The Star Study Guide

The Star by Arthur C. Clarke

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Arthur C. Clarke's short story "The Star" appeared in the science fiction magazine *Infinity Science Fiction* in 1955. It was reprinted in a collection of Clarke's short stories called *The Other Side of the Sky* in 1958. In his introduction to this collection, Clarke noted that he wrote the story for a contest in the London *Observer* on the subject "2500 AD." "I realized that I had a theme already to hand. The story was written in a state of unusually intense emotion; needless to say, it wasn't even placed among the 'also rans.'" The story deals with themes treated in a work by H. G. Wells also titled "The Star" (1897). In Wells's story, a planetoid's collision with Jupiter and the destruction of that planet chillingly reminds the human race that it could just as easily have been destroyed. Clarke's story similarly places the human race in an intergalactic context that suggests that the planet Earth and its inhabitants may not be all that important in the cosmic scheme of things

Religion, and in particular religious faith, are central themes in "The Star." The narrative is the interior monologue of the central character, a Jesuit astrophysicist. He is aboard a starship on a mission to investigate the causes of a supernova in a distant galaxy. He and the rest of the crew discover the artifacts of a highly developed civilization, carefully preserved on the only planet that remains in orbit around the supernova. Knowing that all life would be wiped out when their sun flared into a supernova, this race of sentient beings left a record of who they were and what they accomplished. The pictures, sculptures, music, and other relics of a very human-like race doomed to destruction depress the crew and investigating scientists, who are far from their own homes and lonely. What the narrator has learned but not yet communicated to the others is that the supernova that destroyed this civilization was the Star of Bethlehem, which burned brightly in the sky to herald the birth of Jesus Christ. His discovery has caused him to reexamine and to question his own faith.

Author Biography

Arthur C. Clarke was born on December 16, 1917, in Minehead, Somerset, England. He was brought up on a farm by his parents Charles Wright Clarke and Norah Mary Willis Clarke. Just before his ninth birthday, Clarke took his first airplane ride and was thrilled by air travel. He combined his interest in flying with rocketry and, by the time he entered his early teens, he was making homemade rockets, fireworks, and experimenting with communication devices. Clarke built his own refractor telescopes from old lenses, cardboard tubes, and miscellaneous spare parts. At age seventeen Clarke built a light-beam transmitter, which used light to transmit sound. It formed the basis for Clarke's later design for what became the communications satellite.

As a child, Clarke briefly attended an Anglican Church Sunday school. He later recalled that after a few months he concluded that it was "a bunch of nonsense" and refused to return. His rejection of religion and his interest in science and technology form the basis for much of his writing. Nearly all of his fiction involves underlying religious themes, with the spiritual evolution of humankind a particularly prominent theme.

There is speculation that the death of his father when Clarke was only thirteen was a great influence on his life. His writing reflects this loss and often features father figures and father-son relationships, perhaps most prominently in the novel *Childhood's End.* Another important influence on Clarke's later career as a writer was his discovery, at the age of twelve, of the magazine *Amazing Stories,* which features science fiction as well as fantasy tales.

Clarke was an early member of the British Interplanetary Society, a group of science fiction fans and writers. He began publishing science fic-tion stories in the 1930s and early 1940s— the beginning of the period known as "the Golden Age of Science Fiction," when most of the genre's acknowledged masters, including Isaac Asimov and Robert A. Heinlein, were beginning their careers. In 1941 he joined the British Air Force, becoming adept in radar applications, mathematics, and electronics. After World War II, he entered college and took degrees in physics and mathematics. By the early 1950s, with the publication of his first nonfic-tion book, *The Exploration of Space,* and the novel *Childhood's End,* Clarke became a full-time and very prolific writer. He continued to write both fiction and nonfiction works that draw from his extensive scientific background. He is acknowledged as the preeminent writer of "hard science fiction" that does not depart from known science or natural law or employ elements of the fantastic, and his nonfiction writings are praised for their ability to make scientific ideas understandable to a general readership.

Clarke first visited Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) in 1954 and established permanent residence there in 1975. He lived there part-time for twenty years, required by local laws to leave the country for at least six months a year. During the filming of *2001: A Space Odyssey,* he was in the United States for so long that he had to obtain a Resident Alien card. He joked that the card always made him "feel like a certified extraterrestrial." He was finally able to obtain legal "Resident Guest" status in Sri Lanka when that country

passed what became known as "The Clarke Act" in 1974. He continues to live and write in Sri Lanka. Late in the twentieth century, Clarke has expressed optimism that he will live into the year 2001 and the new millennium.

Plot Summary

The story opens with the unnamed first-person narrator musing that at one time he had believed that his travels in outer space could not alter his faith in God. The reader learns that he is a Jesuit as well as an astrophysicist. He is aboard a starship returning from a scientific mission three thousand light-years from Earth. Something he learned on this mission, as yet unknown to the rest of the scientists and crew, has caused him to question his faith. He reflects regretfully that the data gathered on the mission will soon make the cause of his own doubt-"this ultimate irony" — known to everyone.

The narrator reflects on the "private, good-natured, but fundamentally serious war" that the largely irreligious crew has waged with him during the long mission. He thinks particularly of the ship's doctor, Dr. Chandler, who sometimes professes himself willing to believe that " *Something*" created the infinite vastness of space and everything in it, but cannot accept that a being so powerful could possibly care about "us and our miserable little world."

The narrative goes on to reveal more details about the mission. The ship had been sent to examine the aftermath of a supernova— the explosion of a star, during which it burns with an intensity and a luminosity that may be a billion times that of the Earth's sun. Following such an explosion, a star becomes a white dwarf, a body of very dense matter. These scientific details are imparted almost incidentally as the first-person narrative continues.

When the ship reaches the solar system surrounding the white dwarf, they are surprised to find that the outermost planet survived the force of the supernova explosion, and that it contains a clearly demarcated vault. Within it they find artifacts recording the accomplishments of a highly advanced civilization. The narrator reports that his colleagues have asked him how to reconcile the destruction of an entire civilization with a merciful and loving God. His answer: that "God has no need to justify His actions to man," is not accepted by the others, who say that the random destruction of worlds is further proof that there is no supreme being, that "the Universe has no purpose and no plan." The narrator has learned, but not yet revealed, that the supernova was the Star of Bethlehem, which heralded the birth of Christ.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

The opening of *The Star* introduces the main conflict of the story – a crisis of religious faith. We find the narrator, a Jesuit astrophysicist, on a mission in the far reaches of space. Something awful has happened out there that has made him question his Christian beliefs. "I stare at the crucifix that hangs on the cabin wall... and for the first time in my life I wonder if it is no more than an empty symbol."

Yet, at this early stage in the story, we do not know what has caused the Jesuit's despair, and Clarke keeps us guessing right until the end. We do not even learn that the main character is a Jesuit astrophysicist until the third paragraph, by which time we know that he is on a space shuttle carrying a precious cargo of recordings and photographs back to Earth. These records contain evidence that has caused him to question God.

We learn that the crew is also depressed, even though most of them are atheists. The Jesuit spent a great deal of time debating theology with them on the outward journey. In particular, he debated the origins of the universe with Dr Chandler, the ship's doctor, while the two of them watched the stars spin by from the observation deck. Contemplating the beauty of the stars, Dr Chandler says, "*Something* made it. But how you can believe that something has a special interest in us and our miserable little world – that just beats me."

In his debates with the crew, the Jesuit takes pains to remind them of his impressive scientific credentials. He has published papers in major journals, and indeed the Jesuit order itself has made important contributions to astronomy and geophysics since the eighteenth century. However, he worries that the new information he has learned about a certain 'Phoenix Nebula,' the cloudy remains of an exploded star, will put an end to Jesuit history.

Reaching the Phoenix Nebula, we discover, was the ship's mission. Exploding stars, or novae, are a common event in the universe, and the Jesuit has recorded dozens of them during his career. However, just three or four times in every millennium, a supernova occurs. This massive nova outshines all the suns in the galaxy. The Jesuit notes that in AD 1054, Chinese astronomers recorded such an event, while in 1572 a supernova was observed on Earth that was visible even in daylight.

When they reached the nova, the crew passed through glowing, concentric shells of gas, still expanding from the ancient blast, towards the White Dwarf at the centre. This tiny dense object is smaller than the Earth, but weighs a million times more. It had once been a sun, much like the one at the centre of Earth's solar system.

In a routine check, the crew searches for planets that survived the blast. They find a single world, far from the White Dwarf, at the outer limit of its solar system. Its remoteness saved it from destruction in the supernova.

The planet survived the blast, but it is badly scarred. The Jesuit's ship lands on the planet and the crew make the shocking discovery of something they call the Vault.

A huge pylon marks it over the entrance, reduced to a stump in the blast, but clearly the work of intelligent beings. A huge radioactive pattern also serves as a beacon to lead visitors to the spot. It was clear that an intelligent species that knew it was going to be destroyed in the supernova had erected the monument. They built the Vault to mark their own civilization, and its passing.

It takes the crew a week to drill through the fused rock and unearth the treasures inside. The unknown aliens had had plenty of warning that their sun would explode. They left a huge wealth of information about themselves, everything they wanted to preserve.

The aliens had spaceships that could travel the short distances between the planets of their own solar system, but their technology was not advanced enough to cross the huge ocean of space to the next sun. They had brought their treasures to the furthest planet from the blast, but they could not escape the supernova altogether.

The crew finds the ancient race of aliens were 'disturbingly human', leaving art and sculpture, pictures and records, as well as machines for projecting them. They had graceful cities and musical speech, and the Jesuit is particularly touched by a recorded scene of 'a group of children on a beach of strange blue sand, playing in the waves as children play on Earth.' In the scene, the sun sinks below the waves in a warm sunset, the same sun that would soon destroy them.

The Jesuit and the crew are deeply moved to find this evidence of an advanced culture in a lonely stretch of space. The crew questions the Jesuit: How can the destruction of this beautiful culture be compatible with a merciful God? For them, it confirms the notion that the universe has no architect, no divine justice, no God.

However, the Jesuit stands firm. He believes that God has no need to justify his actions; he can choose to destroy suns and planets at any time, just as he chose to create them.

Later however, comes the ultimate challenge to the Jesuit's faith, the one that has thrown him into a crisis at the beginning of the story. He has calculated the precise date of the supernova, and he has now discovered the year that the brilliant light from the supernova reached the Earth. The exploding star that destroyed the entire race of aliens was the same star that shone over Bethlehem to mark the birth of Jesus Christ.

Analysis

Arthur C Clarke wrote *The Star* for a short story competition in 1955. The competition, run by the *Observer* newspaper in Britain, had as its theme '2500 AD'. The story did not

win, in fact it did not even make runner-up. Yet it won a Hugo award (science fiction's highest accolades) in 1956 and has been reprinted in short-story collections ever since. So, what is it that has made this story still relevant to readers half a century after it was written? It is a rare distinction in a branch of fiction that changes as quickly as human beings can imagine the future.

The Star deals with one of Clarke's favorite themes: the intersection between science and spirituality, in this case Christianity. Science, represented by the crew, and Christianity, represented by the Jesuit, are old adversaries. They conflict over areas such as how the universe began and how it will end. Christians believe that God made the universe, while scientists, who are often atheists, credit the beginning of the universe to the Big Bang.

One of the key differences between these two points of view is that a universe created by God has an intrinsic quality of design and intention – God is ordering the universe and his perfect plan is being carried out through it. Sometimes it may be hard for humans to understand God's plan, but they can be assured that he has a good reason for every decision that he makes. The Big Bang, on the other hand, does not imply any plan or design. Things do not happen for a reason, they just happen. There is no intention or morality to events.

For some people on both sides of the debate, there can be no common ground, yet there are other people, such as scientists who are practicing Christians, who have found ways to integrate both sides of the story in a way that is meaningful for them.

The main protagonist of *The Star* is just such a person. As an astrophysicist, he has spent his career studying the science of the stars. Yet as a Jesuit, he has a deep faith in the Christian message. (Jesuits, also known as the 'Society of Jesus' are a Roman Catholic order founded in Paris in 1534 by Ignatius of Loyola, who the narrator mentions in the story.)

However, this delicate balance is upset when the Jesuit is confronted by a huge test of faith. He learns the star of Bethlehem, a symbol of hope and redemption to Christians on Earth, was also a symbol of terrible destruction and despair for the unknown aliens.

The story leaves the Jesuit facing two choices – he must abandon his faith, or update his understanding of God to encompass an element of cold-hearted indifference.

Clarke presents this huge and complicated theme in just five carefully constructed pages. He creates dramatic tension in the story by making us wonder what terrible thing has happened to make this religious man question God. The problem is set up in the first paragraph, but the answer only comes in the final sentence.

The story is presented in the first-person point of view – we are in the Jesuit's head throughout the story and have access to his private thoughts. This means that we are able to see aspects of the Jesuit's dilemma that he is ashamed to reveal to the crew. It also presents an interesting perspective on the main theme. The events of the story

tend to support the atheist argument, but by presenting the story from the point of view of the Jesuit, our sympathies are drawn to his side of the debate.

The judges of the Observer short story competition overlooked *The Star*, but perhaps this was because the story takes such a challenging subject for its theme. We are still grappling with it today, which is one reason why the story has survived through five decades and it is still being reprinted.

Characters

Narrator

The entire story consists of the male narrator's reflections on what he has learned during a scientific mission to investigate a "white dwarf," a sun in a distant galaxy that became a supernova and burned itself out thousands of years earlier. The reader learns that he is a Jesuit priest and an astrophysicist aboard a starship, and that he has been fighting a "private, good-natured, but fundamentally serious war" against the atheism of the crew. The findings of the mission cause him to question the foundations of his faith.

Dr. Chandler

The ship's doctor is the only person's name the reader learns in the story. A conversation between the narrator and the doctor reveals the atheistic attitudes that the Jesuit astrophysicist encounters from the ship's crew and officers during the mission.

Themes

Religion and Science

The most important theme in "The Star" is the opposition of religion and science. The reader is presented with a very religious narrator who has his faith seriously shaken. The narrator has long attempted to show that science and religion are compatible. He believed that science affirms the existence of God and helps humanity to appreciate the dependence of science on the intricacies of God's ultimate plan. A large part of his faith was founded in the belief that humankind achieved redemption from sin through the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. When the narrator calculates that the explosion of the supernova, wiping out an entire sentient, human-like race, was the star of Bethlehem, he is thrown into doubt. How can he reconcile his believe that God created all things with the knowledge that God annihilated this planet and its people in order to signal the redemption of the human race on Earth? Does it mean that the creator values certain of his creations over others? He fears that his findings will further convince a largely irreligious public that the universe is, in fact, random and not the work of an all-knowing, caring, and loving God.

Homocentrism

An important theme in "The Star" is the idea of homocentrism: that humankind is the center of the universe and the reason for all of creation. This concept embodies the idea that the universe revolves around the creation of humanity, and that everything that happens in the universe is directly related to the progress of humanity. The narrator, as

a Jesuit, has been taught by his Roman Catholic faith that God so loved humanity that He sent His only Son to save humans from their sins. He is confronted with the uncomfortable fact that in order to hold onto this belief, he must admit that his God was neither merciful nor loving toward this admirable alien race— or, in another scenario, that God did not create all things and the extinct alien race is not part of a divine scheme of creation.

Style

Point of View and Narration

"The Star" is a first person narration by an astrophysicist who is also a Jesuit. The narrative unfolds for the reader the emotions of this individual as he tries to comes to terms with the knowledge he has gained on a scientific mission to a distant galaxy—knowledge that has caused him for the first time to question his faith.

Foreshadowing and Irony

In the course of the story, the reader is given clues to the ironic outcome of the story. One of the first occurs in the opening paragraph when the narrator says, " *Once,* I believed that space could have no power over faith . . . that the heavens declared the glory of God's handiwork" (emphasis added). He goes on to tell the reader that something has shaken that belief and left his faith "sorely troubled."

The narrative gradually reveals the information the narrator has gained and foreshadows the ultimate irony of the story's denouement, or final outcome. The story's irony is situational; that is, an event intended or presumed to have had one purpose or effect has also had a markedly different one. In this story, one result of the supernova's explosion is that an entire civilization was annihilated. However, the exploding star, burning brightly in the sky, also signaled the birth of the Christ child. The narrator even considers the name of the Nebula created by the supernova— the Phoenix Nebula—ironic. The phoenix is a mythological bird which creates new life through its own death, immolating itself every hundred years so that a new phoenix can rise from the ashes. It occurs to the narrator that whatever rises from the ashes of the dead civilization found on a planet in the Phoenix Nebula is likely to supersede Christianity.

Quest and Hubris

The mission described in the story begins as a quest to find the cause of the supernova. It in some respects resembles such classic "quest" narratives as Arthurian legend or the Gilgamesh epic, in which a small-scale or personal quest turns out to have universal significance. The plot follows rather ordinary forms through exposition, rising action, and climax, but then does something unexpected- it does not provide a final resolution. The narrator's own feelings about what he has learned are revealed, as are his fears about how humankind will receive the information. But the reader is left to ponder how he or she imagines the human race will respond.

It is at this point that hubris is revealed. Hubris is a term derived from ancient Greek drama. It refers to the characteristic of excessive pride which leads to the misfortune of the protagonist in a tragedy. In "The Star", the entire human race has been guilty of the ultimate hubris: believing themselves to be centrally important in the universe and the

greatest creation of God. According to the events of the story, if humankind is the center, then God created the alien race only to be destroyed in the conflagration of the supernova. Conversely, if humans are to continue to accept an interpretation of God as loving and caring for all of His creations, how can they reconcile His destruction of the alien race? What the scientists have learned on the mission may require a wrenching re-thinking of many central religious principles.

Historical Context

The 1950s: U.S.-Soviet Rivalry and the "Red Scare"

Arthur C. Clarke wrote "The Star" during a time of political and social unease. Both the "space race" and the "arms race" between the United States and the Soviet Union, were ongoing, fueled by cold war animosity between the two superpowers. Both countries were developing and testing newer and more destructive weapons, including the hydrogen bomb, in the aftermath of the atomic bombs used in 1945 against Japan.

Growing fear of Communism leads to the "red scare" in the U.S. A number of high-profile nuclear espionage cases, including that of the Rosenbergs in 1952, convince a portion of the American public and government that Communist infiltrators are potentially everywhere. Large numbers of writers and actors are blacklisted by publishers and Holly-wood movie studios after being accused of Communist Party membership or merely having Communist sympathies. Even U.S. atomic scientist J. Robert Oppenheimer, who led the Manhattan Project that developed the atomic bomb, is considered a threat to American security because of his opposition to development of the hydrogen bomb. In 1954 the Atomic Energy Commission clears him of disloyalty charges but still revokes his security clearance. American Senator Joseph McCarthy (R Wisconsin) conducts a campaign of accusations that the U.S. State Department is infiltrated by "card-carrying Communists." In hearings before the Senate Permanent Investigations Subcommittee, McCarthy charges that the Secretary of the Army is concealing evidence of a Soviet spy ring operating out of a U.S. Army Signal Corps installation in New Jersey.

The State of Science Fiction

The 1950s were also a period of change in science fiction. The careers of many notable science fiction writers, including Isaac Asimov and Robert Heinlein, began in the 1930s and 1940s— a period known as science fiction's "Golden Age." Numerous science fiction magazines began publishing in these years as well; they were called "pulps" because of the inexpensive paper on which they were printed. It was one such magazine, *Infinity Science Fiction,* that bought "The Star" in 1955 for $80. Much of what was written and published as science fiction in the early part of the twentieth century has been dismissed as "space opera": action-packed, improbable adventures involving steely-eyed astronaut heroes wielding ray guns against voracious tentacled aliens. The genre was expanding into more thoughtful and speculative realms when Clarke began publishing; however, he has always been considered the preeminent "hard science fiction" writer. He rarely departed from known science or natural law in his stories, and in fact he is often commended for his ability to make scientific ideas understandable to a general readership.

Science Fiction and Science Fact

Clarke is also the author of dozens of nonfiction books that are commended for their readily comprehensible presentation of complex scientific ideas involving two areas of great interest to him: space travel and undersea exploration. Because of his status as a well-known writer fascinated by the idea of interplanetary flight, Clarke was allowed to tour the White Sands Proving Grounds in 1952 and to witness tests of Honest John battlefield missiles. After seeing one of the missiles launched on a typical angle trajectory, Clarke remarked, "Why get excited about anything that doesn't go straight up?"

Critical Overview

"The Star" was first published in the United States in the magazine *Infinity Science Fiction* in early 1955. It went on to win the most prestigious science fiction writing award, the Hugo, in 1956 as the best short story of the previous year. It has consistently been regarded by genre fans and critics as one of the greatest science fiction stories of all time. From its first appearance in an anthology of Clarke's stories, it has been singled out for comment. In 1958, science fiction, fantasy, and horror writer Fritz Leiber identified "The Star" as "unusual and controversy-rousing." Subsequent criticism, however, has been almost unanimous in commending the story's complex ambiguities. By 1978 science fiction writer and literary critic Thomas M. Disch named "The Star" one of Clarke's "few undeniable classics." Genre critic George Edgar Slusser, focuses on the story's Odyssey-like circular structure. He notes that even though the reader does not see it through to the end, the voyage of discovery out does conclude with a return voyage home. He also comments on the paradox of a Jesuit finding what seems like proof of cosmic indifference together with proof of the existence of the Star of Bethlehem. In a comparison with the H. G. Wells story of the same title, John Hollow pronounces "The Star" "anti-Christian," and focuses on the emotional torment of the Jesuit suddenly forced to reevaluate his Earth-centered view of Creation. Similarly, Patricia Ferrara views the story as a challenge to the morality of viewing the universe as human-centered. Daniel Born ranks "The Star" with other science fiction stories of a future in which "Christianity is tested . . . and found to be wanting."

In 1980 Alexander Nedelkovich found elements in the story of the same homocentrism that most commentators believe Clarke intended to criticize. He considers it an unfortunate choice for Clarke to have portrayed an alien race enough like humans to automatically elicit both sympathy and empathy: is the story's tragedy, he wonders, "only in the loss of a civilization *we like*?" He assesses it overall, however, as an excellent story that contributed to the development of science fiction from mere "space opera" to more thoughtful considerations.

Written early in his long and productive career, "The Star"evinces many of the qualities that critics have consistently noted in Clarke's fiction. His stories, here as elsewhere, seamlessly interweaves scientific facts in a way that has become his trademark: Clarke is universally acknowledged as a master of "hard" science fiction, rarely departing from known fact or reasonable extrapolation.

BOOKRAGS

Criticism

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Critical Essay #1

Girard is finishing a Ph.D. in science fiction and feminist theory. She received her Master's degree by completing her essay on Arthur C. Clarke's Childhood's End. *In the following essay she discusses the religious beliefs that are central to "The Star" and many of Clarke's stories.*

At the age of eighty, Arthur C. Clarke has received every honor possible for his science fiction writing, including numerous Hugo Awards, Nebula Awards, John W. Campbell Awards, and Jupiter Awards. In addition, he has also received awards for his nonfiction writing, inventions, innovations, and service to humanity. Clarke received the 1982 Marconi Fellowship Award, which is "granted to individuals who have made a significant contribution to the advancement of the technology of communications through discoveries, inventions or innovations in the physical or information sciences or engineering." In 1986, Clarke was awarded the Science Fiction Writers of America Grand Master Award for life achievement and, in 1989, was given the honor of Commander of the British Empire (CBE), by Queen Elizabeth, for service to British cultural interests in Sri Lanka.

Clarke received one of his first awards, the Hugo, for "The Star." The story is told in first-person narration by a narrator who only identifies himself as a Jesuit astrophysicist. A Jesuit is a Roman Catholic member of a religious order founded by Saint Ignatius of Loyola. The Jesuits are known for their missions of exploration and their scientific endeavors. On the North American continent, Jesuits were among the first to do missionary work among Native Americans. Several universities, including Notre Dame in Indiana, Loyola University in Chicago, and the University of Detroit in Michigan were founded by the Jesuits. They were the first Europeans to establish trade relations with the Japanese.

It is with all of these influences in mind that Clarke made his narrator a Jesuit priest. This is obvious when the narrator refers to "tampering with the truth which often gave my order a bad name in the olden days." He wrestles with his conscience about what to tell the crew and when to tell them. On the one hand, he says that anyone can figure out what he knows because the "facts are there for all to read." However, on the other hand, he feels that the crew is "already sufficiently depressed." He doesn't have to tamper with the truth, but he can withhold his conclusion and, if questioned about it, he can simply say that he thought that they would know based on the information they had gathered. In that way, if they don't figure it out, he will not have to try to reconcile the facts with his beliefs in God and his religion. His faith has been shaken and he is not sure if he could take a full-fledged attack by the atheists armed with the new knowledge.

Clarke continues his assault on the beliefs of the Jesuit through the crew and, in particular, Dr. Chandler. The reader only knows that Dr. Chandler is a medical man. Clarke seems to impose his own beliefs on the doctor when he has the priest wonder why medical men are notorious atheists. The doctor, addressing the priest on the observation deck, talks about how the universe goes on forever and says that "perhaps

Something made it." He continues by wondering how the priest can expect anyone to believe that, even if God made it, God would have any special interest in humanity. The narrator does not respond with theological arguments, but, instead, points out all of his scientific writing. The reader is to assume that, therefore, a man of God can also be a man of science and vice versa.

The introspection by the narrator serves a twofold purpose. One purpose is to heighten the suspense as to what he has discovered. The other purpose is to give background information so that the suspense will have some grounding in fact and history. For example, the narrator wonders what the founder of his order, Ignatius of Loyola, would do in a similar situation, if his faith would have risen to the challenge as the narrator feels his has not. The reader is also introduced to the motto of the Jesuits, *Ad Maiorem Dei Gloriam,* but is not, significantly, given the English translation "To the Greater Glory of God." This is what the narrator feels he can no longer believe. He cannot believe that the destruction of a civilization at its height contributes to the glory of God.

The nationalities of the narrator and the crew are never mentioned anywhere in the story. This lack of differentiation serves to unite humanity against the cosmos. Clearly, Clarke is saying that humanity can only achieve the stars through cooperation of all of the people of earth. Not only does he see unity in the people of earth, but he sees a similarity in people of the universe. Because the ancient civilization has been destroyed at its height, the narrator says that, "even if they had not been so disturbingly human," they would still have been upset and depressed. The fact that the crew was so far from home and lonely, they were more touched by the similarities between the two worlds. He talks about their music, their architecture, and even the children playing by the sea, much like earth children. He makes no distinction between nationalities or races, other than to compare their destruction to the rise and fall of nations and cultures on earth. The priest contrasts it by saying that he cannot understand how a merciful God could destroy a race "in the full flower of its achievement." The narrator even refers to ancient civilizations on other worlds which had run their course and left only their ruins behind. Those did not compare to the wholesale, mindless destruction incurred by the supernova. He fails to see how, at the risk of blasphemy, God could have signaled the birth of His Son through such wholesale slaughter.

The question of individual religions is not a question that Clarke raises directly in the story. However, he does imply that organized belief in a Godhead who cares for His "children" on earth, seems to be homocentric as well as extremely arrogant. Clarke is not simply addressing the religious belief of Roman Catholic by having a Catholic, Jesuit priest as narrator, but he is using the scientific religious man as a pawn to show how the two are not compatible. He sets up his story to reflect his own belief that religion is nonsense. Only science is fact and space travel will show humans the way, and achieving space travel requires the cooperation of all of humanity.

Source: Theresa M. Girard, for *Short Stories for Students,*Gale, 1998.

Critical Essay #2

In the following excerpt, Ferrera suggests that "The Star" derives its themes from the William Wordsworth poem "Ode: Intimations." She concludes her analysis with an interpretation of the story as a challenge to the morality of viewing God and the universe as human-centered.

Much of Arthur C. Clarke's fiction is oriented towards rapid and simplistic plot development in the way that most pulp fiction is, frequently to the detriment of any other literary values; yet his fiction deserves more critical attention than its faults warrant. Noting this, Michael Thron has argued that we should judge the value of Clarke's fiction, not by literary standards, but by the value of the ideas it contains, and many of the other critics in Joseph Olander's collection of essays seem to agree implicitly with this judgment, mixing esthetics with scientific and philosophic appeal as criteria in applied criticism. But T. S. Eliot points out that great or even good fiction of any genre is not remarkable for the quality of the ideas embodied in it; *King Lear* and the *Divine Comedy,* he says, do not offer much in the realm of abstract thought, and their power does not come from the strength of the reader's shared belief in the social and religious philosophies presented in the works. Clarke varies only slightly from this norm in offering somewhat new scientific ideas its well as elaborating on old philosophical ones. Certainly, his value as a popular scientific thinker who can help the reader understand the implications of space travel and research is without question. His "Death and the Senator" (1961) is a good hypothetical scenario of what could happen if the United States did not continue its space research. It is one of his most reprinted stories largely because of this aspect of relevancy (or even propaganda). The scientific ideas in the story are significant enough for it to have been read before the U. S. House of Representatives Committee on Astronautics on March 14, 1972. But as literature, it is sentimental and predictable: a man finds that his imminent death can ennoble him. The theme is not new, nor is it particularly well-realized, and the work suffers from a lack of character development and imagery.

The science fiction story's lack of traditional literary merit is often dismissed on the basis of generic criteria. Asimov's defense of the genre's poor characterization is typical:

Science fiction stories are notoriously weak on characterization as compared with mainstream stories. At least, so the critics say.

I am always struck with impatience at such cavils. Even if it be true, there happens to be a good reason for it. The characters are a smaller portion of science fiction than of the mainstream . . . .

The double task of building the background society and developing the foreground plot is extremely difficult, and it requires an extraordinary amount of the writer's attention. There is that much less attention that is, or can be, paid to the characters. There is, physically less room in the story for character development.

. . . [More] than once Clarke has managed to make all the elements in his story work together, as he does in "The Star." This story brings up perhaps the trickiest and most important criterion to apply to Clarke: his intertextuality with other writers. If his novels and short stories are important as literature, they should somehow contain narrative patterns and literary tropes which form the basis of other important literature. Despite arguing for new criteria, Slusser's examination of the voyage pattern in the

Space Odysseys of Arthur C. Clarke places Clarke clearly within a literary tradition. John Hollow has also noted Clarke's roots in such poets as Tennyson and Houseman, and Slusser has mentioned his similarity to Keats. However, we can go one step further and find a highly developed relationship between Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations" and Clarke's "The Star" which shows clearly the value of applying literary, rather than sociological, scientific, or philosophical criteria to Clarke's fiction. One of the central tropes of Clarke's work, that of children on a beach in juxtaposition with a vision of eternity, seems to come, not from Houseman or from H. G. Wells, or from Keats, but from Wordsworth's ode. The debt is particularly strong in "The Star," in which Clarke places his narrator in circumstances ironically parallel to those of Wordsworth's narrator, gives him a vision of children on the beach which is similar to Wordsworth's, yet turns Wordsworth's tropes inside out to defy and reverse Wordsworthian meaning. This parallel may seem extraordinary, simply because no one thinks of looking for such a connection between a mainstream work and science fiction. And this is probably why no critic has seen it previously. Yet given Clarke's education in English schools in the early part of the century, he must have read a considerable amount of Wordsworth, including this famous poem. This virtual certainty combined with strong textual parallels would make a convincing argument that one mainstream author was ringing changes on another mainstream author's score. And as Stan-ley Fish points out, to discover that a recognized work is better than anyone thought it was should be a sure way of gaining acceptance for one's view. The parallels between Clarke's story and Wordsworth's poem are strong enough to persuade the reader of the possibility that the two works interact in this fashion, and open the door to the consideration of other such parallels between science fiction and the mainstream.

For the Wordsworthian narrator, the child's "first affections" will allow the man he has become to transport himself metaphorically:

Hence in a season of calm weather Though inland far we be, Our Souls have sight of that immortal sea Which brought us hither, Can in a moment travel thither, And see the Children sport upon the shore, And hear the mighty waters rolling evermore.

The similarity to Clarke's vision speaks for itself:

One scene is still before my eyes— a group of children on a beach of strange blue sand, playing in the waves as children play on Earth. Curious whiplike trees line the shore, and some very large animal is wading in the shallows yet attracting no attention at all.

Many writers have described figures on a beach, but several key features point to a clearly Wordsworthian basis for Clarke's passage: the plural rather than singular number of figures; the circumstance of their being children rather than adults; the circumstance of both groups playing, rather than looking at the stars; and the narrator seeing them only once, and then remembering them in tranquility as he works out his spiritual difficulties. The achingly nostalgic context of the vision is much different from Keats or Houseman; and the lack of a progressive vision at different points in time eliminates Wells as a primary source. This vision and many other correlations between Wordsworth's poem and Clarke's story lay the groundwork for Clarke's final disruption of Wordsworth's metaphor.

Both works introduce us to troubled narrators, the source of whose mental turmoil is at first unclear, but becomes clear as the works progress. "Ode: Intimations" relates the narrator's subjective search for the faded glory of nature, which derives from "our life's Star," the soul. The narrator mourns that only the youth, "Nature's priest," has contact with the light of this Star, which has "elsewhere had its setting / And cometh from afar." Clarke literally sends "Nature's priest," a Jesuit-astrophysicist, off to look for a real star, turning Wordsworth's metaphors into plot realities. In the process of his investigation, he finds the vision of eternity, the filmstrip of the children on the beach, just as Wordsworth's narrator discovers the metaphor of the children during his progress. But this vision is not the end of the Jesuit's discoveries, any more than it is the end of Wordsworth's discoveries in his poem. Wordsworth's narrator finds new ways of placing himself within nature, as nature's center. Clarke's narrator finds unexpected confirmation of Wordsworth's anthropocentric universe which is morally insupportable: God did favor mankind above all races, blowing this star into destruction in order to signal to man the birth of the Christ child. "Our life's Star" did indeed "set" or die, taking with it an entire civilization, before it could shine briefly for man.

Wordsworth deliberately confuses nature-as-metaphor-for-self with nature and self as two separate entities. The poem's narrator makes a metaphorical search through his subjective universe for the light of "our life's Star." Clarke objects to such subjectivity because it assumes that man is the center of the universe. It is this pathetic fallacy turned into a principle of philosophy which Clarke turns topsy-turvy. The idea of anthropocentrism which is unquestioned and comforting in Wordsworth is questioned and discomfortable in its morality in Clarke.

Clarke's objective universe parallels Wordsworth's subjective one. This reversal of Wordsworth's tropes de-anthropocentrises nature without removing its wonder and emotional impact. Because Wordsworth's narrator searches for some way to *feel* immortal by regaining a state of mind, his vision of the seashore is undetailed and almost entirely metaphorical; there is no sense of a remembrance of an actual occurrence. In Clarke's story, the vision of the children on the seashore is detailed and concrete. Clarke's children, like the nature which surrounds them, cannot be appropriated as metaphors for the self. They are (or were) real, and the narrator remembers them only because he actually saw them on a filmstrip. Clarke underlines the otherness of the vision: these children are not human, and the concrete details of the "strange blue sand" and "curious whiplike trees" and the unknown "large animal"

indicate the narrator's distance from the children and nature. Clarke's narrator empathizes with the dead race with painful acuity, but recognizes them as irretrievably alien. He is not even momentarily tempted to project his own changed view of nature onto the universe. The stars shine with "undiminished brilliance" throughout his spiritual difficulties. The glory remains in the flower. And despite his strongly emotional and subjective response to nature, no pansy will ever ask this man a question. Instead, he asks himself why a civilization had to be destroyed when it was in "full flower." In Wordsworth's universe nature creates questions, images, and metaphors; Clarke's Jesuit clearly recognizes that he invents the metaphor and the question. The universe cannot speak, yet continually demands to be recognized as the foundation of ideas about God and man. Both narrators struggle to resolve a newly felt estrangement from nature; the Jesuit leaves the question unresolved because he sees a comfortingly subjective nature as emotionally irreconcilable to morality, requiring a cold-hearted acceptance of man's right to primacy in the universe. Clarke implicitly rejects Wordsworth's metaphoric approach to nature as a philosophy, and hence he also rejects his resulting resolution, leaving instead an open ending. The Jesuit's painful moral paralysis is the result of realizing that these beings with whom he and the reader empathize will remain forever separate from us because our only way of retrieving unity with the cosmos requires us to assume a philosophical stance which rejects our brotherhood with the beings who inhabit it.

Clarke's overall strategy in "The Star" is intertextual. The method of its intertextuality is also clearly literary— a reversal of tropes— and it is extremely well done. In a very Bloomian manner, Clarke has disrupted Wordsworth's text with his own, thus moving into the mainstream of fiction. The story also has a definitely literary structure of some sophistication. It carefully embodies its stance in literary tropes, such as in the journey towards the star and the truly poignant, rather than merely sentimental, vision of the children on the beach. Other sheerly literary values abound. The juxtaposition of the coldly beautiful objectivity of space with the intensely subjective vision of the narrator is powerful in a literary way, unrelated to the values of the ideas it embodies. The first person narration vividly conveys the disembodied, alienated voice of the main character, the Jesuit; and in this story the cardboard nature of the other characters on the spaceship is a literary merit, since it enhances the intense subjectivity and isolation of the Jesuit, who feels closer to the cosmos and the dead civilization than to his own shipmates.

It could be argued that "The Star" is important because it presents Clarke's idea of God, and much attention has focussed on this aspect of the story and of Clarke's fiction in general. However, the story presents no definite image of God, but rather a challenge to the morality of viewing God and the universe as man-centered, a challenge to the Romantic view. Other critics interpret the work variously. Slusser and Hollow disagree entirely on the nature of the Jesuit's problem. Hollow thinks the supernova does not prove the Christian God's existence, while Slusser feels that proof of the existence of a Christian God coincides with proof of cosmic indifference. Roger Bozzetto suggests that science has taken on God's comforting and humanistic moral validity. The basic disagreement about Clarke's ideas result from literary ambiguity rather than philosophical brilliance. As the narrator points out, the problem of God's power and

man's questions appears in the Book of Job. There is nothing philosophically new here. And Clarke himself had already treated the scientific aspect of the Star of Bethlehem in an essay entitled "The Star of the Magi" before he wrote the short story, making a second statement scientifically redundant. While the scientific bent of Clarke's imagination is a necessary element in his fiction, if he and other science fiction writers are going to receive serious critical attention, critics should judge the genre by accepted literary criteria. Being a science fiction writer does not entitle one to special nonliterary criteria. And despite Clarke's many failings, his work at its best has more than sufficient merit to warrant such attention.

Source: Patricia Ferrara, "Nature's Priest: Establishing Literary Criteria for Arthur C. Clarke's 'The Star'," in *Extrapolation,* Vol. 28, No. 2, Summer, 1987, pp. 148-58.

Critical Essay #3

In the following excerpt, Born considers that Clarke's characterization of the Jesuit astrophysicist in "The Star" renders the story superior to most antireligious science fiction.

[Two] stories serve as good examples of how Christianity is tested in a science fiction future and found to be wanting. However, in these stories, Harry Harrison's "The Streets of Ashkelon" and Clarke's "The Star," the anti-Christian rhetoric assumes more power in part because the men of faith have ceased to appear as ridiculous primitives. In Clarke's story, by far the most devastating in terms of casting doubt on Christianity's credibility, the priest is actually portrayed in a sympathetic light. Also, while the real purpose of the first three stories already examined is a glorification of scientific culture— to which the Christian merely serves as a foil— the attention of Harrison's and Clarke's stories is solidly upon the men of faith themselves. The scientific frames of reference in which Christianity is tested are not eulogized but rather simply assumed to be reliable. . . .

The Jesuit astrophysicist in Clarke's "The Star" poses, in several ways, a contrast to the four previous Christian protagonists [discussed in an unexcerpted portion of the essay]. Most noticeable is his first-person narration. We see the Christian's point of view through his own eyes rather than from the author's omniscient vantage point, and in this case that means the character is viewed with neither antagonism nor irony. And besides being a sympathetic character, the astrophysicist is an intellectual and a scientist. This further distinguishes "The Star" from the run-of-the-mill antireligious science fiction story — the Jesuit is evidence that one man can hold both religious and scientific attitudes. He cannot be written off as an intellectual dwarf because he establishes his credentials almost immediately: "It was, I think, the apparent incongruity of my position that caused most amusement to the crew. In vain I would point to my three papers in the *Astrophysical Journal,* my five in the *Monthly Notices of the Royal Astronomical Society.* I would remind them that my order has long been famous for its scientific works."

Besides describing his relationship to the other members of the crew, the Jesuit reveals himself further by providing details of the decor in his living quarters. On his wall hang a crucifix and a Rubens engraving of Loyola. These details taken together with his status on board ship all add up to the impression that piety and intellect can coexist, and the conjunction of these in the Jesuit is what makes his discovery of the supernova's date of explosion so dreadful and poignant. Gary Wolfe has commented that "though his [Clarke's] stories are weak in characterization and often crude in style, they occasionally attain a sort of science fiction version of the sublime— a vision at once humane and technological, personal and cosmic." It is Clarke's artistic choice and characterization of a Jesuit both religious and scientific that accounts for the "sublime" quality of "The Star." The story told from an agnostic or atheistic viewpoint would be ineffective since the problem of evil exists as a "problem" primarily for the theist— how can a just God allow evil? The Jesuit realizes that his problem is a unique one, a product of belief, because for the atheist "there is no divine justice, for there is no God."

At the same time, the Jesuit is capable of losing his faith because he, as a responsible scientist, takes scientific evidence seriously. His choices are three, in light of the evidence: (1) Accept a peculiarly perverse God who willfully destroyed a civilization while creating what appeared on Earth as the Star of Bethlehem; (2) Accept God's purposes in the universe as so incomprehensible to human understanding that they appear amoral and meaningless to a traditional Christian ethic; (3) Stop believing God exists. Although Roger Elwood remarks that among science fiction writers, scientists, and philosophers "it is generally agreed by all sides that . . . no scientific experiment can prove or disprove God's existence," Clarke postulates a situation where the evidence approaches such an experimental possibility. And it should be noted that 1955 was the year when Clarke not only published " The Star," but philosopher Antony Flew also asked his famous question, which still reverberates in college and seminary classrooms: "What would have to occur or to have occurred to constitute . . . a disproof of the love of, or of the existence of, God?" Clarke's story seems tailored to such a query.

If the Jesuit's God has not disappeared, then he has at least become unrecognizable in terms of the crucifix hanging on the wall. J. Norman King comments that

man, who must think within categories of space and time, had, as we have seen, imaginatively visualized a God— symbol and basis of human value and meaning— as located just beyond the spheres, hovering concernedly— or even retributively— near to man. But as the distance, spatial and temporal, is indefinite-ly extended, the same image of God results in pushing that God farther and farther away until he virtually disappears from the galactic universe.

Whatever the differences among these five stories— the Christian's vision being alternately painted as superstitious and savage, naively destructive, or simply inadequate— they all posit an inherent antagonism between Christian and empirical weltanschauungen, and the Christian paradigm is found defective and/or outmoded every time. Their content and conclusions are dictated by the strict adherence to positivism, which Gunn argues is central to all science fiction about religion. However, as suggested earlier, science fiction bound to such positivistic dogma perhaps loses its speculative quality because the possibilities are narrowly limited a priori. This condition seems averse to the very nature of speculative fiction . . . .

Source: Daniel Born, "Character as Perception: Science Fiction and the Christian Man of Faith," in *Extrapolation,* Vol. 24, No. 3, Fall, 1983, pp. 251-71.

Critical Essay #4

The excerpt printed below is part of a longer essay comparing "The Star," by Arthur C. Clarke, "Neutron Star" by Larry Niven, and "To the Dark Star" by Robert Silverberg. Nedelkovich identifies both strengths and shortcomings in Clarke's narrative. Nedelkovich concludes that this widely read story's focus on character contributed to the development of science fiction as a genre.

Clarke's story opens with the famous sentence (one of the best introductory sentences ever in the American science-fiction short story): "It is three thousand light-years to the Vatican." The narrator is, curiously, a Jesuit priest who is also a practicing astronomer and a space-traveler, and he is a member (the chief astrophysicist) of a rather multitudinous expedition which surveys the remains of a supernova that exploded 6,000 years before. The story is set in the thirtieth century. (If it is true that one of the jobs of literary criticism is to *re-create* the work of art, then I should withhold the punch line from you and try to build suspense. But I will not.) The hero computes that the light of this supernova, which killed an entire race of people, was *the* star of Bethlehem; and the readers learn this only in the last sentence of the story, which makes for one of the most famous, classical punch lines in the history of the science-fiction short story. As the ship, with its precious cargo of information, alien artifacts, and works of art, speeds back towards Earth, the Jesuit grieves over the theological and moral implications of his discovery

In my opinion, Clarke errs against plausibility in one matter. He postulates that the destroyed civilization, in the years before its destruction, could reach its outermost planet, its equivalent of Pluto, with such huge machinery and so much cargo that a vast bunkered museum was built there and marked by a colossal stone pillar— "The pylon . . . a mile high when it was built" — but they did not put a colony of their people into that same shelter to survive. The Jesuit even says, "It will take us generations to examine all the treasures that were placed in the Vault. They had plenty of time to prepare, for their sun must have given its first warnings many years before its final detonation." Is it credible that they would have such priorities, that they would build a titanic museum instead of a place where hundreds could live?. . .

There is one unpleasant matter. I have to say that in "The Star," Clarke reveals an attitude toward aliens which is odd and, in my view, quite unacceptable. Of course, a narrator speaks in the story, not the author, but nevertheless, consider these three points. (1) There are no living aliens in the story even though there easily could have been. It is quite obvious and it really strikes us that there should have been a survival colony in the bunker, not the colossal museum. Perhaps the author went out of his way so that he would not have to deal with any aliens. (2) The preserved picture of the aliens show them to be "disturbingly human" in appearance— this should mean, very strongly anthropomorphic. (3) About two hundred words are spent insisting that the aliens were good according to Earth standards of goodness, even "musical" in speech. Is tragedy in the loss of a civilization or only in the loss of a civilization *we like*? "They could travel freely enough between the planets of their own sun, but they had not yet learned to

cross the interstellar gulfs, and the nearest solar system was a hundred light-years away. Yet even had they possessed the secret of the Transfinite drive no more than a few millions could have been saved. Perhaps it was better thus."

Now imagine a mainstream writer, F. Scott Fitzgerald, for instance, writing something in this general vein and having his narrator, Nick Carraway, say:

What a lovely, big heap of ruins I saw at West Egg! Gatsby's mansion had caved in, you see, roof and all, during a big party, and all doors were locked, so everybody was killed. Saw their pictures— they all looked like me. I think it is a tragedy because they weren't just any people, they looked disturbingly like me. Oh, and there was a vault there, uncollapsed, quite safe, within their reach, but they didn't go for shelter there, they all just flung their medallions and pocketwatches there, and a tape recorder. Thinking about those doors: even had the doors been wide open, only a few dozen people would have saved themselves. Perhaps it was better thus.

This may be painful to a science-fiction fan, but if science fiction is good literature, why not put its best writers and the best mainstream writers up against one another and just look at them? Perhaps it is better thus. . . .

In so many stories about space travel, the discovery of an alien civilization or some such thing is never reported, brought back only by the lonely ship, practically by word of mouth, in a somewhat medieval fashion. One example of this occurs in Clarke's story: if the ship with the Jesuit should crash, no one would ever know what was discovered, if anything. All-the-eggs-in-one-starship, then. . . .

"The Star" opens and closes with the Jesuit Father in his cell, thinking, contemplating, as the spacecraft is voyaging back to Earth. Inside that frame is the canvas itself: remembered discussions on board the ship before the arrival at the star and remembered images of the exploration itself. But there are also brief glimpses of the distant past of 6,000 years ago when the civilization in question still existed. And much is said about what will happen on Earth when the discovery is revealed. This structure reminds me of a canvas in a solid, four-sided frame, with an attached piece of painting behind it and another in front of it. The reader has to change telescopes several times. But all of this is firmly integrated into the confessional monologue. The story strikes me as cold and sad, a monotone voice in a little room. Reading it, I seem to hear a clock tick. Clarke's is the only story I have ever read that detonates a supernova quietly. There is a good reason for the shortness of the story: this solitary contemplation could not go on much longer without, to put it bluntly, getting dull. . . .

Clarke's hero, the Jesuit, seems to be a very quiet and composed person. He is primarily concerned with the broad moral and theological implications of his discovery. That discovery he still does not share with anybody. (So, if anything should happen to him, the discovery could be buried forever; thus he increases and prolongs the danger to a piece of scientific knowledge.) Nonetheless, Clarke's excellent story, which appeared in 1955 and was widely read, probably has contributed to the development of

the science-fiction genre by focusing so successfully on things other than space opera. The personality of the narrator must have been helpful....

Source: Alexander Nedelkovich, "The Stellar Parallels: Robert Silverberg, Larry Niven, and Arthur C. Clarke," in *Extrapolation,* Vol. 21, No. 4, Winter, 1980, pp. 348-60.

Critical Essay #5

In the following essay, Hollow discusses the theological philosophy espoused in "The Star," comparing the story to another story by the same title written by H. G. Wells in the nineteenth century.

Clarke's response to Wells' legacy can perhaps best be presented by comparing two of their stories, both of which happen to be entitled "The Star" (Wells, 1897; Clarke, 1955). Clarke's story does not seem, at least not consciously, to have been meant to allude to that of his predecessor, but both refer to the Star of Bethlehem, both contemplate the seemingly meaningless destruction of a civilization, and both finally are about whether the universe can be understood.

In Wells' story, a planetoid wanders into our solar system, where it collides with Neptune and ignites into a giant fireball, the new "star" of the title. As these interlocked bodies narrowly miss the Earth on their fall into the Sun, the result on our planet is terrible storms, earthquakes, and a flood almost as universal as that described in Genesis.

The theme is typically Wellsian: we humans, who thought ourselves the center of creation, suddenly realize that we are no more guaranteed survival than was Neptune. Our fate, for that matter, would be no more detectable over the vast distances of space than was that of whatever beings may have lived on that planet. A new star in the heavens, says the story, is much more likely to announce that the universe is a random and uncaring place than that a savior is born.

Clarke's story, in turn, is equally anti-Christian. A Jesuit priest, an astrophysicist, is returning to Earth from an expedition to investigate the remains of a supernova at the extreme edge of our galaxy. The investigators have found, buried on the planet which must have been the Pluto of the destroyed system, a time fault filled with the relics of a brilliant and beautiful civilization, destroyed when the star exploded. "It is one thing for a race to fail and die, as nations and cultures have done on Earth," the Jesuit says to himself; "but to be destroyed so completely in the full flower of its achievement, leaving no survivors— how can that be reconciled with the mercy of God?"

"I know in what year the light of this colossal conflagration reached our Earth," he says. "I know how brilliantly the supernova whose corpse now dwindles behind our speeding ship once shown in terrestrial skies. I know how it must have blazed low in the east before sunrise, like a beacon in the oriental dawn." "What was the need to give these people to the fire," he cries out; was it "that the symbol of their passing might shine above Bethlehem?"

It is not the ruin of civilizations that undermines the priest's faith. As he says, he and several other members of the expedition have "seen the ruins of ancient civilizations on other worlds." To such routine disasters he is able to answer, as the voice from the whirlwind answers Job, that "God has no need to justify His actions to man. He who built the Universe can destroy it when He chooses." The priest's real difficulty is the

same as that of the people in Wells' story: his religion has claimed too much. The human assumption that this world is the center of the cosmos, which is exemplified in both stories by the Star of the Magi, is bound sooner or later to come up against the fact of other inhabited planets; perhaps in very dramatic fashion. Are we to believe, asks Clarke's story, that God so loved this world that He destroyed another for it? It would be better, the priest is close to deciding, if the crucifix were to be seen as "an empty symbol," if humans were to admit that the Earth-centered view of the universe has difficulties which not even the great founder of his order, not even the far-seeing Loyola of the Rubens engraving, could foresee.

If the priest is to keep his intellectual honesty, he must do as the people in Wells' story do: he must give up the idea of divine favor. (It is even suggested, in Wells' story, that such a surrender would bring about a "new brotherhood" among men, would make of the world a more Christian place than Christianity managed to do.) The priest must realize that the state of human knowledge is as the ship's doctor describes it to him one day when the two of them are looking out from the ship's observation deck at the "stars and nebulae" swinging "in silent, endless arcs." "Well, Father," the doctor says, "it goes on forever and forever, and perhaps *something* made it. But how you can believe that something has a special interest in us and our miserable little world— that beats me." Or as Clarke has said in another context, in answer to the psalmist's "What is man that Thou art mindful of him?": "What indeed?" ("Of Space and Spirit," 1959).

The priest has to learn to see all peoples, his own and those of the destroyed civilization, as the latter present themselves in one of the "visual records" they left in the time vault: as children playing on a beach. The image does not favor one people over another; instead, it captures, as it always has, the poignant beauty of mortality, especially of mortality seen against the magnificent immensity of the universe. Some cultures may be swept away, as in Housman's "Smooth Between Sea and Land"; some cultures may learn to sail the sea, as in Clarke's "Transience." The point is that both are beautiful. The passing of culture is no worse than the passing of a generation, than the passing of an individual. We must concentrate, as does the art of the destroyed civilization, on the moment of youth against the sweep of time, on the moment of intelligent life against the background of death. From such a viewpoint, focused on such an image, it still might be possible for the Jesuit to hope that such beauty— simply because it is beautiful—is *Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam.* The universe and the existence of life in it still may testify to the glory of a creator.

The difference between Wells' "The Star" and Clarke's "The Star" is this faint hope still available to the priest. In Wells' story, the master mathematician, who has been staying up night and day calculating the path of the new "star," finally stands at his window and says, as if to the new star: "You may kill me. . . . But I can hold you— and all of the universe for that matter— in the grip of this little brain." What he means, of course, is that he has the words and the numbers to describe the catastrophe that is about to happen. He is able to conclude that the Earth is not the center of a planned universe, that the human race "has lived in vain." He can only stare his doom in the face, comfort himself that he has understanding, and say bravely: "I would not change. Even now."

For Clarke, as we have seen, the issue is notat least not yet— so clear. The priest's too limited view of the universe is undermined by the timing of the supernova, but Clarke's story does not suggest that the destroyed civilization lived in vain, nor does it conclude that the universe was not made by *something.* George Edgar Slusser has said that, "paradoxically, the hero's perception of cosmic indifference coincides with clear proof of the Christian religion— the Biblical account was correct after all, there was a Star of Bethlehem" I am fairly certain that the supernova is *not* supposed to be a "clear proof of the Christian religion," but I do think Slusser is correct when he describes the story's "final juxtaposition" as "that of a lyrically heightened voice brooding on the spectacle of universal indifference." And I am sure that the story wants the outcome of such brooding to be open-ended, not to be simply the Wellsian conclusion that the cosmos is a random as well as a deadly place. The universe may be indifferent— that is certainly one of the conclusions the priest could come to— but the story offers intelligent life and beauty as contrary suggestions, as aspects of existence which make total pessimism uncertain.

Source: John Hollow, in his *Against the Night, the Stars: The Science Fiction of Arthur C. Clarke,* Ohio University Press, 1976, pp. 14-8.

Topics for Further Study

"The Star" is an example of an interior monologue. Do you think that the narrator's doubts heighten the suspense of the ending? Do his doubts detract from the suspense?

The story looks at the idea that humanity is central to God's plan for the universe. Does this plan seem fair to other civilizations which may inhabit the universe?

The narrator mentions that humans have found traces of other long-dead civilizations, but have never made contact with a living alien race. Does this make the story more believable? Less believable? Why? Would knowledge that other races of sentient beings exist in the universe tend to strengthen or weaken traditional Christian tenets of faith? Why?

The story ends with reference to the star of Bethlehem. Is it necessary that the reader be Christian in order to feel the impact of the ending? Why or why not?

Only one other character, Dr. Chandler, is heard from besides the narrator. The narrator considers the doctor a "notorious atheist" and suggests that most of the starship's other scientists and crew are too. How might a confirmed atheist react to the news that the supernova was the star of Bethlehem? What might be the response of a deeply religious person who is not a Christian—a Jew, a Muslem, or a Hindu? How might their reactions differ from that of the Jesuit narrator?

Compare and Contrast

1954: There are 32,501 Jesuit priests, brothers, and scholars in the world, with 7,630 in the United States.

1990s: The number of Jesuits has declined to 22,000. There are fewer than 4,000 Jesuits in the U.S.

1950s: The "space race" begins, with the worlds's two superpowers, the Soviet Union and the United States, separately developing space travel technology. The Soviet Union launches Sputnik I, the first manufactured satellite, and Sputnik II, carrying a live dog, into orbit around the earth in 1956.

1990s: The lunar surface is littered with debris from 32 unmanned probes and nine manned missions to the moon. The U.S. space shuttles

Atlantis, Discovery, and Endeavour regularly carry U.S. astronauts and scientists to work aboard the Russian space station MIR.

1950s: The "arms race" between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. parallels the space race between the two superpowers. In 1954, the U.S. Atomic Commission explodes a nuclear-fusion hydrogen bomb on Bikini Atoll in the South Pacific. The device is hundreds of times more powerful than the atomic bombs detonated over Hiroshi-ma and Nagasaki.

1990s: The U.S. and the former Soviet Union have signed numerous arms treaties and have committed to destroying their nuclear arsenals. Numerous smaller countries, however, have developed nuclear capabilities.

What Do I Read Next?

The Nine Billion Names of God: The Best Short Stories of Arthur C. Clarke (1967) by Arthur C. Clarke. This collection includes the title story "The Nine Billion Names of God." This story deals with a philosophical confrontation between Western scientists and the religious beliefs of Tibetan monks.

Childhood's End (1953) by Arthur C. Clarke. This was the first of Clarke's major novels to win wide public acclaim. It deals with the evolution of utopia imposed on Earth by an alien race which confines humanity to its own planet by eliminating space travel.

2001: A Space Odyssey (1968) derives from his short story "The Sentinel" and was written concurrently with the screenplay for the motion picture of the same name The novel is divided into sections. In the first section, a monolith appears on Earth and signals the dawn of man by nudging pre-homo-sapiens into learning about tools and taking a giant evolutionary step. In the next section, set in 2001, humans find a second monolith on the moon and set out to track the signal it is transmitting to a distant receiver. Clarke continued the saga in three further works: 2010: Odyssey Two (1982); 2061: Odyssey Three (1987), and 3001: The Final Odyssey (1997).

"Nightfall" (1941) by Isaac Asimov. "Nightfall" has been voted the best science fiction short story of all time by the Science Fiction Writers of America. The story is about a world which has six suns, at least one of which is always shining. Once every two thousand years, however, the planet's alignment is such that the sky becomes dark and true night comes to the world. Because of the incredibly long periods between nightfalls, the idea of total darkness has become a disbelieved legend on the planet. The story revolves around the effect that nightfall has on that civilization.

Starship Troopers(1959) by Robert Heinlein. This was one of Heinlein's line of "young adult" novels, but it is often considered overly violent and right-wing. It won a 1960 Hugo award, but earned Heinlein a reputation as a militarist or even fascist. The story revolves around a young man who joins the military as a professional soldier in the "Bug War" against insect-like aliens. It was released as a motion picture, carrying an "R" rating because of the violence, in 1997.

A Canticle for Leibowitz(1960) by Walter M. Miller, Jr. Emphasizing the cyclical nature of history, Miller's Hugo Award-winning novel depicts the reestablishment of Western civilization following a nuclear catastrophe which has thrown the world into a new Dark Ages.

Further Study

Aldiss, Brian W. *Trillion Year Spree,* Avon Books, 1986.

A history of science fiction. Aldiss places the genesis of the genre in Gothic literature and traces it through late twentieth century literature and film.

Clute, John and Peter Nicholls, eds. *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction.* New York: St. Martin's, 1995.

A carefully compiled reference work.

Olander, Joseph D. Olander and Martin Harry Greenberg, eds. *Arthur C. Clarke.* New York: Taplinger Publishing Company, 1977.

Nine critical essays by writers, critics, and academicians.

Reid, Robin Anne. *Arthur C. Clarke: A Critical Companion.*

Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1997.

Provides biographical information about Clarke, analytical readings of Clarke's works, and discusses his place as a preeminent writer of science fiction. Reid also includes an extensive bibliography of Clarke's work.

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Clarke, Arthur C. *The Other Side of the Sky,* Signet, 1959, p. vi.

Hollow, John. *Against the Night, the Stars: The Science Fiction of Arthur C. Clarke* Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983, 197 p.

Leiber, Fritz. "Engaging Adventure Tales," in *Chicago Sunday Tribune Magazine,* February 16, 1958, p. 7.

McAleer, Neil. *Arthur C. Clarke: The Authorized Biography,* Contemporary Books, 1992, pp. 44, 82-83, 114, 296.

Rabkin, Eric S. *Arthur C. Clarke: Starmont Reader's Guide 1,*Starmont House, 1980, p. 57.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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

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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Short Stories for Students

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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

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