



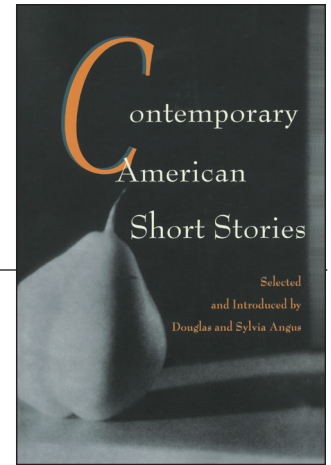
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ACADEMIC RESOURCES

# Teacher's Guide

## Contemporary American Short Stories

*Selected by Sylvia Angus and Douglas Angus*

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### • note to teachers •

#### introduction

These stories, all written after World War II, illuminate two of the primary concerns of people in the United States: understanding who we are as individuals, and searching for ways to pursue individual happiness in a world that imposes limits on that pursuit. Despite the passage of time since each story first appeared and despite intensified emphasis on matters that affect us collectively, as a nation and as members of the human race (more wars, abuses of political power, continual threats to life and health from chemical pollutants and nuclear weapons), our concern about the self has not lessened.

The six stories featured in this guide examine a spectrum of themes and conflicts regarding the individual and his/her relation to the rest of society. Among them: the difficulty in erecting and maintaining elitist barriers in a land where the "have nots" can, and often do, become the "haves;" the internal tug-of-war that results when the requirements of "melting pot" assimilation and the values of and, traditions of one's ethnic, religious, or cultural background are at odds; the longing to affirm one's identity—to find and adhere to personal standards—in a confusing society that demands conformity while at the same time obscuring the tenets to which one is expected to conform; the clash between freedom of the individual and such freedom-quashing forces as racism, sexism, and discrimination against the young or the old.

The introduction by Douglas and Sylvia Angus provides a thoughtful analysis of how the stories in this volume reflect a U.S. state of mind during an "Age of Crisis."

Stories included in this guide are:

- "Come Out of the Wilderness" by James Baldwin
- "Greenleaf" by Flannery O'Connor
- "The Conversion of the Jews" by Phillip Roth
- "Holiday" by Katherine Ann Porter
- "Tell Me a Riddle" by Tillie Olsen
- "A & P" by John Updike

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## → “Come Out of the Wilderness” by James Baldwin

### summary/plot discussion

“Come Out of the Wilderness” is a day in the life of Ruth Bowman, a twenty-six-year-old secretary; a New Yorker transplanted from the South, who stands at an emotional crossroad. As this day opens, Ruth talks with her lover, an artist who, she is convinced, will soon be leaving her for good. Their differences run deeper than their skin colors (she is black, he is white) and are best illustrated by comparing what will happen to them on this day. Paul, prolific but commercially unsuccessful, plans to spend the afternoon with a drinking buddy who has promised to introduce him to a gallery owner who may or may not like his work but whose daughter definitely likes affairs with artists. Ruth, fuming while she thinks of Paul “sleeping as she types,” will be offered and will accept a promotion and raise at the insurance company where she works.

After tiptoeing around the pressing issue of Paul’s restlessness and Ruth’s premonition of his leave-taking, they make love, and then Ruth goes off to work. In the past she silently prided herself on having snared a white lover, gloating in her certainty that her white female co-workers would never touch the well-dressed black executive whom they drool over. But today at the office she daydreams of marriage and children, all the while knowing that Paul will not be the man to fulfill her dream.

Her mind then wanders back to her teen years and a violent encounter with her brother and father. Having mistakenly believed that Ruth had been making love with a boy in the barn, they had hit and insulted her: “You dirty . . . you black and dirty—.” Afterward she had run away to New York with an older man who helped her to feel more confident, more “citified,” less “black and dirty.”

Today she has progressed to the point of being singled out by Mr. Davis, the black supervisor, as his choice for a personal secretary. Up until today, she had always coolly observed him from a mental distance and had acknowledged only one attribute—that he was attractive in a “black-boyish sort of way.” However, during the interview in his office and then at lunch, Mr. Davis displays warmth and humanness that Ruth had not noticed before. Up close, she finds the “blackness” he exhibits appealing, refreshing, and not at all dirty. Here is a man, like her from the South, who seems to fit snugly into corporate life, into city life, and into his own skin, too.

At the end of the workday Ruth is reluctant to return to an empty apartment. In the second bar she visits she sees someone who reminds her of another love, from long ago. He, like Paul, was white, and Ruth and he had acted out roles assigned them by history—the violated slave, the lustful but otherwise unfeeling master. They had parted, as she is sure that she and Paul will part. The story closes uneasily as Ruth reaches her crossroad: she loves Paul, hates Paul; longs for the security that her white lovers have not provided; is apprehensive about turning to the gentleness and protectiveness that she believes a black man might offer, because he might turn on her someday, reminding her of that black and dirty feeling she’s once known. We leave Ruth crying in the rain, without our knowing whether she will ever come out of her wilderness.

### questions for discussion/comprehension

1. What is Ruth’s “wilderness”?
2. Paul, the author says, has power over Ruth because she is “guilty.” Of what is she guilty? Does Paul realize that he has this power over her? If so, does he use it?
3. During Ruth’s telephone conversation with Paul, she thinks of how much she wants to be free of him, how she wants him to run off with the gallery owner’s daughter so that she can “get out from under.” If she doesn’t want to share her life with Paul anymore, why doesn’t she leave him? Why does she think he must be the first to act?

## → “Greenleaf” by Flannery O’Connor

### summary/plot discussion

A stray bull invades the dairy farm of a woman and her two sons. This premise for a plot seems simple enough for the countries to solve: locate the owner of the bull and have it returned to its rightful place. But the story is more about Mrs. May, the farmer, and her obsession with the bull’s owners, a family named Greenleaf, than with the bull itself.

The action takes place in one night and two days but, thanks to flashbacks, the story actually covers the fifteen years that Mrs. May’s destiny has been entwined with that of the Greenleafs’.

When her husband died, Mrs. May and her boys moved from city to country, and she hired Mr. Greenleaf to help out on the farm. With his assistance, Mrs. May built a thriving business, during which time Mr. Greenleaf witnessed with relish (and Mrs. May with jealousy) the progress his sons were making in life, despite their humble beginnings: military honors, college educations, families of their own, a new house, a modern farm. In the meantime Mrs. May's sons, now in their thirties, still lived at home, fought each other, and taunted their mother, despising the business she'd struggled to make successful for their sakes.

Even before Mrs. May learns whose bull it is, its munching on her hedges and "ruining" her cow herd reminds her of her resentment of the Greenleaf sons' advances right under her nose while the lives of her own sons stagnate. When she finds out that the bull belongs to the Greenleafs she sees red and condemns the animal to death.

After a day has passed without anyone coming to claim the bull, Mrs. May commands Mr. Greenleaf to carry out the sentence. Unaware that the bull belongs to his son, the father is outraged by Mrs. May's insisting upon driving him herself to the pasture for the killing. She thinks with glee "he'd like to shoot me instead of the bull."

Unfortunately, her insistence and impatience hasten her own end as well as the bull's; forgetting Mr. Greenleaf's earlier comment that this bull hates cars, she honks the horn repeatedly to summon Mr. Greenleaf from the woods, where she supposes he has chased the bull out of harm's way. The enraged bull answers her call instead, piercing her heart with one of his horns. Only then does Greenleaf shoot the bull.

### questions for discussion/comprehension

1. Mrs. May appears to realize her interdependence with Mr. Greenleaf ("His disposition on any particular day was as much a factor in what she could and couldn't do as the weather," the narrator points out) yet she refuses to give him any credit or gratitude for his role in her success. Why does she despise him and his family so passionately instead?
2. What could Wesley have meant when he told his brother Scofield that "neither you nor me is her [Mrs. May's] boy?"
3. Why don't the Greenleaf boys come to retrieve their bull?

## → "The Conversion of the Jews" by Philip Roth

### summary/plot discussion

Ozzie Freedman, at age thirteen, is a questioner. Never content with "because-I-said-so" responses, he demands straightforward, logical answers about religion from his Hebrew school instructor. If those answers are not forthcoming, Ozzie will not be hushed, even when the consequences are grave. He incurs the wrath of his teacher, Rabbi Binder, and the disapproval and embarrassment of his mother, who is summoned to the school whenever the rabbi's patience has been taxed beyond the limit.

Unfortunately, on one Wednesday afternoon in November, during "free-discussion time" ("none of the students felt too free," the narrator tells us), those consequences expand to gargantuan proportions. Ozzie repeats his earlier challenge of Rabbi Binder's assertion that Jesus could not have been the Son of God because no child can be born unless sexual intercourse between a man and woman has taken place. Ozzie contends that an all-powerful God can bring forth a child in any way he chooses. But today's religious discussion is swept away in a torrent of fury and defiance. By the time the smoke clears, Rabbi Binder, labeled "bastard" by Ozzie, has chased the terrified, bloody-nosed boy onto the roof, firefighters have surrounded the building, and Mrs. Freedman, on the scene for yet another parent-teacher conference, is pleading with her son, "Don't be a martyr!" while classmates on the ground below urge him to jump.

The onlookers begin to fear that he will do away with himself. Using their fears, he "converts" the crowd to the belief that had kicked off the afternoon's ruckus: that God could indeed create a child without intercourse. Finally, after extracting a promise from the kneeling multitude that they would "never hit anybody about God," Ozzie relinquishes his powerful temporal status and jumps—right into the firefighters' net.

### questions for discussion/comprehension

1. Ozzie and Rabbi Binder had "discussed" religious questions in the past. Why the explosion on this particular day?

2. Did Ozzie's mother hit him "about God"? Did Rabbi Binder? If not about God, why did they do it?
3. Why do Ozzie's friends encourage him to jump?
4. What causes Rabbi Binder to surrender his authoritarian air? Do you think that, after the roof incident, Rabbi Binder can assume his usual commanding veneer in the classroom? Do you think he will? Why or why not?
5. What changes Ozzie's state of mind from frightened and confused to powerful?
6. How might this incident alter the classroom relationship between Ozzie and the rabbi in the future (that is, if Ozzie is allowed or chooses to return to the rabbi's class)?

## → "Holiday" by Katherine Anne Porter

### summary/plot discussion

A young woman seeking escape from her troubles takes the unconventional vacation suggested by an old classmate—a visit to a farm run by an old-fashioned German family in Texas. In sharp contrast to her friend's idyllic description, the traveler at first finds the place oppressive in appearance, but she soon recognizes the value of being a stranger in the middle of this foreign setting. Here she is a spectator to life. Others will milk the cows and keep food on the table while she, as a guest, relaxes; since she does not understand their language, any troubles her hosts discuss will be Muzak to her, blending into the soundtrack of her holiday.

What the visitor does not immediately perceive is that instead of escaping from life, she is brought closer to it. She witnesses, at close range, the milestones of life—marriage, birth, work, natural disaster, suffering, and death—all in her one-month "holiday." Gradually she is drawn out of her observer role, offering to help one of the daughters—Hatsy—with the gardening, and by Father Müller, who gives her a lesson in "practical" socialism.

She makes her strongest connection with the Müllers through Ottilie, the eldest sister, who had been disfigured by a childhood disease but who has carved out a position of usefulness to her family, as their servant. On the day of Mother Müller's funeral, the visitor takes a grieving Ottilie for a ride through a peach orchard in a pony-drawn wagon—a holiday from Ottilie's own painful reality.

### questions for discussion/comprehension

1. Why does the visitor feel a stronger kinship with Ottilie than with the other Müllers?
2. The visitor eventually concludes that the Müller's treatment of Ottilie—allowing her to be their servant and no longer recognizing her as their sister and daughter—is virtuous and courageous. Do you agree with this view/set? Why or why not?
3. The narrator takes her vacation to run away from trouble, yet at the Müller's she comes face-to-face with situations that are probably more stressful and severe than those she left. How, if at all, does she benefit from her "holiday"?
4. When she first arrives at the Müller's, the narrator is glad to be in a place where she can "go back to my own center, to find out . . . what kind of creature it is that rules me finally." What discoveries does she make about herself during her holiday?

## → "Tell Me a Riddle" by Tillie Olsen

### summary/plot discussion

After forty-seven years of clinging to each other through poverty, parenthood, the death of a son, and the burials of unrealized dreams, a married couple finds their union on the brink of dissolution. The apparent catalyst of their blowup is the Haven, a retirement community that the husband wants them to move into while the wife insists on staying put in their family home. Their battles over this issue unearth many of the woman's long pent-up resentments about their marriage.

What finally stops the couple from separating, legally or physically, is news of the wife's terminal illness—news that the husband wants to keep hidden from her. He tries to submerge the reality of her dying in a blitz of enforced togetherness. He lays the matter of the Haven to rest and takes her on trips to the homes of friends and children and to warmer climates. Yet even before she realizes that death is imminent, the woman makes her break from the marriage and her current circumstances. The husband can only watch helplessly as the cancer erodes his wife's body as she

shuts herself off from him and others—first by turning down the volume of her hearing aid, later by soaring on wings of memory to distant times, both treasured and tragic.

Increasingly oblivious of her loved ones, the woman recounts incidents and reveals feelings that made her someone more than the children's mother or the husband's wife; that made her an avid student whose beloved reading teacher had been murdered during the Russian Revolution; a young woman who, drained by the demands of marriage and motherhood, was not allowed to indulge in the luxury of reading; an explorer who liked to examine sand under a magnifying glass; a little girl who loved to sing. Her "babblings" (as her mate calls them) and her actions (including her refusal to touch a baby) dismay her children and perplex and embitter her husband. But, at last, they also reach him. Laying aside the derisive nickname he usually calls her, he finally recognizes her as Eva and embraces her with a fervor he has not demonstrated in years. Through dying, Eva recaptures her identity.

### questions for discussion/comprehension

1. To live without being "forced to move to the rhythms of others" was a goal of paramount importance to Eva. Why?
2. Everyone's life is affected in some way by the actions of other people. Is it possible that Eva was overreacting to the effect others had on her life? Or does the story offer evidence that her life was shaped to an extreme extent by others? Use passages from the story to support your position.
3. Eva is portrayed in much of this story as crabby and without imagination ("I know no riddles, child"). Yet we catch glimpses of a thoughtful and free spirit when she sings, recites poetry, and runs barefoot on the beach. Who is the "real" Eva? Which of her family members and friends come closest to solving that riddle? How do you account for their insight?
4. Throughout the story the two leading characters are identified by the dagger-sharp nicknames they give each other and as Ma and Dad, Granny and Granddaddy by their offspring. Why does the author withhold their names, David and Eva, for so long?

## → "A & P" by John Updike

### summary/plot discussion

Author John Updike artfully invests a simple and seemingly insignificant situation—three teenage girls in swimsuits sauntering through a supermarket—with an abundance of humor and astute observations of human behavior. In "A & P," slices of wit are tossed with chunks of absurdity and seasoned with sprinklings of gravity—just enough gravity to prompt readers to acknowledge that every action, from striking the keys of a cash register to selecting a jar of herring snacks, is important to someone, if only for an instant, if only to the one who performs the action.

On this slow afternoon at the A & P, everyone's actions are important to Sammy, the nineteen-year-old checkout clerk who reports every nuance of the proceedings to us. In meticulous and usually sneering but sometimes sympathetic detail, Sammy relays each move of the uniquely clad (unique, that is, for a store in the central business district of this New England town) young women; the delight of Stokesie, Sammy's youthful married coworker; the chagrin of their by-the-book boss, Lengel; the activities of assorted customers; plus a sizeable portion of the store's inventory.

The girls parade up and down the aisles. The manager admonishes them to dress properly next time. Sammy rings up their purchase, protests Lengel's comments to the girls, and then quits his job. That is the plot. As with an incident that is hilarious while it's happening but loses some of its flavor when you try to retell it over lunch, sometimes you just have to be there. Thanks to Updike, you are.

### questions for discussion/comprehension

1. Why do you think the girls went shopping in their bathing suits?
2. Is Sammy justified in saying that Lengel has embarrassed the girls?
3. The first time Sammy says, "I quit," he intends for the girls to take notice. They don't. So what's the point in his going through with his walkout?

## — discussion and writing

### composition

1. "Greenleaf," "Holiday," and "Tell Me a Riddle" all chronicle the final days of hard-working women who dedicated their lives to the support of their families. Were the returns they received for their devotion worth the prices they paid? In a few paragraphs try to answer that question, basing your responses on your observations on these matters related to Mrs. May, Mother Müller, and Eva: the accomplishments of each woman; the satisfaction with her life each felt; the appreciation each received for her achievements; the state of mind each was in during her final days and the state her loved ones were in as well.
2. "Come Out of the Wilderness" was first published in 1948, before the full-scale women's movement of the 1960s and the 1970s erupted. Had the story been set in the present, Ruth Bowman's feelings about herself, men, jobs and careers, and lifestyles might, though not necessarily, have been different. Compose your own epilogue for Ruth's story, resolving her situation the way you would like to see it if it were taking place today.
3. A woman's expectation of life and love wither under the harsh glare of reality. The stories of Ruth Bowman and Eva share that theme, and there are a few similarities in the two women's histories and personalities as well, despite their surface differences (age, cultural backgrounds). Review both stories, make notes on the strengths and weaknesses of each woman, then compare your lists on Eva and Ruth. Allow yourself to imagine how their lives might have been had they shared some of the other woman's strengths (for example, Ruth's ability to pinpoint the sources of her frustration, Eva's knowledge of her inner self). Finally, use this information in a dialogue between the two women, in which they exchange friendly advice on how to improve the quality of their lives (before it's too late).
4. Sammy and the girls in "A & P" and Ozzie in "The Conversion of the Jews" all challenge authority and all suffer the consequences. What does each young person lose? What, if anything, do they gain? And how do you feel about the messages the authors of the two stories are sending regarding the questioning of adults or people in charge? In an essay, compare the clashes with authority described in these stories, exploring those questions.

## — about this guide's writer

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