

Trick or Treat Study Guide

Trick or Treat by Padgett Powell

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Introduction

“Trick or Treat,” a short story by Padgett Powell, originally appeared in *Harper’s* magazine in November 1993 and later was included in the author’s collection of short stories, *Aliens of Affection* (1998). “Trick or Treat” is a brief glimpse into the life of a frustrated and lonely housewife, Mrs. Hollingsworth, who allows herself to be seduced by a smart-mouthed twelve-year-old boy named Jimmy Teeth. Mrs. Hollingsworth is not only at odds with her life, but she also has a love/hate relationship with the South, where she lives. “Trick or Treat” won a 1995 O. Henry Award and was anthologized in the award publication, *The O. Henry Prize Stories 1995*.

Powell is a renowned southern writer, having lived most of his life in Florida. Some would argue that Florida is not *southern* the way Georgia or Alabama are, but one reading of Powell’s fiction may change their minds. He imbues his characters and settings with a distinctly southern tang which is not overdone but at the same time is impossible to ignore. Powell’s work is both funny and emotionally evocative. Many critics have described his use of language as lush. His characters are just fantastical enough to entertain without being entirely unbelievable or unsympathetic.

Author Biography

Padgett Powell was born in Gainesville, Florida, on April 25, 1952, to Albine Batts Powell and Bettyre Palmer Powell, a brewmaster and a schoolteacher, respectively. He grew up in various cities in Florida and South Carolina. In college, Powell struggled with his English classes, opting for chemistry as a major. He graduated from the College of Charleston with a bachelor's degree in chemistry in 1975 and went on to graduate school at the University of Tennessee. Powell lost interest in school and left before he finished. He moved to Texas and became a roofer.

Powell enrolled in the University of Houston's Master of Fine Arts program in fiction writing in hopes of meeting women. He studied under post-modernist author Donald Barthelme, and while a student, he developed and wrote his first novel, *Edisto*. Powell graduated in 1982 and, in 1984, an excerpt of *Edisto* appeared in the *New Yorker*. Later that year, the novel was published separately. The esteemed American author Saul Bellow praised Powell as a promising new writer. *Edisto* won recognition as a National Book Award nominee for first novel in 1984 and was listed as one of the five best books of 1984 by *Time* magazine, and the novel garnered the Whiting Foundation Writer's Award for Powell. The author also received an American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters' Rome Fellowship in literature for two years, 1986 and 1988.

Also in 1984, Powell took a job teaching writing at the University of Florida, back in his birth home of Gainesville. His next two books, short story collections *Typical* and *A Woman Named Drown*, were not as successful as Powell's first novel. Powell kept writing; however, his struggling writing career and alcoholism brought him to an all-time low. He made a bargain with himself that he would not drink any more alcohol until he made a million dollars, and the same night *Harper's* magazine called him about the purchase of "Trick or Treat," which went on to win an O. Henry Award and be published in the O. Henry Award collection for best short fiction. Powell later included "Trick or Treat" in his own collection, *Aliens of Affection* (1998). In 1996, Powell returned to the main character of *Edisto* in the sequel, *Edisto Revisited*.

In 2000, Powell published *Mrs. Hollingsworth's Men*, an atypical novel based on one of the characters in "Trick or Treat." This work uses an avant-garde style that plays with the narrative line, using a series of vignettes to illustrate this unusual character rather than a standard plot of rising action, climax, and resolution.

As of 2006, Powell continued to teach writing at the University of Florida in Gainesville, where he lived with his wife, poet Sidney Wade, and their two daughters.



Plot Summary

“Trick or Treat” takes place in the southern United States. It begins with Mrs. Hollingsworth walking to the grocery store dressed in lizard-skin cowboy boots and other unspecified strange clothes that she calls her “costumes.” She has attracted the attention of a twelve-year-old boy, who has been watching her walk by for weeks from his yard. He is attracted to her and wants to make a pass at her. He finally takes the risk of talking to her. Mrs. Hollingsworth philosophizes about her relationship with the South, and the boy asks her if she is crazy. Offended, Mrs. Hollingsworth stalks off, and the boy is dismayed at having upset her and possibly ruined his chances at having sex with her.

The boy turns up at her house with a lawn mower at a later date. Mrs. Hollingsworth opens the door and looks him over in his tee-shirt and cut-off, frayed shorts which makes the boy self-conscious and defensive. He asks her if she wants him to cut her lawn. Meanwhile he is thinking of the lascivious things he would rather say to her. Mrs. Hollingsworth says, “No . . . But you can cut it anyway,” and she shuts the door, testing him for worthiness by seeing whether he will cut her lawn without discussing terms. The boy whips across the front lawn, cutting the grass quickly. Mrs. Hollingsworth lets him into the backyard and recognizes his determination as a “sexual mission.”

She is intrigued. While he finishes the backyard, she makes *the* lemonade” and brings it to the backyard where she expects him to make his first true advance, setting “the lunacy of his early need and her late fatigue in motion.” The sound of a police radio nearby sends the boy over her six-foot privacy fence before she realizes he is gone. The policeman, Sergeant Garcia, asks Mrs. Hollingsworth about the lawn mower, which turns out to have been stolen from a nearby hardware store. Mrs. Hollingsworth points out the boy’s fleeing footprint in the mud but cannot help him any further than that. The boy calls her later that day and says, with a disguised voice, that he will take a rain check on the lemonade then hangs up without getting an answer. Later that day, Mr. Hollingsworth comes home, and Mrs. Hollingsworth goes through her ritual kiss and welcoming, all the while thinking of the boy and what it will be like to kiss him. She thinks of their impending affair as “an act of survival” because she is “anonymous” to her family, but not to the boy.

Two weeks later Halloween takes place, a holiday that Mrs. Hollingsworth dislikes for its stupid costumes and paranoia about candy that drives some people to use a metal detector to check for dangerous inclusions. The boy turns up on her porch in a suit and fedora and asks to be let in before he is spotted. He is afraid that his father and older brother are going to try and keep him away from Mrs. Hollingsworth’s house. She lets him into her house and is struck by his likeness to Mickey Rooney’s character Andy Hardy. But rather than hang his hat, the boy tosses his suit and hat into the trash compactor, revealing the same tee-shirt and cut-off shorts. The boy reveals that the suit and hat were a disguise to hide from his father and brother, not a Halloween costume. This makes Mrs. Hollingsworth laugh, but she stops herself, afraid that she will offend the boy. She asks him if he steals a lot and if he has been arrested. He avoids the questions, teasing her that she talks too much. Then he confesses that the only time he



was caught was, ironically, when he took a red WD-40 straw, an item which is very small and costs nothing by itself.

Mrs. Hollingsworth asks him what his name is and he tells her it is Jimmy. He wants it to be first names only, "like a hot line," but Mrs. Hollingsworth insists on full names. His name is Jimmy Teeth. She decides he must not be lying about his name because it is so unusual. She introduces herself to him as Janice Halsey, which he knows is not her name but does not catch on that it is her maiden name.

They sit in companionable silence for a while. Jimmy finally asks her if she does like the South after all, harkening back to their first conversation. They both agree that they like the South. Then Mrs. Hollingsworth tells him that the South is "a vale of tears that were shed a long time ago. It's a vale of *dry* tears." She tries to explain it further when Jimmy just sits there nodding in agreement. Jimmy is worried his plan is not going to work, that she is too "square," but then Mrs. Hollingsworth takes his hand. They look at each other over their clasped hands, nearly in tears from unspeakable emotions. Jimmy suddenly worries how to explain himself if someone walks in on them, and he laughs out loud when he realizes his lawn mower and his disguise clothes are gone. He worries that his laugh is inappropriate but then realizes that "nothing was inappropriate." Mrs. Hollingsworth decides that in entering this affair she cannot be an authority figure over Jimmy because that would make their relationship immoral.

Mrs. Hollingsworth tells Jimmy she will pay him eight dollars for the lawn mowing rather than five if he promises not to tell her husband. He agrees. Then she asks him if he still goes trick-or-treating. "No'm, I quit that." Mrs. Hollingsworth is pleased with his answer, and the matter is settled. She will have sex with him. Mrs. Hollingsworth likens herself to Orpheus, ascending "from the underworld with instructions to not look back, with some comical but not ungratifying sex mixed in."



Characters

Sergeant Garcia

Sergeant Garcia comes to Mrs. Hollingsworth's yard to investigate a report of a stolen lawnmower. His arrival causes Jimmy Teeth to run away because the lawn mower he used was indeed stolen. Mrs. Hollingsworth, having just been interrupted in her role of being seduced by Jimmy, looks at Garcia and thinks, "sex with cops."

Janice Halsey

See Mrs. Hollingsworth

Mr. Hollingsworth

Mr. Hollingsworth has been married to Mrs. Hollingsworth for fifteen years. He works all day long. Their marriage is not unhappy, but on some level Mrs. Hollingsworth is upset by how perfect everything is. It is not clear if Mr. Hollingsworth is aware of her feelings.

Mrs. Hollingsworth

Mrs. Hollingsworth, the protagonist of "Trick or Treat," is a thirty-seven-year-old unhappy housewife who starts an affair with a twelve-year-old neighborhood boy. She has three children, one older than twelve and two younger. She has been married for fifteen years and leads a life of soap operas and tropical vacations, but she is dissatisfied with it all. Mrs. Hollingsworth enters into her affair with Jimmy Teeth as a means of survival, a way to be a person again rather than just a wife and mother. There are allusions to Mrs. Hollingsworth's fine education: her classical reference to the myth of Orpheus, who descends into the underworld to retrieve his wife Eurydice; her comment that she can read *Madame Bovary* in the original French; and her cryptic ponderings about the South as a vale of dry tears.

When the story opens, Mrs. Hollingsworth is walking down the street, dressed in odd clothes, and talking to herself about the South. She has a love/hate/love relationship with the South. She tells Jimmy that she likes the South, but its inconsistencies also make her crazy, and she cannot ignore them: "stray pets collected and neutered by alcoholics, unless it rains; automotive mechanical intelligence in inverse proportion to dental health; and *Halloween*." Out of boredom, she thinks of going insane, as if it were a choice. Jimmy's arrival in her life spares her from that path, and instead Mrs. Hollingsworth takes up with the young boy, a decision that many people would revile as statutory rape.



Jimmy Teeth

Jimmy Teeth is a twelve-year-old boy who is fixated on having sex with Mrs. Hollingsworth, a woman who is old enough to be his mother. He eventually gets up the nerve to talk to her and then visit her house. Jimmy has a freckled face that is round, like an uncarved pumpkin. His thoughts are full of profanities although he never says them aloud. He likes to wear tee-shirts with inappropriate sayings on them with the idea that Mrs. Hollingsworth will be impressed with his wit. He has young stringy legs but acts as mature as he can, given his age and inexperience.

At the beginning of the story, Jimmy does not know how to talk to women and starts off badly with Mrs. Hollingsworth, offending her by asking her if she is crazy, which is not far from the truth. Skipping school and stealing a lawn mower, Jimmy tries to initiate the affair by mowing her lawn and nearly succeeds. Despite his tribulations in getting close to Mrs. Hollingsworth, she is actually an easy catch because she is looking for something new or different to lend interest to her life. At the end of the story, Jimmy comes into her house, brave, determined, and mostly assured of success. Mrs. Hollingsworth accepts his swagger and his implicit invitation. Jimmy worries a little about being caught in her kitchen, but it does not stop him from his mission.



Themes

Sexuality

Sexuality is a central theme in Powell's short story. Jimmy, at twelve years of age, is beginning puberty, a time when the human body matures from childhood to adulthood. An important aspect of this maturation is that the body readies itself for reproduction. Teenagers, full of new hormones from puberty, become interested in sex. Jimmy's pursuit of an older woman is daring and unusual, but his thoughts about sex, while still immature, are not. Since the story is told largely from Mrs. Hollingsworth's point of view, the reader does not learn directly why Jimmy is attracted to the housewife who is old enough to be his mother.

Contemporary society does not condone sex between adults and minors—people under the age of eighteen. Mrs. Hollingsworth deliberates whether to enter into a relationship with Jimmy, but she barely considers the question of pedophilia, a deviant behavior in which an adult engages in sex or sexual activity with a child. She recalls worrying about it with her own children but lets that thought go immediately and does not dwell on it. Mrs. Hollingsworth, in the final scene of the story, sees Jimmy as mature in some ways which in her view makes it okay for them to enter into a sexual relationship. Dissatisfied with her life and her family, including her husband, she looks forward to a relationship with Jimmy, "with some comical but not ungratifying sex mixed in."

Ennui

Ennui (pronounced awn-WEE), a word borrowed from French, denotes a feeling of continual weariness or melancholy which is not easily relieved. In Powell's short story, the character of Mrs. Hollingsworth exhibits ennui. Mrs. Hollingsworth attributes her sense of ennui to her boring husband and children as well as to her troubled relationship with the South. This ennui about the South is identified at the beginning of the story: "It loves me, it loves me not. I love *it*, I love it not." Mrs. Hollingsworth wears ridiculous clothes when she goes grocery shopping in an attempt to shake off her melancholy. But it is Jimmy Teeth who rescues her with his underage bravado and unusual—and risky—proposition. Although the end of the story pushes the boundaries of socially acceptable behavior, it is weirdly uplifting within its own terms because the point-of-view character, Mrs. Hollingsworth, is finally fighting to be free of her ennui.

Machismo

Machismo (pronounced ma-KEYS-mo), a word borrowed from Spanish, denotes an exaggerated sense of masculinity. Jimmy Teeth overcomes his young age with machismo to appeal to Mrs. Hollingsworth and attract her attention. He tries to talk to her (and thinks of even dirtier things to say that he believes are grown up perhaps because they are crass) but comes across as smart-mouthed. He mows her lawn as a



way to spend time with her and get her to notice him but has to run away when the police come to reclaim the stolen lawnmower. Last, he appears on her doorstep dressed in a suit and fedora, like an old fashioned movie star, but the costume is really just a disguise to hide from his father and older brother. With confidence borrowed from machismo, Jimmy stuffs the disguise into the trash compactor and sits down at Mrs. Hollingsworth's kitchen table. This last visit finally wins her over as Jimmy appears to her to be more than just a boy from the neighborhood.

Escape

Escape is sought by both Mrs. Hollingsworth and Jimmy Teeth. Mrs. Hollingsworth is dissatisfied and bored and wants some kind of change, although she does not directly face and try to solve her problems. Instead, she turns outward from her dissatisfaction with her family life and toward a neighborhood boy. Jimmy Teeth wants to escape his youth and be grown up enough to date older women like Mrs. Hollingsworth. This combination of desires makes Jimmy's proposition of a sexual relationship to Mrs. Hollingsworth possible rather than ridiculous. Together, in their illicit union, Mrs. Hollingsworth and Jimmy anticipate being able to escape temporarily from the confining aspects of their separate lives. But escapism never provides a permanent resolution from the problems one avoids.

Style

Setting

“Trick or Treat” is set in the contemporary American South, although the specific state and city are not given. The time period is established by present-day references, such as Jimmy’s tee-shirt advertising bubblegum which says “JUST BLOW ME,” Volvos, a Lawn-Boy mower, Saran Wrap, WD-40, and running a metal detector over bags of Halloween candy. The South as a region is clearly established by Mrs. Hollingsworth, who talks about the South throughout the story, wondering at her mixed feelings about her environment. The South has a rich literary history because many fiction writers who grew up there, like Powell, use it as the setting for their stories.

Motif

A motif is a recurring image, idea, or detail. Motifs often support or underscore a theme, and they lend cohesion to the structure. In Powell’s story, pumpkins are a reoccurring motif, which suggest innocence. When Mrs. Hollingsworth first notices Jimmy standing in his yard watching her, she describes him as “an uncarved, unlit pumpkin” and “a portrait of innocence.” At the end of the story, after Mrs. Hollingsworth has decided to accept Jimmy’s proposition, she recalls that “speaking pumpkin head on a fence.” The distinction is made between a jack-o’-lantern (which is a pumpkin carved with a face and lit from the inside with a candle) and a regular pumpkin. Jack-o’-lanterns have a semblance of intelligence (the face) and life (the candle). Featureless, a pumpkin is unassuming and blank. Jimmy must fight past her perception of his young pumpkin-head to be noticed and taken seriously as a “suitor, or whatever he was.”

Title

Given that “trick or treat” is the call children use on Halloween to bring adults to their doors with gifts of one sort or another, the title of this story seems to be used in an ironic or lurid way. Effective titles are always significant, drawing readers’ attention to the essence or main idea of a work. On the surface, Jimmy comes to the door with a trick or treat for Mrs. Hollingsworth, a reversal of the holiday custom. Moreover, Mrs. Hollingsworth’s willingness to engage the boy sexually, giving him the “treat” of sexual experience, may well turn out to be a sordid “trick,” conditioning the boy to become a child molester as an adult and turning Mrs. Hollingsworth into a prostitute (of sorts) if this sexual encounter can be called a “trick,” the common expression for a sexual encounter between a prostitute and someone who pays for her services.



Historical Context

Generation Y

Generation Y is an American cultural reference to people born between the late 1970s through the 1990s. As a term, it correlates to Generation X, known also as the post-baby boom generation. Generation Y as a group is a little difficult to categorize because it is still developing; those who fall within this cultural generation include high school students, college students, and people in their early thirties who are just getting started with their careers and families. Also, with this generation there is no catalyzing event, such as was World War II for the baby boomers.

What is understood about Generation Y is that members of this group experienced their formative years during a millennial rollover and the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States. They have no significant memories of the cold war between the United States and the U.S.S.R. Generation Y was the first generation to grow up using personal computers, and thus its members have been given many other nicknames associated with technology such as the Net Generation and the Google Generation. Generation Y constituents grew up in an age of economic expansion, diversity, and expanding gay rights, although as of 2006 they appear not necessarily more liberal than their predecessors. Powell's character Jimmy probably belongs to Generation Y to judge by his obscene tee-shirt, a fashion style that became more culturally acceptable after the 1990s.

Bull Market of the 1990s

The 1990s was a period of speedy economic growth, during which the stock market was described by economists as bullish. A bull market describes a long-term trend when investor confidence is high and when the economy is good for many consumers. A bear market, by contrast, refers to a period when investors are pessimistic. A famous and extreme bear market in U.S. history occurred during the Great Depression of the 1930s.

The bull market of the 1990s was due in large part to the dot-com boom. Personal computers and Internet technologies grew exponentially as computers found their way into almost every aspect of life, including schools, businesses, and homes. People became concerned that the dot-com bubble would eventually burst because stock speculation and excessive confidence over-inflated the value of many dot-com companies. That bubble burst in the spring of 2000. The burst was a complicated process which included a ruling against Microsoft by the U.S. Supreme Court on April 3, 2000; a drop in business spending following the millennial rollover; and a market correction in March 2000. The deflation of the dot-com bubble turned this bull market into a bear market. Mrs. Hollingsworth's family is doing well financially, which may be because of the 1990s bull market economy in which they are living. She acknowledges the costly landscaping of her property and their annual vacations abroad. Also, her

husband is making enough money so that Mrs. Hollingsworth can afford to stay home even after her children are in school full-time.

Halloween

Halloween is a secular holiday celebrated in the United States on October 31. The name of this holiday is derived from All Hallows Eve, or the night before All Hallows Day, which is also called All Saints' Day. All Saints' Day, a religious holiday for Catholics, is observed on November 1. Pope Gregory III moved All Saints Day to November 1 in the eighth century so as to coincide with the holidays already being celebrated by pagans. One of these pagan holidays, the one celebrated in Ireland, was Samhain (pronounced SOW-in), the beginning of winter. This holiday marked a time when the boundaries between the living and dead were permeable.

In modern tradition, children dress up in fantastical costumes on Halloween and visit their neighbors, calling out "trick or treat," a cheerful threat which earns the child a treat (often a piece of candy) as a bribe for their not playing a trick. Some people, reacting to reports of poison, razor blades, and other dangerous inclusions in this candy taken from strangers, go to extreme measures to check their children's treat bags. Mrs. Hollingsworth's neighbors, who run a metal detector over their kids' bags, express this cautionary attitude. In reality, many parents find a cursory examination for unwrapped or unusual pieces of candy to suffice. Incendiary reports about candy that has been tampered with say more about modern paranoia and isolation from one's neighbors than they do about what this secular holiday means to its celebrants.



Critical Overview

When Powell's first novel, *Edisto* (1984), was reviewed by critics, many praised Powell. For example, Ron Loewinsohn of the *New York Times* praises him as "an extravagantly talented writer." Once a student of the post-modernist author Donald Barthelme, Powell incorporates occasional experimental methods, which are both admired and criticized. Overall though, he is regarded as a southern writer with a flair for lush language, southern dialect, humor, and original ideas. T. Coraghessan Boyle, in a review of *A Woman Named Drown* for the *New York Times Book Review*, admires Powell's "distinctive, understated humor." A *People Weekly* review by Campbell Geeslin of the same novel agrees, calling Powell "very funny." In a review of *Typical*, Powell's first collection of short stories, Amy Hempel, praises Powell's command of the short form, as well as his "almost unequaled ability to bring Southern colloquial speech to the page." Stefan Kanfer, reviewing *Typical* for *Time* magazine acclaims Powell's "unique gift for regional American comedy" as well as his "vigorous imagination." However, Michiko Kakutani's *New York Times* review of *Typical* was less positive. He protested that half of the collected stories were "brittle" and "seemingly unfinished," failing to "do justice to a writer as gifted as Mr. Powell." Scott Spencer, though, gave a glowing review of *Edisto Revisited*, describing Powell's style in terms that have become familiar. He enjoys Powell's "almost disorientingly dazzling turns of phrase," the "lushness of the writing," and his "brilliant prose."

Aliens of Affection, the book in which "Trick or Treat" appeared, was no less warmly received by critics than Powell's other works. A reviewer for *Publishers Weekly* describes Powell's writing as "hyperactive"—but in a good way; in other words, "hip, sexy and playful." The reviewer also nominated "Trick or Treat" as the best story in the collection. A. O. Scott gives a qualified but generally positive review of *Aliens of Affection* in the *New York Times Book Review*: "Powell is an inordinately gifted writer whose stylistic inventiveness has temporarily overwhelmed his perceptive acuity." Francis Hwang focuses on Powell's southern affinity in his review of the collection and describes the stories as "refreshingly vulgar, deeply humane." Elizabeth Brunazzi agrees that "Trick or Treat" is the best story in *Aliens of Affection*, but suggests a limitation in her opinion that this story is the only one "in which Powell successfully defines a female character." Brunazzi's review is mostly positive, celebrating Powell's book as "provocative" and "entertaining."

Powell focuses on the character Mrs. Hollingsworth from "Trick or Treat" in his slim novel, *Mrs. Hollingsworth's Men*. Reviews of this book are mixed. Critics still favor Powell's language, but some are puzzled by his unconventional approach. The book lacks a typical plot, called a "book of poems disguised as a novel" by *New York Times Book Review* critic Robert Kelly. Scott, writing about *Aliens of Affection*, sums up Powell's literary career so far: "In all of the stories there is the good humor and humane intelligence that make Powell's work so appealing."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1



Critical Essay #1

Ullmann is a freelance writer and editor. In the following essay, she examines the southern Gothic elements in Powell's short story.

"Trick or Treat," by Padgett Powell, belongs to the southern Gothic subgenre of fiction. Southern Gothic is an offshoot of Gothic literature which is a genre that uses weird or supernatural elements in a story that examines social issues. Gothic is a type of romantic literature and borrows heavily from romanticism. Southern Gothic uses Gothic elements in conjunction with issues peculiar to the southern United States. The South has its own regional identity comprised of shared history, mythology, food traditions, and dialect. Predecessors to Powell in the southern Gothic subgenre include Flannery O'Connor, William Faulkner, Tennessee Williams, Harper Lee, and Eudora Welty—to name only a few. Powell uses Gothic elements in his story to raise it above the ordinary. Instead of being a simple tale of adolescent sexuality and mid-life disillusionment, "Trick or Treat" is a story of more mythic proportions, replete with talking pumpkins heads, adulterous lemonade, and costumed housewives walking to and from the grocery store.

The excess of emotion and the dark themes of Powell's story mark it as a Gothic in a southern setting, resplendent with the absurd, the grotesque, and the psychologically disturbing.

Characters in Gothic stories exhibit a combination of sympathetic and grotesque elements such that the reader is intrigued but uncomfortable. "Trick or Treat" offers a glimpse into the life of a happily married but enraged housewife, Mrs. Hollingsworth. She both loves and hates the South. She is bored; she is lonely despite having a family. To counter her ennui, Mrs. Hollingsworth dresses strangely and talks to herself while she walks. The finishing Gothic touch on this character is her justification for entering into a sexual relationship with a twelve-year-old boy, supposedly as a way to save her sanity. Insane women are also a common feature in Gothic stories.

She was toying with the idea of losing herself. She did not want her mind to depart . . . she wanted the little craft of things that were considered *her*, that she considered her, to get loose and drift and turn just a little off-line.

Like Mrs. Hollingsworth, her young suitor Jimmy Teeth also combines the normal and the weird. It is not unusual for him, at twelve years old, to feel aroused around women whom he finds attractive; however, it *is* unusual for him to pursue a relationship with someone outside his age group, especially a woman old enough to be his mother. In the course of the story, Jimmy never mentions his mother although he does talk about his father and brother. Jimmy's mother may be missing from his life, either dead or absent, therefore complicating the reasons for Jimmy's interest in Mrs. Hollingsworth.



Jimmy's intense emotions and unusual, even absurd, behavior are components of a Gothic story. Another mark of absurdity is Jimmy's luck at stealing the lawnmower, leaping the six-foot fence to escape the police, and finally getting Mrs. Hollingsworth alone on Halloween night. He is a mixture of maturity and innocence, working hard to sell himself as old enough to be worth Mrs. Hollingsworth's notice. At the very end of "Trick or Treat," Mrs. Hollingsworth asks Jimmy if he still goes trick-or-treating. "No'm, I quit that," an answer which satisfies Mrs. Hollingsworth, as if giving up trick-or-treating were a measurable milestone for maturity. When they exchange names, Mrs. Hollingsworth is struck by Jimmy's strange last name, Teeth, concluding that it is too weird to be made up. Jimmy's last name, Teeth, is another grotesque component. The name conveys images that are both sensual and aggressive.

Gothic stories seek to establish a certain atmosphere—brooding, ruined, lonely—which Mrs. Hollingsworth invokes at the beginning of the story while she ponders her love for the South, and its love for her. "Trick or Treat" is set in the southern United States just before and on Halloween. Halloween is the perfect time of year for a Gothic story because of its natural associations with the grotesque and morbid, a time when Gothic motifs are commonly used. The fact that Mrs. Hollingsworth and Jimmy finally commit to going ahead with their relationship on Halloween night is no coincidence. The southern setting enhances the Gothic character of Powell's story. Jimmy, still unclear about the regional history, asks Mrs. Hollingsworth what she means by the "south."

"This," Mrs. Hollingsworth said, indicating with her arm the trees and air and houses and suspiring history and ennui and corruption and meanness and bottomland and chivalric humanism and people who are smart about money and people who don't have a clue and heroism and stray pets around them.

The arrival of Jimmy Teeth in Mrs. Hollingsworth's life is just the sort of grotesque event one can expect in a southern Gothic story. Her first, unnerving description of him is of "an uncarved, unlit pumpkin" peering over a picket fence and talking to her. The pumpkin head may be an allusion to Washington Irving's short story, "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," a frightening American Gothic tale of a headless horseman who uses a pumpkin in place of his missing head. The pumpkin head also alludes to a jack-o'-lantern, which is a pumpkin that has been hollowed out, carved with a face, lit with a candle, and thus temporarily given an impression of life.

Jimmy later calls Mrs. Hollingsworth "Bonnie" and refers to himself as "Clyde," a reference to infamous criminals Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow who were in love and lived life on the run as they robbed their way across the Texas countryside in the 1930s. Bonnie and Clyde are tragic, romantic figures, who pursued lives of love and revenge that eventually killed them. This reference, therefore, casts Mrs. Hollingsworth and Jimmy as larger than life and destined for each other. Jimmy is also referred to as "Lolito," a reference to Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Lolita*, a tragic and comic story about an older man sexually obsessed with a twelve-year-old girl. Jimmy is Mrs. Hollingsworth's Lolito, and, as in Nabokov's novel, Powell has infused his story with as much potential for comedy as calamity.



The absurd and disturbing subject matter further defines Powell's story as Gothic. The most disturbing element of "Trick or Treat" is the sexual relationship that develops between Mrs. Hollingsworth and Jimmy Teeth. "It was hysterical, she was hysterical, it was perfect." In western culture it is not as common for younger men to date older women as it is for younger women to date older men; however, the twenty-five year disparity in their ages is the least upsetting aspect. No matter how she tries to justify the relationship or how mature and confident Jimmy behaves, if Mrs. Hollingsworth has sex with Jimmy she will have committed statutory rape. Even though Jimmy is consenting, the law denies him the ability to make the choice to consent until he is eighteen years of age. Legally and psychologically, Mrs. Hollingsworth is not considered a pedophile (an adult who is sexually attracted to children) but instead an ephebophile (an adult who is sexually attracted to adolescents). They are mutually exclusive terms. Mrs. Hollingsworth, loosened from the moorings of her safe and boring southern landing, lets herself drift out into these dark waters.

The excess of emotion and the dark themes of Powell's story mark it as a Gothic in a southern setting, resplendent with the absurd, the grotesque, and the psychologically disturbing. The characters of Mrs. Hollingsworth and Jimmy Teeth are at once familiar and yet twisted, discomfiting. They turn to each other, as unlikely a pairing as they seem: a smart-mouthed youth and a well-educated housewife. For Mrs. Hollingsworth, this may just be the love that she has long sought from the South. For Jimmy, Mrs. Hollingsworth is both his conquest and his conqueror. Seeing no farther into their relationship than the first moment of its formation, the reader understands the Gothic tragedy of this story is the formation of that relationship itself.

Source: Carol Ullmann, Critical Essay on "Trick or Treat," in *Short Stories for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.



Topics for Further Study

- How does your family celebrate Halloween? How is Halloween celebrated in the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, and other observant countries? Write a story that takes place during Halloween and exhibits unusual customs, whether real or fictional.
- The southern United States has a rich cultural tradition. Pick one aspect, such as music, literature, food, or pastimes, and research it thoroughly. Present your findings to your classmates in a creative fashion. You could make a poster or a diorama, write a song or create a dish to pass, or make up a game to play, for example.
- Mickey Rooney is mentioned in the story by Mrs. Hollingsworth when she compares Jimmy Teeth in his suit and hat disguise to this Hollywood actor. Watch one of Rooney's Andy Hardy movies and write a one-page response to the film, explaining why Mrs. Hollingsworth compares Jimmy to Mickey Rooney. Do they look similar? Behave similarly? Something else?
- In the United States, there have been a few high-profile cases of older women convicted of statutory rape because they conducted a sexual relationship with a minor male. Mary Kay Letourneau and Debra Lafave are two examples. From a different perspective, although fictional, is the cult classic film, *Harold and Maud*. Watch the movie as well as research a case of statutory rape, involving an older woman and a young boy. Write an essay that compares the movie, the case, and Powell's short story, concluding with your opinions on age of consent and statutory rape.



Compare and Contrast

- **1990s:** Following the recession of the 1970s and the 1980s, the United States experiences an economic boom. This boom is largely tied to the explosive growth of personal computers, the Internet, and related technologies.

- **Today:** After the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the U.S. economy stalls, and Americans experience an economic recession. Corporations cut back staff, gas prices rise, and the real estate market in many parts of the country goes soft.

- **1990s:** Iraq invades Kuwait on August 2, 1990, the beginning of the Persian Gulf War. The United Nations comes to Kuwait's defense, led by U.S. forces. Most of the actual conflict takes place during January and February 1991. Kuwait is liberated, and the war won by February 28, 1991.

- **Today:** The United States invades Iraq on March 20, 2003, intending to overthrow Iraqi president Saddam Hussein, who is captured on December 13, 2003, and put on trial by the interim Iraqi government for crimes against humanity. Iraq meanwhile is torn apart by civil strife, and U.S. forces are unable to withdraw and ensure the safety of Iraqi citizens. The U.S. occupation receives strong criticism from all over the world, but a solution for stability is not readily apparent.

- **1990s:** Grunge culture, propagated by Seattle garage bands, such as Nirvana, is popular among American youth. It is characterized by loose-fitting, layered worn clothes. Alternative rock music, an outgrowth of punk and indie rock, is at its height. Generation X is associated with grunge culture.

- **Today:** Hip hop music and fashion are in the mainstream, following the popularity of gangsta rap styles in the 1990s. Hip hop fashion for men is characterized by baggy, low-slung pants, expensive sneakers, a durag (pronounced DOO-rag, a kerchief tied on the head), and heavy gold or platinum jewelry. Women also wear prominent jewelry, but their clothing tends to be close-fitting and revealing, especially at the waist.

What Do I Read Next?

- *City Life* (1970) is Donald Barthelme's third book of short stories. Barthelme was Powell's writing mentor when Powell was studying for his Master of Fine Arts degree in creative writing.
- *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), by William Faulkner, is a southern Gothic novel about the decline of the Compson family from southern nobility to vice-riddled tragedy, told in the stream-of-consciousness style.
- Set in South Carolina, *Edisto* (1984) is Powell's first novel, a coming-of-age story about Simons Manigault. *Edisto* garnered Powell much critical acclaim and remains a popular book.
- *Typical* (1991) is Powell's first collection of short stories. It features Powell's humor, lush language, and weird characters. The title story was selected for *The Best American Short Stories 1990*.
- *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876), by Mark Twain, is a novel about a young boy and his friends and their childhood adventures while growing up in the nineteenth-century American South. Twain is famous for his use of dialect in his writing; Powell also uses southern dialect and idioms to ground his stories in their southern settings.
- *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), by Tennessee Williams, is a Pulitzer Prize-winning play about a wealthy southern family being torn apart by illness, alcoholism, greed, and despair.
- *Ferris Beach* (1991), by Jill McCorkle, is a novel about a young woman who struggles with her identity while caught between her own self-consciousness and her admiration for the wild women in her life. The novel takes place in McCorkle's home state of North Carolina.
- *Copacetic* (1984) is Yusef Komunyakaa's debut collection of poetry. Komunyakaa's style imbeds striking images into jazz rhythms. Komunyakaa grew up in pre-civil rights era Louisiana, and this southern upbringing influences his poetry.

Further Study

Ayers, Edward L., and Bradley C. Mittendorf, eds., *The Oxford Book of the American South: Testimony, Memory, and Fiction*, Oxford University Press, 1998.

This book is a collection of essays, memoirs, diaries, and letters covering the colonial period up through the twentieth century. The editors have attempted unity in their book rather than a mere catalogue of texts, bringing together history, philosophy, and social issues to illustrate a subculture alive within its own historical context.

Cocca, Carolyn E., *Jailbait: The Politics of Statutory Rape Laws in the United States*, State University of New York Press, 2004.

Cocca's book is the first to look in-depth at the history and application of U.S. legislation enacted to protect and punish adolescents who are having sex. The author uses case studies as well as statistics in her examination of statutory rape laws.

Martin, Robert K., and Eric Savoy, eds. *American Gothic: New Interventions in a National Narrative*, University of Iowa Press, 1998.

This collection of essays celebrates the revival and reinvention of Gothic literature in North America with focus on theory, history, psychoanalysis, racial politics, and women's writing.

Nabokov, Vladimir, *Lolita*, Vintage Books, 1989.

First published in 1955, this famous, controversial novel is about a man who lusts after a twelve-year-old girl whom he calls Lolita. Mrs. Hollingsworth refers to Jimmy as "Lolito."



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Review of *Aliens of Affection*, in *Publishers Weekly*, Vol. 244, No. 40, September 29, 1997, p. 62.

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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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