A White Heron Study Guide

A White Heron by Sarah Orne Jewett

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Introduction

When "A White Heron" appeared in 1886 as the title story in Sarah Orne Jewett's collection *A White Heron and Other Stories,* the author was already established as one of the finest local color writers the United States had produced. This was Jewett's eighth published book, and she had enough influ-ence with her publisher, Houghton, Mifflin, to open the book with the story, although it had already been rejected by the *Atlantic Monthly* magazine as too sentimental and romantic. Jewett's instincts, in this case, were right. The story of a young forest-dwelling girl who must choose whether or not to tell a handsome young hunter the secret of where the rare white heron has its nest was immediately recognized by critics as a treasure; it has since become the most admired and most widely anthologized of Jewett's nearly 150 short stories. While some critics have faulted the story for its shifts in narrative point of view which they saw as lack on control on the author's part, others have praised Jewett's narrative shifts, which they find add an important dimension to the narrator's role. Over the past century critics have explored themes of good versus evil, flesh versus spirit, nature versus civilization, feminine versus masculine world view, and innocence versus experience in "A White Heron." Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, another well-regarded nineteenth-century New England writer, praised the story. An anonymous 1886 reviewer in the *Overland Monthly* called it "a tiny classic," and noted that its themes "never were interpreted with more beauty and insight."

Author Biography

Known primarily as a regional writer, Sarah Orne Jewett spent most of her life on the rugged Maine coast that is the setting for much of her work. She was born in South Berwick, Maine, on September 3 1849, one of three daughters of an old and prosperous New England family. Both of her parents were readers, and they wanted their daughters to be well-educated— somewhat uncommon in the nineteenth century. For a time, Jewett even considered becoming a physician like her father; however, poor health made it impossible for her to complete rigorous medical training. Instead, she turned to her talent for writing.

Jewett often accompanied her father on his rounds and loved to hear him talk about books and ideas. At age eighteen she published her first short story, a melodramatic tale of love. This early success led to what would be her true calling: writing honestly and simply about the richness and poignancy of the common folk of Maine. From the beginning, her focus was on lonely, misunderstood people, particularly women, and their relationships; her stories often have little in the way of exciting or dramatic plot and action but are nonetheless powerfully moving.

In 1878 Jewett's father died, and Jewett was left without her dearest friend, whom she later described in the novel *A Country Doctor* (1884). Shortly after her father's death she began an intimate and lifelong relationship with Annie Fields, the wife of publisher James T. Fields. Through the Fieldses, Jewett became acquainted with many of the most noted writers of the day, including Celia Thaxter, George Eliot, Henry James, and Nathaniel Hawthorne. After James Fields's death, Jewett and Annie became closer, forming what was known as a "Boston marriage;" they did not always share a home, but they were treated as a couple by their friends.

Jewett continued writing, attracting a larger audience as her stories appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* and *Harper's* magazines. "A White Heron," rejected by the *Atlantic Monthly* as too sentimental, was published first in Jewett's collection *A White Heron and Other Stories.* She wrote novels in addition to short stories but they were not as successful, with the exception of her greatest work, *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896), a series of sketches about the residents of a fictional coastal village. This novel solidified her reputation as one of the century's greatest regional writers.

Jewett gave up writing after a 1902 carriage accident left her in disabling pain. She had published more than 150 stories and four novels. She devoted her remaining years to Annie Fields and other friends, including the young writer Willa Cather. Cather credited Jewett with influencing her to write about her home, Nebraska. Cather's first Nebraska novel, *O Pioneers!* (1913), was dedicated to Jewett, who had died in South Berwick on June 24, 1909.

Plot Summary

"A White Heron" begins on a June evening near the Maine coast. As the sun sets, nine-year-old Sylvia drives home a cow, her "valued companion." The child has no other playmates, and enjoys these evening walks with the cow, Mistress Moolly, and the hide-and-seek games the cow plays to escape being caught. It has taken an unusually long time to find the cow this night, and Sylvia hopes her grandmother, Mrs. Tilley, will not be worried. But Mrs. Tilley knows that Sylvia never hurries these walks, because she so loves wandering in the woods. After living her first eight years in a crowded and noisy city with her parents, Sylvia has found her true home with her grandmother in the country. Although she is afraid of people, "there never was such a child for straying about out-of-doors since the world was made!"

As the two companions approach the farm, Sylvia listens to the birds and squirrels preparing for night, cools her tired feet in the brook, and thinks about how different her life is now from when she lived in the city. Just as she remembers uneasily a city boy who used to chase and frighten her, she is startled to hear whistling not far off. This is not the pleasant and friendly whistling of a bird, but the "determined, and somewhat aggressive" whistling of a boy. Before she can conceal herself in the woods, she encounters a tall young man with a gun, who asks her for directions to the road. He has been hunting for birds, and is lost.

Confused and frightened, Sylvia leads the hunter to the farm, where Mrs. Tilley offers him a bed for the night. The young man introduces himself as an ornithologist gathering specimens for his collection. He is surprised to see how clean and cozy the homestead is, delights in his simple meal, and sits on the doorstep listening to the grandmother chatter about her home and family. Sylvia, she explains, most resembles her Uncle Dan, who knew the woods intimately and was a good enough hunter that Mrs. Tilley always had a bit of meat on the table. The hunter is excited to learn that Sylvia, sitting silently and sleepily through the conversation, knows the woods and knows about birds. He has spotted a rare white heron in the area, and would like to add it to his collection.

Sylvia is only half-listening to the man speak; she is more interested in watching a small toad hopping on the path. But when he describes the bird he is looking for, she recognizes it as one she has watched and dreamed about. Its home is near the salt marshes, near the sea, which she has never seen. He offers Sylvia ten dollars (a large sum for such a poor family in the nineteenth century) if she will show him the heron's nest.

The next morning, Sylvia and the hunter set out on a ramble through the woods. Gradually, she loses her fear of her new friend, although she recoils when he brings birds down with his gun. As they wander, he leads the way and does all the talking. Although she knows the area and he is a stranger, she is content to follow and to listen. Her " woman's heart" is being vaguely awakened by the young man, and she begins to see what romantic love might be. Evening comes without the pair seeing the heron, and together they find the cow and drive her home.

Sylvia does not sleep that night, for she is making a plan to please her new friend. Before sunrise, she steals out of the house and runs to an old pine, the tallest tree in the forest. From the top of this tree, she has often thought, one could see the sea, and perhaps she can see the heron's nest from there. As she climbs, birds and squirrels scold her, and thorns grab at her. But she does not turn back.

She watches the sunrise from her perch, and at last sees what she is looking for: the white heron and its nest. But when she returns to the farm she does not reveal what she has seen. The hunter goes away, disappointed, and Sylvia loses her first human friend.

The story closes with the narrator addressing nature directly, asking it to bless this young girl—who has given up her chance to love the young man "as a dog loves" —and to share its "gifts and graces" with "this lonely country child."

Section 1

Section 1 Summary

"A White Heron," written by Sarah Orne Jewett is a short story is about love, companionship, and choice, first published in 1886. The story takes place in the woods during a summer evening in June as a young girl is walking her cow home through the dark woods. The girl, Sylvia, performs this task with regularity because the cow often hides away. The cow even holds itself still so that it does not disturb the bell around its neck. The child puts up with the cow's behavior because it provides good and plentiful milk. Sylvia does not have anything better to do with her time than watching over Mistress Moolly, the cow.

Sylvia wonders if her grandmother, Mrs. Tilley, will be upset that she is late coming home with Mrs. Moolly. Mrs. Tilley had chosen Sylvia the previous year from the large brood of her grandchildren. At that time, Sylvia was eight years old and had spent her entire life in a small manufacturing town. However, the moment Sylvia saw the farm, she fell in love and knew she would never want to leave.

The sound of a loud whistle pulls Sylvia from her thoughts. She looks up with fear as she realizes it belongs to a young man holding a gun. The young man acts friendly, and he asks if the road is far away. He is not from this area, and he is lost. He asks Sylvia if she thinks it would be all right if he spent the night at her house if he leaves very early the next morning to go bird hunting. Sylvia is afraid of the stranger and hopes that her grandmother does not blame her for bringing him home.

Mrs. Tilley is waiting for her granddaughter as the pair and cow clear the woods. The stranger introduces himself to the older woman and asks if he may spend the evening in her home. The grandmother is happy to help the young man in any way. She is hospitable and chatty as the three have dinner. Sylvia's fear of the stranger slowly dissipates as she listens to him speak to her grandmother.

The stranger, who is an ornithologist, mentions that he is on vacation hunting birds. Since he was a young boy he has hunted, stuffed, and collected birds. He only needs a few elusive birds to complete his collection. He has just seen one of these rare birds, the white heron. Mrs. Tilley uses this opportunity to brag about her granddaughter, mentioning that the young girl is very good with all sorts of animals and knows her way around the farm quite well. At this, the young man announces that he would be willing to pay ten dollars to anyone who will lead him to the white heron's nest. Sylvia's heartbeat quickens when she hears this. She had discovered the beautiful white heron one day while she was out exploring. Although she has some idea of where to find the bird, she does not know where its nest is actually located. Sylvia doesn't mention that she does not know where the nest is, and she continues to watch a toad as she listens to the adults talk.

The next day the young man spends the day hunting in the woods and Sylvia tags along. He teaches her things about the birds they see and gives her a jackknife. The young girl knows that she will treasure the small present and feels love for the young man. However, she would like him much more if he did not carry a gun. It is because of this that she does not lead the young man; rather she only follows where he goes. When evening arrives, the pair gathers the cow and head towards the farm home.

Section 1 Analysis

The exposition introduces the main character and setting of the short story. The setting is a quiet, isolated forest. The isolation of the woods is mirrored in the isolation of the young girl. Sylvia's only friend is a wayward cow and the only other human interaction she has is with her grandmother. The way in which her grandmother "chose her" from her mother alludes to a bad or neglectful childhood.

As Sylvia walks through the woods, she encounters a young man, a stranger. She is immediately fearful of this stranger and does not like the fact that he carries a gun. The fact that she is overly fearful of this stranger is further testament to the degree of loneliness and isolation Sylvia feels.

The stranger is very mysterious and never reveals his name. The grandmother's kindness and hospitality toward this stranger symbolize how sharing and caring the older woman is. She takes in the stranger just as she took in her granddaughter a year ago. Although Sylvia's apprehension toward the stranger wanes throughout the night, she keeps silent as the two talk about birds and her possible knowledge of the white heron's nest. The fact that Sylvia has information that the young man wants and that he is willing to give her and her grandmother money in exchange foreshadows an important choice the young girl will have to make.

The next day it is apparent that Sylvia has not yet made the choice. She does not lead the young hunter to the marsh, where she believes the white heron lives. Rather she follows the young man around like a puppy dog. She sees him as a friend and develops a schoolgirl crush on him. The only thing that she does not like about him is the fact that he carries a gun. She never wavers from this position.

Section 2

Section 2 Summary

As the pair walk, Sylvia spots the familiar tall pine standing a half a mile from the house. The tree is not of this generation. It is as if all of the other trees of its time had fallen dead and only this one was left. For years, people-Sylvia included-have been using this tree as a landmark. The young girl has often thought of the tall, towering tree and believes that one could see the ocean from the top. She often touches the base of the tree and imagines the view. Today, however, is different. For today, she not only thought of the ocean, but also the location of the white heron's nest. If one climbed the tree early in the morning, surely they could see all over the land and find the elusive nest.

Sylvia is so filled with excitement over her plan that she cannot sleep that night. Sylvia sneaks out of the house while the stranger and her grandmother sleep. She is afraid that morning will come too swiftly and she will miss it, so she walks toward the tall tree. The young girl has never before felt as much anticipation as she does now, for she had always lead a quite uneventful life. Finally, she makes it to the great tree. As she looks up, she plans her journey up the tree. Wasting no time, Sylvia walks to the neighboring tree and begins to climb. She has climbed in this area many times before and knows that the white oak meets up with the great tall tree. The exchange from tree to tree is daring and very tricky; however, Sylvia makes the pass without incident.

Now climbing the old pine tree, she advances quickly, yet carefully. Her heart beats wildly in her chest with anticipation. Finally, she reaches the top of the great, tall pine tree. She is up in the clouds with the sighing hawks and she does indeed see the ocean. Looking to the west, she sees the woods and farms stretching as far as the eye can see. Amongst the farms are small churches and tiny villages. Sylvia searches for the green marsh where she had last seen the white heron. At last, she spots the bird rising from the marshes. It swoops past the young girl to rest on a nearby tree. Sylvia watches and listens as the bird talks with its mate and grooms his feathers. She sits, perched at the top of the pine tree, watching the graceful bird until a bunch of loud screeching birds interrupts the silence. The young girl makes her way back down the tree. The journey down is more arduous since it is not lightened by the excitement of the unknown.

Sylvia's grandmother cries out her name upon discovering that the child is not asleep in her bed. At the noise, the visitor wakes up and dresses quickly. He knows that Sylvia has been hiding the fact that she has seen the bird and knows where it nests. Surely, by now, Sylvia will be ready to share her secrets. Just then Sylvia appears, looking mussed and dirty. Together the stranger and Mrs. Tilley question Sylvia about her morning adventure.

The young girl does not speak of what she has found. Her grandmother urges her to tell her secrets, and the young man looks at her with kind eyes. The man is willing to make

Sylvia and her grandmother rich and they desperately need the money. Sylvia also has the ability to make the young man immensely happy. Still, she keeps her silence. She does not know why she feels compelled to protect this bird, yet she suddenly decides that the bird is more important than money or the young man's happiness at killing the beautiful creature.

Sylvia feels a painful pang of remorse over the absence of the young man. She would have followed him and been his loyal companion. Sometimes she even hears his whistle while she is in the woods, walking Mistress Moolly. This feeling of sadness leaves her as she remembers the sound of his gun as he shot down another lovely bird. She wonders if she has correctly chosen the birds instead of the hunter for a friend.

Section 2 Analysis

It is not until late in the day, after her feelings of love and friendship for the young man have formed, that she concocts the plan to climb the tall pine tree. The fact that she plans to ascertain the location of the white heron's nest for the young man symbolizes her desire to make him happy. This is the most dangerous and exciting thing that she has ever thought of doing, and she cannot sleep as she is so anxious. Again, this is proof that her life so far has been very dull and lonely. The climax of the story takes place when Sylvia finally makes it to the top of the old pine tree. She is one with the clouds and there is a feeling of freedom that Sylvia has never experienced. She sees the white heron's beauty close-up. The fact that she is perched up in the tree, like a bird, symbolizes the kinship she feels with the creature.

The feeling that the stranger, who inexplicably still remains at Mrs. Tilley's house, expresses about Sylvia is very telling. He believes Sylvia can lead him to the elusive white heron. There is a foreboding sense that the young man has been purposely nice to Sylvia, pretending to be her friend, so that she will tell him her secrets.

Suddenly, and to the surprise of Mrs. Tilley and the stranger, Sylvia decides not to reveal the location of the white heron. Her choice is made. She chooses the white heron and its life over the friendship of the young man. Sylvia's choice is an ultimate self-sacrifice for her, because the one thing she desires more than anything else is friendship. Her choice causes her to forfeit any friendship she might have had with the young man, but it allows her to remain friendly with the nature that surrounds her.

Characters

Hunter

The hunter is heard before he is seen, whistling in a "determined, and somewhat aggressive" manner, in contrast to the birdsong that fills the air. He carries a gun and a heavy sack full of dead birds. He is an ornithologist proud of his collection of birds, "stuffed and preserved, dozens and dozens of them." Still, he is friendly and kind, if somewhat smug about his wealth and sophistication, and Sylvia is both attracted to and somewhat afraid of him. He is so eager to collect a white heron that he offers Sylvia ten dollars (a sum that means little to him but a great deal to her) if she will lead him to the bird. As they walk through the woods together, the two seem to take equal pleasure in the birds they see— Sylvia for their living beauty, and the hunter for their rarity and usefulness to him as trophies. Not much is known about the young man, who, appropriately, is never named. It is not his individuality, but what he represents: masculinity, acquisitiveness, romantic love— that matters.

Sylvia

Nine-year-old Sylvia is a true child of nature. Her name, "Sylvia," and her nickname, "Sylvy," come from the Latin *silva* meaning "wood" or "forest." She lives with her grandmother on an isolated farm in rural Maine, and she rarely sees other people. She remembers the early years of her life, when she lived in a noisy manufacturing town, as a frightening time, and she never wants to return. When a hunter comes looking for a white heron, she enjoys the company of another person for the first time and is puzzled by the conflicting emotions he stirs in her. He offers desperately needed money and also represents her first chance at friendship or romantic love. She alone can give him the bird he seeks. What she must decide is whether what he can give her is worth the betrayal of her relationship with nature. In the end, she does not reveal the heron's nesting place.

Mrs. Tilley

Mrs. Tilley is Sylvia's maternal grandmother. A year before the story opens, she traveled to the city to bring one of her daughter's children back to help her on the farm. That child was Sylvia, who has grown to love the forest. Mrs. Tilley has lost four children, and her two remaining adult children live far away. She appreciates Sylvia's help and company and lets her wander freely.

Themes

Flesh vs. Spirit

When an appealing ornithologist comes to the Maine woods, young Sylvia must decide whether to please her new friend by showing him the nesting place of the heron he wishes to kill for his collection, or remain loyal to her animal companions. Although the nine-year-old girl would never consider her situation in these terms, the decision Sylvia must make is the choice between flesh and spirit— between earthly human pleasures and the natural world. The narrator states the conflict in a sigh directed at the reader: "Alas, if the great wave of human interest which flooded for the first time this dull little life should sweep away the satisfaction of an existence heart to heart with nature and the dumb life of the forest!" The hunter's presence represents two aspects of fleshly desire. First, he offers Sylvia ten dollars if she will betray the heron. Although the sum seems to mean little to him, for Sylvia it is a great temptation: "He can make them rich with money; he has promised it, and they are poor now." When he first offers the money, her head swims in confusion as she thinks of all she might buy. She is dazed and confused for the rest of the story, until the moment she decides not to tell the secret. Secondly, the hunter represents— albeit in a subtle way for the young girl— the fleshly temptations of sex. It is his maleness she responds to, as "the woman's heart, asleep in the child, [is] vaguely thrilled by a dream of love." When Sylvia decides to keep her secret, she chooses grace over treasure, as the narrator's final plea to the natural world emphasizes: "Whatever treasures were lost to her. . . bring your gifts and graces . . . to this lonely country child!"

Rites of Passage

Sylvia's movement toward her decision follows the typical pattern of the hero story or the *Bildungsroman.* Before Sylvia can move from innocence to maturity, or from common mortal to hero, she must undergo a ritual test to prove her worthiness and strength. The girl feels at home in the forest— she does not wish to leave— and at times she feels as one with the natural world. But her relationship to nature has never been tested. Appropriately, her test takes the form of a literal climb to a higher place, from where she can see the world. When she approaches the highest tree where the land is highest, "the last of its generation," she does not know what she will do. She has often thought that from the top of this tree she might see the ocean, but she has never dared. Jewett presents this climb in the language of the hero myth: "What a spirit of adventure, what wild ambition! What fancied triumph and delight and glory." As Sylvia begins "with utmost bravery to mount to the top of it" the birds and squirrels scold her, the thorns and twigs seem to intentionally grab at her. But as she climbs on resolutely, the great tree itself assumes an active role in helping her, until at last she is at the top: "Sylvia's face was like a pale star, if one had seen it from the ground . . . and she stood trembling and tired and wholly triumphant." But the test is not yet over. Sylvia still thinks that what she has achieved, she has achieved for the hunter. She expects to return to

him, claim the money, claim his love and admiration. She is surprised to find (although the reader is not) that in the end she cannot reveal the heron's nesting place. She has completed the test and come out the other side a stronger, wiser, more mature person. Typical of the young hero, however, she has gone through the rites of passage though she does not yet know the extent of her own power.

Style

Narrator/Point of View

Of all the technical aspects of this story, that of a young girl who must choose between revealing the location of a heron's nest to an appealing ornithologist and protecting the bird, none has proven more problematic to critics than point of view. Many readers have seen Jewett's abrupt and dramatic changes in point of view as a weakness and a sign of immature talent; however, more recently, readers have seen the shifts as intentional and effective. The story is told by an omniscient third-person narrator, that is, a narrator who is not present as a character in the story, but who looks out or down on the events and who can see more than the characters themselves see. This narrator sees more deeply into (or shows more interest in) Sylvia's thoughts and feelings than into the other characters'. Nothing is shown of the hunter's or Mrs. Tilley's thoughts beyond what they demonstrate through their words and actions. The narrator tells most of the story in the past tense, but three times shifts to present tense: when Sylvia first hears the hunter approaching ("this little woods-girl is horror-stricken"), when she has spotted the heron's nest ("she knows his secret now"), and when she finds that she cannot reveal the secret ("Sylvia does not speak after all"). These moments give an immediacy that is sharp but that does not last. Each time, the narrator backs up again and stands at a distance. At times detachment falls away completely, and the narrator addresses Sylvia ("look down again, Sylvia") or nature ("woodlands and summer-time, remember") directly; it feels as though the reader, too, were on the scene, watching and hoping. Gayle Smith finds in this mingling of past and present, of memory and experience, of detachment and involvement an example of Jewett's using language to show the transcendence of Sylvia's connection with nature.

Setting

Setting is important in "A White Heron," because it is Sylvia's close connection with nature that sets her apart from other people. Fittingly, the name "Sylvia" comes from the Latin *silva,* meaning "wood" or "forest," and the story takes place in the woods, far from the noisy city where Sylvia was born, and near the vast ocean that, until the story begins, she has never seen. "There ain't a foot o' ground she don't know her way over," and she knows the birds and animals, so she is the perfect guide for the hunter. However, when the two go out together, the young man leads the way. Here, the setting underscores the power differences between the two. The hunter chooses Sylvia specifically because she knows the scene, yet he guides her through it. The nearness of the coast is also important, because it is when the girl reaches the top of the old pine and can see the ocean and "the white sails of ships out at sea" that she realizes that this "vast and awesome world" is hers, and she has found it alone. She does not need the young man to show her the world; this "wonderful sight and pageant of the world" is before her. The time of the story is important as well. In the late nineteenth century, one could easily imagine a girl living in rural isolation, seeing few people other than her

grandmother, and one could guess at how exciting and confusing a visitor offering money might be. Sylvia's innocence of the technological world is essential; she must be wholly in nature because that is where she belongs, yet it must seem unremarkable that she has never seen the sea.

Anthropomorphism

Throughout the first half of "A White Heron," the forest in which Sylvia lives is an ordinary forest, although her connection to it is clearly deeper than other people's. It contains trees and animals and bird songs of the expected kinds, and even the birds feeding out of her hands seem rare but not fantastic. But when she begins to climb the old pine tree, the tree is presented as an active, sentient being: "it must truly have been amazed that morning," "The old pine must have loved his new dependent." This anthropomorphism, or the attributing of human characteristics to nonhuman beings, is used to high light Sylvia's extraordinary oneness with nature. Where at first the tree only seems "to lengthen itself out" as she climbs, by the time she reaches the top the tree's sentience is clear. The narrator does not say that the tree seems to hold the wind away from Sylvia, or that Sylvia imagines it holds back the wind; the bold statement is that "the tree stood still and held away the winds." The increasing anthropomorphism echoes Sylvia's increasing knowledge and power as she climbs.

Pathetic Fallacy

Closely related to anthropomorphism, the pathetic fallacy, or the assumption by the narrator that nature itself has human feeling and cares about human suffering, is used at the end of "A White Heron" when the narrator addresses nature directly on behalf of Sylvia. A direct address to "woodlands and summer-time" seems quaint to modern readers, but Jewett leads up to it by increasing the narrator's and the reader's involvement throughout the second half of the story. After the great tree has actively assisted Sylvia in her climb, and after her oneness with nature has been confirmed by her refusal to divulge the nesting place, it does not seem a great stretch of the imagination for the narrator to beg of nature itself: "Bring your gifts and graces and tell your secrets to this lonely country child!"

For early readers, the story was seen mostly as an admirable example of local color writing. The local color movement, which reached its peak in the United States in the 1880s, tried to capture the mannerisms, peculiar speech, dress, and customs of a particular region of the country. Some of its most successful proponents were Mark Twain, Joel Chandler Harris, Bret Harte, and Sarah Orne Jewett. Local color writing was thought to be less serious than other types of fiction, written primarily to be entertaining, even amusing. This is not to say that these writings were not of high quality, but readers did not generally look to them for deep issues and ideas.

By the 1920s, scholars began to take Jewett's work more seriously, following the lead of Willa Cather, who in her introduction to an edition of *The Best Short Stories of Sarah*

Orne Jewett ranked Jewett with Nathaniel Hawthorne and Mark Twain. Commentators began to look again at the short stories and find in them issues of broad significance. While Jewett was still regarded as one of the greatest of the local color writers, she was also noted for the sophisticated way in which she dealt with the conflicts brought about by industrialization and capitalism. No important criticism of her work appeared in the 1930s or 1940s, but "A White Heron" continued to appear in anthologies and textbooks, and was often cited in literary histories as one of the finest examples of the American short story.

Historical Context

Advancements for Women

The end of the nineteenth century brought many new opportunities for women in the United States and other industrializing countries, and Sarah Orne Jewett took full advantage of them. In 1848, just one year before Jewett was born, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott and others had organized the famous Women's Rights Convention at Seneca Falls, New York. By the time Jewett graduated from Berwick Academy in 1866, women were being granted certificates to practice medicine (for a time, a dream of Jewett's), they were being admitted to universities, and led by Stanton, Mott, and Susan B. Anthony, they had formed the American Equal Rights Association dedicated to winning the vote for women and for African Americans. For the first time in American society, women were gradually and grudgingly allowed into full participation as citizens and as professionals.

Equally important for Jewett, women were beginning to enjoy a wider range of "acceptable" personal lifestyles. Married women could have careers, as in Louisa May Alcott's *Jo's Boys,* published in 1886, the same year as "A White Heron." But it was no longer taken for granted, at least among urban upper-class society, that every woman would marry as soon as she could and live out her life as an unequal partner to a man, with no property rights and no protection should the marriage prove unhappy. For Jewett and others, there was the possibility of living an independent life, outside the traditional patriarchal structure. Women could have careers and earn enough money to support themselves. And, although there were no public and political organizations for lesbians in the nineteenth century, many women like Jewett felt free to discreetly devote their emotional energy to other women. The idea of the "Boston marriage," or the intimate association of two women, was recognized and accepted, though not openly discussed.

All of this plays an important role in Jewett's writings, which tend to focus on independent-minded women struggling with or rejecting men. Jewett wrote several stories and novels about women doctors— impossible at an earlier time. And even many of her rural people, like Mrs. Tilley and Sylvia, live full lives without male associates. When Sylvia rejects the hunter, whom she perceives as a suitor, she is claiming her independence from male-dominated society, just as Jewett and many of her contemporaries were able to do. She "could have served and followed him and loved him as a dog loves," but in this new era she has other choices.

Industrialization

In large cities, manufacturing jobs were plentiful but dangerous, as corporate heads needed more and more cheap labor to keep the factories running. Laborers often went on strike to fight for better working conditions. In New York City, streetcar workers tied

up the city for days in 1886 with a strike; finally they settled for a twelve-hour workday with a half-hour lunch break. New processes for working with metals were developed, the internal combustion engine was perfected, home products like Johnson's Wax and Avon cosmetics became available, and big department stores like Bloomingdale's opened their doors. It was still common in the countryside, however, for people to live simple lives of subsistence farming, without the benefits or hazards of industrial life.

The Growing Conservation Movement

By the late nineteenth century, what had once seemed a vast and limitless continent was now being recognized as fragile and in need of protection. Pollution in the cities like Sylvia's "crowded manufacturing town" was uncontrolled and much worse than it was a century later. The great buffalo herds had been greatly reduced, and their decimation was widely observed in popular songs and tales. Forests were being cut down at an alarming rate, bolstered by the Timber Culture Act of 1878 which permitted the clearing of public lands. A fledgling conservation movement had begun, targeting the preservation of forests and wildlife.

The woods where Sylvia lives are second-growth forest, but it is in the old-growth great pine, "the last of its generation," where she finds wisdom: "Whether it was left for a boundary mark, or for what reason, no one could say; the woodchoppers who had felled its mates were dead and gone long ago." Jewett uses a symbol, a rare old tree, to underscore the value of preserving the land.

The heron, too, is rare and in danger. According to George Held, the bird Jewett would have had in mind was the snowy egret, whose feathers were much in demand for trimming ladies' hats. It was nearly extinct by 1900, and federally protected in 1913.

Critical Overview

In his 1962 *Sarah Orne Jewett,* the first book-length study devoted to the writer, Richard Cary identified Sylvia's rite of initiation as "an arduous journey of self-discovery and maturity." This theme of the rite of passage was explored by critics over the next three decades. Catherine B. Sherman read the story as a miniature *Bildungsroman,* a story of the development of a young person into adulthood, along the lines of Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield.* Kelley Griffith, Jr. took the theme one step further, and found in the story an echo of the archetypal myth of the hero. Sylvia, she wrote in the *Colby Library Quarterly* in 1985, "becomes a traditional hero who makes a quest after a much desired object." Elizabeth Ammons, also writing in the *Colby Library Quarterly,* compared the story's construction to that of a fairy tale.

Two issues have drawn the greatest attention from critics, and divided them the most sharply: the meaning of Sylvia's rejection of the hunter, and Jewett's shifts in narrative stance. Eugene Hillhouse Pool believed that Jewett's own refusal to marry stemmed from an immature attachment to her father, and considered her attachment to Annie Fields a poor second to marriage. Perhaps, he argued in the *Colby Library Quarterly* in 1967, the short story was so popular because "it is the expression of a situation closely paralleling her own personal problems, and thus contains her deepest feeling." By contrast, Ammons called the story "an anti-bildungsroman. It is a rite-of-passage story in which the heroine refuses to make the passage." For Ammons and other feminist critics (including George Held, whose 1982 *Colby Library Quarterly* article saw Sylvia growing into "a woman committed to values that will allow her to be her natural self"), refusal to marry was not a sign of immaturity but a mature choice. In Ammons words, Sylvia "chooses the world of her grandmother, a place defined as free, healthy and 'natural' in this story, over the world of heterosexual favor and violence represented by the hunter."

The matter of shifts in narrative stance has likewise been controversial. It was seen first as a weakness, by such critics as Cary, who commented that the story contains "too much jostling in the presentation to be worthy of the label 'perfect.'" More recently, the shifting has been regarded as an interesting and effective choice by critics including Michael Atkinson, who in a 1982 article in the *Colby Library Quarterly* found that the narrator's loss of detachment echoes the reader's own, and Gayle L. Smith, who described the high language as the "language of transcendence," also in the *Colby Library Quarterly,* in 1983.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
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Critical Essay #1

Bily currently teaches at Adrian College. In the following essay, she examines the universal themes that Jewett uses in "A White Heron."

To her contemporaries, Sarah Orne Jewett was primarily a local color writer. Her stories and novels were peopled with typical villagers speaking in dialect, going about their daily work as country doctors or farmers or seafarers, moving about among the flora and fauna and landscape of New England. As a young avid reader, Jewett had admired the work of Harriet Beecher Stowe, especially her depictions of the common folk of the South, with their strengths and short comings. One of Jewett's aims as a writer was to present the people of her native Maine in the same honest and respectful light. But if her characters' speech and dress and mannerisms were identifiably regional, their concerns and problems were not. Like all the best local color writing, Jewett's fiction uses regional settings, but explores themes that are universal.

Most of Jewett's central characters are women, and they usually operate to some extent out of the bustle of mainstream society: they are not young women having dramatic adventures and finding husbands, but spinsters and widows and children and professional women leading quiet, sometimes lonely, lives. Their conflicts are internal, their support is mainly from other women, their arena is domestic. It has often been observed that fiction with a male protagonist is considered suitable for all to read, but fiction about women is "women's fiction." Perhaps this accounts in part for Jewett's having been treated as second-rate, although in the century since it was written *The Country of the Pointed Firs* has never been allowed to go out of print, and "A White Heron" has been anthologized dozens of times.

The story of "A White Heron" revolves around a conflict, a choice a young girl must make between listening to an external voice and heeding an internal one. It is the story of nine-year-old Sylvia, who lives in the Maine woods with her grandmother, Mrs. Tilley. The two women (if the word can be used to describe a nine-year-old) appear to have no near neighbors, and there is no family around. Sylvia's parents and siblings live in a "crowded manufacturing town" from which Mrs. Tilley rescued Sylvia a year before, and Sylvia has known from the day she arrived on the farm that "she never should wish to go home." Whatever men were once on the farm have wandered off or died. So the two women are alone, with only a cow, Mistress Moolly, for companionship. For Sylvia, the cow is a true "valued companion," giving "good milk and plenty of it," and offering an excuse for lingering walks through the woods between the pasture and home. Sylvia and her grandmother have plenty to eat and a "clean and comfortable little dwelling." They want for nothing. As Elizabeth Ammons describes it, it is a "rural paradise," a mythical woman-dominated Eden.

If the forest home has overtones of fantasy or myth, so too is Sylvia a most unnaturally natural child. Although born and raised in the city, her true home is in the forest (even her name is from the Latin for "wood"). Mrs. Tilley observes, "There ain't a foot o' ground she don't know her way over, and the wild creatur's counts her one o' themselves.

Squer'ls she'll tame to come an' feed right out o' her hands, and all sorts o' birds." She is "afraid of folks," but she is not afraid to be in the woods after dark, even hearing the animals calling and rustling. Rather than causing fear, she listens to the bird calls "with a heart that beat fast with pleasure"; it makes her feel "as if she were a part of the gray shadows and moving leaves." Interestingly, the only thing that does disturb her in the forest is the memory from her city days of "the great red-faced boy who used to chase and frighten her."

Startling Sylvia out of this memory is the "determined, and somewhat aggressive" sound and then the appearance of another male, "the enemy," a handsome young man with a gun over his shoulder and a "heavy game bag." He is an ornithologist, a scientist who studies birds, and he is spending his vacation in the woods hunting for new specimens for his collection of "stuffed and preserved" birds. Sylvia responds to his friendliness by withdrawing. She can barely speak (she says only four words throughout the story), she does not "dare to look boldly" at him, she hangs her head "as if the stem of it were broken," she is "alarmed," "trembling." Mrs. Tilley, on the other hand, leaps to offer the guest a meal, his choice of bedding, and lively chatter about the farm, her lost family, and Sylvia. As the three "new friends" sit in the doorway after supper, Mrs. Tilley and the hunter chat. She tells him about her son Dan, who was so good with his gun that "I never wanted for pa'tridges or gray squer'ls while he was to home." The man talks about his own hunting, not for food, but for specimens for his collection. Mrs. Tilley is enjoying the man's company, but Sylvia avoids focusing on him, and pretends to be more interested in watching a hop-toad on the path.

The hunter is everything Sylvia is not. He is friendly and outgoing, while she is "afraid of folks." He has traveled freely, while Sylvia has "wondered and dreamed about" but never seen the ocean just a few miles away. (Mrs. Tilley, too, has always stayed close to home, but "I'd ha' seen the world myself if it had been I could.") He seems to have plenty of money, and offers ten dollars for the secret of where the white heron nests, but for Sylvia "no amount of thought . . . could decide how many wished-for treasures then ten dollars, so lightly spoken of, would buy."

It is no wonder that Sylvia is confused. As her fear evaporates, she finds that he is "most kind and sympathetic." They walk through the woods together, watching the birds, listening to their songs. Her "woman's heart, asleep in the child, [is] vaguely thrilled by a dream of love." And yet there are uneasy moments. It does not trouble the girl, but the narrator notices that although they are in the woods Sylvia knows every foot of, the youngman always leads the way, and Sylvia follows. He does most the of talking; "The sound of her own unquestioned voice would have terrified her — it was hard enough to answer yes or know when there was need of that." Like the girl, the youngman admires birds, but he shows his admiration by killing them. The only times she is afraid with him now is when he kills "some unsuspecting creature." She is never one with the hunter, never on equal footing. Can the young child recognize that the hunter values Sylvia for the same reason he values the white heron: because in her special knowledge of the woods and the birds she is rare, and therefore useful?

The action of the story comes down to a choice for Sylvia. Having more knowledge than the hunter, she must choose whether to make him happy by telling him where the heron's nest is (and he "is so well worth making happy") or keep the secret to herself. Critics have offered many different interpretations about the meaning of this choice. The hunter offers a chance for money, for fulfilled womanhood, for human companionship, for sex. (Although Kelley Griffith, Jr. points out the inherent absurdity in assuming that this temporary partnership between the man and the child could become permanent.) Whatever he represents, it is clear that if Sylvia chooses him she will lose something of herself. She can remain a "lonely country child," or she can serve, follow, and love him "as a dog loves."

What Sylvia finds at the top of the tree is the world, and her place in it. George Held points out that the offer of money separates Sylvia for the first time from the natural world. As she climbs, the connection is restored. Watching the two hawks, "Sylvia felt as if she too could go flying away among the clouds." Back on the ground, when it is time to tell the secret, "she remembers how the white heron came flying through the golden air and how they watched the sea and the morning together." Sylvia knows where she belongs, she knows what she is complete with and whom she would always follow. And she has seen "the vast and awesome world" without anyone's help.

So Sylvia makes her choice. As Griffith explains, it is a limited triumph, "such a choice is fraught with risk— the risk of loneliness, isolation, disappointment, limited opportunity, and doubt." Having gone through this experience, Sylvia, who had seemed content to live without human companionship, is now a "lonely country child."

What is remarkable about "A White Heron" is how well it has spoken to readers of different generations. When Jewett wrote the story in the 1880s, she was concerned by the decimation of the New England forests and the over-collecting of certain animals, including the heron. These concerns resurfaced in the United States in the 1970s, and gave readers an important look at environmental issues. Feminist concerns that faded from public consciousness after women's suffrage in the 1920s reappeared in the 1970s, and growing public discussion about sexual orientation gave critics new ways to look at the story and at Jewett's life. Of course, archetypal themes of good versus evil, flesh versus spirit, money versus grace, have always been with us. Jewett's great talent was in creating characters and relationships so rich that they have touched readers' hearts and minds for over a century.

Source: Cynthia Bily, "Overview of 'A White Heron'," in *Short Stories for Students,* Gale, 1998.

Critical Essay #2

In the following excerpt, Ammons shares her interpretation of how natural images are used to develop the theme of feminism in Jewett's "A White Heron."

Let us imagine that we live in a culture where time is a cycle, where the sand dollar lies beside its fossil (as it does). Where everything is seen to return, as the birds return to sight with the movement of the waves. As I return to the beach, again and again.

Imagine that in that returning nothing stands outside; the bird is not separate from the wave but both are part of the same rhythm. Imagine that I know— not with my intellect but in my body, my heart— that I do not stand separate from the sand dollar or the fossil; that the slow forces that shaped the life of one and preserved the other under the deep pressure of settling mud for cycles upon cycles are the same forces that have formed my life; that when I hold the fossil in my hand I am looking into a mirror. . . . We are aware of the world as returning, the forms of our thoughts flow in circles, spirals, webs; they weave and dance, honoring the links, the connections, the patterns, the changes, so that nothing can be removed from its context (Starhawk, *Dreaming the Dark: Magic, Sex and Politics,* 1982, pp. 15-16).

And now let us imagine that into this web— into this timeless cycle of birds and waves— walks a man with a gun.

I start with this quotation from the witch Starhawk because I want to suggest that "A White Heron," on one level an interesting but "easy" story about the irreconcilable conflict between opposing sets of values: urban/rural, scientific/ intuitional, civilized/natural, masculine/feminine, on a deeper level represents as radical— as sinister— a challenge to complacent heterosexual ideology as do the imaginings of a witch such as Starhawk. Indeed, it will be my contention that the arguments of "A White Heron" and of Starhawk, "birds" separated by a century (Jewett's story was published in 1886, Starhawk's book in 1982), have things in common. Specifically, after talking briefly about "A White Heron" as creation myth and as historical commentary, I will be arguing three things: that "A White Heron" is a story about resistance to heterosexuality; that the form Jewett adopts to express her idea is, quite appropriately, the fairy tale; and that despite her protests to the contrary Jewett shows in this fiction her ability to create conventional "plot" — that is, to use inherited masculine narrative shape— when she needs to.

Perhaps the most obvious meaning of "A White Heron" comes from the female creation, or recreation, myth Jewett offers. The story presents a little girl whose world is entirely female. No brother, father, uncle, or grandfather lives in it; the men have feuded and left or died. Only she and her grandmother inhabit the rural paradise to which the child was removed after spending the first eight years of her life in a noisy manmade mill-town, the strongest memory (and perfect symbol) of which is a "great red-faced boy who used to chase and frighten her" as she walked home through the streets at night. In the

country with her grandmother she is safe. Named Sylvia (Latin for "woods") the girl feels that "she never had been alive at all before she came to live on the farm." Her grandmother says: there "never was such a child for straying out-of-doors since the world was made!" Clearly Sylvia is nature's child, a pristine or first female, repelled by the city but so at home in the woods that the birds and animals share their secrets and the earth itself, her true grandmother, embraces her with gentle breezes and soft lullabies. Walking home through the woods one night (compare this with the experience she remembers from the city), she listens "to the thrushes with a heart that beat fast with pleasure" and senses "in the great boughs overhead . . . little birds and beasts . . . going about their world . . . [and] saying goodnight to each other in sleepy twitters. . . . It made her feel as if she were a part of the gray shadows and the moving leaves." As her grandmother boasts, "'the wild creatur's counts her one o' themselves'."

The whimsical and yet serious incarnation of this magical "natural" place to which the child has been restored, appropriately by her maternal grandmother, is a cow. Symbol of bountiful female nurture— a cow is a walking udder, a warm mobile milky mother (of a different species from us to be sure, but as this story shows, difference in species is not an important distinction to make in life)— the cow represents what the city is *not* and what the woods, healthy, wild, domestic, maternal, stands for in "A White Heron." In fact, Jewett opens the story by concentrating on the bond between this exaggeratedly female animal and her "little woods-girl." The two of them, the mature female (Mistress Moolly the cow) and nine-year-old Sylvia, amble together through the woods away from the western light (which means toward the rising moon, the heavenly body associated with women) in a wending nightly ritual of hide-and-seek that is almost a dance, the two partners know their steps so well. Played with the wild but milky Mistress Moolly, this game of finding each other, situated as it is at the very opening of the story, serves as a metaphor for the whole realm of matrifocal happiness into which Jewett draws us. In this world females—human, bovine, it does not matter— *can* find each other. They can live together in fertile self-sufficiency and contentment, much as Jewett herself, of course, lived happily with her sisters and women friends within a complex and satisfying network of female support and intimacy into which men might wander, like the nameless intruder in this story, but always as strangers and never to stay.

Read historically, this Adamless Eden represents a response— mythic, spiritual— to the dramatic changes taking place in the lives of middle-class white American women toward the turn into the twentieth century. On the one hand, the middle-class nineteenth-century ideology of separate masculine and feminine spheres excluded women from competition and success in the public arena— medicine, commerce, high art, and the like. The ideology of separatism severely confined and limited women. At the same time, however, as Carroll Smith-Rosenberg points out in her classic study of middle-class, white, nineteenth-century female friendship in America (*Signs,* Autumn 1975, p. 9-10), separatism strengthened women by honoring female bonding and intimacy. As Smith-Rosenberg explains, "women . . . did not form an isolated and oppressed subcategory in male society. Their letters and diaries indicate that women's sphere had an essential integrity and dignity that grew out of women's shared experiences and mutual affection and that, despite the profound changes which affected American social structure and institutions between the 1760s and 1870s, retained a

constancy and predictability" (Josephine Donovan, *New England Local Color Literature: A Women's Tradition,* 1983, p. 109).

Smith-Rosenberg's identification of the 1870s as the beginning of the end of this period of continuity for women highlights the fact that "A White Heron," written in 1881, celebrates the ideology of separatism at the time historically that it was beginning to fall apart. As Josephine Donovan notes, the story speaks to "the profound ambivalence women of the late nineteenth century felt as they were beginning to move out of the female-centered world of the home into male-centered institutions." Sylvia confronts and is tempted by the possibility of a new and traditionally masculine ethic for women. The hunter invites her to participate in his project. She can, like her sisters in the ranks of stenographers and typewriters smartly decking themselves out in shirtwaists and suit jackets to invade the nation's offices and boardrooms, bastions of male privilege and power previously off limits to women, identify with men. She can join the great masculine project of conquering and controlling ("harnessing") nature and agreeing on money as the best measure of worth and most effective medium of exchange between human beings. She can, in short, even though she is female, join in the great late nineteenth-century game of buying and selling the world.

She can— but she won't. Sylvia, and clearly Jewett as well, finds in the ideology of female separatism, despite its limitations, a better environment for women than that offered by the new ideology of integration, or identification with masculine values. The older ideology values compassion over profit and cooperation over competition. While the perfect bird for the ornithologist is a dead one, the perfect bird for the child is alive. Sylvia, choosing the past over the future, the bird over a ten dollar gold piece, says no to the temptation represented by the glamorous young scientist so eager to make a girl his partner. In the last paragraph the narrator concedes that the choice is not easy: "Were the birds better friends than their hunter might have been,— who can tell?". The young stranger with a gun is beautiful and powerful. "He can make them rich with money; he has promised it, and they are poor now. He is so well worth making happy." The stranger has great allure: the future is tempting. Indeed, Sylvia's grandmother is converted. But Sylvia is not. She may change when she is older; of that we cannot be certain. But the moment this story captures is the moment of her resistance. The moment of her saying no. . . .

Source: Elizabeth Ammons, "The Shape of Violence in Jewett's 'A White Heron'," in *Colby Library Quarterly,* Vol. XXII, No. 1, March, 1986, pp. 6-16.

Critical Essay #3

In the following excerpt, Griffith examines some ways in which the character Sylvia from Jewett's "A White Heron" fits the archetype of a hero, with attention paid especially to the conflict of "man versus society."

"But what shall I do with my 'White Heron' now she is written? She isn't a very good magazine story, but I love her, and mean to keep her for the beginning of my next book." (Letters of Sarah Orne Jewett, *ed. Annie Fields 1911, p. 60)*

When Sarah Orne Jewett wrote these words to a friend, the *Atlantic Monthly* had rejected her story "A White Heron," and she was puzzled about its artistic merit. But after it appeared in a collection of her stories in 1886, it immediately attracted compliments from friends and fellow writers. Since then, it has become her most anthologized and best known story. I feel that the key to both the *Atlantic*'s puzzlement and the story's wide appeal is its handling of the hero archetype. Sylvia, the protagonist, becomes a traditional hero who makes a quest after a much desired object. The *Atlantic* editors probably did not know what to make of this work of fantasy from a normally down-to-earth local color realist. But the story is much more than a simple fantasy. For Jewett, it seems to have been a personal "myth" that expressed her own experience and the experience of other women in the nineteenth century who had similar gifts, aspirations, and choices. And for modern readers its implications are even broader.

The hero archetype has been ably treated by a number of writers, but the definitive treatment is probably Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949). Campbell draws the hero's basic story from his survey of myths, tales, rituals, and art from all over the world. The hero's career, he says, has three main parts. In the first, the "Departure," the hero receives a "call to adventure." By a seeming accident, someone or something invites the hero into "an unsuspected world," into "a relationship with forces that are not rightly understood" (Campbell, p. 51). Often he receives supernatural aid from a "protective figure" who helps him in his adventures (Campbell, p. 69). In the second part of the hero's story, the "Initiation," the hero crosses a dangerous "threshold" into a strange, fluid, dreamlike world where he undergoes a succession of trials (Campbell, pp. 77, 97). The climax of these trials is the hero's victory over all opposition. Sometimes this victory is accompanied by a mystical vision that shows the hero something of the life-creating energy of all existence (Campbell, pp. 40-41). The third part of the hero's story is the "Return." Because of his victory, he now has a "boon" to bestow upon those he has left behind (Campbell, p. 30). The trip back to his homeland can be arduous, but once back he has a choice and a problem. He can withhold or bestow his boon, whatever he wants (Campbell, p. 193). And he must somehow integrate, if he can, his transcendental experience with the "banalities and noisy obscenities" of his old world (Campbell, p. 218).

This summary of Campbell's archetype fits "A White Heron" exactly. "A White Heron" is the story of Sylvia, a nine-year-old girl, who goes in quest of an exotic, almost miraculous bird. She herself has unusual gifts. Since coming from a "crowded

manufacturing town" to live with her grandmother deep in the forest, she has become, as her name suggests, a "little woods-girl," a forest nymph. Her closeness to the forest and to the forest creatures is phenomenal. "There ain't a foot o' ground she don't know her way over," her grand mother says, "and the wild creatures counts her one o' themselves. Squer'ls she'll tame to come an' feed right out o' her hands, and all sorts o' birds." Her tale begins when the unexpected breaks into her life— a young hunter whistles and emerges from the shadows into her pathway. She is frightened but leads him home where her grandmother promises him a night's lodging. After supper, he explains that he collects birds— kills and stuffs them— and that he wants particularly to find a white heron, rare to the area, that he had glimpsed only a few miles away. He offers ten dollars to anyone who might help him find its nest. Sylvia's heart beats wildly, for not only would the ten dollars buy "many wished-for treasures," but she has herself seen the same white heron. This, to use Campbell's terms, is her "call to adventure." The next day she tags along behind the hunter, grows increasingly fond of him, and decides to find the heron's nest.

At this point, Jewett tells us that a "great pine tree, . . . the last of its generation," stands at the edge of the woods taller than any other tree around. This tree, we come to learn, has magical properties. Sylvia has often thought that from the top of this tree one could see the sea, something she dreams of doing. But now the tree means more. Not only could one see "all the world" from its top but the white heron's "hidden nest" as well. The next morning, the "Initiation" part of Campbell's archetype begins. She steals out of her house before daybreak and goes to the tree, "the monstrous ladder reaching up, up, almost to the sky itself." Her "threshold" is a white oak that just reaches the lowest branches of the pine tree: "When she made the dangerous pass from one tree to the other, the great enterprise would really begin."

Once on the pine tree she experiences the most difficult trials of her journey. The way is "harder than she thought; she must reach far and hold fast, the sharp dry twigs caught and held her and scratched her like angry talons, the pitch made her thin little fingers clumsy and stiff." But the tree itself now awakens to act as her supernatural guardian. It is "amazed" that "this determined spark of human spirit" is climbing it. It loves "the brave, beating heart of the solitary grey-eyed child," steadies its limbs for her, and frowns away the winds.

The climax of Sylvia's climb is a mystical experience corresponding to that in Campbell's archetype. For her, the pine tree becomes a tree of knowledge; it is, after all, like a "great main-mast to the voyaging earth." At the top, "wholly triumphant," she sees the sea for the first time, "with the dawning sun making a golden dazzle over it." She looks westward at the woods and farms and sees that "truly it was a vast and awesome world." And at the same time, she also sees the "solemn" white heron perched on a lower branch of her tree, and she sees it fly to its nest in "the green world beneath."

Now she "knows his secret" and begins the third part of the hero's journey, the "Return." The way down is "perilous" and "her fingers ache and her lamed feet slip." But she reaches home finally, where the hunter and her grandmother await her expectantly. All she has to do now is bestow her "boon." But although the hunter "can make them rich

with money" and "is so well worth making happy," Sylvia at the last minute holds back her secret. Why? asks the author. Why, when "the great world for the first time puts out a hand to her," does she "thrust it aside for a bird's sake"? The answer is that Sylvia "remembers how the white heron came flying through the golden air and how they watched the sea and the morning together"; she cannot "give its life away." As in Campbell's archetype, Sylvia exercises her option to withhold her boon. She chooses to remain in the world of nature, the place of her adventures and the subject of her revelation. She will not— or cannot— integrate it with the materialistic world beyond the forest that now beckons to her.

The resemblance of Sylvia's experience to the hero archetype described by Campbell is probably not coincidental. Jewett was fond of the same kind of fantasy literature on which Campbell bases his archetype. It would not have been out of the way for her to write an adult fantasy of her own. But if Sylvia is a traditional hero, what is she a hero of? That is, what does she fight for? What does she fight against? What does she renounce? Had Jewett simply ended the story with Sylvia's refusal, the answers to these questions would be quickly forthcoming. Sylvia would be a heroic defender of pristine nature against those who would reduce it to a commercial value— ten dollars for the life of one heron. Sylvia, of course, refuses to betray nature, and in this way "A White Heron" is a "conservation" story. Most of the commentators on this story interpret it in exactly this way.

But Jewett does not end the story with Sylvia's refusal. She adds a paragraph that broadens the implication of the story and makes its meaning ambiguous. Here is the paragraph, the final one of the story:

Dear loyalty, that suffered a sharp pang as the guest went away disappointed later in the day, that would have served and followed him and loved him as a dog loves! Many a night Sylvia heard the echo of his whistle haunting the pasture path as she came home with the loitering cow. She forgot even her sorrow at the sharp report of his gun and the sight of thrushes and sparrows dropping silent to the ground, their songs hushed and their pretty feathers stained and wet with blood. Were the birds better friends than their hunter might have been,— who can tell? Whatever treasures were lost to her, woodlands and summertime, remember! Bring your gifts and graces and tell your secrets to this lonely country girl!

The story now no longer seems to be merely about a choice between nature and someone who would destroy it but between "love" — a woman's love for a man— and loyalty to something else, something that inevitably leads to loneliness and isolation. Sylvia's attachment to the hunter, we learn earlier, is not just friendship or affection but romantic love. Although she cannot "understand why he killed the very birds he seemed to like so much," she watches him "with loving admiration", "her grey eyes dark with excitement." Her "woman's heart," asleep until now, is "vaguely thrilled by a dream of love," and the "great power" of love stirs and sways them both as they traverse "the solemn woodlands with soft-footed silent care." Because of this new love, she makes her quest: "What fancied triumph and delight and glory for the later morning," she

thinks, "when she could make known the secret! It was almost too real and too great for the childish heart to bear."

Looked at realistically, this love motif makes little sense. Sylvia is only nine years old. Even if she told the hunter her secret, he would leave the area, probably never to return. Yet Jewett makes it seem as if Sylvia could have fulfilled a long-term commitment to the hunter, something akin to marriage. Jewett also indicates that the results of Sylvia's choice will be loneliness and lost "treasures," even though Sylvia returns to the same idyllic conditions that existed before the hunter emerged. Finally, Jewett casts doubt upon the rightness of Sylvia's choice. . . .

Sylvia is a hero on several levels of meaning. On the literal level, she is a backwoods girl who quests for something that the man she "loves" wants, and at the climax of her quest she finds something much more valuable. She sees the sea, the morning sun, and the countryside— symbolically, the whole world— all at once. Unconsciously she realizes that the white heron represents the essence of this mysterious new world, and she cannot betray it for a mere ten dollars. On another level, she is Jewett herself and other women like her who heroically reject the too-confining impositions of society for an independent, self-fulfilling life lived on their own terms. Sylvia's age underscores the abstract nature of that choice. She is not just rejecting one man; she is Jewett's surrogate, rejecting all men. But unlike the more polemical "Farmer Finch" and *A Country Doctor,* "A White Heron" qualifies the triumph of that choice. The final paragraph seems to suggest that such a choice is fraught with risk— the risk of loneliness, isolation, disappointment, limited opportunity, and doubt. On a third level the story achieves its most universal appeal. Sylvia is anyone who unselfishly quests for knowledge, receives a stunning revelation, and resists any cheapening of it. The hero, someone has said, does what normal people are not brave enough or strong enough to do. Most of us would have taken the ten dollars, if only to retain the warm approval and appreciation of those we love. But Sylvia does not, and she pays the penalty. This is her heroism. We admire her for it and would strive to do likewise.

Source: Kelley Griffith, Jr., "Sylvia as Hero in Sarah Orne Jewett's 'A White Heron'," in *Colby Library Quarterly,* Vol. XXI, No. 1, March, 1985, pp. 22-7.

Critical Essay #4

Atkinson is Associate Professor of English at the University of Cincinnati. In the following excerpt, he offers his interpretation of the favorable impact varying narrative voices have on the conclusion of Jewett's "A White Heron."

"A White Heron" seems a simple story of simple people, in a simple time. Seems. But if we look more closely, we see that Jewett has used diverse and unusual devices to give this much anthologized story the satisfying impact which puts us so at rest at its conclusion. In the next to last scene, for example, she uses authorial voice and privilege in genuinely extravagant ways: a tree's thoughts are reported and given weight, and the author not only urgently whispers counsel to the main character but later exhorts the very landscape and seasons of the year in pantheistic prayer. But these departures from "common sense" seem perfectly natural to us as we read the story, because they contribute so directly to the effect of the tale, the sense of which is a little uncommon. In fact, the work demands these extravagances.

"A White Heron" is a story of innocence, a theme calculated to move us deeply, loss of innocence being a mainstay of literature and myth from Genesis through Milton, Joyce, Salinger, and beyond— a theme of proven power. However, Jewett here writes not of innocence lost, but of innocence preserved, much rarer, yet in less obvious ways touching each of us in the corners of our lives where we remain uncalloused by experience, resignation, or cynicism. To make the story take, Jewett has to convince us emotionally that Sylvia's staying in the world of innocence is a positive step in her development as a person— not merely a cowering, a retreat, or a regression she must ultimately transcend. And it is to this end that she employs her extravagant means.

The world of innocence in which Sylvia lives is a frail one, lacking strength. Both the girl and her grandmother, innocents of youth and age, their cottage a virtual "hermitage," seem vulnerable in a number of ways, living in a balance that could be upset by Sylvia's return to the city or by the intrusion of even the genuinely nice young hunter/ornithologist who loves birds but kills what he loves, to preserve them, offering money to find the path to his prize. Our most immediate desire is that Sylvia remain in her innocent world, inviolate. But we also are made (by the impingement of threats from without) to want strength for her innocence that it might fend for itself— not a further retirement, but a compelling vision, an experience beside which anything promised by the thrill of infatuation for the hunter would pale.

And that vision is precisely what Jewett gives us in her management of the climactic scene, Sylvia's ascent of the great pine tree. As she climbs, our hopes and expectations are decidedly mixed: the climb is frightening, but the vision from the top tantalizing; the heron must be seen, but (contrary to Sylvia's conscious purpose in climbing) the hunter must not be told. In short, we want for her a transforming vision, but fear she will fail to attain it or will squander it. Something more than a glimpse of the heron's nest is needed here— some transcendent way of seeing, beyond the capacity of Sylvia, or her grandmother, or the hunter, each of whom in turn has been a center of consciousness

through which this story has been reflected so far. And it is to fulfill this precise need that Jewett gives us the following passage:

The tree seemed to lengthen itself out as she went up, and to reach farther and farther upward. It was like a great mainmast to the voyaging earth; it must have been truly amazed that morning through all its ponderous frame as it felt this determined spark of human spirit creeping and climbing from higher branch to branch. Who knows how steadily the least twigs held themselves to advantage this light, weak creature on her way! The old pine must have loved its new dependent. More than all the hawks, and bats, and moths, and even the sweet voiced thrushes, was the brave, beating heart of the solitary gray-eyed child. And the tree stood still and held away the winds that June morning while the dawn grew bright in the east.

Sylvia's courage summons a response from the tree, a deep and intimate bond of trust in which nature rises to the needs of the girl without her asking, actively caring for the child and her birdlike soul, rare and wonderful, now hidden, like the heron, deeply and inaccessibly in nature itself.

Thus, it is not just that Sylvia has transcended her former viewpoint, symbolized (in the story's next paragraph) by her looking down upon the sea and the flying birds, but that the entire fiction has transcended its human limitations— and thus stepped outside the limits of human relationship which lured and threatened Sylvia. The validity of her remaining in nature and not forsaking its trust for human relationship is confirmed by the sentience of the tree, the towering and deeply rooted presence of nature embodied. Sylvia's final decision to keep her bond with nature inviolate is both anticipated and justified as we experience not just nature from her point of view, but her from nature's. She is its creature and child.

But another voice also makes itself heard in this scene, the voice of the tale's teller herself. Heretofore content to let the story tell itself by reflection through the consciousnesses of girl, grandmother, and hunter, and now tree, the narrator cannot keep silent at this crucial moment. She calls out to Sylvia silently, directly.

There where you saw the white heron once you will see him again; look, look! a white spot of him like a single floating feather . . . . And wait! wait! do not move a foot or finger, little girl, do not send an arrow of light and consciousness from your two eager eyes, for the heron has perched on a pine bough not far beyond yours.

The narrator's voice is given great power here, because as she directs, so Sylvia sees the long sought heron, the climactic moment of the climactic passage. The narrator's calling counsel is as unexpected as the articulated feelings of the tree. But it serves to confirm with human wisdom what the tree would show with natural intelligence. And like the consciousness of the tree, the voice of the narrator transcends other viewpoints in the story. She speaks from a wisdom greater than that possessed by the reader or any character in the tale. She is "older" and wiser than the grandmother, and sees what the old woman does not, representing a true maturity of innocence. She gives a voice to the reader's hopes, and in doing so extends and legitimates them— not by addressing *us*

and telling *us* how it is, but by calling (as we in our wisest innocence might call out) to Sylvia.

This sudden cry of the narrator also prepares us for her speaking out in her own voice again at the end of the story. She addresses our uncertainties by articulating them herself: "Were the birds better friends than their hunter might have been,— who can tell?" And then, closing the circle between the points of nature's intelligence and human wisdom, she addresses nature itself: "Whatever treasures were lost to her, woodlands and summertime, remember! Bring your gifts and graces and tell your secrets to this lonely country child!" The hushed and urgent whisper of this conspiracy of wisdom confirms for us the value of Sylvia's experience and her decision not to tell of the white heron, transferring maturity from the social back to the natural realm— profounder, deeper, never to be betrayed. Her innocence is preserved, extended; her soul is larger and steadier; and our experience, complete.

Source: Michael Atkinson, "The Necessary Extravagance of Sarah Orne Jewett: Voices of Authority in 'A White Heron'," in *Studies in Short Fiction,* Vol. 19, No. 1, Winter, 1982, pp. 71-4.

Adaptations

A White Heron was adapted as a video for elementary and junior-high audiences, Learning Corporation of America, 1978; available in VHS, Beta and 3/4U formats from Modern Curriculum Press (MCP).

The story has also been recorded as a book on tape; recorded by Sound Window, the tape includes excerpts from Henry Beston's *The Outermost House,* distributed as *Christine Sweet Reads,* 1996.

Topics for Further Study

The bird Jewett was thinking of when she wrote this story is more frequently called the snowy egret. Research the natural history of the snowy egret, especially its status at the beginning of the twentieth century, to see why Jewett was so concerned about this bird. Describe the reaction informed citizens of the 1890s might have had to the ornithologist's plan. What animals might be used in stories today to achieve a similar effect?

Read an article or essay in a recent issue of a nature or conservation magazine (for example, *Audubon, National Wildlife* or *Sierra*). Compare and contrast the advantages and disadvantages of using fiction and nonfiction to argue for environmental protection.

Visit a natural history museum, or another museum with a collection of "preserved and stuffed" animal specimens. Discuss with the curator or a guide the value of such collections. Report on what you learn.

Research marriage in the United States at the end of the nineteenth century, focusing on the differing rights and responsibilities of husbands and wives. Compare your findings to the implications Jewett makes about marriage.

Compare and Contrast

1880s: Concern for the environment becomes an issue in the United States in the years following the Civil War, when economic development increases rapidly at the expense of natural resources, such as timber. In 1891, President Harrison signs a proclamation that turns a million acres in Colorado into the nation's first forest preserve.

1990s: Forest preservation threatens jobs in the Pacific Northwest, where loggers prohibited from destroying the habitat of the spotted owl face layoffs. Global concern for the environment results in conferences such as the 1992 Earth Summit, held in Brazil. Topics for discussion include global warming and the destruction of the rain forests.

1880s: Naturalist John James Audubon (1785-1851) attains great wealth and fame from his paintings of birds. He works from dead models; disliking the stiffness of stuffed and mounted specimens, he requires many freshly killed birds for each painting.

1990s: The Audubon Society, founded in 1886 as the country's first bird preservation society, comprises 500 chapters, 9 regional, and 12 state offices.

1880s: Many people move to crowded manufacturing towns, like the one in which Sylvia lives with her family, because of the availability of factory jobs. In the 1880s, the industrial sector grows rapidly as machine processes are standardized and new technologies, along with vast resources, make U.S. industries among the most productive in the world.

1990s: Concerns regarding manufacturing industries are tied to environmental issues. Pollution from factory and automobile emissions is linked to global warming. While wealthier nations make some efforts to regulate emissions, developing countries dependent on industrialization to improve their economy lack the resources and desire to control pollution.

What Do I Read Next?

The Country of the Pointed Firs, Jewett's 1896 novel, is often considered her greatest work and one of the nineteenth century's best pieces of regional fiction. Set in a New England coastal village and the surrounding countryside, and narrated in a strong female voice, it tells the stories of the typically eccentric people who shape the landscape, and are shaped by it.

Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919) does for the American Midwest what Jewett's work does for New England: presents universally recognized characters in a highly localized setting. Anderson's male narrator observes life in his small town, recording the secret loneliness and pain of his neighbors.

Mary Austin's 1903 *The Land of Little Rain* is an early work of Southwestern regional literature. It is nonfictional but very personal, a detailed look at the terrain, plants, animals, and Native Americans in the Sierras, presented by a woman who spent years living in the dry mountains and fighting to protect them from human exploitation.

Buffalo Gals and Other Animal Presences is Ursula K. Le Guin's 1987 collection of short stories. Le Guin may be best known as a science fiction writer, but these stories explore the place of women and animals in a male-dominated culture. In "May's Lion" and other stories, she describes a world of women in which the earth's creatures are respected and welcomed.

In one of the best-known works of American natural history, *Walden, or Life in the Woods* (1854), Henry David Thoreau abandons civilization for two years and attempts to live a life of self-sufficiency and exploration in a tiny cabin at the edge of Walden Pond.

Further Study

Cary, Richard. *Sarah Orne Jewett.* Twayne, 1962.

The first full-length critical review of Jewett's work. This book attempts to analyze all of Jewett's work. Cary finds "A White Heron" philosophically interesting but technically flawed.

Griffith, Jr., Kelley. "Sylvia as Hero in Sarah Orne Jewett's

'A White Heron.'" *Colby Library Quarterly,* Vol. 21, no. 1, March, 1985, pp. 22-7.

Shows how Sylvia's story follows the archetypal pattern of a hero following a quest for a desired object, and suggests that Sylvia's independence mirrors Jewett's.

Held, George. "Heart to Heart with Nature: Ways of Looking at 'A White Heron.'" *Colby Library Quarterly,* 18 (1982):55-65.

Discusses his overall interpretation of Jewett's "A White Heron," paying particular attention to changes that occur in the character Sylvia's relationship with nature.

Johns, Barbara A. "'Mateless and Appealing': Growing into Spinsterhood in Sarah Orne Jewett," in *Critical Essays on Sarah Orne Jewett,* ed. Gwen L. Nagel, G. K. Hall, 1984, pp. 147-65.

Explores a common theme of Jewett's works— the young woman who turns away from marriage and traditional female action once her view of the world is expanded— and examines Sylvia as an example of this.

Pool, Eugene Hillhouse. "The Child in Sarah Orne Jewett." *Colby Library Quarterly,* Vol. 7, September 1967, pp. 503-09.

Reads Jewett's works as autobiography. Pool finds that Jewett herself wanted to remain a child and avoid adult relationships.

Smith, Gayle L. "The Language of Transcendence in Sarah Orne Jewett's 'A White Heron.'" *Colby Library Quarterly,* Vol. 19, 1983, pp. 37-44.

Demonstrates the aptness of Jewett's use of these techniques in presenting a transcendental vision of reality, though some critics have found the shifting point of view and high language to be a weakness in the story.

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Ammons, Elizabeth. "The Shape of Violence in Jewett's 'A White Heron.'" *Colby Library Quarterly,* 22, no. 1 (March 1986): 6-16.

Griffith, Jr., Kelley. "Sylvia as Hero in Sarah Orne Jewett's

'A White Heron.'" *Colby Library Quarterly,* 21, no. 1 (March 1985): 22-7.

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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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