The Wives of the Dead Study Guide

The Wives of the Dead by Nathaniel Hawthorne

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Introduction

Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "The Wives of the Dead" was first published in 1832 in *The Token,* an annual, along with three other stories, "My Kinsman, Major Molineux," "The Gentle Boy," and "Roger Malvin's Burial." Hawthorne had tried, unsuccessfully, to publish the stories as a group in 1829. "The Wives of the Dead" was subsequently republished in other magazines such as *Democratic Review* under the title "The Two Widows." Hawthorne included the story in his 1852 collection *The Snow-Image, and Other Twice-Told Tales.* He named them "twice-told" because each tale was first told in a periodical or gift-book. Set in the eighteenth century in a Bay Province, Massachusetts, seaport, the story concerns two sisters-in-law, who have just been informed that their husbands have died—one drowned in the Atlantic when his ship capsized, the other killed in a "skirmish" in Canada. The story details the women's responses to news of their husbands' deaths and, later, to news that they are, in fact, still alive. Although it has not received the degree of critical attention that some of Hawthorne's other stories have such as "The Birthmark," "Rappaccini's Daughter," and "Ethan Brand,""The Wives of the Dead" is considered important because it is an early work that embodies the kind of dream world for which Hawthorne's stories have become known. In fact, one of the controversies surrounding the story is whether the events portrayed are actually dreams of the main characters. Critics often point to the story's last sentence as proof of this interpretation and to illustrate Hawthorne' s characteristic use of ambiguity. In addition to exploring the borders between appearance and reality, the story delves into themes such as the relationship between thinking and feeling, responses to loss, and familial guilt.

Author Biography

The son of a ship captain, Nathaniel Hathorne, and Elizabeth Clarke Manning, Nathaniel Hawthorne was born on Independence Day in 1804 in Salem, Massachusetts. His paternal ancestors came over from England in 1630, and his maternal ancestors in 1679. Hawthorne's father died in 1808, and his mother and her sisters raised him in Salem and at his maternal uncle's house in Raymond, Maine. There, Hawthorne spent time roaming the woods and taking long meditative walks around Lake Sebago, developing what he called his "cursed habits of solitude." After graduating from Samuel Archer's School in Salem, Hawthorne attended Bowdoin College, graduating in 1825. At Bowdoin, Hawthorne made connections and friends that would prove influential throughout his life, including future President Franklin Pierce; Horatio Bridge, his lifelong best friend; Congressman Jonathan Cilley; and poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. While in college, Hawthorne added a *w* to his name; read widely, both in and outside of the curriculum; and began writing fiction. In 1828, he self-published a romance, *Fanshawe,* influenced by his reading of Gothic novels and the adventure stories of Sir Walter Scott. However, he soon grew embarrassed of the work, withdrawing and burning all remaining copies.

A few years later, Hawthorne began publishing short stories. Called by some critics the father of American fiction, Hawthorne plumbed family and local history for ideas and characters. Obsessed by the ways in which the Puritans shaped New England culture, Hawthorne drew on the lives of his own ancestors for his writing. His first American ancestor, William Hathorne (circa 1606-1681), was involved in a version of events depicted in "The Gentle Boy." The story of Hathorne's son John (1641-1717), a magistrate during the Salem witch trials of 1692, influenced a spate of Hawthorne works including "Young Goodman Brown" and *The Scarlet Letter.* His first published story, "The Hollow of the Three Hills," (1830) addresses themes that would occupy Hawthorne throughout his life, including the concept of sin, religious persecution, and the effects of guilt on the human heart and mind. Other early stories include "The Gentle Boy," "The Wives of the Dead," "My Kinsman, Major Molineux," and "Roger Malvin's Burial." The latter three stories are published in *The Snow-Image, and Other Twice-Told Tales* (1852).

Today Hawthorne is perhaps best known for his novel *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), a tale of witchcraft, adultery, and illicit love. Other novels include *The House of the Seven Gables: A Romance* (1851), *The Blithedale Romance* (1852), and *The Marble Faun* (1860). Dedicated to writing, Hawthorne struggled to make a living with his pen, though at various points in his life he also worked as an editor, a weigher and gagger at the Boston Customs House, surveyor for the Salem Customs House, and U.S. Consul in Liverpool, England. In May 1864, while visiting former President Franklin Pierce in Plymouth, New Hampshire, Hawthorne died in his sleep.

Plot Summary

Part One

In the first part of "The Wives of the Dead," the narrator assures readers his tale is "scarcely worth relating," then proceeds to tell it in detail. A hundred years ago, in the early eighteenth century, two "young and comely" (attractive) women in a Massachusetts seaport town married brothers and set up house together. In "two successive" days, they learn of their husbands' deaths: one is lost at sea, while the other is killed fighting the French and Indians in Canada. The British battled with the French for control of North America at this time, and colonists from the Bay colonies often fought on the Canadian frontier. Though many townspeople turn out to offer their sympathy, the women want to be left alone to console each other.

After the mourners leave, Mary, the more practical and disciplined of the pair, prepares dinner, but Margaret, distraught and bitter, cannot eat. The two go to bed, and although Mary falls asleep easily, temporarily forgetting her loss, Margaret remains awake, in a "feverish" state, gazing at the living room both couples had shared and grieving the past. Hawthorne uses imagery of light, in terms of the hearth and the lamp, to suggest the warmth of the past and the coldness of the present.

Part Two

While trying to sleep, Margaret hears a knock at the door and, reluctantly, answers it, taking the lamp from the hearth with her. Goodman Parker, a neighbor and innkeeper, brings news that Margaret's husband is, in fact, still alive. Speaking of a messenger who recently stopped at Parker's house on his ride through town with news of the frontier, Parker tells Margaret, "He tells me we had the better in the skirmish you wot of, and that thirteen men reported slain are well and sound, and your husband among them." (The phrase "wot of" means "know of." "Goodman" was a common name in the American colonies and appeared in other Hawthorne stories (e.g., "Young Goodman Brown"). Margaret is elated, but decides not to wake Mary and tell her because it might change the way Mary feels towards her. She returns to bed and to "delightful thoughts," which sleep transforms into "visions."

Part Three

Mary awakens from a "vivid dream," hearing "eager knocking on the street-door." Like Margaret, she takes the lamp from the hearth and opens the window, which had been left unhasped. A former suitor of Mary's named Stephen, a sailor, tells her that her husband survived the shipwreck and is alive and well. Hawthorne uses irony when he names the capsized ship *Blessing.* Initially thinking he had come to win her back, Margaret is appalled, and the narrator writes that she "was no wit inclined to imitate the first wife of Zadig," who is a wealthy man in Voltaire's story, "Zadig's Nose." (A day after

Zadig fakes his death, his wife takes up with another man.) But Mary, like her sister-in-law, is overjoyed when she hears the news that her husband is alive. However, she resists waking Margaret, fearing the news would only compound her own sorrow. The last line of the story is ambiguous. That is, it is unclear whether Margaret suddenly awoke when Mary touched her, or whether Mary awoke to her own tears, and Stephen's visit was a dream.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

The story opens as a recollection of a tragedy that occurred a hundred years ago in a busy seaport. The brides of two brothers have been widowed on successive days and are surrounded by well-meaning and sympathetic townspeople seeking to console them. Their best efforts -- whispered passages of Scripture meant to comfort the bereaved – are met with tears. Finally, near sunset, they are alone. This is what they want. As close as they were, their shared grief has brought them even closer. They are certain that whatever consolation they may find will be through each other.

They cry for nearly an hour before Mary recalls the precepts of resignation and endurance which piety taught her. She also reflects on the fact that she learned of her husband's death first and thus, she should be the first to resume her usual routine. She rises, puts the table before the fire and sets out their supper. She entreats her sister to join her for the meal and a blessing. Margaret, consumed still by her sorrow, responds bitterly that there is no blessing left for her. Instantly, she regrets her blasphemous outburst and slowly allows Mary to console her.

The couples had shared their home, -- a common sitting room with bedrooms on opposite ends. The young widows retire to their rooms after heaping ashes on the dying embers in the fireplace and leaving a lighted lamp on the hearth. They leave their doors open so each can see into the other's room. While Mary drifts into a temporary forgetfulness, Margaret becomes agitated and feverish. She lies in bed, listening to the rain and watching the flickering light from the lamp playing on the sitting room furniture. She remembers the cheerful radiance of the fire shining on their happy circle in contrast to the dead glimmer of the lamp on empty chairs.

She then hears a knock. She thinks of how her heart might have leapt at the sound only yesterday when she was awaiting news of her husband. Now, she does not care and makes no move to answer the door. Then, she wonders at the reason for such a persistent visitor so late at night. She sees that Mary is still sleeping and gets up to silence the visitor before he wakes her. She takes the lantern, goes to the window and opens it to find the town's innkeeper at the door. Goodman Parker tells her he is glad she answered his knock because he has no words of comfort for Mary. He goes on to tell Margaret that a courier just stopped at his house with news from the frontier. He recounted the skirmish in which Margaret's husband had fought and said that he had not died as reported, but had survived. Margaret thinks to wake Mary with the news but changes her mind, knowing her joy will only sharpen Mary's pain. Therefore, she goes back to bed leaving her sister undisturbed.

Later in the night, Mary wakes with a start from a vivid dream. She remembers only that she woke at the most interesting part. She is dazed, but hears knocking at the front door. Now, fully awake, she remembers her grief. Fearing her sister will be awakened,

she rises and goes to the window, finding it unlocked. Stephen, a sailor and former suitor, stands at the door. He tells her that he came to cheer her with news that her husband has not died at sea, but is one of four rescued when his ship sank. Mary thinks to wake Margaret with the news and goes to her room, finding the door closed, but not locked. Margaret is sleeping restlessly with a smile on her face. Mary does not want to wake her from such a happy dream. She sets down the lantern and pulls the covers up over her shoulders, but her hand trembles, a tear falls on her cheek and she suddenly wakes.

Analysis

Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Wives of the Dead" was first published in a collection, *The Token*, in 1832. It is rich with the historic and architectural details of the period. The setting is a modest home in a seaside town, the parlor of which contains clues to the identity of its occupants – relics from across the sea and from the Indian frontier. The conflict that has arisen is the death of two brothers in two days, leaving two widowed brides to be consoled by their neighbors. The narrative deftly defines the states of grief, amplified by the sisters' words and actions. They cry, experience resignation, lean on faith, go through the motions of an ordinary evening, are quick to anger, experience relief only through sleep and dream of impossible scenarios in which their husbands escape their deaths. On the other hand, are they dreaming?

It is what happens after the sisters retire for the evening that is the magic of this story, drawing the reader into events, which could be interpreted as actual or merely the dreams of the main characters. Hawthorne embraced this ambiguous literary device in many of his works with "The Wives of the Dead" being one of the earliest examples. In this story, the author carefully constructs two climatic scenarios in which each woman answers a knock at the door and is given the news that her husband is alive. Are both dreaming? Does Margaret have a real experience while Mary has a dream? Does Mary have both dreams? A reader may reread the details many times trying to decide. Here they are; the doors of both rooms are left open; the windows are locked; Margaret was restless and could not sleep. Yet, Mary finds Margaret's door closed, the window unlocked and Margaret asleep with a smile on her face.

It is the last sentence of the story that seems to provide the answer, but is still open to interpretation. Mary, like Margaret, hesitates to wake her sister, knowing that when she is awake she will be sad and separated from her sister who has learned she still has a husband. She feels guilty and disloyal, a common familial theme in Hawthorne's work. She fears the distance that may come between the two because of their divergent fates. While it is commonly assumed that both women regained their husbands, the story ends, "…her hand trembled against Margaret's neck, a tear also fell upon her cheek, and she suddenly awoke." In the strictly grammatical sense, this would seem to indicate that Mary was dreaming, but which "she" awoke?

In addition to the themes of familial guilt, appearance vs. reality and the stages of grief, this story also contains some powerful symbolism. The sisters bury the embers of their

dying fire by heaping ashes on them, much the way they might cover a coffin. No doubt, the image is also a metaphor of the sisters' own lives at the moment. There is also the contrast drawn between the radiance of the fire that shone on their happy circle and the dead glimmer of the lamp that now only lit the men's empty armchairs.

Characters

Margaret

Along with her sister-in-law, Mary, Margaret is one of the wives referred to in the title. Both are "recent brides," and still "young and comely"; that is, attractive. She has a "lively and irritable temperament," and is bitter, virtually inconsolable, about her husband's death. She declines eating the meal Mary offers her, saying, in reference to God, "Would it were His will that I might never taste food more." She cannot sleep and stays up listening to the rain, looking at the hearth and the furniture in the living room the two couples shared, grieving her loss. When she hears a knock on the door, she answers it with apprehension, saying to herself, "I have nothing left to fear, and methinks I am ten times more a coward than ever." Agitated, she screams at Goodman Parker, asking him what he wants. When Parker tells her that her husband, in fact, was never killed in the skirmish in Canada, and is alive and well, Margaret can scarcely contain her joy. However, she does not wake Mary, feeling that "her own better fortune had rendered her involuntarily unfaithful." Benjamin Friedlander, in his essay "Hawthorne's "Waking Reality," writes, "This guilt, Margaret's feeling of unfaithfulness, pierces the story's dreamy surface, allowing a revelation of hidden desires—perhaps even a revelation of adultery." Margaret returns to sleep, her dreams now happy "visions," deciding to tell Mary the news in the morning.

Mary

Mary is the more pious and more practical of the two sisters-in-law, level headed, with an even temperament, and the character with whom Hawthorne begins and ends the story. After the other mourners have left the house of the sisters-in-law, Mary prepares a meal, encouraging Margaret to be grateful for what they still do have. She sleeps peacefully until she is woken in the middle of the night by the knocking of a former suitor, Stephen, a sailor who brings her the news that he saw her husband on a ship the day before, alive and well. At first she thinks that Stephen is taking advantage of the situation and has come to seduce her, but when she hears his news, she is happy. As Stephen leaves, Mary watches him "with a doubt of waking reality." In his essay, "Hawthorne's 'The Wives of the Dead,'" John McDermott interprets this line as meaning that Mary's meeting with Stephen is a dream, and John Selzer, in "Psychological Romance in Hawthorne's 'Wives of the Dead,'" notes that Mary "simply means to substitute for her lost husband. . . . Her dream appears, then, as a wish-fulfillment to fill the void in her heart." Mary cannot bring herself to tell Margaret about her good news, for she fears Margaret would "awake to thoughts of death and woe," which would only be compounded by Mary's happiness. Mary is unaware that Margaret herself had received news earlier in the night that her own husband was also still alive. Before going back to bed, Mary straightens Margaret's blankets to protect her from the cold. As she does, "her hand trembled against Margaret's neck, a tear also fell upon her cheek, and

she suddenly awoke." The meaning of the story rests on this last line of the story. It is left unclear whether Mary awakens Margaret or wakes herself up with her own crying.

Goodman Parker

Goodman Parker is "a friendly innkeeper of the town" and the man who brings news to Margaret that her husband, whom she thought had died fighting the French and Indians in Canada, is still alive. The narrator describes him as "a man in a broad brimmed hat and blanket-coat" and as an "honest man."

Stephen

Stephen, Mary's former suitor, whom the narrator describes as a "rejected lover," brings her the news that her husband is still alive. He is described as "a young man in a sailor's dress, wet as if he had come out of the depths of the sea." After he comes home from a voyage, his mother tells him the bad news about Mary's husband. Stephen rushes to assure Mary that her husband is still alive, saying that he saw him on a brig the day before, and that same brig will be in port by daylight. The narrator describes him as a "generous seaman."

Themes

Loss

Hawthorne's story illustrates how a person's response to death and loss reveals true character. Both women mourn the loss of their husbands. However, Mary's "mild, quiet, yet not feeble character" and her faith enable her to endure the emotional torment of her husband's death with more equanimity than Margaret. She prepares a meal and sets the table soon after the mourners leave, and tries to help her sister-in-law calm down. Margaret, on the other hand, of a "lively and irritable temperament," cannot accept the loss and remains bitter, dwelling on the past and taking no comfort in her faith. Later, Mary drifts into sleep with relative ease, while Margaret stays awake "groan[ing] in bitterness." The motivation of each in not waking the other after hearing their respective news reflects their characters. Margaret is more worried about how Mary's response would diminish her own joy, saying to herself, "Shall I waken her, to feel her sorrow sharpened by my happiness?" Mary, on the other hand, is more concerned with the pain that Margaret would feel if Mary told her about Stephen's news. "My poor sister!" she thinks to herself as she looks at Margaret, "you will waken too soon from that happy dream."

Reality and Appearance

"The Wives of the Dead" is both a story about two widows and a meditation on the nature of reality, asking readers to question the dreamlike quality of their waking life and the reality of their dreams. Hawthorne's setting creates a world in which things are never as they appear because appearance itself rests upon the volatile emotional state of the two primary characters, through whose eyes the story is told, and upon the trustworthiness of the narrator, whose honesty is in doubt. The bulk of the events take place at night, and the narrator repeatedly emphasizes what the characters can and cannot see. In bed, Margaret, agitated and unnerved, sees the lamp throw "the shadows of the furniture up against the wall, stamping them immovably there, except when they were shaken by a sudden flicker of the flame." This image calls to mind Plato's *Allegory of the Cave,* a dialogue in which the Greek philosopher argues for the existence of a higher reality than the one human beings experience with their senses. Hawthorne employs other visual symbolic imagery such as the lantern, the hearth, morning mist, and windows to emphasize the relationship between truth and seeing, sight and insight. For example, after Goodman Parker reports to Margaret that her husband is still alive, the narrator says that Parker's lantern "gleamed along the street, bringing to view indistinct shapes of things, and the fragments of a world, like order glimmering through chaos." Such a description embodies Margaret's response to the good news.

Style

Romance

"The Wives of the Dead" is an American romance. The term "romance" emerged during the Middle Ages and often referred to stories with farfetched plots and exotic settings, involving knights and their quests, and chivalric behavior. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the term became synonymous with stories emphasizing emotion and subjective experience. Classical romance includes intricate plots, mistaken identity, random events, and separated lovers, most of which Hawthorne's story contains. American romantics, especially Hawthorne, occasionally digressed from the traditional formula and incorporated Gothic features such as ghosts and the supernatural into their writing. The romance, however, should not be confused with the romantic movement, which literary historians date from the late eighteenth century to the middle of the nineteenth century. In their treatment of original subjects, their focus on the psychology of the individual, and their use of symbol to point to a reality beyond the physical world, American writers such as Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Margaret Fuller, Emily Dickinson, Edgar Allan Poe, and Ralph Waldo Emerson all shaped the American romantic period.

Ambiguity

Ambiguity is a literary device, often a word or phrase signifying multiple meanings. Poets and fiction writers use it to create possibility and mystery. The ambiguity of Hawthorne's story rests on the final sentence and the meaning of the words "her" and "she." Depending on which woman the pronoun refers to determines, in large part, what part of Hawthorne's story can be read as a dream.

Imagery

Undergirding the ambiguous ending is the story's symbolic imagery. Imagery is symbolic when it suggests or stands for something other than what it is. For example, Hawthorne's image patterns of light versus darkness echo the degree of separation or togetherness the sisters feel toward each other, and also their changing emotional complexions. Of particular significance is the lamp, a conventional symbolic image used to suggest insight and understanding, and the hearth, a symbol of home and domesticity.

Structure

The story is organized symmetrically around pairs. Two sisters-in-law of two brothers learn in two successive days about the deaths of their husbands. They then have almost identical experiences during the night, each awakened by a messenger bearing

good news about her (supposedly dead) husband. Each takes a lamp from the hearth to address her visitor at the window while the other is asleep, and each declines to wake the other, though for different reasons. This symmetrical structure allows Hawthorne to contrast the women's characters, showing how each responds differently to a similar experience.

Historical Context

Eighteenth-Century Newspapers

Hawthorne sets his story in the early eighteenth century in Massachusetts' Bay Province, and his two principle characters, Margaret and Mary, learn of their husbands' fate through men who visit them at their home. As one can imagine, news traveled slowly more than three hundred and fifty years ago. British censors kept a tight grip on what could be printed, and attempts to disseminate information that was not sponsored by the British government was forbidden. In 1690, for example, the governor of Massachusetts shut down Benjamin Harris's independent newsletter, *Publick Occurrences, Both Foreign and Domestick,* almost immediately because of its perceived threat to power. The first successful newspaper publisher in the colonies was William Campbell, postmaster of Boston, whose *News-Letter* was launched in 1704 to keep people in the Bay Colony apprised of world events. This changed to the *Boston Gazette* in 1719. Benjamin Franklin's older brother, James, who printed the *Boston Gazette,* founded Boston's *New England Courant* in 1724. By the middle of the century, two dozen newspapers flourished in the colonies including the *Philadelphia American Weekly Mercury,* the *Pennsylvania Gazette,* the *Maryland Gazette,* the *Charlestown South Carolina Gazette,* and the *New-York Gazette.* As newspapers spread, the colonies began to assert their freedoms and separate themselves from Britain. In 1735, John Peter Zenger, the publisher of the *New-York Weekly Journal,* was acquitted of criminal libel, something virtually unheard of in England. "Freedom of speech or of the press" was to become part of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, ratified in 1791.

French and Indian War

The "Canadian warfare" in which Margaret's husband supposedly dies refers to the numerous conflicts and wars between the British and the French for control of North America. Both allied themselves with different Indian tribes, among them the Iroquois and the Algonquin. In the early eighteenth century, France held claim to most of what is now Canada and the land along the Mississippi River, extending all the way down to Louisiana. The British, seeking to wrest control from the French, often staked claim to the same land. English and French hostilities led to the outbreak of Queen Anne's War, which lasted from 1702 until 1713. Hostilities erupted again with the outbreak of King George's War (1744-1748), and then the French and Indian War (1754-1760). Much of the fighting in Canada took place in Nova Scotia and Cape Breton, parts of New France that had been ceded to England by a previous treaty. A few years after King George's War, the French began building forts in the Ohio River Valley and positioning troops in Canada, and the British sent expeditions against them. As colonists from Pennsylvania southward battled in the Appalachian region, colonists from New York and New England fought the French and Indians in Canada. Driving the French from Canada became crucial if Britain was to continue its expansion in North America.

Nineteenth-Century Literary Culture

"The Wives of the Dead" was initially published in *The Token,* a publication known as a gift-book. Gift-books flourished in nineteenth-century America and England from the 1820s through the 1850s. They contained poetry, prose, and illustrations, and were elegantly produced, often with colored plates. *The Token* came out in the fall but had the coming year on its cover, so shoppers could buy it for either Christmas or the New Year season. In addition to Hawthorne, writers such as Edgar Allan Poe and Ralph Waldo Emerson published in gift-books, often anonymously. Women edited many gift-books. For example, Lydia Maria Child edited *Looking Towards Sunset* (1865) and *The Oasis* (1834); Sarah Josepha Hale, who penned the children' s poem "Mary Had a Little Lamb," edited *The Opal* in 1845, 1848, and 1849; and Lydia Sigourney edited the *Religious Souvenir* in 1839 and 1840. Though these books were popular, their authors were often poorly paid. Hawthorne himself struggled throughout his life to make money at his writing, while writers of sermons, sentimental novels, and patriotic essays often fared much better. Hawthorne vented his anger and expressed his envy of the success of women writers such as Maria Susanna Cummins in the 1850s when he wrote to his publisher complaining of the "damned mob of scribbling women." Ironically, literary historians and critics mark the span 1828-1865 as the American Renaissance in literature, as writers such as Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, Harriet Wilson, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Herman Melville, Hawthorne, and Edgar Allan Poe helped to carve out a distinctly American body of work.

Critical Overview

When "The Wives of the Dead" first appeared in 1832, it was published anonymously. Terrence Martin in his book *Nathaniel Hawthone* writes that Samuel G. Goodrich, the publisher of *The Token,* the annual in which the story appeared, included "The Wives of the Dead" along with "The Gentle Boy," "Roger Malvin' s Burial," and "My Kinsman, Major Molineux" because they were the best he had received and no one could object to so many stories from the same author if the stories were published anonymously. Though virtually ignored when first published in 1832, "The Wives of the Dead" has gained in critical attention since then, primarily because it is one of Hawthorne's earliest published stories. Writing in 1918, George Edward Woodberry, in his study *Nathaniel Hawthorne: How to Know Him,* argues that the story is "drenched with Hawthorne's temperament. No other pen could have written it." Mark Van Doren is more specific in his assessment, noting in his book *Nathaniel Hawthorne,* Hawthorne's characteristic use of light and darkness to describe the setting: "No reader. . . will forget the speed with which its interior lights up and stays lit with a significance almost too delicate to name." Edward Stephenson does name it, arguing in his essay for the *Explicator* that the story is Hawthorne's attempt to "demonstrate the real nature of human experience." Offering a crafty reading of the story's symbolic imagery, Stephenson's 1967 essay argues against critics who interpret the widows' experiences as dreams, contending that Margaret is the only one truly asleep. John McDermott, however, also in an essay for the *Explicator,* argues just the opposite, that it is Mary who is asleep: "When we read the story's final sentence, we may be assured that it is Mary who suddenly awakens from her dream and, in crying, realizes her dream was simply that—a dream." Offering yet another view, Neal Frank Doubleday, in *Hawthorne's Early Tales: A Critical Study,* claims that both brothers are alive, to believe anything else would be to question the truthfulness of the narrator. Doubleday also suggests that Hawthorne "did not much value this tale," because he passed it over for inclusion in two other short story collections. More recent interpretations have not sought to argue for the story taking place in either a dream or the physical world but to show how Hawthorne's language creates a netherworld that resists interpretation. Calling the final lines of the story "the most inexplicable in all of Hawthorne's work, a body of writing well noted for its purposeful ambiguity," Benjamin Friedlander, in his 1999 essay "Hawthorne's 'Waking Reality,'" claims "'The Wives of the Dead' demands a style of reading that remains open to possibilities of meaning, not certainties."

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Semansky is an instructor of literature and composition and publishes regularly in literary journals and magazines. In this essay, Semansky considers the function of the narrator in Hawthorne 's story.

Although "The Wives of the Dead" is a story about events surrounding two widows in early eighteenth century colonial America, it is the narrator who sets the tone of the story and filters information in such a way as to shape the reader's understanding of events. The narrator is not Hawthorne but a persona created to tell the story. Think of a persona as a mask. Hawthorne puts on a mask and tells the story from behind it. Readers must suspend their own doubt and believe the mask is a real person. The persona that Hawthorne uses as his narrator to tell the story of Mary and Margaret is one of a wise, gentle man who is nonetheless intrusive. This means that he not only reports on the action but also comments on it, evaluating events and the motives of the characters. By doing so, the narrator becomes a character himself, effectively helping to shape the tale's meaning.

The narrator introduces himself in the opening paragraph, telling readers, "The following story, the simple and domestic incidents of which may be deemed scarcely worth relating, after such a lapse of time, awakened some degree of interest, a hundred years ago, in a principal seaport of the Bay Province." This introduction suggests that the teller of the tale is modest, yet has the reader's best interest at heart. His assumption is that because the story had interest to those in the seaport town a hundred years ago, it has interest for Hawthorne's readers in 1830. His modesty and the fact that he is drawing from an (allegedly) historical account help him to establish credibility with readers. But he doesn't just disappear after that. Rather, he both tells the story *and* he interprets it.

The first time the narrator visibly intrudes into the story is after he describes Margaret's tossing and turning in her bed, the night she learns of her husband's death. Feverish and bitter, she tries to decide whether or not to answer the knock at the door. It is here that the narrator interjects, "It is difficult to be convinced of the death of one whom we have deemed another self." This puts the narrator on the outside looking in and temporarily jars the reader's involvement in the story's action. He explains Margaret's feelings by universalizing them, not just showing her behavior or thoughts and letting readers do with them as they will. Hawthorne sprinkles this story with such observations. These comments have the effect of telling the reader how to respond. However, they also carry with them a kind of authority, as they help to establish the value system in which characters act, as well as establishing those of the narrator.

Hawthorne's narrator again intrudes when Margaret decides to wake Mary and tell her of Goodman Parker's visit. He does this subtly, and then more overtly, as he first describes Mary's sleep and then comments on it:

Her face was turned partly inward to the pillow, and had been hidden there to weep; but a look of motionless contentment was now visible upon it, as if her heart, like a deep

lake, had grown calm because its dead had sunk down so far within. Happy it is, and strange, that the lighter sorrows are those from which dreams are chiefly fabricated.

These are the narrator's eyes upon Mary, not Margaret's, and the "happy it is" comment is the narrator's, not one of the characters. This "editorial" does two things: it tells readers that Mary's sorrow is genuine and that it is deep; secondly, it alerts readers to consider the idea that Margaret's sorrow is perhaps not so deep or genuine. In his study of Hawthorne's fiction, *Nathaniel Hawthorne,* Mark Van Doren sees such narrative intrusion not only as benign but also as a virtue. He writes,

[Hawthorne] is moved to create, and then to contemplate with characteristic tenderness—a tenderness unique in the story—the love of two girls not only for each other but for their husbands whom we never see.

What Van Doren doesn't contemplate, however, is the relationship between what readers think of the narrator and how they understand the events of the story. For example, the ambiguous ending asks to be read one way if readers believe that the narrator's motivation is to relate a true story. They must believe that the visitations by Stephen and Goodman Parker actually occurred and that the husbands are, indeed, alive and well. If, however, the events are read as either a pair of dreams or as one or the other sister dreaming her episode, the narrator's own truthfulness must be questioned, and hence any universalizing messages as well. Such questioning, rather than invalidating the tale for some critics, adds to its emotional richness. Benjamin Friedlander, for example, argues in his essay "Hawthorne's 'Waking Reality,' that the uncertainty of the narrator's character adds to the texture and emotional complexity of the story:

However misleading Hawthorne's initial historicizing gesture, however unsatisfying the ambiguity of his ending, Hawthorne's handling of the sisters' inner lives and of the shared interiority of their dwelling stands beyond reproach, a marvelous depiction of hidden household dynamics brought to light by intense grief and extreme shifts of fortune.

Other critics, such as Neal Frank Doubleday, writing in his *Hawthorne's Early Tales: A Critical Study,* argue that to read the episodes as being dreams would be to question the narrator's honesty. After claiming that the "narrative point of view has a subtlety which for the most part eludes analysis," Doubleday claims that to read the ending as suggesting that one or both episodes were dreams would be to "assume an entirely dishonest narrator, a narrator who. . . distinctly tells us that, although Mary has been dreaming, she awakes and realizes the knocking on the door." But what's wrong with assuming a dishonest or naïve narrator? Fiction, especially eighteenth- and nineteenth-century fiction, has a rich history of unreliable and intrusive narrators, including narrators who may or may not be aware of contradictions within their own stories. Hawthorne presents the tale as if his narrator had physically been present. He not only has access to the minds and hearts of the characters but also to the setting in the absence of his characters. For instance, after Parker has given his message to Margaret, the narrator describes him walking away:

His lantern gleamed along the street, bringing to view indistinct shapes of things, and the fragments of a world, like order glimmering through chaos, or memory roaming over the past. But Margaret stayed not to watch these picturesque effects.

In this way, Hawthorne shifts from a focus of narrator to a focus of character. These shifts in point of view contribute to the story's mysterious atmosphere, which Hawthorne has already worked to develop through his use of symbolic imagery, particularly that relating to light and darkness. This "gray zone," where readers are never sure what is dream and what is reality, where the characters' perceptions are not clearly attributed, creates a dream-like world which prepares the reader for the ambiguity of the story's final sentence. However, in his essay "The Wives of the Living?: Absence of Dreams in Hawthorne's "'The Wives of the Dead,'" Mark Harris claims Hawthorne's dream-like setting is not meant to lure readers in, but is designed instead to warn them against confusing dreams and reality. Harris writes, "'The Wives of the Dead'" turns out to be not a darkly ironic treatise on the hopelessness of the wives' dreams, but simply a caution against ignorance of the distinction between dreams and reality."

But what is to be gained by offering such a caution, and such a banal one at that? Hawthorne, by employing an intrusive and possibly unreliable narrator, who may or may not be aware of the contradictions in his own story, manages artfully to create a landscape in which dream and waking life are fused. If readers are confused by the ending and feel a need to resolve it as either a dream or reality, they have missed the point (and the art) of Hawthorne's story.

Source: Chris Semansky, Critical Essay on "The Wives of the Dead," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Harris examines dream and reality in "The Wives of the Dead," and the importance of distinguishing between the two.

The few Hawthorne commentators who have given any attention to the undeservedly neglected "The Wives of the Dead" have either ignored the question of whether it deals with dreams or reality, or acknowledged the question and then dismissed it in one or two cryptic statements. Even those who have looked at the details of the story in any depth have evaded the mystery that asks for solution, or have arrived at erroneous conclusions that contradict the details the story presents.

H. J. Lang, who devotes over two pages to the story (which is, relatively, a lot), summarizes the first two types of criticism I have mentioned:

Arlin Turner summarizes the "slight" story as showing the response of each [sister] when she receives her own good news while believing her sister remains bereaved. Mark Van Doren finds it "one of Hawthorne's most attractive tales. Its atmosphere is the atmosphere of sadness and death, but its outcome—though the full effect of it upon the principals is withheld from us at the end—is in some rich, strange way happy and reassuring." For these and other critics the story is slight, plain, realistic and uncomplicated.

Unfortunately, Lang then goes on to applaud Harry Levin for the passing, unexplained remark that "The Wives of the Dead" "dream vainly of their husbands' return." Although Lang avers that "the story . . . must be read as a dream of the widows," he dismisses the primary question of the story—*do* the wives really dream?—with a simplistic "the title . . . alone should be sufficient." Having revealed to us (without explanation) that the husbands' "happy return was only a dream; reality is as terrible as it is," Lang leaves the dream/reality question of the story and tells us that the light and the dark in the story are the key elements, with "the center of the story's symbolism [being] the lamp"— again, without explaining why.

Michael Colacurcio treats the tale in some depth, but like other critics he makes erroneous statements about the plot (e.g., that both husbands die "on a single day" and that "Both women, we are told, do eventually fall asleep" and devotes most of his discussion to the sisters' individuality. Thomas Friedmann follows Lang in support of Levin's contention that the wives dream. However, Friedmann goes too far to the other extreme, presenting an overly imaginative thesis that alternately ignores and distorts the story's details. A close analysis of the story simply does not support the contention that "each [wife] dreams a scenario in which the other's husband survives." Richard Poirier, though otherwise reticent about the story, identifies one of its integral aims: "Hawthorne. . . is trying to suspend us . . . between actuality and dream."

"The Wives of the Dead" is written by a man about whose writing Poe says, "Every word tells, and there is not a word which does not tell." We should look closely at the details

of this tale that is obviously meant to raise (and evoke answers to) the question of whether the events it relates are dreams or reality.

From the start, the narrator tries to deceive us as to what is dream and what is reality by making us move too quickly over the story's details. Why, for example, does he say that the incidents of the story related in "The Wives of the Dead" "may be deemed scarcely worth relating?" Because, as he immediately goes on to say, his relating of the incidents takes place "after such a lapse of time." The *story,* he goes on to say—perhaps by way of explaining what he is going to tell us in spite of what he has just said—"awakened some degree of interest, a hundred years ago." The narrator then launches us into the story, himself fading into the background, and we may fall too quickly and deeply into the story without paying adequate attention to the few preceding lines and the caution they imply. For example, the narrator does not tell us that the *incidents* of the story *happened* a hundred years ago; he says that the *story* awakened. . . interest" at that time, which puts into question whether the story is or ever was supposed to be based on fact. Thus, a key element of the story is introduced: the difficulty of distinguishing between reality and unreality. At times the narrator will try to mislead us, burying reality beneath what may appear to be dreams, and we must distinguish dream from reality by the clues he provides.

Margaret is the first of the two sisters to receive a visitor who tells her that her husband is not dead as reported. To find out whether the visitor is right, we first need to determine whether Margaret dreams her visit or whether it actually occurs. This is rather easily determined, in spite of the narrator's misleading clues; Margaret does not dream her visit because she does not fall asleep before it happens. Her "mind" may have come "nearer to the situation of" the calmer Mary's, but nothing in the story suggests that the same is true of her heart. Margaret does not fall asleep before her visit because she cannot; unlike Mary, she is still greatly disturbed by her grief. This is shown through the description of Margaret's state right up through the point when she hears "a knock at the street door":

Margaret became more disturbed and feverish, in proportion as the night advanced with its deepest and stillest hours. She lay listening to the drops of rain, that came down in monotonous succession, unswayed by a breath of wind; and a nervous impulse continually caused her to lift her head from the pillow, and gaze into Mary's chamber and the intermediate apartment. . . While Margaret groaned in bitterness, she heard a knock at the street-door.

The passage includes nothing that suggests Margaret has slept. Unlike Mary, who is clearly emerging from sleep when her visitor knocks the first time, Margaret hears and understands her summons the first time, even though it is "apparently given with the soft end of a doubled fist,. . . through several thicknesses of wall." She expresses thoughts immediately, she "breath[es] hurriedly, . . . straining her ears to catch a repetition of the summons," and she gets out of bed lucid and alert. Clearly, Margaret is awake when her visitation occurs.

As is true also of Mary's visit, however, establishing Margaret's wakefulness and the reality of her visit do not necessarily insure that the visitor's report is true. Examining Margaret's visit, however, we find nothing suggesting that the visitor and his information are unbelievable, notwithstanding the wonderful use the storyteller makes of light, dark, and color in his description of the outside of the house. The visitor, Goodman Parker, is known by Margaret "as a friendly innkeeper of the town" and is called "honest" by the narrator. Nothing seems disputable or ambiguous in his account of having received from "an express" the "tidings on the frontiers" that include news of Margaret's husband and 12 other soldiers' being alive. Parker's report to Margaret is straight-forward and simple. And although it is true that, unlike Mary's visitor, Goodman Parker brings secondhand information, the narrator says nothing to cast doubt on Parker's source, who has been traveling from the eastern jurisdiction."

As Goodman Parker leaves, the narrator tells us that "his lantern gleamed along the street, bringing to view indistinct shapes of things, and the fragments of a world, like order glimmering through chaos, or memory roaming over the past." Is the narrator telling us that there is something unreal about what has just happened? No: unlike the "doubt of waking reality" that follows Mary's visit, which is clearly attributed to Mary's thoughts, we are told that Margaret "stayed not to watch these picturesque effects," much less created them out of her own alternately doubting and hopeful thoughts, as Mary perhaps does. Since we have seen that Margaret's visit does occur, and since there likewise seems no doubt that her visitor is sincere and his report accurate, the only thing that may seem "unreal" to Margaret is the welcomed shock, still sinking in, that her husband is alive after all.

After her visit, Margaret runs to tell Mary, but, realizing that doing so might make Mary feel worse, she "turned away. . . Her mind was thronged with delightful thoughts, till sleep stole on." Speeding the reader on, the narrator now turns to detailing Mary's experience.

He tells us that even before going to bed, Mary,

all of whose emotions were influenced by her mild, quiet, yet not feeble character, began to recollect the precepts of resignation and endurance, which piety had taught her. . . Her misfortune, besides, as earliest known, should earliest cease to interfere with her regular course of duties.

The slightly ironic tone of parts of this passage is reminiscent of the narrator's earlier subtle criticism of the superficially sympathetic mourners who had left "one by one, whispering many comfortable passages of Scripture, that were answered by more abundant tears." However, the narrator may also be subtly chiding Mary for yielding too quickly to those "precepts of resignation and endurance." Margaret, obviously still very upset by her loss, is "given" back her husband, perhaps via the actual facts of the incident, but perhaps only via the narrator's story. Will Mary, then, since she seems much more accepting of her loss, remain without her husband? Mary fixes a meal, begging Margaret to join her in both her meal and her resignation. "Arise, I pray you, and let us ask a blessing on that which is provided for us." Margaret protests that "There

is no blessing left for me"—further evidence that Margaret's visit will not be a creation of wishful thinking—but Mary feels that life must go on and that other blessings can still befall her. Does she, then, dream her visit, out of wishful thinking? Or is she thinking of other blessings?

When Margaret, after her visit, enters Mary's room to tell Mary what has happened, she notices that upon Mary's face

a look of motionless contentment was now visible, as if her heart, like a deep lake, had grown calm because its dead had sunk down so far within. Happy is it, and strange, that the lighter sorrows are those from which dreams are chiefly fabricated.

The reader who moves too quickly over this passage might later assume that Mary looked happy here because she was dreaming that her husband was alive. However, the passage does not say that Mary looked happy. The narrator describes her look as one of "contentment," which echoes the "resignation" to her husband's death more than it suggests the elation a grief-stricken wife would feel on finding her beloved alive after all. The rest of the passage also supports this: Mary's heart "had grown calm"—again evoking an image of peaceful resignation, acceptance of the situation—"because its dead had sunk so far within." If the narrator had said "deadness," we might take that as the sorrow Mary was feeling. But the nominative use of "dead" here may just as likely mean Mary's dead husband, and thus it would be he who, in Margaret's view, has "sunk so far within" Mary's heart that it has "grown calm." In either case, the entire passage, especially in conjunction with Mary's actions before going to bed, suggests that Mary is practically over her loss—at the least, resigned, and at most, content. Then we come to the final sentence of the passage, which, in light of our analysis of the sentences before it, now makes perfect sense: "Happy is it, and strange, that the lighter sorrows are those from which dreams are chiefly fabricated." We find out in the next paragraph that Mary has in fact been dreaming, and her sorrows, relative to Margaret's, are "the lighter" sort, because she no longer fights them. We must read further to see how this information can help us determine the truth or unreality of Mary's visit.

Though "a vivid dream had latterly involved her in its unreal life" and although the description of Mary's coming to recognize a knock on the door is clearly that of a person who has been asleep, the narrator also adds unequivocally that "Mary awoke." She does not answer her summons—that is, the actual meeting with her visitor does not begin— until, clearly, she is wide awake: "The pall of sleep was thrown back from the face of grief . . . she unclosed her eyes . . . [She] hastened to the window. By some accident, it had been left unhasped, and yielded easily to her hand." As with Margaret, however, that Mary is awake when her visit occurs does not necessarily mean that her visitor's report is true. And upon examining Mary's visitor and his story, we find many suggestions that neither is a reliable source of information, but rather that Stephen is either lying or mistaken.

A few brief but important details in the first paragraph describing Stephen can help us. We are told that "the storm was over, and the moon was up," and that Stephen's "livelihood was gained by short voyages along the coast." How and why, then, is

Stephen "wet as if he had come out of the depths of the sea?" The phrase suggests that Stephen is not merely rain-soaked or wet from shallow coastal waters; if this is so, then a possible explanation is that Stephen has drowned—whether Mary's husband has also or not—and, as a ghost, has come to tell Mary either the truth (to do penance?) or a lie (to seek revenge). All of this information about Stephen may just be the narrator's misleading us, but it certainly serves to cast doubts on Stephen, which further information from the narrator increases.

First, we are told that Stephen, "previous to [Mary's] marriage. . . had been an unsuccessful wooer of her own," and the narrator refers to him as "the rejected lover." Mary herself is at first suspicious of Stephen's intentions, and we might well be also. It does seem odd that a "rejected lover" who "got home not ten minutes ago" would rush to tell the woman who had spurned him that his rival for her affections was in fact alive rather than dead as reported. That is exactly the opposite of what one would expect Mary's "unsuccessful wooer" to do. Since we have established that Mary is awake and that, therefore, her visit occurs, what we must ask is not whether Stephen has "run" to tell Mary, but *why* he has. The most likely answer in light of Stephen's being a "rejected lover" is that he is lying, either to give Mary false hope in revenge on her for having rejected him—or perhaps to resurrect his chances for winning her affections by seeming to do her a kind deed. The narrator refers to Stephen as "the generous seaman" midway through Stephen' s account, and this label may also suggest that, if Stephen is not intentionally lying, he may still be mistaken, exaggerating what he has seen or heard in order to please Mary.

The status of Mary's husband is ultimately harder to prove than that of Margaret's, but the evidence seems to cast doubts on Stephen and his story's legitimacy. After the visit, Mary watches Stephen

with a doubt of waking reality, that seemed stronger or weaker as he alternately entered the shade of the houses, or emerged into the broad streaks of moonlight. Gradually, however, a blessed flood of conviction swelled into her heart, in strength enough to overwhelm her had its increase been more abrupt.

Instead of the unquestioning conviction with which Margaret leaves her visitor, even Mary's positive feelings seem just that, feelings—a rush of emotion that may be as inconsistent as Stephen seems to be. And if, as may well be the case, the narrator is giving us more than a straight retelling of the story he came across, Mary may be getting the false report he feels she deserves for too quickly getting over her loss.

Finally, the "she" in the story's last sentence is purposely ambiguous, but it necessarily refers to Margaret. Mary is definitely awake already, and the grammar and syntax of the surrounding sentence make it appropriate for the "she" to refer to Margaret. "The Wives of the Dead" clearly presents to the reader "realities" shrouded in—but not necessarily made less real by—an atmosphere of unreality, exuding mystery and suggesting dreams without actually presenting them. If we succumb to false assumptions, such as that the wives must be dreaming because (1) the story is written by Hawthorne, or (2) what transpires in the story is exactly what the wives would be likely to dream, or (3) the

mood and setting of the story suggest dreaminess, with the "rainy twilight of an autumn day" and the use of light and dark imagery throughout—we miss the point, and the narrator has succeeded in deceiving us. His deception is that a story by Hawthorne the dreamer, which is seemingly full of dreams, and the interpretation of which seems to hinge on the interpretation of those dreams, in fact contains only one dream, which is not described and which is of no direct importance to interpreting the story. Thus, "The Wives of the Dead" turns out to be not a darkly ironic treatise on the hopelessness of the wives' dreams, but simply a caution against ignorance of the distinction between dreams and reality.

Source: Mark Harris, "The Wives of the Living?: Absence of Dreams in Hawthorne's 'The Wives of the Dead,'" in *Studies in Short Fiction,* Vol. 29, No. 3, Summer 1992, pp. 323-29.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Christophersen explores how Hawthorne "challenges conventional moral assumptions" in "The Wives of the Dead."

In 1832, the year Hawthorne wrote "Roger Malvin's Burial" and "My Kinsman, Major Molineux," he also wrote a less remembered, but no less exquisite story entitled "The Wives of the Dead." In it Margaret and Mary, the "young and comely" brides of two brothers, discover within a day of each other that their husbands have been killed. Grief draws them together. But during the night, each unknown to the other receives word her "dead" husband is alive and on his way home. A drama of mixed emotions ensues: neither woman can bring herself to break her news to the other, for fear of accentuating the other's sorrow.

The few critics who have addressed this tale have underlined the ambiguity of what happens that night: Do the women only dream their husbands' return, or are they really so blessed? Critics have also stressed that "the 'core of meaning' lies with the difference of the two women's response" to their husbands' death. Such differences are usually viewed along traditional Christian lines: "Margaret is rebellious and bitter; Mary is resigned and tolerant."

But perhaps the point is not that the women's experiences during the night elude easy definition (they do), but that, whether or not their husbands live, their lives have been permanently changed by the fatal news and by their subsequent adaptations. And perhaps the point is not that the women differ (they do), but that the traditional Christian norms by which we tend to judge these differences belie their complexity. In short, perhaps Hawthorne's story not only eschews transparent plot and characterization, but also challenges conventional moral assumptions; perhaps the story we think we see—a story of faith rewarded—is only one of several shadows cast by Hawthorne's lamp.

To begin with, I submit that Hawthorne's two "sisters" (as he terms them) derive, at least in part, from the New Testament sisters, Mary and Martha, whose brother, Lazarus, Jesus raised from the dead, according to John 11. This account of miraculous resurrection and the triumph of faith over despair adumbrates Hawthorne's plot, since Mary and Margaret' s men are, as it were, raised from the dead and returned to them. Hawthorne's sisters, moreover, resemble their Biblical counterparts in more than name. The Biblical Mary personifies piety, faith, submission, and an unswerving sense of spiritual priorities; Martha, though devoted to Jesus, has a "weaker" faith, a more human nature. Martha, for instance, is at first unable to believe Christ intends to raise her dead brother. (Christ rebukes her doubt before accomplishing his miracle.) On another occasion Jesus, while visiting Mary and Martha, rebukes Martha for complaining that her sister, who is listening at Jesus' feet, has left her to do all the chores. "One thing is needful," says Jesus, "and Mary has chosen that better part, which shall not be taken from her." So when we read, in Hawthorne's tale, of Margaret's recalcitrance and Mary's pious resignation in the face of death, the image of their Biblical counterparts recurs, however subconsciously or fleetingly.

But with it recurs a familiar moral grid against which we can scarcely help viewing the wives' acts and attitudes—a moral grid Hawthorne's story questions. His setting alone, stark as it is, hints at an ambiguous moral universe. The widows' house is "plainly furnished. . . yet decorated with little curiosities from beyond the sea and a few delicate specimens of Indian manufacture." We need only recall the dubious connotations of sea and forest in Hawthorne's fiction—the mutually pagan pirates and Indians Pearl romps with in *The Scarlet Letter,* for example—to doubt this otherwise innocent setting. Moreover, though the tale enacts a resurrection of sorts, and reinstates, at last, a "daylight" universe, it begins on "The rainy twilight of an autumn day," and takes place almost entirely at night. Daylight and the order it represents have been banished from the story. The sisters, despite their Bible-quoting well-wishers, are suddenly immersed in a dark and seemingly godless world. How the two adapt to such a world is, in fact, the central drama of the piece. And while the two sisters indeed cope differently—Mary, seemingly, better than Margaret—Hawthorne plays something of a Devil's advocate, querying Mary's reaction at least as much as Margaret's.

Both sisters at first resist their lot and the prescriptions of Christian duty; their visitors' Scriptural condolences, we are told, only elicit "more abundant tears." But Mary, after outpouring her grief, resigns herself to her husband's death and to the Lord's will. Margaret, on the other hand, rebels— not just against her bad fortune, but against God. "Come, dearest sister," says Mary, "Arise, I pray you, and let us ask a blessing on that which is provided for us." But Margaret responds, "There is no blessing left for me, neither will I ask it." Now there *is,* in fact, a blessing—albeit an ironic one— left for both women, but more of that later. Margaret' s retort mirrors her outspoken and contentious stance toward experience in general. Like her husband, the Indian fighter, Margaret grapples with her fate—as she does with her emotions. When Goodman Parker rouses her during the night, claiming news of her husband, Margaret "screams" for him to fill her in—while Mary, under the same circumstances a short while later, falls "speechless."

If Margaret, meanwhile, takes after her husband, the "landsman" and Indian fighter, Mary, like her husband, is aptly identified with the sea, whose surface conceals what lies below. While Margaret, like the land, blows hot and cold, Mary, like the sea, submerges her sorrows. This style of coping seems, on the surface, mature, laudable, and eminently Christian: we watch approvingly as Mary reins in her grief and begins to pick up the pieces, all the while supporting Margaret and encouraging her to do likewise. Yet the same mechanism that allows Mary to recover so admirably also leads her to submerge essential feelings, to court "temporary forgetfulness"—and perhaps even to dissemble in matters of the heart.

For the crux of the story is the way the sisters adjust to their husbands' death *by cleaving to each other.* It's easy to miss this almost-too-obvious point. But Hawthorne's message, if not explicit, is certainly implicit: The two sisters "join their hearts"—remarry, as it were—during their hours of grief. The story pivots on this transfer of affections that the sisters themselves only gradually acknowledge.

Neither woman—understandably—seems fully aware of the emotions at work in her breast following her bereavement. Margaret, however, unlike Mary, is openly troubled—unable to sleep; a vague anxiety, Hawthorne notes, impels her to gaze repeatedly into Mary's chamber. Over and above grief for her husband, can an awareness of her deepening attachment to Mary figure in her insomnia? Whatever Hawthorne may wish to imply by this contrast, Margaret is certainly the first to realize the nature of her dawning emotion. This becomes clear after Goodman Parker informs Margaret that her husband lives—at the moment she turns to tell Mary the news. Margaret's husband's imminent return, however wonderful, dooms the "marriage" grief and love has forged between her and Mary, and Margaret, acknowledging the dilemma, resists the reinstated order to the extent it threatens the new bond. Margaret, that is, refuses to awaken Mary— and not merely out of delicacy:

Margaret shrunk from disturbing her sister-in-law, and felt as if her own better fortune *had rendered her involuntarily unfaithful,* and as if altered and diminished affection must be the consequence of the disclosure she had to make. With a sudden step she turned away (my italics).

Later that evening Mary receives word that her own husband is alive, and on his way home. She too is overjoyed. But her affections too, we sense, have been in flux—though she, unlike Margaret, seems blind to the fact until the story's close. It isn't until she sets about arranging the bed clothes over Margaret' s sleeping form that Mary' s heart betrays how deeply she feels toward Margaret. Hawthorne doesn't paraphrase Mary's thoughts as he did Margaret's; we can only guess what's on her mind as she approaches Margaret's bed. But unlike Margaret, who acknowledged and refused to sever their tie, Mary seems disposed, however reluctantly, to submerge her inchoate love for Margaret under the guise of a sister's solicitousness (hence her unnecessary fussing with Mary's bedclothes)—and to the extent, however slight, that she does so, she betrays her own heart.

Perhaps it is to dramatize Mary's equivocation that Hawthorne includes the seemingly gratuitous scene in which Mary mistakes Stephen's motives for visiting her. Stephen, the sailor who goes out of his way on a rainy night to inform Mary that her husband lives, had courted Mary, we are told, before she married. Seeing him at her window and hearing his obscure preamble, Mary jumps to the conclusion that he seeks selfish advantage from her tragedy. Mary, that is, thinks he is making advances, and is appalled that he should think her capable of entertaining new affections so soon after being widowed. Now, ironically, this is precisely what she has already done, as I have suggested—and perhaps no more than what steals across anyone's mind in the lonely and desperate hours after losing a loved one. In fact, as if to stress the point, Hawthorne limns Stephen as a virtual projection of Mary's own heart. (Her heart, we are told, was "a deep lake . . . grown calm because its dead had sunk so far within." Stephen, meanwhile—one of Mary's figurative dead—looks "wet as if he had come out of the depths of the sea.") Mary, in any case, rebukes his seeming effrontery and moves (characteristically) to close the window, never for a moment admitting any such ambiguous emotions herself. But moments later, when she finds herself lingering over Margaret's sleeping form, the news of her husband's rescue still ringing in her ears, her

tears overflow. Hysteria notwithstanding, perhaps her tears stem as much from self-realization as from emotional release or a sister's sorrow. Perhaps Mary glimpses her humanity peeking out from beneath the robes of Charity and Christian duty she all-too-resolutely draws about herself.

Hawthorne, though, is finally less concerned with psychoanalyzing Mary and Margaret's differences for their own sake than for the sake of the larger universal drama they attest to; less concerned with spotlighting the individual psyche's sleight-of-hand than with querying the modern (Christian) community's. For Hawthorne's story vibrates with the theological implications of its New Testament iconography. I have already suggested in part its relation to the Mary-Martha-Lazarus story—the story of *a* resurrection that anticipates *the* Resurrection. So too Hawthorne's tale of imminently returning bridegrooms recalls the parable of the Returning Bridegroom—i.e., Christ—and the anxieties of those who wait. Bereavement, in other words, becomes a spiritual metaphor—one which, even if we interpret Hawthorne's story optimistically, poses grave questions.

In "The Wives of the Dead," God ostensibly rewards the sisters' faith by returning their husbands. But by focusing on the loss accompanying this dispensation, Hawthorne radically qualifies the sisters' renewed state of grace—renders it (to borrow Hawthorne's own conceit) something of an inverted blessing.

For "The Wives of the Dead" is finally a tale about surviving in the modern world. Two women, awash in a "deluge of darkness," evolve a hybrid love that, however unorthodox, offers solace appropriate to the void that has overwhelmed them. Figuratively speaking, the women adapt to the dark; finding "whatever consolation . . . grief admits . . . in the bosom of the other," they accommodate themselves to a moral night in which there may be no Father to appeal to for a blessing. Their love, a lamp fashioned in isolation, glows tentatively, perhaps even promisingly—until the curtain is, as it were, withdrawn to reveal a prank: daylight without .. . Given the circumstances as Hawthorne presents them, and the New Testament context in which he steeps them, we are left to wonder whether Dawn, with its prospect of the Returning Bridegroom, isn't as much an imposition as a comfort.

Do the wives' husbands really live? Are they indeed returning? We can't say for sure. The hardest evidence we have is hearsay. Moreover, the possibility that all or part of what seems to transpire may be no more than an overwrought widow's dream qualifies still further any conclusions we may be tempted to draw, and neither Hawthorne's lamp imagery nor the text in general seems likely to clarify the issue. Hawthorne's tale, as tactful and ambiguous a masterpiece as he ever wrote, at last resists explication.

This ambiguity informs even the story's minor motifs. The Biblical ironies proposed earlier, for instance, resonate against other potentially reassuring Biblical images of subsiding waters, blessed mourners, faithful virgins and well-trimmed lamps. The "deluge of darkness" finds its counterpart in the "blessed flood of conviction" that fills Mary's heart after she accepts the news that her husband lives. The dire images of night and storm and sea and season also suggest a larger, cyclical world in which good and

evil, pain and pleasure, despair and promise balance out. Dark implications about the relativity and complexity of our most idealized emotions fall back in perspective alongside the simple, apparently selfless love Stephen displays in visiting Mary. Divine goodness seems, miraculously, to prevail over the most compelling doubts.

But what if the husbands don't live—except in their wives' frantic dreams? At its outermost bourne, "The Wives of the Dead," as subversive as it is tender, is an ironic parable of self-salvation posing as a fairy tale of divine grace. Like Margaret's husband and his twelve fellow Indian-fighters— frontier apostles who grapple with their fate rather than submit to it; like Mary's husband and his mates, who "saved themselves on a spar, when the Blessing turned bottom upward," Hawthorne's two women, by joining their hearts in inverted matrimony, *save themselves* in the most anti-Christian sense after their bright, blessed world capsizes. And given a moral night whose darkness, in the Bridegroom' s absence, threatens to suffocate, Margaret's Promethean mode rather than Mary's mode of resigned submission may well prove "the better part."

Source: Bill Christophersen, "Hawthorne's 'The Wives of the Dead': Bereavement and the 'Better Part,'" in *Studies in Short Fiction,* Vol. 20, No. 1, Winter 1983, pp. 1-6.

Adaptations

Blackstone Audiobooks has released a 450-mi-nute audiocassette of Walter Covell and others reading Hawthorne's *Tanglewood Tales.* Dick Hill reads Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* on a CD released by Brilliance in 2001.

Durkin-Hayes Audio publishes an audiocassette of Winifred Phillips reading Hawthorne's short story masterpiece, "The Birthmark."

Turner Classic Movies now has the rights to the 1926 silent film of *The Scarlet Letter,* based on Hawthorne's classic novel. The film, shown occasionally on cable television, stars Lillian Gish, Lisa Anne Miller, and Mark Northam. *The Scarlet Letter* has been adapted for film a number of times since then. The most recent adaptation, available on video, is Hollywood Pictures' 1995 *The Scarlet Letter,* starring Demi Moore and Gary Oldman.

Topics for Further Study

Keep a diary of your dreams for two weeks, then write an essay exploring some of the common elements of the dreams. What, if anything, does this tell you about your waking life?

Both Margaret and Mary are visited by men who bring them news about their husbands' fate. What if they learned this news in another way? Put yourself in 1730 and write a story for the local newspaper conveying the information the women learn about their husbands. Feel free to embellish where appropriate.

Imagine how your friends and family would respond if they learned that you had died. Write a description of the scene. Is this different than how you would like them to respond?

Research the average life expectancy of early eighteenth-century Americans. At what age did they marry? What was the most common cause of death for men? For women?

Mary was initially told that her husband drowned in a shipwreck in the Atlantic. Research the history of shipwrecks in the early eighteenth century. How common were they? What was the primary cause?

A major Hollywood studio has hired you to direct a film adaptation of "The Wives of the Dead." Who would you cast in the lead roles and why? If the tale were made contemporary, describe the changes you would make (e.g., characters, setting, dialogue, plot changes, etc.) and the reasons why you would make them.

"The Wives of the Dead" was originally published in a "gift-book" of literature and illustrations, along with three other Hawthorne stories. Research the names of these stories and then read them. Write an essay ranking them according to their literary appeal. What criteria did you use, and why?

Compare the theme of guilt as it appears in "The Wives of the Dead" with the theme of guilt as it appears in Hawthorne's story "Roger Malvin's Burial." Discuss the similarities and differences.

Compare and Contrast

1721: Benjamin Franklin's older brother, James, launches the first independent American newspaper, the *New-England Courant,* in Boston.

1835: Samuel Morse invents the telegraph.

Today: The Internet makes news gathering and reporting almost instantaneous and open to individuals as well as to news organizations.

1754-1760: The French and Indian War is fought between the French and British over North American territory, specifically whether the Ohio River valley is a part of the British Empire and therefore open for trade and settlement to British colonists. Ultimately the war spreads to every part of the world where either of the two nations have territorial interests.

1846: The United States and Britain sign the Oregon Treaty, a compromise by which British navigation rights on the Columbia River are guaranteed and the land boundary is drawn along latitude 49° N. In 1859, Oregon enters the Union as a free state.

Today: The United States is no longer involved in expanding its land holdings. However, conflicts over what some countries see as American cultural imperialism are common.

 1713: The Treaty of Utrecht affirms possession of Hudson's Bay, Newfoundland, and Acadia by the British. Cape Breton is still French.

1843: Fort Victoria is built by Britain to establish claim to Vancouver Island.

1995: Reflecting the continuing conflict between French and British culture, the Canadian province of Quebec holds a referendum on whether it should become a sovereign state. The referendum is barely defeated by a small majority.

What Do I Read Next?

Hawthorne's first collection of stories, *Twice-Told Tales,* was originally published in 1837, then reprinted in 1841 and 1851. The best text of Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales* is that published as Volume IX of the *Centenary Edition of the Complete Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne,* edited by J. Donald Crowley, 1974.

Hawthorne's 1852 collection, *"The Snow Image" and Other Twice-Told Tales,* contains some of his best-known short stories, including "My Kinsman, Major Molineux," "Ethan Brand," and "The Wives of the Dead."

Harry Levin's acclaimed 1967 study, *The Power of Blackness: Hawthorne, Poe, Melville,* argues that the tradition of American fiction lay not in the realistic novel of man in society but in the romance, a form which uses methods and materials of folklore, fable, myth, and allegory to explore what Hawthorne called the "truth of the human heart."

James C. Wilson's *The Hawthorne and Melville Friendship: An Annotated Bibliography, Biographical and Critical Essays, and Correspondence Between the Two* (1991) is a veritable casebook on the friendship and professional relationship between two of the nineteenth century's most revered writers.

Hawthorne had an often frustrating time with his publishers, one of whom was Ticknor and Fields. Michael Winship's 1995 study of the publishing industry, *American Literary Publishing in the Mid-Nineteenth Century America: The Business of Ticknor and Fields,* analyzes the records and publications of Boston-based Ticknor and Fields, revealing how its books were produced, marketed and distributed, and the extent of its expenses and profits.

Further Study

Erlich, Gloria C., *Family Themes and Hawthorne's Fiction: The Tenacious Web,* Rutgers University Press, 1984.

Erlich believes it is Margaret's husband who lives, and Mary's who dies.

Gale, Robert L., *A Nathaniel Hawthorne Encyclopedia,* Greenwood, 1991.

Gale's exhaustive reference work includes entries on every story, sketch, and novel that Hawthorne wrote. This is an indispensable reference book.

Mellow, James R., *Nathaniel Hawthorne in His Times,* Johns

Hopkins University Press, 1998.

This is a reprint of the 1983 edition, which won the 1983 National Book Award. Mellow's biography places Hawthorne in the midst of the literary and cultural turmoil of the early republic. The biography traces Hawthorne's literary concerns to the events of his life.

Pickard, Samuel T., ed., *Hawthorne's First Diary,* 1972. Though the authenticity of this book has been questioned, it contains a wealth of information on Hawthorne's personality, his living situation, and his literary opinions.

Thompson, G. R., *The Art of Authorial Presence: Hawthorne's Provincial Tales,* Duke University Press, 1993, pp. 66-76.

Thompson provides a useful review of the scant critical literature on Hawthorne's story.

Young, Philip, *Hawthorne's Secret,* David R. Godine, 1984.

Young's biography draws on Hawthorne's fiction, letters, and diaries to argue that Hawthorne, who shared a passionate attachment with his sister, Elizabeth (Ebe), discovered that an ancestor on his mother's side had committed incest in the seventeenth century. Young claims that this conjunction filled Hawthorne with revulsion and the fear that he had been cursed to repeat the sins of the past.

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Woodberry, George Edward, *Nathaniel Hawthorne: How to Know Him,* Bobbs-Merrill, 1918, pp. 68-69.

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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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