The Wave Study Guide

The Wave by Liam O'Flaherty

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Contents

Introduction

This story was included in a collection of early stories titled *Spring Sowing.* When O'Flaherty's friend and mentor, the critic Edward Garnett, told him to write about those things with which he was familiar, he naturally turned to the scene of his childhood: the bleak Aran Islands. Many of his stories are graphic descriptions of the peasant life on these nearly barren rocks, as human beings grapple with the unforgiving elements of nature. There are also stories, nine of them in this collection, that have to do with animals and their treatment by human beings. In "The Wave," however, there are neither human nor animal characters, but one part of nature against another.

Liam O'Flaherty became famous because of his novels, especially *Famine* and *The Informer,* but his literary reputation rests more heavily upon his short stories. Frank O'Connor, another great Irish short story writer, says in his book A Short History of Irish Literature that "the great O'Flaherty of the short stories is a man without ideals or opinions, concerned only with the 'facts.'" "The Wave" is little more, at least on the surface, than a recitation of facts by a seemingly objective reporter. At high tide, small, disconnected waves are replaced by a giant wave that destroys a weakened cliff. There is little here on the surface that would lead us to grand conclusions about life or "universal truths."

Yet, if we look at the descriptive prose, we see an artist at work. The story begins with a description of the cliff, static and unmoving. It continues with a description of the sea just before high tide, violent and roiling. It ends with a description of the sea at high tide, and the single, united wave that comes crashing in, destroying the cliff. There is room for the reader to maneuver within this story. Is it the wave or the cliff that should be read as the protagonist? Is it destruction, or a natural restructuring? O'Flaherty's stories do not propose answers but, as Anton Chekhov has said is the purpose of stories, they state the question correctly.

Author Biography

Liam O'Flaherty was born in 1896 on Inishmore, the largest and northernmost of the Aran Islands off the west coast of Ireland. O'Flaherty's writing was deeply influenced by his environment; the Aran islands, with their thin soil, are barren and wild, and subject to the whims of sea and weather. O'Flaherty's writing, often violent, looks at humankind's connection to nature, but not in a sentimental fashion. In many of his stories, he shows how people lose their affinity with nature—and to a deeper life—when they turn their backs on it and live in cities, but he also demonstrates how brutish and short life can be for those who live close to the land.

In 1908, a priest visited Inishmore looking for candidates for the junior seminary at Rockwell, and Liam's teachers recommended him enthusiastically. At Rockwell, he excelled in the classics and modern languages. From there he went to Blackrock Seminary and then to Holy Cross College, Dublin. He won a scholarship to University College, Dub-lin, where he decided to study medicine.

While at University College, he formed a corps of volunteers for the Republican cause (freedom for Ireland from British rule), but in 1915, he joined the British Army and fought in France and Belgium. He was wounded and suffered shell shock at Langemarck, Belgium, and was discharged from the army after treatment.

When he became well, he traveled to Brazil, Canada, and the United States, working at a variety of odd jobs, from factory worker to oyster boat crewman. In Boston, his brother, who had emigrated years before, bought him a typewriter and encouraged him to write. O'Flaherty wrote four stories, but they were all rejected and he quit writing.

He returned to Ireland in 1920 and declared himself a communist. He and a group of men seized the Rotunda in Dublin and held it for three days before being forced out, after which he escaped to Cork. After a visit to Russia to see communism in action, he became disillusioned and began to write against it, declaring all political ideals to be corrupt, while at the same time holding fast to hopes for a workable form of socialism.

Returning to London in 1922, he wrote a novel and several short stories, none of which were published. Finally, he decided to write about what he knew: the Aran Islands and the people who lived there. The result was his first published novel, *Thy Neighbor's Wife*—a story about a priest who still loves a woman from his youth. His next book was more autobiographical, about the return of a soldier to his home in the Aran Islands; entitled *The Black Soul,* its wild characters mirror the wild sea and sky of the islands.

Over the next thirty years, O'Flaherty wrote fourteen more novels, a play, several autobiographical books, essays, and criticism, as well as the short stories for which he is most noted, including *The Wave,* which was included in the 1926 collection *Spring Sowing.* His novel *The Informer* was made into a movie three times (the best of which is John Ford's Oscar-winning version of 1935). He wrote his most famous novel, *Famine,* in 1937. In all, he penned 36 books.

In the early 1950s, however, he stopped writing for reasons he chose not to divulge to the world. On September 7, 1984, he died in a Dublin hospital, having been silent to the literary world for nearly thirty years.

Plot Summary

Although O'Flaherty does not name the setting of his story "The Wave," it's almost certainly set somewhere on the Aran Islands. The story begins with the description of an imposing cliff, two hundred feet high, that sits facing the sea. It is semicircular, with a twenty foot high cavern at its base, a concave area that "the sea had eaten up . . . during thousands of years of battle."

It is not quite high tide as the story opens. The sea is angry, and waves come "towering into the cove" formed by the cliff and the two reefs at each end of its semicircle. These waves are separate, and O'Flaherty uses violent language to describe them as they "[chase] one another, [climb] over one another's backs, [spit] savage columns of green and white water vertically when their arched manes [clash]." They hurl themselves against the cliff, then retreat.

There is a pause as high tide is reached. The small waves dissipate, falling back from the cliff. When the sea reforms itself, it is in a single wave "from reef to reef." It rises and stands "motionless, beautifully wild and immense." Then, propelled from the rear by the power of the ocean, "that awful mass of water [advances] simultaneously from end to end of its length without breaking a ripple on its ice-smooth breast."

Suddenly it is the cliff that appears small and helpless as the great wave approaches. It reaches its apex and smashes into the cliff which vanishes "in the white water and foam mist." Then the wave falls back, exposing the cliff once again, but there is "a great black mouth . . . at the centre, above the cavern." The cliff begins to crumble in upon itself "with a soft splash." A cloud of dust rises and blows backward across the land.

The story ends with the cliff demolished, "the land [sloping] down to the edge of the cove." Rocks are strew about. Smoke rises. And another wave is "gathering in the cove."

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

This story begins with a rather vivid description of a semicircular cliff overlooking the ocean. The cliff is nearly two hundred feet high. Twenty feet from the cliff's base is a cavern with an opening twenty feet high and a sloping roof that meets the floor at its rear. On either side of the cavern are reefs that jut away from the cliff and into the water.

It is almost high tide and the water is alternately rushing and retreating over the two reefs. As the water crosses the reefs and enters the cove, the waves meet and seem to chase each other toward the cliff. When they reach their destination, the waves strike the cliff's base with a mighty crash before retreating into the sea.

When the tide reaches its highest point, the violence and fury momentarily subside. The cliff is awash in brine, making the surface black. Then, just as quickly as the silence had descended, it is shattered and the waves begin to swell with newly found strength.

It seems as though, for a moment anyway, that the wave is standing still. At this precise moment, the wave is an awesome sight with bands of white, blue and green water accentuating its different heights. At the wave's peak, the white water gives the appearance of an angry swan.

The wave moves toward shore, slowly at first, and then increasing in speed. The cliff, which just moments ago had stood high and strong above the water, now seems small and vulnerable. As the wave reaches its full height and the crest begins to break, the downward falling water gives the appearance of fangs ready to sink into the cliff. As the water finally comes crashing down, the cliff momentarily disappears.

When the water clears and the cliff is again visible, there is a hole above the cavern. Weakened, the sides of the cliff crash down into the cavern below. As the sides cave in, a large film of gray dust rises, completely obscuring the cliff.

Soon, the dust settles and the spot where the mighty cliff had stood is again visible. In the ocean, another wave is beginning to form.

Analysis

Liam O'Flaherty's short story, "The Wave," appears in the anthology *The Collected Stories, Volume 1*. This story, though brief in length, is rich in imagery and description.

One of the most unusual things about this story is that there are no human characters. Rather, the forces of nature take center stage as the author offers a vivid description of how the fury of the ocean can seemingly instantaneously obliterate a cliff that presumably had been standing at the water's edge for centuries.

In fact, by the end of the second paragraph, we already have some sense that the cliff may no longer be able to withstand the punishing sea: "The sea had eaten up the part of the cliff that rested on that semicircle of flat rock, during thousands of years of battle." In this one sentence, we are given a sense that the cliff has been considerably weakened and it will not stand much longer.

While the story may not contain any human characters, the author takes great care to give both the cliff and the water human characteristics. Recall from the beginning of the story that the cavern is described as being in the cliff's face. Later, after the smaller waves had battered the cliff, the author describes its face as being black and drenched with brine. Finally, after the most punishing of the waves had struck, the author describes the "great black mouth" that had opened in its face.

By giving the cliff these types of features, it makes it easier for the reader to understand how it can have weakened over time. Likewise, when we read the portion of the story in which the cliff crumbles, it appears to us as almost like a death. These feelings would likely not have been evoked if the author had chosen to describe the cliff instead in terms that are more tangible.

Similarly, the waves gathering below the cliff chase one another and "climb over one another's backs." Interestingly, the author chooses also to give the waves animal-like qualities implying perhaps that the water is savage and providing an indication of what is to come. For instance, the waves gathering prior to high tide have "arched manes" while the final, destructive wave's head is compared to that of an angry swan. In this description, the author is showing how the water, though beautiful, can instantly turn ugly and destructive.

As the story ends and the cliff comes tumbling down, we are reminded of the lack of permanence of anything in this world. Indeed, even cliffs that have stood for hundreds of years will, under continued stress and punishment, crumble.

Characters

The Cliff

Because there are no human characters in this story, the elements of nature become the main characters. The first of these is "The Cliff" which is hard and silent. It sits before the sea in a calm arrogance, having stoically weathered "thousands of years of battle." But there is a weakness in the cliff: crashing waves have carved out a cavern at its base.

Smaller Waves

These waves are important, because they contrast with the wave of the title. They come "towering into the cove . . . confusedly, meeting midway in the cove, chasing one another, climbing over one another's backs." Because they are not unified, they do little damage to the cliff, and they retreat—"disheveled masses of green and white, hurrying backward." They do not have the force of the sea behind them, because it is not yet high tide.

The Wave

Unlike the cliff, the wave is active and in constant motion. It is wild and chaotic and angry. It is almost possible to feel, in its violence, the frustration of all the years of pounding away at the unyielding rock. While the cliff takes no notice of the sea beneath it, the wave, with its "head curved outwards, arched like the neck of an angry swan" seems intent on attacking the great limestone rock. It is important to note that this wave is unified, "stretching from reef to reef."

Themes

Permanence

What could be more permanent than a towering cliff? Expressions such as "solid as the rock of Gibraltar" seek to compare human endeavors to the enduring solidity of just such a cliff. Yet, in "The Wave," we see that this monstrous edifice, two hundred feet high, may last a long while, but—in the end—it falls in upon itself. Nothing, this story seems to suggest, is truly permanent.

Time

Time changes everything. The sea could not have caused the cliff to fall in upon itself in a day or a month or a year—it took thousands of years. Time is the catalyst for change, and it is inevitable. It moves inexorably forward, allowing the events that occur within time to proceed and then become the past. At the end of the story, there is no more cliff, just a slope down to the water's edge and, although the sea's constant pounding was the direct cause of its demise, the sea needed time in order to do its work.

Change and Transformation

In nature, nothing is lost, but much is changed or transformed from one thing to another. As human observers, we tend to value one thing in nature over another. A cliff impresses us with its grandeur, while a mere slope rarely makes us pause to consider it at all. When the wave causes the cliff to fall apart, we may observe the falling apart itself in awe: the crashing boulders, the thunderous roar, the smoke pluming up and drifting away. It is a sight similar to the demolition of an old building. But, just as with the old building, when the excitement is over and there is only rubble, we are dismayed at the disarray, the mess that is left. But nature makes no such distinctions—the rocks are still a part of the landscape, the path of the water merely shifts, adapting to its new course. A simple structural change has taken place. There is no better or worse. Nature is uncaring, indifferent.

Style

Point of View

The third person narrator who tells this story is interesting in that he, or she, seems to disappear. It is almost as if the reader is telling the story to him or herself. This faceless narrator is not objective, however—the language the narrator uses to tell the tale is emotional and suspenseful.

Anthropomorphism

The narrator leads readers to think of the cliff as unfeeling, unthinking, as cliffs surely are, but in this story, the cliff has been given human attributes: It opens "a great black mouth . . . in its face." It seems to yawn, as if it is "tired of battle." The waves, meanwhile, meet "confusedly." They chase each other, climb over each other, spit, yawn, tumble, hiss, and roar.

Symbolism

So, who is this cliff? Who are these waves? The narrator is mute on this subject. There are clues, however. The weak, confused waves before high tide have no effect on the cliff, while the huge, unified wave of high tide causes it to crumble. Is it unity—perhaps of the weak—that the great wave symbolizes? Are readers to infer that, joined together, the small and the weak can overthrow the large and the strong? Or is it simply that, given time, water can erode limestone?

Setting

Though the setting is not specifically stated, it is probably somewhere on the Aran Islands that O'Flaherty has in mind—but it needn't be. The description could fit many cliffs on many shorelines. It is presumably not a heavily populated area, since no human being nor human habitat is noted.

Foreshadowing

The destruction of the cliff is foreshadowed early in this very short story. After giving the cliff's imposing dimensions, the narrator notes that "the sea had eaten up the part of the cliff that rested on that semicircle of flat rock, during thousands of years of battle." So there has been a long battle, and only the cliff shows its wounds.

Additionally, the sea is presented as active and persistent. It flows in, and it flows out. Then it flows in again. And again. The waves take a "monstrous stride" across the flat

rock. It is not quite high tide yet, but it is obvious that, when it is, the waves will become stronger and crash further up on the cliff. It is uncertain at this point in the reading what will happen, but when the cliff crashes down, the narrator has prepared the reader for its demise.

Historical Context

The British occupied Ireland for nearly 800 years (and still occupies six counties). It was a cruel occupation, as they pushed the Irish from the best land and kept it for themselves. They outlawed education for the Irish, who were forced to learn in secret (the term "hedgemasters" comes from this period, when teachers—or masters—would hold classes behind the hedges to avoid the British authorities). "Penal Laws" also prohibited Catholics from owning land or any property (including animals) valued at more than 5 pounds. They could not practice law nor be part of the government. Catholic priests who broke penal laws were branded on the face or castrated. Wolfe Tone, assisted by the French and inspired by the American Revolution, led an unsuccessful rebellion in 1798. It wasn't until 1829, however, that the harsh penal laws were repealed.

British occupation and rule continued, and there were more rebellions. Significant uprisings occurred in 1803, during the great Famine in 1848, and in 1867, but were brutally put down. But nationalism did not die, and its flames were fanned by the Irish Literary Renaissance when writers such as William Butler Yeats, Lady Gregory, John Millington Synge, and others cultivated Irish culture in their writing. There was a resurgence of interest in the Irish language, and Ireland and its people became the subjects of poetry and drama and fiction.

The Ireland of 1924, when this story was first published, had survived rebellion, civil war, and a partitioning imposed by the British government. The famous Easter Rising of 1916 began this series of events, when a group of armed patriots took control of the Dublin Post Office and held it for nearly a week, proclaiming the Irish Republic.

Sixteen leaders of the rebellion were executed by the British.

In 1919, the Anglo-Irish War began. The Irish used guerilla tactics to fight the more powerful British Army, and an agreement ending the war was signed on December 6, 1921. However, not everyone agreed with the settlement with the British, because it artificially partitioned six counties in Northern Ireland which would remain British. Two days after the signing, Eamon de Valera, who had survived the Easter Rising and would later go on to become president of Ireland, denounced the treaty. In April of 1922, civil war broke out between the Republicans (led by de Valera) and the Free Staters (led by Michael Collins). It was a bitter and bloody war, as all civil wars are. More Irish were killed in the civil war than had been killed in the war with England. It lasted a little over a year, and Michael Collins was among those killed.

Liam O'Flaherty sided with the Republicans, and he became disenchanted with his countrymen who were willing to give up the six Ulster counties in order to secure peace. Many of his stories—and his novels—deal with this period of history. In fact, his first published creative work, "The Sniper," tells the story of a rooftop sniper who shoots and kills another sniper and, when he goes down to the street to roll over his kill, finds that it was his own brother he had shot. *The Informer,* considered at the time to be one of his

best novels and made into an Oscar-winning film directed by John Ford, was also about the civil war.

Critical Overview

The collection *Spring Sowing,* which contains the story "The Wave," was O'Flaherty's third book. The first two were novels, *Thy Neighbor's Wife* and *The Black Soul.* Although the first of these was well received, the reviews of his second book were mixed at best, infuriating O'Flaherty, who would always consider it one of his best works. In the May 1, 1924, edition of *Times Literary Supplement,* an unsigned review of the book stated that "the chief characteristics of Irish novels of the present day seem to be an angered sincerity, an impatience with shams, and an endeavor to express actual life even at the cost of literary or technical excellence." But O'Flaherty did not feel he'd sacrificed anything, and on May 2, 1924, he wrote to his friend Edward Garnett: "One writes as one sees or else one is a mountebank . . . I will write in the future for the satisfaction of my own soul since that to me is the most important thing in the world or in the next either." And O'Flaherty must have kept his word, for ten years later, on April 19, 1934, the *Times Literary Supplement* echoed its earlier review, saying that "his powerful and primitive imagination has been forced too rapidly and therefore thwarted, by the modern cult of literary violence and exaggeration."

O'Flaherty's novels were variously received over the years, and even today they are considered wildly uneven in quality. Although *The Informer* was widely praised when it was published in 1925 (the *Times Literary Supplement* of September 24 of that year said that "in his new novel, *The Informer,* Mr. Liam O'Flaherty shows a considerable advance in his art"), it is not considered his best today. Most modern critics prefer *Skerrett,* published in 1932, and *Famine,* published in 1937.

However, his short fiction generally has been well-received. On October 2, 1924, upon the publication of *Spring Sowing,* the *Times Literary Supplement* noted that "in this collection of thirty-two sketches and tales, Mr. Liam O'Flaherty reaffirms his grip upon elemental life."

In that review, and in other critical essays and reviews since, critics have discussed O'Flaherty's realistic portrayal of the peasants of Ireland. They have talked about the insightfulness of his animal stories (nine are included in *Spring Sowing*) and the ambiguity of his feelings about nature and the countryside versus man and the city. But none have attempted to interpret "The Wave" as anything more than a slight vignette, an accurate portrayal of a moment in nature. It was, and still is, apparently considered one of the "sketches" rather than one of the "tales." In a July, 1963 essay by George Brandon Saul in *A Review of English Literature,* Saul notes that "some of the pieces ("The Wave" and "The Rockfish," for example) contain little more than description." And James F. Kilroy states in his book *The Irish Short Story* that "The Tide," a later story, deserves comparison with the earlier "The Wave," in that both describe a natural phenomenon of water's motion. The early story is undoubtedly forceful in its vivid description of a wave acquiring enormous force and then break against the shore; but the later story, although more sedate, is more comprehensive in surveying the curative effects of the regressing and progressing tide.

Criticism

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Critical Essay #1

Henningfeld is an Associate Professor at Adrian College and holds a Ph.D. in literature. She has written widely on literary topics for academic and educational publications. In the following essay, she argues that "The Wave" reveals O'Flaherty's understanding of the forces of nature and that its inclusion in the collection Spring Sowing *serves to undercut notions of birth and rebirth suggested by the collection's title.*

Liam O'Flaherty's short story, "The Wave," first appeared in 1924 as one of the stories in the collection *Spring Sowing.* The story later appeared in a 1937 collection, *The Short Stories,* as well as in the 1970 compilation, *Selected Short Stories.* Because of its frequent inclusion in anthologies, "The Wave" draws increasingly close attention from students and scholars alike. Its importance to the body of O'Flaherty's work is perhaps best illustrated by the appearance in 1980 of a collection called *The Wave and Other Stories,* edited by well-known O'Flaherty scholar, A. A. Kelly.

Like the other stories in *Spring Sowing,* "The Wave" offers a glimpse of the Aran Islands, a bleak, isolated group of small islands just off the west coast of Ireland. O'Flaherty was raised on Inishmore, the largest of the Arans. According to John Zneimer in his 1970 study, *The Literary Vision of Liam O'Flaherty,* for O'Flaherty, "The Aran Islands were reality in microcosm, for the Aran Islands were to earth as earth was to the universe...."

Nevertheless, "The Wave" represents a departure from O'Flaherty's more typical presentation of rural peasant life. Indeed, the story does not have one living creature in it. That O'Flaherty was attempting something different in this story seems clear from letters he exchanged with critic and mentor Edward Garnett in early 1924. In one letter, O'Flaherty claims that he does not know if the story is "good, or bad, or middling." In a subsequent letter, he seems much relieved by Garnett's praise of "The Wave," noting that the story "cost such an immense effort to write...."

While it seems apparent that O'Flaherty wants to reveal something important in the story, just what this revelation is seems to elude many critics. Few critics have tried to tackle the story, preferring to concentrate on O'Flaherty's novels or short stories depicting rural peasant life. One explanation for this may be, as Zneimer argues, ". . . the contemporary scholar who has become accustomed to approaching short stories as an intellectual challenge or problem in need of scholarly interpretation or explication will find no rich mine in O'Flaherty."

Another explanation for the lack of critical attention to the story could be the structure of the story itself: at just ten paragraphs and about one thousand words, the story is more a lyrical poem than a traditional short story. Critic James O'Brien in his book, *Liam O'Flaherty,* describes stories such as "The Wave" as "lyric sketches, with a simple narrative, a limited plot, and with scene and characterization governed by what is immediate and readily observable." Certainly, "The Wave" fits such a description.

On closer examination, however, the story seems to be striving toward something larger than just what is "immediate and readily observable." Further, although Zneimer states that O'Flaherty's "stories cannot be called symbolic as the term has come to be used in criticism with a *this* representing *that* relationship of details and events," "The Wave" is more than a simple, albeit intensely dramatic, description of a wave hitting a cliff face. Rather, it seems clear that in "The Wave," O'Flaherty is revealing something of his own understanding of nature and of the nature of reality. To arrive at what this understanding might be, however, requires readers, first, to read with great care the story before them.

At first reading, the detached tone observed by several critics seems obvious. O'Flaherty accomplishes this detachment in several ways. First, as noted earlier, there are no living creatures in the story. All is cold, wild water, and hard, black rock. The descriptions are carefully controlled with the detachment of a scientific observation: "The cliff was two hundred feet high. It sloped outwards from its grassy summit, along ten feet of brown gravel, down one hundred and seventy feet of grey limestone, giant slabs piled horizontally with large slits between the slabs where sea-birds nested." It is almost as if O'Flaherty is cataloguing the scene before him.

In addition, O'Flaherty's images are concrete. That is, the images in the story appeal to each of the reader's senses directly, without a narrative intermediary. The most obvious images are, of course, visual ones: "Its base in front was ragged, uneven and scratched with white foam." There are also many examples of auditory images that engage the reader's sense of hearing: "a tumbling mass of white water that yawned and hissed and roared." Less obvious are those images appealing to the sense of touch, such as "ice-smooth breast," or "slimy weeds." Even taste is addressed indirectly: the cliff's face is "drenched with brine." Finally, the story abounds with kinesthetic images, or images of movement: "the wave stood motionless," "the wave sprang upwards," "they drivelled backwards slowly."

The most important technique O'Flaherty uses to establish the tone of detachment, however, is his narrator. Zneimer, in fact, argues that there is no narrator, nor any sense of O'Flaherty's presence: "We do not hear the author's voice. We see no evidence of his presence, only the scene, the wondrous vision, not told but imposed directly upon us."

Such a reading, however, denies the obvious. All stories have tellers, just as all texts have writers. Even encyclopedia articles are authored by someone, despite their detached, authoritative style. It is through the process of inclusion and exclusion of facts and details that all authors provide the narration to their texts. In the case of "The Wave," O'Flaherty attempts to hide his presence in the text through the use of what is called the "self-effacing" narrator. That is, he chooses to conceal his narrator by the seeming objectivity of the description. However, close reading of the images reveals that the story is, of course, not nature itself, but a humanly constructed text about nature, a text that is shaped in a particular way to reveal a particular understanding of reality.

Thus, although there are no living characters in the story, O'Flaherty bridges the gap between the mineral, elemental nature of the cliff and the sea and the organic nature of

animal and human by using similes and metaphors. By so doing, he animates both the wave and the cliff. The cliff, for example, is nearly always described in human terms. The cliff has a black face, and a "great black mouth," that it tries to close. The cliff yawns, "tired of battle."

Likewise, O'Flaherty uses primarily animal or monster images to describe the waves: the wave's head "curved outwards, arched like the neck of an angry swan.... Its crest broke and points of water stuck out, curving downwards like fangs. It seemed to bend its head as it hurtled forward to ram the cliff." Similarly, "The waves came towering into the cove across both reefs, confusedly, meeting midway in the cove, chasing one another, climbing over one another's backs, spitting savage columns of green and white water vertically, when their arched manes clashed."

In addition to animating the inanimate seascape, the images serve to connect "The Wave" with the other stories in the collection, stories about peasant life and animal life on the Aran Islands. Each of the stories, in some way, refers to the cycles of life and death on Aran. Indeed, calling a collection *Spring Sowing* implies a belief in the cyclic renewal of plants, animals and humans. The spring sowing and the fall harvest organize life and reality on Aran, and by extension, in the universe.

However, the inclusion of "The Wave" in *Spring Sowing* introduces a more disturbing view of reality, one that undercuts the cycle implicit in the title of the collection. The cycle represented by "The Wave" is not one of renewal, but one of destruction. The opening images of the story place the waves and the cliff in opposition to each other: "The sea had eaten up the part of the cliff that rested on that semicircle of flat rock, during thousands of years of battle." If Aran is indeed a microcosm of the earth and of the universe for O'Flaherty, the elemental struggle between wave and cliff becomes laden with significance. The struggle implies that the sea, like time, never ceases moving, and that all within its path will, inevitably, be destroyed. Even the solid earth, made of rock and metal, will crumble and disappear within the sea of time.

It should not be thought, however, that O'Flaherty represents the sea or the waves as evil forces. Rather, it seems that O'Flaherty views such forces as coldly neutral, all powerful, and inevitable. In his novel, *The Black Soul,* O'Flaherty's main character, Fergus O'Connor, cries "Ah, beautiful, fierce sea.... You are immortal. You have real life, unchanging life." It seems that the position of "The Wave" within *Spring Sowing* reinforces the contrast between the mutable, changing, mortal nature of human beings and the immutable, unchanging, immortal nature of the sea. Human life, after all, is lived within finite time, while time itself exists separate and apart from the timed. Thus, while the residents of Aran (and by extension, the earth) go about their daily business, caring for animals, sowing seed, giving birth, burying their dead, they do so within a temporary and provisional reality. As "The Wave" instructs, even the reality of the cliff face is temporary and ultimately impermanent against the unchanging, all-powerful reality of the sea.

In the last paragraphs of the story, a monstrous wave forms and hurls itself against the cliff with devastating strength. The cliff, made human by its face, is utterly destroyed by

the wave. In this final cataclysm, all the cycles of human life and death are rendered meaningless. Like a human, the cliff disappears into black dust. Although the wave itself disappears as well, the last line of the story reveals that in the cove, the ocean gathers another wave.

Source: Diane Andrews Henningfeld, "An Overview of 'The Wave'," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 1999.

Critical Essay #2

Korb has a master's degree in English literature and creative writing and has written for a wide variety of educational publishers. In the following essay, she discusses the way in which the elements of nature become living creatures in "The Wave."

Short story writer and novelist Liam O'Flaherty was born on the Aran Islands off the west coast of Ireland, and this geographic fact may be the most significant factor in his writing, for his work reflects the wildness and instability of life on these isolated, storm-battered islands. Although O'Flaherty first began to work seriously on his writing in the years following World War I, while in the United States and London, he acknowledged in an autobiographical note that these efforts were not very good, and he burnt them. His work took an abrupt turn after 1923, however, when he returned to his homeland, Inishmore on Aran. The 1920s saw his enormous literary output; in that decade alone he wrote 8 of his 15 novels as well as the majority of his 160 short stories. Seemingly inspired by Aran, O'Flaherty also spoke of his desire to be the voice for his people: "It seemed as if the dam had burst somewhere in my soul; for the words poured forth in a torrent. They came joyously and I felt exalted by their utterance, just as I used to feel when telling my mother some fantastic tale in my infancy."

Many of O'Flaherty's short stories concern the peasant life of Ireland and can function today as a sort of social history. A number of his stories, however, are nature stories, with animals usually taking the center stage. Richard J. Thompson has said, "At their most obvious, O'Flaherty's nature stories are celebrations of the workings of instinct and appetite, of the biological chain, and of the struggle of natural selection which often brings random death to living creatures but never dishonor." O'Flaherty's "The Wave," from the collection *Spring Sowing,* goes one step further and features no living characters. The brief story (only about 1,000 words) narrates waves crashing against a towering cliff. After several fierce lashings, a powerful wave gathers, pummeling the shoreline. Under such pounding, the cliff gives way, crumbling into the sea, leaving behind only a cloud of grey dust. In the cove, the waves continue to gather. Critics have disagreed over interpretations of this story. Is it indeed a story or merely a vignette? Should it function primarily as a descriptive piece or does it express some deeper connection between humans and nature? Does O'Flaherty admire the destructive actions of the waves or does he represent an impartial viewer?

Most critics do agree that "The Wave" takes its place among the larger body of O'Flaherty's work that depicts the balance of nature. Helene O'Connor points out that the upsetting of the accepted equilibrium and the establishment of a new one "is the repeated and distinctive pattern of O'Flaherty's stories." However, at the start of the story, it would appear that O'Flaherty has created a simple (and perhaps typical) descriptive yarn. It begins, "The cliff was two hundred feet height. It sloped outwards from its grassy summit, along ten feet of brown gravel, down one hundred and seventy feet of grey limestone, giant slabs piled horizontally with large slits between the slabs where sea-birds nested." The next few paragraphs continue in the same vein, describing the cavern in the cliff's face, the cove at its base, and the constant pounding

of the waves. Not until the third paragraph does O'Flaherty provide a hint of the drama and of the central storyline to come: "But the sea moved so violently that the two reefs bared with each receding wave until they seemed to be long shafts of black steel sunk into the bowels of the ocean." Amidst a background of benign and nature-derived adjectives, the word *violent* leaps out, drawing attention to itself and to the turn the story is about to take.

The reader soon understands how "The Wave" functions on two levels. With no real characters in the story, the smaller waves and the giant wave take on central roles, emerging as inexorable forces of nature, but they also have distinct predatory characteristics. The waves that precede the final lash from the ocean move "confusedly, meeting halfway in the cove, chasing one another, climbing over one another's backs." The waves have transformed from merely a part of the scenery into living creatures. The hostility of these waves, akin to that of a lion perhaps, is clear not only from their actions but from their desire to bring harm; they strike the cliff with "a mighty roar" and then they rise again "like the heavy breathing of a gluttonous giant." Yet O'Flaherty never sacrifices realism in his drive to bring to life the movements of the water. Instead, his writing takes on a dual nature. Every description of the waves works with either interpretation; for instance, the "mighty roar" as the waves strike the cliff evokes both the known sounds, or roars, of the sea, as well as the sound of an animal on the attack. O'Flaherty also effectively mixes images that remind the reader of both of these descriptive functions, such as the "manes of red seaweed." Here the reader finds an effortless invocation of both the sea and the animal.

The large, destructive wave is yet to come. Again, O'Flaherty clues the reader into the impending change with the words "there was a pause." These words also imply culpability, as if the wave itself is toying with the cliff while gathering strength for its final assault. "For a moment the wave stood motionless," writes O'Flaherty. Here the wave is taking the time to savor the attack. The prose that follows, although containing descriptions of animal-like features—the "neck of an angry swan," an "ice-smooth breast," or "the shoulders of the sea"—also describes the sea in more realistic terms—the "white foam" or the "belt of dark blue." The sea at this point is more water and less animal. Suddenly, O'Flaherty overturns that lulling sensibility. "Then there was a roar. The wave sprang upwards to its full height. Its crest broke and points of water struck out, curving downwards like fangs. It seemed to bend its head as it hurtled forward to ram the cliff." When the cliff, "tired of battle," gives up and falls into the sea, the overall effect is that the wave attacked the cliff purposefully, deliberately, and maliciously. O'Flaherty also acknowledges the relentless nature of the sea itself in the story's final words: "And the wave had disappeared. Already another one was gathering in the cove."

This brief narrative tells of a cataclysmic event—the extreme alteration of the natural environment. Yet, its effect on humans or even animals would seem negligible, for they do not exist in the scope of the story. The extreme isolation of the scene is apparent in the structure O'Flaherty has chosen to impose on it; no lizards scuttle along the cliff's grassy summit, no fish flop among the crashing waves, no birds observe the crumbling of the cliff or flap their wings in the cloud of grey dust that arises. But the implications of

the scene are apparent, too. Early in the story, O'Flaherty points out that the sea and the cliff had been engaged in "thousands of years of battle." For in the victory of the sea over the cliff, the equilibrium so long maintained by the earth has been destroyed, implying that all sorts of changes can come about at any time. As O'Connor points out, "Everything is quiet, but not as it was before."

That there is no logical purpose for the motion of the sea or the destruction of the cliff also serves to emphasize the isolation of this event. But O'Flaherty brings a human element into the story with his depiction of the cliff. He maintains narrative integrity by again using words that can both describe an aspect of nature and a living creature; to refer to a "cliff's face" or a "cavern's mouth" is to say nothing new, but O'Flaherty's cliff also "stood ajar, as if it yawned, tired of battle," and under attack from the wave, the "cliff tried to close the mouth." While the waves can only be compared to animals, the cliff can readily be compared to a human. This significance cannot be overlooked, nor can its implications for the ongoing battle between nature and humans. At the same time, however, O'Flaherty is careful not to create a clear dichotomy between the cliff and the waves; his implementation of the same technique indicates their similarities.

Stories such as "The Wave" confirm Amy Scher's assertion that O'Flaherty's "short stories prove him to be one of the first of twentieth-century writers to demonstrate an ecological sensitivity." O'Flaherty, while pointing to the battle between earth and earth and humans and earth, also points to how animals and humans are equally embodiments of life and nature. In the emphasis "The Wave" places on nature over human or animal characters, O'Flaherty indicates that nature is a crucial force in the cycle of life.

In a letter to a friend, O'Flaherty tells of his efforts to achieve in his writing "a feeling for coldness." Critic John Zneimer defines this as "the coldness of extreme detachment, pure artistry, where the artist's warm human qualities represent a blot or an imperfection if they are allowed to intrude." He further states, "O'Flaherty sees the writer as possessing a goat's eye, or a snake's eye, or a weasel's eye, as one who is condemned to observe but not participate in the richness of life." This objectivity on O'Flaherty's part enables him to raise many issues in a story as short as "The Wave": the emphasis on nature without human interference, the implication of the continuous battles that exist around nature, and the fundamental similarities of the creatures of earth—human, animal, and inanimate.

Source: Rena Korb, "Nature as a Living Thing" in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 1999.

Critical Essay #3

In the following excerpt, Murray faults O'Flaherty for his didactic narrative, arguing that O'Flaherty breaches the oral tradition by "refusing to let his art suggest" important thematic issues, instead weighing down his stories with "contrived symbolism or overstated theme."

The success or failure of Liam O'Flaherty's short fiction actually depends on quite a different phenomenon, one to which Vivian Mercier has made passing reference in a discussion of the stories of Corkery, Lavin, O'Connor, O'Faolain, and O'Flaherty. Although he is a native speaker of Gaelic and "therefore born into the oral tradition," O'Flaherty is the "least oral in his approach to narrative of all five writers." Mercier refers here to the conception of so many of the stories in what he calls "cinematic terms," but the statement has other far-reaching implications. By extension he faults O'Flaherty for failing to remember that the relationship between story teller and audience is the indispensable component of the oral tradition. Liam O'Flaherty's style does not falter only when he leaves the barnyard; his imagery, his dialogue—in fact, the entire fabric of his narrative—disintegrates completely whenever he abandons his primary function as story teller in favor of self-conscious commentary on life; when, refusing to let his art suggest, he must speak through literature, only to pull down his tale under the weight of contrived symbolism or overstated theme.

Disparities in O'Flaherty's prose style bear out this argument. Whenever he rejects the straight narrative told for its own sake for the short story of philosophical statement, artless grace gives way to inappropriate imagery, careless structure, and tedious repetition. Selections from the first collection, *Spring Sowing,* will serve to illustrate this consistent stylistic problem in O'Flaherty's short fiction.

In choosing Liam O'Flaherty's finest stories, Mercier singled out the title piece of his first group for special praise. Here the writer deals with the central theme of nature and man's relations with the natural environment, but most important, according to Professor Mercier, is that "[t]his picture of a newly married Aran Islands couple sowing their first crop of potatoes together is both realistic and symbolic." This observation is entirely correct. The seeds in Mary's apron, Martin's cheeks on fire with a "primeval desire . . . to assert manhood and subjugate earth," his wife's deep sigh as he cleaves the ground to the accompaniment of his stooped grandfather's encouraging shrieks—all are symbolic of man's renewal in and through the regenerative earth mother. And, in this first story in Liam O'Flaherty's first collection of stories, the reader discovers in microcosm both the essence of his narrative strength and his potential for failure. The symbolism comes dangerously close to shouting the writer's theme, and both threaten to overwhelm the narrative straining to support them. The oral qualities of this story prove to be its salvation; but when the configuration of a symbolic structure or the statement of a theme becomes more important than the narrative in which it should inhere, O'Flaherty's style breaks down, consistently, and often horribly.

There are for example several stories in this first series in which, naturally enough for an Aran Islander, Liam O'Flaherty has chosen to deal with the sea. "The Wave," a vignette without characters, would perhaps have been successful as purely descriptive prose. Yet O'Flaherty attempts to force from the landscape a symbolic evocation of mindless violence. The stress is painfully obvious; the story disintegrates into a series of grotesque images of which one contorted smile is sufficient example: "the trough of the sea was convulsing like water in a shaken glass." "The Landing" promises at first to be more successful. Thematically reminiscent of Synge's starkly beautiful "Riders to the Sea," the tale projects a powerful image of barren Ireland in the grieving Aran mother watching on the cliff, "wisps of grey hair flying about her face." Unfortunately O'Flaherty cannot permit the narrative to suggest its own multi-level meaning to his audience. Over and over he circles his theme, more and more explicitly stating the paradox of sea as simultaneous nourisher and destroyer. Finally, inevitably, he loses control and tells his reader that the raging ocean resembles "eau de cologne or something." Faulty parallelism and repetition mar this potentially fine story at its close.

Source: Michael H. Murray, "Liam O'Flaherty and the Speaking Voice," in *Studies in Short Fiction,* Vol. V, No. 2, Winter, 1968, pp. 154-62.

Topics for Further Study

What was the "Irish Renaissance"? Who were some of the literary giants associated with it? O'Flaherty was born after most of the older writers of the renaissance had published some of their best work. Would you rank him in this group? How does his work differ from that of other renaissance writers?

Find information on the Easter Rebellion, then read Yeats's poem "Easter, 1916." What does Yeats mean by "A terrible beauty is born"? Liam O'Flaherty was, in 1916, fighting against the Germans in France and Belgium, wearing a British uniform, yet he had been a Republican (a group of Irish patriots who called for freedom from England) and, on his return to Ireland would advocate a united, free Ireland. Do you find this contradictory?

What other stories have you read in which there are no human (or animal) characters? Do you consider this a fully formed story, or is it a sketch? What *is* a story? What are its components?

Many people consider O'Flaherty's best work to be *Famine,* a novel about the 18th Century famine in Ireland. During the famine years, 1845-49, Ireland lost half of its population to starvation and emigration. Research the famine on your own. Were the British at fault? How do you think such an event would have influenced Irish literature afterward? Find a poem about the famine. What is its tone? How would you have written about it?

Another story in *Spring Sowing* is "The Cow's Death." This story has been reprinted in various collections of O'Flaherty's work, so it shouldn't be too hard to find. Read it and compare it to "The Wave." What similarities do you notice in tone, theme, and setting? Is O'Flaherty's customary gritty realism present in both stories?

Compare and Contrast

1924: Although Ireland has won a measure of freedom, it is still considered to be under the dominion of Great Britain. It will be another twenty-five years before Ireland declares itself a republic.

1990s: Ireland is still partitioned, with British troops stationed in the six counties of Northern Ireland. Irish Catholics in those six counties still do not enjoy the same civil rights as the Protestants of English descent.

1924: William Butler Yeats is still writing poetry, perhaps at his peak, (he won the Nobel Prize for poetry in 1923) but the Irish Literary Renaissance has dwindled to a virtual end. Many of its most prominent writers, including John Millington Synge, are dead. But other, younger writers, including O'Flaherty and Sean O'Casey (whose *Juno and the Paycock* appeared that year), will be producing works for decades. James Joyce has already published *Dubliners, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man,* and *Ulysses. Finnegan's Wake* will not appear for fifteen years.

1990s: Ireland continues to produce some of the world's greatest literature. Seamus Heaney wins the Nobel prize for literature in 1995 for his poetry, which the Nobel committee says has a "lyrical beauty and ethical depth, which exalt everyday miracles and the living past." William Trevor, Patrick McCabe, Edna O'Brien, John McGahern, Maeve Binchy, and dozens of other writers produce books that take their place next to those of Brendan Behan, George Bernard Shaw, and Oscar Wilde.

1924: Dublin is a war-ravaged city. The country's direction is still unsure, and people are suspicious of their neighbors. Although the civil war is over, remnants of the Republican movement continue their violent opposition for another twenty-five years.

1990s: Called "the hippest city in the world," Dublin is not only a favorite with writers, rock stars, actors, and tourists, but with high-tech companies who find a well-educated work force in "the silicon valley of Europe." Five star hotels compete with traditional Bed-and-Breakfasts, as peace and prosperity bless this city.

1924: The Aran Islands, where O'Flaherty was born, are a barren, bleak place. The women knit sweaters that have a pattern particular to their family, so that when bodies wash up on shore weeks or months after a boat has been lost, the families can determine by the sweater who its wearer was. The people are peasants, most just barely avoiding starvation.

1990's: Both tourist site and archaeological treasure, the Aran islands have never known such prosperity before. On bicycle, tourists travel to pre-Christian forts, early Christian churches, and prehistoric mounds. To the south, immense limestone cliffs rise above the sea. Dun Ducathair, a huge fort lying in ruins, reveals the power of the sea that O'Flaherty wrote about in "The Wave." Much of the cliff before it has fallen into the sea, so that the fort itself is now inches away from the precipice.

What Do I Read Next?

Stories of Liam O'Flaherty (1956) with an introduction by Vivian Mercer. This collection pulls together many of O'Flaherty's finest stories in one place.

Famine (1937) by Liam O'Flaherty. Considered one of his two great novels, this fictional account of the Irish famine is even-handed and devoid of the melodramatic touches of some of his other work. It has been reprinted many times since its first publication in 1937, most recently in 1991.

The Famine Ships: The Irish Exodus to America (1997) by Edward Laxton recounts the courage—and desperation—of the starving Irish who emigrated to the United States, and others who suffered and died in the attempt.

44 Irish Short Stories (1955), edited by Devin A. Garrity. This "Anthology of Irish Short Fiction from Yeats to Frank O'Connor" contains the works of 33 Irish authors, including two stories by O'Flaherty, and is still in print and widely available.

The Penguin Book of Irish Short Stories (1988) edited by Benedict Kiely contains two stories by O'Flaherty, as well as others by Irish authors from Lady Gregory to Brian Friel and John McGahern.

The Oxford Book of Irish Short Stories (1991) edited by William Trevor. From folk tales to Oscar Wilde and James Joyce to Edna O'Brien and Desmond Hogan, this ambitious book surveys the long history of Irish short fiction.

How the Irish Saved Civilization (1996) by Thomas Cahill. Western Civilization was nearly wiped out when the barbarians ushered in the "Dark Ages"—an era devoid of scholarship, learning, and culture. Monks and other scribes in the unconquered country of Ireland went to work copying all the great works they could find and, eventually, reeducating the world.

Dubliners by James Joyce is available in various reprint editions. It was first published in 1914 (although it had been accepted for publication in 1906, then rejected as the publisher had second thoughts about its profanity and suggestiveness, as well as the possibility of libel, as it used real places and real names). Joyce wrote these stories when he was a young man, between the ages of twenty-two and twenty-five.

Further Study

Cahalan, James M. *Liam O'Flaherty: A Study of the Short Fiction,* Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991.

Concentrating on the shorter works, a critical analysis of O'Flaherty, including a literary biography of influences, a reprinting of early and later reviews and essays.

Doyle, Paul. *Liam O'Flaherty,* Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1971.

Provides a short biography followed by a critical look at the major texts.

Hildebidle, John. *Five Irish Writers: The Errand of Keeping Alive,* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989.

A look at the lives and works of five writers whom the author thinks are underappreciated: Liam O'Flaherty, Kate O'Brien, Frank O'Connor, Elizabeth Bowen, and Sean O'Faolain

Kelly, Angeline. *Liam O'Flaherty the Story Teller,* New York: Barnes and Noble, 1976.

Another look at the short fiction, in two sections: I. Themes, Narrative Structure, and Style; II. The Protest of Vitality.

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Saul, George Brandon. "A Wild Sowing: The Short Stories of Liam O'Flaherty," in *A Review of English Literature,* Vol. 4,No. 3, July, 1963, pp. 108-13

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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

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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Short Stories for Students

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

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

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

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

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

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

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