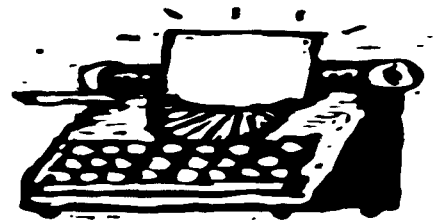


Short Stories *for Students*

Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on
Commonly Studied Short Stories

Volume 12

Jennifer Smith, Editor



Detroit
New York
San Francisco
London
Boston
Woodbridge, CT

Table of Contents

Guest Foreword	
“Why Study Literature At All?”	
Thomas E. Barden	vii
Introduction	ix
Literary Chronology	xiii
Acknowledgments	xv
Contributors	xvii
The Beginning of Homewood	
John Edgar Wideman	1
Debbie and Julie	
Doris Lessing	17
The Erlking	
Angela Carter	33
The Feathered Ogre	
Italo Calvino	49
Fountains in the Rain	
Yukio Mishima	68
Goodbye, Columbus	
Philip Roth	84
Heart of Darkness	
Joseph Conrad	111
Kew Gardens	
Virginia Woolf	133

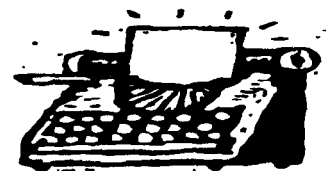


Table of Contents

Leaving the Yellow House		The Spinoza of Market Street	
Saul Bellow.....	155	Isaac Bashevis Singer.....	239
The Lesson		Suspicion	
Toni Cade Bambara.....	171	Dorothy L. Sayers.....	258
The Metamorphosis		That Evening Sun	
Franz Kafka.....	188	William Faulkner.....	273
The Pagan Rabbi		What We Talk About When We Talk About Love	
Cynthia Ozick.....	213	Raymond Carver.....	296
		Glossary of Literary Terms	313
		Cumulative Author/Title Index ...	325
		Nationality/Ethnicity Index	331
		Subject/Theme Index	335

Why Study Literature At All?

Short Stories for Students is designed to provide readers with information and discussion about a wide range of important contemporary and historical works of short fiction, and it does that job very well. However, I want to use this guest foreword to address a question that it does *not* take up. It is a fundamental question that is often ignored in high school and college English classes as well as research texts, and one that causes frustration among students at all levels, namely—why study literature at all? Isn't it enough to read a story, enjoy it, and go about one's business? My answer (to be expected from a literary professional, I suppose) is no. It is not enough. It is a start; but it is not enough. Here's why.

First, literature is the only part of the educational curriculum that deals directly with the actual world of lived experience. The philosopher Edmund Husserl used the apt German term *die Lebenswelt*, "the living world," to denote this realm. All the other content areas of the modern American educational system avoid the subjective, present reality of everyday life. Science (both the natural and the social varieties) objectifies, the fine arts create and/or perform, history reconstructs. Only literary study persists in posing those questions we all asked before our schooling taught us to give up on them. Only literature gives credibility to personal perceptions, feelings, dreams, and the "stream of consciousness" that is our inner voice. Literature wonders about infinity, wonders why God permits evil,

wonders what will happen to us after we die. Literature admits that we get our hearts broken, that people sometimes cheat and get away with it, that the world is a strange and probably incomprehensible place. Literature, in other words, takes on all the big and small issues of what it means to be human. So my first answer is that of the humanist—we should read literature and study it and take it seriously because it enriches us as human beings. We develop our moral imagination, our capacity to sympathize with other people, and our ability to understand our existence through the experience of fiction.

My second answer is more practical. By studying literature we can learn how to explore and analyze texts. Fiction may be about *die Lebenswelt*, but it is a construct of words put together in a certain order by an artist using the medium of language. By examining and studying those constructions, we can learn about language as a medium. We can become more sophisticated about word associations and connotations, about the manipulation of symbols, and about style and atmosphere. We can grasp how ambiguous language is and how important context and texture is to meaning. In our first encounter with a work of literature, of course, we are not supposed to catch all of these things. We are spellbound, just as the writer wanted us to be. It is as serious students of the writer's art that we begin to see how the tricks are done.

Seeing the tricks, which is another way of saying “developing analytical and close reading skills,” is important above and beyond its intrinsic literary educational value. These skills transfer to other fields and enhance critical thinking of any kind. Understanding how language is used to construct texts is powerful knowledge. It makes engineers better problem solvers, lawyers better advocates and courtroom practitioners, politicians better rhetoricians, marketing and advertising agents better sellers, and citizens more aware consumers as well as better participants in democracy. This last point is especially important, because rhetorical skill works both ways—when we learn how language is manipulated in the making of texts the result is that we become less susceptible when language is used to manipulate us.

My third reason is related to the second. When we begin to see literature as created artifacts of language, we become more sensitive to good writing in general. We get a stronger sense of the importance of individual words, even the sounds of words and word combinations. We begin to understand Mark Twain’s delicious proverb—“The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and a lightning bug.” Getting beyond the “enjoyment only” stage of literature gets us closer to becoming makers of word art ourselves. I am not saying that studying fiction will turn every student into a Faulkner or a Shakespeare. But it will make us more adaptable and effective writers, even if our art form ends up being the office memo or the corporate annual report.

Studying short stories, then, can help students become better readers, better writers, and even better human beings. But I want to close with a warning. If your study and exploration of the craft, history, context, symbolism, or anything else about a story starts to rob it of the magic you felt when you first read it, it is time to stop. Take a break, study another subject, shoot some hoops, or go for a run. Love of reading is too important to be ruined by school. The early twentieth century writer Willa Cather, in her novel *My Antonia*, has her narrator Jack Burden tell a story that he and Antonia heard from two old Russian immigrants when they were teenagers. These immigrants, Pavel and Peter, told about an incident from their youth back in Russia that the narrator could recall in vivid detail thirty years later. It was a harrowing story of a wedding party starting home in sleds and being chased by starving wolves. Hundreds of wolves attacked the group’s sleds one by one as they sped across the snow trying to reach their village. In a horrible revelation, the old Russians revealed that the groom eventually threw his own bride to the wolves to save himself. There was even a hint that one of the old immigrants might have been the groom mentioned in the story. Cather has her narrator conclude with his feelings about the story. “We did not tell Pavel’s secret to anyone, but guarded it jealously—as if the wolves of the Ukraine had gathered that night long ago, and the wedding party had been sacrificed, just to give us a painful and peculiar pleasure.” That feeling, that painful and peculiar pleasure, is the most important thing about literature. Study and research should enhance that feeling and never be allowed to overwhelm it.

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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 short stories 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 short fiction. While each volume contains entries on "classic" stories frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary stories, including works by multicultural, international, and women writers.

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

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the story 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 story was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the story or author (if available). A unique feature of *SSfS* is a specially commissioned overview essay on each story, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each story, 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 work.

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 include: literature anthologies, *Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges*; *Teaching the Short Story: A Guide to Using Stories from Around the World*, by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE); and "A Study of High School Literature Anthologies," conducted by Arthur Applebee at the Center for the Learning and Teaching of Literature and sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts and the Office of Educational Research and Improvement.

one knows how to release it. There is sterility, lack of peace, and discord. The story is called “The Beginning of Homewood,” because this beginning is what still determines the lives of these family members, and the story has no end yet. Still in the beginning stages of making sense of Homewood and its people, they wait for an authentic resolution.

This theme of waiting pervades “The Beginning of Homewood.” In the first paragraph, the narrator’s report that he has delayed the writing of the letter—the telling of the story—establishes the mood of “The Beginning of Homewood,” one of uncertain waiting and incompleteness. Furthermore, the narrator’s brother waits in prison. Sybil waits in a cage. The isle of Delos waits in a barren limbo with no death and no birth. The narrator has just visited Dachau, where prisoners waited and died, hopelessly. Aunt May’s plea in her song for the lord to come down and touch her expresses a reverent waiting. May and Sybela Owens wait for each other in their exchange of gazes, wait to share the truth, wait to hear it, wait upon each other. The narrator wonders whether he would have tried to escape slavery, or waited in its hold. The narrator ends this letter to his brother with the words, “Hold on.”

In the last story the narrator tells, people wait to hear the Supreme Court. The Court will be hearing a story to which it must offer some kind of resolution, a case involving prison conditions and inmate rights. Though it does not seem that this case would directly affect the narrator’s brother, it offers hope because the Court may be able to re-conceptualize human rights; it has “a chance to author its version of the Emancipation Proclamation.” The simple hearing of an unusual story might cause the Court to see things differently, the narrator hopes, to probe deeper than present ideas of “crime,” to “ask why you are where you are, and why the rest of us are here.” For the narrator, there is no simple conviction that everything will turn out well, but his faith in storytelling allows him to have faith in the institutions of justice that have imprisoned his brother. Given the circumstances, that is a tremendous accomplishment.

At the conclusion of “The Beginning of Homewood,” none of the stories end. There is still waiting to be done, everyone must “hold on.” They will all wait for some resolution, for some new version of the Emancipation Proclamation, for the Judgment Day that Sybela’s neighbors saw portended in the falling of stars, stars who come to symbolize her descendants and their falls. While

that waiting is uncertain in nature, the stories told can begin “to cohere” and offer hope that their lives may finally do the same.

Source: James Frazier, Critical Essay on “The Beginning of Homewood,” in *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 2001.

Jessica Lustig

In the following interview, Wideman discusses how the fictional Homewood portrayed in his stories relates to the real Homewood, his hometown.

- **Topics for Further Study:** a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the story. 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 Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the story was written, the time or place the story was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after the mid-1970s may not have this box.
- **What Do I Read Next?:** a list of works that might complement the featured story 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 “Why Study Literature At All?,” a guest foreword by Thomas E. Barden, Professor of English and Director of Graduate English Studies at the University of Toledo. This essay provides a number of very fundamental reasons for studying literature and, therefore, reasons why a book such as SSfS, designed to facilitate the study of literature, is useful.

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**.

Entries may include illustrations, including an author portrait, 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 SSfS may use the following general forms to document their source. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, thus, the following examples may be adapted as needed.

When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (for example, the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format may be used:

“The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County.” *Short Stories for Students*. Ed. Kathleen Wilson. Vol. 1. Detroit: Gale, 1997, pp. 19-20.

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

Korb, Rena. Essay on “Children of the Sea.” *Short Stories for Students*. Ed. Kathleen Wilson. Vol. 1. Detroit: Gale, 1997, p. 42.

When quoting a journal essay that is reprinted in a volume of *Short Stories for Students*, the following form may be used:

Schmidt, Paul. “The Deadpan on Simon Wheeler.” *The Southwest Review* Vol. XLI, No. 3 (Summer, 1956), pp. 270-77; excerpted and reprinted in *Short Stories for Students*, Vol. 1, ed. Kathleen Wilson. (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 29-31.

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

Bell-Villada, Gene H. “The Master of Short Forms,” in *Garcia Marquez: The Man and His Work* (University of North Carolina Press, 1990); excerpted and reprinted in *Short Stories for Students*, Vol. 1, ed. Kathleen Wilson. (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 90-91.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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

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