# Waterland Study Guide

## Waterland by Graham Swift

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# Contents

# Introduction

British novelist Graham Swift's *Waterland* (London, 1983; New York, 1984) is a complex tale set in eastern England's low-lying fens region. It is narrated by Tom Crick, a middle-aged history teacher. Tom is facing a personal crisis, since he is about to be laid off from his job and his wife has been admitted to a mental hospital. He is a man who is keenly interested in ideas about the nature and purpose of history. Faced with a class of bored and rebellious students, he scraps the traditional history curriculum and tells them stories of the fens instead. These stories form the substance of the novel, which takes place mainly in two time frames: the present, and the year 1943, when Tom Crick is fifteen years old. The traumatic events of his adolescence reach forward in time to influence the present. The structure of the novel, which frequently moves back and forth in time, also suggests the fluidity of the interaction between past and present.

Tom's tale of the fens is sometimes lurid. It includes a family history going back to the eighteenth century and such lurid topics as murder, suicide, abortion, incest, and madness. These events are set against a background of some of the great events in history, such as World War I and World War II. The novel also includes digressions on such off-beat topics as the sex life of the eel, the history of land reclamation, the history of the River Ouse, and the nature of phlegm. At once a philosophical meditation on the meaning of history and a gothic family saga, *Waterland* is a tightly interwoven novel that entertains as it provokes.

# Author Biography

Graham (Colin) Swift was born May 4, 1949, in London, England, the son of Allan Stanley and Sheila Irene (Bourne) Swift. His father was a civil servant. Swift attended Dulwich College, in South London, from 1960 to 1967. He earned a bachelor of arts degree in 1970 from Queens' College, Cambridge, and a master of arts degree in 1975 from the same school. From 1974 to 1983 he worked part-time as a teacher of English.

Swift's first novel, *The Sweet-Shop Owner*, was published in 1980 and records the memories of a dying shopkeeper. It was followed by *Shuttlecock* (1981), which is also an analytical story about the past. A collection of Swift's short stories, *Learning to Swim and Other Stories* was published in 1982.

In 1983 Swift had a literary breakthrough with his novel *Waterland*. A commercial and critical success, it was nominated for the Booker Mc-Connell Prize and was awarded the *Guardian* Fiction Prize (1983), the Winifred Holtby Prize from the Royal Society of Literature (1984), and Italy's Premio Grinzane Cavour (1987). *Waterland* was adapted for film by Peter Prince and released by Palace Pictures in 1992. The novel was also a success in the United States, and since its publication, Swift's earlier books have also been published in America.

Swift's third novel, *Out of This World* (1988), was followed a few years later by *Ever After* (1992). Like *Waterland*, each of these novels examines the interplay between the past and the present. *Ever After* was awarded France's Prix du Meilleur Livre Etranger in 1994. Swift's novel *Last Orders* (1996) won the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for best novel and the Booker Prize, both in 1996. *Last Orders* was adapted for film by Sony Pictures Classics in 2001, directed by Fred Schepisi and starring Michael Caine and Bob Hoskins. In 2003 Swift's novel *The Light of Day* is due to be published.

# Plot Summary

*Waterland* begins with the narrator Tom Crick describing his childhood growing up in the low-lying fens area of eastern England. His father is a lock-keeper, and they live in a cottage by the River Leem. One day in July 1943, the drowned body of a local boy, Freddie Parr, floats down the river.

The story flashes forward to the present. Tom, having spent thirty-two years as a history teacher, is leaving his job because the school is eliminating the history department. The other reason he is leaving is because of a scandal involving his wife, who apparently has stolen a baby. No more details are given.

Crick abandons the history syllabus he is supposed to teach, deciding to tell his class stories of the fens instead. He describes the history of the fens and the persistent efforts over the centuries to drain the land. He also describes his ancestors, going back to Jacob Crick, who operated a windmill in the fens in the eighteenth century. His mother's ancestors were the Atkinsons, originally farmers from Norfolk.

After a scene in which the headmaster of the school, Lewis Scott, discusses Tom's dismissal with Tom, the narrative returns to 1943 and the discovery of the drowned body. Tom notices a bruise on the body, finds a telltale beer bottle in the rushes, and Tom's girlfriend Mary insists Freddie was killed by Dick, Tom's mentally retarded brother.

The narrator then embarks on one of his many explorations of the nature of history, before flashing back to a time in 1942 when Tom and Mary, both fifteen years old, first begin to explore each other sexually. They are careful to meet at times when they will not be discovered either by Freddie or Dick. After the death of Freddie, it transpires that Mary is pregnant, and Tom is unsure whether the baby is his or Dick's.

The narrative then returns to the distant past, as Tom relates the history of the Atkinson family and how they built their fortune through land-reclamation projects and a brewery business. One of the most significant events occurs in 1820, when Thomas Atkinson strikes his wife Sarah in a fit of unreasonable jealousy. She loses her mind as a result of the attack but lives another fifty-four years to become something of a local legend. The Atkinsons continue to prosper as the leading local family, the height of respectability and power. Arthur Atkinson is elected to Parliament in 1874, the same year that a great flood causes devastation throughout the area.

The story line goes back to 1943, and Freddie's death is ruled an accident. Freddie's father, unable to deal with his grief, attempts suicide but fails, thanks to the intervention of his wife. Mary goes into seclusion at her father's house for three years. It appears she never had her baby. Tom joins the army in 1945 and is stationed in Europe. In 1947 he returns home and he and Mary marry. They move to London, where he becomes a history teacher. For several decades they live a comfortable middle-class life. As the story reaches the present, Tom notices that his wife is becoming secretive. She has also

become very religious. Then she announces, at the age of fifty-two, that she is going to have a baby. God has told her so.

Tom then launches another inquiry into the nature of history ("De la Révolution"), discussing the French Revolution. He debates the issues with his class, which includes a boy named Price, who questions everything Tom says.

After a digression about the attempts of man to divert the course of the River Ouse in the fens, the narrative returns briefly to the present, and then back again to describe the life of Tom's father, a World War I veteran who married the nurse who brought him back to health.

In the present day, Tom attempts a debate with Lewis Scott over the usefulness of history as a subject of instruction. They cannot agree on an answer.

Tom describes the life of his grandfather, Earnest Richard Atkinson, who perfected a special kind of ale and lived in seclusion after a failed bid to win a parliamentary seat. After another round of present-day disputation with Price, the narrative returns to 1911 and Atkinson's remarkable brew. In the celebrations for the coronation of George V, the whole town seems to become intoxicated. But there is a fire at the New Atkinson Brewery, and it burns to the ground.

The narrative returns to 1940 and the exploratory sexual games played by Tom, Mary, and their friends, including Freddie. Dick wins an underwater swimming contest, and there is sexual tension between him and Mary. Freddie puts an eel in Mary's panties, which prompts Tom, as narrator, to devote a chapter to the riddle of the birth and sex life of an eel.

In 1943, Tom puts the beer bottle he suspects was used by Dick to strike Freddie in Dick's room. He wants to see what Dick will do. Dick secretly returns the bottle to a mysterious locked chest in the attic.

Returning to the history of the Atkinsons, Tom describes how Earnest Atkinson becomes a recluse, falls in love with his daughter Helen, and lives with her as husband and wife. Helen becomes a nurse and wants to marry a wounded soldier, Henry Crick (Tom's father). Earnest Atkinson wants a child by Helen, and she agrees to his request on the condition that she can raise the child as if it is Henry's. The child, Dick, turns out to be mentally retarded. Earnest leaves a letter for Dick, hidden in the chest in the attic, to be opened on Dick's eighteenth birthday. The letter explains that Earnest is Dick's real father. After leaving the letter, Earnest shoots himself. Back in the present, Tom takes his argumentative pupil Price to a pub for a drink, where they discuss history and teaching.

The narrative now starts to swing more and more rapidly between time periods. In the early 1940s, Mary takes it upon herself to educate Dick about sexual matters. Tom believes it may be Dick who got Mary pregnant. Mary denies it and tells Dick it is Freddie's baby, in order to protect Tom from what she fears might be Dick's jealousy.

In the present-day narrative, Tom returns from school to find his wife has snatched a baby from a supermarket. Back in the past, Tom's mother dies in the 1930s, when he is nine years old. In 1943 Mary tries unsuccessfully to abort her own baby, and then she and Tom go to a local woman, Martha Clay, who has a reputation as a witch. Martha performs a grisly abortion.

Present-day Tom insists to his wife that they return the stolen baby. They drive back to the supermarket and hand it back. They are both interviewed by the police. Back in 1943, Dick and Tom open their grandfather's chest. Tom reads Earnest Atkinson's letter and tries to explain to Dick his incestuous origin. Dick goes off on his motorcycle, heading for a dredger on the river.

Tom visits his wife in the mental institution. He is distressed and unable to sleep. At a school assembly, the headmaster makes a speech about Tom's departure. The narrative then describes the death of Tom's father in 1947. Finally, the story returns to 1943. Tom and his father chase after Dick. With two American servicemen, they take a boat out to the dredger but cannot stop Dick from leaping over the side to his death.

# Chapter 1

## Chapter 1 Summary

*Waterland* begins with the first of many view points concerning the Fens and its elemental geography. Three hundred years of attempts to drain parts of the Fens for farmland or other commercial developments created a series of artificial canals and waterways, many of which were regulated by "sluice-gates," barriers designed to regulate the flow of water and to guard against flood. Henry Crick, Tom's father, is the lock keeper of the Atkinson Lock on the River Leem, a slow moving, turgid waterway that empties in the Great Ouse, a major east England waterway which ultimately drains into a bay of the North Sea called the Wash. Henry is responsible for both the monitoring of the sluice as well as the safe passage of boats along this portion of the river.

The Cricks are an old family of river men - so linked are the Cricks to the water that Tom Crick describes their smell as sometimes half men, half fish. His father, a veteran of World War I, tells stories, some of which involve the stars in the sky as seen from the broad Fens. Henry is very particular about his eel traps, a chief activity in his life on the River Leem. Tom's mother is dead, and the three Crick's Tom (age 14 or 15 in July, 1943), his older brother Dick, and father Henry lived together in the Lock masters cottage. The discovery of the dead body of Freddie Parr is briefly noted here.

## Chapter 1 Analysis

Chapter 1 is both a setting of the stage of the story that Tom Crick will tell about the events of the summer of 1943, as well as an examination of the linkage between water and land that is at the root of every theme in the novel. As with all but a handful of the chapters, About the Stars and the Sluice provides morsels of the story that becomes clear only with the addition of Tom's later histories.

The names selected by Swift have a meaning too - it is no coincidence that the Crick's are named Tom, Dick and Henry - Harry is a common English corruption / nickname for Henry, and the expression "every Tom, Dick and Harry" has a relevance to both the common status of the Cricks, as well as the sexual relations and the uncertain paternity of the Mary Metcalfe pregnancy.

# Chapter 2

## Chapter 2 Summary

"The End of History"

Crick takes us forward to the present of 1980, addressing his History class at the school where he teaches. He has been told by the Headmaster that the school is cutting back on history, and his position will be no more. Crick also mentions for the first time the theft of a baby perpetrated by his wife Mary at a local food store and the impact that act may have had upon his tenure as a teacher.

Crick then sets out the words of his classroom student foil, Price, who is a debunker of the role of history and any power that History might have to effectively communicate anything of value to the modern world. Price states that in fact history must at some point end - Crick responds by commencing to tell another story that is a history, namely his own and that of his family

## Chapter 2 Analysis

"The End of History" draws the battle line between Crick and the student Price. This conflict regarding the value of history is replayed throughout the novel. The key theme introduced here, that of nature and that of the power of history as story telling, appear either as a stated narrative line or as an undercurrent to other elements of the work throughout the novel.

# Chapter 3

## Chapter 3 Summary

"About the Fens"

This chapter is the first of the natural history essays delivered by Crick in "*Waterland*." In a detailed, yet emotionally detached dissertation, Crick begins by describing the Fens as a place that is not quite solid, a mixture of water and silt. The silts that wash into the rivers and canals of the Fens created over time the rich, fertile peat from which the Fen people grew wonderful vegetables to sustain themselves, and barley to brew excellent beers. Crick describes the process of dredging silt and maintaining the canals and sluices as the constant process and the progress of reclamation.

Crick describes his own family over the period of years as having made their own transformation, from water people to that of either land people, or perhaps, like most of the images in the Fens, that of an amphibious people. The substance that makes up this partly solid Fen land Crick equates to "phlegm," itself a not solid, not liquid substance in humans.

Crick then describes for the first time in *Waterland* the relationship between the Atkinson family, wealthy brewers and developers, and the Cricks. In beginning his description of the relationship (which Crick advances at numerous other parts of the narrative), he sees the Crick legacy not in terms of Atkinson like wealth, but as Crick's with the power to tell the story. Crick contrasts the mud of the Fens that the men of the area, including his father Henry Crick, traded for war in the mud of Flanders in the Great War in 1917.

## Chapter 3 Analysis

"About the Fens" is one of the few chapters in *Waterland* that is self contained both in terms of time and narrative. Developing some of the ideas that were described in the opening chapter, Swift gives the reader detail regarding the amphibious nature of the Fen and its people. His history of the Fen lands reclamation and the silt that flows into the water will neatly be referenced in later chapters to Phlegm. His reference to "phlegm" is clever - phlegm as the mucous in our throats, as well as the particular English quasi compliment - a calm, solid, somewhat sluggish person - that would describe many of the people in *Waterland*, the water and the silt.

# Chapter 4

## Chapter 4 Summary

"Before The Headmaster"

Crick shifts again to his present in this short chapter, with the Headmaster determining that the school is cutting back on history, to better equip the students for the real world.

## Chapter 4 Analysis

This chapter is a contrast to "About the Stars and the Sluice" and "About the Fens," which are both history lessons - the Headmaster has decreed an end of History, in his desire to equip students for his notion of the real world.

# Chapter 5

## Chapter 5 Summary

"A Bruise Upon a Bruise"

The body of 14 year old Freddie Parr is recovered from the Atkinson Lock in July 1943, floating in the water with the sticks, boughs and other river debris. The apparent drowning of the young Parr is something of a local sensation, and the reader is presented first with the conclusion of the death and his finding by the Cricks near their cottage - the cause of the death and the involvement of Mary Metcalfe, Dick Crick and others is not revealed immediately.

The finding of the boy's body, and the painstaking detail regarding how Tom Crick describes the position of the body in the water, and the efforts of the Cricks to fish the body from the River Leem with a fishhook are set out in a chronology.

Tom Crick then described how his father Henry continued with resuscitation attempts on Freddie, when it was certain that the boy was dead. Henry Crick clearly believed in miracles, and he thought that perhaps one might be visited upon Freddie.

In the subsequent inquest, it is determined that Freddie had alcohol in his body - it is believed that he must have been drunk and stumbled into the river. His father was a black marketer trading liquor and cigarettes with the US military stationed in the area, so that Freddie state was explained. The coroner determined that the mark found on Freddie's body was caused by the fish hook used by the Crick's to fish Freddie out of the river; a second mark, obscured by the fish hook blow, is ignored by the coroner.

Tom Crick's description of his brother Dick's reaction, the second mark on the body and the alcohol in Freddie's body at the tie of his death all foreshadow Crick's deeper explanation in the later chapters as to who killed Freddie, and why.

## Chapter 5 Analysis

The discovery of Freddie Parr's body in the River Leem continues the image of the Fens begun in the first 4 chapters. At death, Freddie becomes a part of the amphibian Fen world itself, and the image of the drowned boy is one that links the water inevitably to the human.

The facts and the suggestion through Tom Crick's recount of the events in this chapter that there is more to Freddie's death sets the stage for Crick to delve into his own history more deeply, to explain Freddie not only in terms of July, 1943, but also in terms of Crick's 1980 present, in a tone that compels the reader to conclude that Freddie Parr really never left Crick or his life.

# Chapter 6

## Chapter 6 Summary

"An Empty Vessel"

In "An Empty Vessel," Crick returns to his present day and describes the state of his marriage to the former Mary Metcalfe. Each is 52 years old. Crick sets out some of the emptiness that he feels with his teaching position terminated and their marriage childless. Tom Crick expresses his surprise that Mary has entered into a love affair, or perhaps returned to a love affair, with God at this stage of her life. This fact leaves Tom Crick feeling both astounded and forsaken, and he provides the imagined audience (his history class) with the view that a woman is "an avid and receptive vessel."

## Chapter 6 Analysis

"An Empty Vessel" is the metaphor used by Swift in this chapter to describe the present state of the marriage of Tom Crick and Mary Metcalfe - it is a compelling one. By 1980, Crick is about to be emptied of his career, Mary was unable to have children (the reasons for which are graphically described in later chapters), and their marriage itself seems devoid of emotion. Mary has evidently filled herself with a renewal of her Catholic faith.

# Chapter 7

## Chapter 7 Summary

"About Holes and Things"

"About Holes and Things" is a return by Crick to that pivotal summer of 1943. At age 15, Mary Metcalfe is an adolescent girl, educated at a Catholic school, who is becoming curious about her sexuality. A group of young people, including Mary, Freddie Parr, Tom Crick and others, engage from time to time in the sexual banter of adolescents, as they gather during summer days on the banks of the Leem.

Tom Crick and Mary have something in common - each has a mother who is dead.

Crick tells of the sexual explorations in which he engaged with Mary that summer - he recounts that talk of "holes" and the use of his "thing," and the voracity of both Mary and the acts themselves. It is evident that not only does Mary engage in a regular sexual rendezvous with Tom, she has experimented with his brother Dick, and perhaps Freddie Parr as well.

Tom then recounts the meeting he has with Mary on July 26, 1943, the day that Freddie Parr was found in the Leem. It is then that Crick learns from Mary that she saw Dick Crick push a drunken Freddie Parr into the river. She tells Tom that she had told Dick that she was pregnant, with Freddie's child. She says that this was not true, and she asserts to Tom that the child is in fact his; Dick's penis was too big, she says, to enter her.

Tom Crick investigates the river bank after Mary is gone, and he finds a curious bottle. Tom knows the bottle (he reveals in later chapters why he can identify it). He concludes that Dick used the bottle to strike Freddie on his head and then push him into the Leem.

In "About the Story Telling Animal," Tom Crick continues to address his class - he engages in a debate with his student, Price, who asserts that all that matters is the here and now, the mirror argument to the proposition that History is of little value. Tom Crick responds with a proposition that only animals live in the Here and Now, that History exists because Man by nature is a story telling animal, and that the telling of stories, invented or true, is essential to our existence.

## Chapter 7 Analysis

"Of Holes and Things" describes on one level the adolescent fixation with matters sexual - slang terms with which it is easy to identify. This chapter is the first in which the death of Freddie Parr is revealed as a murder, and it serves as the foundation for the later chapters which reveal both the details of the Parr death, but the resultant attempts to create a miscarriage by Mary, and her ultimate, gruesome abortion.

Swift captures both the excitement of adolescent experiments with sex, and the fear of unintended and unwanted pregnancy in this chapter. Crick tells us that "curiosity, which distinguishes us from animals, is an ingredient of love"- as the novel unfolds, one is not certain whether Crick actually believes this himself.

# Chapter 8

## Chapter 8 Summary

"The Story Telling Animal"

In the "Story Telling Animal," Crick is again addressing his history students. He tells them that the curiosity of people is a distinctive feature of our humanity is buttressed by Crick's views about story telling being the difference between humans and animals - only animals live in the here and now.

## Chapter 8 Analysis

This segment contrasts the technocratic Headmaster and his desire to eliminate History, with Crick's notion of the power of story telling at the root of History.

# Chapter 9

## Chapter 9 Summary

"The Rise of the Atkinsons"

This chapter is the longest in "*Waterland*," spanning 38 pages. It traces the history of the local prominent family, the Atkinsons, who are Tom Cricks mothers family. Crick takes his audience back 300 years into the history of the local seat, Gildsey (an invented name, like the River Leem0, weaving actual historical events such as the French Revolution, the Napoleonic Wars, advances in marine engineering, land drainage and brewing techniques, with the history and the advancement of the Atkinson family.

Crick describes how the early Atkinsons were able to develop their ability to grow and to malt barley for their beer from the lush peat of the Fens, by draining over 12,000 acres of Fen lands for this purpose. There are the colorful public houses, such as the Jolly Bargeman and the Pike and Eel. Crick describes (as elsewhere), the patron saint of the town, Gunnhilda.

He recounts in some detail the story of Sara Atkinson, who in 1820 suffered a blow to her head, leading to her confinement due to her mental instability for over 50 years. Crick tells us that Sara became something of an icon in Gildsey - she had the gift, both desired and feared, to see the future, the ability to disentangle myth from fairy tale.

The Atkinson power as brewers and local powers grew during this time. Crick refers to the Atkinson "Grand '51 Ale," brewed to commemorate the great Exposition of that time. He describes the New Brewery, and its logo "Ex Aqua Fermentum"(Out of Water, Ale), which employed many in the town. The brewery lead to the creation of the local railway, and further wealth for the Atkinson family

On the death of Sara, there are omens, says Tom Crick - a rain, for two days and two nights, a great flood and the belief that the old Sara never died at all. Her ghost is seen at various places in Gildsey, and worst of all, it is said that the Atkinson beer was never the same - watery, like the river.

## Chapter 9 Analysis

The rise of the Atkinson family is the ascent of a "land" based family, who made wealth from the soil and the railroad. The Atkinsons are a contrast to the Cricks, who were "river" people - the ultimate union of these families through the marriage of Henry Crick and an Atkinson is the union of water and land that is at the root of the novel.

It is an extension of the amphibious nature of the Fens that the Atkinsons "land" based riches came from both the reclaimed soil that grew their barley and the water for their beer.

The references to omen and the supernatural are a contrast to the images of established organized religion made both in this chapter and throughout the novel. Swift's St. Gunnhilda is an invention (Gunnhilda is a character from an Icelandic legend), but the parallels between established order (the Atkinson family, the Church, the British Empire), and the random nature of a catastrophic flood, omens, and ghosts are compelling.

In this history rich Chapter, Swift creates a body of information that is referred to by Crick in his later narrative. Having outlined the history, Crick will provide further details, fitting this backdrop, about both the events of July 1943, Dick as the product of an incestuous relationship between his mother and grandfather and brother Dick's ultimate suicide.

# Chapter 10

## Chapter 10 Summary

"Question Why"

In the "Question Why," Crick again is debating his antagonist Price about the "useless ifs of history." The concept of "Explanation" is proffered by Crick as the essence of History.

## Chapter 10 Analysis

Crick and his approach to the arguments of his student Price continue the debate that Crick will ultimately win.

# Chapter 11

## Chapter 11 Summary

"About Accidental Death "

"About Accidental Death" returns the narrative to 1943. The testimony given at the Coroner's Inquest is set out, where the Coroner confirms for the public record that the death of Freddie Parr was "accidental." Henry Crick, who fished Freddie's body from the river, is seen by Tom, walking along the towpath, saying why? Why? Why? Jack Parr, Freddie's father, attempts to commit suicide by having a train run over him, but no train comes.

## Chapter 11 Analysis

This chapter title is intended as an ironic one, as it becomes clear that the death of Freddie Parr was murder. Swift uses the reactions of Henry Crick as discoverer, and Jack Parr, as father, to contrast reaction to sudden and seemingly inexplicable loss.

# Chapter 12

## Chapter 12 Summary

"Change of Life"

"Change of Life" details how after Freddie's death, (and after what will be revealed as her abortion) Mary Metcalfe locked herself in her father's house, remaining inside and away from the world for 3 years. Tom and Mary resumed their relationship later by letter, and are ultimately married.

## Chapter 12 Analysis

Swift through Tom Crick examines both the sexual and religious implications of this chapter title. The marriage of Tom and Mary is seen as a part of Destiny, and the future history teachers wife, is described by Tom Crick ironically, in his suggestion that no family leaves no history, given that they are childless.

# Chapter 13

## Chapter 13 Summary

"Histrionics "

The story returns to 1943, the aftermath of Freddie Parr's death. Mary, at 10 weeks pregnant, and her reaction to the death are the title focus of a short chapter.

## Chapter 13 Analysis

"Histrionics" is a play on words, referring both to Tom Crick's reaction to Mary and her views about Freddie Parr's accidental death, and the history itself. It is the only significant section of the work where Tom Crick refers to himself and his actions in the third person.

# Chapter 14

## Chapter 14 Summary

"De La Revolution"

"De La Revolution" sets out Tom Crick's essential theory of History as a loop, going backwards and forwards through Time. He uses the French Revolution here (as he does later in the story) as an example of influences in history that loop through Time. He is again challenged by Price, who sees History as "nostalgia."

## Chapter 14 Analysis

The theme of history as a nostalgic, useless endeavor is not restricted to academics. Price the school boy and the technocratic Headmaster are Swift's examples of modern thought - Crick's view of history echoes the words of Winston Churchill - "Those fail to study history are doomed to repeat it." Crick the history teacher might go further - does History will repeat itself inevitably, no matter what we do?

Crick makes it plain that he and Mary Metcalfe were destined to marry, and that both carried to their union the terrible memories of the Parr death and Mary's aborted pregnancy. Tom Crick assumed the course of this destiny as if he knew that he would ultimately be happy only teaching his histories, telling the stories - not in love.

# Chapter 15

## Chapter 15 Summary

"About the Ouse"

The Great Ouse is the major waterway into which the Leem, the river on which the Cricks live, empties. This chapter is another essay type dissertation, where Crick describes the slow moving Ouse, as a footloose and obstinate river, "unconcerned with ambition."

## Chapter 15 Analysis

This chapter continues the previous narrative concerning the natural world of the Fens. The Ouse is something of a metaphor for the Crick family - like the river, Tom Crick has lived a life that meandered as opposed to taking a specific direction - for example, Tom Crick never tells us of any burning ambition or passion to achieve anything in his life. Like the Ouse, Crick seems to move along in the world not directed by ambition, but by circumstance

# Chapter 16

## Chapter 16 Summary

"Longitude 0°"

Crick returns to his present, and recounts from a third party perspective the discussion he has with his wife Mary concerning her increasing religiosity. Crick calls it schizophrenia, that she needs to see a doctor; it creates what Tom Crick describes as a type of separation, except neither of them is actually leaving the other.

## Chapter 16 Analysis

Tom Crick tries to ground his wife to reality in this short chapter. He has mentioned in earlier chapters the importance of "stories and fairy tales"- he fears that his wife and her conduct are leading him into such a place in their own lives. The Crick's live in Greenwich, which has a longitude of 0°, the commencement of the world's time zones

# Chapter 17

## Chapter 17 Summary

"About the Lock Keeper"

About the Lock keeper continues in the natural history / essay theme, describing the habits and duties of the lock keeper, especially in relation to eel trapping and eel cooking. It repeats the earlier theme of the Phlegmatic Henry Crick, who met Tom's mother while recuperating from his wounds in World War I, and whose father in law gave him the post at the Atkinson Lock.

## Chapter 17 Analysis

This short chapter bridges the history between Henry Crick and his coming to the position of Lock keeper. It provides the linkage between the successful Atkinson brewing family and the river Cricks.

# Chapter 18

## Chapter 18 Summary

"In Loco Parentis"

In Loco Parentis, the Latin expression meaning "in the place of a parent" Crick returns to the termination of his history teaching position, and his interview with the Headmaster. In response to the Headmaster's views about the "gloom" and the "pessimism" inspired by history, Crick casts himself subtly as the parent figure, and the subject of History as a parental influence, to the children he teaches. He links in this exchange the scene from the grocery store where his wife Mary has stolen the unattended baby.

## Chapter 18 Analysis

Tom Crick states, indirectly, that he has a faith and a belief in his students as a result of history - the business of teaching is children, not technology or efficiency. The Latin expression also refers to the fact that when in possession of the stolen child, he and Mary stood in the place of parents to the child.

# Chapter 19

## Chapter 19 Summary

"About my Grandfather "

Crick recounts the history of his grandfather, Ernest Richard Atkinson, brewer, politician and man of prominence in Gildsey. It became Ernest's mission to create beer of surpassing taste, which ultimately became his "Special." Unlike his forefathers, Ernest drank a great deal himself, but he in time perfected this beer, which would play a role in the death of Freddie Parr.

## Chapter 19 Analysis

Like most of the short chapters in *Waterland*, this chapter acts as a bridge between generations in the Crick history. Tom Crick determines that his grandfather passed the line dividing "Merriment" and "Drunkenness" in his motivation.

# Chapter 20

## Chapter 20 Summary

"The Explanation of Explanation "

Crick is now back in his present day History classroom, with the rebellious modernist Price standing before him after class to explain his disruptive conduct. Their talk eventually leads to Price delivering a challenge to Crick, demanding to know why everything Crick says in class about History must demand an explanation. Crick response is to let Price vent his frustration, and by the end of the conversation it is clear that they understand one another better than ever.

## Chapter 20 Analysis

Price the antagonist is in the process of making a metamorphosis into Price the Crick ally, an appreciation, not repudiation, of History

# Chapter 21

## Chapter 21 Summary

"Aux Armes"

The tension between Price and Crick is extended to the class as a whole in this one page chapter. Crick again uses the French Revolution as his subject, one of action and drama, to parallel the telling of his own history, with its own similar excitements.

## Chapter 21 Analysis

This short chapter is used to lead back to the history of Ernest Atkinson, picking up the story where it was left off in "About my Grandfather."

# Chapter 22

## Chapter 22 Summary

"About Coronation Ale"

Tom Crick then goes on to relate the history of the Atkinson special Ale, a potent and irresistible brew perfected in 1911 by Ernest Atkinson and released at the time of the Coronation of King George V that year, and named Coronation Ale. It is a bottle of this mystical beverage that is linked to the death of Freddie Parr in 1943, and Crick will reveal in later chapters that his brother Dick, entrusted to a quantity of the Coronation Ale upon the death of his mother (daughter of Ernest Atkinson), gave a bottle of it to Freddie just before Freddie's death. Crick tells his audience that Coronation Ale lead to "drunkenness in many sudden and wonderful forms"- the Atkinson brewery burned the night of the coronation of King George V, another omen for the historian Crick. It was believed that Atkinson himself burned the brewery to collect insurance monies, but the fire was ruled an accident.

## Chapter 22 Analysis

The special beer is linked to the accidental fire at the brewery, just as the beer is known to Crick to be linked to the "accidental" death of Freddie Parr in 1943. The burning of the Atkinson brewery, which precipitates their decline in both Gildsey commerce and the Fens, is contrasted with the progress of the French Revolution (the Fall of the Bastille on July 14, 1789 etc.).

# Chapter 23

## Chapter 23 Summary

"Quatorze Juillet"

In reference to the chapter Quatorze Juillet (July 14), the anniversary of the fall of the Bastille, in four paragraphs Crick refers his school class again to the events of the French Revolution as an event to learn from today, emphasizing the fact that even if one historical symbol is knocked down (be it a Bastille or a brewery), another will rise to replace it.

## Chapter 23 Analysis

"Symbolic value" is espoused by Tom Crick as being the importance of certain events in history, and not necessarily their grand scale. A number of learned commentaries written about "*Waterland*" cast Crick as a classic protagonist; in fact, he is a narrator / observer, and only at rare points in the work does Crick initiate - he typically responds, takes note and comments, as a historian would do.

# Chapter 24

## Chapter 24 Summary

"Child's Play"

"Child's Play" at eleven pages is one of the longer passages in *Waterland*. After introducing the chapter with reference to the war in France as it had commenced in June, 1940, Crick now provides the details as to how Mary Metcalfe, Freddie Parr, Dick Crick and the other young people become involved in the adolescent sexual challenge game that leads to Freddie Parr's death in July, 1943.

A group of boys are on one side, a group of girls across from them, on the banks of the Leem. Parr initiates a dare with Mary Metcalfe, where the other will have to show their pubic area to the group. The boys have been drinking whisky, stolen by Freddie from his black marketer father.

The dare results in Mary telling the boys that the one who can swim the longest underwater will see her naked. Crick's brother Dick, 4 years older, now sits near the group of boys, and he is noted to have a very large and protuberant penis, attracting the attention of Mary. Freddie Crick protests the contest, because he cannot swim.

The boys dive in except Freddie, and Tom Crick thinks he has won, except that Freddie dove in at the last moment and he had to be rescued. Suddenly, Dick dives in the river and swims under water for a remarkable length, leaving everyone to believe that he will claim his prize with Mary.

At this point, Freddie Parr goes to an eel trap, and takes an eel and drops it into Mary's underwear, causing Mary to freeze in shock until the eel escaped and returned to the river.

## Chapter 24 Analysis

The sexual games area prelude to Mary's own games with Freddie, Dick and Tom leading to her confusion as to who might be the father of her child. The amphibious eel is a phallic symbol in this chapter, slithering in Mary's underwear, and this reference will be followed in two chapters by a lengthy analysis of the eel, its habits, its ability to reproduce and its importance to the Fens.

# Chapter 25

## Chapter 25 Summary

"Forget the Bastille"

Tom Crick returns the narration to his history class, who are very attracted to his story about Mary and the eel. The students are prepared to forsake the study of the French Revolution for Crick's personal and now prurient story of Mary.

## Chapter 25 Analysis

Crick makes the point that History is not always fact - it permits exploration around a body of fact, that it is important to be curious.

"About the Eel"

Like the chapters concerning the Fens and the Ouse, "About the Eel" is a very detailed natural history / biology essay concerning the eel, its habits and its characteristics. Tom Crick develops in chronological form the research into the eel's abilities to reproduce, and the animal is described both as a phallic reference and as sexless.

Important to the Fens, Crick describes how the local cathedral church, "Ely," is named for the eel.

Tom Crick introduces the research of Johannes Schmidt into the reproductive organs of the eel, his discovery of their breeding grounds and the circular passage of eel larvae, into a linkage with the greater circle of history, including an eel ending up in Mary Metcalfe's underwear.

## Chapter 26 Analysis

The eel exists as it always has, as a part of a reproductive circle of life and death. The eel's own existence in the Fen River, not quite a fish and not a land animal, mimics the history of the Cricks themselves

# Chapter 26

## Chapter 26 Summary

"About Natural History"

Again before his class, Crick challenges the students to be curious. In five paragraphs, where he references the French Revolution, Crick states that there can not be a true revolution without curiosity.

## Chapter 26 Analysis

This passage sets the stage for the later chapter "Detective Work," which sets out the investigation carried out by Tom Crick to determine the true cause of the death of Freddie Parr.

# Chapter 27

## Chapter 27 Summary

"And Artificial History"

This narrative continues from where the eel was deposited into Mary's underwear by Freddie Parr on the riverbank. Tom Crick tells of how he saw a "look" pass between Mary Metcalfe and his brother Dick, a hint at the relationship that would be at the root of Freddie Parr's death. Crick goes on the reference a recurring theme, that history is circular.

## Chapter 27 Analysis

This short chapter underscores the Crick view point that with his history, it is possible, even desirable to move back and forth between past and present.

# Chapter 28

## Chapter 28 Summary

"Detective Work"

The narrative returns to the aftermath of Freddie Parr's death. Tom Crick believes that his brother Dick has killed Parr, and he is seeking clues. Tom has found a curious looking beer bottle near the river shore where Freddie was likely killed, and he believes it to be connected to an old Atkinson chest stored in the attic since the death of his mother, to which she gave Dick the key before her death. Tom attempts to open the chest, and when he cannot, he begins his search for the key.

## Chapter 28 Analysis

This chapter heightens the tension now keenly felt by Tom Crick regarding his brother and the death of Parr. Dick has been referred to as "potato head," and as someone who is dull mentally I previous chapters; this is the first definitive statement in the novel as to Tom Crick's belief that Dick was capable of the act.

# Chapter 29

## Chapter 29 Summary

"About the Savior of the World"

At 19 pages, this chapter is one of the longest in "*Waterland*." Tom Crick returns to the history of the Atkinsons after the events of the Coronation Ale and the brewery fire of 1911. He tells of his mother, a local beauty named Helen Atkinson, daughter of Ernest Atkinson. Ernest is badly regarded by the people of Gildsey, and it is suspected that he keeps Helen in the role of nurse and housekeeper to him as he becomes reclusive.

In describing Ernest's only pubic appearance in Gildsey during the First War, a military march past became a shambles - Tom Crick says that there was feeling in the town that this was the work of the Sara Atkinson ghost. Ernest Atkinson never appeared in Gildsey again. He did found a hospital. He destroyed all but a small portion of the mysterious Coronation Ale, he continued to expert with potent beers and that he began to go "out of his wits."

At this point, the stories of the Atkinson and the Crick families converge. Henry Crick, who was wounded in the First War, suffers a form of post traumatic depression in 1922, and he is hospitalized. It is here that he meets Helen Atkinson, who is working there as a nurse.

It is against this backdrop of the blossoming love between Henry Crick and Helen Atkinson that Tom Crick relates that Helen became involved in a sexual relationship with her father Ernest Atkinson. Ernest loved his daughter, and Helen had consented to his physical love because she had felt sorry for his increasingly mad state, and having been his only companion since childhood.

Henry presented a route of escape for Helen. She told her father that she would have his child, but that she would claim it to be Henry's child. Ernest and Helen refer to this child as "The Savior of the World." Helen, who now was attempting to become pregnant with both Henry and Ernest, secretly hoped that Henry was make her pregnant, and not her father; how would she ever be

certain?

Henry Crick and Helen Atkinson marry and they move into the cottage at the Atkinson Lock. On the day that Henry sees a "will o 'the wisp" in the Fen (physically explained as phosphorous rising from a swamp, but often interpreted as a spirit or bad omen), the locked Atkinson chest is delivered to the cottage, sent by Ernest with a note inside explaining that he was his son's true father, the chest that will be later found to have contained the potent and dangerous Coronation Ale. Ernest commits suicide that night, after consuming vast amounts of his ale.

# Chapter 29 Analysis

The incest passages commencing at page 198 are powerful and neatly woven. The notion that the product of incest might be a savior of the world is a very compelling one - the notion of a father impregnating a virgin daughter to create a savior parallels the Christian story.

The chapter is rich in its portrayal of the power of omen - the first meeting of Henry and Helen, the will o the wisp, the suicide of Ernest after drinking beer, the ultimate deceit of Dick Crick as to the true identity of his father, all are linked to the death of Freddie Parr

# Chapter 30

## Chapter 30 Summary

"A Teachers Testament"

The narrative returns to the present, with Tom Crick addressing his History class. In a dissertation about what it is to teach history, Crick defines the history teacher as "Someone who teaches mistakes," the person who pints out previous errors and bungles.

He meets Price by chance after class. Crick tells Price that he has met with the Headmaster and his position has been terminated. Price also expresses his sadness about the situation of Mary Crick (Metcalfe), held by the authorities as a result of the baby snatching. They agree to go together to the "Duke's Head" pub.

Drinking together at the pub, Tom Crick tells Price about how he became a teacher. He and Price continuing, with Crick getting quite drunk - when the bar tender challenges Crick as to whether Price is over 18 years of age and old enough to drink, Crick refers to Price as "my son" to placate the bar man.

## Chapter 30 Analysis

This chapter sets out the transformation of Price from cynical rejecter of History to sympathetic Crick supporter. Cricks says that people like Price reject History because they are afraid - by taking the larger view that History presents, one loses fear.

# Chapter 31

## Chapter 31 Summary

"About Beauty and the Beast"

This chapter, at 14 pages in length, describes the life of Dick Crick, as contrasted with that of Tom and Mary Metcalfe, from Dick's birth to the events of the summer of 1943.

In the opening sentence, Dick is described as "Not a savior of the world. A potato head. Not a hope for the future. A numb skull with the dull, vacant stare of a fish..." He leaves school and goes to work on a silt dredger, the Rosa II (which will play a role in the conclusion to the story). Dick purchases a motorcycle, which becomes the love of his life. In contrast, Tom is a star pupil, destined for academic success.

From the day in 1940, when Freddie Parr put the eel down Mary Metcalfe's underwear, Dick begins to hang around Mary, from a distance, even when Tom begins to demonstrate his own affection for her. Mary decides to in fact encourage Dick, agreeing to meet him at certain nights near the river, when Dick was engaged in the collection of eels from the traps. On the first occasion, Dick gives Mary a gift of an eel, and he then meets Mary every Wednesday and Saturday. Tom Crick as narrator refers to Dick's "instruction" by Mary - he tells us that he stood aside in his own desire to pursue Mary to permit Dick's education to proceed with Mary. Tom first read of the French Revolution during this time.

## Chapter 31 Analysis

The description of Dick as dull reinforces the fact that he is the product of the incest between Ernest and Helen Metcalfe, especially when brother Tom, the child of Helen and Henry, is a bright boy. The image of the eel as a sexual symbol continues in this chapter. From the incident with Freddie Parr, to the gift of the eel, it is the linkage to the blossoming sexuality of Mary Metcalfe over this period.

Mary Metcalf's involvement with Dick and Tom (and later with Freddie Parr) echoes the involvement of Helen Atkinson with both her father Ernest and Henry Crick. It is of note that each woman is painted in a positive light - what might otherwise be described as promiscuity is treated as almost inevitable, as being a part of history that is not criticized, but accepted as part of the flow.

# Chapter 32

## Chapter 32 Summary

"Who Says"

Tom Crick and Price remain at the Duke's Head pub - Price returns to his more argumentative position about the future. Price asks Crick whether he would have children today, if her could - the question strikes a chord with Crick.

## Chapter 32 Analysis

This short chapter leads into the next chapter ("Too Big"), by establishing that Crick truly wished to have a child of his own but never did; ironically, his continued references to the history class as children refers not simply to their status in the class room, but his self perception as a father figure to them.

# Chapter 33

## Chapter 33 Summary

"Too Big"

Tom Crick returns to the summer of 1943 as a time when he had a child, correcting to confirm that Mary had a child. Dick continued with his visits and his education with Mary. In passing along Mary's version of what took place between her and Dick, Mary stated that Dick's penis was "too big," that he could not have ever made her pregnant, and that he did not have intercourse with her. Tom Crick expresses doubt that this could be completely true - he sees Mary as an experimenter.

At the same time, Tom begins his sexual relationship with Mary. He ties the entry of the third party, Freddie Parr, and he then states conclusively for the first time in the narrative that as a result, Dick got Freddie drunk, hit him on the head with a bottle and pushed him in the river.

## Chapter 33 Analysis

This chapter sets up the motive for the killing of Freddie Parr. The element of uncertainty as to the identity of the father of Mary's baby is a neat contrast to the certainty and ferocity of Dick's response to the involvement of Freddie Parr with her.

# Chapter 34

## Chapter 34 Summary

"Unknown Country"

The narrative returns to the present, when Tom Crick returns home to find his 52 year old wife Mary in the possession of a baby - "Madonna and Child"- a baby that Mary says she got from God. Tom tells his wife that the baby must be returned at once, and they engage in a tugging match for the child. Tom Crick refers to himself first as a shepherd (as at the Nativity) and then as a ruthless Herod (killer of the children in Christ's time). Mary confesses that she took the baby from a grocery store while unattended.

## Chapter 34 Analysis

This chapter is rich in biblical references - the second virgin birth in Mary's life. Mary sees herself as having been directed by God to take this child. Crick contrasts the need for God as being restricted to backwards people, with his own view of Mary's madness.

# Chapter 35

## Chapter 35 Summary

"About Nothing"

This one paragraph chapter takes Crick back to the pub with a drunken Price - a melancholy assessment of the world perhaps being at an end for real this time.

## Chapter 35 Analysis

The feeling about the world being at an end is part of history's loops - it has recurred through time.

# Chapter 36

## Chapter 36 Summary

"Le Jour de Gras"

Tom Crick tells his history class, in three paragraphs, of the work of the guillotines, the terror and the horror of death in the French Revolution, and asks the rhetorical question - would they prefer a fairy tale instead?

## Chapter 36 Analysis

Crick paints the image of History as relentless and unstoppable; stories and fairy tales are a form of escape from it.

# Chapter 37

## Chapter 37 Summary

"About the East Wind"

In one of the longer chapters in "*Waterland*," Tom Crick uses the chill, forbidding east wind to introduce the narrative that describes the death of Helen Crick to influenza in 1937. Throughout the story describing both influenza outbreak, the affliction of Tom with the illness, and the ultimate death of his mother in his place, the East Wind blows.

In the chapter, as Helen becomes very ill, the role of nurse which she played previously to her husband Henry is now reversed. Near her death, Helen calls for Dick to come to her - she gives him the brass key to the mysterious Atkinson chest which has been stored in the attic since she married Henry. Helen dies the next day, in an event which Henry tells the boys, "Children, your mother's gone. She's gone. Gone." The East wind stops at this moment.

Tom Crick then discusses the difference between death and being "gone." He describes his father as making repeated trips to their mother's grave, talking to himself or perhaps to her - the Crick survivors began to live under a shared belief that perhaps Helen was still present, as if watching over them.

Three weeks after his mother's death, Dick opens the Atkinson trunk, and he removes a bottle of beer (the Coronation Ale) and takes it to the river. Tom follows him from a distance and he observes the effect of the beer on Dick when Dick drinks it - frenzied drunken effect, so strong that Tom says that Dick never drinks anything from a bottle again. As Tom sneaks back to the cottage, amazed at what he saw in his brother, the East Wind rises again.

## Chapter 37 Analysis

This chapter, like the other segments dealing with the world of the Fens, links the natural force of the East wind, with the portends of illness and death. Wind is a common agent of change, and it can be a positive or a negative element.

Dick's access to the Atkinson trunk and his experiment with a bottle of its contents all foreshadow the death of Freddie Parr. The chapter also sets the stage for Tom Crick's investigation as to how Freddie Parr was killed three years later, in that he acts as a detective once his brother accesses the trunk after his mother dies. Dick was easy to follow, for as Tom Crick says, "What hope of stealth in a flat land?" (Like the Fens), a phrase that echoes the Shakespearian observation, Murder will out."

# Chapter 38

## Chapter 38 Summary

"Stupid"

The East wind is the image to lead this chapter, now the summer of 1943. Tom Crick describes his meeting at a ruined windmill with Mary a week after Freddie Parr was found dead. It was at this place that he and Mary had begun their own sexual relationship.

Tom Crick tells of how he saw Mary that day, jumping violently up and down - she calls him "Stupid" repeatedly, telling him to leave. Tom then comes to understand that Mary is pregnant, and she is trying to abort the child. Tom thinks that it must be Dick's baby, because Mary, he believes, would never attempt such a thing with "their "child. She ultimately tells him that the child is "ours," but Tom Crick is not certain.

The jumping and violence to herself have cause Mary to bleed. Tom tries to return her to the time when they first came to the windmill, but Mary is not interested, white faced and no longer "curious."

## Chapter 38 Analysis

Mary behaves as one might expect from a 15 year old girl who finds herself pregnant - she takes action to solve the problem. The confusion over who is in fact the father is the precipitating factor, as will be revealed, in the death of Freddie Parr.

# Chapter 39

## Chapter 39 Summary

"About Contemporary Nightmares"

This two paragraph chapter sets out a segment of dialogue referencing nuclear holocaust. The speaker is evidently Price.

## Chapter 39 Analysis

This portion of narrative contrasts the finality of holocaust with the loops of history previously outlined by Tom Crick.

# Chapter 40

## Chapter 40 Summary

"A Feeling in the Guts"

Tom Crick returns to his conversation with Price in this one page chapter. He tells Price that he and Mary decided to go to Martha Clay (who is revealed in a later chapter) to solve the pregnancy - Tom Crick refers to this story as a "fairy tale."

## Chapter 40 Analysis

This chapter sets up the longer chapter "About the Witch," detailing Mary's abortion by Martha Clay.

# Chapter 41

## Chapter 41 Summary

"About the Witch"

Martha Clay, an inhabitant of the Fens, is described as a witch. Mary and Tom decide to go to her to end Mary's pregnancy, as she is reputed to have strong, seemingly supernatural powers. Tom casts the pregnancy as a part of a progression in history - The French Revolution, the First World War, the bombing of Germany - this pregnancy was "our own end of the world to face."

As Mary is bleeding from her own imperfect efforts to abort, they arrive at Martha Clay's cottage, set in a remote part of the Fens. Mary is described as a very small woman, with a compelling face, her cheeks described as bladders of fire, and small moist eyes. Tom Crick is struck by the intense smell of the cottage, and the sight of her huge forbidding dog.

The Cottage is described as being from another world, filled with various products of the Fens - ducks, eels, plover and other dead birds. Mary is made to lie down on a dirty bed, and Tom is directed to boil water. In a very graphic segment, Mary's blood soaked panties are thrown to the dog by Martha for him to chew on.

Martha has Mary drink a potion, and then she assembles what appeared to Tom to be items of surgical equipment. Tom is directed out of the cottage for a time, and when he returns, he sees Martha with a tube inserted into Mary's vagina, sucking with her mouth to remove the fetus. Martha appears to spit something in to a pail, as Mary recites a prayer, Holy Mary Mother of God.

## Chapter 41 Analysis

Martha Clay is a part of the Fen, as if she were part human and part of the supernatural land itself. She is a throwback in history, proof of Tom Crick's earlier observations that History is a loop. At a time of crisis, Mary and Tom opt for an age old, and not a modern solution.

There is the impression that through this abortion, Mary returns to a virginal state, like the mother of God.

# Chapter 42

## Chapter 42 Summary

"Not So Final"

Tom Crick describes how Price helps him from the pub to a bus, as he is too intoxicated to drive. Crick links the fact that on the eve of the French Revolution, King Louis XVI mourned the death of his first born.

## Chapter 42 Analysis

This chapter carries forward the new understanding between Crick and the former antagonist Price.

# Chapter 43

## Chapter 43 Summary

"Begin Again"

The narrative now returns to the baby snatching committed by Mary at the Safeway store. In this chapter, the confession of Mary as provided to Tom as they drive back to the scene of the abduction is contrasted with Tom's evidence as given in court after Mary was charged with the offence.

When Tom, Mary and the abducted child return to the store, Tom describes the crowd of people in the vicinity. It becomes apparent that the mother, very distraught, is a young girl, not much older that Mary at the time of the 1943 abortion. She appears to Tom to be "hoping for a miracle," and the baby is in fact returned to her by Tom as Mary faints.

## Chapter 43 Analysis

Mary is denied her equivalent of the Immaculate Conception by Tom's intervention, and insistence that the baby is returned.

# Chapter 44

## Chapter 44 Summary

"About the Pike"

Tom Crick returns to the summer of 1943, with the image of a stuffed pike that was mounted in Dick's room. The pike is described as a killer fish, a part of its nature. It is in the mouth of the pike that Dick has hidden the key to the Atkinson trunk. Tom tells Dick that the baby Mary aborted was Dick's, and Dick tells Tom he wants to open the Atkinson trunk.

## Chapter 44 Analysis

The pike as a killer mirrors that of Dick as the killer of Freddie Parr. The chapter links the concluding narrative where the death of Freddie is described in detail.

# Chapter 45

## Chapter 45 Summary

"About my Grandfathers Chest"

When the Atkinson trunk is unlocked by Tom Crick and Dick after the death of Freddie Parr, the trunk is found to contain 11 bottles, 10 full, and one which Dick used to first intoxicate, and then kill, Freddie Parr at the river, which Dick returned to the chest.

Tom finds a letter addressed to Dick in the trunk, which Dick asks him to read aloud. The letter is from Ernest Atkinson, who reveals to Dick that he is actually Dick's father, not his grandfather.

In the midst of this recitation, Tom tells Dick that he and not Dick was the father of Mary's aborted baby.

Later that day, Tom Crick relates how his father Henry now knew that Dick knew of his actual parentage; there is the suggestion that Henry was aware of the fact that he was not Dick's father. Dick is absent, and when Henry and Tom Crick go to look for him, Dick sneaks out of the house on his motorcycle, taking with him the contents of the Atkinson trunk in the bag in which he normally transported eels.

## Chapter 45 Analysis

The revelation for Dick that his father was actually his grandfather, coupled with the events leading to Freddie Parr's death, have set in motion the acts Dick will take to end his own life. The beer in the trunk, the Coronation Ale that had previously caused the fire at the brewery, the suicide of Ernest Atkinson and the death of Freddie Parr, would be the foundation of Dick's own end.

# Chapter 46

## Chapter 46 Summary

"Goodnight"

After the baby abduction and the arrest and legal actions taken against Mary Crick, Tom Crick relates her confinement to a mental hospital. Mary does not grieve for her husband's departure when he bids her good night and leaves after a visit - she grieves for the baby that she had and which she lost.

Mary was acquitted of abduction on the combined bases of extenuating circumstance (the baby's return) and diminished responsibility. Crick describes his own solitude, drunk, unable to sleep and marking history papers. They live in Greenwich, longitude 0°, the title of chapter 16.

## Chapter 46 Analysis

This brief chapter reinforces the permanence of the separation of Mary and Tom. The gain and the loss of the Safeway baby mirror her gain and loss of the baby aborted in 1943.

# Chapter 47

## Chapter 47 Summary

"And Adieu"

Tom Crick recounts the speech given by the Headmaster to the school to announce that Crick will be leaving the school. The speech narrative is punctuated by Crick's own commentary - every euphemism employed by the Headmaster is the subject of a rebuttal from Crick as to the real reasons as to his ouster. The speech is disrupted by Price and his fellow classmates, calling out "Fear is here," and followed by "No cuts! Keep Crick!"

## Chapter 47 Analysis

This chapter symbolizes the winning over of Price and his modernism by History, in the guise of Crick. There is an undercurrent that suggests that History has a timelessness and an indestructibility, that the Crick position will always triumph of that of the technocrat.

# Chapter 48

## Chapter 48 Summary

"About Empire Building"

Crick returns to the imagined address to his History class, tying the French Revolution and images of progress to the earlier images of the reclamation of land.

## Chapter 48 Analysis

The images of progress, as opposed to the world always improving, are noted here in the narrative. This chapter bridges to the climactic concluding three chapters.

# Chapter 49

## Chapter 49 Summary

"The Whole Story"

This chapter commences with the description of the flood of 1947, when Henry Crick obstinately refuses to leave the Atkinson cottage in the midst of a terrible flood. Tom Crick, as a volunteer rescue worker, is a part of a rescue boat that endeavors to persuade Henry to leave his cottage and be rescued. The lock has disappeared, and the Atkinson trunk has washed away from the attic and out to sea. Henry is very ill after rescue, but his old Phlegm returns, as he is nursed by Mary Metcalfe, soon to be Mary Crick.

## Chapter 49 Analysis

This chapter brings to an end the Atkinson Lock and every thing about it that the Cricks had known. The powerful image of water as a destructive force, the battle between flood and reclamation is played out here, including the image of the Atkinson chest, a powerful force, washing out to sea.

# Chapter 50

## Chapter 50 Summary

"About Phlegm"

The mucous substance, referred to at a number of points in "*Waterland*" is given a fuller description in three paragraphs here.

## Chapter 50 Analysis

Swift uses this most mundane and unattractive of bodily fluids, part solid and part liquid, to further the metaphor for both human nature and the fen itself.

# Chapter 51

## Chapter 51 Summary

"About the Rosa II"

This is the concluding chapter to *Waterland*. The Rosa II is a dredging boat, where Dick Crick had secured a job as ship's mate. The Rosa II dredges silt, as a part of the ongoing reclamation of the Fen and its waters.

In his reaction to both the death of Freddie Parr and the revelation as to who is true father is, Dick has fled to the Rosa II on a Sunday, when the boat would not be working. Dick started the boat and took it onto the River Ouse. His purpose in taking the boat at this time is not clear to Henry Crick, and Tom, his father, the owner of the Ship, Stan Booth, and some American servicemen take to a row boat, approaching the Rosa II in an attempt to persuade Dick to leave the boat and return home with them.

Dick gets to the top of the craft, and makes a long dive into the River Ouse. He is never seen again. The party searches for him and his body is never found. On the boat they find the bottles of Coronation Ale scattered on the deck.

Tom Crick describes the dive as like the dive on the day of the challenge game played out between the boys and the girls on the Leem three years before. He describes Dick as having gone out to sea, much in the fashion of the eels whose migratory and breeding habits are described in the earlier chapters.

## Chapter 51 Analysis

This chapter serves to link a number of themes that have been developed in the course of the novel. The chief of these are: (1) Suicide - Dick follows in his actual father Ernest's path in the taking of his own life. The Coronation Ale has its part in each death. (2) Water - Dick as a product of the Fen takes his own life in a way that returns him to the Waterland. Like the eel in Mary Metcalfe's underwear, and like Freddie Parr, Dick traveled from the land to the water. (3) Dive - neatly linking the first encounter with Mary to the end.

# Characters

## Alfred Atkinson

Alfred Atkinson is Thomas Atkinson's younger son. In 1832 he marries Eliza Harriet Bell, the daughter of a farmer. He and his brother George are extremely successful businessmen. They found the Atkinson Water Transport Company and build the New Atkinson Brewery. Alfred becomes mayor of Gildsey in 1848. In his later years, with his brother, he builds Kessling Hall, a rural family retreat.

## Arthur George Atkinson

Arthur George Atkinson is the son of George Atkinson. In 1874 he becomes a member of Parliament for Gildsey.

## Earnest Richard Atkinson

Earnest Richard Atkinson is the son of Arthur Atkinson. Born in 1874, he is Tom Crick's grandfather. Earnest experiments with the process of making beer and comes up with a recipe for a new ale, which he begins manufacturing in 1906. A craze for the potent new beer spreads far and wide. Earnest stands for Parliament in 1909 for the Liberal Party but fails to win election. After the Atkinson brewery burns down in a fire in 1911, he goes into seclusion. He falls in love with his daughter Helen, who bears a child by him, Dick Crick.

## George Atkinson

George Atkinson is Thomas Atkinson's elder son. In 1830 he marries Catherine Anne Goodchild, the daughter of a banker. He becomes mayor of Gildsey in 1864. Like his brother Alfred, with whom he partners, he is a highly successful businessman who brings industrial progress to the entire region.

## Josiah Atkinson

Josiah Atkinson is Tom Crick's eighteenth-century ancestor. He is the first to establish the Atkinson business of selling beer.

## Sarah Atkinson

Sarah Atkinson is the beautiful young wife of Thomas Atkinson. She is the daughter of a brewer, Matthew Turnbull. When she is thirty-seven, her husband strikes her in the face,

and as she falls, she hits her head against a writing table. Although she lives for over fifty more years, her mind is completely gone as a result of the attack. During the long period of her insanity, local legends build up around her, including the idea that she has the gift to see and shape the future. She dies in 1874 at the age of ninety-two.

## Thomas Atkinson

Thomas Atkinson is William Atkinson's son. He becomes rich from land-reclamation projects, during which time the Cricks first come to work for the Atkinsons. Thomas builds a malting house and furthers the family beer business. He is also a farmer who opens up the River Leem, formerly a swamp, for transportation of his produce. He becomes a prominent citizen known for his good works. He marries Sarah Turnbull, who is much younger than he, but in his later years he develops feelings of jealousy over her, although Sarah did nothing to justify them. In 1820, Thomas strikes Sarah in the face. As a result of an injury sustained in the attack, she loses her mind. Thomas spends the rest of his days in remorse. He dies in 1825.

## William Atkinson

William Atkinson is Josiah Atkinson's son. An astute businessman, he further develops the family brewery business.

Bill Clay is an old man who is about eighty in the early 1940s. He has lived in the fens all his life. In the winter, he makes a living by shooting ducks; in summer, he catches birds in snares and sells them locally but illegally, since he does not have a license.

## Martha Clay

Martha Clay is the wife of Bill Clay. She is known locally as a witch. She lives in a rundown cottage in the fens. Mary and Tom go to her when Mary is pregnant, and Martha performs a crude abortion.

## Dick Crick

Dick Crick is raised as the elder son of Henry Crick. He is born in 1923 and is mentally retarded. He receives only a minimum of education; he cannot read or write, or speak in coherent sentences. His job is to work on a dredger that removes silt from the bottom of the River Ouse. He is a diligent worker, tall and physically strong. He also has a knack with machinery; his hobby is working on his motorcycle. Dick becomes jealous of Freddie Parr because Mary tells him that Freddie is the father of her baby. Dick kills Freddie by hitting him on the head with a bottle and pushing him into the river. Dick later learns he is the product of an incestuous union between Earnest Atkinson and his mother, Earnest's daughter Helen. Henry Crick is not really his father. Distressed and

confused by this information, he commits suicide by leaping from the dredger into the river.

## Helen Crick

Helen Crick is the daughter of Earnest Atkinson. She trains as a nurse and nurses Henry Crick back to health after World War I. She marries Henry but cannot free herself from the incestuous attentions of her father, a relationship that produces the retarded Dick Crick, who is raised by Helen and Henry as the son of Henry Crick. Tom Crick is Helen and Henry's legitimate son. Helen dies of influenza in 1937, when Tom is nine years old.

## Henry Crick

Henry Crick is Tom's father. He is a lockkeeper in the fens. He is also a superstitious man with a knack for telling stories. Henry was wounded in World War I and nursed back to health by Helen, whom he married in 1922. He does not know until Dick is eighteen that Dick is not really his son. Henry dies in 1947.

Jacob Crick is Tom Crick's eighteenth-century ancestor who operated two windmills in the fens.

## Mary Crick

Mary Crick is the daughter of Harold Metcalfe. Her father has high hopes for her and sends her to a convent school. As a teenager, Mary is curious and sexually adventurous. She tries to educate Dick about sex and becomes pregnant by Tom. She tries to abort the baby herself and then goes to Martha Clay for an abortion. The abortion causes an injury that renders her unable to bear children. After some years of being married to Tom, she takes a job in a local government office concerned with the care of the elderly. She leaves her job during a troubled menopause and then becomes very religious, telling Tom that God has told her she is to have a baby. She eventually snatches a baby from a supermarket, and after Tom insists that they return it, she is committed to a mental institution.

## Tom Crick

Tom Crick is the narrator of the novel. Born in 1927, he is the son of Henry and Helen Crick and the younger brother of Dick Crick. Unlike Dick, Tom is highly intelligent, and wins a scholarship to Gildsey Grammar School, where he first becomes interested in history. As an adolescent he later describes himself as timid and shy but still manages to get his girlfriend Mary pregnant in 1943, at the age of fifteen. In that same year, he discovers that the drowned Freddie Parr was murdered by Dick. For a while he is scared of his own brother. In 1945 Tom serves with the British Army on the Rhine, after

the war has ended. He returns home in 1947, the year his father dies, to marry Mary. They move to London, and he teaches history in a school. The couple lives an uneventful, conventional life, although Mary, because of a botched abortion in 1943, cannot have children. But around 1979, Tom's life changes. Mary becomes mentally unstable and snatches a baby from a supermarket, and Tom's school terminates his employment because history is being phased out of the curriculum. Tom has not done his standing any good by abandoning the regular history syllabus and telling his class stories of the fens instead. Tom continually searches for the meaning of history, seeking to understand how the past impinges on the present. His present unhappy circumstances make this a necessary quest for him. He has a curious, questioning nature, always asking why things happened as they did.

## Harold Metcalfe

Harold Metcalfe is Mary's father. He is a farmer, reserved and hardheaded. His wife dies less than two years after he marries her. Harold is devastated by Mary's teenage abortion and keeps her in seclusion for three years, only reluctantly giving her permission to marry Tom in 1947.

## Freddie Parr

Freddie Parr is the son of Jack Parr and a friend of Tom Crick when they are teenagers. He is known as a gossip and is often drunk on whisky stolen from his father. He is also lecherous and has designs on Mary. Freddie dies at the age of sixteen when he is knocked on the head and pushed into the river by Dick. He cannot swim.

## Jack Parr

Jack Parr is Freddie Parr's father. He is a signalman and guardian of the Hockwell level-crossing. He is known as a heavy drinker and exploits the wartime black market solely for the purpose of procuring alcohol.

## Price

Price is a sixteen-year-old student in Tom Crick's history class. He questions the value of studying history.

## Lewis Scott

Lewis Scott is the headmaster of the school where Tom Crick teaches. He and Tom do not see eye to eye. Lewis, who used to teach physics and chemistry, regards the teaching of history as of little value. He thinks education should be about the future, not the past.

# Themes

Tom Crick is obsessed with exploring the meaning and value of history, but the view he presents is not a comforting one. He rejects the naïve notion that we study history in order to learn from our mistakes and improve the present. He prefers instead a cyclical view of history that denies the idea of progress. Each step forward is followed by a step backward; there is no achievement without loss: "It [history] goes in two directions at once. It goes backwards as it goes forwards. It loops. It takes detours." Similarly, every benefit that has ever been granted to human society has been accompanied by a corresponding regression. The invention of the printing press, for example, led not only to the dissemination of knowledge, but also the dissemination of propaganda and strife. All in all, Tom does not know whether the conditions of human life are any better now than they were the year zero.

History, in the view of Tom Crick, is an attempt to fight off the nothingness of existence, the essential meaninglessness of life. The idea of "nothing" continually recurs in the novel. Tom speculates that the feeling that everything in life really amounts to nothing haunted Tom's father in the World War I battlefield at Ypres; it also haunted his grandfather, Earnest Atkinson, which was why Earnest started drinking. The whole of civilization that looks so solid and immutable is in fact only a veil held across the face of nothing, and it easily collapses. But it is no less essential for its insubstantiality. It is essential, as is all of history, because it imposes an intelligible story on bare existence. Whether the story is true or not is less important than the fact that it exists. It is a way of making the emptiness seem full. "As long as there's a story, it's all right," says Tom. It is a way of driving out fear, and this is why all humans have the instincts of storytellers, whether they are professional historians or spinners of fairy tales.

Everything Tom says of the global history that forms the background of the novel (the French Revolution, the two world wars, the threat of nuclear annihilation during the Cold War) is true also of personal life, at least in Tom's view. For example, he regards the day-to-day details of his marriage to Mary as mere "stage-props," behind which lies "the empty space of reality." In Tom's view of life, children will grow up to be just like their parents, and in that sense there can be no such thing as progress.

But Tom does not abandon the study of history or the search for explanations. The reason he tells his class about the history of the fens is because he desperately needs to come to terms with his own present unhappiness. This has been prompted by the imminent loss of his job and his wife's insanity. In spite of his skepticism about traditional approaches to history, he knows he cannot understand his present situation except by delving into the past. In personal and in societal life, the past always fluidly interacts with the present. It is never buried, even when it appears to be; it lies in wait, ready to cast its pall over the present. This point is conveyed by Tom's 1943 discovery of the beer bottle in the river. His brother Dick threw the bottle away, but it did not vanish. It resurfaced, ready to tell its tale to anyone who would ask the relevant questions. The river in this example symbolizes the stream of the past and perhaps also the personal unconscious mind.

Asking questions is essential for the study of history, and it also happens to be, in Tom's view, one of the most fundamental human traits, related to innate curiosity. However, the question "Why?" that reverberates throughout the novel can never be finally answered. In the family saga of the Cricks and the Atkinsons there are plenty of alternative explanations bandied around regarding the interpretation of key events, just as there are always conflicting versions of history; no one can know with certainty the absolute, definitive truth of an event that lies in the past. Tom confesses that his investigation into the history of the fens yielded only "more mysteries, more fantasticalities, more wonders and grounds for astonishment than I started with." He concludes, "history is a yarn."

Be that as it may, history cannot be escaped. In the novel, the most dramatic moment that shows the past intersecting with the present comes almost immediately after the grim account of the abortion Mary had as a teenager. After a brief digression comes the sentence, "We take the baby to the car." For a brief moment the reader, having just read of the disposal of an aborted fetus, is unsure what is happening. Then it becomes clear that the narrative has returned to the present, to the baby who fifty-two-year-old Mary has just snatched from a supermarket, not the baby who was aborted nearly forty years earlier. This incident in itself seems to explain the necessity of history, whether personal or societal, since there is no other way of understanding Mary's bizarre action except in terms of what happened to her as a teenager, since the botched abortion prevented her from ever having children of her own.

# Style

A metaphor is an implied comparison in which one item symbolizes a dissimilar item. For example, the process of land reclamation in the fens is a metaphor of the process of human history. Humans continually try to create substance and order (land) on the amorphous, slippery nature of life (the marshes and the water). Humans are always building dykes (histories, stories of all kinds) to keep the emptiness and nothingness of existence (the essential nature of water) at bay. And telling coherent stories that satisfactorily explain the past is as difficult as the engineering projects that attempted to drain and stabilize the fens. Water is always striking back. It can never be fully defeated, just as behind the mask of history lies the terrifying prospect of naked existence, without story or explanation and so without comfort. The vast expanse and flat, featureless nature of the fens suggests such emptiness, which is why, according to Tom Crick, the people who dwell there are excellent storytellers. They need their stories to beat back the emptiness.

The eels that are so plentiful in the fens act as another metaphor. In the chapter "About the Eel," the narrator describes not only the mysterious sex life of the eel (for centuries no one knew how eels reproduced) but also the cyclical nature of the eels' lives. Apparently, the adult European eel, which spends years of its life in the fresh waters and estuaries of Europe and North Africa, eventually journeys back to the sea for the sole purpose of spawning before it dies. In other words, it returns to where it came from; it journeys in reverse. Crick calls this "Natural History . . . Which doesn't go anywhere. Which cleaves to itself. Which perpetually travels back to where it came from." The implication in the novel is that human history may also, despite the frequent belief to the contrary, travel in a cyclical pattern. The very word "revolution," for example, implies the completion of a cycle, and the desire for progress is often accompanied by a desire for a return to a golden age that existed in a mythical past.

# Historical Context

For centuries the fens of eastern England were vast desolate marsh areas. Patches of firm ground were interspersed with rivers, pools, and reed-beds. The rivers could be navigated only by shallow-bottomed boats. The fens harbored abundant bird life and sea life, especially eels (as *Waterland* makes clear).

The first attempts to drain the fens were made by the ancient Romans. In the sixteenth century, Queen Elizabeth I also wished to undertake the project to improve the region's agricultural yields. But it was not until the seventeenth century that drainage of the fens took place on a large scale. This was a massive engineering project that caused enormous ecological changes in the region and took several decades to accomplish. The impetus came from the Duke of Bedford and wealthy investors in London who wished to increase the value of the land they owned, which they could then sell at a profit.

The most important figure involved in the drainage project was Dutch hydraulic engineer Cornelius Vermuyden (1595-1683). Vermuyden became involved in drainage projects in England in the 1620s and had the confidence of King Charles I. During the 1640s, Vermuyden was the chief engineer when 40,000 acres of fen were drained. Vermuyden's methods included ditches (known as cuts), dykes, sluices, and windmills. The effect was to reclaim the rich peat soil that lay beneath the water. As the novel makes clear, however, not all the drainage projects were successful in the longterm. The fens were often resistant to the changes imposed on them. However, the initial intention of the drainers, to produce good summer grazing land, was fulfilled.

This success was in spite of the fact that the project was vigorously opposed by the local people, who had lived in the area for centuries and who feared the loss of their traditional hunting and fishing rights. They also resented the Dutch workers Vermuyden employed. (The narrator in *Waterland* mentions how the local fen dwellers cut the throats of the Dutch workers and threw their bodies into the very water they had been employed to drain.) Local opposition forced the authorities to agree to compensation for the native fen dwellers and also to employ only English workers.

The fens are flat and low-lying, and much of the area lies below sea level. The landscape is monotonous, "bare and empty," as Swift notes in *Waterland*, and observers often remark on the sense of isolation it produces. The nineteenth-century English poet John Clare wrote a descriptive poem called "The Fens" which contains the following lines:

Oer treeless fens of many miles Spring comes and goes and comes again And all is nakedness and fen.

The poem concludes with a picture of the fens in winter:

But all is level cold and dull And osier swamps with water full

The modern fens fall into four main categories: the settled fens, also known as the townlands, which include the long-established cities of Kings Lynn and Boston; the Peaty Fens or Black Fens, which were drained from the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries; the fens of southeastern Lincolnshire, which were originally one of Britain's richest wildlife habitats and were the last to be drained (little of the wildlife remains there in the twenty-first century); and the band of Wash Marshes, which were reclaimed from the Wash by the building of sea wall defenses.

# Critical Overview

*Waterland* was shortlisted for Britain 's most prestigious literary award,the Booker Prize.It received generous praise from critics. Peter S. Prescott, in *Newsweek*, is one of a number of reviewers who compare Swift to William Faulkner. Prescott praises the intricate design of the narrative, pointing out that it moves "as water in the fens does: a current flowing one way encounters eddies circling in others."

Alan Hollinghurst in the *Times Literary Supplement* notes the way Swift combines various literary traditions: the "family saga, the business saga, the novel of provincial life," including also "social history and adolescent love." Hollinghurst praises the novel's "vigorous and complex metaphorical life," by which he meant Swift's use of the constant process of land reclamation in the fens as a parallel to the attempts of humans to make sense of their past. Hollinghurst finds the novel's vision "appallingly bleak," noting it emphasizes the "circularity and repetitiousness of history" and creates through the central character of Tom Crick a "portrait of a man who is deeply disturbed, and who is vainly attempting to build a structure . . . which will protect him from his childlessness, from his failure to create the future."

Few critics have anything but praise for the novel,although Michael Gorra in the Nation ,while acknowledging the novel is "intellectually bold, provocative and challenging" finds fault with Swift's style. According to Gorra, the novel's "passion is all for history itself and not for the people who are affected by it."

# Criticism

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

# Critical Essay #1

*Aubrey holds a Ph.D. in English and has published many articles on twentieth-century literature. In this essay, Aubrey discusses the nature and purpose of history as presented in the novel.*

Underlying the sometimes lurid story of murder, suicide, abortion, insanity, incest, and mental retardation are some central questions about the nature of history. What is history? What is the point of studying it? Can the past really be known? How does the past affect the present? As a schoolteacher, Tom Crick, the narrator, has a professional interest in history, and it is no coincidence that the present-day sections of the novel are set in 1979, during a time of great upheaval in the methods applied to the scholarly study of history. Tom Crick also faces an academic climate in which the study of history is considered expendable (his school is phasing out its history department). And he must deal with a troublesome though highly intelligent student named Price, who thinks history is a waste of time, a view shared by Lewis Scott, the school headmaster, who refers to history as "a rag bag of pointless information."

For a man of Crick's generation, the method of studying history that he would have learned in the 1940s and 1950s was very different from what it would later become and what it is today. Fifty years ago, history usually meant political history, the story of governments and their relations, of wars, international treaties, parliamentary legislation, and the like. The lives of ordinary people, including women, were not considered worthy of study, since ordinary people appeared not to exercise any power over historical events. In addition to the narrowness of historical study, the emphasis of historians was on what was called an empirical/analytic method. The facts were assembled, the historian studied them objectively and dispassionately, and wrote a narrative that purported to explain those facts. The explanation became history, and when practiced by the leading scholars in the field, it was generally considered a true account of what had happened in the past.

The voice of the traditional historian can be heard in Crick's mocking admonition, evoking "good, dry, textbook history":

History, being an accredited sub-science, only wants to know the facts. History, if it is to keep on constructing its road into the future, must do so on solid ground. At all costs let us avoid mystery-making and speculation, secrets and idle gossip.

Of course, Crick himself does not believe any of this. Even when he was a child and first began to be bewitched by history, it was the myths and stories, the "fabulous aura" of history that attracted him, not the parade of facts. As a mature history teacher, he rejects the idea that history is studied in order to learn from the mistakes of the past, since if that were the case, history would be the record of inexorable progress, which it clearly is not. Nor does history reveal the meaning of the events it records and purports to explain. History in Crick's view is nothing more than a "lucky dip of meanings," even though this does not stop humans from perpetually searching for meaning.

Crick has clearly been influenced by the debate over the nature of history that swept through the intellectual community of historians during the 1960s and 1970s. Much of this was due to the influence of the movement known as postmodernism, which cast doubt on the reliability of the rational empirical method to interpret the meaning of the past. Historians began to ask questions such as, Is the meaning that the historian finds in history something that genuinely is inherent in the past, or is it something that the historian imposes on it? How does language shape meaning? Is there only one correct meaning in history, or might there be several competing interpretations and meanings, each with its own validity?

As history expanded with the study of women, minorities, gays, and cultures all taking their place alongside—and also challenging—old-style political history, the conclusion postmodernism pointed to was that there is really no such thing as objectivity. Just as a novelist or poet gives expression, knowingly or not, to a certain ideology often dictated by class or gender, so too does the historian. The interpretation of the facts before the historian is inevitably colored by his or her own subjectivity, biases, and cultural and intellectual assumptions. The historian is, in a sense, a partner with the past in an act of co-creation, rather than an objective chronicler of something entirely separate from him- or herself. This is why historians today often speak of "doing" history rather than "studying" it, of "constructing" a historical narrative rather than merely writing it. The newer terms help to convey the active role of the historian in shaping his or her material. Some radical postmodernists even express the view that it is impossible to "do" history at all, since what is known as history is in fact no more objectively true than a fairy tale. This is not unlike the view once expressed by the French philosopher and satirist Voltaire, who remarked in a letter that "History is after all nothing but a pack of tricks which we play upon the dead" (quoted in Durant's *The Story of Philosophy*).

In *Waterland*, Crick is clearly in sympathy with the postmodernist approach to history. Not only is history a "lucky dip" as far as meaning is concerned, it is also inherently and unavoidably incomplete, "the attempt to give an account, with incomplete knowledge, of actions themselves undertaken with incomplete knowledge." Crick's scrapping of the traditional curriculum and his decision to tell his students stories of the fens instead is also a radical attempt to revise what history is or should be. When challenged by Lewis Scott as to the value of this approach, Crick says, "Perhaps history *is* just story-telling," the implication being that the listener or reader can take whatever meaning he or she needs and wants from it. Certainly as Crick tells the family saga of the Atkinsons, he does not restrict himself merely to the facts that can be known. He also gives expression to local superstition and legend, of which the fens has much; they too are a part of the fabric of history, a history that Crick reconstructs more like a novelist than a historian. History, it seems, is more art than science, and like a great symphony or a great novel, it can afford many interpretations, none of which has a definitive claim on truth. The virtue is not so much in uncovering the facts, which are going to be colored anyway by how the historian thinks and writes about them, but in continuing to ask the questions. Questioning, always seeking if not always finding explanations, is humanity's saving grace, according to Crick. Curiosity is the quality that connects human beings to the web of life. When curiosity dies, then life (and history) dies with it.

There is one other way that history dies, and that is when people manage to live in what Crick calls the Here and Now, which he contrasts with living with an awareness of history. Normally, people live their lives enmeshed in and weighed down by the burden of history, both personal and societal, which increases over time. As Crick tells his class:

tempts to throw it off . . . become more violent and drastic.... As history becomes inevitably more massive, more pressing and hard to support, man . . . finds himself involved in bigger and bigger catastrophes.

It is this sense of the crushing weight of history that produces the tone of melancholy that pervades *Waterland*. It seems there is an inevitable paradox in human life, at least according to Crick. Humanity creates history, its collection of stories and explanations, in order to escape the grim, featureless face of naked existence, and yet that very construct that humans build serves only to burden them further, for the present cannot escape the weight of the past.

Unless, that is, humans can live in the Here and Now. This term carries several meanings in the novel. At one level, it simply refers to the urgent issues of the present day—whatever wars or other disturbances happen to be currently raging. The view advocated by Price, Crick's rebellious student, is that it is more important to tackle the Here and Now than to study the tortured upheavals of previous generations.

But Crick also means by the term the Here and Now, the times when an individual lives fully in the present moment, fully alive to the sensual reality of life and focused only on what the moment needs in terms of action and response. Thus in 1943, when he and Mary make love for the first time, they are in the Here and Now. The Here and Now is not necessarily a pleasurable experience, however, as when Tom, in the Here and Now, feels terror when he sees blood emerging from the drowned Freddie Parr's temple. The experience of the Here and Now, according to Crick, is a comparatively rare experience; only animals live fully and constantly in it; we humans are most often somewhere else, hoping for a future or pondering the past.

It is the concept of the Here and Now that underlies the curious passage in which Earnest Atkinson insists that his offspring by his daughter Helen will be the "saviour of the world." When the offspring turns out to be mentally retarded (Dick), the title his father bestowed on him appears absurd and ironic. And yet there is no irony in the following passage, which occurs as Dick goes through his last moments on board the dredger. The year is 1943, and the world is immersed in World War II:

He's here. He knows his place. He knows his station. He keeps the ladder turning, the buckets scooping. The noise of the churning machinery drowns the fleeting aerial clamour of global strife. He hears no bombers, sees no bombers. And the smell of silt is the smell of sanctuary, is the smell of amnesia. He's here, he's now. Not there or then. No past, no future. He's the mate of the *Rosa II*.

And he's the saviour of the world . . .

At this point, Dick is so focused on what he is doing in the Here and Now that history, either his own or the world's, does not touch him. In a curious way he is free, certainly freer than Tom Crick is ever to be. And there is a certitude and purposefulness about his actions that give him a kind of tragic dignity that he did not possess before. This can be seen in the description of his suicidal, self-sacrificial dive into the river, which takes place, significantly, in the glow of the setting sun behind him. As he dives "in a long, reaching, powerful arc," Tom observes his body "form a single, taut and seemingly limbless continuum, so that an expert on diving might have judged that here indeed was a natural, here indeed was a fish of a man."

In that moment Dick attains a kind of apotheosis that eludes every other character in the novel. Perhaps for a moment he *is* the savior of the world, at least the small world of the Cricks, since with his death the tragic folly of Earnest Atkinson is finally laid to rest.

Other aspects of the past, of course, are not so easily dispensed with. If the world can be, metaphorically speaking, saved only in the occasional moments when it is forgotten in the Here and Now, the Here and Now cannot keep history at bay for long, for when it passes from here and now to there and then, history claims it as its prize. Then the eternal question "Why?" rises up once more to beguile and haunt humans and to draw them back into the myths and stories of the past, where truth may or may not lie.

**Source:**Bryan Aubrey,Critical Essay on *Waterland* ,in Novels for Students ,Gale,2003.

# Critical Essay #2

*In the following essay, Cameros discusses Swift's work and the authorial intent that lies behind his novels.*

"Can it be a kindness not to tell what you see? And a blessing to be blind? And the best aid to human happiness that has ever been invented is a blanket of soft, white lies?" asks one of the characters in *Out of This World*. These questions sound the central theme of Graham Swift's six novels: does human happiness depend on understanding or on feeling? While the question is asked as if for the first time in each novel, Swift's answer remains, with one exception, the same: "soft, white lies" are necessary to human happiness. In keeping with his belief that feelings matter more than understanding, Swift also adheres to a model of authorship that prioritizes self-expression above communication with readers.

*The Sweet Shop Owner* spans a single hot summer's day, the last day of the life of widowed shopkeeper Willy Chapman. Throughout much of the day Willy carries on an internal dialogue with his estranged daughter. He remembers his marriage to an unloving wife, Irene, who attempted to compensate by bearing him the child: "You were her gift." His scholarly daughter has forsaken her father, and, according to Mrs. Cooper, won't return. Refusing to accept this, Willy quietly kills himself in the hope of finally reuniting with his daughter. "Don't you see, you're no freer than before, no freer than I am? And the only thing that can dissolve history now is if, by a miracle, you come."

A single suspicion brings about the climax of *Shuttlecock*. Immobilized by the heroic figure of his war spy father, Prentis, a Dead Crimes Investigator, bullies his wife and two sons. The suspicion that his father may have been a traitor has multiple effects. It frees Prentis: "Something had collapsed around me; so I couldn't help, in the middle of the ruins, this strange feeling of release. I had escaped; I was free." The threat of the publicity of this suspicion also may have driven his father mad. The suspicion illustrates to Prentis the power—and the danger—of knowledge: "I stared again at the file. I thought of the number of times I'd opened the cover of *Shuttlecock* hoping Dad would come out; hoping to hear his voice. Was I afraid that the allegations might be true—or that they might be false? And supposing, in some extraordinary way, that everything Quinn told me was concocted, was an elaborate hoax—if I never looked in the file, I would never know. I read the code letters over and over again. C9/E. . . . And then suddenly I knew I wanted to be uncertain, I wanted to be in the dark." Rather than confirmation or denial of his father's betrayal, it is the suspicion—the "soft, white lies"—that ultimately proves more valuable because it preserves the possibility of a heroic man.

Like Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*, *Waterland* is a *bildungsroman* about a young boy from the Fens of East Anglia. Unlike other Swiftian characters, Tom Crick, the history teacher protagonist, is drawn to face the truth of his family's tortured history: "I'm the one who had to ask questions, who had to dig up the truth (my recipe for

emergencies: explain your way out)." But the price Tom pays for his knowledge is high. His wife abducts a child. His half-brother commits suicide.

The split between understanding and feelings structures *Out of This World,* which is narrated through the alternating monologues of photographer, Harry Beech, and his estranged daughter, Sophie. The latter has forbidden cameras (a metaphor for realist understanding) in her house. We learn that Sophie glimpsed Harry photographing the wreck of the car bombing of his own father: "I saw him first, then he saw me. He was like a man caught sleep-walking, not knowing how he could be doing what he was doing, as if it were all part of some deep, ingrained reflex. But just for a moment I saw this look on his face of deadly concentration. He hadn't seen me first because he'd been looking elsewhere, and his eyes had been jammed up against a camera." Appalled by her father's detachment, she has refused to speak to him for 10 years. At first Harry resists Sophie's point. Ultimately, Harry acknowledges that a lie reunited him with his estranged father. His father's lie, which shielded Harry from his wife's infidelity, demonstrated his father's love. Harry reciprocated by reaching out to his father: "We strolled to the end of the terrace. As we turned, I wanted to do that simple but rare thing and take his arm.... He said, 'I've never told you, have I?' "

The split between understanding and feelings also structures *Ever After*, which is narrated through the alternating monologues of Victorian Darwinist Matthew Pearce and widowed English professor Billy Unwin. Whereas the Victorian Pearce sacrificed his wife and family to remain faithful to his Darwinist beliefs, Unwin would sacrifice the few beliefs he holds to bring back his deceased wife. "I would believe or not believe anything, swallow any old make-belief, in order to have Ruth back. Whereas Matthew—Whereas this Pearce guy—" After a seduction plot momentarily tempts Unwin to forget the memory of his wife, life no longer appears to be worth living to the professor, who attempts suicide. His revival leads him to the discovery that it is the "soft, white lie" of the memories of his wife that gives him a reason for living.

Like Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying,* the polyphonic *Last Orders* is narrated through the friends and family of a recently deceased man on the burial journey. Londoners Ray Johnson, Lenny Tate, Vic Tucker, Vince Dodds, and Amy Dodds are bound to the recently deceased Jack Dodds through decades of love, friendship, and secrets. Vince is Jack's adopted son, who ran away as a teenager. Ray fought with Jack in World War II, and has been in love with Jack's wife, Amy, for as many years. Amy remembers the foundering of her marriage as Jack refused to acknowledge their mentally retarded daughter: "He won't mention June so I won't mention Ray. Fair dos. What you don't know can't hurt." Here the lies sometimes serve not only to protect, but also to create a better community. "So when Vince Pritchett, but forget the Pritchett, dropped into my lap, into our lap," says Amy, "I ought to have known it wouldn't help a bit, it wouldn't win him back. You can't make a real thing out of pretending hard." Regardless of her denial, it is through "pretending hard" that Amy has created a family: After years of resentment, Vince has reunited with his adopted parents.

The importance of "soft, white lies" is apparent in Swift's attitude towards authorship. Some authors write to communicate with their readers a necessary piece of social

criticism, a rationale which has its roots in the Realist tradition of social responsibility. Other authors write to express themselves, a rationale which has its roots in the Romantic tradition of self-expression. A quote from Swift expresses the Romantic tenet that deep feeling is the essential ingredient of art: "I am absolutely not a formalist, because what does matter to me are things as felt, and feeling seems at least to stand in opposition to form: form is to do with control and discipline, and feeling is to do with liberation...."

While expressing himself may be Swift's intention as an author, it's suspect that this self-expression is "liberation." After all, what kind of "liberation" can obsessively rewriting the same plot be called? Immobilized by the excessive expectations of her parents, Irene in *The Sweet Shop Owner* could neither fully reject, nor fully participate in her family life. Immobilized by the heroic figure of his father, Prentis in *Shuttlecock* is freed by the revelation that his father may have been a traitor to the English. Immobilized by the expectations of her father to become like her sanctified mother, Mary in *Waterland* goes mad. Sense a pattern here? Regardless of which book by Swift one chooses, one meets the same plot: an adult frozen in childhood must free him- or herself from the overpowering example of an idealized parent. The repetition of a single plot suggests that Swift has supported a rationale of writing as self-expression from necessity rather than from choice. Even if Swift had wanted to write for his audience, one wonders whether he could do so. As Swift has said, "I write a lot by sheer instinct, groping around in the dark."

Expressing himself may have been Swift's foremost aim, but communicating with his readers is a necessary aim of any author. Swift fails—as several reviewers' comments indicate—to communicate with his readers. Too many perspectives, none of which are authorized by the obfuscating narrator has been the frequent charge of reviewers. "Mr. Swift is so committed to seeing around perspectives, undermining his own assertions, squeezing the narrator between the pincers of the past and present, being ironic at the expense of what somebody didn't know but somebody now does, that the effect he creates is rather like a three-ring circus," a *New York Times Book Review* critic said of *Waterland*. "One yearns for a whiff of directness. . . ." Stephen Wall of the *London Review of Books* also protested that the multiple perspectives in *Ever After* were not resolved: "Despite its manifestly humane intentions, the different areas of narrative interest in *Ever After* disperse, rather than concentrate attention. Although its varying strands are conscientiously knitted together . . . they don't seem significantly to cohere." In failing to organize the multiple viewpoints, Swift violates the assumption that the author will provide a "hierarchical organization of details." Instead, the reader is left alone to make meanings; a job she could have done without the reading of any of Swift's novels.

Why this refusal to guide his readers? An answer lies in Swift's admiration of "vulnerability." Swift's characters are often proud to say, "I don't know." In *Shuttlecock*, Prentis says: " 'I don't know' . . . It seemed to me that this was an answer I would give, boldly, over and over again for the rest of my life." According to Swift, when an author shows the reader his vulnerability, he gains the reader's trust: "An author ought to have authority . . . It makes sure the reader trusts the writer . . . Often that stems from the

realization that the writer is prepared to show that vulnerability." When Swift has shown vulnerability, however, his reviewers have not trusted him. Just the opposite. Swift has said, "I am desperate to avoid a sense of power derived from form." His fear of authority is indeed evident in his novels.

**Source:** Cynthia Cameros, "Swift, Graham," in *Contemporary Novelists*, 7th ed., edited by Neil Schlager and Josh Lauer, St. James Press, 2001, pp. 959-61.

# Critical Essay #3

*In the following essay, Landow identifies* Waterland *as a "self-reflexive text," focusing on the novel's treatment of the nature of storytelling, history, and the novel's relation to works by Dickens and Faulkner.*

Children [are those] to whom, throughout history, stories have been told, chiefly but not always at bedtime, in order to quell restless thoughts; whose need of stories is matched only by the need adults have of children to tell stories to, of receptacles for their stock of fairy-tales, of listening ears on which to unload, bequeath those most unbelievable yet haunting of fairy-tales, their own lives.

Graham Swift's *Waterland* (1983), a novel cast in the form of a fictional autobiography, has much to tell us about the fate, even the possibility, of autobiography, in the late twentieth century. Although *Waterland* does not confuse personal with public history, it intertwines them, making each part of the other, for as Tom Crick, the secondary school teacher of history who is Swift's protagonist, seeks an explanation of how his life has turned out, he tells his story, but as he does so, he finds that he must also tell the stories of the fens and of his ancestors who lived there. In the course of telling his story, their story, he questions why we tell stories to ourselves and our children, how the stories we tell relate to those found in literature and history, and what these stories tell us about selves, ourselves.

*Waterland* meditates on human fate, responsibility, and historical narrative by pursuing a mystery; so the book is in part a detective story. It is also the story of two families, of an entire region in England, of England from the industrial revolution to the present, of technology and its effects, and it is, finally, a meditation on stories and storytelling—a fictional inquiry into fiction, a book that winds back upon itself and asks why we tell stories.

As a novel that questions the interrelated notions of self and story in Dickens's *Great Expectations* and Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* at the same time that it draws upon them, *Waterland* appears a late-twentieth-century postmodernist rewriting of each. In attempting to relate his own story, Tom Crick begins by questioning the purpose, truthfulness, and limitations of stories while at the same time making clear that he believes history to be a form of story-telling. These questionings of narrative within its narrative make *Waterland* a self-reflexive text.

The novel has as protagonist a history teacher who is about to be fired because history (his stories) are no longer considered of sufficient cultural value. He ruminates upon history in terms of the events of his own life, and he quickly runs up against the young, those without interest in the past, those who quite properly want to know why? why pay attention to what's over and done with? "You ask," the narrator tells his students, "as all history classes ask, as all history classes should ask, What is the point of history." They want to know, as we do, two things: What is the point of history as a subject; that is, why

study the past? and what is the point of history itself, that is, does history, man's existence in public time, have any meaning, any pattern, any purpose?

This resistance to both notions of history by the young, who wish to live in the here and now, is embodied in Price, Tom Crick's student, who voices all the usual objections to paying attention to what has gone by. "Your thesis," Tom responds, "is that history, as such, is a red-herring; the past is irrelevant. The present alone is vital." Some of Tom's own statements about history and historiography suggest that Price might have a point. "When introduced to history as an object of Study . . . it was still the fabulous aura of history that lured me, and I believed, perhaps like you, that history was a myth." Tom Crick confesses that he retained such pleasing, soothing notions of history

Until a series of encounters with the Here and Now gave a sudden urgency to my studies. Until the Here and Now, gripping me by the arm, slapping my face and telling me to take a good look at the mess I was in, informed me that history was no invention but indeed existed—and I had become a part of it.

Concerned with saving the world from nuclear war, concerned that there may not be a future, Price thinks history is bunk: "I want a future . . . And you—you can stuff your past." As it turns out, Price's use of the second-person pronoun is correct, for this past, this history, that he rejects is precisely his—Tom's—past.

Price also makes a second appealing attack on history and historiography, namely, that it is a means of avoidance: "You know what your trouble is, sir? You're hooked on explanation. Explain, explain. Everything's got to have an explanation . . . Explaining's a way of avoiding facts while you pretend to get near to them." To be against history is thus for Price anti-explanation, because according to him, both history and explanation evade life in the present—an attitude based on the assumption that the present is pleasant, nurturing, and not deadly.

Near the close of the novel Swift's protagonist answers the charge that people resort to history only as a means of evasion with the counter claim that curiosity and the explanations to which it leads are necessary and inevitable. They do not subvert life, claims Crick, nor do they bear responsibility for keeping us from engaging in important events like revolutions.

Supposing it's the other way round. Supposing it's revolutions which divert and impede the course of our inborn curiosity. Supposing it's curiosity—which inspires our sexual explorations and feeds our desires to hear and tell stories—which is our natural and fundamental state of mind. Supposing it's our insatiable and feverish desire to know about things, to know about each other, always to be sniff-sniffing things out, which is the true and rightful subverter and defeats even our impulse for historical progression.

Trying to understand why—trying to understand, that is, what has happened to him and his life—Crick retells the story of his life. By relating the events of his life in some sort of an order he makes it into a story. He constructs history—his story. He constructs himself, and in the course of doing so he recognizes that "Perhaps history *is* just story-

telling": "History itself, the Grand Narrative, the filler of vacuums, the dispeller of fears of the dark." And he has examples of this in the historical legends told to him by his mother.

Before the murder of Freddie Parr, he and Mary lived outside of time and history, outside that stream of events he is trying to teach to his class. But with the discovery of Freddie's body floating in the canal lock, and with the discovery of a beer bottle, Tom and Mary fall into time and history. Previously, "Mary was fifteen, and so was I . . . in prehistorical, pubescent times, when we drifted instinctively." As Tom explains, "it is precisely these surprise attacks of the Here and Now which, far from launching us into the present tense, which they do, it is true, for a brief and giddy interval, announce that time has taken us prisoner."

This view accords with that of those philosophical anthropologists—Mircea Eliade and others—who emphasize that until human beings leave tribal, agricultural existence, they live in an eternal present in which time follows a cyclical pattern of days and seasons. Emphasizing that "from the point of view of a historical peoples or classes 'suffering' is equivalent to 'history,' " Eliade claims that archaic humanity has no interest in history or in the individuation it creates. Interest in the novel, the unique, the irreversible, appeared only comparatively recently. Tom Crick's whole existence in the novel instantiates Eliade's point that the "crucial difference" between tribal humanity and its descendants lie in the value "modern, historical man" gives to historical events—to the " 'novelties' " that once represented only failure and infraction. In tribal society, one becomes individual, one becomes *an* individual, only by botching a ritual or otherwise departing from some universal pattern. In such societies, one differentiates oneself, becoming an individual, only by sin and failure. The individual therefore is the man or woman who got wrong the planting or fertility ritual, the hunting pattern. Which is why the narrator explains: "What is a history teacher? He's someone who teaches mistakes. While others say, Here's how to do it, he says, And here's what goes wrong."

Therefore, writing history, like writing autobiography, only comes after a fall, for autobiography and other forms of history respond to the question "why," and people only ask that question after something has gone wrong. "And what does this question Why imply?" Crick asks his students. "It implies—as it surely implies when you throw it at me rebelliously in the midst of our history lessons—dissatisfaction, disquiet, a sense that all is not well. In a state of perfect contentment there would be no need or room for this irritant little word. History begins only at the point where things go wrong; history is born only with trouble, with perplexity, with regret." But, of course, were it not for trouble, perplexity, and regret we would not have autobiographies, and as the history of Victorian autobiography demonstrates, periods of trouble and perplexity, if not regret, produce self-histories galore, for in such circumstances autobiographers traditionally have offered their experiences, their survival, as exemplary.

Tom Crick's autobiographical project therefore centers on what went wrong. This whole novel, in fact, is an attempt to explain what went wrong—what went wrong with his own life and Mary's, with the lives of his parents, and with the lives of both their families, who represent the peasant and wealthy entrepreneurial classes of Britain from the

seventeenth century to the present. *Waterland* begins, therefore, with the discovery of Freddie Parr's body in midsummer 1943, a discovery that comes all the more shockingly, unexpectedly, because Swift presents it within a fairy-tale landscape, for it was "a fairy-tale land, after all," in part because both his mother and father had a gift for making it such with their hand-me-down tales.

*Waterland*, in other words, to a large extent embodies the conventional Romantic pattern best known, perhaps, from "Tintern Abbey." Like the idealized Wordsworth who is the speaker of that poem, Tom Crick returns (though only in imagination) to the landscape of thoughtless youth, and like the poet, he concerns himself with the losses of innocence and with the corollary fall into time, self-consciousness, and social existence—into, that is, the world of adulthood, into "trouble . . . perplexity . . . regret." Finally, like Wordsworth in "Tintern Abbey," Crick relates his meditations on his own life and its patterns in the presence of a younger audience, and like the poem's speaker, Crick also acts in the manner of a ventriloquist, obviously placing words in the mouths of that younger audience. The obvious difference between the two works, of course, appears in the fact that, unlike "Tintern Abbey," *Waterland* bravely refuses to find solace in some Romantic revision of Milton's Fortunate Fall.

Tom does, however, come to believe that all such explanatory narratives, function, however provisionally, as means of ordering our lives and thereby protecting us from chaos and disorder. And Swift's array of characters surely need such shelter, for some are victims of progress, technology, and the anti-natural (the Cricks of earlier generations lost their way of life as swamp people when the swamps were drained), and others victims of what the adult narrator considers purely natural (as are Mary, Tom, Dick, and Freddie, who were only following natural sexual urges); and yet others were victims of World War I (like Tom's father and uncle), or victims (like Tom's mother) of natural unnatural love, of the incest that produces Dick, his idiot half-brother. Story-telling, and history, and books like *Waterland* are these people's prime defences against fear: "It's all a struggle to make things not seem meaningless. It's all a fight against fear," Tom Crick tells his class. "What do you think all my stories are for . . . I don't care what you call it—explaining, evading the facts, making up meanings, taking a larger view, putting things in perspective, dodging the here and now, education, history, fairy-tales—it helps to eliminate fear."

In fact, Tom Crick argues, story-telling comes with time, with living in time, and story-telling, which distinguishes us from animals, comes with being human.

Children, only animals live entirely in the Here and Now. Only nature knows neither memory nor history. Man man—let me offer you a definition—is the story-telling animal. Wherever he goes he wants to leave behind not a chaotic wake, not an empty space, but the comforting marker-buoys and trail-signs of stories. He has to go on telling stories. He has to keep on making them up. As long as there's a story, it's all right.

The problem, as this entire novel goes to show, is that the material of stories often refuses to be shaped by them, just as nature, unmediated nature, refuses to be shaped by the convenient story of progress within which Victorians tried to place it. (And, one

must note in passing, this fact might cast into doubt all story-telling, particularly that of this novel, since narrative always involves some kind of progress.) Thus, Graham Swift's emphasis throughout the novel on two matters—the Fens and sexuality—that resist all ideological, narrative control, that refuse to be shaped by stories we tell. Putting together the two opposed forces that drive much of his tale, Tom claims "Children, there's something which revolutionaries and prophets of new worlds and even humble champions of Progress (think of those poor Atkinsons . . . ) can't abide. Natural history, human nature." As Tom makes us realize, natural history is a paradox and an oxymoron—that is, a jarring placement together of contraries—because it is history of the antihistorical which has no order or is cyclical (nonhistorical) without individuating markers.

This whole novel, in other words, sets out to examine these ages—and their literary as well as religious and philosophical foundations—and finds them wanting. It examines various theories of history, such as that proposed by religion, progress, and hubris, and canvasses a wide range of subjects for history, such as political events from the Roman conquerors of Britain to the Bastille and World War I and II, the history of technology, including draining the Fens, the history of places, the history of families, the history of individual people, especially the narrator and Mary, and the history of a beer bottle.

*Waterland*, which is cast in the form of a fictional autobiography, probes the role of narrative and in so doing raises questions about the means and methods of autobiography. Like much recent theory and criticism, the novel looks skeptically at two aspects of narrative. First, it expresses suspicion of the way human beings gravitate towards folktales, myths, and other well-shaped narratives that falsify experience and keep us from encountering the world. Swift's narrator himself admits that his "earliest acquaintance with history was thus, in a form issuing from my mother's lips, inseparable from her other bedtime make-believe—how Alfred burnt the cakes, how Canute commanded the waves, now King Charles hid in an oak tree—as if history were a pleasing invention." Recent studies of nineteenth-century autobiography have pointed out the extent to which authors depend upon such conventional narrative patterns to create what Avrom Fleishman has termed a "personal myth" by which to tell their lives. As Linda H. Peterson has pointed out, however, conventional narratives, such as those drawn from scripture, create major problems for many would-be self historians, particularly women, who find that these narratives distort their stories or do not permit them to tell their stories at all.

Second, Swift's novel takes its skepticism about narrative further, for it not only points, like recent critics, to the falsifications created by particular stories, it is suspicious of all story-telling. *Waterland* questions all narrative based on sequence, and in this it agrees with other novels of its decade. Like Penelope Lively's *Moon Tiger* (1987), another novel in the form of the autobiography of an invented character, Swift's novel has a historian, Tom Crick, as his protagonist, and like Lively's character, Swift's relates the events of a single life to the major currents of contemporary history.

Using much the same method for autobiography as for history, Swift's protagonist would agree with Lively's Claudia Hampton, whose deep suspicion of chronology and

sequence explicitly derive from her experience of simultaneity. Thinking over the possibility of writing a history of the world, Lively's heroine rejects sequence and linear history as inauthentic and false to her experience:

The question is, shall it or shall it not be linear history? I've always thought a kaleidoscopic view might be an interesting heresy. Shake the tube and see what comes out. Chronology irritates me. There is no chronology inside my head. I am composed of a myriad Claudias who spin and mix and part like sparks of sunlight on water. The pack of cards I carry around is forever shuffled and reshuffled; there is no sequence, everything happens at once.

Like Proust's Marcel, she finds that a simple sensation brings the past back flush upon the present, making a mockery of separation and sequence. Returning to Cairo in her late sixties, Claudia finds it both changed and unchanged. "The place," she explains, "didn't look the same but it felt the same; sensations clutched and transformed me." Standing near a modern concrete and plate-glass building, she picks a "handful of eucalyptus leaves from a branch, crushed them in my hand, smelt, and tears came to my eyes. Sixty-seven-year-old Claudia . . . crying not in grief but in wonder that nothing is ever lost, that everything can be retrieved, that a lifetime is not linear but instant." Her lesson for autobiography is that "inside the head, everything happens at once." Like Claudia, Tom Crick takes historical, autobiographical narratives whose essence is sequence and spreads them out or weaves them in a non sequential way.

Lively and Swift are hardly the first to suggest that narrative sequence falsifies auto biographical truth. Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, one of the most influential as well as most technically daring poems of the nineteenth century, embodies this post-modernist suspicion of narrative as falsifying. Arthur Henry Hallam's death in 1833 forced Tennyson to question his faith in nature, God, and poetry. *In Memoriam* reveals that the poet, who found that brief lyrics best embodied the transitory emotions that buffeted him after his loss, rejected conventional elegy and narrative because both falsify the experience of grief and recovery by mechanically driving the reader through too unified —and hence too simplified—a version of these experiences. Creating a poetry of fragments, Tennyson leads the reader of *In Memoriam* from grief and despair through doubt to hope and faith, but at each step stubborn, contrary emotions intrude, and readers encounter doubt in the midst of faith, pain in the midst of resolution. Instead of the elegaic plot of "Lycidas," "Adonais," and "Thrysis," *In Memoriam* offers 133 fragments interlaced by dozens of images and motifs and informed by an equal number of minor and major resolutions, the most famous of which is section ninety-five's representation of Tennyson's climactic, if wonderfully ambiguous, mystical experience of contact with Hallam's spirit.

Like Tennyson and most other nineteenth-century autobiographers, Tom Crick tells his story as a means of explaining his conversion to a particular belief and way of life. Unlike the great Victorian autobiographers, real and fictional, he does not relate the significant details about his life from the vantage point of relative tranquility or even complacency. Mill, Ruskin, and Newman, like the Pip of *Great Expectations* or the heroine of *Jane Eyre*, all tell the stories of their lives after *everything interesting* as

already happened to them and they have at last reached some safe haven. Similarly, however tortured Tennyson's mind and spirit had been after the death of Hallam, and however little conventional narratives were suited to communicating that experience, by the close of *In Memoriam* the reader encounters an autobiographical speaker or narrator who stands on safe, secure, unchanging ground. In contrast, Tom Crick, unlike Pip and Jane, writes from within a time of crisis, for Tom, like his age, exists in a condition of catastrophe.

Such writing from within an ongoing crisis may well be the postmodernist contribution to autobiography, for whether or not one chooses to see such a narrative position as a pretentious pose—after all, people have always lived within crisis; the Victorians certainly believed they did—this vantage point inevitably undercuts the traditional autobiographer's project, which entails showing himself and his survived crises as exemplary. Even though Newman, Mill, Ruskin, and Tennyson present themselves and their experiences as essentially unique, they nonetheless emphasize the representativeness and therefore relevance of their lives to their readers. They present themselves as living lessons for the rest of us. The approach to autobiography undertaken by Tom Crick, on the other hand, essentially deconstructs the potentially hopeful aspects of his narrative. By refusing the autobiographer's traditionally secure closing position, in other words, Swift's protagonist casts into doubt the world of the autobiographer, his autobiography, and narrative in general.

*Waterland*, as we have seen, is a book that winds back upon other books, for it is a descendent, an echo, and a qualification of both Dickens's *Great Expectations* and Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* Swift's novel begins, for example, with an epigraph from *Great Expectations*, another work that opens in the fens, and it shares with Dickens's novel many elements other than their opening scenes of death and guilt. Both works, which combine autobiography and atonement, begin with the intrusion of a fearful reality into a young person's consciousness. Both, furthermore, tell of their protagonists' climb up the social ladder from working class to some form of shabby gentility, and both, for these reasons and others, could equally well bear the titles *Great Expectations* and *Expectations Disappointed*, for both end with far sadder, somewhat wiser narrators. Both novels relate the dark results of an adolescent passion, and both are haunted by the presence of an abused older woman, as Sarah Atkinson echoes and completes Miss Havisham—as do the breweries and flames that associate with each.

*Waterland* stands in a similar relation to a twentieth-century canonical work—Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* Brian McHale's contrast of modernist and postmodernist fiction helps us place both *Waterland*'s attitudes toward narrative and its relation to Faulkner's novel. According to McHale, whereas epistemological concerns define the novels that embody modernism, ontological concerns characterize postmodernist fiction.

That is, modernist fiction deploys strategies which engage and foreground questions such as . . . "How can I interpret this world of which I am a part? . . . What is there to be known? Who knows it?; How do they know it, and with what degree of certainty?;

How is knowledge transmitted from one knower to another, and with what degree of certainty?" . . . Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* has been designed to raise just such epistemological questions. Its logic is that of a detective story, the epistemological genre *par excellence*.

In contrast to modernist fiction, which thus centers on questions of knowledge, postmodernist work is informed by ontological questions such as "What is a world?, . . . What happens when different kinds of world are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?; What is the mode of existence of a text, and what is the mode of existence of the world (or worlds) it projects?"

Although *Waterland* shares little of postmodernist fiction's aggressive, explicit destabilizing of the world and the self, the novel's intertextual relations with Faulkner differentiates it from both his work and from literary modernism. The clear parallels between *Waterland* and *Absalom, Absalom!* that reviewers have observed in fact serve to point up the differences between the two fictional worlds. As one anonymous review pointed out, "The Fens of east England serve novelist Graham Swift as Yoknapatawpha County served William Faulkner: less as a geographical setting than as an active force shaping people's lives . . . Mysteries ramify but ultimately lead, as in all Gothic novels (including Faulkner's) to a secret at the center of the family house." The two novels share other similarities as well: both take the form of family tragedies in which a male ancestor's hubris leads to terrible disaster, both emphasize violations of the family bond, and both employ as backgrounds cataclysmic wars that change their nations forever. Like Faulkner's

*Absalom, Absalom!*, and like Dickens's *Great Expectations* (which the British reviewers don't mention), *Waterland* meditates on human fate, responsibility, and historical narrative by pursuing a mystery; so the book, like these others, is in part a detective story.

There is, however, one important difference: In true modernist fashion Quentin Compson and his Harvard roommate attempt to solve a mystery by detection and by imaginative re-creation. In true postmodernist fashion Tom Crick, who knew the identity of the murderer years before he began the story-telling that constitutes *Waterland*, creates a mystery (for us) where none exists.

In addition to *Waterland*'s very different, self-conscious use of mystery, its discussions of narrativity and narratology make it a late-twentieth century retelling of the works of both Faulkner and Dickens as do its postmodernist grotesqueries, play fulness, emphasis upon the erotic, and convoluted style that continually draws attention to itself. Another aspect of postmodernist fiction with particular significance for autobiography appears in Swift's creation of a textualized, inter textualized self.

Presenting Tom Crick as intertwined with so many other tales and selves, Swift presents the self in the manner of many poststructuralist critics and postmodernist novelists as an entity both composed of many texts and dispersed into them. In *Water-land* Swift textualizes the self, and that self matches the description of text that Roland Barthes

advances in *S/Z* when he points out that entering a text is "entrance into a network with a thousand entrances; to take this entrance is to aim, ultimately . . . at a perspective (of fragments, of voices from other texts, other codes), whose vanishing point is nonetheless ceaselessly pushed back, mysteriously opened." Tom Crick's textualized self fulfills Barthes's description of the "ideal text" whose "networks are many and interact, without any one of them being able to surpass the rest; . . . it has no beginning; it is reversible." Therefore, we can say of the self-construction that Tom Crick offers us to read, that "we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one; the codes it mobilizes extend as far as the eye can reach, they are indeterminable." And that is why to record part of himself, Tom must also record so many other histories, for they all intertwine, echo, and reverbrate; causes, responsibilities, limits become difficult to locate.

In other words, as soon as Crick begins to tell his story he finds necessary expanding that story beyond his biological beginnings. On the one hand, *Waterland* seems a rigorously historicist presentation of selfhood; on the other, its self-conscious examination of the history that historicizes this self makes it appear that these narratives, like the historicism they support, are patently constructed, purely subjective patterns.

Tom Crick's autobiographical acts, in other words, turn out to be fictional analogues of the land reclamation whose presence dominates the novel. Provisional, essential, limited as they may be, telling stories can never adequately control reality or nature or what's out there or what Tom calls the Here and Now. Like the Fen waters, like the natural force it is, Mary's and Tom's and Dick's and, alas, Freddie's sexuality refuse to be contained by the canal walls and dams of human fairy stories and, instead, lead to Freddie's murder, Dick's suicide, Mary's abortion, and ultimately to her kidnapping an infant in a supermarket and subsequent commitment to a mental institution. That is why the Fen lands and Fen waters, which the Atkinsons and other commercial leaders of the Industrial Revolution try to fit into a human story, play such an important part in this novel. And that is why Tom, who explicitly takes draining the Fens to exemplify progressive theories of history, speaks in his imagination to his wife of their "Sunday walks, with which we trod and measured out the tenuous, reclaimed land of our marriage." Fen lands and waters represent the reality that won't fit into our stories (one can't call it nature or the natural because those terms refer to a reality that already has been placed in a story). "For the chief fact about the Fens," Crick emphasizes when he introduced them as the setting of his life history, "is that they are reclaimed land, land that was once water, and which, even today, is not quite solid."

*Waterland* examines and finds wanting the Neoclassical view of nature that takes it to be divine order, the Romantic one that takes it to be essentially benign and accommodated to our needs, and the Victorian one that takes it to be, however hostile or neutral, something we can shape to our needs and use for the material of a tale of progress.

Like John McPhee's *The Control of Nature*, *Waterland* takes land reclamation and man's battle against water as a heroic, absurd, all too human project that particularly

characterizes modern Western civilization's approach to man, nature, and fate. Swift's novel presents both land reclamation and telling one's story as game, even heroic, attempts to shape the chaotic setting of human existence: marriage, nature, water, past time, memory, other literature. Within such a conception of things, telling one's own story takes the form of a similarly heroic, if absurd, reclamation from the destructions of nature and time, for autobiography, like land reclamation, takes the purely natural and after great self-conscious exertions makes it human. Of course, autobiography and history, like draining the fens, can never achieve more than temporary victories against the natural, for the simple reason that people carry out both these projects within time, and eventually, sooner or later, time wins. Time wears channels in the dykes, rusts machinery, makes a particular autobiographical act obsolete or irrelevant. None of these facts, of course, argue against reclaiming land nor do they argue against undertaking to write history and autobiography. But, as Tom Crick recognizes, they do cut such projects down to size. Suspicious of the idea of progress, Crick warns us that the world does not really head toward any goal, and therefore "It's progress if you can stop the world from slipping away. My humble model for progress is the reclamation of land. Which is repeatedly, never-endingly retrieving what is lost. A dogged and vigilant business. A dull yet valuable business. A hard, inglorious business. But you shouldn't go mistaking the reclamation of land for the building of empires." Similarly, autobiographical acts (and fictional versions of them) provide brief, temporary, provisional living spaces for human beings.

Autobiographical acts, then, follow from a basic human need for order and meaning that relates intimately to the need to escape chaos and fear. Telling stories about ourselves, like telling stories about people of earlier times and about the natural world, derives from curiosity, that force that, according to Swift's narrator, weds us to both world and word—a force that drives sexuality, science, and story-telling. Swift raises the problem of the erotics of the text in the context of explaining his wife's curiosity as a fifteen year old back in that halcyon year, 1943. "Mary itched," Tom Crick explains. "And this itch of Mary's was the itch of curiosity. In her fifteen-year-old body curiosity tickled and chafed, making her fidgety and roving-eyed. Curiosity drove her, beyond all restraint, to want to touch, witness, experience whatever was unknown and hidden from her." This intense curiosity, which, according to Crick, defines the human, "is an ingredient of love. It is a vital force. Curiosity, which bogs us down in arduous meditations and can lead to the writing of history books, will also, on occasion, as on that afternoon by the Hockwell Lode, reveal to us that which we seldom glimpse unscathed (for it appears more often—dead bodies, boat-hooks—dressed in terror): the Here and Now." Despite the occasional encounters with terror that curiosity begets—which Swift instantiates by prompting our readers' curiosity to lead us to Dick's incestuous origins and Mary's horrific abortion—in *Waterland*, curiosity, the force of narrative, appears in Aristotelian fashion as an essentially life-giving drive. "Curiosity begets love. It weds us to the world." To be human we have to be curious, and curiosity produces story-telling.

As impossible as getting right these stories may be, attempting to shape a narrative, one's narrative, one's own novel, is all we have, and we must therefore all be historians. Like autobiography, "History is that impossible thing: the attempt to give an account, with incomplete knowledge, of actions themselves undertaken with incomplete

knowledge. So that it teaches us no short-cuts to Salvation, no recipe for a New World, only the dogged and patient art of making do."

By forever attempting to explain we come, not to an Explanation, but to a knowledge of the limits of our power to explain. Yes, yes, the past gets in the way; it trips us up, bogs us down; it complicates, makes difficult. But to ignore this is folly, because, above all, what history teaches us is to avoid illusion and make believe, to lay aside dreams, moonshine, cure-alls, wonder-workings, pie-in-the sky—to be realistic.

However provisional, however reduced, however its narratives are fractured or dispersed, autobiography in the world of *Waterland* therefore remains essential and inevitable. One basic justification for history, narrative, and autobiography lies in the fact that it is something we as humans must do. As Crick explains to the members of his class, their very questioning of history provides one of its basic justifications:

Your "Why?" gives the answer. Your demand for explanation provides an explanation. Isn't the seeking of reasons itself inevitably an historical process, since it must always work backwards from what came after to what came before? And so long as we have this itch for explanations, must we not always carry round with us this cumbersome but precious bag of clues called history? Another definition, children: Man, the animal which demands an explanation, the animal which asks Why.

Telling stories, particularly one's own story, turns out to be absurd and even comical when viewed by any cosmic scale, but for all that it is a necessary act, something that one does, as Carlyle put it, to keep our heads above water. Carlyle comes readily to mind when considering Tom Crick's willingness to face reality in reduced, bleak circumstances in part because, as Tom tells us, he read Carlyle's *French Revolution* during one crisis in his life and that work, which provides some of the narrator's facts and emphases, led to his vocation as a history teacher. But one thinks of Carlyle even more because Tom Crick also shares his general tone, his willingness to act in a bleak, barren world if only because that's all there is to do. Crick believes, finally, that

All the stories once were real. And all the events of history, the battles and costume-pieces, once really happened. All the stories were once a feeling in the guts . . . But when the world is about to end there'll be no more reality, only stories. All there'll be left to us will be stories. Stories will be our only reality. We'll sit down, in our shelter, and tell stories to some imaginary Prince Shahriyar, hoping it will never . . . [ellipsis in original].

**Source:** George P. Landow, "History, His Story, and Stories in Graham Swift's *Waterland*," in *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, Vol. XXIII, No. 2, Fall 1990, pp. 197-211.

# Critical Essay #4

*In the following essay excerpt, Wilt examines the concept of fatherhood in* Waterland*.*

Graham Swift's *Waterland* opens like a Gothic novel with a murdered body floating down the river that drains the English fenland. The narrator is a mysteriously spooked London history teacher whose fenland, paternal forbears were rural lock keepers and tale spinners, and whose maternal forbears were Victorian builders and brewers on the rise, in league with progress. Throughout the novel he addresses as his readers a class of adolescents who have suddenly rebelled against "the grand narrative"□history. The young people are spooked, too; they are pierced by nuclear fear, the recognition that the future, which is all that makes the past significant, may be foreclosed. Their challenge to the teacher, Tom Crick, culminates two other disasters. His headmaster, a no-nonsense technocrat with an airy faith in a future under the nuclear umbrella, has used the excuse of Thatcherite cuts in the budget to eliminate the history department and, by implication, Crick, too. And his wife, Mary, returning in her childless, early fifties to the Roman Catholic religion she had grown up in, began a "love-affair, a liaison . . . with God," whose issue was the kidnapping by the would-be, couldn't-be mother of another woman's baby from the supermarket.

The narrative is carried back from these present errors in rushes, oozes, and broken crosscurrents of self-interrupted musing, explaining, and reasoning, to the three deaths which at some profound level stopped the lives, the stories, of Tom Crick and Mary Metcalf, his wife. For, Crick warns his students in the obscure early pages of his rambling, "there is such a thing as human drainage, too, such a thing as human pumping." And the subsequent "pumping" of Mary and Tom, sexually, socially, intellectually, produces energies which drain continually back to the murder of Freddie Parr, found floating in the lock of the Leem River in 1943, the suicide (if it was such) of the murderer, and the pregnancy/abortion that caused and was caused by these.

Of the three mysteries these deaths involve, the first introduced is the most easily explained and the first illuminated. The narrator's brother, the mentally retarded "potato head," Dick Crick, killed Freddie Parr by getting him drunk on a bottle of his grandfather's famous Coronation Ale, then hitting him on the head and pushing him into the river. He did it because he was, in his dim but intense way in "lu□lu□love" with Mary Metcalf and believed that desire alone was sufficient to make him the father of the child the sixteen-year-old Mary was carrying. This naive belief runs in the family: brother Tom believed that desire alone is sufficient (and necessary) to fill "that empty but fillable vessel, reality" of which a woman's womb is "a miniature model." Mary's protest, protecting Tom, the real father, that their friend Freddie Parr was the father, thus outraged not only Dick's manhood but his very reality. For Dick is (more than he or we know at the moment) the child of the maternal Atkinson ancestors, a child of "progress" for whom the things that happen, are done, are made, *are* reality. Tom, on the other hand, is a child of their Crick ancestors, rural philosophers like Faulkner's Bundrens for whom events, deeds, are mere hallucinations in the everlasting flatland of vacancy, for whom "reality is that nothing happens."

The Atkinson vision thus privileges paternity as the ultimate sign of reality: Atkinsons seek fatherhood, invest it with godhood, be unable to relinquish it. But the Cricks have been "water people" for hundreds of years, living on its animals, sustaining and repairing its ravages, receiving its draining cargoes, and taking to heart its message: "For what is water, children, which seeks to make all things level, which has no taste or colour of its own, but a liquid form of Nothing?" For the Cricks, fatherhood is what it was to primitive peoples, man's hallucination, his favorite fiction, poignant attempt to raise on the flats of reality, in the empty womb of it, "his own personal stage, his own props and scenery□for there are very few of us who can be, for any length of time, merely realistic." A Crick will not believe his own fatherhood nor insist upon it, nor, on the other hand, will he be destroyed by it or by its lack.

This is what Tom Crick claims to understand of his own vision as he looks back beyond and around the conception and abortion of his only child, a primal scene reluctantly uncovered by the skittering narrative as a series of nightmarish snapshots. It started with "curiosity," a "vital force," an "itch," which drove the fifteen-year-old Mary to explore her own and Tom's bodies, an itch "beyond all restraint" whose verbal form, "those spellbinding words which make the empty world seem full," is (as it was in Faulkner's novel) the repeated phrase drained of reality, "I love□I love□love, love." It begins in a "little game of tease and dare" between the aggressive Mary and two boys, Tom Crick and Freddie Parr, as to who will "show" what lies between the legs. Dick Crick, "potato head," several years older and more physically developed, suddenly makes himself a part of the game when Mary agrees to "show" to the boy who swims longest underwater. Experiencing an erection for the first time, Dick dives from the bridge and wins the game, the splash and swim itself serving as his act of intercourse with the river, with Mary, with the fillable vessel of reality. The whimsical and malignant Freddie Parr, seeing Dick, bewildered, fail to claim his trophy, initiates another game: he seizes an eel from the river trap and thrusts it into Mary's "knickers." And Dick, erection, dive, eel, and ejaculation combining in his rudimentary mind, begins a kind of courtship of Mary, bringing her an eel in an act which to him signifies his creativity, his fatherhood, his reality.

So the first fragment of mythic memory□Dick, ready, erect, on the bridge; Freddie in the water reaching for the eel; Mary, "impregnated"□contains all the elements of the second□Freddie, dead in the water from Dick's possessively paternal blow; and Mary, pregnant and, good Catholic girl that she is, "responsible," telling the terrified and shamed actual father, Tom, "I know what I'm going to do." Mary is frozen in guilt, "so inside herself she might never emerge again. And inside Mary who's sitting so inside herself, another little being is sitting there, too."

The abortion Mary plans is both her effort to emerge from herself, from her guilty self-imprisonment, and her effort to expiate one death with another, to punish in herself the sexual curiosity that led to Dick's murder of Freddie. It is a ritual of abasement and sacrifice which Swift's narrative connects with her Roman Catholicism: at the crisis of the abortion, "with a terrible involuntary persistence," comes the phrase from her school prayers, "Holy Mary Mother of God Holy Mary Mother of God Holy Mary Mother of□." Tom is excluded from this decision. It is Mary who first tries abortion by dislodgement:

"She jumps. Her skirt billows; brown knees glisten. And she lands in what seems a perversely awkward posture, body still, legs apart, not seeming to cushion her fall but rather to resist it. Then, letting her body sink, she squats on the grass, clasps her arms round her stomach. Then gets up and repeats the whole process. And again. And again." Then, miscarriage begun but not completed, Mary makes the ultimate decision: "Little cramps□not so little cramps□in Mary's guts. And Mary says at last, because it's not working, it's not happening: 'We've got to go to Martha Clay's.' "

Martha Clay, fen dweller, "witch," living image along with her mate, Bill, of Tom's Crick ancestors, the water people, performs the abortion in a nightmarish evocation of the force that empties, drains, the vessel of reality:

A pipe□no, a piece of sedge, a length of hollow reed□is stuck into Mary's hole. The other end is in Martha's mouth. Crouching low, her head between Mary's gory knees, her eyes closed in concentration, Martha is sucking with all her might. Those cheeks□those blood-bag cheeks working like bellows. . . . Martha appears to have just spat something into the pail. . . . In the pail is what the future is made of. I rush out again to be sick.

A figure from Tom's own kind of nightmare, Martha beckons him back into the circle, the decision from which Mary would have excluded him. After the long process of drainage, in the dawn, Martha orders him to empty the pail of "the future" into the water, the liquid form of nothing: "You gotta do it, bor. Only you. No one else. In the river, mind." So his seed is abandoned to the river, as was his brother Dick's in that first dive after his first erection. Tom Crick's vision of reality is sealed by that abortion, draining, flowing back, stopping. The whole superstructure of his subsequent life, love, and marriage with the abortion-injured and now barren Mary, the ever-filling "grand narrative" of history, the precarious "fatherhood" of the teacher with his students, is a gallant fiction extended over that fundamental fact. It collapses, paradoxically, when the fiction becomes intolerable for Mary and she opts for the madness of an alternate vision: that God has offered to her aged womb a child, like the patriarch of the Old Testament did to Sarah, the patriarch of the New Testament to Elizabeth. Though her husband forces her to return the stolen child, as Martha had forced him to look on the reality which is drainage, she will never, Tom knows as he visits her in the "temporary" criminal asylum, submit to emptiness, will always grieve for the baby she believes she bore at age fifty-two, "the baby they took away from her and won't give back. That baby who, as everyone knows, was sent by God. Who will save us all."

With that phrase the story of Tom Crick's aborted fatherhood is linked with the messianic madness, the driven Atkinson pride, that produced empire, fueled war, sired Dick Crick, the mysterious elder brother whose attempts at lu□lu□love were behind the whole tragedy. Behind the tragedy of Dick's mental retardation is the Atkinson lu□lu□love (poignant, neurotic, incestuous) which begot him□a love timed by the "great narrative of history" to coincide with the Great War in which the Victorian dream of progress, of the March of Mind, of the primacy of energy over matter and of event and deed over reality, circled back upon itself and blew itself up (to quote an American tale of incest and the Great War, Fitzgerald's *Tender Is the Night*) "in a great gust of high explosive love."

The story of the "rise" of the Atkinson side of the narrator's family from Crick-like flatlanders and water people to hillside shepherds, barley farmers, then monopolist brewers, land reclaimers, transportation barons and heads of local government, is a story of "the tenacity of ideas" over/ against "the obstinacy of water." It is also a story of powerful but blind patriarchs and haunted and haunting wives, of men who sought to control their women like their water. A blow struck out of psychotic jealousy by Thomas Atkinson in 1820 puts his beautiful wife, Sarah, in a waking coma for the next fifty-four years, and, despite his external activity, internally "history has stopped for him" at that moment, waters leveling once again the "unreclaimable internal land." And while his son and grandson maintain "the driving force of the Atkinson machine" through the century, the traumatized wife mutters or screeches three words, "smoke . . . fire . . . burning" at intervals, dives into the Ouse River "like a mermaid," according to local legend, just before her funeral, and, according to the same source, presides over the conflagration which destroys the Atkinson Brewery in the last moments of the long Edwardian summer, 1911.

Tom Crick possesses the journal of his grandfather (Sarah 's great grandson),Ernest Atkinson, in whom the engine of progress finally strips its gears. The journals record Ernest's late Victorian doubts, financial and political failures. They follow his descent into a mysticism in which he brews a hallucinogenic, Coronation Ale, suffers and imposes an incestuous love upon his teenage daughter, Helen, and finally, despairing of humanity as his doubts and Sarah's ghostly prophecies have their culmination in World War, conceives the mad but tenacious idea that only beauty, a child of beauty, his own child begotten of his own Helen, can "become a Saviour of the World."

So Helen Atkinson, like Mary Metcalf thirty years later, becomes a ghostly emblem of Sarah Atkinson, "who, local lore has it, offers her companionship to those whose lives have stopped though they must go on living." Loving her father, seeing his diseased desire, Helen tried first to divert it. She helped him found an asylum for shell-shocked veterans: "Wasn't that a better plan? To rescue all these poor, sad cases, all of whom would be in a sense their wards, their children." But the father was adamant: both his Atkinson desire to control, possess, and materialize in his own deed, the idea, the "Saviour of the World," the son of beauty, and his counter-Atkinson despair at the secret failures of progress, drive him to this incest: "When fathers love daughters and daughters love fathers it's like tying up into a knot the thread that runs into the future, it's like a stream wanting to flow backwards."

The daughter's compromise, to marry the convalescing soldier Henry Crick but bear as his first child her father's projected saviour, frees her for a kind of future and triggers a last visit from the ghost of Sarah Atkinson as well as the suicide of the (next-to) last Atkinson: "Because on the same September evening that my father saw a will o' the wisp come twinkling down the Leem, Ernest Atkinson, whose great-grandfather brought the magic barley down from Norfolk, sat down with his back against a tree, put the muzzle of a loaded shotgun into his mouth and pulled the trigger."

The child of incest, "Saviour of the World," is Dick Crick, "potato head." This last Atkinson grows up like a Crick, deft handed, water drawn, apparently vacant brained.

But as his brother, the narrator, noted, none of us, however apparently well-fitted for it, can be truly realistic□empty□all the time. In Dick's brain the disappearance (death) of his mother, Helen, becomes linked with his (putative) father's trips to the eel traps in the river, as well as with the substance (Ernest's last cache of Coronation Ale) in the bottles his grandfather (who was really his father) left him in the chest with the journals that he couldn't read, though his brother Tom could. Out of this draught of his heritage, together with the sexual play with Mary and the eel which he witnessed and then took part in, Dick constructs a myth, incestuous in its turn, Oedipal, of a mother who will "rise up, wriggling and jiggling, alive□alive□o, out of the river"; who may consummate his earliest desire if he dives with force into the river, refuses to relinquish that desire. When he goes to the river after Tom's guilty and desperate revelation of his incestuous origin he is, Tom speculates, partly feeling that counter-Atkinson despair at the botch, the emptiness he is. But his dive has the look not of self-immolation but of search, another Atkinson push toward the idea, another gallant, if futile, move into the future which is, in reality, governed by the backward flow of the liquid form of nothing. It is a dive which kills him.

**Source:** Judith Wilt, "Abortion and the Fears of the Fathers: Five Male Writers," in *Abortion, Choice, and Contemporary Fiction: The Armageddon of the Maternal Instinct*, The University of Chicago Press, 1990, pp. 101-31.

# Critical Essay #5

*In the following essay, Janik explores the interaction between history and the Here and Now in* Waterland*.*

On one level, *Waterland* is a series of history lessons, the lessons Crick teaches in the last few weeks before he is forced into early retirement after thirty-two years. As such, they are often wildly inappropriate: the nominal topic of his class is the French Revolution, but he alludes to it rarely, only to illustrate a point about the family and personal events that form most of the narrative's substance. On another level, *Waterland* is a manifestation of man's need to tell stories to keep reality under control, and Crick can be seen in much the same light as Prentis, a man telling his story in an attempt to cope with its implications.

The novel's structure is rambling and recursive, intermixing episodes from three major elements. The first of these elements is a history of the Fenland and of the prominent entrepreneurial Atkinson family and the obscure, plodding Crick family, from the seventeenth century to the marriage of the narrator's parents after World War I. The second consists of events of the 1940s: Mary Metcalf's adolescent sexual experimentation with Tom, Crick and his "potato-head" half brother Dick (who in his demented father/grandfather's eyes is the "Saviour of the World"), Dick's murder of Freddie Parr, Mary's abortion, Tom's revelation of Dick's incestuous conception and Dick's consequent suicide by drowning, Tom's return from the war and his marriage to Mary. The final element involves events of 1980, the narrative present: Mary's religious visions, her kidnapping of a baby (whom she calls a "child of God") from a supermarket, her committal to a mental institution, and Tom's loss of his position as a history teacher. The structure is not chaotic, for each of these three major elements, as it comes to the forefront of the narrative, is treated more or less chronologically; but as a whole the novel conforms to Tom's characterization of history: "It goes in two directions at once. It goes backwards as it goes forwards. It loops. It takes detours" because "there are no compasses for journeying in time."

Tom Crick's stories, which would form a continuous narrative if they were rearranged chronologically, are also interrelated by a number of parallels that resemble in kind but far exceed in complexity the recurring images of confinement in *Shuttlecock*. One set of parallels involves the concept of history itself, with its emphasis on constructions like Rise and Fall or Revolution. Tom Crick occasionally returns, in his classes, to the subject of the French Revolution:

Children, do you remember . . . how I explained to you the implications of that word "revolution"? A turning round, a completing of a cycle. How I told you that though the popular notion of a revolution is that of categorical change, transformation□a progressive leap into the future□yet almost every revolution contains within it an opposite if less obvious tendency: the idea of a return. A redemption; a restoration. A reaffirmation of what is pure and fundamental against what is decadent and false. A return to a new beginning....

As Robespierre and Marat sought not a futurist utopia but a return to an idealized Rome, Crick's students demand his reinstatement when the headmaster acts out their spoken contempt for the subject of history; generations of Cricks devote themselves to reclamation of the land; the last Atkinson brewer seeks to reproduce the purity of his family's original ale; and Mary Metcalf tries in a Lewisham supermarket to regain the motherhood she had relinquished more than three decades before in a filthy Fenland cottage. The parallels are indirect and inexact, redolent not of literary contrivance but of Tom Crick's notion of history as a series of loops and detours in the journey through time.

The duality of History and the Here and Now that played an important role in Swift's first two novels comes to the forefront in *Waterland*, and virtually all of the elements of the novel contribute to Swift's exploration of this theme. Tom Crick's meditations lead him to define and redefine history, in ways that are sometimes contradictory but from which a pattern ultimately emerges. History is, in the first instance, an academic subject that is about to be retrenched at Crick's school because the headmaster considers it "a rag-bag of pointless information." While Crick admits that history is distinct from the usually much less eventful everyday reality, that it is "reality-obscuring drama," he nevertheless insists on its value in helping us to shape our responses to that reality: "even if we miss the grand repertoire of history, yet we imitate it in miniature and endorse, in miniature, its longing for presence, for feature, for purpose, for content."

Confronted by a rebellious class that doubts the value of history, that asks in effect "Why the past?," Crick at first resorts to the pat answer that the "Why?" itself is the reason for studying history, that man is "the animal which asks Why." But in the face of present reality□a job that is about to disappear, students who are convinced that history is about to end in nuclear holocaust, and a wife who has lost her sanity□he is less confident about history as explanation; perhaps it is only a matter of telling stories and *hoping* to find meaning through them. The study of history is also an attempt at reclamation, based on the desire to "discover how you've become what you are. If you're lucky you might find out why. If you're lucky□but it's impossible□you might get back to where you can begin again. Revolution." History is a matter of reflection, the attempt to retrieve or find or impose logic and order on what is neither logical nor orderly; it is the creation of public reality.

But as Tom Crick states early and keeps demonstrating, "history is a thin garment, easily punctured by a knife blade called Now." That other realm, the immediate life-transforming moment, the Here and Now, is history's mirror image: it is a matter of chance or impulse; its logic is the logic of madness or of nonsense; it is and creates the most intense kind of *private* reality. Price, the self-appointed leader of Crick's bored and rebellious students, introduces the term when he insists, "What matters is the here and now," setting Crick to wondering just what "this much-adduced Here and Now" really is:

How many times, children, do we enter the Here and Now? How many times does the Here and Now pay us visits? It comes so rarely that it is never what we imagine, and it is the Here and Now that turns out to be the fairy tale, not History, whose substance is at least forever determined and unchangeable. For the Here and Now has more than

one face. It was the Here and Now which by the banks of the Hockwell Lode with Mary Metcalf unlocked for me realms of candor and rapture. But it was the Here and Now also which pinioned me with fear when livid-tinted blood, drawn by a boat-hook, appeared on Freddie Parr's right temple.

The Here and Now is not simply present daily life, as Price would have it; "life includes a lot of empty space. We are one-tenth living tissue, nine-tenths water; life is one-tenth Here and Now, nine-tenths a history lesson." The Here and Now comes in "surprise attacks" that "bring both joy and terror" and "for a brief and giddy interval announce that time has taken us prisoner."

History and the Here and Now thus are not opposites but polarities, two aspects of experience. Both emerge out of the empty space of daily life. Making history, like the Atkinsons, and telling stories about it, like the Cricks, are two different ways to outwit the emptiness we glimpse (and fear) at the heart of reality; to "assure ourselves that . . . things are happening." It was a series of surprise attacks of the Here and Now in the summer of 1943□Freddie's murder, Mary's pregnancy and her abortion, Dick's suicide□that seriously involved Tom Crick in the study of history, which had seemed only a set of fairy tales:

Until the Here and Now gave a sudden urgency to my studies. Until the Here and Now, gripping me by the arm, slapping my face and telling me to take a good look at the mess I was in, informed me that history was no invention but indeed existed□and I had become part of it.

The Here and Now□the moment of penetrating, inescapable reality in which one is poignantly alive and aware□thrusts one into history, the equally inescapable awareness that decisions are irrevocable and actions have consequences.

History and the Here and Now have the same sources, the most potent of which is curiosity. It was Tom's curiosity about his forebears, the Atkinsons and Cricks, his need for an explanation, that led to the stories he tells in *Waterland*, and it was Mary's sexual curiosity that led to the series of events that touched off the need:

Curiosity which, with other things, distinguishes us from the animals, is an ingredient in love: It is a vital force. Curiosity, which bogs us down in arduous meditations and can lead to the writing of history books, will also, on occasion, as on that afternoon by the Hockwell Lode, reveal to us that which we seldom glimpse unscathed (for it appears more often□dead bodies, boat-hooks□dressed in terror): the Here and Now.

Curiosity is endangering, but it is also potentially redemptive. It is their lack of curiosity that most worries Crick about Price and his other students:

Children [he warns them,] be curious. Nothing is worse (I know it) than when curiosity stops. Nothing is more repressive than the repression of curiosity. Curiosity begets love. It weds us to the world. It's part of our perverse, madcap love for this impossible planet we inhabit. People die when curiosity goes. People have to find out, people have to know.

Curiosity in its manifestation as the study of history contributes to the preservation of life and its value. Tom Crick explains to Price that he became a teacher of history because of his discovery, in the rubble of postwar Germany, that civilization is precious: "an artifice□so easily knocked down□but precious." History does not promise endless progress, in fact it tends to teach that "the same old things will repeat themselves," and it thereby offers a model of worthwhile human endeavor. A person, a generation, a people have been successful if "they've tried and so prevented things slipping. If they haven't let the world get any *worse*." Crick expands on this idea when he addresses the school on the occasion of his forced retirement:

There's this thing called progress. But it doesn't progress. It doesn't go anywhere. Because as progress progresses the world can slip away. My humble model for progress is the reclamation of land. Which is repeatedly, never-endingly retrieving what is lost. A dogged and vigilant business. A dull yet valuable business. A hard, inglorious business. But you shouldn't go mistaking the reclamation of land for the building of empires.

The *Rosa II*, the silt-dredger where Dick Crick works and dies, is a reclaimer of land, performing the work of staying even, the unglamorous but essential business of "scooping up from the depths this remorseless stuff that time leaves behind." The student of history has the same task: to keep scooping up the detritus of time in the attempt, if not to get ahead, at least not to leave things worse than they were. In his last confused, drunken hours on the dredger Dick unconsciously acts out that imperative:

He's here. He knows his place. He knows his station. He keeps the ladder turning, the buckets scooping.... And the smell of silt is the smell of sanctuary, is the smell of amnesia. He's here, he's now. Not there or then. No past, no future. He's the mate of *the Rosa II*.

And he's the saviour of the world....

Considering the nature of Dick's work, the valediction is only partially ironic. In two of *Waterland's* crucial event□Dick's death and the return of the child Mary kidnapped□the Here and Now and the principles of history meet and clash, with uncertain results. The "Saviour of the World" drowns himself, and the "child of God" is restored to his natural mother and an ordinary life. The world cannot afford saviors, cannot support them. The only salvation is in the continual task of reclamation of the land.

**Source:** Del Ivan Janik, "History and the 'Here and Now': The Novels of Graham Swift," in *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 35, No. 1, Spring 1989, pp. 74-88.

# Adaptations

*Waterland* was adapted for film by Peter Prince and released by Palace Pictures in 1992. The film was directed by Stephen Gyllenhaal and stars Jeremy Irons and Sinead Cusack.

# Topics for Further Study

What aspects of human life have improved over the last one hundred years? What has stayed the same, and what if anything has got worse? Do you think that the sum total of human happiness today is more or less than it was in the past? Support your answers with details from your research.

What, in your opinion, is the purpose of studying history? What value is there in learning about the history of one's nation or culture?

Watch the 1992 movie version of *Waterland* and note whether it stays true to the story line of the novel. Does the novel easily lend itself to adaptation as a film? In the movie version, the location for the present-day sections is Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, with flashbacks to the fens in England. What, if anything, is lost in such a switch?

In what sense can a myth be as true as a historical narrative that sticks to known facts? Do myths teach us as much as history does? In what sense?

# Compare and Contrast

**1943:** Abortion is illegal in Britain, and illegal abortions are performed by untrained people. Many women are seriously injured and about thirty die each year.

**1983:** Abortion is legal if performed in the first twenty-eight weeks of pregnancy. This law was established by the 1967 Abortion Act.

**Today:** Abortion in Britain is legal if performed in the first twenty-four weeks of pregnancy. The written permission of two doctors is required. In 2001 in England and Wales, 175,952 abortions are performed, with an additional 12,000 in Scotland.

**1943:** The Allies begin to turn the tide against Nazi Germany in World War II.

**1983:** The Cold War between two nuclear-armed superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union, means that the world lives under the threat of nuclear annihilation.

**Today:** One of the main global security problems is the proliferation of nuclear weapons and the threat of biological and chemical weapons. The fear that such nations as North Korea, Iraq, and Iran are close to producing or have produced nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction is perceived as a threat to Western nations such as the United States and Britain.

**1943:** The teaching of history focuses mostly on political history.

**1983:** The teaching of history has broadened and now includes the history of people and topics formerly ignored, such as women and minorities. There is a fierce debate in the history profession about methods of studying history.

**Today:** Oral history has become an important part of the historian's arsenal. Oral history is the use of eyewitness accounts and oral narratives in the writing and presentation of history.

# What Do I Read Next?

In Graham Swift's novel *Last Orders* (1996), which won a Booker Prize, four working-class English friends go on a day trip to honor a friend's last request that his ashes be dropped off Margate Pier. The men use the opportunity to review their lives and reflect on life and death.

British playwright Caryl Churchill's play *Fen* (one of four Churchill plays in *Plays 2*, 1990) is about the plight of the fen inhabitants, who are presented as living hard lives dominated by religion and the traditions of their community, while being exploited by greedy landowners and land-buying conglomerates.

*Master of Morholm: A Novel of the Fenland*

(1987), by Timothy Wilson, is set in the eighteenth century in the fens. Wilson creates a complex story of romantic attachments that sheds light on class differences and morality.

*East Anglia and the Fens* (2000), by Rob Talbot (photographer) and Robin Whiteman, is a pleasant and well-illustrated guide to the region in England that provides the setting for *Waterland*.

# Further Study

Higdon, David Leon, "Double Closures in Postmodern British Fiction: The Example of Graham Swift," in *Critical Survey*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 1991, pp. 88-95.

Higdon analyzes Swift's use of closure (that is, how he ends his novels) in *Waterland* and other works. He concludes that Swift synthesizes traditional endings with a postmodernist open-endedness.

Hutcheon, Linda, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, Routledge, 1988.

Hutcheon includes an analysis of *Waterland*, concluding that the narrative strategy of the novel is designed to question modern concepts of history and to explore the processes of historiography.

Janik, Del Ivan, "History and the 'Here and Now': The Novels of Graham Swift," in *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 35, No. 1, Spring 1989, pp. 74-88.

Janik discusses the relationship between history and the present in Swift's first three novels.

Landow, George P., "History, His Story, and Stories in Graham Swift's *Waterland*," in *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, Vol. XXIII, No. 2, Fall 1990, pp. 197-211.

Landow discusses Swift's emphasis on history and storytelling in *Waterland*, classifying the novel as a late-twentieth-century example of fictional autobiography.

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Clare, John, *John Clare: Selected Poetry and Prose*, edited by Merryn and Raymond Williams, Methuen, 1986, pp. 150-53.

Durant, Will, *The Story of Philosophy*, Simon & Schuster, 1926, p. 241.

Gorra, Michael, Review of *Waterland*, in *Nation*, March 31, 1984, p. 392.

Hollinghurst, Alan, "Of Time and the River," in *Times Literary Supplement*, October 7, 1983, p. 1073.

Prescott, Peter S., "Faulkner in the Fens," in *Newsweek*, April 30, 1984, pp. 74-75.

BOOKRAGS

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**Introduction**

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) 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, NfS 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 NfS 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 NfS 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 NfS 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 NfS 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

NfS 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 Novels 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 NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS 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 Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels 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 NfS 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.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

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

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Novels 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 NfS, 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 Novels 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 NfS, 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 Novels 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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