The Woman Who Came at Six O'Clock Study Guide

The Woman Who Came at Six O'Clock by Gabriel García Márquez

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Contents

Introduction

"The Woman Who Came at Six O'Clock" was first published in 1950 in *El espectador*, a Bogotá, Columbia, daily publication, where Gabriel García Márquez was already a renowned journalist. This twin pattern of fiction and journalism has influenced many of García Márquez's works, including his best-known novel, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. The novel is a key example of the magical realism movement—which García Márquez helped to develop. It was after the success of his longer works that the author's earliest short stories, which had received little critical attention when they were first published, began to get reprinted and reviewed. Many critics consider "The Woman Who Came at Six O'Clock" the best of these early stories, which are often thought of as failed experiments.

The story tells of an unnamed woman prostitute who comes into José's diner everyday at six o'clock for a free meal. One day, she comes in and convinces him to say that she came in earlier so that she has an alibi for the murder she has just committed. The story explores such themes as the justification of murder, the power of a person's reputation, and the different realities that people experience. Critics note that García Márquez was influenced by other popular authors, including Hemingway, whose short story, "The Killers," is considered by many to be a source of inspiration for "The Woman Who Came at Six O'Clock." Although the story has been reprinted in various collections since 1972's *Ojos de perro azul* (translated as *Eyes of a Blue Dog*), today it can be found in *Collected Stories*, translated from the Spanish by Gregory Rabassa and J. S. Bernstein, and published by Perennial Classics in 1999.

Author Biography

World-renowned, Nobel Prize-winning author, García Márquez is especially popular in his native Latin America, where he is affectionately referred to as "Gabito." The author has done much to illuminate the trials and tribulations of Columbian life, through both his fiction and journalism. García Márquez was born on March 6, 1928, in Aracataca, Colombia. The son of a telegraph operator, the author spent the first years of his life with his maternal grandparents, moving into his parents' house after the death of his grandfather.

The author earned a scholarship to a high school near Bogotá, and seven years later, in 1947, he enrolled in law school at the Universidad Nacional de Colombia. He attended school there until the political upheaval of *la Violencia* caused the university to close the next year, at which point the author transferred to the Universidad de Cartagena. However, he never graduated. Instead, he chose to follow his writing career, which had begun with his journalistic efforts in law school. Eventually, he worked as a reporter on several publications, including *Universal* in Cartegna, *El heraldo* in Baranquilla, and *El espectador* in Bogotá. It was this last publication where the author became a well-known journalist, and where his early short stories, including "The Woman Who Came at Six O'Clock," were first printed.

While the author was in law school, Columbia experienced *la Violencia*, a bloody conflict that raged off and on until the 1960s. Although the political unrest originally manifested itself in a number of separate conflicts, with the assassination of liberal leader, Jorge Eliecer Gaitán, it was sparked into something more. Later, the author wrote about this type of political violence in short stories like "One of These Days" and in his most famous novel, *One Hundred Years of Solitude.*

In the latter half of his career, the author has continued his trend of writing both journalistic and fiction works. His latest offerings include *Strange Pilgrims: Twelve Stories* (1993), *The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World: A Tale for Children* (1993), the novel, *Of Love and Other Demons* (1995), and the critically acclaimed exposé, *News of a Kidnapping* (1997), which examined a series of kidnappings by a Colombian drug cartel. The author lives and works in Mexico City, Mexico.

Plot Summary

The Six O'Clock Ritual

"The Woman Who Came at Six O'Clock" takes place in a small diner-style restaurant over a period of about thirty minutes. The story starts when the clock strikes six and a prostitute walks through the door, as she does every day at six o'clock. José, the fat restaurant owner, calls the woman "queen," a pet name that he usually uses to address her. He wipes the counter with a rag, as he does after every customer comes in.

The woman is obviously on edge and says that José needs to be more of a gentleman—indicating that he should light the unlit cigarette that is between her lips. José lights her cigarette and tells the woman she's beautiful. She says that flattery will not get her to pay him, and he mistakes her disagreeable mood for indigestion. He offers her a steak, but she says she can't pay. He says that she never pays him anyway, but he still feeds her every day when she comes in at six o'clock. She says that today is different.

Turning Back the Clock

José gives an explanation of their daily dinner routine, which the woman agrees is correct. However, she tells him that she didn't come in at the regular time today. He protests, saying that the clock is right, but the woman insists that she arrived fifteen minutes before six. José accuses the woman of being drunk but the woman tells him she's been sober for six months. José finally gives up and says that if she wants to say she's been there for longer, he doesn't care, because it does not make any difference.

The woman says it does matter, and increases the time difference between her stated arrival time and actual arrival time by five more minutes. José agrees with her, saying that he would give her even more time if it would make her happy, and professes his love to her.

The woman gets agitated—which José once again mistakes for indigestion—and says that no woman could stand to sleep with José because he is too fat. José is hurt by this comment, even though he tries to hide this fact by starting to clean the restaurant. He tells her that she's being grumpy, and that she should just eat and go take a nap. The woman says she isn't hungry, and changes her voice, becoming soft. She calls José Pepillo, a pet name, and asks him if he really loves her. Although he is hurt by her comments about his weight, he says that he does love her, so much so that he would not go to bed with her. Furthermore, he says that he would kill the man who does sleep with her.

Justifying a Murder

The woman playfully accuses José of being jealous, but he only says that she doesn't understand him this afternoon. He says that he loves her so much that he doesn't like her working as a prostitute, and repeats the fact that he would kill one of her customers. The woman says that she didn't know he was a murderer and acts like she is scared by this. However, even when he tries to change the subject, the woman brings it back to the idea of José murdering one of her customers, and asks if he would defend her if she killed one of her customers.

José waffles a little, saying that it depends on the circumstances, and the woman notes that José has such a reputation for honesty that the police would believe anything that he said. José is confused by this conversation, especially when the woman looks at the clock and waxes serious, asking point blank if José would lie for her. José starts to understand what the woman is getting at, and asks what the woman has gotten herself into.

She reassures him that he may not have to kill anybody, says that she can't work as a prostitute anymore, and tells him that she is going away tomorrow. José thinks she is being crazy, but remarks that being a prostitute is a dirty business. At this point, she begins to ask José questions about the supposedly hypothetical situation of a woman murdering a man, and trying to get him to say that this woman would be justified in doing it. She starts out by asking José if it would be okay to kill a man she has slept with because she was disgusted with herself. He says no. She asks him if it would be justified if she felt she couldn't wash away her disgust. He still says no. Finally, she asks if it would be okay if the man forced himself on her, even after she says that the man disgusts her. José doesn't believe that any man would do this, but the woman keeps pressuring José to say that in this hypothetical instance, the woman would be justified in stabbing the man.

He finally caves in and agrees with her and, when the woman pressures him some more, says that he would lie for a woman who did such a thing in self-defense if he loved her enough. He becomes distracted by the clock and starts to wonder about his other regular customers.

A Going-Away Present

The woman repeats the fact that she is leaving town to go where there aren't any men to sleep with her. José comes out of his trance and starts to realize the seriousness of this idea. The woman says that if José lies for her, saying that she got to the restaurant earlier than usual, she will leave town and the business of prostitution, although she notes that she will be jealous if she comes back and sees another woman on her stool. José says that she will have to bring him a present if she comes back.

The woman pressures José again, trying to get him to agree to say that she arrived fifteen minutes before six o'clock. When he caves in again, she says that she is ready to

eat and he starts to cook her a farewell steak. While he is cooking it, she asks again if he will give her all that she has asked, as a goingaway present. José doesn't understand her, and she says that she wants another fifteen minutes. He still doesn't understand, and the woman tells him that all he needs to remember is that she has been there since five-thirty.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

The story opens in a restaurant. Jose, the owner, is described as a fat, ruddy man with a rustic manner. Through the swinging door comes the second character of the story, an unnamed woman. Jose refers to her as queen. He describes her as sad, tired, her hair greased with Vaseline. Marquez immediately establishes a routine: these things happen at the same time every day, with an air of ritual. At 6:00 everyday, this woman comes in and sits down. She arrives before the regular customers who usually begin to filter in at 6:30.

The woman enters the restaurant and sits down on a barstool. An unlit cigarette dangles between her lips. She chastises Jose for not noticing her unlit cigarette, and he lights it. Things seem to get off to a rough start: she is agitated. Jose describes her mood as the result of a disagreeable lunch and offers to prepare some food for her. She replies that she still does not have any money. He refers to the established routine: she never has any money, but still he feeds her.

She tells him that today is different. He acknowledges that she has broken the pattern of their routine slightly by not saying that she was as hungry as a dog. She tells him that it is because she did not come at 6:00. He argues about the accuracy of the clock and she redirects him, repeating that she has been there for a quarter of an hour already. Knowing that this is not true, he accuses her of having been drinking and brushes off her confusion. However, she remains solid, telling him that it is very important that he realize she had been there for twenty minutes.

Jose tells the woman that he wants to see her happy, that he loves her. She retorts with anger, claiming that no amount of money would buy her for him. He tells her to go home to bed. There is a pause: and when she speaks again, her tone has changed. She asks him if he really loves her. He replies that he does, not looking at her. She carefully asks if this love is contingent on sleeping with her. He replies that his love is contingent on not sleeping with her. He stands facing her and tells her that he would like to kill every man who does sleep with her. She calls him jealous, but he shakes his head, saying that she has misunderstood. He tells her that he does not like her being a prostitute, though he never uses that label.

She asks him if he would kill a man to prevent him from sleeping with her, asks if he is capable of killing a man. Jose replies that he would be capable of killing a man for having slept with her. The tension climaxes in the conversation. The woman breaks into a laugh, making fun of his loyalty. Again, he tells her to go home.

When the woman draws him in again, this time, she takes him by the hair with a gesture of tenderness and control. She makes him repeat that he would kill a man for sleeping with her. Then she asks if he would defend her for killing that man. Jose pauses. The

woman baits him, telling him that the police would believe anything he said. Jose pounds the counter in frustration. The woman pulls the conversation back, seeking closure. She asks him again whether he would lie for her.

The woman then takes the pressure off Jose, telling him that he will not need to kill anyone, that she cannot continue to prostitute herself. She tells him that she will be going away, and not sleeping with any more men.

He questions her about her abrupt change of heart. She replies that men disgust her. She asks whether it is excusable for a woman to kill a man after sleeping with him because of that disgust. She builds the conversation to a fevered pitch, begging him to tell her that such an act would be self-defense. Jose does not.

There is a pause. The woman points out that he did not respond to her plans for leaving. He questions her seriousness. She replies that it depends on his willingness to lie for her.

Another customer enters the bar. Jose appeases her, telling her that he would do anything for her and begins preparing her food. The woman sits quietly for a moment, dissolving into herself. Then she asks him again whether he will grant her the extra fifteen minutes as a going away present. Aware of the other customer at the end of the bar, he looks at her and claims not to understand. She chastises his foolishness and tells him to remember that she had been there since 5:30.

Analysis

Marquez immediately sets up the cyclical structure of the story by establishing a sense of routine. The same events take place day after day, always at the same time and in the same way. There is almost an air of ritual to it. The symbolism of the swinging door plays into this notion of a cycle of give and take. Even the dialogue is structured in this cyclic way, the characters dance around what they are saying, rather than taking a linear approach and speaking directly.

There is also an element of fantasy to the ritual. Marquez describes Jose as playing a role, "his daily comedy of a hard-working man." This statement is thick with intent. A man's hard work would not usually be considered comedy, unless there is some discrepancy between appearance and actuality. Both Jose and the woman have their scripted dialogue and established expectations of each other. It progresses almost like a skit, with each actor reciting his or her lines by rote.

The moments when the woman breaks from the routine breed the building tension in the story. When she says, "No woman could stand a weight like yours" she is destroying the fantasy with truth, personal confession about how she feels about men in general and Jose in particular. Again, when she breaks into laughter and teases Jose for his loyalty to her, it is a blatant foul. Jose reacts with anger because she has broken the rules, stepped outside the scripted lines and insulted him on a personal level, taking them both out of their roles and exposing their intimate vulnerabilities.

Both characters are aware of what the woman is asking of him. He tiptoes around her request, feigning confusion in an attempt to escape involvement. She plays on his generosity and needles him out of desperation. Jose is able to give to the woman without taking in return. Though she has no money, he feeds her every day. He has broken the cycle that men in her life have established, as a prostitute men just take and take. Jose takes nothing, which is why the woman turns to him in need. Jose expresses empathy for the woman and pity. He is patient and generous, but does not give any indication that he is willing to lie to provide her with an alibi.

Marquez describes the way that the woman looks at Jose, "Watching him as a lamp about to go out might have looked at a man." This line suggests that the woman's desperation is real, that she has exhausted her ability to cope with her world. Comparing her to an inanimate object also reinforces the notion of her as an actor, a plaything. Her profession necessitated the abandonment of emotions, escape from herself.

When the woman speaks about her impending departure, she promises to bring back the 'tame bear' for Jose. He reacts warmly to this and mentions 'the little wind-up bear' again a few minutes later. The bear can be seen to represent Jose in his role as the bartender. He has the appearance of an uncivilized ruffian, but he is tame. He does not act the aggressor but rather a slapstick version, running through his routine day after day.

The story does not end with a neat conclusion. Marquez lets the dialogue continue its dance with a feeling of spontaneity. Once the second customer has sat down at the bar, the woman recognizes that she needs to end the conversation. She tells Jose directly what she is asking of him, "I want another quarter of an hour." Jose's hesitation implies that he acknowledges the severity of the request. He is pinned, unable to deny the woman because his need to please her is so central to his role. He is also unable to protect her because of the gross consequences of her crime. Jose demonstrates this frustration to her by saying that he really does not understand.

The woman replies with certainty, the instinct to survive, the ability to lose her in the role that she plays. She tells him to remember that she has been there since 5:30.

Characters

José

José is the restaurant owner, whom the woman prostitute tries to convince to lie for her, thereby providing her an alibi for the murder she has just committed against one of her customers. Although José loves the woman prostitute, she rarely returns his affections, instead remarking on his appearance. José is a fat man who is used to routines. Most of his customers are regulars who come in at the same time every day. He has the habit of cleaning the counter with his rag every time a customer comes in, in an effort to show that he is a hard worker. He also tends to clean when he gets nervous or offended, as he does during the conversation with the woman, who alternately insults him and tries to pressure him into telling a lie.

José is known as the most honest man in the village, which makes him the appropriate source for a fabricated alibi since even the police would believe anything he said. He is so honest that his love for the woman is almost childlike, and he says that he loves her so much that he would not sleep with her. In fact, when she announces she is going away and that she is leaving the prostitution business, he is happier over the fact that she will be taking care of herself than sad at her leaving. He tries to watch out for the woman, by giving her free food every day and by making sure that she does not go back to destructive habits like drinking too much. He also sees only the good in people, as when he looks at the worn-out body of the prostitute and calls her beautiful. His honesty and goodwill become frustrating to the woman, when he is unable to believe that a man could be so evil as to force himself on a woman. This idealized view of the world also leads to his not being able to understand that the woman is asking him to lie for her until she spells it out clearly at the very end of the story.

Pepillo

See José

Queen

See The Woman

The Woman

The woman prostitute has just murdered one of her customers out of disgust and, throughout the story, tries many different conversational tactics to coerce José into giving her an alibi—by lying about the time she came in to the restaurant. When the woman arrives, she is agitated, something that José initially attributes to indigestion. Although she makes fun of José's weight at first, she switches her tone repeatedly, at

times appearing like she cares about him, at other times browbeating him into saying what she wants him to. At one point, José attributes her odd behavior to alcohol, but she notes that she has not had a drink for a while. Her admission indicates that she has had a problem with alcohol in the past.

However, the woman's life as a prostitute has taken a greater toll than the drinking. Although she was attractive once, her beauty has faded, and she now has to use tricks like putting Vaseline in her hair to make it unnaturally shiny so that she can still attract customers. She is disgusted with herself by the men she has slept with, to the point where she now hates all men. Both for her alibi and her own sanity, the woman attempts to get José to say that a woman would be justified in killing a man if he tried to force himself on her. José is the only man who has ever treated her kindly, giving her a free meal every day and trying to protect her from her bad habits. However, she does not think of him as anything other than a close friend since he is too fat and too innocent for the harsh world that she has lived in— and therefore could never understand her. In the end, she decides to leave José and leave town to try to find some place where she can survive without having to resort to prostitution.

Themes

Murder

Although it is never stated outright, the woman in the story hints at the fact that she has just killed one of her customers. In fact, in the middle of the story, the woman gives José a hypothetical situation in which a woman murders a man whom she has slept with, and attempts to get José to agree that a murder in this case would be justified. Says the woman, "'Don't you think they ought to lay off a woman who kills a man because after she's been with him she feels disgust with him and everyone who's been with her?'"

José is unconvinced that murder would be justifiable in this case, saying that "'there's no reason to go that far.'" The woman continues her hypothetical situation, adding more details to the hypothetical situation, but it is only when she talks about a man who forces himself on a woman that José agrees somewhat, saying, "'That's terrible.'" However, he does not believe that any man would do this. Finally, after the woman keeps pushing the issue, and asking him if, in this situation, murder would be considered "'self-defense,'" José again agrees somewhat, saying, "'almost, almost.'"

José refuses to agree totally that what the woman says is right, and instead gives lukewarm answers like "'it's all probably just the way you say it is.'" José, an honest man who is not used to the hardened world of the woman prostitute, has a difficult time fathoming a situation that would justify murder—even though he has already given his own hypothetical situation where he explains why *he* would murder someone. When the woman asks José if he truly loves her, he tells her, "'I love you so much that every night I'd kill the man who goes with you.'" The woman is intrigued by this admission, and pushes him to say it again, which he does. However, when the woman later tells him that he "'may not have to kill anybody,'" José becomes distressed, saying that "'I never thought about killing anybody.'" In José's mind, saying that he would kill a man who slept with her is a chivalric statement, intended to show the love and affection he has for the woman. He has no intention of actually killing somebody and when the woman calls him on it, he says so. The woman, however, has just committed a murder, proving that she had both the intent and the will to do it.

Routines

The characters in the story all follow routines, defined by their respective roles in life. José is a restaurant owner so his life is organized around the times in which his customers come in to eat. He knows that his customers are "conservative and regular," and is not surprised when the woman enters precisely at six o'clock, "as on every day at that hour." The woman tries to convince José that today is "'different'" from other days, but he doesn't believe her. "'Every day's the same,'" he says, "'Every day the clock says six, then you come in and say you're hungry as a dog and then I fix you something good.'" The woman persists, saying that she didn't come in at the same time, to which

José replies, "'I'll cut off my arm if that clock is one minute slow.'" This is an overly dramatic response to the woman, but it illustrates the fact that José is a creature of habit, who tries rigidly to adhere to his daily routine, no matter what.

In fact, when the woman engages him, trying to get him to break the pattern and falsely agree that she came in earlier, he fights her but eventually decides to take the path of least resistance, saying, "'Well, if that's the way you want it, you've got a quarter of an hour that says you've been here.'" José's biggest concern is staying in his routine, and by giving in to what the woman says, he can do that. It shows in his actions, for as he talks, he also putters around the restaurant, paying more attention to "changing things, taking something from one place and putting it in another," than he does to their conversation. As the author notes, "He was playing his role."

The woman, however, can no longer follow the same routine or play her role. She is disgusted with her years as a prostitute and attempts to break the pattern. Whereas José's role is as a respected business owner, who is concerned only with going through the motions and appearing like he is a hard worker, the woman's life is not so nice. Every day, she comes to see José, "'who cooks me a steak every day and has fun talking to me until I find a man.'" For the woman, everything in her world, including the free steak from José, is defined by her life as a prostitute. In this world, it takes a major act to break the everyday routine. In the case of the woman, it is a murder, which also gives her the motivation to leave town, to look for a place "'where there aren't any men who want to sleep with somebody.'"

Misunderstandings

In the story, the two main characters have a hard time understanding each other, on two different levels. One level deals with the divide between their respective backgrounds, while the other deals with José's inability to recognize what the woman is asking him to do. An example of the first case takes place in the beginning, when the woman asks José if he loves her, "'even if you didn't go to bed with me?'" His response that he loves her so much that he doesn't want to sleep with her is misunderstood by the woman. She is unable to fathom this concept, and so accuses José of being "'jealous.'" In response, he tells her, "'this afternoon you don't seem to understand anything, queen.'" He says that he is jealous, but that "'it's not the way you think.'" As José tries to explain, he is not jealous of the men that the woman sleeps with; instead, he is jealous in a protective sense, and wishes she would stop being a prostitute.

Likewise, the woman wishes José would understand where she is coming from. Although she walks him through an increasingly worse scenario, where a woman is taken advantage of by a man, and tries to get him to agree with her that murder would be justified in this case, José tries to maintain that "'it's not that bad.'" This frustrates the woman who calls José "'a savage,'" and says that "'You don't understand anything.'"

The biggest form of misunderstanding in the story comes in the form of José's inability to comprehend what the woman is asking him to do. Although she builds up her request

throughout the story, first of all asking for "'a quarter of an hour"'; then establishing the fact that José would "'defend"' her if she killed a man who slept with her; then finally asking if he will "'really tell anyone who asks" him that she got there early. However, because José is unable to comprehend a situation that is so bad that it calls for murder, he is not able to put the links together and he asks her, "'What for?"' Even at the end, after he has agreed to "'do whatever"' the woman asks, he still says, "'I really don't understand, queen."'

Reputation

Reputations play a huge role in the story. The woman's occupation as a prostitute gives her a bad reputation, which will not protect her if the police try to accuse her of the murder. Instead, she tries to procure an alibi from José by having him falsely claim that the woman was at José's diner when the man was murdered. As the woman tells José, "'I'm willing to bet that you've never told a lie in your life."' José is so honest that nobody would ever suspect him of lying. Also, as a respected business owner, his word holds more weight than that of a prostitute. In fact, as the woman notes, "'The police know you and they'll believe anything without asking you twice."'

Style

Exposition

In many stories, writers use exposition—or the revealing of facts—as a narrative hook, feeding their readers a little piece of information just when they need it, so that they can retain the dramatic tension and keep their readers interested and waiting for the next piece. In this story, however, the telling is straightforward, and readers start to get a clue in the beginning when the woman argues with José, saying that she's "'got a quarter of an hour that says I've been here.'" The reader may wonder why the woman wants José to say that she came in earlier than she actually did, but doesn't have to wonder for long. One gets a strong idea of what the woman has done in the middle of the story when the woman asks José if he would defend her if she killed a man who slept with her; when she says that "'the police know you and they'll believe anything without asking you twice'"; and finally when she asks him: "'Would you tell a lie for me, José?'" By putting all of this together, along with the woman's earlier, emphatic request to turn back the clock, the reader can infer that the woman has killed a man and is seeking an alibi to hide this fact. From this point on, this fact is reinforced even more, when the woman goes into more detail, thinly veiling the fact that she has committed a murder behind a hypothetical situation, in which an unnamed "woman" kills an unnamed "man."

Tone

Since the exposition is straightforward, the narrative tension has to come from somewhere else. In this case, it is from the story's tone of desperation and loss. Tone is the author's attitude and mood, which in this case is reflected in the relationship between the woman and José. The woman is desperate when she comes to the restaurant seeking an alibi. Although she tries different tactics to get José to understand and support what she has just done, it is no use, and she becomes even more desperate when she realizes that José doesn't understand her plight or what she is asking of him: "The woman pounded the counter with her knuckles. She became affirmative, emphatic."

Once she realizes this, the tone changes from one of desperation to one of loss. The woman now knows that she and José are different, and that he could never truly empathize with her. At this point, the woman becomes "silent, concentrating, watching [José's] movements with an air of declining sadness." As García Márquez notes, the woman watches José "as a lamp about to go out might have looked at a man." She is feeling empty, drained of life from her experiences as a prostitute. As a result, she is going to follow through on her plans to leave town. "'I told you I was leaving tomorrow and you didn't say anything,'" the woman says to José. All José can do is ask where the woman is going, and to "'bring me something'" if she comes back to town. The man is going to lose the woman who he adores, but he is so caught up in the details of his own

routine existence that he doesn't realize the full implication of this fact. With cues from the author however, the reader understands this tragic sense of loss.

Setting

The story takes place in a very small setting, a diner-style restaurant in an unnamed South American city, which is never described in detail. Throughout the story, very little mention is made of the world outside the restaurant, although the woman occasionally looks out on the street through "the wide restaurant window," and at one point watches "the passers-by of the dusking city." Because the city is not described, the restaurant becomes the entire world of the story. In fact, it is a fairly desolate world, as only one other person comes into the restaurant during the story. This happens at the end, which in turn signals the woman that it is time to end her conversation with José. By limiting the scope of the story and keeping the details of the city ambiguous, García Márquez mirrors the anonymous nature of the prostitute, who also remains unnamed, and forces the reader to focus on the relationship between her and José, as well as the crime that the woman has just committed.

Historical Context

García Márquez was born in Columbia in a time when political tensions were high. The turmoil had a long history dating back to the nineteenth century, after Columbia fought to win its independence from Spain. Several civil conflicts resulted between Liberals and Conservatives, which eventually culminated in the Thousand Days War (1899-1903).

García Márquez was affected by the conflict between the Liberals and Conservatives right from his birth. As Gene H. Bell-Villada notes in his *García Márquez: The Man and His Work*, the author's father "belonged to the Conservative camp," a fact that did not sit well with the author's maternal grandfather, who had served as a colonel for the Liberal forces during the Thousand Days War. Says Bell-Villada, "Later, in a conciliatory gesture, Luisa [the author's mother] would be sent to her parents' in order to give birth to baby Gabriel in Aracataca."

Aracataca, where García Márquez lived with his grandparents until he was eight, was like many other poor Columbian towns. The widespread poverty helped to instigate periodic uprisings, which boiled over with the assassination of Liberal leader Jorge Eliecer Gaitán on April 9, 1948, in Bogotá. A mob of Liberal supporters unleashed a brutal killing spree and destroyed or burned many buildings in an event that became known as *el bogotazo*. Bell-Villada notes how the violence and destruction of this coup directly affected the author. "The boardinghouse where he'd been staying caught fire, and despite an abortive, tearful rescue attempt on his part, his books and manuscripts were mostly set ablaze."

The Universidad Nacional de Columbia, where García Márquez was studying at the time, was another casualty of the violence. The institution closed its doors shortly after the coup, and the author and other students were forced to attend other schools in other areas of the country if they wanted to continue their education.

Prostitution, an occupation that thrives in poor areas, ran rampant in South American countries like Columbia at this time. With his move to Barranquilla at the start of 1950, García Márquez became extremely familiar with this institution when he found lodging in a brothel, which was upstairs from a collection of law offices. As Bell-Villada notes, the prostitutes "treated Gabo as a family friend, generously sharing their lunches with him." This association led to sympathetic portrayals of prostitutes in García Márquez's works —including "The Woman Who Came at Six O'Clock." Published the same year he moved into the brothel, the story features a restaurant owner who feeds a woman prostitute for free.

The immediate destruction of *el bogotazo* in 1948 led to an era of heightened political tensions and social revolution, which lasted until the mid-1960s. This period, known as *la Violencia*, greatly influenced the characters and themes in many of García Márquez's works.

Critical Overview

García Márquez's early short stories were written in the late 1940s and early 1950s, when the author was in his early twenties. Many of them, including "The Woman Who Came at Six O'Clock" (1950), were published in the Bogotá, Columbia, daily publication, *El espectador*. However, it was not until the author achieved fame through novels like *One Hundred Years of Solitude* that his earliest short stories were reprinted and translated into different short story collections, thereby reaching a wider audience. It was at this point that critics began to notice the stories.

Although "The Woman Who Came at Six O'Clock" was first collected in *Ojos de perro azul* (translated as *Eyes of a Blue Dog*) in 1972, most reviewers didn't notice the story until it reappeared in *Innocent Eréndira and Other Stories* (1978) and *Collected Stories* (1984).

"The Woman Who Came at Six O'Clock" is rarely discussed on its own; instead, it is usually lumped in with García Márquez's other early stories. Overall, these works have received much negative critical attention, with critics such as George R. McMurray stating that they were "of scant literary importance." In her book, *Gabriel García Márquez: Revolutions in Wonderland*, Regina Janes called the author's earliest stories "a disaster of Kafkaesque experimentation with physiologically rendered psychological states," and said that García Márquez refused, "deliberately, to specify the usual components of stories: time, setting, character, names, relationships between characters." In his 1983 article in *Commentary*, Joseph Epstein agreed, saying that the "early stories are dreary in the extreme: dryly abstract, bleak, cut-rate Kafka, without the Kafkaesque edge or the humor."

Still, "The Woman Who Came at Six O'Clock" has weathered the critical attention better than the other early short stories. John Simon called the story "a neatly managed mood piece," which contains "nice turns of phrase." Bell-Villada, in a 1979 review, observed that while most of the early stories are "brooding and morose," and "deal overwhelmingly with isolation or death," "The Woman Who Came at Six O'Clock" "shows notable, if derivative achievement." Bell-Villada described the story as "Hemingwayesque," and said that "for an early effort, this open-ended sketch is quite subtle." Likewise, McMurray discussed the "vague resemblance" of "The Woman Who Came at Six O'Clock" to Hemingway's "The Killers," citing that both stories feature "objective, transparent delineation of superficial reality," "naturalistic dialogue occurring in a café," and "oblique allusions to a murder."

One of the subtleties that Bell-Villada discussed later in his 1990 book, *García Márquez: The Man and His Work*, dealt with the title of the story itself. As Bell-Villada noted, the title, which was "in the imperfect past tense in the original," actually means not "came," as most translations read, but "*Used to Come.*" According to Bell-Villada, this "signals that day's untruth while also hinting that the woman no longer does come, for tomorrow she vanishes."

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Poquette has a bachelor's degree in English and specializes in writing about literature. In the following essay, Poquette compares García Márquez's story to Ernest Hemingway's "The Killers."

Gabriel García Márquez is considered one of the greatest living writers in the world. The majority of the positive praise for García Márquez comes from his first novel, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, considered his masterpiece, although his later works have been favorably reviewed as well. However, when it comes to his earliest short stories, the praise is not always good. With rare exception, critics find these stories "dreary in the extreme," as Joseph Epstein wrote, or "a disaster of Kafkaesqe experimentation," as Regina Janes noted.

García Márquez's early story, "The Woman Who Came at Six O'Clock," is sometimes exempted from this negative criticism although many critics find the story derivative of Ernest Hemingway's story, "The Killers." However, as critic George R. McMurray notes, the stories only share a "vague resemblance." In reality, the two stories are very different. By comparing the pacing, characterization, and setting in Garcia Márquez's "The Woman Who Came at Six O'Clock" and Hemingway's "The Killers," the stark differences between the stories become apparent.

The speed at which the story reads, the pacing, is one of the differences between the two stories, which becomes apparent within the first lines of each opening. "The Woman Who Came at Six O'Clock" starts out: "The swinging door opened. At that hour there was nobody in José's restaurant." After this, García Márquez gives several lines of narration, in which the reader learns about the "conservative and regular" habits of José's customers. José briefly says "'hello"' to the woman who walks in, and then the author employs several more lines of narration, discussing José's compulsive cleaning habits. Overall, this method of giving long blocks of description after short pieces of dialogue serves to slow the pace of the story's opening.

"The Killers," however, has a much faster beginning. The story starts out: "The door of Henry's lunch-room opened and two men came in. They sat down at the counter." Unlike "The Woman Who Came at Six O'Clock," there is no additional description of the men or the proprietor, George, right away. Instead, the story kicks right into George asking the two men, "'What's yours?"' This short phrase is a very concise way of asking the men what they want to eat. Both of the men answer, "'I don't know,"' one right after the other. After a short section of narration that helps to establish the setting, one of the men orders and there isn't any narration for a while. The dialogue comes hard and fast, firing back and forth among the characters like the bullets that the reader later learns will inevitably be shot into Ole Andreson, the unfortunate target of these two hitmen.

After the slow open of "The Woman Who Came at Six O'Clock," the rest of the story follows a similar pattern, with long lines or sections of dialogue followed by narrative passages that are highly descriptive. These help to put a literary brake on the action

because of their length and their lack of real action, as in this passage that illustrates how José is nervous and avoiding the topic of murder:

She watched the man go away. She saw him open the refrigerator and close it again without taking anything out. Then she saw him move to the other end of the counter. She watched him polish the shining glass, the same as in the beginning.

The slower pacing serves to force readers to focus on emotions, not action. In the process, readers get a sense of the woman's sense of loss. Throughout the story, she tries repeatedly to get José to understand her but she realizes, after watching José ignore her and go back to his routine cleaning activities, that he will never understand and that she is alone. "The woman stayed on her stool, silent, concentrating, watching the man's movements with an air of declining sadness."

The characters in each story follow the respective style of their story's pacing. In "The Woman Who Came at Six O'Clock," the characters are softer and as a result, the reader is drawn to them. This is especially true with the woman prostitute. Although the woman has a hard edge to her voice at times, which matches the hard life she has been living, she is not so far gone that she can't speak "with a tender, soft, different voice." In fact, even when she looks like she's going to get violent, as when she grabs José "by the hair," it is still "a gesture of obvious tenderness." These characterizations help to offset the idea that this woman has committed murder, which she alludes to with such phrases as "'you'd defend me if I killed him, right?'" and "'Would you tell a lie for me, José? Seriously.'" These allusions are coupled with the woman's "hypothetical" scenario, where an unnamed woman kills a man because he "'isn't decent'" and has taken advantage of her, to the point where "'he disgusts her so much that she could die, and she knows that the only way to end it all is to stick a knife in under him.'"

In spite of these strong hints of murder, the reader is still encouraged to feel sympathy for the woman through the descriptions of her. As the author writes, she has a "face gilded by a premature autumnal grain," "flat, sad breasts," and hair "greased with cheap, thick Vaseline." It is hard for readers to condemn a character when they feel sorry for her and the hard, shameful life that she has lived, which is what García Márquez intends with this kind of intentionally sympathetic characterization.

The men in "The Killers," however, are just that—cold, unfeeling murderers who do not inspire sympathy. These professional hitmen, like the story's pacing, are hard and rough. They are rude from the start, when they try to order a couple of items during lunch hours that are not served until dinner, which is an hour away. "'Oh, to hell with the clock,'" one of them says. The men's demeanor does not improve as they eat their food, and George tries to appease the two by agreeing with a joke they have made about everybody coming to his restaurant to "'eat the big dinner'":

'That's right,' George said.

'So you think that's right?' Al asked George.

'Sure.'

'You're a pretty bright boy, aren't you?'

'Sure,' said George

'Well, you're not,' said the other little man. 'Is he, Al?'

'He's dumb,' said Al.

The two men only get more antagonistic and condescending as the story goes on, and they slowly reveal their plan, telling Nick, the only customer in the place, to "'go around on the other side of the counter with your boy friend.'" At this point, Al takes Nick in the back and ties him up with Sam, the black cook, while the other man, Max, keeps watch on George while waiting for their target to come in. George does as Al and Max asks, and lies to his customers when they come in the door, saying the cook stepped out and that they will have to come back later to eat. Max commends George on the handling of the situation, still using the condescending nickname, "'bright boy,'" but Al pipes up from the kitchen, saying, "'He knew I'd blow his head off.'"

Through this stark characterization, Hemingway paints the two hitmen as men who really enjoy their work, men who are beyond a reader's sympathy. They like the power that killing gives to them, and flaunt it by making fun of people and making violent threats. In this story, however, the killers don't get to hit their target in the restaurant, because Ole Andreson does not show up at six o'clock like he usually does. Although the two killers argue about whether or not to kill George, Nick, and Sam, they finally decide to let them go and leave; in the process, they tell George that he's "'got a lot of luck,'" and that he "'ought to play the races, bright boy,'" leaving George with one last condescending phrase.

After the killers leave, Nick follows shortly after to go warn Ole Andreson. Nick's leaving, and the resulting expansion in the setting as the narration follows him, helps to illustrate the third major point of distinction between the two stories—the difference in setting. Although both stories take place in a small restaurant, in "The Woman Who Came at Six O'Clock," the setting is deliberately confined within José's small restaurant, where the story concerns only José and the woman, one of his regulars: "The clock hadn't finished striking six when a woman entered, as on every day at that hour."

At the story's end, unlike Hemingway's killers, the woman is still talking to José—the action never leaves the restaurant. José and the woman exist in their own little world. Even when a customer comes in, he doesn't say hello to the two people, he merely goes to a table and sits, "silent, waiting in the corner." With this focus on the two characters, García Márquez's story takes on almost dream-like qualities. This is unlike Hemingway's story, where there are several characters who come and go, and conversations take place between different people in different places. In "The Killers," the world is anything but a dream. Instead, the harsh pacing of the story, the cold attitude of the hitmen, and their overt references to violence make the tale very realistic, in an extremely gritty way.

Source: Ryan D. Poquette, Critical Essay on "The Woman Who Came at Six O'Clock," in *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

Sanderson holds a Master of Fine Arts degree in fiction writing and is an independent writer. In this essay, Sanderson examines García Márquez's experimentation with time and reality in his short story.

Critics have long noted the influences of many modern fiction writers on Gabriel García Márquez, especially in the Colombian author's handling of the passage of time and in the depiction of reality in his stories. In *Twayne's World Authors Series Online*, for example, Raymond L. Williams credits García Márquez's reading during the 1940s of German novelist and short story writer Franz Kafka with his discovery "that literature can not only reflect reality but also permit the invention of reality; fiction can not only present moral problems in social contexts but also place into question the matter of reality itself." Deborah Cohn, in her article in *College Literature*, notes that "García Márquez joined with many of his fellow Latin American authors in embracing [William] Faulkner as one of their own." Indeed, many critics have found parallels between the author from the American South and García Márquez, not the least of which is their shared interest in how time passes. "García Márquez's debt to Faulkner's treatment of time is evident," comments Cohn.

Cohn also mentions in her article that García Márquez's "notions of time" are similar to those of the French philosopher Henri Bergson, who depicted time "as a past which creeps up on and encompasses the present and future . . . [and] a never completed movement towards the realization of potential." She also notes, however, that in some of his work, García Márquez adopts a view of time that is "diametrically opposed to that of Bergson" but that appealed to Faulkner, who created "characters who are paralyzed in historical time," unable to move beyond traumatic events. Both of these concepts of time infuse García Márquez's 1950 short story "The Woman Who Came at Six O'Clock." Time does, indeed, seem to creep up on and encompass the futures of both José and the prostitute, but just as firmly, time and reality trap them and make them unable to move forward. García Márquez experiments with both the events in his story and the characters to shift time and reality.

"The Woman Who Came at Six O'Clock" is one of García Márquez's first stories, written during a period in which, according to Williams, the author was beginning to establish his identity as a writer. "The first stories, as has been suggested, were more important as a symbolic beginning than for their purely artistic merit," notes Williams. In this story, García Márquez is experimenting with the use of time, signaling his interest in having realistic situations co-exist alongside an invented reality in which time is nonlinear. His efforts to manipulate time and reality in some of the early stories set the ground work for the magic realism that has brought him so much fame and a Nobel Prize for literature. (Magic realism is a style of literature popularized in the 1960s in Latin America that combines ordinary events and characters with fantasy and dream-like features.)

At first glance, the story reads as a very straightforward piece of realistic fiction: a prostitute arrives at six in the evening at José's restaurant, just as she has been doing

for some time. Her cool, flirtatious conversation with José, along with her request that he accept the idea that she arrived at the restaurant earlier than she actually did, progressively reveals that she has most likely murdered one of her customers.

The story's minimalist setting and mood recall Edward Hopper's 1942 painting *Nighthawks*, a hyper-realistic illustration of an isolated diner in a gritty urban setting. Similar to García Márquez's story, Hopper's painting appears simplistic in its presentation. But, as with the story, time in the painting seems to have stopped for a moment. Because Hopper does not include a door into or out of the diner in the painting, the four occupants look as if they are sealed inside the restaurant by its large, smooth windows. Time stands still, and the customers and counterman are trapped in a moment.

The atmosphere found in Hopper's painting pervades the tale of José and the prostitute, whom José refers to as "the queen." Like the painting, García Márquez's story seems fairly clear-cut, at least until the gathering weight of the author's use of time as a narrative technique is fully felt in the story's final action, when the prostitute asks that the reality of her arrival at the diner be altered yet again. Throughout the story, the prostitute is preoccupied with the distinction between when she truly arrived at the diner and when she wishes she had arrived. José offers her steak, but what she really wants is to be able to recapture a piece of time that has vanished.

Each day's interaction between José and the prostitute is the same: she walks into his restaurant at exactly six o'clock, and he cooks her a free steak dinner. On the day of the story, however, the prostitute declares, "'Today's different,'" and tries to explain why she does not want her usual meal. José's protests to the contrary, she insists, "'I didn't come at six today, that's why it's different, José.'" She seeks to change reality, in a sense, when she declares that she arrived fifteen minutes before six o'clock, the hour of her actual arrival. "'I've got a quarter of an hour that says I've been here,'" she maintains.

While this early story may not be one of García Márquez's great achievements, his careful choice of the story's two characters contributes to his efforts to experiment with time and reality. Here he introduces two ordinary people with unexceptional histories—two people who have collected many hours, days, and years upon which their present days and their futures rest. The prostitute is no longer young and beautiful: when José leans over to light the prostitute's cigarette, he notices "the beginning of her twilight breast." José has, for many years "put on his daily comedy of a hard-working man," wiping the same spot on the counter over and over again whenever a customer enters his restaurant. Their lives have been unglamorous and unspectacular —just the kind of lives that provide a perfect foil, or ground, for García Márquez's bits of unreality and fantasy.

José and the prostitute attempt to adjust their reality by supposing certain scenarios and participating in a kind of role-playing. Not only does the prostitute ask José to alter time for her, but they both play with the idea that they are lovers and share a past and future with each other. When discussing how he would give her "'a whole day and the night that goes with it'" just to see her happy, he admits out loud that he loves her—so much

so that he would not go to bed with her, distinguishing himself from the other men she knows. Then José goes one step further in his role-playing as her lover, telling the prostitute that he would "'kill the man that goes with you.'" Suddenly there are two murders: the actual murder committed by the queen, and the imaginary murder that José would commit in some other reality, if things were different.

The couple becomes so involved in their conversation about José's professed love and whether he would kill another man for the prostitute that they create a world of their own, apart from reality. "The conversation had reached an exciting density," writes García Márquez. The prostitute's face was "almost stuck up against the man's healthy, peaceful face, as he stood motionless, as if bewitched by the vapor of the words." At this moment, time does stand still, and the couple is sealed off from the reality of who they are and what the prostitute has done. She even strokes his arm. The "vapor" clears only when the prostitute suddenly laughs, as if she is waking up from a dream only to realize the absurdity of José's assertion that he would kill for her. "'How awful, José,'" she says, yanking the two of them back to the present moment by teasingly announcing, "'Who would have known that behind the fat and sanctimonious man who never makes me pay . . . there lurks a murderer.'" José is hurt and embarrassed by her response to his drift into a fantasy world and accuses the prostitute of drinking.

The prostitute plays with possibilities and alternate realities just as much as José does. For example, she uses his real name, José, until he mentions that he loves her. Then she begins calling him by another name, Pepillo; his pretending to be a man who would kill propels them both into another reality and a possible series of events requiring an alternate identity. Later in the story, she presents the reality of her committing murder as a scenario just as imaginary as José's fantasy about killing a man for her. If José would kill a man who slept with her, she asks him, certainly he would defend her if she killed that same man? When José becomes alarmed, the queen assures him that she was simply talking to "amuse" herself, and José—despite his recent proclamations to the contrary—denies ever having considered killing anyone.

Both José and the prostitute are trapped by past events, unable to move forward. García Márquez underlines this feature by concluding the story with the prostitute asking José for just a bit more time, for her alibi. When José acts as if he doesn't understand her—as if he hasn't been present for the past thirty minutes' discussion of love and murder and what he would do for her—she closes the story with the words, "'Don't be foolish, José. Just remember that I've been here since five-thirty.'"

The prostitute's final appeal echoes her first request for fifteen minutes and her second request for an additional five minutes, raising the question of just how far back in time she will want to go. How much more time will she ask for to provide herself with an alibi? Is she looking to go so far back into her history that she will rewrite her life and no longer be the tough, aging prostitute? By continuing to regress further into her past, the prostitute expresses the concept of time that García Márquez borrows from Faulkner, in which a character cannot escape the past but is held in check by it and prevented from moving forward. Even though the prostitute claims that she is planning to leave town (in an attempt to move forward), her desire for more time and an alternate reality seem to

keep pushing her backwards. García Márquez closes his story with the image of a woman sitting in a diner, moving backwards because time and reality will not let her do otherwise. Her talk of leaving town, then, is another fantasy, no more real than the dream of her and José becoming lovers and of him committing murder for her.

Source: Susan Sanderson, Critical Essay on "The Woman Who Came at Six O'Clock," in *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #3

Kukathas is a freelance writer and editor. In this essay, Kukathas looks at how García Márquez explores the nature of communication in this short story.

In "The Woman Who Came at Six O'Clock," Gabriel García Márquez invites his reader into a private exchange between two people who enjoy a strange sort of familiarity. José, the restaurant owner, has "almost come to acquire a degree of intimacy" with the woman who visits his establishment each evening at six o'clock. Both are lonely figures and because of their loneliness they share a certain bond. As an onlooker and eavesdropper to the scene described and to their conversation, the reader of the story is suddenly privy to the details of their lives and their unusual relationship. With very little description on the part of the narrator, the reader learns about José, the woman, and something shocking that has transpired that evening. The reader comes to know what has happened from "reading between the lines" and from picking up on clues from the two characters' conversation.

At the same time, José and the woman have a conversation in which they must pick up on each other's clues and read between the lines as they talk to each other. However, it is not really clear whether each truly understands what the other is trying to say. The story thus is an interesting study in the complex nature of communication and in the way people relate to each other. García Márquez explores these issues as they are played out between the characters in his tale as well as between author and reader in the artificial construct of the short story.

The reader gleans over the course of the story, by listening to the two characters, that the woman, "queen," as José calls her, is an aging prostitute who has killed one of her customers earlier in the evening. She now wants to leave town and put her old life behind her. None of these facts is ever told to the reader, but the details emerge with the description of the characters and as they talk. The woman comes to José's restaurant as she does every evening at six, but today she is in need of an alibi. She does not tell José what has happened—at least not explicitly—instead she offers him a hypothetical situation of a fictitious woman who has killed a man she has slept with and asks him whether her action is defensible. She tries to suggest to him that she has been at his restaurant for longer than she actually has been: she has been there since a quarter to six, not six, she says. But although she repeatedly demands that she "wants another quarter of an hour," José, it appears, never realizes that she is asking him to be her defense. Right up until the end, when she insists she has been at the restaurant since fivethirty, he declares that he does not understand what she means. She tries to tell him without actually spelling it out, that she needs him to lie to the authorities if they ask her where she has been since five-thirty, but he seems not to recognize what she is asking of him.

Or at least that is how it appears. But is José in fact ignorant of what the woman is asking him? As the story proceeds, the reader learns something about the relationship between the two characters, and it becomes a question as to what his responses to her

entreaties exactly mean. José treats the woman with kindness, declaring that he loves her very much. He does not like the fact that she is a prostitute, and he says that he loves her to the extent that he would not go to bed with her, that he would kill the man who goes with her. The woman, on the other hand, mistreats José, mocking him because he is fat, talking to him harshly, and baiting him at every turn. But she also shows him some tenderness, calling him "Pepillo" and telling him she will bring him a "wind-up bear" if she returns after she goes away. She appears to trust him to some extent as well as to need him, and she tells him with some desperation about the supposedly fictitious woman who has killed the man she sleeps with.

José seems to be willing to do almost anything for "queen"; he is rather like the "wind-up bear" he asks for in that she seems to be able easily to manipulate him and get him to do her bidding. He seems to be very sensitive to her words (he is hurt when she calls him fat, blushes when she says he is jealous). But how is it then that, despite their familiarity with each other, their method of communicating through underhanded bantering, and their ability to understand each other's signals, José does not understand when "queen" tries to tell him that she has murdered a man because of the disgust she felt at herself? And how can he not understand what she is telling him when it seems so obvious to the reader of the story?

Perhaps José simply is not the observant type; after all, "queen" chides him and says he "still hasn't learned to notice anything" when he fails to see her unlighted cigarette at the beginning of the story. Perhaps he is simply slow. But perhaps it is that José *does* understand what the woman is saying to him and lets on that he doesn't in order to protect her and to protect himself from the reality of the situation. His recognition of what has happened seems to come at the point in the story at which he has a "tremendous idea," one that "had entered in through one ear, spun about for a moment, vague and confused, and gone out through the other, leaving behind only a warm vestige of terror." José seems to understand then that the woman has done something awful. When she presses him about whether killing a man out of disgust would be selfdefense, he does not want to answer, but he finally does, wearing "an expression that was at the same time a cordial comprehension and a compromise of complicity."

These are both signs that José knows something that he is not letting on. When "queen" tells him that she will be leaving town, he tells her he is happy for her, even though earlier on he had told her she must be feverish for considering such a thing. He then agrees to tell anyone who asks that she got to his restaurant at a quarter to six. But, significantly, he agrees to this only after he sees the first customer coming in through the swinging door of the restaurant at "six-thirty on the dot"; he agrees to give her a quarter of an hour after he knows it is safe to do so. So then, while it appears at first that José does not understand what "queen" is saying to him in the story, on closer consideration it seems that he might in fact know something about what she is asking him to do and why. Perhaps he knows what is going on but does not want it to be known that he does.

García Márquez never provides the reader with any definitive sense of how much José actually understands. It is never explicitly shown whether José correctly picks up on the

many clues that "queen" offers him to explain her situation. The author never makes it clear what José thinks about what the woman is saying. All that is shown is his reaction to her, and his outward behavior. The reader is told what José says and how he reacts (he says he would kill for her, says that no decent woman would do what she says her fictitious woman has done, pretends to clean the restaurant counter, acts distracted) but it is not exactly clear how to interpret his behavior or what to make of it.

Indeed by the end of the story, the reader is in a similar situation as José. Many hints have been dropped and clues offered as to what has gone on, but it is not entirely clear what has taken place. What really has happened to queen? Has she in fact murdered her "john?" *Is* she asking José for an alibi? Does José know what she is trying to tell her? And what is the author trying to say by relating all of this? The reader is left feeling a similar sort of vague terror as José feels—that something awful has happened in the story, but it is difficult to know what to make of it. The story leaves the reader feeling as though she knows but does not know, that there is some mystery that is not solved, that there are questions that cannot definitively be answered.

With both the action of the story and the device of the story, García Márquez offers up a lesson about the nature of human communication. It is, significantly, not a didactic lesson that tells us exactly how things are, but a suggestion in the form of an intimate exchange about the complexity of relating to each other in words, gestures, and signals. Communication between human beings is a delicate matter; it is a difficult thing to say to each other the things that we want to. In life and in fiction people drop hints, say things sideways, and dance around the truth in order to communicate something deeper that they cannot seem to say in direct terms. And although in such exchanges, people can learn much about each other, in the end humans remain mysteries to one another.

José and queen talk in code by dropping clues and reading between the lines of their conversation, but in the end there is a gap in their understanding of each other; indeed at various points in the story the characters say that the other doesn't understand or that they don't know what the other is talking about. Similarly, the author of the short story offers clues to tell the reader about his ideas, about characters, about motivation. The reader can learn from this exchange, can gain insights about life that are not possible with more direct descriptions. But in the end, the clues that are dropped can only tell so much. A great deal about what we can know about other human beings, what they think and feel, what motivates them, what they are truly about, is left a mystery. Similarly, the short story can inform and teach us, but its ultimate "point" or "meaning" seems to be as elusive as the humans it seeks to understand.

Source: Uma Kukathas, Critical Essay on "The Woman Who Came at Six O'Clock," in *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Topics for Further Study

Research the Colombian legal system in the late 1940s and early 1950s. What would happen to the woman if the police did not believe her alibi and she was found guilty of the murder? What would happen to José for protecting her? Write a short news article about the case that details the trial and addresses these issues.

These days, an alibi is not always enough to hide a murder. Research the contemporary investigative methods that law enforcement officials use to solve crimes. Using this information, pose three reasons why the woman might not get away with the murder today.

Research the long and complex history of *la Violencia*, a social and political conflict that gripped Columbia from the late 1940s to the mid-1960s. Compare this time period to contemporary Columbia. What types of political conflicts are evident in the country today?

At the time the story was written, the United States witnessed the strengthening of many post-WWII social movements like feminism, in which women fought for equal rights and the ability to pursue professional careers. Research the history of feminism in the United States and draft a scenario where the woman from the story comes to the United States in the early 1950s and has the opportunity to pursue an occupation other than prostitution—addressing some of the barriers that the woman might still have faced.

Latin Americans have thrived in other arts besides literature in the twentieth century. Research the contributions of other Latin American artists, photographers, and musicians over the past one hundred years and give a short overview that details common elements found in these works. Choose one artist and write a short biography about him or her.

Compare and Contrast

1940s: Widespread poverty and unemployment in Columbia forced many single women to turn to prostitution to earn a living.

Today: Columbia is internationally known for its thriving drug trade, which is led by a number of influential cartels. However, while the people in charge of these organizations are wealthy, much of the country is still racked by poverty.

1940s: The assassination of the Colombian Liberal leader, Jorge Eliecer Gaitán, sparked *El bogotazo*, a looting and pillaging spree that in turn led to *la Violencia*, a decades-long, brutal civil conflict.

Today: Due in a large part to the economic divide between the haves and the have-nots in Columbia, political instability is ever-present and results in periodic outbreaks.

1940s: Spencer Tracy and Katherine Hepburn starred in the film, *Adam's Rib*, as married attorneys on opposite sides of a case—in which a woman is on trial for attempted murder. The movie is noted for its feminist views, uncommon at the time, which acknowledged that women could perform just as well as men, even in traditionally "male" fields of work like construction.

Today: Although women still earn less than men in many occupational fields, inequality issues such as these have been highly publicized and are being addressed in various sectors.

What Do I Read Next?

Franz Kafka is one of the writers who many critics agree influenced García Márquez's early works. Kafka is best-known for his novella, *The Metamorphosis*, which was originally published in 1915. The story is told from the viewpoint of a young man who wakes up one day to find that he has been turned into a giant insect.

In 1950 when García Márquez published "The Woman Who Came at Six O'Clock," the small diner-style restaurant described in the story was typical of those found in South American towns. In the United States at the same time, diners were even more popular, as a result of a long tradition of convenience eating that began with horsedrawn lunch wagons. In his book *The American Diner*, published by Motorbooks International in 1999, pop culture historian Michael Karl examines the fascinating history and decline of the American diner. The book includes a vivid collection of archival photographs, many of which are in color.

Although he is primarily known as a fiction writer, García Márquez started out as a journalist and still considers himself one. Nonfiction works like *News of a Kidnapping* show why. Translated from the Spanish by Edith Grossman and published by Knopf in 1997, the book details the kidnapping of several prominent Colombian journalists and others who supported the extradition of Colombian drug lords to the United States during the 1980s. Although most of the hostages were eventually released, two were killed, and the survivors had harrowing stories that they shared with García Márquez.

Although García Márquez started writing fiction with short stories, some of his best-known works of fiction are novels, including his critically acclaimed masterpiece *Cien anos de soledad*, which was published in Buenos Aires in 1967. It was translated as *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gregory Rabassa and published by Harper in 1970. The novel details one hundred years in the life of the fictional town of Macondo and exempli fies the techniques of magical realism, a literary movement that García Márquez helped to develop.

García Márquez was born in Colombia, but like many other contemporary Latin American writers he has lived and worked in other parts of the world. His story collection, *Doce cuentos peregrinos*, published in Madrid in 1992, is one of few works that is influenced by his expatriate experiences: the stories feature the trials and tribulations of Latin American characters abroad in Europe. The collection was translated by Edith Grossman as *Strange Pilgrims: Twelve Stories* and published by Knopf in 1993.

Further Study

Bushnell, David, *The Making of Modern Colombia: A Nation in Spite of Itself*, University of California Press, 1993.

Bushnell, a noted Colombia scholar, examines the country's history, focusing on the fact that it has managed to develop into a modern, democratic country in spite of the drug traffickers, guerrillas, and other stereotypes that the rest of the modern world often associates with the country.

McNerney, Kathleen, *Understanding Gabriel García Márquez*, University of South Carolina Press, 1989.

This book provides a great guide to understanding the author's major works, including *One Hundred Years of Solitude, The Autumn of the Patriarch*, and *Love in the Time of Cholera*. McNerney also examines the author's shorter works as well as his dual interest in journalism and fiction.

Pelayo, Ruben, *Gabriel García Márquez: A Critical Companion*, Critical Companions to Popular Contemporary Writers series, Greenwood Publishing Group, 2001.

This critical biography of the author gives an account of the author's various life experiences and discusses his place within the canon of Western literature, examining the literary techniques that he has contributed both to the modern novel and Latin American fiction.

Sánchez, Gonzalo, and Donny Meertens, *Bandits, Peasants, and Politics: The Case of "La Violencia" in Colombia*, University of Texas Press, 2001.

The authors examine the complex political and social conflict of *la Violencia*, which took place in Colombia from the 1940s to the 1960s. Focusing on 1958-1965, what they consider the second phase of the conflict, the authors discuss the role of the *bandolero*, or bandit, in defending the peasantry during this time period.

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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

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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Short Stories for Students

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

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

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

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

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

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

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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