What We Cannot Speak About We Must Pass Over in Silence Study Guide

What We Cannot Speak About We Must Pass Over in Silence by John Edgar Wideman

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Introduction

□What We Cannot Speak About We Must Pass Over in Silence□ by John Edgar Wideman was first published in the December 2003 issue of *Harper's*. It is also available in a collection of Wideman's stories, *God's Gym* (2005). This disturbing story features an anonymous black, middle-aged male narrator who becomes obsessed by the imprisoned son of a dead friend. He spends much time struggling with prison bureaucracy in order to track the man down to a prison in the Arizona desert. The story, which is told in a stream-of-consciousness style, reflects Wideman's concerns about the high levels of incarceration of African American men (as of 2006, Wideman's younger brother and son were serving life sentences). Themes include the dehumanizing nature of the prison system, the political and economic division between the races, and the social isolation and fear felt by many African Americans. Also emphasized are the broader human difficulties of gaining reliable knowledge and of forming connections with, and knowledge of, other people in a society characterized by disconnection, fragmentation, and mechanization.

Author Biography

Ethnicity 1: African American

Nationality 1: American

Birthdate: 1941

The African American writer John Edgar Wideman was born on June 14, 1941, in Washington, D.C., the eldest of five children of Edgar and Bette Wideman. The family moved to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where he was later to set much of his fiction (especially in the Homewood ghetto). He attended Peabody High School, excelling in his studies and being made captain of the basketball team. He won a scholarship to the University of Pittsburgh, where he began to study psychology but soon changed to English, graduating in 1963. During his undergraduate career, Wideman made the Big Five Basketball Hall of Fame, won the university's creative writing prize, and earned membership of Phi Beta Kappa. He received a Rhodes scholarship to study philosophy at Oxford University in England, becoming only the second African American to receive such recognition. He gained a B.Phil. in eighteenth-century literature from Oxford's New College in 1966.

After returning to the United States, Wideman began writing and teaching at such institutions as the University of Pennsylvania and the University of Wyoming. His first novel, *A Glance Away*, was published in 1967. The story of a day in the life of a drug addict, the novel reflects Wideman's experiences during his youth in Homewood. Wideman soon gained critical acclaim for his use of an erudite and experimental literary style to describe ghetto experiences. His subsequent novels include *Hurry Home* (1970), *Hiding Place* (1981), *Sent for You Yesterday* (1983), *Philadelphia Fire* (1990), *The Cattle Killing* (1996), and *Two Cities* (1998). His short story collections include *Damballah* (1981), *Fever* (1989), *The Stories of John Edgar Wideman* (1992), and *All Stories Are True* (1993).

Wideman is also the author of a memoir, *Brothers and Keepers* (1984), which juxtaposes his life and that of his younger brother Robby, who was sentenced to life imprisonment for taking part in a robbery and for murder. In 1988, Wideman's son Jacob, aged eighteen, was sentenced to life imprisonment after pleading guilty to murder. Wideman has written numerous articles and given speeches on race, social deprivation, and the criminal justice and prison systems. His short story collection *God's Gym*, which includes □What We Cannot Speak About We Must Pass Over in Silence,□ was published in 2005.

As of 2006, Wideman was a professor of English at the University of Massachusetts, a post to which he was appointed in 1986. Wideman was living in Amherst with his wife, Judith Ann Goldman, whom he married in 1965, and three children: Daniel, Jacob, and Jamila. Daniel was a published writer, and Jamila a professional basketball player for the L.A. Sparks; Judith was working as a lawyer specializing in death penalty cases.

Wideman's work has won numerous awards. He is the only writer to have been awarded the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction twice—once in 1984 for *Sent for You Yesterday*, and again in 1991 for *Philadelphia Fire*, which also won an American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation. *Brothers and Keepers* was nominated for a National Book Critics Circle Award. Wideman was awarded the James Fenimore Cooper Prize for historical fiction in 1996 for *The Cattle Killing*. He won the New England Book Award and a Black Caucus Award of the American Library Association in 2002 for his memoir *Hoop Roots: Basketball, Race, and Love* (published in 2001).

Plot Summary

□What We Cannot Speak About We Must Pass Over in Silence□ begins with the anonymous fifty-seven-year-old narrator announcing that he has a friend with a son in an Arizona prison. About once a year, this friend visits his son. The friend says that the hardest part of visiting is leaving, in the painful knowledge that his son is left behind, trapped in prison.

The narrator has just received a letter from a lawyer announcing the death of his friend, who is called Donald Williams. Inside the lawyer's envelope is a sealed letter that the friend has addressed to the narrator. The narrator is surprised that Williams thought him significant enough to be informed of his death. They had not known each other well and had been acquaintances rather than friends. Because of their not being close and because he accepts death as inevitable, the narrator has no strong emotional response to Williams's death. However, he finds himself grief-stricken over the plight of the son, who, according to Williams, never had any other visitors. The narrator wonders if his grief is partly due to the fact that he himself is, metaphorically speaking, imprisoned, interacting less and less with others.

He writes to the lawyer asking for the son's mailing address. The lawyer's office replies saying that while it executed Williams's will, it has no knowledge of any son. The narrator researches prisons in Arizona in an attempt to track down the son. He finds that there are many prisons and retirement communities in that state and wonders if the skills required in managing retirees translate to managing prisoners. This human □traffic□ is processed by a huge number of computer specialists who input and retrieve information all day.

The narrator is motivated in his search by curiosity about the son and anger that though the system has the information he requires, it refuses to divulge it. He observes that if a person ever reaches a human voice, its hostile tone implies that the caller has done something wrong.

Finally, he locates the son. He writes to the son offering sympathy on his father's death. The son replies curtly, saying that he knew nothing of his father until he received the narrator's note. The narrator wonders if this is a case of mistaken identity or whether father or son was lying, or even hallucinating.

He goes to the lawyer's office and talks to the lawyer's paralegal, a young Asian woman called Suh Jung. Suh Jung has a brutally short haircut. She had her long hair cut after her domineering father, who had forbidden her to cut it, committed suicide by hanging himself. Suh Jung confirms that her office has no information on the son, but she offers to help the narrator in his search. The narrator flirts with Suh Jung and gets her telephone number. Though the narrator has now obtained information on where and how to visit the son, he delays his visit while he and Suh Jung begin a sexual relationship. He finds himself breaking through his usual timidity by taking small risks, such as bathing her and smoking marijuana with her. He imagines how it would be if the

son, not he, were with Suh Jung, as the son would be a more appropriate age for her partner.

Traveling one day on a bus, the narrator notices fresh blood on one of the seats and sits as far away from it as possible. He recalls an exhibit of works he visited by the Swiss sculptor and painter Alberto Giacometti (1901-1966). He reflects on Giacometti's belief that □art always failed□ because it □lied□ and also on the notion that people's eyes lie, in the sense that □No one ever sees the world as it is.□ Indeed, the narrator cannot even remember his dead friend's face and tries to reconstruct it from his own reflection in the mirror. He recalls some research showing that most people do not see accurately what is around them. As he gazes into the mirror, he is amazed at how beaten-up he looks and concludes that he prefers to see nothing.

In order to ease the narrator's passage through prison bureaucracy, the son tells him to claim on the form that he is the son's father. As the narrator waits for the prison to authorize his visit, he is afraid that this lie has been discovered. He calms himself with the thought that it is no crime to believe one is someone's father, even if it is not true. With Suh Jung's help, he gathers more information on the son. He learns that the son has done □the worst kinds of things□ and that as the state cannot execute him, it will never let him go. Suh Jung says she would think twice about visiting, but the narrator tells her that everyone has crimes to answer for and that innocence or guilt is sometimes irrelevant in deciding who ends up behind bars.

The narrator arrives at the prison two days later than scheduled, and there is a delay while the prison authorities check up on him. He hears two guards laughing as they discuss a coyote that came scavenging near the prison's perimeter fence and that had been casually shot by a guard. The narrator imagines that the guard was having a bad day and took out his frustration on the coyote.

The narrator must go through a metal detector and various locked doors to get into the visiting area. Every step of his security progress is watched and monitored by machines. He is held in an open-air wire cage, exposed to the baking sun. Hot and silently furious, he waits as the prison staff shuffle papers and punch buttons on a computer console. He fears he might be trapped there forever and forced to confess his sins. Finally, one of the staff arrives and tells him his visit has been canceled and that according to the computer the inmate he seeks is not at this facility. The story ends with the narrator being told to come back on another day and to make way for the next visitor.

Characters

Friend

The narrator's friend is already dead when the story opens. He is only once referred to by his name, Donald Williams. Before he died, the friend told the narrator that he had a son in prison, whom he visited about once a year. The friend said that the hardest part about visiting was walking away from the prison, knowing that his son was still trapped inside.

After the friend's death, the narrator is surprised to receive a lawyer's letter with a note from the friend inside it. His surprise stems from the fact that he thought of the friend as only a casual acquaintance. The narrator becomes obsessed with the idea of visiting the son in prison. His failure to achieve this meeting raises the question that perhaps the friend, the son, or the narrator was lying or even hallucinating.

Suh Jung

Suh Jung is a young Asian female paralegal who works in the lawyer's office that informs the narrator about his friend's death. She helps the narrator track down his friend's son in prison. Like the narrator, Suh Jung is a frightened person who lives in an internalized prison. She was victimized by her brutal father, who dominated her and the rest of his household, and seems not to have given her any love. After he committed suicide by hanging himself, she cut off the long hair that he had insisted she not cut. Her stated aim in doing so was to protect herself from the submissive Asian female stereotype.

At the narrator's instigation, Suh Jung starts a sexual relationship with him and opens him up to new experiences, such as mutual bathing. The relationship does not appear to be founded on deep love or even strong attraction, and Suh Jung soon begins to taunt the narrator about his obsession with the son. She takes a more conventional view of the criminal justice system than the narrator, believing the records that accuse the son of terrible crimes and cautioning the narrator against becoming involved.

Narrator

The narrator is a fifty-seven-year-old African American man with a timid, nonconfrontational nature. He is acutely aware of being a member of □America's longest, most violently reviled minority,□ but unlike his hero, the poet Amiri Baraka, he is neither an activist nor a fighter. He uses expressions that suggest that he feels as if he is locked in an internal prison. When his friend dies, he becomes obsessed with the idea of visiting his son in prison. He tries to track down the son, frustrated at every step by bureaucracy. Along the way, he expresses many observations and criticisms of the prison system that Wideman himself has also voiced in his non-fictional writings. The

narrator's failure to achieve the long-awaited meeting raises the question that perhaps the friend, the son, or the narrator was lying or even hallucinating.

Instead of forming a relationship with the son, the narrator begins a sexual relationship with Suh Jung, the young Asian paralegal who helps him in his search. Though there is no strong spark of attraction between them, he finds himself taking small risks in his relationship with her that appear to shift him out of his habitual timidity. Her bathing him appears to him to be a ritual cleansing, preparing him for the meeting with the son.

Though the narrator fails in his stated purpose of visiting the son, his bearing witness to the prison experience (both in terms of external and internal, psychological prisons) may represent his real achievement. In the simple act of telling his story, he has become an artist-activist like his hero, Baraka.

Son

Very little information is given about the son. He remains a shadowy character who never appears in person in the story. According to the official records, the son has done □the worst kinds of things,□ and since the state cannot execute him, it will never let him go. When the narrator writes to the son in prison telling him of the death of his father, he replies in a curt note, indicating he has no knowledge at all of his father, not even that he had died. The narrator sees him as □A smiling leopard in a cage,□ an image suggesting stored-up rage. The narrator fails to meet the son, and finally, the reader is left in doubt about the son's whereabouts or even existence.

Themes

Imprisonment

□What We Cannot Speak About We Must Pass Over in Silence□ features the narrator's obsession with the imprisoned son of his dead friend. The story offers a critique of the prison system, reflecting the author's activism on the subject. As of 2006, Wideman's son and younger brother were both serving life sentences for murder, and Wideman has given speeches and written stories and articles questioning the prison system and the high rates of incarceration for black males in the United States.

In the story, Wideman's narrator emphasizes the dehumanization of the prison system, in which vast numbers of people are processed and monitored by equally vast numbers of computer specialists punching keys. He presents Arizona, where the son is held, as a state in which the economy depends upon prisons and other sorts of holding facilities (retirement homes, senior centers, hospices, and so on). The inmates are treated not as people, but as commodities, □a steady stream of bodies□ or □traffic.□ Humane and ethical concerns have vanished, just as the son has vanished beyond the sight and reach of the narrator, beyond the knowledge of the prison's computer system. The system is dominated by the economic concerns of filling vacancies, collecting fees, and making sure the dead are replaced by the living with maximum efficiency. The absence from this picture of human values is emphasized by the narrator's description of the □eerily vacant□ streets during □heatstroke daylight hours.□ He imagines the people who do the counting as □sequestered in air-conditioned towers or busy as bees underground in offices honeycombed beneath the asphalt.□ In the Arizona □gulags,□ each prisoner has ceased to be a person and has become □a single speck with its unique, identifying tag.□ Not only are the kept (the prisoners) stripped of their humanity by such a system, but so are the keepers (the computer operators), who have been reduced to the status of insects living underground. Wideman raises the question: in such a system, arising from society's terrified determination to keep criminals out of sight and out of reach, who are the prisoners, and who are the free?

Suh Jung represents the conventional view, that prison walls separate the dangerous people (the prisoners) from the decent people (the free), as is suggested by her warning the narrator against becoming involved with the prisoner. She believes the records, which say he is guilty of terrible crimes. The narrator is more ambivalent, replying, □Everyone has crimes to answer for.□ He says that people can end up in □Situations when nothing's for sure except some of us are on one side of the bars, some on the other side, but nobody knows which side is which.□ He goes on to tease Suh Jung with the possibility that he himself could be a serial killer. The narrator's stance echoes the words of African American radical activist and prison abolitionist, Angela Y. Davis (born 1944), in her essay, □A World Unto Itself: Multiple Invisibilities of Imprisonment,□ in *Behind the Razor Wire* (a book to which Wideman also contributed): □to hear the stories of incarcerated women and men is to recognize that little more than the luck of the draw□or rather, of one's socioeconomic birthright□separates 'us' from 'them.'□

Indeed, the narrator's experiences of the adversarial prison system lead him to feel like a criminal. During his research, when he finally extracts information on the son's whereabouts, the automated and the human administrators of the prison system make him feel that he has done something wrong. During his visit to the prison, he is held in a wire cage under a burning sun until he is desperate to flee, fearing that he will be trapped there forever, knocked to his knees, and □forced to recite my sins, the son's sins, the sins of the world.□ Apart from the narrator's dealings with the prison system, even in his daily existence, he is a kind of prisoner. His life, restricted by his timidity, is a □prison I've chosen to seal myself within,□ with □fewer and fewer visits paid or received.□

Imprisonment and Race

In his essay, □Doing Time, Marking Race□ in *Behind the Razor Wire*, Wideman writes that incarceration is a form of apartheid. This judgment is based on the disproportionately large numbers of incarcerated black males, the perceived racism of the criminal justice system with its heavy sentencing for so-called black crimes, and the exploitation of society's fears by politicians who promise to get tough on the crimes perpetuated by some □other□ group (by implication, black people). Wideman writes that he has an intimate knowledge of prisons due to the fact that □From every category of male relative I can name□grandfather, father, son, brother, uncle, nephew, cousin, in-law□at least one member of my family has been incarcerated.□ He adds, □I am a descendant of a special class of immigrants□Africans□for whom arrival in America was a life sentence in the prison of slavery.□

In the same essay, Wideman comments: □To be a man of color of a certain economic class and milieu is equivalent in the public eye to being a criminal.□ One possible response to such treatment is to protest loudly; another, that adopted by the narrator of □What We Cannot Speak About We Must Pass Over in Silence,□ is to keep one's head down. The narrator compares himself unfavorably with the outspoken black activist poet Amiri Baraka (born 1934), describing himself □as quietly integrated and nonconfrontational a specimen as I seemed to be of America's longest, most violently reviled minority.□

In line with Wideman's accusation that incarceration is a form of apartheid, □What We Cannot Speak About We Must Pass Over in Silence□ shows the desire of white middle and upper classes to separate themselves from prisons and their inmates by hiding prisoners in far away places like the Arizona desert. This desire, however, seems doomed to backfire. Just as Wideman's story blurs the line between those locked in literal prisons and those on the outside who inhabit psychological prisons, Wideman suggests in □Doing Time, Marking Race□ that for an African American underclass, the distinction between prison and the urban street is increasingly hard to define. Prison itself is being transformed by the street values of young prisoners to mirror urban war zones, revolving around drugs and gang affiliations. Prisons now □accommodate a fluid population who know their lives will involve inevitable shuttling between prison and the street.□ Wideman's story confirms that because prisons are products of attitudes of

those inside and outside the prison walls, they cannot effectively be separated from the general society.

The Problem of Knowledge

The sense of isolation, alienation, and imprisonment felt by the two main characters in the story is compounded by the seeming impossibility of gaining accurate knowledge about anybody or anything in a world that is fragmented and dehumanized. The first line of the story, □I have a friend with a son in prison,□ turns out to be open to doubt in its every aspect: the friend is not so much a friend as an acquaintance, the friend may or may not have a son, and the son may or may not be in prison. The narrator muses on his inability to remember his dead friend's face or even to recognize his own face and points out that nobody knows for sure who their father is. His attempts to trace the son are frustrated by an almost impenetrable bureaucracy administered by computers and automated systems. The narrator's small successes in gaining information are punished by an adversarial, hostile stance conveyed by these systems that makes him feel like a criminal. Even the narrator's relationship with Suh Jung is characterized by a failure to achieve a meaningful connection, partly because of her frightened defensiveness about her true nature.

The only successful attempts at both seeing and showing truth are achieved by two artists featured in the story, the Swiss sculptor and painter Alberto Giacometti (1901-1966) and the African American poet Amiri Baraka (born 1934). Giacometti's picture of a dog awakens a passionate response in the narrator, who, contrary to his habit, both sees and recognizes its truth. Baraka's courageous activism inspires the narrator to take small risks in his relationship with Suh Jung. The narrator, in spite of his timidity, joins the ranks of the artists when he creates his own piece of art, the story he is telling. Through the story, he shows something of the truth about society's external and internal prisons.

Style

Stream of Consciousness

In this story, Wideman uses a stream-of-consciousness and experimental language, both reminiscent of the work of the Irish novelist James Joyce (1882-1941). Stream-of-consciousness presents an interior monologue of the narrator, allowing us to see inside the mind of the character as it associates ideas and moves along in a flow of thoughts. Writing in stream of consciousness allows rapid and apparently unrelated (but in reality, carefully crafted) jumps in focus. This kind of narrative gives no objective information about external events, and readers are forced to rely on and evaluate the narrator's thoughts which may or may not be reliable. It is left up to readers to decide if the narrator's thoughts are aligned with objective reality or delusional. For example, when the story ends, readers may wonder where the son is or whether he even exists.

Word Order and Rhythm

Wideman's experimental use of language has been likened to the improvised rhythms of modern American jazz. It adds to the density and relative difficulty of Wideman's prose style, but it also creates remarkable effects. For example, in one place, the story presents a letter from the narrator to the son. The letter is a mosaic of original and revised wording juxtaposed without explanation:

Please allow me to express my sympathy for your great loss I don't claim to know to have known him well but I your father fine man good man considered him a valuable friend heartfelt he spoke of you many times always quite much good love.

Elsewhere is a passage in which the narrator imagines Suh Jung making love with the imprisoned son: □Would it be the same woman in both places at once or different limbs, eyes, wetnesses, scents, like those tigers whirling about Sambo.□ The insistent, frantic rhythms of this passage reflect both the whirling tigers and the imagined sexual excitement of the scene. In these and other stylistic ways, Wideman locates the action of the story very much in the internal language of a particular person, this narrator, words jumbled together oftentimes as only that person would think of them.

Metaphors

Wideman uses metaphors of imprisonment to describe the free lives of those outside prison, blurring the line between the so-called innocent and the so-called guilty. The narrator's experience of extracting information about the son from the adversarial prison system makes him feel that he has □done something stupid or morally suspect by pursuing it to its lair.□ The metaphor raises the question of who is the hunter and who is the hunted, in a society whose terror of criminals leads to locking them up physically

and to isolating them even further behind a mesh of mechanization and computerization.

A metaphor emphasizing the narrator's restricted, prisoner-like existence is used to describe his home. He lives □in a building in the bottom of somebody's pocket. Sunlight never touches its bricks.□ His life itself has become restricted; it is a □prison I've chosen to seal myself within. Fewer and fewer visits paid or received.□ He likens himself to a prisoner about to be executed: After he has finished looking at himself in the mirror, he switches off the light, letting □the merciful hood drop over the prisoner's head.□

The Asian character Suh Jung is also described in images that compare her to a criminal, a prisoner, or more particularly, a prisoner of war. She tries to cover up her fear with an □unsuccessful theft□ of her father's blank eyes. She is her father's victim and his prisoner, □relentlessly, meticulously hammered into an exquisitely lifelike, flawless representation of his will, like those sailing ships in bottles or glass butterflies in the museum.□ After her father's suicide, she tries to protect herself against the Asian female cliché of submissiveness by having her hair cut into a □helmet,□ an item of military defense. Her nipples are □twin sentry towers.□ When the narrator makes love to her, he describes her in terms of a vanquished enemy: she is □easy to . . . subdue□; he is □capturing her, punishing her.□ He realizes that in his power over her, he has become her brutal father and her jailer, □the steel gate dropping over the tiger pit in which she's naked, trapped, begging for food and water. Air. Light.□

This image of the steel gate dropping over the tiger pit is a terrifying one, suggesting not love, but power exercised over someone who is angry yet helpless. Coming from the narrator, it also blurs the line between abuser and victim, just as Wideman blurs the line between those inside the prison and those outside. The narrator is a victim when faced with those in power, such as the prison authorities, but a potential abuser when faced with those weaker than he is, like Suh Jung. Wideman seems to suggest that to whatever extent a person feels himself to be a victim, he victimizes, passing on the prison experience, just as a beaten dog does not bite his tormentor but finds a smaller dog to bite.

Another metaphor pattern uses big cats. When the narrator imagines Suh Jung making love to the imprisoned son, he pictures her as a tiger whirling about him, suggesting both the clichéd expression, the Asian tiger, and the unleashed sensuality that he himself never achieves with her. When the narrator is making love to her, he likens her to a tiger trapped in a pit, suggesting anger denied free expression. The same meaning is implied by his description of the imprisoned son as □A smiling leopard in a cage,□ except that the son is in a literal prison, whereas Suh Jung is in a psychological one.

Symbols

The coyote that prowls around the prison is given significant emphasis in the story. It is a predator, but harmless to the guards. They laugh at it until one of them, who is

evidently having a bad day, casually shoots it. The coyote symbolizes both the narrator, in his cautious and fearful approach to the prison, and black people, who are mercilessly hunted down if they encroach on white territory. Their lives, like the life of the coyote, are seen as cheap and disposable.

Plot

Wideman deliberately breaks one of the conventions of fiction by denying the reader the long-expected outcome□the meeting between the narrator and the imprisoned son. This inconclusive ending achieves a number of effects. One is to emphasize the frustration of dealing with the prison system: the narrator's frustration is mirrored by the reader's. Another is to indicate that the story is not really about this meeting but something else entirely. Possible interpretations of the story include the difficulty of making meaningful connections in a dehumanized, disconnected world and the narrator's artistic achievement in shining a light into the dark world of the prison system.

Setting

The setting of the prison, in the Arizona desert, emphasizes the way in which the prison system is removed and hidden from the U.S. population at large. Also, as the narrator points out, Arizona is the national choice for institutions that house those it would rather forget: the criminals, the retirees, the dying, and the dead. It confirms Angela Y. Davis's comment in *Behind the Razor Wire*, that the prison creates an □illusion of inaccessibility,□ which

works two ways: on the one hand, it is designed to persuade those on the outside that those who are locked away cannot reach into our homes, our neighborhoods, or, for that matter, our society; on the other hand, however, we in the 'free' world rarely imagine ourselves being able to reach into the imprisoned world□that is, to enter into this world□without ourselves being arrested and imprisoned.

Wideman wants readers to be aware of the system that is in place to handle prisoners and what that system does to prevent those on the outside from making contact with inmates. More than that, he wants readers to understand that what distinguishes insiders from outsiders may be more matters of race and class than of free will and law infringement. Finally, bondage and entrapment take various forms. So while Wideman focuses on Arizona for its role in the prison industry, he also makes clear that other settings, both urban and psychological, play their parts in the various kinds of incarceration people experience.

Post-Aesthetic Movement

John Edgar Wideman's work is considered as falling in the literary category of the post-aesthetic movement. This movement is an artistic response made by African Americans to the black aesthetic movement of the 1960s and early 1970s, which attempted to

produce works of art that would be meaningful to black people. Since that time, writers of the post-aesthetic movement have placed less emphasis on the disparity between black and white in the United States. African Americans are portrayed as looking inward for answers to their own questions. In □What We Cannot Speak About We Must Pass Over in Silence,□ the focus is as much on the internal, psychological prisons of the characters, as on the external prisons.

Historical Context

Race, Imprisonment, and the Socioeconomic Divide

In the later half of the nineteenth century, some American states passed laws restricting privileges given to emancipated African Americans after the Civil War. These so-called Jim Crow laws segregated African Americans from the white population and denied them equal status with whites in all aspects of their lives, including the use of public services, public places, schools, poling regulations, and so forth. These local laws remained in place until the civil rights movement, which gained momentum in the 1940s, pushed the Supreme Court to declare segregation laws illegal in a series of decisions beginning in 1954. In 1964, the U.S. Congress passed the Civil Rights Act which outlawed state laws requiring segregation. However, this law did not end the practice of segregation, which continues unofficially, mostly due to the economic factor of poverty. Thus, in many parts of the United States, African Americans live and attend schools separately from whites. In a 2003 speech, "The American Dilemma Revisited: Psychoanalysis, Social Policy, and the Socio-cultural Meaning of Race," published in *Black Renaissance*, Wideman gives some revealing statistics: Poverty has continued to increase for African Americans since the 1980s. Forty-four percent of black children live below the poverty line, compared with 20 percent of all American children. A black baby is three times more likely to die than a white one.

Black people's experiences with, and attitudes toward, the criminal justice system often differ from those of white people, prompting racial tensions. In 1991, the beating of an unarmed black man, Rodney King, by four Los Angeles police officers was captured on videotape. An all-white jury acquitted the police officers, prompting riots in Los Angeles and widespread protests. In 2001, fifteen black men were killed by police or died in police custody over a period when no men from other races died in comparable circumstances. No police officers were found guilty in criminal or civil courts. This sequence of events provoked rioting in Cincinnati, Ohio.

The statistics on African Americans caught up in the criminal justice system give an idea of the extent of the problems. In "The American Dilemma Revisited," Wideman notes that 781,000 black males are incarcerated, 200,000 more than are enrolled in colleges and universities. Every day, a black male aged between eighteen and thirty-four has a one-in-ten chance of finding himself locked up; one in three are under custodial supervision; each year, each has a one-in-three chance of being imprisoned. Possession of the cheap drug crack, widely used in poor African-American communities, carries much heavier jail time than luxury drugs such as cocaine. An analysis of 141,000 traffic citations written between 1999 and 2000 by Cincinnati police found black drivers were twice as likely as whites to be cited for driving without a license, twice as likely to be cited for not wearing a seat belt, and four times as likely to be cited for driving without proof of insurance.

The Privatization of Prisons

The 1990s saw a debate about the growing privatization of prisons, which previously were run by the government. The argument for privatization emphasizes cost reduction. Arguments against it claim that cost-cutting results in lower standards of care and that privatization leads to a market demand for prisoners and prison labor, which is fed by tougher sentencing. Wideman's story, □What We Cannot Speak About We Must Pass Over in Silence,□ critiques the dehumanizing aspects of what the author terms the □prison industry,□ which flourishes from human □traffic.□

Critical Overview

The work of John Edgar Wideman arouses strong responses in readers, and critics are no exception. His work, too demanding to achieve mass popularity, is largely read in colleges and universities, where he enjoys a distinguished reputation as a black intellectual who is steeped in Western culture but who is gradually rediscovering his African roots. It has been remarked that a college education is needed to negotiate his complex prose style and understand his erudite references to various artists and philosophers. His stories and novels combine ghetto experiences with experimental fiction techniques and quasi-autobiographical material to explore social, racial, and cultural conflicts.

Revealingly, with each publication of a Wideman work, a multitude of articles appear in newspapers and magazines about the man. His early years as a basketball player and the contrast between his extraordinary academic reputation and the fact that both his younger brother and his son are serving life prison sentences make him an intriguing subject for journalists. However, there is relatively little in-depth criticism of his work. This is possibly because critics are wary of its intellectually challenging nature and its uncomfortable tendency to frustrate readers' expectations. It must be emphasized, though, that Wideman's work strongly repays patient attention and rereading, perhaps with the help of an encyclopedia for checking references.

After John Edgar Wideman's story, □What We Cannot Speak About We Must Pass Over in Silence,□ appeared in *Harper's* in 2003, it was chosen for *The Best American Short Stories 2004* (edited by Lorrie Moore, published 2004). The story was published again in the collection, *God's Gym* (2005). Critical response to the collection was mostly admiring. Earni Young, in *Black Issues Book Review*, writes that Wideman's stories are □alive with passion, intelligence and the electric rhythm that has twice won him the PEN/Faulkner Award.□

Several reviewers warn the more timid sort of readers about the difficulty of Wideman's experimental style. Playing on the title *God's Gym*, Ed Nawotka, writing in *People Weekly*, cautions that the collection is □a mental workout□ that may leave the reader fatigued. In similar vein, the anonymous reviewer for *O, The Oprah Magazine* comments that *God's Gym* □is so brazenly and lyrically experimental, so charged with emotion and restless intellect, that a reader gets winded just trying to keep up with him.□ John Freeman, writing in *Seattle Times* and making reference to Wideman's stint as a basketball player, comments, □No American writer dribbles a sentence quite like John Edgar Wideman. Watching him thread language between his legs and around his back is a bit like watching a Harlem Globetrotter vamp.□ He terms the collection □dazzling.□ Terrence Rafferty, writing for the *New York Times Book Review*, also uses a basketball analogy, noting Wideman's practice in the stories of aborting developing scenes or abruptly shifting the direction of the narrative, □backpedaling like a basketball player in transition from offense to defense□for all sorts of reasons.□

Referring to Wideman's withholding of the expected meeting between the narrator and the imprisoned son, Rafferty acknowledges that some readers may find □Wideman's persistent refusal to fulfill the requirements of well-made fiction□ to be □willfully perverse.□ But Rafferty cautions, □it would be a mistake to think he's just messing with our heads□; Wideman violates the conventions of narrative and language itself because □they can't take him where he wants to go.□

An anonymous reviewer for *Kirkus Reviews* notes, □The best of the stories are charged with deep feeling,□ singling out □What We Cannot Speak About We Must Pass Over in Silence□ as a □wrenching tale.□ A *Publishers Weekly* reviewer admires the way Wideman pushes the boundaries of narrative and form but was one of several critics who object to his treatment of the coyote, pointing out that □the detour is so long it stops the story dead□ and robs it of its power. Jeffrey Severs, in his review for the *Austin American-Statesman*, points out that while the coyote seems to symbolize black people being hunted down by a hostile society, Wideman's real topic is □the fear that twists black people's minds in many other, less dramatic moments.□

Rebecca Stuhr, in her review for *Library Journal*, calls the stories □feasts of language offering up new metaphors and original imagery.□ Stuhr remarks on an important aspect of Wideman's work, which can at first meeting seem inaccessible and opaque: □Each story is a gem that grows more brilliant with rereading.□ In sum, reviewers seem to agree that reading Wideman's prose is well worth the effort.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Robinson is a former teacher of English literature and creative writing and, as of 2006, is a full-time writer and editor. In the following essay, Robinson explores how the problem of finding truth in a world dedicated to avoiding it is examined in John Edgar Wideman's What We Cannot Speak About We Must Pass Over in Silence.

John Edgar Wideman took the title of his story, □What We Cannot Speak About We Must Pass Over in Silence,□ from the last line of a work by an Austrian philosopher: *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921) by Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951). A possible interpretation of Wittgenstein's sentence and the argument that leads up to it is that the essence of the world is beyond the reach of human thought and words. Words can describe known facts about the world, but that is all. Among the many things that lie beyond words are ethics, aesthetics, the meaning of life, the immortality of the soul, the nature of language and logic, and the fundamental structure of the universe. Wittgenstein asserts that most philosophical confusion arises from trying to speak about things that can only be shown. Having dismissed even his own philosophical propositions as nonsense, Wittgenstein concludes, □What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence.□

Wittgenstein's statement alerts the reader to an important theme of Wideman's story: the difficulty of knowing anything about anything and anybody. This eternal philosophical problem is given added weight in modern society as Wideman portrays it. Here is a world in which computers, which were designed to facilitate communication between people, often serve only to dehumanize and fragment society. It is a world in which huge resources are poured into the prison industry and ever-increasing numbers of people are moved out of sight in an effort to make the rest of the people feel safe. This social fragmentation is reflected in the isolation and alienation felt by the narrator. His attempts to extract meaningful information from his limited interactions with others are largely marked by frustration and failure.

In this respect, the first sentence of the story is revealing: □I have a friend with a son in prison.□ As the story progresses, it turns out that every aspect of this simple statement is open to doubt. The narrator's friend, he later reveals, is not really a friend, but an acquaintance with whom he has only fleeting contacts. The friend may or may not have a son, and that son may or may not be in prison. The question of the son is made even more opaque when he writes to the narrator asking him to pose as his father, apparently to smooth his way through the prison bureaucracy, though this is not certain. The narrator agrees, since nobody can prove that he does not believe himself to be the son's father. Indeed, he reflects that most children go through a phase in which they do not believe that the adults raising them are their real parents. The episode suggests that nobody can know for certain who their father is.

The narrator never learns the truth about the son. In fact, in a reversal of the usual story format, the truth seems more elusive at the story's end than at the beginning:

□Computer says the inmate you want to visit is not in the facility.□ Frustratingly, the narrator cannot question the computer further.

Thus, the expected meeting with the son never happens. Instead, the narrator forms a relationship with Suh Jung. But even this, the only person-to-person relationship presented in the story, is characterized by a lack of truth and meaning. It does not spring from attraction, but an embarrassment on the part of the narrator at seeming weak and indecisive. There is always a distance between them, which grows more obvious when she begins to taunt him about his obsession with the son in prison. The narrator admits that he uses her in order to obtain information about the son, but he justifies himself by saying that all relationships are about using people. He does not mention love.

Suh Jung is also disjointed or lacking in congruence. She has cut her hair into a brutal style that does not suit her in order to protect herself from a stereotype. She is in reality a terrified girl but hides her fear with a pretended coolness. She has stolen this coolness from her father, whose attitude toward her is characterized by a □blankness□ behind his eyes and a determination to hammer all around him into □an exquisitely lifelike, flawless representation of his will.□ To him, she is not a human being, but an artifact.

Compounding the sense of uncertainty and disorientation is the narrator's inability to recall the face of his friend, the son's father. When he tries to reconstruct it by gazing at his own reflection in the mirror, he is shocked by the time-battered, frightened face that gazes back. He does not even recognize himself: □Who in God's name was this person,□ he asks. Recalling scientific research that shows that people do not really look at what is around them, he suggests that this is an unconscious way of avoiding taking responsibility: □Instead of staring without fear and taking responsibility for the unmistakable, beaten-up person I've apparently become, I prefer to see nothing.□

This comment resonates in the story. The narrator describes how the Arizona prison is situated in a □Vast emptiness,□ and how the computer operators who administer it and the other facilities are □sequestered□ in towers or in underground offices. The aim is to keep the inmates safely apart from outsiders, out of sight and out of mind. This aim is supported by the impenetrable prison bureaucracy that is reluctant to give up any information to the narrator about the imprisoned son. So successful is it that by the end of the story, the narrator has no idea where the inmate is or even if he exists at all.

Like the narrator of Wideman's □What We Cannot Speak About We Must Pass Over in Silence,□ who prefers not to see his frightened, battered face, people on the outside prefer not to see the prisons or their inmates; they cannot speak about them, and they pass over them in silence. Angela Y. Davies, in her essay in *Behind the Razor Wire*, □A World Unto Itself: Multiple Invisibilities of Imprisonment,□ calls prisoners □invisible populations□ living in □invisible worlds.□ In his essay □Doing Time, Marking Race□ in the same book, Wideman elaborates on this theme: □Prisons do their dirtiest work in the dark. The evil they perpetrate depends on a kind of willed ignorance on the part of the public.□ As a potential remedy to this state of ignorance, Wideman suggests that □The truth of art. . . . can throw light on what occurs inside prisons. This light, whether a

source of revelation for millions, a spur to political reform, or simply one more candle burning, will help to dispel the nightmare we've allowed our prisons to become.□

Even this modest degree of certainty about the power of art to reveal the truth seems to be thrown into doubt by the bleak vision of □What We Cannot Speak About We Must Pass Over in Silence.□ The narrator says that the artist Giacometti, who, unlike the willfully and complacently blind, actively sought the truth, □didn't trust what was in front of his eyes□: □He understood art always failed. Art lied to him. People's eyes lied. No one ever sees the world as it is.□ Giacometti found that if he glanced away from his model, when he looked back, □it would be different, always different, always changing.□

However, it would be a mistake to identify the narrator with Wideman's own view. The narrator is self-confessedly timid, simultaneously □begging and fearing to be seen,□ imprisoned by a □lack of directness, decisiveness, my deficiency of enterprise and imagination.□ While this timidity is understandable in humanity in general, it is perhaps especially so in a member of an ethnic minority. But the narrator's timidity is not the way to truth.

The two artists featured in the story, Giacometti and the African American poet Amiri Baraka (born 1934), who is known for his activism in black causes, are braver. While no character in the story manages to see or speak the whole truth, these artists do manage to show something of the truth. Showing is the one way that Wittgenstein believed truth could be revealed; in Wideman's story, the people who show are the artists. While Giacometti sees the limitations of art to capture a changing world, he does not allow that to stop him from creating it. The narrator, in spite of his focus on Giacometti's statements about the failure of art, cannot fail to respond to the artist's famous picture of a dog. The truth of this picture produces a heartfelt passion in him that Suh Jung fails to inspire: □I loved the slinky dog. He was so . . . so . . . you know . . . *dog*.□ It is characteristic of the narrator that he fails to see it at the exhibit, as he is overwhelmed by all the objects. Instead, he sees it at one remove, in the catalog. But this man who has made a habit of not seeing his own face or the faces of those around him at last does see, with great immediacy and immediate recognition, and he is moved.

The narrator also loves Baraka, not so much for what he writes but for □the chances he'd taken, chances in his art, in his life.□ The narrator is thankful for the □Sacrifices of mind and body he endured so I could vicariously participate, holed up in my corner.□ It is significant that the narrator's praise of Baraka comes just before his account of the tiny risks he takes, the □low-order remarkable things□ he experiences with Suh Jung. These risks, if he were able to magnify them many times, could make a difference in his life and perhaps in the lives of others. Baraka and Giacometti have embraced risk. Through their art, they show a truth that can illuminate the invisible, the hidden, that which is passed over by most people in silence. The final twist is that, in telling his story, the narrator has abandoned his timid existence on the sidelines and has, largely in spite of himself, become an artist. His obsession about the imprisoned son has led him to create a piece of art that shows us a part of the truth about our external and internal prisons.

Source: Claire Robinson, Critical Essay on □What We Cannot Speak About We Must Pass Over in Silence,□ in *Short Stories for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Critical Essay #2

Dunham has a master's degree in communication and a bachelor's degree in English. In the following essay, Dunham examines the debilitating effects of the narrator's spiritually imprisoned soul in What We Cannot Speak About We Must Pass Over in Silence and the violent means God uses to free it.

T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* opens with an epigraph that John Edgar Wideman could just as easily have used to open □What We Cannot Speak About We Must Pass Over in Silence□: □For on one occasion I myself saw, with my own eyes, the Cumaean Sibyl hanging in a cage, and when some boys said to her, 'Sibyl, what do you want?' she replied, 'I want to die.'□ This passage, which Eliot took from Petronius's *Satyricon*, refers to the Sibyl of Cumae, a prophetess of the ancient world to whom Apollo granted a single wish. She wished to live as many years as the number of grains she could hold in her hand, but she forgot to ask for eternal youth; as a result, she suffered increasing decrepitude as the years wore on, only she did not die. In the context of *The Waste Land*, the Sibyl hanging in her cage is an image of the soul imprisoned, an apt metaphor for the monotonous, lonely, and empty lives of the poem's characters. The image is especially befitting the narrator and main character of □What We Cannot Speak About We Must Pass Over in Silence,□ an unnamed man who sees everything in his experience as a kind of prison. Like the people who inhabit *The Waste Land*, he lives a life emotionally cut off from others and is unable to find joy or fulfillment; but unlike the narrator of *The Waste Land*, he is not aware that there is a way out of the cage, that is, until the very end. □What We Cannot Speak About We Must Pass Over in Silence□ is the chronicle of a man's journey from a confining life of empty routine to the cusp of a new life in which the possibility exists for value and renewal.

Throughout the story, no philosophical or theological interpretation is given for the narrator's imprisoned soul, and no explanation is provided for how it became imprisoned. Wideman seems to be in accordance with the postulation Eliot puts forth in *The Waste Land*: an imprisoned soul is part of the natural order of things and can only be freed by a spiritual force. (The Christian term for this is original sin.) Many people, like those in *The Waste Land*, are unaware of their predicament, while others are aware and try to do something about it. The narrator of □What We Cannot Speak About We Must Pass Over in Silence□ is one of the latter, his awareness being triggered by the manner in which he responds to the news of his friend's death. When he receives the manila envelope containing the information, he feels no shock, sadness, or remorse; in fact, it □move[s] [him] not a bit.□ After all, this was a friend in the loosest sense of the word, an acquaintance whom he had met on occasion for coffee or a movie but never got to know very well; in fact, he cannot even remember what he looked like. The narrator describes the nature of their relationship in chillingly impersonal terms:

He's the kind of person you could see occasionally, enjoy his company more or less, and walk away with no further expectations, no plan to meet again. If he'd moved to another city, months might have passed before I'd notice him missing. If we'd lost contact for good, I'm sure I wouldn't have regretted not seeing him. A smidgen of

curiosity, perhaps. Perhaps a slight bit of vexation, as when I discover I haven't restocked paper towels or Tabasco sauce. Less, since his absence wouldn't leave a gap I'd be obliged to fill.

The action the narrator takes is different from that which he normally takes when faced with a personal dilemma. He is used to stepping away from it, □escap[ing] into a book, a movie, a vigorous walk,□ or simply laughing it off. This time, however, he faces the dilemma head-on, energized by the sympathy he feels for the imprisoned son. He writes to the attorney who sent the envelope and asks for the son's mailing address, but the attorney is unable to provide it, so he calls the Arizona correctional system and endures one bureaucratic nightmare after another before he is finally able to get it. He sends the son a letter expressing his condolences, to which the son replies, in essence, that he never knew his father. Rather than stop there, the narrator goes to the attorney's office in an effort to find out where he had been led astray. He pursues the matter with the attorney's paralegal, Suh Jung, and suddenly, what was once a wholehearted effort becomes halfhearted and lackadaisical. The pursuit of information becomes the pursuit of Suh Jung and thus begins yet another empty relationship that brings no comfort and leaves him □more alone now . . . than when [he] arrived spanking brand-new on the planet.□ The only difference between this and former relationships is that now he is aware of the emptiness and loneliness. This awareness, first triggered by his response to the contents of the envelope, has become a permanent part of his consciousness. He continues to act on behalf of the imprisoned son, writing to him and trying to arrange a visit, but as he dawdles with Suh Jung, he becomes a brooder as never before and begins to see all that surrounds him as a reflection of his imprisoned nature.

The first thing the narrator notices is the oppressive nature of his living conditions. He says the building he lives in is □in the bottom of somebody's pocket,□ a pocket □deep and black□ where □a hand may dig in any moment and crush [him]"; he describes its physical appearance as one might describe a prison: □Sunlight never touches its bricks. The building's neither run-down nor cheap. Just dark, dank, and drab.□ The narrator portrays the confines of his small apartment in much harsher terms: □Water, when you turn on a faucet first thing in the morning, gags on itself, spits, then gushes like a bloody jailbreak from the pipes.□ Such imagery brings to mind Dostoevsky's underground man, the sick and wicked brooder who lives holed up in his little compartment, shut off from society and reflecting on his sorry condition. Words such as □gag,□ □spit,□ □gush,□ and □bloody jailbreak□ suggest states of illness and imprisonment; but, interestingly enough, they also suggest possibilities□although violent□of escape. At this point in the story, these words act as a foreshadowing (a hint for what will come later), since the narrator is not yet aware that the possibility for escape exists.

Within his cell of an apartment, the narrator □dallies□ (his word) with Suh Jung: they smoke marijuana and stimulate each other sexually by various means. However, the narrator quickly loses interest in Suh Jung. Her sarcastic remarks get on his nerves, and her boyish body disappoints him. Their relationship, like the apartment, is oppressive, the essence of which is perfectly detailed in the brutal entrapment image the narrator uses to describe them while having sexual intercourse: □I'm aware of my size, my strength towering over her squirming, her thrashing her gasps for breath. I am her

father's stare, the steel gate dropping over the tiger pit in which she's naked, trapped, begging for food. And water. Air. Light.□ Comparing sexual intercourse to the violent capture and caging of an animal is one of the story's most powerful metaphors and a precise encapsulation of the story's theme: the human soul is in bondage and needs to be freed. The objectification of others, as the narrator does with Suh Jung, is a facet of this bondage that □What We Cannot Speak About We Must Pass Over in Silence□ explores. To the narrator, Suh Jung is not a human being to be loved and cared for but an object to be conquered and confined. A loving relationship is simply not part of his experience, nor the rest of the world's, for that matter; as he says when describing the expedient nature of the relationship he had with his friend, □Most of the world fits into this category now.□ He is a product of the wasteland in which he lives, where giving is replaced by taking and sexual expression is a matter of entrapment. The image of the caged animal, in which he is the objectifying captor, suggests that he too is a □selfish, greedy animal.□

After much delay that is partly his fault and the partly the fault of the bureaucratic prison system, the narrator flies to Arizona to visit his friend's son. One might think that the trip itself would provide temporary relief from his oppressed state, but such is not the case; he carries it with him everywhere and it distorts all he sees. No sooner is he in the air, free of his apartment and Suh Jung, than the natural world begins to encroach on him. He looks down at the land far below and observes mountains and farmland but recognizes beauty in none of it. The mountains are simply □rugged,□ the farmland looks like a flat desert, and the rest is an □undramatic nothingness beyond the far edge of wrinkled terrain.□ Instead of bringing him joy, the landscape makes him think of hell: □Upside-down mountains are hollow shells, deep, deep gouges in the stony waste, their invisible peaks underground, pointing to hell.□

For reasons even he cannot explain, the narrator arrives at the prison two days late, causing confusion and unwelcome shuffling on the part of certain prison personnel. As the narrator waits for them to make the necessary phone calls and fill out the additional paperwork, he overhears two guards talking about a coyote that had, for an undisclosed period of time, been scavenging around he prison's perimeter fences. That very morning, however, one of the tower guards trapped the unsuspecting creature in his sights and killed him. The guards' discussion hearkens back to the narrator's description of his sex act with Suh Jung in that it depicts an image of animal entrapment, but it also adds something to it: an image not of death (as one might anticipate) but of release. Like the phrase □bloody jailbreak,□ this new image foreshadows the story's final moments. The narrator passes through various checkpoints and locked doors before being told to wait in a wire holding pen while more prison personnel perform more bureaucratic shuffling. He waits and waits. The heat becomes so oppressive that sweat gushes out of him, but the heat is purgatorial rather than injurious . It is what Eliot and Dante (alluding to the words of the prophet Zechariah in Zechariah 13:9) refer to as □the fire that refines.□ In a manner reminiscent of Flannery O'Connor, the narrator describes his experience in the cage in both violent and redemptive terms:

Would I be knocked down to my knees, forced to recite my sins, the son's sins, the sins of the world. If I tried to escape, would my body□*splat*□be splashed and pulped on the

razor wire or could I glide magically through the knives glinting like mirrors, not stopping till I reach a spot far, far away where I can bury my throbbing head in the coolness miles deep below the sand, so deep you can hear the subterranean chortle of rivers on the opposite face of the planet.

Using prison as an overarching metaphor, Wideman depicts how relationships, living conditions, and the natural world reflect the entrapped state of the narrator's soul, then reveals how a trip to a literal prison in the Arizona desert can serve as a means to free it. In this collection of stories, entitled *God's Gym*, the prison and the gym function as metaphors for the same thing: they are both places where God causes spiritual growth in His people. The God of John Edgar Wideman works in mysterious ways. He reveals Himself in the dark corners and gritty crevices where one would least expect to find Him, using prisons and gyms as instruments of mercy and violence as a means of grace. He is tough and stern, yet also just and merciful. The narrator of □Weight,□ the first story of the collection, describes Him best: □My mother believes in a god whose goodness would not permit him to inflict more troubles than a person can handle. A god of mercy and salvation. A sweaty, bleeding god presiding over a fitness class in which his chosen few punish their muscles. She should wear a T-shirt: *God's Gym*.□ The narrator of □What We Cannot Speak About We Must Pass Over in Silence□ should wear one as well.

Source: Timothy Dunham, Critical Essay on □What We Cannot Speak About We Must Pass Over in Silence,□ in *Short Stories for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Topics for Further Study

Read about John Edgar Wideman's views on prison, social exclusion, and race, and write an essay showing how □What We Cannot Speak About We Must Pass Over in Silence□ explores these views.

Research African American and white people's views of aspects of the criminal justice system, such as interactions with police, the courts, and prisons. You may use written sources and/or interviews in your research. Write a report comparing African American views with white views.

Research the criminal justice systems of other cultures, whether historical or current. Write a report analyzing the advantages and disadvantages of the different systems, saying which aspects, if any, you would like to see adopted by current society.

Study the writings of people who are currently working for reform of the criminal justice system. Write a report on their views of what should be changed, and how, and finally, give your own views.

Research the correlations between poverty and crime. Write a report on your findings, drawing charts where appropriate.

Many people who work for reform of the criminal justice system draw attention to what they see as unfair differences in treatment of so-called black crime and white crime. Research this topic and write a report on your findings.

Study the work of a contemporary or historical writer or artist who is/was also a social activist. Write an essay analyzing their views and how their work relates to it. Discuss any of the social changes they pressed for which may have been brought about by the artist's work or other factors.

What Do I Read Next?

John Edgar Wideman's autobiographical work, *Brothers and Keepers* (1984), includes a portrait of his brother Robby, who is serving a life prison sentence for a murder committed during a robbery. Wideman seeks to understand how he and his brother could have such disparate lives after a childhood together in the ghetto of Homewood, Pittsburgh.

Nathan McCall's autobiographical work, *Makes Me Wanna Holler: A Young Black Man in America* (1994), recounts his life as a boy in a black neighborhood, his participation in violent crime, and his imprisonment for armed robbery. While in prison, he worked as a librarian, and on his release, he became a successful writer.

Michael Jacobson-Hardy's *Behind the Razor Wire: Portrait of a Contemporary American Prison System* (1998) is a book of uncompromising and revealing photographs and essays on the prison system. Included are essays by Angela Y. Davis (□A World Unto Itself: Multiple Invisibilities of Imprisonment□) and John Edgar Wideman (□Doing Time, Marking Race□).

Alan Elsner's *The Gates of Injustice: The Crisis in America's Prisons* (2004) is a devastating exposé of the prison industry. It recounts aspects of prison life, including drug and alcohol abuse, disease, rape, murder, and racism, and shows how a huge prison-industrial complex promotes imprisonment over other solutions.

Prison Nation: The Warehousing of America's Poor (2003), edited by Tara Herivel and Paul Wright, makes the case that the United States has an in-justice system at work which operates largely out of sight of the public. Shocking brutalities and mistreatments are recounted, as well as racist bias, inadequate medical care, abuses of prison labor, and the use of the restraint chair.

Further Study

Coleman, James W., *Blackness and Modernism*, University Press of Mississippi, 1989.

While this book was written long before Wideman wrote □What We Cannot Speak About We Must Pass Over in Silence□ and many of his other stories and novels, it remains a major critical source on his work.

Davis, Angela Y., *Are Prisons Obsolete*? Open Media, 2003.

In this book, African American activist and prison abolitionist Angela Y. Davis questions why two million Americans are behind bars and looks for her answer at the corporations that profit from prisons. Davis explores the question of racial bias in the criminal justice system, which has the effect of politically disenfranchising large numbers of ethnic minority voters.

Dyer, Joel, *The Perpetual Prison Machine: How America Profits from Crime*, Westview Press, 2001.

Dyer argues that the growing practice of turning over the running of prisons to private enterprise has led to cost-cutting, resulting in negligence, danger, violence, and escapes. He points out that the privatized prison industry has a vested interest in incarcerating ever-increasing numbers of people.

Ferranti, Seth M., *Prison Stories*, Gorilla Convict Publications, 2005.

This book, written by a prisoner, gives vivid, firsthand accounts of various aspects of prison life.

Mbalia, Doreatha D., *John Edgar Wideman: Reclaiming the African Personality*, Associated University Presses, 1995.

Mbalia argues that Wideman's earlier voice was characterized by the white Western culture in which he was immersed by his education but that in his later work he has rediscovered his African voice.

Ross, Jeffrey Ian, and Stephen C. Richards, *Behind Bars: Surviving Prison*, Alpha, 2002.

Protest groups often issue leaflets to their supporters, offering advice on what to do if they are arrested during a demonstration. This book, written by two criminologists, is a guidebook for surviving the criminal justice system, loosely modeled on those kinds of leaflets, though it covers crimes more serious than civil disobedience. The legal system the authors portray bears no resemblance to the one depicted in textbooks.

TuSmith, Bonnie, ed., *Conversations with John Edgar Wideman*, University Press of Mississippi, 1998.

In a series of interviews and articles spanning thirty-five years, Wideman discusses a variety of topics, from postmodernism to genocide, from fatherhood to basketball. He also reveals his artistic aims, techniques, and sources of inspiration.

Wice, Paul, B., *Rubin Hurricane Carter and the American Justice System*, Rutgers University Press, 2000.

Wice takes the famous story of Rubin Carter, a man sentenced to life in prison for a murder he did not commit, and scrutinizes the U.S. justice system as it handled his case. Of the many books about Rubin Carter's case, this one particularly works to show both the strengths and weaknesses of the American legal system.

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Eliot, T. S., *The Annotated Waste Land with Eliot's Contemporary Prose*, edited by Lawrence Rainey, Yale University Press, 2005, pp. 57, 75.

Freeman, John, □Wideman Short Stories Hit Nothing but Net,□ in *Seattle Times*, February 27, 2005, p. J10.

Nawotka, Ed, Review of *God's Gym*, in *People Weekly*, Vol. 63, No. 6, February 14, 2005, p. 60.

Rafferty, Terrence, □Pumping Irony,□ in *New York Times Book Review*, March 20, 2005, p. 20.

Review of *God's Gym*, in *Kirkus Reviews*, Vol. 72, No. 23, December 1, 2004, p. 1115.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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

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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Short Stories for Students

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

“Night.” Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234–35.

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

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

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

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

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

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

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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

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