Women in Their Beds Study Guide

Women in Their Beds by Gina Berriault

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Introduction

Gina Berriault's short story "Women in Their Beds" was published in a collection of the same name in 1996, when the author was seventy. This volume of new and selected stories represented a breakthrough for Berriault, who had worked steadily at her craft for forty years but, up to this point, had received little critical attention. *Women in Their Beds* was widely praised in the press and won a number of prestigious national literary awards. In his effusive review of the collection, Lynell George of the *Los Angeles Times Book Review* writes, "In stories that are part trance, part cinema, Gina Berriault writes about the beds we make and are forced to lie in."

The title story, set in San Francisco in the late 1960s, describes the experiences of a young actress, Angela Anson, who has a day job as a social worker at the county hospital. She carries out the duty of assigning patients on the women's ward to beds at other institutions, but otherwise resists her role as a cog in the bureaucracy, identifying strongly with the downtrodden and lonely women on the ward. Meditating on the patients, Angela makes imaginative connections between the destinies that all women share, forming a theory that women are "inseparable from their beds." "Women in Their Beds" has a dreamlike logic that blurs the boundaries between self and other, fact and feeling, drama and reality. The story showcases Berriault's greatest strengths as a writer: the precise beauty of her language, the vivid comparisons she draws between perception and reality, and the enormous compassion with which she represents her characters.

Author Biography

Berriault was born in Long Beach, California, in 1926, the youngest of her Russian-Jewish immigrant parents' three children. Her father worked as an ad solicitor and a writer for trade magazines. Berriault began to write stories on her father's typewriter when she was still a child. She was, from a young age, independent and self-motivated. In an interview with Bonnie Lyons and Bill Oliver in the *Literary Review*, she describes transcribing passages from great literature when she was a child, "to see the words coming out of my typewriter. It was like a dream of possibilities for my own self."

The family fell on rough times in Berriault's teenage years. When they lost their house, Berriault dreamed of earning enough with her writing to buy the family a farm. Her mother began to go blind when Berriault was fourteen. Her father, whom Berriault describes to Lyons and Oliver as a "mentor for my spirit," died when she was in high school. At this point Berriault had aspirations of being an actress, and a teacher had offered to pay her tuition at a drama school, but Berriault declined in order to help support the family by taking over her father's trade writing business. After high school she received no further formal education, but remained an avid reader and dedicated writer while she worked at odd jobs including clerk, waitress, and journalist.

Berriault began to publish her short fiction in popular and literary magazines in the late 1950s and her first novel, *The Descent*, was published in 1960. Though she gained little popular attention, her work was much admired by fellow writers. She began to earn a living as a writing teacher and was also the recipient of a number of fellowships. Berriault published three other novels and several volumes of short stories. She adapted one of her best known stories, "The Stone Boy," as a screenplay in 1984. In 1996 she published *Women in Their Beds*, which collected new and selected stories. This book won her great accolades, including the PEN/Faulkner Award, the National Book Critics Circle Award, and the Rea Award for the Short Story. With this book, the fruit of a forty-year career, Berriault finally rose from obscurity and came to be credited as one of the finest writers of her generation.

Berriault was by all accounts a private person, and little personal information about her has been made available. Her marriage to musician J. V. Berriault produced one child—daughter Julie Elena, born in 1955—and ended in divorce. Berriault lived most of her life in northern California, where she died in 1999.

Plot Summary

The story opens with Angela Anson—the protagonist— and two of her friends joking around by calling each other by the names of famous fictional doctors over the loudspeaker of a city hospital where they are all employed as social workers. It is San Francisco in the 1960s, and the events of the story take place against the background of the Vietnam War and the counterculture youth movement. Angela, who is a struggling actress, has been working on the women's ward of the hospital for only a few days. She has no credentials to work as a social worker. The atmosphere on the ward—where Angela's task is to report to the elderly and infirm women the public institutions where they will next be sent—has a strong impact on the sensitive young woman, who sees in the patients a reflection of the condition of women at large. She is not sure she will be able to stand the job.

Angela delivers to one middle-aged alcoholic woman the news that she will be sent to an undesirable "home" called Laguna Honda. The woman responds that her daughter will prevent it, but the daughter never comes to advocate for her mother. This makes Angela think back on visiting her own mother in a hospital ward in another city and the grief involved in the severing of mother-daughter bonds. Angela tries to reassure the woman that there might be other options, but this is futile. Later she sees the woman thrashing in her bed in the midst of alcohol withdrawal, which looks to Angela like the woman is trying to run away.

She talks to another patient who reminds her of a sickly old aunt she visited as a child who, her mother told her, had once been beautiful. She tries to picture the women on the ward as they had been when they were girls, but she can't. She tells this to Nancy, the head nurse, who doesn't understand why she would bother.

Angela tells Dan her theories about women and beds. That night, against hospital rules, she helps a teenage girl who has just attempted suicide to use a bedpan. She recalls her own suicide attempt at sixteen. She then goes to visit the psychiatric ward where she observes a psychiatrist, whom she calls "The Judge," determine where patients should be assigned upon admission, and remembers having waited on him when she worked as a caterer.

Angela accompanies a dwarflike woman as she is discharged from the hospital. She is a cleaning woman who had gotten pneumonia. Her young son, who has an extra finger on each hand, had stayed at the hospital with her because there was no one else to care for him. A young doctor asks to see the cleaning woman's hands and questions her about her son's birth defect. She explains that they were cursed. Angela later complains to Lew about the doctor's lack of insight into his patients' lives. Lew cautions her never to take a deep breath while at the hospital.

An old Gypsy woman who is a patient on the ward offers to read Angela's palm, telling her that she will live a long life and asking her if she is a "wayward girl." The next morning the Gypsy woman has taken a turn for the worse. Her numerous children and

grandchildren gather around her. When Angela returns to the ward later that afternoon the Gypsy woman has died. Her children ask for a candle. Angela looks around the hospital for one and even goes to the corner grocery, but cannot find one.

That night, in her own bed, Angela imagines telling the women at the hospital about her life and choices. She describes her life in terms of different beds in which she has lain—the linty bed she shares with her current lover in a basement apartment, the bed she shared with her first lover when she was fourteen, a bed at a home for unwed mothers. She thinks about the son she gave up for adoption in comparison to the devoted son of one of the patients. She imagines herself as an old woman on the ward, describing her life to a young social worker and meditating on the significance of beds in women's lives. Then she sees a candle in her bedroom and thinks about bringing it to the hospital.

The next morning she enters the women's ward holding the lit candle. Nurse Nancy asks her about it and she says it is for the Gypsy woman's children. Nurse Nancy dismisses this. When Angela says that other women on the ward might appreciate it, the nurse says that they haven't even noticed that the Gypsy woman is gone. The story ends with the nurse blowing out the candle and touching Angela ambiguously on the elbow and back.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

The setting of this story is in a county hospital's temporary ward in San Francisco. Three friends — Angela, Dan and Lew — also work at the hospital. Dan and Lew have university degrees, but Angela does not. In their spare time, the three friends are actors and playwrights, performing where they can, like the nearby park during the summer. Angela is bold as an actress but shy when she is off the stage, so Dan urges her to pretend she has degrees in order to give herself more confidence.

During the story, Dan and Lew also have control of the intercom and call names of doctors from history and literature, each a code word signifying something to Angela, even if only as words of encouragement.

Angela is a social worker at the hospital. Her job is to find longer-term care for the patients, whether they wanted that care or not. It is a quiet place, unlike the men's ward, as she has been informed, where the men curse and hit the walls or attempt to leave the hospital without permission. The women's ward has three long rows of beds, one on each of three walls. If the ward is especially busy, a fourth row runs down the center. Curtains can separate each bed, but the curtains are usually kept somewhat open. Each day when Angela comes, the beds have been arranged, entire rows moved or women have disappeared, and Angela does not always know where these women have gone.

Angela feels somewhat guilty due to bad dreams she has had of her mother berating her for not being closer, for not allowing her to share her thoughts in her final hours. Dan encourages her by calling "Dr. Curie" on the intercom, a woman who discovers what others cannot see or what may not even exist.

Angela almost tiptoes across the floor of the hospital ward, as if she were in a museum or a church. She does not walk this quietly because she feels the ward is a holy place. She does so because she does not want to be there, witnessing the sadness, mental pain and final hours of so many other women. As she hears the historical doctors' names over the intercom, she feels that these are more solid than the ever-changing young interns are. They will still be known and respected long after these interns have gone on to other places.

There is similarity between these rows of women and the rows of bodies laid out in Vietnam, but the similarity ends in the surrounding environment. In Vietnam, there is always fighting and loud noises around the bodies, but here in the women's ward, there is only a medication-induced acceptance, despite the daily confusion.

Despite the medication, however, some do not wish to accept their chosen fate. The next woman Angela talks to looks as though she has been running away and rebelling

against society for most of her life. Angela gives her the name of the nursing home where she will be transferred to, but the woman does not want to go there. She claims that her daughter will be coming to visit any day, but the daughter has never visited her. She has abandoned her. Knowing this makes Angela feel guilty over her own mother once again. She attempts to calm the woman by saying that they are still hoping another bed will become available at a place that might be more acceptable. The woman is unconvinced. No place will be where she wants to go. Later in the day, Angela sees her as she is suffering from seizures due to alcohol withdrawal.

Another woman, whom Angela cannot face straight on at first, asks quietly if she can go home. Angela promises to ask the doctor again, already knowing what the answer will be. She had attempted to draw some feeling from the doctor she had asked before but was unsuccessful. The guilt of being unfeeling toward these women became too much then, and Angela looks at this woman full in the face. The woman reminds her of her Aunt Ida, who she remembers as being very frail and delicate. Aunt Ida was apparently the most beautiful of the sisters, or so Angela's mother told her, so she tried to imagine Aunt Ida as a young girl. Remembering this, Angela tries to imagine the woman in front of her as a young girl and finds that she wants to care for all of the women who were once young girls, since she had not done so for her Aunt Ida.

Angela mentions this to the head nurse, Nurse Nancy, who cannot imagine why she would want to see them as young girls. Angela persists, however, and tells Dan at a coffee break that she cannot see women separate from their beds anymore. She does not ever want to be confined as these women are, with a sense of doom and unraveling bothering them.

The next patient Angela goes past is a young girl, somewhat gangly and restless. She pleads for help, as she is not allowed to go to the bathroom on her own, but the nurse has not come yet. Angela hands her a bedpan, though it may be breaking the rules. She tells her how to go about using the bedpan, which the girl does awkwardly.

The girl's awkwardness reminds Angela of her own awkwardness at that age. She failed in her suicide attempt as well and soon after, left the awkwardness behind her. She knows there is no real answer to the "why" of suicide but hopes that this girl will come out of this stage in her life in the same way, remembering it like a "crazy childhood girlfriend."

At a reminder from Lew, through yet another doctor's name on the intercom, Angela sneaks into a psychiatric hearing for the girl's destination. She recognizes the judge from when she served at a wedding reception he had attended. After the hearing, she followed him for a little while, imagining how she would play someone like him on stage, with his characteristic shuffle and large belly.

Her next task is to escort a former cleaning woman to see her son. The son was there for care because there was no one else to watch over him while she recovered from pneumonia in the hospital. The son apparently has six fingers on at least one hand, if not both. A doctor asks the woman how this happened, and the woman simply tells him

that they were cursed. This dazes the doctor somewhat, and he does not continue. Instead, another orderly and social worker escort the woman's son out from another ward in his own wheelchair.

Lew arrives just then and escorts Angela outside in the open. Angela vents her frustration at such a silly question. Lew tells her never to take a breath inside the ward, only before she goes in. Once she is in the ward, it is already too late to re-center herself.

Angela goes back to work, trying to stay calm, but a gypsy woman catches her. The woman is sitting up in bed and seems confident and well cared for in the life she has led. She asks for Angela's hand, and begins reading her palm. A promise of a long life is the first thing the woman spouts, and then she asks Angela if she is a wayward girl. Angela scoffs inwardly at this, thinking it must be obvious, since she does not fit in with the starched and coifed nurses. Finally, Angela says that she is an actress. The gypsy woman is unimpressed, mocking her with her eyes.

The next day, the same woman is lying down again. Her beautiful family has come to visit in her last hours. As Angela passes by, they ask for candles. Angela searches all over the hospital for candles, and even goes down to the corner store to ask for them. She finds none, and by the time she returns, the family has gone.

Later that night, she lies in her bed with her lover and thinks over everything that has been happening while waiting for sleep to come. She wonders if they think about her at night the same way she thinks about them. She remembers some of her past, possibly as part of a dream state, where she had a son in a home for unwed mothers. The son was taken from her and probably given to another family. She wonders if this son will be sitting by the bedside of someone else that has been his mother, and then thinks about when she is in the same state, and she is trying to communicate from her bed with someone who is in her position now.

Suddenly, she realizes that there is a candle on the table in her apartment. She takes the candle with her to the hospital the following day, lighting it and carrying it up and down the rows of beds in the women's ward, even though the gypsy woman is gone. She knows that not all the women will be able to see that it is lit, but those nearest to her will see it and know.

Nurse Nancy stops her, asking what the meaning of this was. Angela explains that the gypsy woman's family was asking for a candle. Nancy wearily tells her that they have their own traditions; it is not the hospital's concern. Angela replies that she thought the women might appreciate the candle as well. Nancy says the other ladies do not know that the gypsy woman is gone and blows out Angela's candle.

Behind her and at her elbow, Angela feels light touches from the women in their beds, directing, supporting, understanding.

Analysis

This story by Gina Berriault provides an overarching view of humanity and the inhumanity within it. Angela is a young social worker in one of the most emotionally charged places there are in the world — a temporary ward, similar to the hospices of today, in a county hospital.

Because this takes place during the Vietnam War, it is still near the age when the women in this ward were still brought up to be somewhat reserved. This caused them to bottle up their emotions, as well as the pain and suffering causing those emotions. This is a stark contrast from the description of the men's ward, a place of utter chaos and complete insanity. However, the author also hints at a regular changing and rearranging of beds, patients and orderlies — a quiet version of the chaos and confusion described in the men's ward.

Angela wanders through the quiet suffering in the ward, feeling the daily shock each of these women go through. She also finds similarities to parts of her own life — the older woman who is mother to an estranged daughter, the girl who had failed to commit suicide, the woman who used to be beautiful but barely clings to life now. Using these stories in Angela's current week of life, the author gives the reader brief glimpses into Angela's colorful past, where we learn that she lost her mother and an aunt at fairly young ages, she attempted suicide and afterward left her youthful awkwardness behind her, and she had a son out of wedlock and gave him up for adoption.

Perhaps it is Angela's previous pain that she gains the humanity and compassion for the women in their beds. She understands that, much like karma or fate, sometimes you get to choose your own bed to lie in, and sometimes that bed is chosen for you. When it comes time for someone else to tell you which bed you will be lying in, you are often in a state where you need someone to know that you are a human being and have a history that is important to you.

The doctors and nurses pretend not to understand why Angela cares about the patients. It is their escape route, a selfish attempt to stay separate from so many. They attempt to squelch her compassion and humanity through snide comments and denial of basic patient care that she requests.

The nurse strikes the final blow of the story. Blowing out Angela's candle symbolizes an almost physical attempt to "blow out" her flame of compassion. However, as soon as the nurse turns on her heel and leaves, Angela feels the direction, support and understanding of the nearby bedridden women.

Characters

Alcoholic Woman

One of Angela's patients is an alcoholic woman in her fifties. Angela surmises that she "must have run away from home at nine and kept on running." Angela tells her that she has been assigned for transfer to an undesirable public institution. The woman says that her daughter will come to the hospital and prevent it, but the daughter does not come. This reminds Angela of her relationship with her own mother and the grief of mother-child separation.

Angela's Lover

Angela's current lover is a painter. She is not in love with him. She describes him as a "friend, who is as much in need as myself of a friend to lie down with, make love with, share the rent with, share soup with, break bread with, and lie down with again." Sharing these things with him makes life easier but does not mitigate the loneliness she feels.

Angela Anson

Angela is the protagonist of the story, which is dominated by her outlook on the world. She is a struggling young actress living in bohemian San Francisco in the 1960s. She takes a job as a social worker on the women's ward of the city hospital and is deeply affected by her interactions with the patients there. Her job is to inform them of the next public institution where they will be sent, the next "bed" to which they have been assigned. However, she is unable to maintain any kind of clinical detachment, imagining pasts and futures for the women and bending hospital rules to accommodate their emotional needs. She starts to meditate on the relationship between women and their beds as a summation of the female experience, one that transcends her differences from the downtrodden women on the ward. In each of the sick women, she sees parts of herself—her past, her future, her relationships with her mother and her abandoned son. Angela's ability to see into the interior lives of the women patients is connected to her vocation as an actress, which requires imagining oneself as another person.

Cleaning Woman

Another of Angela's patients is a cleaning woman who has just recovered from pneumonia. She is so small that Angela, with her theatrical way of seeing the world, perceives her as a dwarf and a symbol of deprivation. A doctor questions the woman about her son, who has an extra finger on each hand. He asks to examine her hands, foreshadowing the Gypsy woman's reading of Angela's palm. The doctor is looking for a

scientific rationale and doesn't understand her explanation that the extra fingers are due to a curse.

Dan

Dan is one of Angela's friends and coworkers. He has a master's degree in political science, has dissident views on Vietnam, and writes a political column for an underground weekly. Angela describes him as having "the kindest heart, the hardest head." He is witty and playful, joking with Angela and Lew at the hospital by calling them over the intercom by the names of famous fictional and historical doctors. She tells him some of her ideas about women and beds.

Gypsy Woman

An old Gypsy woman on the ward has a special fascination for Angela. Described as a "Gypsy queen," she is a powerful image of womanhood. The Gypsy Woman offers to read Angela's palm and tells her she will have a long life, then asks if she is a "wayward girl," which Angela attributes to her clothing and jewelry rather than her palm. This stands in contrast to the doctor's request to see the cleaning woman's hands; the Gypsy woman represents a more intuitive form of knowledge.

The next day the Gypsy woman takes a turn for the worse and her children and grandchildren, whom Angela admires, gather around her. Even though she dies, she avoids the isolation and disappointment that the other women exude. "Fear wasn't her bedmate here, Faith was and probably always would be."

The Judge

The Judge is the name Angela gives to the doctor who screens psychiatric patients upon admission to the hospital. His title suggests that this administrative power has a mythic force behind it. He assigns patients to their next "bed" and thus— according to the metaphorical logic of the story—to their destiny. Angela remembers meeting him in a different context: at a wedding reception where she had worked as a caterer. She observes his demeanor and imagines how she would play a judge on stage.

Lew

Lew is one of Angela's friends and coworkers. Like Angela, he is an actor. With Dan, he plays the prank of calling fake names over the intercom. She shares with him some of her critical and despairing ideas about the women's ward. Lew seems to "know everything before it was told him," but listens to her anyway. He advises her not to breathe too deeply at the hospital, suggesting that he understands how its atmosphere may be dangerous to her state of mind.

Nurse Nancy

Nurse Nancy is the head nurse on the women's ward. She discourages Angela from imagining the patients as girls or bringing them candles. A part of the cold medical system, she lacks Angela's imagination and therefore, also, her empathy for the patients. She is the only woman character with whom Angela doesn't establish a connection, except, perhaps, in the ambiguous closing lines, when she touches Angela "to assist her to stay on her feet and point her in the right direction" or, perhaps, out of "complicity."

Suicidal Girl

During one of Angela's shifts, she helps a young girl with a bedpan, though she is not supposed to do this in her capacity as a social worker. The girl has recently bungled a suicide attempt, and Angela is curious as to why she did it. She identifies with the girl's awkwardness, remembering her own secret suicide attempt as a teenager. Later, she visits the psychiatric ward, curious to see where the girl's next bed will be.

Young Doctor

A young doctor approaches the cleaning woman as she is about to be discharged from the hospital and asks to see her hands, curious about the medical cause of her son's extra fingers. He is described as "hyperactive" and "intense." Angela gets angry with him for his insensitivity toward his patients. He is blinded by his enthusiasm for medical knowledge, unable to see the complex ailments of his patients' spirits.

Themes

Sex Roles

The story is explicitly about women, but it touches on sex roles only indirectly. Berriault does not compare women's roles in society to men's so much as she explores women's common life experiences. At the hospital, Angela observes women in crisis and transition as she assigns them to new places, or "beds," at public institutions. Seeing the various women on the ward, all in their beds, makes Angela think back on formative moments in her own life—a visit with her mother, a suicide attempt, her first lover, the birth of a child. This leads her to form a theory about women's place in the world. "Now I see women as inseparable from their beds," she tells Dan. "Maybe beds are where women belong. Half the women in the world are right now in their bed, theirs or somebody else's, whether it's night or day, whether they want to be or not." She intimates that women are determined by the beds that they have chosen—or are made —to lie in.

Because men also get sick, have sex, and sleep, the idea that women are specially destined for beds must be understood as a metaphorical comment on women's place in society. Women are "inseparable from their beds" because the activities associated with them play a large role in forming women's identities. Beds are intimate places, where relationships with others are consummated, confirmed, contested, or sorely missed. Daytime rationality doesn't apply in beds, and things in beds have a dream-logic. Intimacy and irrationality are associated with femininity. This can be powerful, as in the case of the Gypsy woman who commands destiny through palm reading, but more often women go from bed to bed passively, not in charge of their own fates. Angela compares the rows of beds on the women's ward to those she sees on television of soldiers in Vietnam. "Over that other scene there was always a terrible struggle in the air, but in this women's ward there was a yielding to whoever was watching over them and to the medication that must seem like a persuasive stranger entering their most intimate being for their own good."

Life Cycle

When she starts working at the hospital, Angela tries to imagine the women on the ward when they were young, to "come to their rescue by reviving them as girls again." Later, she imagines herself as an old woman in a hospital bed: "Some night, some day, there'll be Angela Anson herself in your row, and what will I say to soften the heart of the social worker who I'll dislike at first sight?" By thinking of women's lives in terms of their beds, she sees connections between them at all points in the life cycle. The bed is a site of birth, sex, childbirth, sickness, and death. All of these are particularly important in determining who women are and how they experience the world.

These various transitions, which take place at different points in the life cycle, are to some degree interchangeable according to Angela's way of thinking. She sees similarities between these "beds" and imagines women moving through them continually. "Just remember the beds where you wished you weren't and the beds where you wished you were, and then name any spot on this earth that's a bed for some woman," she says. She comes to see it as misguided that women try to control their lives by choosing the right bed, when their fates are so inescapably determined by their place in beds in general—including, ultimately, in the bed that is the grave. As a young woman, Angela looks back on previous beds and forward to prospective ones with some despair. She sees the women—the "dear alones" at the hospital—and, picturing her own end in a hospital bed, feels powerless before her fate.

Creativity and Imagination

Angela and her consorts, Dan and Lew, make light of their day jobs at the hospital by calling for each other using the names of fictional and historical doctors over the intercom. This is not the only way in which Angela treats the hospital as if it were a stage. She performs the clinical duties of a social worker—informing women of the next bed to which they have been assigned—but with the imagination of an actress. The hospital is an institution dominated by a rational and pragmatic mode of thought, as represented by Nurse Nancy, while Angela is creative and intuitive, attentive to the patients' injured "karmas" rather than their physical ailments. Angela sees human drama everywhere. She imagines life stories "unfolding" like the portable hospital beds. She envisions one patient as a dwarf "because of her theatrical tendency to recognize types from bygone centuries" and imagines an entire history for another: "This one ... must've run away from home at nine and kept on running. The nights of her life on a bar stool till 2:00 AM and the last hours of the morning with a new-found friend, down in the dubious comfort of his bed." Part of what makes her capable of such flights of imagination is that her identity is very fluid; she identifies powerfully with the women she cares for, seeing correspondences between their lives and her own. For example, she has an imaginary conversation with this patient's daughter—who has never come to the hospital—sharing her feelings of grief about her own mother. While Angela might not be very tuned in to "reality" as a doctor or nurse would understand it, she has special insight—closer to that of the Gypsy—based on her intuitive and empathetic outlook.

Style

Narration

"Women in Their Beds" is narrated in the third-person—that is, from the point of view of someone who is not involved in the situation described. However, this narrator has a perspective very closely aligned with that of Angela Anson, the deeply absorbed protagonist. The narrator has complete access to and knowledge of Angela's inner thoughts and feelings, but not those of any of the other characters. Frequently, the narration switches from third-person description to Angela's interior monologue. The boundary between the narrator and Angela is very fluid, as is the boundary between Angela and the patients she encounters, and the effect is moody and introspective.

The narration reflects Angela's state of mind in great detail, while representing the external reality only in a fragmentary way. For example, when one patient begs Angela to advocate for her to be allowed to go home, Angela's speech is briefly quoted: "I'll ask again." Then the narration dips into Angela's consciousness, recounting her memory of an asking an arrogant doctor to help, exploring her motivation for doing this, and going on to describe how this patient has "humanized" her by reminding her of a visit to a sick aunt when she was a child. The scene concludes with Angela's thoughts about trying to imagine the patients as young girls. For Angela, the connection she feels with the women and the sorrow, pity, and insight that they evoke take precedence over the external and pragmatic concerns of the hospital. The narration closely re- flects these priorities.

Structure

The plot of "Women in Their Beds" is not structured conventionally through the introduction of conflict, which rises in tension to a climax, then reaches resolution in a denouement. In fact, Angela's inner conflicts regarding her day job as a hospital social worker are relatively similar when she questions how long she can last at the job at the story's opening and when Nurse Nancy blows out the candle at the story's close. However, "Women in Their Beds" does have a structure—albeit a less traditional one. Like the experience of the women who move from bed to bed, the structure of the story is based on a pattern of repetition, contrast, and comparison. Objectivity (a view of truth as external and verifiable) is repeatedly contrasted with subjectivity (a view of truth based on personal, inner experience). Angela's empathetic and subjective view is set against that of the cold and distant medical personnel again and again. For example, when Angela sees the cleaning woman's hands, she imagines them curled around mop and vacuum cleaner handles, while the doctor examines them with only the science of genetics in mind. The story is also structured by the repeated comparison between "self" and "other," moving back and forth between Angela's experiences and those of the women on the ward. Angela encounters a series of women patients in their beds and relates parts of their lives to her own. Then, back in her own bed, she imagines

herself as one of them. The story ends with death—the Gypsy woman's death and the symbolic death of empathy and imagination as represented by the blowing out of the candle. But in death there is still irresolution; as Angela sees it, the grave does not offer a grand conclusion, but is just another in a series of beds.

Symbolism

"Women in Their Beds" is named for Angela's symbolic way of thinking about the commonalties between women's lives. Her ideas about women and their beds are multifaceted. Beds are associated with sleep and dreams. They are an illogical space where ego boundaries become fluid. The women Angela meets are dreamlike figures, symbolizing aspects of her own past and future. As Angela assigns institutional beds to the women on the ward, she thinks about how women lack agency in their own lives. She forms a theory that women are "inseparable from their beds." Beds represent women's role in society, which is bound by their biological destiny and their most intimate relations with others. This relates to women's roles as sex objects and as child-bearers—both of which are potentially sources of power and joy but, in Angela's experience, more often sources of impotence and loss. The beds where women lie—for sex and sleep, in labor and sickness—sum up their fates. Beds suggest passivity: "And what about the beds you thought you'd chosen yourself? Do they now seem chosen for you? Destiny's hand patting them down. Lie here, Lie here." On the women's ward, Angela glimpses her own fate, determined by the set of feminine roles that beds symbolize. Beds are the dominant symbol in the story, but not the only one. According to Angela's way of thinking, things are always more than they seem, thus symbolism permeates the story. For example, the candles that the Gypsy woman's "archangelic" children request have great symbolic meaning for Angela. She does not know the particular role they play in the family's death ritual, but she has an implicit understanding of the importance of ritual. She identifies the candles with her own alternative lifestyle—she and her friends always light them. Candles represent a form of comfort and healing that the bureaucratic hospital is completely unable to offer. When Angela brings the candle to the hospital she is offering a symbol of the connection she feels with the women, most of whom are severely isolated, and of the continuities she sees among women and between life and death.

Historical Context

Youth Counterculture

"Women in Their Beds" takes place in the late 1960s, a period of great social upheaval in the United States. In 1966, the largest generation of Americans—the crest of the baby boom—reached legal age, and a youth-oriented counterculture was born. While the majority of these young people went on to college, work, marriage, and family, as had the conservative generation that came before them, an increasing and visible number began rebelling against the social rules and norms that governed American life. They were the counterculture, which means counter to or against the established, mainstream culture. These youthful rebels, often known as hippies, were critical of what they described as the Establishment—institutions including the police, schools, businesses, organized religion, and the traditional nuclear family. The characters' mockery of the doctors' status through their intercom prank can be seen in light of this antiestablishment outlook. Angela's more somber critical perspective on the bureaucratic hospital authorities is also counterculture in spirit.,/p>

Sometimes hippies' social criticisms were politically motivated; members of the youth counterculture were active in the powerful antiwar and civil rights movements of the era. (In the story, Dan writes articles expressing his dissident views on Vietnam.) Others hippies were more individual and philosophical in their approach—preaching peace and love, using drugs such as marijuana and LSD that were thought to broaden the mind, and adopting permissive sexual practices. Though based on strong criticisms of the greed and isolation of mainstream American life, the hippie movement was generally positive and even utopian in spirit. Young people believed that if they opened their minds and hearts they could bring about a true social revolution. Though Berriault sets her story at the heart of the hippie movement, she does not share this optimistic outlook.

The Sexual Revolution and Feminism

Berriault writes of her protagonist, Angela, "Anyone could spot her for a working hippie, a counterculture actress, a wayward girl." She is an actress living with her lover in San Francisco. San Francisco—and, in particular, a neighborhood called Haight-Ashbury or The Haight—was a center for the early counterculture movement. Few of the antimaterialist, anticapitalist hippies had steady jobs, so they lived modestly and shared what they had. Angela implies that she is living with her lover in order to share, among other things, the rent of their small basement apartment. The sexual permissiveness that would allow such an arrangement was central to the hippie movement, which promoted free love. When the Gypsy woman calls Angela a "wayward girl" she refers to her sexual accessibility.

One of the reasons it was possible for the idea of free love to come into currency was the development of the birth control pill. The Pill, which, when taken daily, is nearly 100 percent effective in preventing pregnancy, was approved by the FDA (Food and Drug Administration) in 1960. By 1967, about twenty percent of women of childbearing age were on the Pill. Use of the Pill among the women of the baby boom generation was even higher. On the Pill, young women were liberated from their fears of an unwanted pregnancy, giving rise to a much higher level of sexual experimentation. (Abortion, however, remained illegal until 1973.) Premarital sex became more common and, arguably, the Pill gave women a greater sense of social and sexual autonomy than they had ever before experienced. By those who saw their generation as ushering in a new age, the new, freer attitudes toward sex were celebrated as part of a Sexual Revolution.

The concept of free love was premised on the positive potential of permissive sexuality. At the same time that hippies began to preach free love, a "second wave" of feminism was forming that criticized sex roles in and out of the bedroom. (The "first wave" was in the 1920s.) In 1963, Betty Friedan's The Feminine Mystique gave voice to the dissatisfactions of a generation of housewives. By the end of the decade, women had won legal battles over wage parity and sex discrimination in the workplace. They also had begun to question the way they conducted their most intimate relationships. A slogan of the second-wave feminist movement was "the personal is political." Though it was largely a middle-class movement, one of the bases of its philosophy was the struggle against the universal oppression of women.

"Women in Their Beds" does not take up a specifically feminist agenda, but it does reflect the ideas about women circulating at the time. Angela lives her life as a "liberated" participant in the Sexual Revolution, but she recognizes the ways in which she shares with all women the burdens and pains of her sex role, which she sees as a kind of destiny. In contrast to the tenor of the feminist movement at large, Berriault is gentle in her representation of men in the story. Women are, on some level, oppressed —but men are not their oppressors. In a Literary Review interview with Bonnie Lyons and Bill Oliver, Berriault commented on her view of gender politics: "I've known and still know a fear of men's judgments and ridicule and rejection. At the same time I've been acutely aware of the oppression and abuse and humiliation that men endure and struggle against, the same that women endure and now know they don't have to endure. In other words, I'm a humanist, I guess."

Critical Overview

Berriault began to publish her fiction in the late 1950s, earning the praise of a few critics and the loyalty of a small but devoted group of readers. Her stories and novels portray a wide range of characters, but share a concern with situations of isolation and loss and themes contrasting subjective and objective views of the world. Some early reviewers found her writing too gloomy and criticized her novels for their lack of narrative momentum, but she was also admired for her ability to create complex, believable characters and to plumb the depths of the human heart. Her short stories, in particular, were singled out for their precise form and deep feeling. Berriault continued to write for over forty years in relative obscurity. She had the dubious honor of being viewed as a "writer's writer"—admired by her literary peers and considered by them to be one of the most unappreciated talents of her generation.

In 1996, when Berriault was seventy, she came out with *Women in Their Beds*, her third collection of short stories. The book, containing thirty-five new and selected stories, represented the best of Berriault's long career and, at last, brought Berriault into the literary spotlight. The collection won a number of prestigious national awards, including the PEN/Faulkner Award, the National Book Critics Circle Award, and the Rea Award for the Short Story. It was widely reviewed with practically unanimous high praise. Critics commended Berriault's ability to represent such a broad range of characters— male and female, young and old, rich and poor—with such accuracy and empathy. Nation reviewer Gary Amdahl expresses his admiration for Berriault for creating characters who are so different from most readers. "[Berriault] creates characters whom we emphatically do not recognize—or whom we recognize, rather, only in ways that have nothing to do with superficial similarities." Others also compliment Berriault's ability to enable readers to see the world from her diverse characters' points of view. The "elevation of the particular to the universal is the hallmark of Berriault's finely wrought stories," writes Donna Seaman in a Booklist review. In addition to reflecting the author's capacity for empathy, the collection was often praised for the beauty of its writing. "In these 35 stories, one struggles to find a sentence that is anything less than jewel-box perfect," writes Tobin Harshaw of the *New York Times Book Review.*

Several reviewers singled out the title story as representative of the Berriault's greatest talents. Seaman posits that "Women in Their Beds" "contains all the key elements of her metaphysical, compassionate fiction." Lynell George concluded his review in the *Los Angeles Times Book Review* with these comments, riffing on Berriault's own overarching metaphor: "Ghosts, impostors, pariahs, Berriault's characters move like somnambulists through their lives. These are the beds, prompts her protagonist from the title story, 'Where you wished you weren't and the beds where you wished you were.... ' Memory recalls the rote particulars, but Gina Berriault's great gift is summoning the pitch and roll of restlessness within which we lie in them."

In an autobiographical statement appearing in editor John Wakeman's *World Authors, 1950-1970*, Berriault chooses to describe her motivation for writing rather than the events of her life.

My work is an investigation of reality which is, simply, so full of ambiguity and of answers that beget further questions that to pursue it is an impossible task and a completely absorbing necessity. It appears to me that all the terrors that human beings inflict on one another are countered to a perceptible degree by the attempts of some writers to make us known to one another and thus to impart or revive a reverence for life."

Berriault goes on to list some of the writers who she believes achieve this feat. More than twenty years later, reviewing *Women in Their Beds for the Nation*, Amdahl praises Berriault for the very lifeaffirming quality that she spoke of admiring in others. "Berriault does not imitate, cater, affect or posture," he writes. "She deepens reality, complements it, and affords us the bliss of knowing, for a moment, what we cannot know."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Madsen Hardy has a doctorate in English literature and is a freelance writer and editor. In the following essay, she explores Berriault's representations of superstition in her story.

So she was . . . Dr. Curie ... discoverer of so much that was undetectable and that might not even exist.

Angela Anson, the sensitive young protagonist of Gina Berriault's "Women in Their Beds," doesn't like going to work. In fact, she is not sure that she will last at her job as a hospital social worker for more than a few days. And it's not just because the job assigning patients on the women's ward to their next "beds" at various public institutions is depressing, or because she is afraid that it will be discovered that she lacks the credentials for the job, though these things are also true. Angela suffers from a feeling of dread that is both more personal and more cosmic. She comprehends—and vicariously experiences—the frightening emotions of the patients themselves. For example, she implicitly understands one alcoholic patient's dread of an institution called Laguna Honda because of her own superstitious idea of the place, where she imagines ghostly "pale faces floating on deep black waters" whenever she drives by.

"Women in Their Beds," is structured, in part, through the contrast between pragmatic and superstitious outlooks on the world. The hospital setting is a space of science and bureaucracy, both of which are ultimately pragmatic in nature—that is, concerned with empirical rules of cause and effect. This cold practicality is represented by the figure of Nurse Nancy, who discourages and disapproves of Angela's lack of clinical distance from the patients. When Angela describes trying to imagine the patients when they were girls, Nancy asks pragmatically, "Why would you ever think to do that anyway?" In contrast, Berriault often describes Angela's feelings and perceptions in magical or, at least, specifically nonrational terms. A superstition is a belief held resulting from ignorance of the laws of nature or from faith in magic or chance. Superstitions rely on the belief in connections between things that can be empirically proven not to exist. For example, the common superstition, "Don't step on a crack or you'll break your mother's back," or Lew's less explicit warning to Angela about the dangerous atmosphere of the hospital, "Never take a deep breath in here." As represented by these examples, superstition often involves fear resulting from such irrational beliefs. The word "superstition" has a somewhat negative connotation, de- fined in opposition to a rational, science-based concept of truth that has been dominant in Western culture for centuries. However, most people hold some beliefs that are not strictly rational and certainly not provable—for example, the beliefs that go into any kind of religious faith or spirituality.

In "Women in Their Beds," Berriault explores a world of unprovable connections. She refers to superstition throughout the story, developing the idea through a pair of references to palmistry, otherwise known as palm reading. Palmistry, a superstitious practice that predicts a person's destiny based on the creases and lines in the palm of

his or her hand, resonates with Angela's interest in tapping into the life histories of the patients, and embroiders on the story's theme of destiny as an unfolding series of beds. In two parallel and contrasting incidents, a palm is "read." In the first, a young doctor asks to see the hands of one patient, a cleaning woman, in order to discern the reason for her son's birth defect. In the next, another patient, an aged Gypsy woman, offers to read Angela's palm. The doctor and the Gypsy represent two opposing ideas of fate—one based on the empirical science of genetics, the other on the superstition and faith.

In the first scene, Angela is in the midst her own kind of intuitive "reading" of the cleaning woman, interpreting her diminutive stature as a symbol of deprivation, when a young doctor runs up and demands to see her hands. Angela first thinks that the doctor is talking to her—"Was there some new scan that doctors had, a scientific palmistry for detecting liars and imposters and actors?"—which suggests Angela's identification with the patient, their shared intimidation by medical authority. But the doctor is interested in the patient's hands because he has noticed that her son has a strange birth defect, leaving him with an extra finger on each hand. The "scientific palmistry" he wishes to perform is informed by the laws of genetics—which can be understood as a rational method for predicting a person's fate. His zeal for uncovering the objective cause for the birth defect renders him oblivious to the woman's overall condition. "Can you tell me ... why your son has six fingers?" he demands, blind to the life history that Angela intuits as she gazes at the woman's humble hands, "curved to the shape of mop handles, vacuum cleaner handles."

The answer the patient offers him literally stops him in his tracks. She tells him that her mother cursed her and her child. Curses depends on a superstitious idea of cause and effect, one that doctors, educated in the laws of nature, would dismiss as sheer ignorance. However, when Angela describes the events to Lew, it is the doctor she describes as "simpleminded." "Doctors don't know what they're getting into when they get to be doctors," she says. She is critical of the young doctor's insensitivity to his patients as human beings as opposed to organisms and his blindness to the spiritual profundity of their suffering. She herself gleans from the cleaning woman's modest stature, her humbly curved hands, and her mother's curse, a life of poverty, indignity, and severed bonds of love.

What Angela does to her patients—glimpsing into their souls, imagining pasts and futures in her brief interactions with them—is not unlike palmistry. But in the next scene a patient turns the tables and glimpses into her soul. A ninety-six-year-old patient, described as a "Gypsy queen," offers to read Angela's palm—in order to flatter her, Angela surmises. She speculates that the Gypsy's "reading" of her as a "wayward girl" has more to do with her clothes and grooming than it does with the lines in her palm. But, nevertheless, Angela's waywardness lies at the heart of her lonely condition. While Angela affects a skeptical attitude toward the reading, she is moved by what she hears of her destined long life, both admiring and fearing the Gypsy's power.

The Gypsy is not, like the cleaning woman, humble before the hospital authorities. She is not passive in the face of the bureaucracy of which Angela nominally is part. Instead of allowing her fortune to be "told" by the pragmatic logic of the health care system,

takes control and tells Angela's fortune. This refusal to be passive is the secret of the Gypsy's life force, one that Angela also identifies with her brood of beautiful "children of whatever generation" who remain, after the Gypsy's death, as a testimony to intimacy and continuity throughout the life cycle. The "archangelic" children transcend the pragmatic gloom of the hospital atmosphere, "Unreal, their garments biblically splendid as that coat of many colors, and all with golden skin." They are an extension of the Gypsy's spiritual health and her power. The Gypsy's faith in that which is unprovable dignifies the superstitious feelings that dominate the women on the ward and inhabit Angela when she works there.

It is Angela's job on the women's ward to facilitate patients' transition into their next "beds." When the Gypsy's children ask for a candle, she understands implicitly that this is part of a ritual of transition, and seizes the chance to invest her bureaucratic job with a bit of spirituality. Angela experiences the hospital as a place of dread, from which she wishes she could magically disappear, but also, at the same time, as a holy place. Angela (whose name is derived from *angel*—a spiritual being) uses a light step at the hospital, one she saves for "museums and churches, sanctified places that always made her feel unworthy." Thus, it makes sense to her to try to convert the hospital into a place of ritual. There are no candles to be found there, however, and the only reason the "bona fide" social workers could imagine for needing one is utterly pragmatic: "Maybe the light had gone out in the lavatory." When she returns with one the next day, Nurse Nancy blows it out, telling her that the other women won't appreciate it, "They've got their own problems." The impractical candle that Angela searches for, and ultimately brings to the women from her own home, represents the connection between each of the isolated women's "own problems" and the unifying, healing power of faith.

For Angela, the women's ward is a place where she can make a leap of faith and connect to some- thing larger than she is. By referring to God as "an Audience of One who never blinked," Berriault draws a parallel between Angela's dramatic sensibility and religious faith. Angela seeks truths that are based on faith and feeling rather than observation and verification. It is largely through Angela's vocation as an actress that she is able to perceive the women patients' injured "karmas," their unobservable, nonmedical injuries. Acting requires the capacity to imagine oneself as another. The women's ward offers her a chance, as suggested by the dream she has of her mother berating her, to learn about herself through the suffering of the patients. This openness to other women's souls is a chance for knowledge but also a threat to Angela's delicate sense of self. Angela, like most of the women on the ward, lives a life in which connections keep coming undone. The women's lives "must be unfolding before their eyes, in there, and they're unfolding mine," she thinks. "They're unfolding me." She needs to be healed as much as they do.

Source: Sarah Madsen Hardy, in an essay for *Short Stories for Students*, Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

Semansky publishes widely in the field of twentieth- century culture and literature. In the following essay, he discusses the ways in which Berriault's story embodies the author's idea of "the eternal moment."

Although she has written numerous screenplays, novels, and essays, Gina Berriault says that she finds her true voice when writing short fiction. On the dust jacket of her collection of short stories *Women in Their Beds*, she has this to say about the form: "[Short stories] are close to poetry—with the fewest words they capture the essence of a situation, of a human being, and they attempt to capture the eternal moment."

In the searching, elliptical title piece of that same collection, Berriault captures that eternal moment in showing readers the women's ward of a county hospital in San Francisco during the Vietnam War years. She replicates the then-common televised sight of wounded soldiers in makeshift hospitals with eerie inexactitude: the wounded are all women, and the war which has cost each so dearly has been waged within rather than without. Some are withdrawing from alcohol, some have attempted suicide, all bear the weight of poverty and emotional torment. In the hospital, the social workers are untrained, including out-of-work actors and writers, and the doctors are young interns who sometimes charge their patients with making their own diagnoses.

Angela Anson is the character Berriault creates to give the reader a view of this "captured situation," to guide readers into the story's deepest recesses. The point of view is third person, but the reader has complete access to Angela's thoughts as she moves through the women's ward. Her own suicide attempt at sixteen and her past experiences with her bedridden mother and aunt give Angela a pressing reason to come to terms with the essential meaning of a woman in a bed. Berriault tugs and pulls at the image of the vertical, attended woman, treating it as a conundrum or a sign, and asking, through Angela and the women she encounters on their backs: what brings a woman to a bed, and what is her world once she arrives there?

One cannot help recalling the "rest cures" once pressed upon women who stepped outside their tightly constructed gender roles. For women too passionate or too aware, bed rest was recommended as antidotal—the most vigorous will could be sapped by simply disallowing the possibility of rising from a bed for indefinite durations. In titling her story "Women in Their Beds" and in dwelling on numerous images of women living in a helpless and immured world, Berriault alludes to the seminal work of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's, "The Yellow Wallpaper," as well as to contemporary works such as Susan Sontag's "Alice in Bed."

Angela Anson walks the ward, charged with explaining to the women where they will go once they are discharged—as she thinks of it, "the dispersal of the deranged." The beds in the ward have a way of appearing and disappearing, of multiplying in the night or magically subtracting themselves, creating a "shocked atmosphere like that after a quake." This atmosphere resonates throughout the ward: "*What's happening here?* The

question on each face upon a pillow. A quake of the mind, a quake of the heart." Like life elsewhere, each moment in the ward is surprising, unrehearsed, and potentially shattering, and the question that rings out of each human being is one of wonder. But unlike life elsewhere, these women are cast adrift in a world where they have become defined almost solely as burdens to others, and where their own helplessness is the only certainty on which they can depend. The physical instability of the beds echoes the tenuous interior lives of these female patients.

Angela and her fellow employees play a game that sets up another kind of echo in the story. A point that is felt acutely by Angela—who calls herself a "confidante without credentials," and despairs of doing anyone any good, even for a fleeting moment— is the falseness of their qualifications as social workers. The game, which is to call to each other over the paging system using code names, pokes fun at the idea of expertise. The names they use for one another, Dr. Zhivago, Dr. Jekyll, Dr. Curie, Dr. Freud, bear a ring of authenticity as they sound down the grim corridors, but for any inmate listening closely enough, the ridiculousness of hoping for serious help from any of the local authorities is made manifest. Berriault uses the calling of these names over the paging system as a device for breaking the story into pieces, for showing the passage of time, and for calling readers back to the sensory life of the ward from Angela's thoughts. The names, each in their turn, bring to mind heights of romance, gothic terror, female will, and the psychopathology that underlines the need for the hospital in the first place and the undulating rows of women's beds that line it in the second. Angela's own epithet is "Dr. Curie." She finds it curiously apropos, since she sees her work in the hospital as being that of a "discoverer of so much that was undetectable and that might not even exist."

The ward itself is "pale" and "quiet," like a woman grown acquiescent after her own rest cure. Angela moves through it gently, trying to imagine lives for the women better than the ones they've had. Her hope is to see that they are not overlooked. As she works, she finds that the ward affects her in ways she would not have predicted. She comes to see that its unlucky people and vulnerable pain make it a meaningful place on its own terms, and give it a sanctity different from the ordinary life that those a short walk beyond its threshold might be able to claim. In fact, its peculiar atmosphere makes her feel unworthy. She unconsciously delivers to her fellow social workers a representation of herself so filled with a longing to merge with the patients that they chastise her and tell her she is not St. Teresa of Avila, and that kissing lepers' wounds is not part of her job description. But the difference between Dr. Curie—the name her coworkers chose for her—and St. Teresa, is less than one might think. Both figures moved willingly toward sickness, be it radiation or leprosy, as a path to enlightenment. In this way Berriault underlines one of the subversive processes open to women in their search for selffulfillment and development—a movement toward the weakening of the self to bring on knowledge.

At night Angela dreams of her mother, bad dreams in which she is being berated. She guesses that she is to blame for never knowing enough about her mother, who may have wanted to reveal herself, to unfold herself, but was unable to. Angela looks at the women in the ward whose lives, "must be unfolding before their eyes, in there," and

believes that "they're unfolding mine. They're unfolding me [as well]." She remembers herself as she stood at her mother's bedside in some other hospital. In her mind, she speaks to a daughter who fails to come to see her own mother in the ward. "Your heart sinks down and leaves your breast and may never come back. But when you're out in the street again it comes racing back, bursting with grief." The period of nonfeeling Angela describes during her own long-ago visit to her mother is a common occurrence in the county hospital for those who are forced to stand beside a woman who is in bed, raising the specter of helplessness. In one instance, a woman in bed pleads with Angela to intervene with a doctor. But the doctor remains arrogant, with "impatiently jiggling knee" and "disposing gaze." So there is only Angela herself to overcome the nonfeeling that separates the healthy from the unhealthy. Angela alone must "humanize herself" and face the consequences of witnessing something she would rather not see.

On the woman's face Angela superimposes the face of her own Aunt Ida, one of the legion of women in beds, and remembers that her mother told her that this same withered aunt had been the most beautiful of all her five sisters. As a child Angela was pierced with disbelief, and now, in the ward, looking into the eyes of this woman at her elbow, she is likewise unable to believe that this woman "had ever been other that she was now, had ever been young, a girl, twelve, sixteen, eighteen, in that flowering time." In the most abstract sense, Angela avoids the truth the moment offers up because it implicates her: if others can wither and grow old and become burdensome, so can she. But more specifi- cally, she perhaps sees a trajectory that mimics too closely the one she has already begun. It was at sixteen, a year she specifically mentions when looking at the pleading woman, that Angela attempted suicide, an attempt that she had convinced herself was childish and awkward, and that she now recalls "fondly." This jarring idea of closure on her past is upended by her vigorous attempts to picture all the women on the ward "when they were young, wanting to come to their rescue by reviving them as girls again."

Berriault plays with the sexual nature of the image of a woman in bed, writing that "in this women's ward there was a yielding to whoever was watching over them and to the medication that must seem like a persuasive stranger entering their most intimate being for their own good." Later, Angela asks a fellow employee if he has ever been to the French cemetery where Colette is buried. She tells him that the monument above the writer's grave resembles a bed, which suggests to her that cavorting on beds is "where women belong," whether living or dead, sick or well. She invokes Hamlet's mother and Desdemona as examples of women inseparable from their beds. Her contact with the women in the ward has made her think about destiny, which she sees as the force moving people— women in particular—from one bed to the next, without their consent and sometimes to their sorrow. In this way a subtle implication is made that a woman's sexual life is her destiny, and that the beginnings and endings of love affairs are the major currents of change.

The epiphany in "Women in Their Beds" occurs when Angela is lying beside her lover, reworking the meaning of the lines: "I in my bed of thistles, you in your bed of roses and feathers." In her actress's life she has said these lines before, but until she went to work at the county hospital she believed they were no more than a simple expression of

jealousy, one woman reporting on her lost lover as being another woman's gain. But Angela's recent experiences have left her unable to see her life in terms of personal losses and gains; the line reworks itself in her mind and she understands that should she in fact be the one with the bed of roses and feathers then she would only be relegating someone else to the bed of thistles. She moves away from the duality of good and bad, me and her, and toward an understanding of collective suffering that is irrefutable. "Just remember the beds where you wished you weren't, and beds where you wished you were, and then name any spot on this earth that's a bed for some woman at this very hour.... If I'd wished for a bed of roses and feathers, and *I did, I did,* now I don't want it so much anymore." In this section readers see Angela achieve the "eternal moment" that Berriault says the short story can provide. The moment is transcendent because Angela's identification with the women is complete; her own suffering and the suffering of her mother and aunt, which resurfaced for her during her stint as a pseudo-social worker, have been painfully acknowledged.

In the final scene in "Women in Their Beds" a distressed Angela walks up and down the aisles of the women's ward carrying a white candle in a wooden holder. The light, she thinks, is "for any woman leaving at any time." Leaving the ward? Leaving this life? Leaving one particular bed to go to another? The reader knows only that she is stopped by the head nurse, who blows out the candle after questioning the intent of the ritual and finding it inadequate. "And Nurse Nancy blew out the flame, with a breath that failed to be strong and unwavering but did the job anyway. Lightly then, a touch at Angela's elbow and at her back, touches to assist her to stay on her feet and to point her in the right direction." By helping her "stay on her feet" the nurse strikes a note against the helplessness of women in their beds, and Angela is left faltering but still upright as the story closes.

Source: Chris Semansky, in an essay for *Short Stories for Students*, Gale Group, 2001.

Topics for Further Study

In the story, Angela develops a theory that beds have special significance to women. Summarize Angela's ideas about why women are "inseparable from their beds." Do you agree or disagree with her view of women's lives?

Berriault offers the metaphor of "women in their beds" as a way of thinking about common experiences that all different kinds of women share. Try to come up with a symbol for the common experiences that all different kinds of *men* share. Explain why you chose this symbol.

At the hospital, Angela, Lew, and Dan communicate by paging each other using the names of famous fictional and historical doctors. Berriault opens and then punctuates the action of the story with these names. Identify the doctors to whom Berriault alludes. Discuss how one or more of these figures reflects the themes of the story.

Angela is an actress posing as a social worker. She often thinks about the hospital as if it were a kind of stage. How does Angela use acting techniques to help her understand the patients on the women's ward? Do you think that she overdramatizes things or is, in her own words, "carried away by her role"?

"Women in Their Beds" takes place in San Francisco in the 1960s, against the backdrop of the antiwar movement and the other associated social protests. Do some research about the kinds of criticisms that young people leveled against social institutions in the counterculture movements of the 1960s. How does this context enrich your understanding of the story?

What Do I Read Next?

Conference of Victims (1962), an early novel by Berriault, offers an indirect and ironic view of the effects of a man's suicide on those closest to him.

The Infinite Passion of Expectations: Twenty- Five Stories (1982) is an acclaimed earlier collection of Berriault's subtle and compassionate short stories, some of which are reprinted in *Women in Their Beds*.

Girl, Interrupted (1994), Susanna Kaysen's memoir of her psychiatric hospitalization in 1967 at age eighteen, questions the boundary between what is normal and what is deviant.

Dusk and Other Stories (1989), a collection of lyrical short stories by James Salter, explores relations between men and women and takes up themes of memory and loss.

The Gate of Angels (1990) is a short novel by Penelope Fitzgerald. Set at a hospital in 1912, this doctor-nurse love story is also an inquiry into different ideas of truth.

The Shawl (1990), by Cynthia Ozick, includes the title story and a short novel centering on the same character—a woman now living in Florida and confronting her loss thirty years after her infant daughter died in a Nazi concentration camp.

Further Study

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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 memberseducational 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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