awards. He quickly became recognized as one of the preeminent American stylists and a chronicler of the suburban landscape that developed across the country after the end of World War II. Updike is among the nation's most eminent writers in at least four genres: novels, short stories, poetry, and essays. Updike has won many prestigious awards in each of these fields, including the National Book Critics Circle Award, the American Book Award, the PEN/Malamud Memorial Prize, the Caldecott Medal, and several Pulitzer Prizes. His most famous body of work is the ambitious "Rabbit" tetralogy, a series of novels that started in 1960 with *Rabbit, Run* and returned to the same central character roughly every ten years, with *Rabbit Redux* in 1971, *Rabbit Is Rich* in 1981, and *Rabbit at Rest* in 1990.

Updike continues to write and publish fiction and poetry. His work continues to appear frequently in the *New Yorker,* with which he has enjoyed an ongoing relationship since he was in his early twenties, and in the*Atlantic.*

Plot Summary

When "The Slump" begins, its narrator, a professional baseball player, has already been experiencing trouble with his hitting. The opening line goes right past the subject of a batting slump, leaving readers to understand the subject matter from the story's title, and starts immediately with guesses about what might be causing the problem. The first topic that the narrator suggests is "reflexes," which his coach and the press assume to be causing his problem. He explains that he does not think it is caused by reflexes, though. As evidence for why he discounts this theory, he explains that the night before his wife surprised him in their bedroom with a rubber gorilla mask and he jumped under the bed in less than a second□she had a stopwatch ready and timed his reaction.

He remembers how easy it used to be for him to hit before falling into this slump, how the pitched ball seemed to float in the air before his eyes so that he could see every detail about it clearly. Now, though, the ball is obscured in a cloud, a "spiral of vagueness." He paraphrases the Danish philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard, as saying that "You can't see a blind spot." Aware that his hitting is his strong point as a ballplayer, he reflects on the likelihood, which he has already seen reported in a newspaper, that his team will try to trade him.

One good thing about being unable to hit is that he feels less pressure. He recalls how he used to leave home for the stadium and as he drew closer and closer, he could feel the butterflies in his stomach growing. He thought of himself as a thief, and walking through the corridors to the locker room, he imagined that he was being taken to the electric chair. It seemed like a dream, then, that players he had looked up to all his life recognized him. The whole experience of being on the team had been so amazing to him that he was constantly nervous□"by the time I got into the cage, I couldn't remember if I batted left or right."

Since the slump, however, the pre-game nervousness is gone. He drives to the stadium singing along with the radio, ignores the fans on the street, strides into the stadium, and performs perfectly in the batting cage before the game. When he steps up to the plate to bat, however, he is overcome with self-consciousness and unable to hit at all.

He describes his situation as "panic hunger." It is not the kind of hunger that drives him to achieve what he needs to sustain himself, which is what his detractors say he has lost as he has grown successful. He compares panic hunger to the intensity that a child puts into trying to catch a ball, becoming so consumed with the idea of doing well that he closes his eyes as the ball approaches. He tries to force himself to keep his eyes open, to look at something off in the distance (the example he gives is "some nuns in far left field"), but his eyes keep closing.

The slump that has affected his hitting has affected other parts of his life, as well. He avoids intimate contact with his wife, although he knows that it disappoints and angers her. He rides the lawn mower around the lawn so often that the grass is all dead. Filled with inexplicable dread, he is afraid to see his children trying at baseball. When he goes to Florida with the team, the repetitive sameness of wave after wave hitting the beach reminds him of the endless succession of batting opportunities that he endures in his profession, each one following the others with no meaning or differentiation. He suspects that reading Kierkegaard might lead him to the answer to his dilemma, but when he tries it, he finds himself unable to read: the pages of the book *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* all look blank, an emptiness that he describes as metaphorically resembling "the rows of deep seats in the shade of the second deck on a Thursday afternoon, just a single ice-cream vendor sitting there, nobody around to sell to, a speck of white in all that shade, old Søren Sock himself, keeping his goods cool."

In the end, he reflects on the indignity of his situation. He cannot even get on base by being hit by a pitch because the pitchers do not fear him enough to throw the ball near him; instead, they throw it right up the middle of the plate, where it would be easy to hit if he were not in a slump. For a moment, while thinking about the catchers laughing at him behind his back, he remembers "the old sure hunger" that drove him in his hitting in the old days, but the memory fades quickly, leaving him hopeless again. He is unable to believe in the external things about the game, citing specifically the stadium and the batting averages that are used to measure a batter's success. "[J]ust *you* are there," he muses, "and it's not enough."

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

As this story begins, the narrator – a professional baseball player – is searching for a way to explain his current batting slump. While his coach and the newspapers attribute the slump to bad reflexes, the narrator does not believe this to be the case. He tells us that in an attempt to test this theory, his wife recently walked into their bedroom wearing a rubber gorilla mask, which sent him under the bed in six-tenths of a second.

Instead, the narrator attributes his slump to not being able to see the ball clearly. He recalls being able to see nearly every detail on the ball as it moved toward him: the stitches, the pitcher's thumbprint, even the manufacturer's guarantee. Now, however, the ball appears to have a cloud surrounding it, making it more difficult to see. The narrator also wonders if he is taking his eye off the ball at the last minute so that he can imagine what it will be like to round second base or slap the third base coach's hand. In any case, he knows that his current batting slump may result in his trade to another team.

As he contemplates the possible reasons for his slump, the narrator tells us that ironically, since the slump began, he actually feels less anxious before games. Before the slump, he would begin to get anxious as soon as he pulled into the stadium parking lot and this nervousness would increase in intensity as he prepared to take batting practice. Now, however, he confidently strides into the stadium, and during batting practice, he is easily able to hit the ball. However, once the game begins and he finds himself in the on-deck circle, he finds himself almost paralyzed with anxiety.

While some criticize him for not being hungry enough, the narrator tells us he now feels a kind of panic hunger. He compares his current state with that of a young child attempting to catch a ball: as the ball comes closer, the child usually closes his eyes. Similarly, when the narrator approaches the plate, he feels as though his eyes are closed and that he must force himself to see.

The narrator tells us that the slump has not only affected his professional life, it has had an impact on his personal life as well. He has stopped being intimate with his wife, compulsively mows the lawn to the point where the grass has turned brown, and is afraid to watch his children play baseball. He also tells us that while he used to enjoy spending time in Florida during the pre-season training period, the sun now seems like a fly ball he is about to lose track of and the waves never seem to stop pounding the shore. Additionally, when he tried to read a book, all he was able to see were lines of print, no words.

The narrator thinks that perhaps if he were "beaned" – hit by a pitch – he would break out of his slump. He recalls Joe DiMaggio's notorious slump that was broken after he followed his manager's suggestion to get drunk one evening. However, he knows that if he is not hitting, the pitches will never come close enough to hit him. As he settles into the batter's box, he can almost hear the catcher laughing at him. For just a moment, he is able to see the ball clearly: the stitches, the pitcher's thumbprint, even the manufacturer's guarantee, before it blurs. In searching for a possible explanation for this, the narrator concludes that nothing associated with baseball is important. "Just you are there," he concludes, "and it's not enough."

Analysis

John Updike's short story "The Slump" is told in the first person from the point of view of a professional baseball player who is in the midst of a batting slump. We do not know the identity of the player, the team he plays for or even how long he has been in this slump. Nonetheless, the author has given us a few clues that imply that at some point, this player was famous. Recall from the beginning of the story when he tells us that even the newspapers are speculating as to the cause of his slump.

Several clues imply that this particular player may be nearing retirement; the description he offers of his profile while waiting on the on-deck circle as an "old hawk," the hint of gray in his wife's hair, the suggestion that his reflexes have slowed down, and his inability to clearly see the ball as it nears home plate are all indications that he may be nearing the end of his playing days.

Based on this analysis then, the central theme to this story is denial. The baseball player, while at a loss to explain why he has not been able to hit the ball, seems nevertheless to ignore the signs that he has passed his prime. However, while he outwardly seems to be in denial, there are indications that perhaps deep down he knows that he is near the end of his playing days. The most significant indication is his description of the stadium grass before the onset of his slump: "the grass seemed too precious to walk on." In contrast, when he is in the midst of the slump, he repeatedly mows his lawn until the grass finally turns brown, an indication that it is dead. In killing the grass, the narrator seems to be saying that he knows that his career is over.

Finally, while this story is told from the point of view of an aging baseball player, its message is applicable to nearly every aspect of life, that is, sometimes there are not specific reasons why things happen, rather, things happen because it is simply their time to occur.

Characters

The Ballplayer

The narrator of this story is a professional baseball player. Readers are not given his name or told what league he plays for. They do know, from the very first sentence, that he is famous enough to have his hitting problem discussed in the newspapers. When he was at the top of his game, children waited around the parking lot of the baseball stadium, just trying to get a glimpse of him. He has an attendant to park his car for him at the stadium. Also, the fact that the ballplayers who were famous when he was young now know his name is one more sign that he is famous and that he may have been a star player before his slump began.

Now that he is afflicted with his batting problem, he does not spend his time studying batting technique. Instead, his thoughts about what has happened to him are philosophical. He is a well-read man, with enough education to be familiar with the Van Allen belt and with the writings of Kierkegaard. The connection between his intellectual musings and his slump is made fairly explicit in the story, particularly where his rest on the beach in Florida is associated with losing, which turns immediately to his unsuccessful attempt to read philosophy. It is not clear whether his philosophical nature is actually causing the slump, forcing him to be too conscious of things that he should do naturally, or if he is turning to philosophy as a way of dealing with the fact that his batting is off.

The slump has affected his entire life. He has no physical contact with his wife anymore, causing her to walk right past him "with a hurt expression and a flicker of gray above her temple." He does not play with his children anymore as he did in the past. Opponents no longer fear him, and he himself can no longer enjoy simple pleasures that used to mean much to him. On the other hand, he does have more freedom: In the past, he used to turn down the volume on his radio as he approached the stadium because he was a role model for the children, but now it does not matter who hears him; they would not care anyway. And his slump continues because he cannot care enough about his own performance to make them care.

The Ballplayer's Wife

Trying to help the narrator break out of his slump, his wife tried shocking him, on the night before this story was narrated, by coming into the bedroom wearing a rubber gorilla mask that belonged to one of their children. The fact that she did this as an attempt at therapy is clear from the fact that she brought a stopwatch with her to measure in tenths of a second how long it took him to react. That she thought to time him, and that she thought of this idea to test his reflexes at all, shows that she understands the life of a ballplayer.

She is only mentioned in the narrative in the context of the gorilla mask incident, which comes up a second time when the narrator is talking about dread. He mentions his wife in a mask as an almost erotic image, mentioning that in the old days he would have taken fast, decisive action if she has approached him in such an exotic way; now, she goes away disappointed. And he spends more time outside by himself on the lawnmower than he did before the slump. The third time he mentions the gorilla mask, he thinks that she was probably hinting at his need for a change of pace. Since his interpretation of her action changes throughout the story, with no new input from her, it is difficult for readers to tell her real intentions from those that he assigns to her.

The Coach

The ballplayer's coach is only mentioned in the first sentence, as agreeing with the newspapers and the fans in thinking that the slump is caused by "reflexes." He is conspicuous by his absence: Since coaches are supposed to help athletes play better, the fact that this player in the middle of a slump has so little to say about his coach, and so much to say about Kierkegaard, indicates to readers that his problem stems from philosophical causes.

Themes

Futility

At the end of this story, the narrator notes that he finds it hard to care about his slump. Although he does not care about his own existence, he cannot force himself to believe in the importance of baseball, either. This is given as the final clue to what is bothering him, but it cannot be read as the only or most pervasive cause. He does, in fact, realize the value of some things throughout the story. He longs for the feeling of being important to his wife and children, and he fondly remembers the adulation of fans and other players. He can see things that make life worth living, but he does not know how to attain those things. It is not life but action that he finds futile.

In some way, this speaker seems to feel that futility is a liberating force, freeing him to act only when he knows that nothing important will come of it. He speaks of the tension that followed him from home to the ballpark when he was hitting well, how he had to behave in a certain way for his fans and for the other players. During the slump, though, he drives along, singing, and feels no compulsion to talk to his fans. A telling detail is how well he can hit the ball□just not during a game. "[I]n the batting cage I own the place," he says, noting that hits come as easily to him "as dropping dimes down a sewer." When there is nothing to be gained, his hitting is fine, but when his batting is supposed to count, he realizes that there is no ultimate point, that what he is doing is futile.

Self-Knowledge

At the very start of this story, the ballplayer muses on the fact that everyone who observes his slump says that it is a matter of "reflexes." His inability to hit the ball the way he used to seems to everyone else to be caused by too much thought, as reflexes, like instinct, rely on action that takes place automatically. Though he does not personally accept this theory, he does mention it again in the last paragraph: "for a second of reflex," he says, "I see it like it used to be." In that second, everything seems the way it did back when he was hitting well. He is in control of the situation, paradoxically, only when his body is acting reflexively and his mind does not control it.

Though thought might be holding him back, he knows that reflex alone is not the answer to his problem. He does have reflexes, as evinced by his ability to move quickly when his wife sneaks up on him. When he is forced to move without thinking, he can move as well as ever. His problem is that he cannot not think while playing baseball. He knows the game too well to move reflexively, and he knows himself too well, is aware of how he will react in every situation. This knowledge of himself makes it unlikely that he could ever again act out of pure reflex on the baseball diamond. Pure reflex is only for organisms that do not have the capacity to be self-conscious. As this ballplayer's knowledge of his own situation has grown, he has lost the ability to act as a non-conscious creature would.

Baseball

There is great irony in the fact that this person's philosophical crisis occurs in the game of baseball. Fans of the game consider baseball to be one of the most intellectual sports, requiring strategy and nerve, in addition to physical prowess. Still, its status asAmerica's national pastime means that millions of people enjoy the game without giving much thought to its mental aspect. Like any part of mass culture, baseball is something that does not require much intellectual activity to watch, and so it would at first seem to be an unlikely platform for exploring issues of such depth.

The very fact that there is a common word, "slump," to describe an inability to hit the ball, a condition that is otherwise unexplainable, is a clear sign of baseball's philosophical side. Although many baseball fans would recoil from the idea of studying Kierkegaard, the nature of the sport is such that it addresses the very same issues about the human condition that philosophers have addressed for centuries.

Existentialism

The nineteenth-century philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, who is referred to several times in this story, is credited with having coined the phrase "leap of faith" to describe the philosophical position of having to act even when one knows that action will be futile. He is recognized as being the precursor to the philosophy of existentialism, which is prevalent throughout "The Slump."

At the heart of Kierkegaard's philosophy is the concept of subjectivity. In his book *Concluding Unscientific Postscript,* which is mentioned in this story, Kierkegaard explains the tension between objective reality and subjective reality. According to him, these two concepts will always be at odds with one another and can never be reconciled. In "The Slump," this paradox shows itself in the subjectivity of the individual player and the objectivity of the team that he is a member of, as well as in the subjectivity of the intellect versus the obj ectivity of physical activity. Another of Kierkegaard's books, *Fear and Trembling,* stresses the dread that is a part of the human condition. This dread comes from realizing that one's fate is always one's choice, even though it might not seem so at times. A ballplayer in a slump, for instance, might look for all sorts of explanations in order to avoid accepting the responsibility for it.

These themes in Kierkegaard's writing carried over into the philosophy of existentialism in the twentieth century. Because of its focus on the balance between the individual's actions and his or her circumstances, existentialism was clearly expressed in literature, and in the 1940s and 1950s a wave of French writers, led by Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, produced plays and fiction that popularized the existential worldview. In "The Slump," Updike uses his protagonist's awareness of Kierkegaard to draw attention to the existential dilemma at the heart of a ballplayer's inability to hit.

Style

Monologue

This story is constructed as one continuous monologue given by the ballplayer experiencing the slump to an unidentified audience. Unlike most stories, it is not constructed in individual scenes, and it does not contain dialogue between individual characters. Instead, all of the action occurs in the head of the speaker. It is not *shown* to readers but is rather *told* to them.

Narrative

Because the action is set so deeply within this one person's consciousness, the narrative flow of the story shifts freely, more like a person's rambling thoughts than like a structured story. In some cases, this can confuse readers, making them feel that they have stepped into the middle of a situation that has not been adequately explained. For instance, the first paragraph begins, "They say reflexes," without providing any background about who "they" are or why they say this. The second paragraph starts off with "the flutters," as if readers should know what those are. This gives the impression of a narrator who is allowing his mind to wander freely, taking up issues with which he himself is familiar without bothering to explain them to an audience.

Symbol

Though a baseball player's slump is in many ways unique to his particular situation, Updike talks about it in such a general way that readers can draw connections to many different aspects of life. Anyone in any field can know the feeling of being unable to produce, of knowing all the right steps to take but still not achieving the desired results, and of wanting to let instinct, or reflex, guide his or her actions, only to be disappointed with the results. That the narrator of this story is not given a name and is vague about his circumstances leads readers to understand that the narrator is not meant to be thought of as a real human being—that he exists as a symbol for all people facing the sort of existential dilemma that he faces.

In particular, it is easy to see how baseball is used in this story to symbolize Updike's own profession, writing. Not only do the anxieties associated with a batting slump apply to the emotions that a writer with writer's block faces, but the career of the ballplayer in the story parallels Updike's own career. When this story was written, Updike had been famous for almost ten years and was trying to write in new styles. The ballplayer, intimidated by public scrutiny, wishes for "a change of pace" as something that might possibly help him get over his intense self-consciousness, the way that a writer might tackle new subject matter or a new style to get over the sense that he has nothing more to say.

Tone

The rambling, stream-of-consciousness structure of this story leans it in the direction of confusion, as readers are not certain at any time where the narrator is going. He picks up new subjects as they come to him and drops hints about what is on his mind, without feeling any responsibility to explain what he means. The lack of clarity takes some getting used to, forcing readers to adjust their expectations of what a story should do, to accommodate Updike's style.

Readers who are uncomfortable with the confusing aspects of the story are nonetheless compelled by the tone of the work to trust that it does have something to offer. Updike gives this baseball story a very elevated, specific vocabulary. He uses complex sentence structures that indicate intelligence and care. In its tone, this story shows readers that the story is being told by someone who understands what he is talking about, even though the situation that he describes is one of emotional instability. Combined, they render an accurate portrait of a talented individual who finds himself unable to exercise his talent.

Historical Context

According to common belief, baseball was invented by Abner Doubleday, a nineteen-year-old West Point cadet, atCooperstown, New York, in 1839. Few historians consider that more than a myth, though. Doubleday did in fact set down standardized rules, but the game had been played for decades before his involvement. It is mentioned, for instance, in Jane Austin's novel *Northanger Abbey,* published after her death in 1816, and poet Oliver Wendell Holmes mentioned that he played the game in 1829, before his graduation from Harvard. The game's mysterious origin is just one of the many bits of folklore that have grown up around it. The acceptance of the Doubleday story is a fitting symbol of the relatively young nation's need for a prefabricated tradition. Though it is clearly a derivative of the English game of cricket, baseball has always been thought of as a metaphor forAmerica.

In the 1840s and 1850s, baseball was popular throughout the New York area. It spread throughout both theUnion and the Confederacy during the Civil War (1861-1865), which set the stage for the formation of the National League in 1876. Once it was realized that there was a profit to be made by exhibiting professional baseball games, other leagues formed: the American Association in 1881, and the Players' League in 1990. National League managers worked either to bankrupt the other leagues or to absorb their teams by offering other contracts, leaving it briefly the only league by 1891. They remained unchallenged until 1900, when the American League formed, mostly in cities where National League teams had folded and left their fans embittered.

To limit competition between the two leagues and to ensure that they did not violate each other's interests, the American League and the National League joined together through an agreement, creating the Major League Baseball Commission. As a result of this agreement, the team owners were able to control the game's profits throughout most of the twentieth century. Although it was the players with whom the fans identified, whom they cheered in good times and jeered in bad times, the players themselves actually had little control over their lives. They were bought, sold, and traded at the whims of the teams' owners. The two leagues only had eight teams each, and few other countries besidesAmerica were interested in the game, so professional ballplayers were very limited regarding where they could ply their trade.

Over the decades, the game's popularity rose and fell, often in step with the world around it. The year 1919 brought the infamous Black Sox Scandal, with gamblers bribing players to lose the World Series, and it also brought the Volstead Act, which outlawed the sale of liquor. Baseball gained a reputation for crime just as bootlegging led to the rise of organized crime throughout the 1920s. During the 1930s, baseball was appreciated as a relatively inexpensive diversion during the Great Depression. In the 1940s, the country turned its attention to the war inEurope, and the game itself became less worthy of attention as its bes t players left to join the service. Baseball regained its popularity during the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s with the advent of televised games.

Its iconic stature in the American culture makes baseball a fitting subject for Updike to approach with the cultural cynicism that pervaded the late 1960s. The baby boom generation, which consisted of those born inAmerica's triumphant years after World War II, was raised to be more inwardly directed than earlier generations: Not only were they free of the economic and military distractions that had engulfed earlier generations, but they were also the first generation of the new consumer culture. Advertisers drew the baby boomers' attention to finding cures for their own problems. At the same time, in the colleges and universities, which were suddenly accessible to record numbers because of government programs to pay tuition for veterans, intellectuals drew their attention to their own enlightenment. This emphasis on the individual led to a skeptical approach to revered institutions. People questioned the government's involvement inVietnam and, in fact, found that they had been lied to. Writers like Updike questioned the sexual morals that previous generations insisted on and found their repression to be psychologically harmful. The individual player, which Major League Baseball always showed as just one piece of a team, a league, and a tradition, was due the sort of psychological scrutiny that Updike gives him in "The Slump."

The first players' union was formed in 1966. It took some time, until the mid-1970s, for the union to win the right for players to successfully control their own contracts. Finally, a player was able to demand as much money as he thought he was worth or go to another team if he thought he was being treated unfairly. This caused a dramatic spike in salaries and ticket prices. As individual players won their freedom, fans' sympathies divided between those who blamed the owners and those who blamed the players for the game's troubles. The perception of major league baseball as an American institution has gradually eroded since the 1970s.

Critical Overview

John Updike has been considered one ofAmerica's most important fiction writers since the publication of his first novel, *The Poorhouse Fair,* in 1959. Critics generally categorize him as a witty writer from the *New Yorker* school, acute in his observations and accurate in his diction. His work as a novelist is well respected among his peers. A survey done by the *Sunday Times* ofLondon in 1994, asking a group of distinguished British writers who they thought was the greatest living novelist writing in English, ranked Updike second. (Saul Bellow, another American, ranked first.) James A. Schiff, who reports those survey resul ts in his book *John Updike Revisited,* goes on to list the things that Updike's detractors hold against him: "he writes about the white middle class and epitomizes the comfortably smug white male;" and "he allows his white male protagonists to think or make derogatory statements about anyone and everyone, including women, blacks, gays, and various others." Although these are certainly things that might push Updike out of favor with some critics, others legitimately point to shortcomings such as a vague hollowness to his exquisitely wrought characters. Readers tend to see different things. "The same novel," Bernard A. Schopen wrote in his essay "Faith, Morality and the Novels of John Updike," "might be hailed as a major fictional achievement and dismissed as a self-indulgence or a failure."

"The Slump" is seldom specifically mentioned in criticism of Updike's works. In part, this is because Updike has been such a prolific writer, churning out more than sixty novels, short story collections, poetry collections, and volumes of essays, that there may be space only to mention one or two of the outstanding short pieces. In addition, though, it is written in a style different from most of the author's works. Typical of these is a 1984 survey of Updike's career, for example, in which Robert Detweiler discusses the book *Museums and Women* (mentioned in his book *John Updike)* for six pages and then tacks a paragraph onto the end to cover the "Other Modes" and "Maples" sections of the book, which make up almost half the text.

One of the few critics to specifically mention this particular story is Robert M. Luscher, who mentioned it in *John Updike: A Study of the Short Fiction.* Luscher found:

The 'Other Modes' . . . fill out the volume, but vary in quality. Updike's considerable stylistic talents receive exercise as he ventures further beyond the traditional narrative, although the weight of his well-chosen words threatens to collapse the slighter subjects.

He goes on to dismiss "The Slump" as a "whimsical sketch," though he does so respectfully, making clear that nothing more should be expected of it than what it turns out to be.

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Kelly is an instructor of creative writing and literature at several Illinois colleges. In this essay, Kelly considers how readers are to approach an elusive story that seems to intentionally hide its meaning and purpose.

"The Slump" from John Updike's 1972collection *Museums and Women, and Other Stories* provides readers with a challenge. It is not clear what this piece of writing is supposed to be, only what it is not. It is not an essay or a poem and is probably not really a short story either, though that comes the closest to identifying it. In the book, it is tagged as a "mode." Since a mode is an undefined literary genre, though, identifying it as such does not help much. This is a piece that lacks character development, plot, setting, and any other element that usually builds a short story, indicating that it does not need these things. Still, if there is to be any understanding of "The Slump," then there has to be some understanding of what it is so that readers might at least guess at whether or not it is achieving what it is supposed to do.

Understanding the piece's negative nature starts with seeing its place in the book. *Museums and Women* is divided up into three sections. The first contains the title story, and, presumably, the other ones. It is not clear whether "... and Other Stories" means that *all* of the things in the book are stories or just *some* of them are, although, if there are pieces that are not stories, then the title should properly be *Museums and Women, and Other Stories, and Still Other Things.* But they are clearly not all stories. There are the initial fourteen, which, like most of Updike's works in the late 1960s and early 1970s, concern themselves with understated domestic troubles: marriage, sex, destiny, disappointment, and such. There are also five stories at the end of the book, identified as "The Maples," that are concerned with one couple, Joan and Richard Maple, whose stories Updike collected later in his career in *Too Far to Go.* Revisiting characters over and over again, bringing them back for another look at them, is another technique that is common in Updike's work, such as his multiple books about another failing athlete, "Rabbit" Angstrom, and the intellectual writer Henry Bech.

Nestled in the middle of all of these stories is the section called "Other Modes." The ambiguity of this phrase is clearly intentional. The pieces gathered under this heading have an undefined quality that either frees them from conventional expectations or devalues them, rendering them forgettable, like jokes or sketches that were never fully worked out.

The cynical view of the "Other Modes" would hold that they are orphan pieces that Updike wrote and had published in magazines around the time that he wrote the stories in this book and that they are included between its covers for no better reason than that he wrote them. Not having enough of these "mode" things to fill a book of their own, they serve in *Museums and Women* the way empty pages would, to fill up space and make the book sit more imposingly on a shelf. Harsh as this sounds, it seems to be the prevailing critical attitude. These short, experimental pieces are generally avoided by critics. There is enough in Updike's oeuvre that much can be written about his career without ever touching on this brief section of this one book. Even when talking about his work of the sixties and seventies, most writers ignore the "Other Modes." Those who get so specific as to mention this particular book cannot ignore the "Other Modes," but they focus on the pieces that can be identified as short stories and then, perhaps embarrassed, make passing mention of these undefined pieces and get off the subject as quickly as possible. It would be hard to blame them. No matter what the reason for including them in this collection, the pieces in the "Other Modes" section are, by definition, undefined, which makes them a blatant challenge to anyone reading them. "The Slump," in particular, balances between obviousness and obscurity in a way that can be maddening.

This much is known, and it is all that is known: There is a baseball player, the narrator, and he once was able to hit well but now cannot. He is intelligent and analyzes his trouble in terms of a broad range of concepts, from physics to philosophy. Specifically, he seems to think that his hitting dilemma is an existential one, as he mentions the father of existentialism, Søren Kierkegaard, several times. His understanding of his situation is enough to make him dread it but not enough to make his experiences matter to him. He may break out of his problem someday, or he may be trapped in it forever. Updike has clearly, actively, tried to make this a story that defies interpretation, just as readers and critics are inclined, by their nature, to try to interpret it.

If, for instance, this piece were about the ballplayer's marriage, then that would offer a solid enough point of reference, even though it is completely different in tone and style from Updike's other short stories about marriage of the era. It is not, though; at least, it does not seem to be. The main character's wife only shows up once in the story, for a fraction of a second, to give him a shock. And in this one appearance (the first sentence, referred to again in the fifth paragraph), she is hidden in a rubber gorilla mask. She does not qualify as an important character, but she is the closest thing this narrative comes to admitting another character into the ballplayer's world. Her attempt to break through the cloud of angst that surrounds him might not be successful, but it shows that he is not in this thing alone. The people associated with baseball□his coach, the reporters, the other players, and the fans□are pushed even farther away from the center of his consciousness. In a general way, this could be considered a "marriage" story by default, because no one else seems to reflect the narrator's mental state back upon him the way his spouse does. They do not have the daily interaction that the Maples share, but unusual circumstances require unusual actions: His wife, with her gorilla mask and stopwatch, shows a screwy sense of psychological intimacy with the narrator.

Of course, the presence of a spouse does not make "The Slump" a story about a marriage, any more than it is a story about a car, a radio, or an ice cream vendor, all of which are also mentioned in the course of the story. It only serves to give this piece some recognizable element. This is obviously what Updike was trying to avoid when he wrote it in an unconventional "mode," but it might be necessary. Clearly, the idea is that this piece intends to be considered on its own terms, and not put into a broader context; this is not, however, always practical or useful for helping it achieve its artistic purpose.

There is no forward motion in this piece nor even the sort of hidden growth that many similar experimental pieces of fiction have used to develop a character at the same time that they seem to go nowhere. Even with the talk about "dread" and "reflex" and "hunger," readers do not find out where this player's slump came from, how long it has lain upon him, or what it will take to ease him. It has to be this way when dealing with an existential dilemma, because the problem is not one that ebbs and flows; it is one of existence. And to that extent, Updike is forced by his subject matter to shun the basics of storytelling. Without putting it into a context or trying to connect it to other works that they know from the same author, readers come away from "The Slump" with nothing but a mood. Facile readers get from this nothing but the general sense that thought equals sadness.

Updike does what he can to subvert the natural inclination that readers and critics might have to label this piece. He puts it in this category called "Other Modes" to excuse it from being held to the same expectations that a short story is held to. He avoids plot; he avoids characterization; he avoids conflict. With so much negative about it, the piece can only work if it establishes an identity for itself, on its own terms. The mood is its identity: mournful, pensive, and obsessed with the works of Kierkegaard, who is expected to somehow, someday, provide the cure for this narrator's troubles. "The Slump" does not offer a portrait of this man nor even a snapshot of him□just a passing glimpse, which allows readers to absorb his problem and his thoughts on his problem, though even that is clouded because his thoughts are unclear and uncertain and presented in an uneven order. Readers who respect this piece, despite all they do not know, do so out of respect for Updike, trusting that he would not present something that fails to be worthwhile. Skeptics, though, cannot accept the value of an undefined, elusive work without making sure that it has some connection to the world at large.

Source: David Kelly, Critical Essay on "The Slump," in *Short Stories for Students,* Gale, 2004.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Updike recalls his beginnings as a writer.

My first books met the criticism that I wrote all too well but had nothing to say: I, who seemed to myself full of things to say, who had all of Shillington to say, Shillington and Pennsylvania and the whole mass of middling, hidden, troubled America to say, and who had seen and heard things in my two childhood homes, as my parents' giant faces revolved and spoke, achieving utterance under some terrible pressure of American disappointment, that would take a lifetime to sort out, particularize, and extol with the proper dark beauty. *In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea*—this odd and uplifting line from among the many odd lines of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" seemed to me, as I set out, to summarize what I had to say about America, to offer itself as the title of a continental *magnum opus* of which all my books, no matter how many, would be mere installments, mere starts at the hymning of this great roughly rectangular country severed from Christ by the breadth of the sea.

What I doubted was not the grandeur and plenitude of my topic but my ability to find the words to express it; every day, I groped for the exact terms I knew were there but could not find, pawed through the thesaurus in search of them and through the dictionary in search of their correct spelling. My English language had been early bent by the Germanic locutions of my environment, and, as my prose came to be edited by experts, I had to arbitrate between how I in my head heard a sentence go and how, evidently, it should correctly go. My own style seemed to me a groping and elemental attempt to approximate the complexity of envisioned phenomena and it surprised me to have it called luxuriant and self-indulgent; self-indulgent, surely, is exactly what it wasn't—*other*-indulgent, rather. My models were the styles of Proust and Henry Green as I read them (one in translation): styles of tender exploration that tried to wrap themselves around the things, the tints and voices and perfumes, of the apprehended real. In this entwining and gently relentless effort there is no hiding that the effort is being made in language: all professorial or critical talk of inconspicuous or invisible language struck me as vapid and quite mistaken, for surely language, printed language, is what we all know we are reading and writing, just as a person looking at a painting knows he is not looking out of a window. .. .

The writing enterprise that so engaged [my mother] presented it to me first as a matter of graphic symbols; the tangible precise indented forms of those alphabet blocks and the typewriter's smart little leap of imprintation were part of the general marvel of reproduced imagery, of comic strips and comic books and books and magazines and motion pictures. This last looks like the anomalous term in a sequence, the one that must be circled on the aptitude exam, but in fact, in that pre televis ion Thirties world, the world of the movies and the world of the popular press were so entwined, and the specific world of Walt Disney so promiscuously generated animated cartoons and cartoon strips and children's books and children's toys, that it all seemed one art. The projector in effect printed with its beam of light the film upon the screen, and the stylized activities one saw there were being simultaneously read in a thousand theatres. A potentially infinite duplication was the essence, an essence wed for me to the smell of inked paper, dead pulped paper quickened into life by the stamped image of Dick Tracy or Captain Easy or Alley Oop; the very crudities and flecked imperfections of the process and the technical vocabulary of pen line and crosshatching and benday fascinated me, drew me deeply in, as perhaps a bacteriologist is drawn into the microscope and a linguist into the teeming niceties of a foreign grammar. . ..

My subsequent career carries coarse traces of its un-ideal origins in popular, mechanically propagated culture. The papery self-magnification and immortality of printed reproduction—a mode of self-assertion that leaves the cowardly perpetrator hidden and out of harm's way—was central to my artistic impulse; I had no interest in painting or sculpting, in creating the unique beautiful object, and have never been able to sustain interest in the rarefied exercise of keeping a journal. I drew, in black and white, exploring the minor technical mysteries of lettering nibs and scratchboard, of washes and benday, and then I drifted, by way of Ogden Nash and Phyllis McGinley and Morris Bishop and Arthur Guiterman, into light verse, and very slowly—not until college age, really—into the attempt to fabricate short stories. The idea of writing a novel came even later and presented itself to me, and still does, as *making a book;* I have trouble distinguishing between the functions of a publisher and those of a printer. The printer, in my naïve sense of literary enterprise, is the solid fellow, my only real partner, and everyone else a potentially troublesome intermediary between him and myself. My early yearnings merged the notions of print, Heaven, andManhattan (a map of which looks like a type tray). To be in print was to be saved. And to this moment a day when I have produced nothing printable, when I have not gotten any words out, is a day lost and damned as I feel it.

Perhaps I need not be too apologetic about these lowly beginnings. The great temple of fiction has no well-marked front portal; most devotees arrive through a side door, and not dressed for worship. Fiction, which can be anything, is written by those whose interest has not crystallized short of ontology. Coming so relatively late to the novel, as the end-term of a series of reproducible artifacts any of which I would have been happy to make for a living if I could, I find I feel, after completing thirteen of them, still virginal, still excited and slightly frightened by the form's capacity. My assets as a novelist I take to be the taste for American life acquired in Shillington, a certain indignation and independence also acquired there, a Christian willingness to withhold judgment, and a cartoonist' s ability to compose within a prescribed space.

Source: John Updike, "Getting the Words Out," in *John Updike: Studies in the Short Fiction,* by Robert M. Luscher, Twayne's Studies in Short Fiction Series, No. 43, Twayne Publishers, 1993, pp. 175-77.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Larsen discusses Updike's mastery of the short story form, focusing on his "lyrical meditation."

The often acerbic critical controversy over the stature of John Updike continues, unabated by the publication of *Rabbit Redux.* It is still too early to tell, of course, how durable will be the total work of a writer so surprisingly fertile and inventive. One thing seems indisputable even now, though: his mastery of the short story form. . . .

Even after the strikingly modish *Rabbit Redux,* the short story seems as significant a part of Updike's achievement as it was for Hemingway and Fitzgerald. Many of Updike's efforts bear the hallmarks of good short fiction inAmerica since Poe: discipline, structural soundness, a unity of theme or effect, a sense of wonder at life—all results of the "care and skill" which, Poe said, the form demands. Yet they do not follow the direction taken early by Poe and almost universally since World War II, the depiction of brooding psychomachia that seems in our time to have transfixed the epigoni of Lawrence and Faulkner. Rather they are content to portray, if not (to borrow Howell's phrase) "the more smiling aspects of life," then at least those nonviolent, sublunary events that form the backbone of contemporary American experience. If Updike's characters are not happy, their frustrations drive them neither to madness nor to morbidity. The intelligent, rational, yet sensitive minds of the protagonists preclude psychopathic behavior merely as a function of their (albeit sometimes hypertrophic) observation of life's stable minutiae.

It is in the lyrical meditation that Updike allows precise intelligence and linguistic *delicatesse* their greatest play. The *lyrical* (meaning imaginative and image-filled subjective prose-poetry) *meditation* (meaning contemplation of large, problematic areas of human experience) is not a story in the conventional sense: it bears only vestigial "characterization " and makes no concessions to standard devices of "plot." It is more closely related toHawthornes "pure essays" (our guide Poe's term for such pieces as "Snow-Flakes" and "The Sisters Years") or Washington Irving's sketches (both Updike and Irving had intensive art training and hence exhibit the painterly eye) than it is to something out of *Dubliners* or *Go Down, Moses.* Ranging uninhibitedly but always anchored to a central image or concept, it is often incremental in manner: meaning accrete through small revelations as the story works toward making concrete one or more monadic abstractions. In arriving at illumination it employs what Northrop Frye calls *"dianoia,* the idea or poetic thought (something quite different, of course, from other kinds of thought) that the reader gets from the writer." In arriving there, too, it often requires of the reader a greater mental involvement than he is accustomed to giving the A+B+C plotted story. Yet it is typically neither an exhibition of stylistic dandyism nor the type of solemn lucubration that the word *meditation* sometimes implies: it is, metaphorically, a miniature geography of a region of human experience, elaborated with erudition and wit and a full measure of the author's renowned verbal magic, often partly parodic. Drawing upon story and essay and poem for its form, it succeeds in overcoming the usual limitations of its models: the storyline of the story, the prosaic logic of the essay, the often obscure ellipticality of the poem. It is a sophisticated writer's most sophisticated accomplishment. . . .

Ambiguity itself is one of the many delights of the lyrical meditation. Subsuming whole worlds of experience under the abstractions it engages, it ensures against facile exhaustion of meaning and thus more greatly regards the sedulous reader. Ignoring what are often called the "conventions" of the short story, it is an autonomous form that arrogates to itself what it needs of poetry and the essay and offers, where appropriate, universal problems in place of plot and archetypes in place of character. And in celebrating the concrete and minute in experience as a vital aspect of the human condition, it becomes perhaps the most infrangible accomplishment of an author around whom critical whirlpools will, no doubt, continue to swirl.

Source: R. B. Larsen, "R. B. Larsen," in *John Updike: Studies in the Short Fiction,* by Robert M. Luscher, Twayne' s Studies in Short Fiction Series, No. 43, Twayne Publishers, 1993, pp. 197-98.

Critical Essay #4

In the following essay excerpt, Detweiler offers a thematic analysis of the stories in Updike's Museums and Women *collection.*

Critical Essay #5

The title story (originally published in 1969) of this 1972 collection is crafted as a meditative reminiscence by the narrator-protagonist William Young (manifestly an Updike alter ego) on six significant women in his life and their connection to museums he and they have visited. The recounting of his relationships to these six merges with the imagery of four terms he finds evoked by the two key title words—museums and women—conjoined (and which also echo in his name): radiance, antiquity, mystery, and duty. The story proceeds as a developing interplay of this imagery and of the characterizations of the six women in William's life. For example, William's mother, obviously the first woman in his consciousness and the one who takes him to the local provincial museum, "like the museum" is for her adolescent son "an unsearchable mixture of knowledge and ignorance ... a mystery so deep it never formed into a question," while the woman— the sixth one of the story—who becomes his lover shares with him in a New York gallery (probably the Cooper-Hewitt) "a translucent interval" and represents to him, along with the museum, "the limits of unsearchability"—radiance and mystery paired.

Yet the orchestration of images based on the quartet of concepts, and of the depiction of the six women interacting with the narrator in museums, disguises a persistent plot line that surfaces toward the end of the story with clarity and power. The narrator's progression, in his relationship with women, has been from mother love, to adolescent infatuation (with the freckled popular girl in his school), to courtship and marriage, to esthetic reflection (on the eighteenth-century figurine of the sleeping girl), to casual erotic friendship, to an extramarital attachment. The common denominator in these is the inaccessibility, one way or another, of all of the women, and William's experience with them has centered on his desire both to know them intimately and to preserve their ineffability. His response to them has been like his passion for museums, where "we seek the untouched, the never-before-discovered, and it is their final unsearchability that leads us to hope, and return." One is not surprised, then, to learn that William has had a serious affair with the sixth woman of the story but has chosen what he perceives as duty over mystery and remains with his wife; this situation, described in the final section, constitutes the main conflict of the story's plot.

A seventh female enters the story at midpoint and reappears toward the close to help resolve via imagery what is left unresolved in the literal action: the headless marble Attic sphinx in the Boston museum, the focal point of William's college-days visit there with the girl (at this time marked by "something mute and remote") he will marry, is glimpsed again years later when William meets his lover, their affair over, in that same gallery. The sphinx combines the four qualities of radiance, antiquity, mystery, and duty that inform William's striving with women. Headless, she suggests the absence of vision that typifies William's erotic sojourn; interacting with the delicate figurine of the slumbering girl, she spells the blend of fascination, danger and premonition that William feels in his dealings with women; and finally, she contrasts in her classic and "pagan" way with the Judeo-Christian imagery that begins and ends the narrative: the imagery of a lost Eden, its portal watched by the archangel rather than a woman with a lion's body. William's mother, the first woman who guides him through the "paradisiacal grounds" redolent of Adam's articulating presence, is replaced by William's wife, who seems to him initially to be "someone guarding the gates"; and in the story's final paragraph, William leaving the museum and his abandoned lover there looks back at the building ("the motionless uniformed guard like a wittily disguised archangel") and feels the loss of innocent wonder and the first hints of jadedness from a surfeit of experiencing. Unsearchability can lead to ennui. The narrator expects "to enter more and more museums, and to be a little less enchanted by each new entrance," and that muted anticipation clearly applies to his future with women as well.

The staging of a mood of world weariness at the end of "Museums and Women" is self-conscious design on Updike's part. It recalls the epigram from Ecclesiastes 3:11-13—the biblical text famous for its evocation of "vanity"—that prefaces the collection, and it anticipates other biblical elements that mark stories such as this one. "I Will Not Let Thee Go Except Thou Bless Me," the fifth story of the collection, are also the words spoken by Jacob in Genesis 32:26 to the angel with whom he has struggled throughout the night. That account, erotic in itself, is employed here in quasi-allegorical fashion to deepen a modern tale of desire and departure. The main components of the Genesis account concern Jacob (destined to become an Israelite patriarch) on the way to his brother Esau's land, wrestling an angel of Yahweh. Because of Jacob's formidable strength the angel cannot prevail until he dislocates Jacob's thigh with a divine touch, but even then Jacob holds him in his grip until he is blessed by the angel and christened with the new name of "Israel."

The Jacob figure in Updike's story is Tom Brideson, a computer software expert about to be transferred to Texas with his wife Lou (one of Jacob's wives is Leah) and their children. The Brideson's attend a predeparture party on the eve of their journey, and there Tom encounters Maggie, his former lover. With her white dress and great white sleeves, she suggests an angel, and her struggles to escape Tom's grasp as they dance are the equivalent of Jacob's contest with the angel. Tom, ironically, does not get the "blessing" from her that he wants—some assurance that she still loves him. Instead, she tells him that he is "nothing," pronouncing his loss of identity instead of a new identity of the sort that Jacob/Israel receives.

But toward its conclusion the story leaves the Genesis model and takes an instructive turn. On the way home Lou reports that Maggie has kissed her "warmly" as she left whereas she was aloof to Tom. The story ends with:

He must not appear too interested, or seem to gloat. "Well," Tom said, " she may have been drunk."

"Or else very tired," said Lou, "like the rest of us."

What Tom takes as evidence of Maggie's continued affection for him, bestowed on his wife as surrogate, could just as well be a kiss of good riddance or an impulsive gesture of sympathy for his wife. Weariness at the end of this tale is female exasperation at the male's persistent obliviousness to the emotional distress he causes, a masculine failing that attends many of the dissolving relationships inhabiting Updike's fiction.

A more immediately lethal sexual triangle is handled in the brief story "The Orphaned Swimming Pool," barely six pages long. It begins with an elaborate simile that is expanded into an illustrative narration in the paragraphs that follow: "Marriages, like chemical unions, release upon dissolution packets of the energy locked up in their bonding." The imagery also reminds one of atomic fission and could be a punning comment on the breakdown of the "nuclear" family. At any rate, here a swimming pool becomes the literal focus of a divorce in progress, of its aftermath, and of the instability of neighborhood ties in seemingly solid suburbia. The two-year-old pool, at first the locus of the Turners' uxorial pleasures, through Updike's adoption of a scenic point of view mirrors their separation in the neglect it suffers; then as both Ted and Linda Turner vanish during this late-sixties summer, the neighbors take over the pool, and its use extends to strangers exhaustively accounted for in a comic catalogue of over thirty assorted types. This busy traffic represents the energy let free by one couple's separation. The bizarre listing is matched by the spectacle of Tom and a woman trapped inside the house, by the hordes of pool users, during a clandestine visit, so that "the root of the divorce" is spotted as the lovers flee that evening.

When Linda returns home in the fall, divorced, she sees in the pool images of her broken marriage: "The nylon divider had parted, and its two halves floated independently." Above all, "Linda saw that the pool in truth had no bottom, it held bottomless loss, it was one huge blue tear." This could be the tear of weeping or the tear of rending; both ways it signifies the grief over the end of love. Further, the ex-wife's vision of the pool as bottomless likens it to the classical abyss, symbol of humankind's worst fears. This symbolic weight is too much for such an innocuous object as a suburban swimming pool, but it works as a conveyor of the sense of disproportion and unreality that accompanies the breakdown of deep attachments.

In "The Orphaned Swimming Pool" a suburban community attends a long ritual of separation; in "I AmDying, Egypt, Dying" an international fellowship of travellers imitates a lengthy rite of passage. The thirty-three page tale is one of Updike's longest, comprehensive enough to contain the complexity of interaction between Clem, a wealthy young American from Buffalo, and more than twenty other characters accompanying him on a luxury boat trip down theNile in 1967 during the Israel-Egypt conflict. One could profitably engage the old " Ship of Fools" motif to interpret this story, for the motley group floating down the river, dressed in often outlandish costumes and indulging in antic behavior, reminds one of the mad passengers of the *stultifera navis* set adrift on European rivers during the Renaissance and constituting a popular theme of iconography. Stock elements of the Ship of Fools symbolism included a wine glass and a naked woman, and Updike reproduces these in scenes of heavy drinking and of the bikini-clad Swedish girl who desires Clem. Yet Clem himself is too sober to fit such a designation, and his neutral demeanor reminds one far more of Robert Musil's "man without qualities"□an apt *typos* for expressing the superficiality and overadaptability supposed to characterize *homo technicus.*

The words comprising the story's title are uttered twice by the dyingAntony to Cleopatra toward the close of Act IV of the Shakespearean drama, and it is sharply ironic that the passionate Roman should be made to serve as a forebear of the bland American. Clem is dying inEgypt only in the sense that he seeks to avoid, in his placid but consuming egotism, all experience that could arouse and unsettle him, and thus the voyage, although it has the trappings of a ritual journey, is for him not a passage that leads to a new stage of being. His *stasis* is stressed, and is carried by two tropes that permeate the narrative. The first (actually two tropes that interact) is the language of mirrors counterposed to that of scratching, and the other is the figuration of parentheses. Clem, of course, is the polished entity who reflects others, without an identity of his own, and the one who resists being scratched□touched in any significant way□by others. And he is the one who exists in parentheses: in a world, and with a provisionary status, that separates him from other people. But the parentheses also mean his "in between state" (a favorite Updike concept), or as the anthropologist Victor W. Turner puts it, his "liminal period" in the rite of passage, the period of transition during which nothing decisive happens. Clem's problem is that he cannot escape this nowhere condition, cannot grow, and condemns himself to an impoverished emotional life.

This story can be read just as profitably as a lightly disguised criticism ofUnited States foreign policy. Viewed from this angle, Clem stands for the rich, blasé, desirable, and enviableAmerica which assumes itself to be at the center of the world's interest, which exerts its great influence globally with an amiable, unwitting destructiveness, and manages always to insulate itself from the worst of human suffering.America's liminal period presents a terrible burden to the rest of humanity, for other nations are spellbound by the wasteful self-absorption of this amorphous giant.

Like "The Orphaned Swimming Pool," "Egypt" concludes with an evocation of the void: "Gazing into the abyss of the trip that was over, [Clem] . .. saw that he had been happy." The "abyss" of the voyage must refer to its emptiness; if Clem has found pleasure in this vacuity, he may be even further removed from participation in erotic existence than he was at the start. His ritual passage seems to be a regression.

It would be misleading to imply that all of the other *Museums and Women* tales deal with the disintegration of love relationships. "I amDying, Egypt, Dying," possibly the most impressive narrative in the collection, is in fact the inability to enter into, rather than sustain, such a relationship. Nevertheless it is not incorrect to view this collection as evidence of Updike's deepening concern, if not to say outright obsession, in the early seventies with deteriorating marital, domestic, and broader social-erotic affections. Four other stories from among the fourteen (including the four just analyzed) comprising the first and major part of *Museums and Women* develop facets of the subject. "The Day of the Dying Rabbit" depicts discord within a family on holiday, with marriage problems threatening in the background; "The Witness" shows a middle-aged man's embarrassing attempt to use an affair as an antidote for a bad marriage; in "Solitare" a husband plays the card game alone while his guilty imagination pits wife against mistress; and "When Everyone Was Pregnant" is a nostalgic trip back to the fifties from the narrator's seventies perspective, evoking young marriages and interlocking domestic lives, and with the predictable theme of infidelity running throughout.

Of the ten stories, some of them experimental, in the middle section called "Other Modes," only one deals with sexuality: the whimsical "During the Jurassic," in which the familiar Updike triangle of desire is acted out at a party attended by lustful dinosaurs. The five stories comprising the final section on "The Maples" are indeed on the subject, describing the continuing decline of Richard and Joan Maple's conjugal fortunes; these stories reappear later in *Too Far to Go* (in which context I will treat them), where in the company of the other Maple tales they make up the chronicle of that couple's marriage and its demise. It is portentous that the Maple tales conclude *Museums and Women,* for virtually all of Updike's fiction written since then stresses the pleasures and agonies of those who love neither wisely nor well. It is, however, shortsighted to conclude, from reading the *Museums and Women* stories, as Donald J. Greiner does, that "marriage is a relic." The marriage bonds are indeed vulnerable to the extreme, but as one learns by the end of *Too Far to Go,* they are also as resilient as anything that exists.

Source: Robert Detweiler, "More Fiction of the Seventies: The Exertions of Eros," in *John Updike,* G. K. Hall, 1984, pp. 140-46.

Adaptations

John Updike reads several of his own short stories, including "A&P," "Pigeon Feathers," and "Separating," on the audiocassette *American Masters: The Short Stories of Raymond Carver, John Cheever, and John Updike.* It was produced by Bantam Books Audio in 1998.

Topics for Further Study

Research the philosophical theories of Søren Kierkegaard, and then write a letter from Kierkegaard, giving batting advice to this baseball player.

Study the batting statistics from the most recent season and find a batter who experienced a significant batting slump. Read newspaper reports on the batter, and write your own report on how long it lasted, the theories about what caused it, and what might have finally ended it.

This ballplayer's wife's trying to startle him with a gorilla mask is reminiscent of the sort of practical jokes that baseball players are famous for. Find out about some famous pranks, and share them with your class.

Read the 1888 poem "Casey at the Bat," by Ernest L. Thayer. Compare specific lines from that poem with the experience the narrator of this story describes.

Compare and Contrast

1968: At the height of the Vietnam War, America is gripped with a crisis of conscience: Millions of citizens, mobilized by a movement started on college campuses, vocally oppose the U.S. actions inSoutheast Asia.

Today: Politicians still fear that popular support for their actions will be split if a military situation is perceived to be "another Vietnam."

1968: Baseball isAmerica's most popular pastime.

Today: Television viewership for football has eclipsed baseball's audience. Furthermore, millions of Americans now play and watch soccer, which is the world's most popular pastime.

1968: A public figure such as a professional ballplayer can lead a fairly normal life, driving from his house to the stadium, past his fans.

Today: Since entertainers such as John Lennon (1980) and Selena (1995) were killed, all public figures are aware of the need for added security.

1968: The average major-league baseball player's salary is $19,000. The minimum salary is $10,000.

Today: Average salaries range as widely as $4,575,000 for members of the New York Yankees to $300,000 for members of the Tampa Bay Devil Rays. The minimum salary in Major League Baseball is $175,000.

What Do I Read Next?

Updike's greatest work is considered to be his four-part series of novels about Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom, a protagonist that he followed from 1960 through 1990. All of the "Rabbit" novels are available in *Rabbit Angstrom: The Four Novels,* published by Knopf in 1995.

W. P. Kinsella, who wrote the novel that was adapted to the movie *Field of Dreams,* is considered one of the best contemporary fiction writers. Baseball is a constant theme of his stories, as in those in his 1985 collection *The Thrill of the Grass.*

Mark Harris's novel *Bang the Drum Slowly* is considered a classic of baseball writing. It follows the final season of a baseball pitcher with a dark sensibility similar to the one Updike's narrator displays. Published in 1956, the novel was made available again byUniversity of Nebraska Press in 1984.

A wide variety of literary perspectives on the game of baseball is represented in *Hummers, Knucklers, and Slow Curves: Contemporary Baseball Poems,* edited by Don Johnson. It was published in 1991 byUniversity of Illinois Press

Further Study

Greiner, Donald J., *The Other John Updike: Poems/Short Stories/Prose/Plays,* Ohio University Press, 1981.

Greiner puts " The Slump" in the context of Updike' s other works of failing athletes, recognizing the author's own background in sports as a solid base for his writing.

Oates, Joyce Carol, "John Updike's American Comedies," in *The Profane Art: Essays & Reviews,* E. P. Dutton, 1983. This essay, which does not mention "The Slump" by name, still gives a good analysis of Updike's works at the time it was published and his significance to American literature.

Plath, James, ed., *Conversations with John Updike,* University Press of Mississippi, 1994.

This book contains thirty-two interviews with the author, over the course of more than thirty-five years.

Pritchard, William H., *Updike:America's Man of Letters,* Steerforth Press, 2000.

Pritchard traces the roots of Updike's writing back to early American authors, with contemporary references to show the author's influence.

Bibliography

Detweiler, Robert, ' *'Museums and Women:* Liminal States," in *John Updike,* Twayne Publishers, 1984, pp. 140-46.

Luscher, Robert M., *John Updike: A Study of the Short Fiction,* Twayne Publishers, 1993, pp. 103, 105.

Schiff, James A., "Introduction:America's Bourgeois Artist," in *John Updike Revisited,* Twayne Publishers, 1998, pp. 7□8.

Schopen, Bernard A., "Faith, Morality, and the Novels of John Updike," in *Critical Essays on John Updike,* edited by William R. Macnaughton, G. K. Hall, 1982, pp. 195-206.

Copyright Information

This Premium Study Guide is an offprint from *Short Stories for Students*.

Project Editor
David Galens

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

Research
Michelle Campbell, Nicodemus Ford, Sarah Genik, Tamara C. Nott, Tracie Richardson

Data Capture
Beverly Jendrowski

Permissions
Mary Ann Bahr, Margaret Chamberlain, Kim Davis, Debra Freitas, Lori Hines, Jackie Jones, Jacqueline Key, Shalice Shah-Caldwell

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

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

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

©1997-2002; ©2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc.

Gale and Design® and Thomson Learning™ are trademarks used herein under license.

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

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.
No part of this work covered by the copyright hereon may be reproduced or used in any

form or by any means—graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping, Web distribution or information storage retrieval systems—without the written permission of the publisher.

For permission to use material from this product, submit your request via Web at http://www.gale-edit.com/permissions, or you may download our Permissions Request form and submit your request by fax or mail to:

Permissions Department
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535

Permissions Hotline:
248-699-8006 or 800-877-4253, ext. 8006
Fax: 248-699-8074 or 800-762-4058

Since this page cannot legibly accommodate all copyright notices, the acknowledgments constitute an extension of the copyright notice.

While every effort has been made to secure permission to reprint material and to ensure the reliability of the information presented in this publication, The Gale Group, Inc. does not guarantee the accuracy of the data contained herein. The Gale Group, Inc. accepts no payment for listing; and inclusion in the publication of any organization, agency, institution, publication, service, or individual does not imply endorsement of the editors or publisher. Errors brought to the attention of the publisher and verified to the satisfaction of the publisher will be corrected in future editions.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". © 1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". © 1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Short Stories for Students

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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

Editor, Short Stories for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535