

DAUDET, ALPHONSE. THE LAST LESSON.

France

Bedside Book of Famous French Stories. New York: Random House, 1945.

Translated by Marian McIntyre.

Author: Alphonse Daudet (1840–1897), a French novelist, poet, and short story writer, was born in Provence. Because his father's business failed when Alphonse was young, he was unable to complete his formal education. He read widely, though, and at age sixteen, he taught briefly at the College of Alais. He then joined his brother in Paris, where he began his writing career. When the Franco-Prussian War began in 1870, Daudet, due to extreme nearsightedness, was sent to the National Guard rather than to the battlefield with his regiment. Many of his works contain his moving depiction of the suffering he observed during this period. THE LAST LESSON was published in 1873.

One of the masters associated with the naturalist school, Daudet is often compared to Charles Dickens. He presented vivid portraits of life in Provence and of the various social classes in Paris.

Story: An Alsatian, Franz, recollects a childhood experience that took place near the end of the Franco-Prussian War (1870–71). He recalls a morning when he was late and unprepared for school. To his surprise, his tardiness was not punished, and the usually empty back benches were filled with villagers. His stern teacher, Monsieur Hamel, shocked his listeners by announcing the new Prussian interdiction against the teaching of French in the schools of Alsace and Lorraine. That day would be the last day French would be spoken in the classroom and his last day of teaching after forty years. Monsieur Hamel's reproaches to the children, the villagers, and even himself made them all regret their previously negligent attitude toward the value of studying their native tongue. The conscientious approach of

both the students and villagers to that final lesson echoed the nationalistic pride of the teacher as he wrote on the board for the last time "Vive la France."

Comparison: In "The Pupil," Henry James explores a similar subject. As the title indicates, however, the focus is different. Daudet emphasizes the importance of the subject being taught and the students' apathy, while James concentrates on the close relationship between Pemberton, the exploited tutor, and Morgan, the gifted pupil. The denouement of both stories is emotionally moving, but the schoolmaster's final action in THE LAST LESSON softens the sense of loss, while the tragedy of Morgan's death in James's work is unrelieved.

The initiation theme of THE LAST LESSON, as represented by the maturing consciousness of Franz, receives modern treatment in Toni Cade Bambara's "The Lesson." Sylvia, a sassy young black girl living in the ghetto, treats education with derision until a concerned college-educated neighbor takes her and her friends on a trip to an expensive toy store. This experience changes Sylvia's perspective, moving her to contemplate at length the lessons presented that day. Bambara's economical style, her directness of presentation, is much like Daudet's in THE LAST LESSON.

The nationalistic pride felt by the villagers in THE LAST LESSON is also seen in Daudet's "The Siege of Berlin." In this story, a chauvinistic retired French officer suffers a heart attack when Prussian troops enter Paris. — M A F

DESAI, ANITA. A DEVOTED SON.

India

World Writers Today. Glenview, IL: ScottForesman, 1995.

Author: Born of a Bengali father and a German mother in Mussorie, Anita Desai (1937-) knows German, Bengali, Hindi, and English, but prefers to write in English because of the richness, vitality, and suppleness of the language. Her first novel, *Cry the Peacock*, published in 1963, set a new trend in Indian literature by focusing on psychological rather than physical details. Recognized internationally by the time of the publication of her fifth novel, *Fire on the Mountain*, she won many awards in India and was considered for a prestigious British award in English literature. In her short stories as well as her novels, Desai explores the interior world of her characters as they struggle with common human dilemmas in the context of existential predicaments.

Story: Son of poor, illiterate parents, Ravesh gains a reputation as a devoted son when, after he wins academic honors and earns an M.D. degree in the United States, he returns to his small village in India and touches his father's feet in respect. He weds an illiterate girl in an arranged

marriage and continues to live at home and serve his parents.

His devotion takes an ironic turn, however, when his father becomes ill. Ravesh sanitizes his father's diet to such a degree that the last remaining pleasure in the old man's life, eating, is taken from him. He suffers unspeakable misery as Ravesh tries to prolong his life by feeding him tonics and pills.

Comparison: What occurs between Ravesh and his father when the son gains control happens frequently as parents age. Yet there are added dimensions when traditional societies are confronted by Westernization. Such complicated intergenerational encounters are depicted in countless stories from around the world, such as GRANDMOTHER TAKES CHARGE by Lao She. The neglect and helplessness felt by Ravesh's father can also be compared with the plight of the old woman in THE GRANDMOTHER by K. Surangkhanang. — ML

DESAI, ANITA. GAMES AT TWILIGHT.

India

Games at Twilight and Other Stories. London: Heinemann, 1978.

Author: See A DEVOTED SON.

Story: After a hot day, the children are eager to play outside. In a game of hide-and-seek, Ravi, determined not to be found, heads for a secret place next to the garage. Sliding through a small gap between the door and walls, he hides in a locked shed stuffed with old household goods. When the person who is "It" comes charging close to him, he is scared at first, but the sheer delight at not having been discovered enables him to endure a long stay in the dark. When at last he gets tired of his confinement, he emerges with a victory cry. As he breaks through the crack, he falls on his knees and chokes with tears of rage

and humiliation. His playmates have completely forgotten about him and are concentrating on new games. His mother scolds him for being a baby. He lies down in the grass, "silenced by a terrible sense of his insignificance."

Comparison: The central existential dilemma presented here corresponds with themes of isolation and alienation found in writers classified under the existential school, such as Camus, Sartre, and Kafka. In Kafka's THE METAMORPHOSIS, for instance, protagonist Gregor Samsa, also "silenced by a terrible

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sense of his insignificance," finds himself changed into an insectlike creature. Despite his freedom from human pressures in his new state, he is shunned, denigrated, and all but forgotten, even by his own family. In dying, he leaves a light empty shell, which the maid sweeps away.

Ravi's loss of innocence and his initiation into real life, the realization that what occurs does not necessarily match one's own expectations and that one is fundamentally

alone in life, parallels the "anguish and anger" expressed by the narrator in James Joyce's "Araby" when he too is disillusioned and disappointed that his experience of the bazaar does not match his dream. This sense of absolute aloneness is also realized by Juliet in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, when she realizes that she has no one to trust and must take the sleeping potion alone. — M L

DHLOMO, H. I. E. THE DAUGHTER.

South Africa

H. I. E. Dhlomo: Collected Works. New York: Raven Press, 1985.

Author: Herbert Dhlomo (1903–1956) was born at Siyamu, near Pietermaritzburg, Natal, and died in Durban. He was the second son of parents from prominent families in Johannesburg. Like his older brother, Herbert qualified as a teacher and worked at the Amangimtoti Training Institute in Natal from 1922 to 1924. Later, he became head teacher at the American Board Mission School in Doornfontein.

His early ambition to write prompted him to prepare articles for the South African newspaper. Like many other blacks prominent during that time, he joined the African National Congress and, in 1935, published his first short story, "An Experiment in Colour," and left the teaching profession. He produced many articles and literary works, including short stories, poetry, and plays. He served as librarian at the Ndonyeni Library in the Bantu Social Centre in Durban and then became assistant editor of *Ilanga Lase* in Natal, where his older brother was editor. He held this position until just before his death.

Story: THE DAUGHTER is a romance, a story of love that entangles the lives of four people from the same family. Bursting with exotic imagery, classical allusions, and aphorisms, the story is told from an objective point of view in order to drive home a universal truth:

"Absence makes the heart grow fonder"—often, however, fonder of someone else.

The main character is Zodwa Valo, who married Bob Frafa when she was only sixteen and he twenty, a marriage that lasted just fifteen months. After this short time, Bob decides to leave Durban for Johannesburg, the "big city" of excitement and glamour. After Bob leaves, Zodwa gives birth to a girl, Bob's daughter, Rose. When she grows up, Rose too decides to go to Johannesburg, leaving behind both her mother and her lover, Max. In the city, she meets Bob. Neither recognizes the other, of course, and after a number of meetings, they consummate their love.

The story concludes when Bob's work calls him back to Durban. Rose also returns, and the two lovers meet at Rose's mother's house. Just as they begin making introductions, Max enters the room. The reader is kept in suspense as the truth unfolds and the point of the story is revealed: "Absence makes the heart grow fonder."

Comparison: THE DAUGHTER mirrors the culture of the South African people. The story may be reminiscent of Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex*, a reversal disguised within a seemingly innocent but incestuous relationship. — M J J

DIB, MOHAMMED. NAEMA—WHEREABOUTS UNKNOWN.

Algeria

One World of Literature. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993. Translated by Len Ortzen.

Author: Mohammed Dib (1920-) was born in Tlemcen, Algeria, a town near the Moroccan border. He was raised a Muslim, and after receiving his education in Algeria and Morocco, he tried a number of occupations before becoming a full-time writer. But even while working as a primary school teacher, a carpet weaver, a railway worker, and, finally, a journalist, he contributed fiction and articles to Algerian publications. In 1959, he moved from Algeria to France, where he continues to live and where his novels and short stories have been widely acclaimed. Two of his novels, *Omneros* (1978) and *Who Remembers the Sea* (1985), are available in English translations.

Always interested in using his fiction as social commentary, Dib was naturally drawn to the subject of the Algerian war for independence, but his treatment of that struggle often shows evidence of his earlier fascination with surrealist style. NAEMA—WHEREABOUTS UNKNOWN, published in Arabic in 1966, is a case in point, as the style of the diary entries is at times so vivid as to seem surreal.

Story: NAEMA—WHEREABOUTS UNKNOWN opens with the narrator's anguished thoughts about his wife, Naema, who has been taken to prison, or perhaps killed, by French soldiers, presumably as a result of her involvement in the armed struggle for Algerian independence. The reader learns later in the story that the narrator's thoughts are actually entries in a diary, and the first entry continues as he ponders his young son's attitude toward the war and the French. While his son feels that the rebels should "Kill the lot. Keep throwing bombs," the narrator wants only an end to the killing, a personal peace.

This diary entry is followed by one that recounts the narrator's escape from a bomb explosion and the ensuing police violence. Dashing into a cobbler's shop, he suggests that the proprietor lock his door to protect them from the police, who are seeking the bomb thrower. When a loud pounding comes at the

door, he tells the man not to open it, but the police break it down and kill the cobbler. The narrator escapes, returning the next day to find the shop padlocked. Upon inquiring at the neighboring shops, he can find out only that there will be no funeral. All the victims of both the bomb and the police have already been buried by the authorities.

This entry is followed by a page or so of musings on the situation in Algeria. The narrator has come to realize that "While we remain at the mercy of these butchers, bound hand and foot, the real war is taking place elsewhere. So we find our only defense against this daily terror is in disturbances and the breakdown of law and order. We have paid too dearly already, to hesitate or draw back. Something has got underway which is even worse than war."

Following these thoughts come three vignettes, each illustrating the narrator's changing attitude. First, he and the other diners at a popular café are held in silence at gunpoint for over an hour while the police check identity cards. After the incident, he thinks, "My throat was sore from the insults I had swallowed." Next, later that same day, he is ordered by the police to stop, but rather than obey, "looking straight at them, I made the decision to walk towards them. At every moment I expected them to open fire on me. I was quite cool and calm, and filled with disdain." In the final vignette, he describes "the most astounding procession ever seen in the town." Arab women without their veils and barefoot Arab children were "sweeping forward shrieking out the Liberation Anthem," carrying a makeshift rebel flag. "All at once, automatic weapons began to stutter," and the women and children were mowed down.

The final entry is brief. An agent of the rebel forces seeks him out because his earlier inquiries about the dead cobbler led the rebels to believe that he was the cobbler's friend. The cobbler's shop, the

narrator is informed, had been used by the rebels, and they now need someone to replace the dead man and to reopen the shop." I let him deliver his little speech. . . . 'Have you the keys,' I said. . . . He produced a ring with two keys from his trouser pocket. I took it. . . . I am closing this diary now. It was thinking of my wife, the shoemaker and the others which sustained me and helped me to carry on until now. They knew why they died, they did."

Comparison: Especially in light of Dib's earlier work, one can see NAEMA—WHEREABOUTS UNKNOWN as a work of social commentary demonstrating the need for commitment to a socially worthy cause. In that sense, one might compare this story to such socially conscious novels as John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* or *In Dubious Battle* or John Dos Passos's massive trilogy *USA*. Dib's story might also indicate that involvement in armed

struggle can provide meaning in life. The narrator turns away from the self-involvement of the diary at the end of the story and begins a real involvement with the life of his time. One finds a contrasting view in Stephen Crane's "An Episode of War."

NAEMA—WHEREABOUTS UNKNOWN could also be considered a story of initiation. The narrator moves step by step from a relatively meaningless absorption in his own personal loss to a commitment to a changed life, one of meaningful struggle for a just cause. Just as the narrator of James Joyce's "Araby" must put his childish life of self-involvement behind him, so Dib's narrator must go beyond his great personal loss if he is to find something worth living and dying for. The fact that he achieves his initiation through surmounting situations of grave physical danger suggests a comparison to Doris Lessing's "Through the Tunnel," where Jerry must swim to manhood through a dangerous underwater tunnel. — P T M

DINESEN, ISAK. THE SAILOR BOY'S TALE.

Denmark

A World of Great Stories. New York: Crown, 1947.

Author: Isak Dinesen was the pen name of Baroness Karen Blixen of Rungstedlund (1885–1962). Born into an old Danish family, she married a cousin, Baron Blixen, in 1914 and spent the next seventeen years of her life in Kenya Colony of British East Africa. For much of that time, she managed a coffee plantation almost single-handedly. Her book *Out of Africa* is an account of those years.

Returning to Denmark in 1931, Dinesen produced two volumes of long short stories in English, *Seven Gothic Tales* and *Winter's Tales*. With their masterful blend of fantasy and reality, these stories established her fame, especially in the United States. Dinesen died in her ancestral home near Elsinore.

Story: The combination of fantasy and reality that characterizes Dinesen's stories is nowhere more apparent than in THE SAILOR BOY'S TALE. Young Simon rescues a peregrine falcon entangled high in the rigging of his sailing ship. He attempts the dangerous rescue only after much thought: "Through his own experience of life he had

come to the conviction that in this world everyone must look after himself, and expect no help from others. But the mute, deadly fight kept him fascinated for more than an hour. . . . He remembered how, many years ago, in his own country and near his home, he had once seen a peregrine falcon quite close, sitting on a stone and flying straight up from it. Perhaps this was the same bird. He thought: That bird is like me. Then she was there, and now she is here." As he reaches the trapped falcon, who looks at him "with a pair of angry, desperate yellow eyes," a bond is formed. Despite the danger of his mission, he feels a sense of unity, "as if the sea and sky, the ship, the bird and himself were all one." Simon climbs down, with the falcon secured inside his jacket, only to endure the laughter of shipmates for risking his life so foolishly. As he releases the bird, though, he thinks proudly, "There flies my falcon."

Years later, the same yellow eyes of a falcon stare out at Simon from the face of an old woman who rescues him from his own entanglement with a band of Russians. Simon has changed greatly from the boy who first saved the falcon. He has killed a man and kissed a girl. More importantly, he has forgotten the unity of all living things that he had once known. But the old woman saves him in every respect, for she restores this harmony and sends Simon on his way again with a blessing. A sense of universal retribution pervades this coming-of-age story that, like all

fairy tales, is enjoyable on more than one level.

Comparison: THE SAILOR BOY'S TALE and Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" underscore reverence for all life, a lesson the mariner and Simon must both learn. Dinesen's suggestion of the mythological element pairs interestingly with Coleridge's emphasis on the religious aspect. Doris Lessing's "A Sunrise on the Veld" and George Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant" are additional choices for comparative reading. — P G L

DINESEN, ISAK. SORROW-ACRE.

Denmark

Winter's Tales. New York: Random House, 1942.

Author: See THE SAILOR BOY'S TALE.

Story: This strangely compelling tale is a story within a story. On one hand, "Sorrow-Acre" refers literally to the field of rye a widow contracts to mow with a scythe between sunup and sundown on a single day. This extraordinary feat—should she accomplish it—will save her son's life. Should she fail, her son must suffer the punishment for arson, a crime he claims not to have committed. Against this long day of agonizing toil for the widow, Dinesen balances a philosophical struggle between the old lord with whom the widow has struck her bargain and his young nephew and possible heir.

Both contests—one a physical marathon, the other an ideological debate—revolve around the line of a plaintive French tune. Translated, the line suggests that to die for a person one loves is an effort too sweet for words. Such a degree of commitment is on a level of consciousness far higher than Adam, the lord's nephew, can imagine. Yet the

cleared field at the end of the day symbolizes more than the greatness of the mother's love. It represents as well the cleared thought, the resolutions Adam has made about the heritage of his homeland and his acceptance of that heritage.

Comparison: In SORROW-ACRE, students should note that the landscape exists more as a principal character than as mere setting. Much in the manner of a Conrad story, the landscape functions as a primal mirror in which the questions of life must be endlessly reflected. Nadine Gordimer's "The Train from Rhodesia" offers a thought-provoking juxtaposition with SORROW-ACRE. The young woman on the train questions the whole nature of human relationships, the valuing of human worth and dignity, against the landscape—and the heritage—of South Africa. Similarly, Sholokhov's THE COLT and Tamasi's FLASHES IN THE NIGHT offer stories set against a lyrically described natural background. — P G L

DIOP, BIRAGO. THE WAGES OF GOOD.

Senegal

African Writing Today. Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1967.

Translated by Robert Baldick.

Author: Born in Dakar, Senegal, Birago Diop (1906-1989) is best known for short stories inspired by the folktales of West Africa. He left Senegal to study in France and received a doctorate in veterinary science from L'École Nationale Vétérinaire de Toulouse in 1933. He served as a veterinary officer in Senegal and in French Sudan and as a nurse in a military hospital in St. Louis, Senegal. He was employed at L'Institut de Médecine Vétérinaire Exotique in Paris and as head of zoological technical services in Upper Volta. He has also been administrator for a broadcasting company, ambassador from Senegal to Tunisia, vice president of La Confédération Internationale de la Société d'Auteurs et Compositeurs, and an official in the French National Defense Institute. He has won many awards, among them the Grand Prix Littéraire de l'Afrique-Occidentale Française and the Grand Prix Littéraire de l'Afrique Noire from the Association des Écrivains d'Espression Française de la Mer et de l'Outre Mer. He has published several short story collections and a volume of poems. He has also adapted several of his stories for the stage.

Story: THE WAGES OF GOOD is a short, simple folktale with a clear message. Like many traditional folktales, the forces of evil are outsmarted, and the forces of good win in the end. And like many such tales, most of the main characters are animals. In this case, the only human is a child who interacts and speaks with the animals as though all were intellectual and social equals. As a matter of fact, the animals, because of their greater experience, are wiser than the child and serve as both adversary and rescuer.

Diassigue-the-Alligator becomes stranded when the stream in which he lives is drained. He is helped by Goné-the-Child, who rolls the alligator into a mat and carries him to the

river. Once he is safe, Diassigue turns his attention to his stomach. He tricks Goné into wading into the water up to his neck and then threatens to eat the child. Yet Goné is able to make a deal with the alligator. They will ask the first three people they see whether "a good deed is repaid with a kindness or with a bad turn." They ask Nagy-the-Cow, who remembers how well she was treated when she was young, how she gave great quantities of milk and mothered many calves, and points out that now that she is old, she must look for her own food. Her good deed, she says, was repaid with a bad turn. Much the same story is told by Fass-the-Horse, who was well treated when he was a young war horse, but now he is hobbled and left to care for himself. He too claims that a good deed is repaid with a bad turn.

The third to approach Diassigue and Goné is Leuk-the-Hare. Instead of simply answering the question, Leuk investigates the source, and he immediately understands the cruel trick the alligator is playing on the child who just saved his life. Leuk, pretending not to believe the story of Goné's rescuing the alligator, has the two reenact the scene: they come out of the water, Diassigue allows himself to be rolled into the rug and tied, and Goné places the bundle on his head. Leuk then advises the child to carry the now helpless alligator home for his own supper, for "that is how to repay those who forget a good deed."

Comparison: This story, told in the tradition of the fable, may be compared with Aesop's fables or with stories derived from or modeled after his fables, such as Fontaine's classic *Fables*. Kafka's parables offer an interesting variation of the fable. —B H N

DJILAS, MILOVAN. THE OLD MAN AND THE SONG.

Montenegro

The Stone and the Violets. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971.

Translated by Lovett F. Edwards.

Author: Born in Montenegro, then a Turkish province, Milovan Djilas (1911–1995) distinguished himself throughout his life by his uncompromising love of freedom—even when his principles led to his sacrificing his own personal freedom. Djilas attended Belgrade University, where he won recognition in several areas: for his poetry, short stories, and revolutionary activities. In 1932, he joined the illegal Communist Party and was arrested and imprisoned for three years by the Austro-Hungarian government.

During World War II, Djilas became a partisan leader, fighting against the Italian and German occupation forces. With the end of the war, he rose to high office in the Communist Party and the Yugoslav government. His journalistic criticism of the Communist regime, however, culminating in his comments on the Hungarian uprising, caused him to be expelled from the Communist Central Committee and sentenced to a three-year prison term. Refusing to be silenced, he published *The New Class*, was accused of slandering his country, and had his sentence extended. After his conditional release, he published *Conversations with Stalin* and was rearrested and returned to prison. THE OLD MAN AND THE SONG was written in prison at Sremska Mitrovica in March 1966 and published that same year.

Several themes in Djilas's works reflect his philosophy and experiences: the cosmic struggle between good and evil, the need for the individual to fight evil, and the need for the individual to survive and to preserve freedom in the world.

Story: Set during World War I, at a time when the Turks still occupied much of Montenegro, this story deals with two mountain tribes that in the past had often fought their own small wars over the boundaries of mountain pastures.

Vuk, a young man of the Rovci tribe, has left his mountain home for the first time, with a letter that he hopes will gain him a position in the Montenegrin prince's bodyguard. En route, because of danger from the Turks, he

finds he must stay overnight at the home of his friend Šćepan, a member of the Piperi tribe. Struck with how much more prosperous Šćepan's family is than his, as well as with their courtesy and hospitality to him and the respect and care they show toward a very old man living with them, Vuk accepts their invitation to play the gusle and sing a song. He decides to sing a folk song about Savić Spasojev, a great Piperi hero. When he finishes, the family and some friends look at one another strangely. After Šćepan's father has thanked Vuk, the others also thank him, and then Šćepan asks if he would like to meet Savić. To Vuk's amazement, the hero of the folk song is the old man whom he had noticed earlier and who is lying on a felt pallet near the fire. The old man, who is ill-humored, listens to the others recite more of his deeds, then asks, "Why are you repeating all that tonight? Let me rest! Then it was easy to be a hero."

Accustomed to the old man's ill humor, the Piperi leave, still praising Vuk and his song. When Šćepan asks Vuk if he is glad to have seen Savić, the disillusioned Vuk, tears in his eyes, responds negatively, saying it would be better if he had never started his journey.

Comparison: Primarily a story dealing with the shattering of a young man's illusions, this story may be compared with Hemingway's "The Killers" or Joyce's "Araby." Its unusual setting amid the mountain tribes of former Yugoslavia permits comparison with other stories of peasants and peasant life, especially with Andrić's THE SCYTHE and the peasant parents of Djilas's own WAR. Both of these stories are also set in former Yugoslavia. Savić, as a leader of the Piperi, may be compared with the title character in Steinbeck's "The Leader of the People."—H M M

DJILAS, MILOVAN. WAR.

Montenegro

Russian and Eastern European Literature. Glenview, IL: ScottForesman, 1970.

Translated by Giovanni Segreto.

Author: See THE OLD MAN AND THE SONG.

Story: In this tragic story, two simple peasants are counterposed against a modern army and its discipline. Djilas carefully avoids naming characters or places, merely setting the story on the banks of a river where fighting has been going on for three months. All means of crossing the river have been destroyed except for a motorized scow run by the army. During the night, when there is no danger of bombing, this scow is used for military purposes. During the day, it ferries the inhabitants, largely peasants, across the water.

As the story opens, two old peasants, a man and a woman, board the scow with a wagon carrying a coffin. They explain that they are returning home with the body of their son, who was killed at the front. Earlier they had lost two sons in the war; in the coffin is their last one. When they reach shore, while papers are being checked, another peasant asks to see the commanding officer, whom he tells that he has heard sounds coming from the coffin. When the coffin is opened, it contains the son, alive and dressed in peasant clothing. The peasant who reported his suspicions is horrified, saying he thought the coffin

contained a spy. At the order of the commanding officer, the son is shot through the heart, and the two parents, now mourning in reality, are told to return home with the body.

In the concluding lines of the story, Djilas has something bitter to say about the value of human life: "The lieutenant said: 'Strange people, these peasants. Look at them. They're mourning and crying just like they did before.' However, no one heard him. They were all busy with the trucks on the bank of the big river."

Comparison: In its depiction of the character of the Slav peasant, this story may be compared with Solzhenitsyn's MATRYONA'S HOME, Andric's THE SCYTHE, and Sholokhov's THE COLT. As a story dealing with humanity's inhumanity, it may be compared with Solzhenitsyn's THE RIGHT HAND, Sholokhov's THE COLT, and Sienkiewicz's YANKO THE MUSICIAN. The story also lends itself to the broad subgenre of antiwar fiction. In this area, it may be compared with Sholokhov's THE COLT and THE FATE OF A MAN, with Hemingway's "Old Man at the Bridge," and with other antiwar stories written in Europe and America after World War II. — H M M

DOSTOEVSKI, FYODOR. THE DREAM OF A RIDICULOUS MAN.

Russia

Notes from Underground, "White Nights," "The Dream of a Ridiculous Man," and Selections from "The House of the Dead." New York: New American Library, 1961. Translated by Andrew R. MacAndrew.

Author: Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevski (1821–1881) was born in Moscow, the second son of a merchant's daughter and a staff doctor at Mariinskaya Hospital for the poor. He attended a Moscow boarding school and, after his mother died, the School of Military

Engineers in St. Petersburg, from which he resigned his commission after four years.

Dismayed, indeed revolted, by the grim realities of Russian life, particularly the mistreatment of the common people by government workers and officials, Dostoevski

became an active member of a socialist group and, while working on his third novel, *Netochka Nezvanova*, was arrested, tried, and condemned to death for political activities. His death sentence was commuted, however, and he spent four years in a penal colony. This served to reinforce his desire to use his writing to change the society in which he lived. Repeatedly, his works, written under conditions of poverty and personal and emotional trauma, call for freeing the serfs, abolishing censorship, and relaxing the laws governing free discussion of political events.

After receiving full amnesty in 1859 and returning to St. Petersburg with his wife, Dostoevski's philosophy as revealed in his work acquired a more mature attitude, stressing the hope of gaining salvation through degradation and suffering. In his later years, during which he was plagued by epilepsy and financial ruin, he produced his best-known works, which demonstrate a mastery of the psychological novel through insight into abnormal states of mind. These include *Crime and Punishment* (1866), *The Idiot* (1869), *The Possessed* (1872), and *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880). The last novel was published just one year before his death.

Story: The story opens with the narrator's avowal "I'm a ridiculous man," which sets the tone for his attitude toward life and his dream. The dream, a story within a story, is provoked by an incident on a cold, gloomy day, a typical Dostoevski setting, in which a ragged, shivering, terrified little girl, apparently separated from her mother, desperately appeals to the narrator for help. He ignores her and continues on his way to his apartment. Feeling intensely sorry for the child, "so sorry that it hurt," and guilty about not having acted, he resolves to kill himself, partly for guilt and partly for despair ("nothing had happened while I'd been alive").

Before he can lift the gun to his head and fulfill his intent, however, he slips into sleep, "still juggling with the eternal questions," and dreams of shooting himself in the heart. The dream progresses through his burial, after which his consciousness awaits its demise while he begs, "Whoever You are—if You do exist—if there is anything more sensible than what's happening here, make it happen." Suddenly, the grave opens, and he is seized by a "mysterious creature" bearing "a human resemblance."

The creature is part of a duplicate universe in which the inhabitants are truly happy,

innocent, and serene, for "this earth had not been desecrated by the Fall of Man; its inhabitants still lived in a paradise such as that of Adam and Eve before they sinned." He moves among them noting the lack of disease and war, the serenity of old age and death, and the absolute belief in eternal life. Then, "the truth is that—well, that I ended up corrupting them all."

Once corrupted, the people have to seek ways to find happiness, to unite society, to live in harmony, to develop systems for universal love. Wars are fought, crimes are undertaken, suicide is committed, and religions are formed that worship "nonbeing and self-annihilation for the sake of an eternal repose in nothingness." When the people grow tired and begin to praise suffering, the narrator comes to love them and their corrupted earth more than he has ever loved before. As the agent of their corruption, he asks for martyrdom at their hands, but they laugh at him as "a feeble-minded fool" and exonerate him instead. Filled with sorrow, he awakens.

As a result of his dream, he preaches to everyone a doctrine of love, unity, and happiness. He reveals his dream and himself as the corrupter, and, just as in his dream, people laugh at him. Still, he continues to preach the golden rule and the belief that if everyone acknowledged that "awareness of life is of a higher order than knowledge of the laws of happiness," then "everything could be arranged immediately."

Comparison: Although the opening lines are reminiscent of those in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell Tale Heart" and "The Black Cat," this story does not follow the opening with the adamant disavowal one finds in Poe's stories. Rather, there is casual, even benign, acceptance of one's absurdity.

Embedded in the story are shades of Camus's existentialism as defined in *The Stranger*, especially when Dostoevski's protagonist avers, "I began to feel with my whole being that nothing had happened while I'd been alive." This echoes the deliberate isolation of Raskolnikov in Dostoevski's own *Crime and Punishment*, an isolation born from egoism and based on pure rationalism—rationalism devoid of feeling. Isolation marks the life of the ridiculous man, a circumstance that sets up a tale in which one learns that there is a reality external to one's own thought.

There is an actual world in which love and compassion and giving can solve the problem of human suffering. While this is also an unattainable reality, it gives us purpose. Without it, we have nothing for which to strive, nothing to justify our being. In this sense, the central character is representative of humankind.

Presenting this view is also the role of the title characters in *The Brothers Karamazov*, as it is of Gregor Samsa in Kafka's *THE METAMORPHOSIS*. Gregor too is isolated from the rest of humanity, just as he is isolated from his feelings about the world and the manner in which he lives. In *THE DREAM OF A RIDICULOUS MAN*, the dream is just that—a sleeping event. In *THE METAMORPHOSIS*, it is a nightmare in wakefulness. In both, however, it is indicative of the state of humanity from

Dostoevski's perspective, and, in both, the rest of humanity remains oblivious to the truth of the situation. Such nonrecognition of the truth is also seen in Mark Twain's "The War Prayer," the result of which is a continuation of anguish.

Once the dream has been experienced, the dreamer moves outside himself and begins preaching universal love, the betterment of all humanity, in the manner of Joe in Dalton Trumbo's *Johnny Got His Gun* and the narrator in Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*. The preaching consists of truths that, if recognized and accepted, could allow humanity to take a small step toward establishing the dream of an earthly paradise, the same sort of paradise depicted by James Hilton in *Lost Horizon* — J A G

DOSTOEVSKI, FYODOR. THE HONEST THIEF.

Russia

The Best Short Stories of Dostoevski. New York: Modern Library, n.d.

Translated by David Margarshack.

Author: See *THE DREAM OF A RIDICULOUS MAN*.

Story: As he leaves for work one morning, the narrator is informed that an elderly gentleman is about to become a lodger in the same household. Despite his usual solitude and "boredom of existence," the narrator finds this old soldier, Astafy Ivanovich, quite pleasant, particularly due to his storytelling abilities. When the narrator's coat is stolen, Astafy begins a tale about a thief he had the dubious pleasure of knowing two years earlier.

One evening at a pub, Astafy met a vagabond drunkard for whom he felt overwhelming pity, so Astafy allowed the man to stay the night in his own lodgings. One night turned into two, two into three, and so on, until the drunkard, Yemelyan Ilyich, became a permanent figure in Astafy's life. Yemelyan was quiet and gentle but could not be trusted to spend a single ruble on anything but drink. Although Astafy was "dreadfully sorry for the poor fellow" and could not throw him out into the street, Astafy himself was quite poor and

wanted to rid himself of this obviously dependent creature.

One day, Astafy moved to a single room in an old lady's flat and bade a grateful farewell to Yemelyan, declaring, "You'll never find me now!" Upon arriving at his new room, however, he found Yemelyan waiting for him. Yemelyan again became an integral part of Astafy's life, but this time, instead of running from his guest, Astafy decided "there and then to be his only provider and benefactor."

Astafy tried to teach Yemelyan a trade; none could be found at which he was adept. Astafy tried to make Yemelyan look reputable; his coat remained torn and tattered. Astafy tried to make Yemelyan give up drinking; he "just heaved a sigh" and his "blue lips started quivering all of a sudden and a tear rolled down his pale cheek and trembled on his stubby chin." One day, Astafy casually mentioned a pair of blue checkered riding breeches he hoped to sell for fifteen rubles. That evening, he found Yemelyan extremely drunk and the breeches missing. Both

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Yemelyan and his landlady denied taking them, and later the sober Yemelyan helped look for them. Astafy finally apologized: "I am sorry if, fool that I am, I've accused you unjustly." Despite his words, however, Astafy developed an intense dislike for Yemelyan. He felt betrayed, but still he pitied the man, whose drinking continued to become worse and for whom sulking had become a habit.

Knowing he wasn't trusted, Yemelyan left. "He wasn't to be found anywhere: gone, vanished!" Astafy was worried until, after five days, Yemelyan returned, obviously driven home by hunger. Feeling more pity than ever before, Astafy offered him a drink, which, to his dismay, Yemelyan refused, declaring that he was ill. Astafy put him to bed and cared for him. As he lay dying, Yemelyan had one last piece of business to take care of: he confessed to the theft of Astafy's breeches—and died.

Comparison: THE HONEST THIEF has a typical Dostoevski character in Yemelyan, who cannot resist temptation under any circumstances. This is his tragedy, as it is the tragedy of Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*. The idea of repentance at the

moment of death for fear of retribution is also common in Dostoevski and evident in the character of Svidrigalov in *Crime and Punishment* and in early editions of WHITE NIGHTS:

"I am told that the proximity of punishment arouses real repentance in the criminal and sometimes awakens a feeling of genuine remorse in the most hardened heart; I am told this is due to fear."

There is also in THE HONEST THIEF a love of humanity's poor and wretched, which is also evident in the writing of Charles Dickens, one of Dostoevski's favorite authors. And, like Gregor Samsa in Franz Kafka's THE METAMORPHOSIS, Yemelyan seems to have some special knowledge of life's meaning, a meaning of which only the wretched seem conscious. This insight is also evident in the title character in Herman Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener." Dostoevski's Yemelyan also parallels Melville's Bartleby in the sudden way each arrives on the scene and their tenacious presence. Finally, Astafy parallels Bartleby's employer in their mutual compassion, pity, and desire to understand. —J A G

DOSTOEVSKI, FYODOR. WHITE NIGHTS.

Russia

Notes from Underground, "White Nights," "The Dream of a Ridiculous Man," and Selections from "The House of the Dead." New York: New American Library, 1961.

Translated by Andrew R. MacAndrew.

Author.: See THE DREAM OF A RIDICULOUS MAN.

Story: A young man, the story's narrator, bemoans the state of alienation and isolation in which he finds himself as the people of St. Petersburg vacate the city for the summer. Not realizing that his isolation is self-imposed, he feels a personal sense of betrayal: "Why, they were deserting me for their summer places." During one of his evening walks, he comes upon a young girl, Nastenka, crying as she stands by an embankment. Like him, she is lonely, but hers is a lovelorn loneliness imposed by separation from her love, the young lodger in the attic room of her grandmother's house. Her lover has gone to Moscow for a year to attend to business. She has agreed to wait,

for he promises, "When I come back, if you still love me, I swear we'll be happy." During their nightly meetings to escape their loneliness, Nastenka shares all this with the narrator, along with her hopes, dreams, and desires. He too shares his past and his feelings with her, and, despite her request to the contrary, he falls in love with her.

The narrator reveals this love when Nastenka's young man returns to St. Petersburg and fails to contact her, despite her having sent a letter the narrator unselfishly helped her write. In her moment of despair, she returns the narrator's vow: "I do love him but I'll get over it. . . . I'm already getting over it. . . . I love you. . . . Yes—I love you—I love you the

way you love me." He agrees to move into the room vacated by the lodger, and they excitedly make plans for the future.

Suddenly, the lodger appears. Nastenka runs to him, then back to the narrator, then back to the lodger, and, "Still without uttering a word . . . caught his hand, and hurried away with him."

A new morning dawns, appropriately raining and dreary, and the young narrator receives a letter from Nastenka in which she begs forgiveness for hurting him. His reaction is one of great understanding, compassion, and insight: "So may the sky lie cloudless over you, and your smile be bright and carefree; be blessed for the moment of bliss and happiness you gave to another heart, a lonely and a grateful one." More importantly, however, he ends with an affirmation of love and self-sacrifice: "My God, a moment of bliss. Why, isn't that enough for a whole lifetime?"

Comparison: The theme of this story, subtitled "A Sentimental Novel from the Memoirs of a Dreamer," recounts the poignancy and delicate charm of a quixotic state of existence. It is most often sympathetic to the dreamer who would trade all worldly fantasies for a single, fleeting moment of true happiness. The youthful exuberance with which the story opens and sustains itself—"It was a marvelous night, the sort of night one only experiences when one is young"—is most immediately reminiscent of Joseph Conrad's "Youth," in which all that occurs, the most dangerous and life-threatening situations, is adventuresome and exciting. One also hears echoes of Conrad's impressionism in Dostoevski's

depiction of a hazy, dreamlike St. Petersburg, as if it were a fairy tale setting.

The same youthful enthusiasm depicted by Conrad gives rise to passions rooted in unthinking haste and unrestrained outpourings of emotion in *WHITE NIGHTS*:

he deceives himself and winds up by believing that he is moved by true, live passion, that there is substance—flesh and blood—to his fancies! And it is quite a deception!! Just look at him and see for yourself. Can you believe looking at him, Nastenka, that he doesn't even know the woman he loved so passionately in his sultry flights of fancy.

This is not unlike the passion portrayed by the nineteenth-century American short story writer Fitz-James O'Brien in "The Diamond Lens," the tale of a young man who goes to emotional and criminal extremes for the love of a girl seen in an idyllic world encased in a drop of water viewed through a powerful microscope lens.

The tone can be likened to that of Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome*, although without the ultimate despair. Dostoevski's narrator says, "I am reduced to celebrating anniversaries because I no longer have anything with which to replace even these silly, flimsy dreams. For dreams, Nastenka, have to be renewed too." Life offers at the very least celebration of the imagination, of the internal workings of the artist painting and controlling his own existence. Like Ethan Frome's dreams, the narrator's sad dreams also change and fade, leaving only memories. —J A G

DOVE-DANQUAH, MABEL. THE TORN VEIL.

Ghana

A Selection of African Prose. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964.

Author: In 1952, Mabel Dove-Danquah was the first woman elected to the Gold Coast Legislative Assembly. She was educated in Ghana and in England and has been a practicing journalist and editor of the *Accra Evening News*.

Story: *THE TORN VEIL* is a ghost story in the tradition of Washington Irving. In this case, the innocent victim of the evildoer comes back

from the grave to seek, and find, a fitting revenge.

Ten years ago, Kwame Asante married Akosua under the Native Customary law, a civil law that "needs disinfecting, for though it aids the man to gain his desire when it is at its fiercest, it does in no way safeguard the position of the woman when the man's passion abates." Over those past ten years, Kwame has become an important man in the community

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and is considering entering the town council. A "cloth woman" might have been adequate ten years ago, but now, he convinces himself, he deserves better. He has decided to marry a "frock lady" in a Christian church ceremony.

Kwame confronts Akosua in a bitter scene in which he self-righteously offers her one hundred pounds to go away. "You are only entitled to twenty-five pounds," he reminds her, "and here I am out of kindness offering you a hundred. Show some gratitude, Akosua." She spurns his money and threatens to leave. He cannot allow that. A potential town councilman must keep up appearances. He threatens her: "If you leave this house without my knowledge and permission, I shall claim every penny I have spent on you since I married and lived with you these ten years; and not only that but I shall claim all the presents I have given to your parents and other relatives." In spite of these threats, the next day Akosua leaves with the children. Far from being distressed, Kwame sends his father-in-law a bill for three hundred and fifty pounds and begins scheming how he will marry his "frock lady" and win Akosua back too: "I can then have one wife in Akwapim and another in Accra—after all, monogamy is all humbug."

At this point, the narrator inserts an analysis of Kwame's character" [He] had foundered in his sense of values; the western impact on his mentality had sent it all askew. He would have been very much surprised if an outspoken friend had told him that he was neither a Christian nor a gentleman, and that Akosua had far finer instincts and culture than he; but fortunately for him his friends could not see farther than himself—so he was happy in his good opinion of himself."

The marriage to the "frock lady" takes place, and Kwame turns Akosua's "desertion" to his own advantage. No one blames a man for marrying again when his first wife has run away. After the wedding guests depart, Kwame steps onto the veranda for a bit of air. Upon

returning, he sees a figure in bridal finery resting on the settee: "She lifted her head. Asante blinked rapidly. He rubbed his eyes. Was he drunk or dreaming? Akosua was looking at him shyly. He remembered that look; it had charmed him again and again.... Had he really left this cameo in ebony for that other common-place girl? 'I must have been mad.' He stretched out his arms. Akosua, forgive me.' She smiled and beckoned to him." In an almost comic scene, Kwame chases Akosua about the room until he trips and falls, hitting his head.

The next morning he is found dead, "a flimsy bit of a torn bridal veil tightly clenched in one fist. Joy was in his countenance." Nearby lies a stack of unread congratulatory messages. Among them is a telegram that reads, "To Kwame Asante, Adabraska. Your wife Akosua died 10 a.m. today."

Comparison: Supernatural forces are often shown interceding in human affairs, not uncommonly by aiding those seeking revenge against great wrongs. Such literature ranges from the comical "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" to the more serious *Don Giovanni* and Dante's *The Divine Comedy*. This use of divine intervention to aid in the attainment of revenge can be compared with supernatural intervention in other stories for other purposes, as, for example, in "Young Goodman Brown" by Nathaniel Hawthorne and "Markheim" by Robert Louis Stevenson. Those stories of "salvation" can be further compared to stories in which divine intervention appears in the form of "temptation," as in Stephen Vincent Benét's "The Devil and Daniel Webster" and Christopher Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus*.

THE TORN VEIL is also an attack upon a particular social tradition. In this regard, it can be compared to more subtle handling of the same kind of message, such as in "The Lottery" by Shirley Jackson and "Battle Royal" by Ralph Ellison. — B H N

EKWENSI, CYPRIAN. THE GREAT BEYOND.

Nigeria

Restless City and Christmas Gold. London: Heinemann, 1975.

Author: Cyprian Ekwensi (1921–) was born in northern Nigeria and educated at the School of Forestry in Ibadan, after which he studied pharmacy at London University. He has taught biology, chemistry, and English and has worked as a pharmacist with the Nigerian Medical Corporation. He has also worked for the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation as head of features and as director of information in the Federal Ministry of Information in Lagos. He resigned his position at the outbreak of war to do the same work in the East. He then returned to his profession as a pharmacist. His stories and novels are set in West Africa between pre-independence in the fifties and modern times. His work includes the novels *Burning Grass*, *People of the City*, *Beautiful Feathers*, and *Jagua Nana* and two story collections, *Lokotown* and *Restless City and Christmas Gold*.

Story: THE GREAT BEYOND is a story of the supernatural—the story of Ikolo's sudden return from the dead in the middle of his own funeral procession. The note of lightness struck in the first sentence never falters: "He has always said that on the day of his death he would come back—if only to have his last laugh." When Ikolo begins banging with all his might against his coffin lid, the pastor and the son of the undertaker pry it open. Ikolo, looking "much too young," sits up, sneezes, and asks for Jokeh, his wife. "He looked at her for perhaps half-an-hour, during which time he said not a word." At the end of that time, Ikolo tumbles back into his coffin, the procession continues to the cemetery, and Ikolo is buried.

Two weeks later, Jokeh approaches a stranger and demands the money he was to have paid her husband. No one knew of the debt except Ikolo and the stranger himself. Jokeh takes the money to the pastor, who is surprised by the donation. "I do not understand this," the pastor says. "I mean no harm to your husband's memory . . . but was he all that religious?" Jokeh does not understand either. All she knows is that "when my husband looked at me like that, something seemed to happen to me. I was looking at

things, pictures before my eyes . . . just like in a cinema. He did not talk to me, but every wish of his I saw before me." The only explanation she can offer is that Ikolo described "a long journey beyond death" leading to "a hall with white clouds" in the midst of which was "some Great Power" that "sent him back to make amends for all he had done wrong." Failure to donate to the church was evidently one of the things he did wrong.

As she speaks, Jokeh, like Ikolo, seems to grow younger, "even younger than Ikolo." She has had a great experience, one all humankind would like to share. She "contacted someone who had been there . . . to the Great Beyond, and who came back to tell." She leaves to prepare for her own anxiously awaited departure to the "Great Beyond."

Comparison: THE GREAT BEYOND is told in the style of a tall tale. The tone is appropriate to the absurdity of the situation. The glimpse of the "Great Beyond" and the "Great Power" is not detailed, but neither is it the point of the story. The theme is a very simple and common one: that there is life after death, during which people will be judged according to the deeds of their life on earth; however, there will also be an opportunity, at least for some, to make retribution for the wrongs they may have committed.

Other "tall tales" of supernatural retribution include the popular "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" by Washington Irving, *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens, and THE TORN VEIL by Mabel Dove-Danquah. They are told with the same mock-seriousness, and all suggest more than they reveal about supernatural events. A far more serious story dealing with questions of the relationship between death and life is William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily," in which the "haunting" takes place in recognizable circumstances and with psychological credibility that adds a chill not present in similar themes handled with humor. Students familiar with the works of Stephen

King and many modern "horror" movies could probably draw many comparisons and contrasts between the styles of Ekwensi, Irving, Faulkner, Dove-Danquah, and the more modern works.

As a story of repentance, one might compare THE GREAT BEYOND to "Markheim" by Robert Louis Stevenson and to several

works by Nathaniel Hawthorne, including *The Scarlet Letter*. Each invites the reader to think about the advantages of mending one's ways while still on earth, rather than taking a chance on beneficent kindness beyond the grave. — B H N

FENG J,CAI. THE MAO BUTTON.

China

World Writers Today. Glenview, IL: ScottForesman, 1995.

Translated by Susan Wilf Chen.

Author: Born and reared in Tianjin, China, Feng Jicai first trained as an athlete, but later worked at the Chinese Traditional Painting Press. Both an artist and a writer, he taught Chinese traditional painting at the Tianjin Workers' College of Decorative Art and later became vice chairman of a branch of the Chinese Writers' Association. Since 1976, he has published three novels: *The Boxers, Magic Light*, and *The Miraculous Pigtail*. THE MAO BUTTON is taken from *Chrysanthemums and Other Stories*, one of his six collections of short stories and novelettes.

Story: In the heyday of Mao, the worker Kong had only one aspiration: he wanted to get the most "stupendous" Mao button, at least a "three-and-a-half." He stops bypassers to ask for the buttons they wear and wanders far in search of button traders. After a near scrape with a man who tries to coerce him into getting a huge novelty button that lights up on battery power, he returns home to find out from his wife that the best supplier lives next door. From this neighbor, he acquires a "five-and-a-

half," weighing at least half a pound.

Beaming with pride the next day, he pins the button onto the back of his denim jacket. He is such a sensation that a crowd gathers around him. In squirming his way out, he hears a clank and recognizes it as the sound of the button falling. Frantically looking for it, he steps back and finds himself committing the worst of offenses: stepping on a portrait of Chairman Mao. The consequences he suffers contrast sharply with a subsequent era, when not a single Mao button would be seen across the country.

Comparison: This archetypal story of self-destructive greed is the story of King Midas from Greek mythology. Midas too desires the largest and the most of everything, which for him is symbolized by the golden touch—everything he touches turns to gold. Unfortunately, this gift turns to misfortune when he finds that the food he touches also turns into gold. — M L