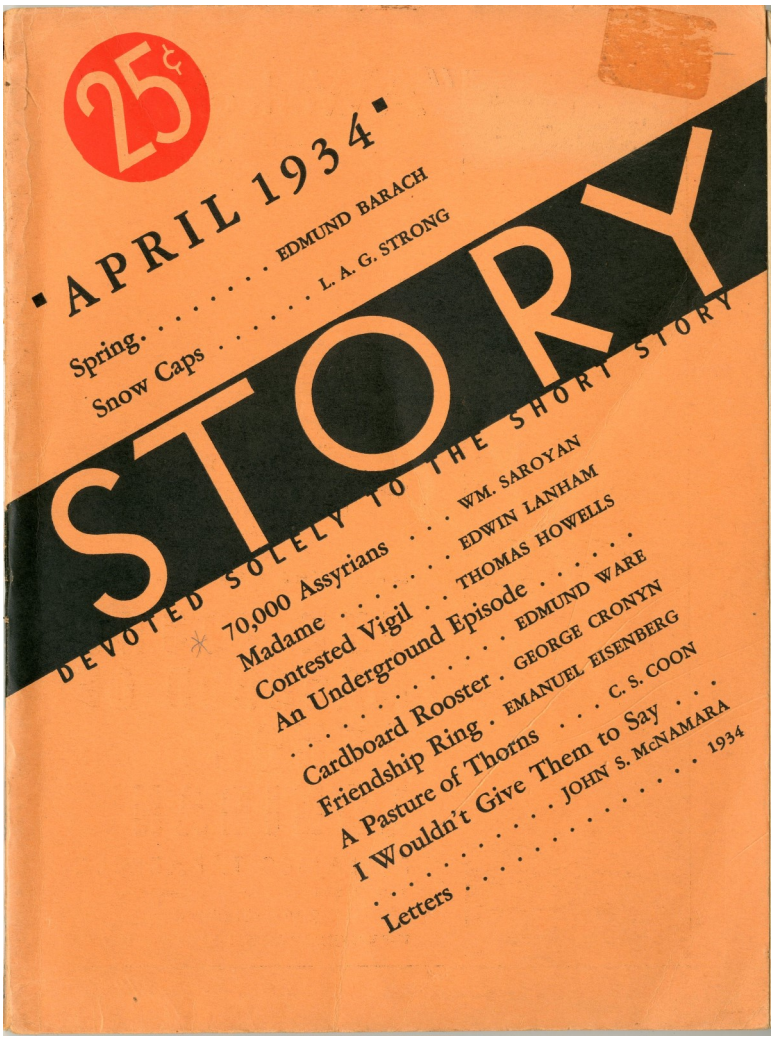
Study Guide

70,000 Assyrians

(1934)

FOREVER SAROYAN LLC



70,000 Assyrians: A Study Guide

"Seventy Thousand Assyrians" is a short story written by Armenian-American author William Saroyan and published in *Story Magazine* in 1934. It was one of his first stories published and appeared in his first collection: *The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze and other stories* later that year. The story deals with a main character, modeled on Saroyan himself, who goes to get a haircut, only to become embroiled in a conversation with the Assyrian barber who expresses his thoughts on historical memory, ethnic identity, and other topics.

Summary

Our main character has not had a haircut for forty days, and his hair has gotten so long he "had outgrown his only hat." Not having much money, he goes to the local barber college to get his hair cut. He exchanges friendly words in Japanese and English with the young Japanese man at the barbershop, and then a young student barber comes to cut the man's hair. After he begins the haircut, the main character, an Armenian-American, asks the student barber if he is also Armenian. The Barber explains that he is Assyrian, having come to the United States five years prior, and that he is trying to turn away from his home country. He explains that there are only seventy thousand Assyrians left in the world, and that number is shrinking because of regional conflict, genocide, and other factors, and that many, if not most, Assyrians are trying to erase their connections to the homeland in favor of building a new life in America.

Characters

There are three significant characters in the work, the first being the narrator. While it is often inaccurate to assume the speaker in a story is the author, in this case it seems clear that the main character is, or is at least closely modeled on, Saroyan himself. The narrator is a writer writing a story, he doesn't have much money, something that Saroyan struggled with throughout his life, and he is an Armenian. Saroyan also lived at a house on Carl Street in San Francisco, which the character mentions as the location of his home.

At times the narrator, who is a writer, revises the story he is telling, including tightening up the first paragraph into a much cleaner, less poetic form. The humor he employs is self-deprecating, but he is jovial, intelligent, and thoughtful, all traits that Saroyan would have applied to himself.

The young Japanese man at the barbershop is not present for long, but he is shown to be dutiful, and and if not exactly talkative, more than happy to engage in chit-chat. He shows interest in the main character speaking to him in Japanese, and they talk about a fellow acquaintance briefly.

The student barber is a young Assyrian, having come to America five years prior, first arriving in New York, then going on to Turlock, in central California, before finally settling in San Francisco. He explains his family's roots, what it means to be Assyrian in the 1930s, and how the various members of his family are dealing with being away from the ancestral homeland. Saroyan seems perplexed by the idea of not wanting to continue the traditions of one's homeland, but the barber says that there are different forms of dealing with being taken away, and their way is to try and become American.

Assyrians

Assyria was a kingdom in Mesopotamia, the area between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, an area that covers portions of modern-day Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran. Located in the northern portion of the Fertile Crescent, it made up the majority of the northern section while Babylon occupied much of the south. Assyria morphed from a city-state into a nation, and then into an empire over the course of almost three thousand years. The rulers of Assyria built great monuments and well-known works of art dedicated to their great victories and traditions, including the famed lion hunt reliefs found at the North West Place in Nimrud.

Assyria was the home to several early Christian groups, possibly introduced to the faith by the Armenian Christians they neighbored in Anatolia. The Church of the East was founded in the eleventh century, with its own leadership separate from that of the Catholic or Eastern Orthodox lineages. Centuries later, the Church of the East had a schism, giving rise to the Assyrian Church of the East, which still exists to this day.

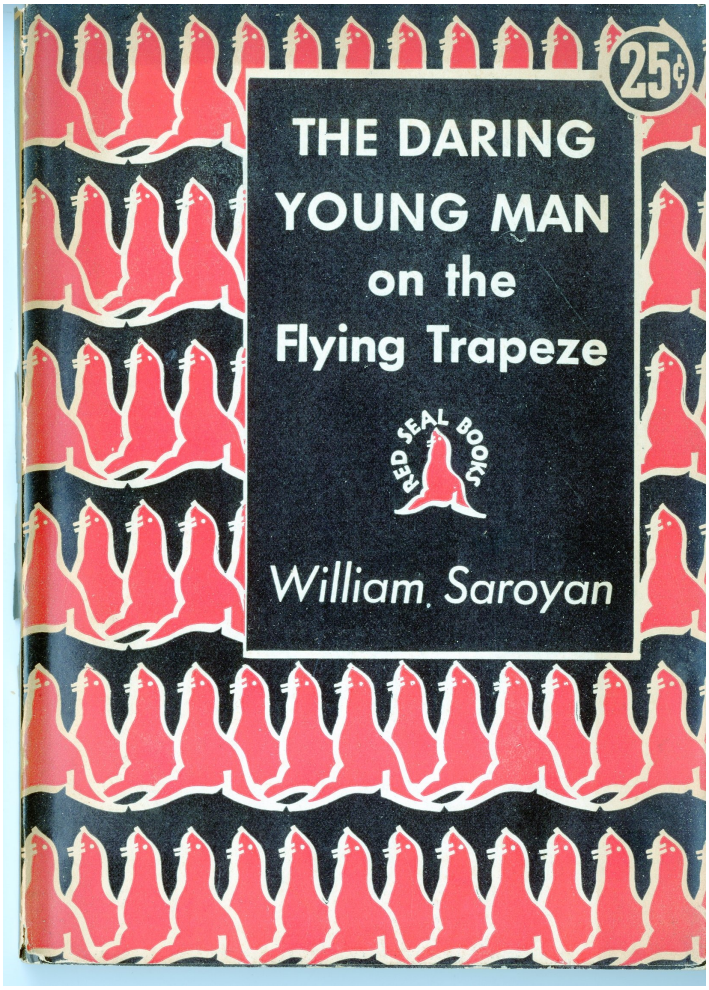
As time moved on, the Assyrians were conquered several times, including the Muslim conquest in the seventh century, the Mongol conquest beginning in 1096, and later by the Ottoman Empire. Assyrians found themselves often subjugated, and many Assyrian Christians were either forcibly converted to Islam or chose to convert to avoid persecution. At times, various portions of Assyria were split off and administered by different powers, giving rise to the nations of the area we know today.

The most significant events to this story began in the latter half of the 19th century. Western powers were at the height of their colonial ambitions, in particular the Ottoman and British Empires. While World War I was raging across Europe, a genocide was perpetrated against the Assyrians, committed by Ottoman and Kurdish forces. This genocide happened at the same time as the Armenian Genocide committed by the Ottoman Turks, and the Greek Genocide. Like the Armenian and Greek populations of Anatolia, many Assyrians left their homeland and settled in Europe, North America, and other parts of the world. Many Assyrians and Greeks who came to America settled in and around Detroit and Chicago, as well as in the Central Valley of California. In the Central Valley, they'd have been in contact with Armenian populations, especially in and around Fresno and Turlock. Saroyan often wrote about the shared connections between Armenians, Assyrians, and Greeks in California, notably in "The Summer of the Beautiful White Horse" in *My Name is Aram.*

Style

This piece is a story told more than a story shown. The narrator is also the main character of the story he is telling. As a result of the character essentially being firmly grounded in Saroyan's persona, it's possible there are auto-biographical elements in the story as well. The story is told with a metanarrative style, that is the teller of the story knowingly telling the story, and this includes elements that touch on the process of storytelling itself. Today, stories written in this style are often referred to as "post-modernist," though the term would not be applied to literature until the 1970s. The following paragraph is an excellent example:

> *Now I am beginning to feel guilty and incompetent. I have used all this language and I am beginning to feel that I have said nothing. This is what drives a young writer out of his head, this feeling that nothing is being said. Any ordinary journalist would have been able to put the whole business into a three-word caption. Man is man, he would have said. Something clever, with any number of implications. But I want to use language that will create a single implication. I want the meaning to be precise, and perhaps that is why the language is so imprecise. I am walking around my subject, the impression I want to make, and I am trying to see it from all angles, so that I will have a whole picture, a picture of wholeness. It is the heart of man that I am trying to imply in this work.*



This paragraph demonstrates the playfulness of Saroyan and his embrace of contradictions. He is writing about his writing and at the same time making clear reference to the different methods of writing. Saroyan was known for the tautness of his prose, for not being overly "wordy" and using compact sentences without much adornment or unnecessary description. Here, he goes on about the process and style of writing itself, adding to the setting of the piece instead of telling the story. He indicates what he considers the ideals of good writing – brevity, directness, and clarity, but does so within a digression of 150 words.

Setting

The setting for "70,000 Assyrians" is San Francisco in the early 1930s. The city is stated several times, and the timeframe is stated at the end of the story as 1933. The part of San Francisco the story takes place in is not the nicest part; it is similar to the Bowery in New York, known for high crime and low opportunity. This is the sort of setting that Saroyan often wrote about in his work, preferring to present the lives of the working class and lower status figures in society.

References

Saroyan was always incorporating elements of the world around him in his stories, both from events he personally experienced, and items that he saw in the newspaper, in newsreels, or generally in popular culture.

Early in the story, he says "Readers of Sherwood Anderson will begin to understand what I am saying after a while; they will know that my laughter is rather sad." Anderson was a popular American author starting in the 1920s with a style based on an unsentimental presentation. He was also one of the first fiction authors who incorporated ideas from psychologist and analyst Sigmund Freud.

He references Ernest Hemingway, arguably the most famous author of the day, and then gives a list of his most famous works. This may have been something of a mocking jab at Hemingway, who was known as something of an egomaniac. This passage, and a series of back-and-forth comments in magazines over the next few years, were the basis for a feud that lingered between the two of them, though at times there were friendly with one another.

The story mentions a cartoon – "Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf." The cartoon was actually titled *The Three Little Pigs* and was produced by Walt Disney Studios. The song that played throughout it was "Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf," performed by Henry Hall and written by Frank Churchill, with additional lyrics by Ann Ronell. The cartoon features a retelling of the three little pigs fable, where one pig builds a house of straw that a hungry wolf blows down, another pig builds with wood which suffers the same fate, and the final pig makes his of brick. When the wolf attempts to enter through the chimney, it ends up in a boiling pot, being cooked alive. The 1933 Disney version of the tale was one of the most successful cartoons of the day and has been remade many times. It was added to the National Film Registry in 2007.

Saroyan had a complicated relationship with the major literary figures and outlets of the time.

> "I have no desire to sell this story or any story to *The Saturday Evening Post* or to *Cosmopolitan* or to *Harper's.*"

These were three of the top magazines in America at the time, as well as the best-paying. They were all known to publish highly literary material by the best-known authors of the day. While he was not overly fond of those particular magazines, he did certainly submit to each of them as early as 1929, and would be regularly published by all of them, starting with *Harper's* in 1941.

> "I am not trying to compete with the great writers of short stories, men like Sinclair Lewis and Joseph Hergesheimer and Zane Grey, men who really know how to write, how to make up stories that will sell."

The authors he refers to here were three of the best-selling authors of the day. Sinclair Lewis was one of the most lauded writers in America by 1934, having won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1930 for works including *Elmer Gantry*, *It Can't Happen Here*, and *The Jungle.* Hergesheimer was known for his stories set among the rich and famous. He had been voted the "Most Important American Writer" by *Literary Digest* readers in the 1920s. Zane Grey wrote Western stories, notably *Riders of the Purple Sage* in 1912. By 1934, he was a famous writer, but publishing far less frequently.

Another name Saroyan mentions is Mencken, the writer, commentator, and co-founder of one of the most important literary magazines, *The American Mercury*, which published Saroyan's work often throughout the 1930s.

Themes

The Brotherhood of Man

The stated goal of this story, and one of Saroyan's major themes in his works, is to make clear the idea of the "brotherhood of man." This concept dates back centuries and traditionally is used to indicate that all humans on Earth share a sense of humanity and camaraderie. This idea of the brotherhood of man has been explored by many philosophers, artists, and writers, including Mark Twain who once wrote, "the universal brotherhood of man is our most precious possession, what there is of it."

In the story, Saroyan explores the idea by examining the individuals the main character comes across. They are all a part of the same community, and thus share a set of experiences, even if they are not entirely the same. Saroyan treats each of them with kindness, no matter their station in life. This is a signature of many of Saroyan's works, especially prevalent in the books *My Name is Aram*, *The Human Comedy*, and the play *The Time of Your Life*.

One key element is when characters of different background and social status interact, they act in a way that is non-confrontational and helps to close the distance between those differences. The main character speaks Japanese to the young man in the barber shop, closing a gap between them, as an example of treating someone of a different background with respect.

The Immigrant Experience

Another major theme is the universality of experience among immigrant populations in America. Saroyan, born in America to immigrant parents, is Armenian, and writes about Armenian-ness often. The narrator interacts with the Japanese boy at the barber shop and uses some Japanese he picked up. He knows that the immigrant experience means that out in the world, you are less likely to hear your own language, and even less likely to hear any of it from those who are not of your same nationality or ethnicity. Though there is a power dynamic in play, Saroyan makes it clear that they have a similar place in the structural setting of their interactions because of their shared experience as small parts of non-dominant cultures in the United States.

The Assyrians and the Armenians have much in common, including a history of diaspora. Both peoples were forced from their homeland at about the same time, but far more Armenians came to America than Assyrians. Still, their experiences are mirrors of one another, as their populations set up churches, grocers, aid organizations, and other businesses that allowed their communities to flourish in their adopted countries.

The Role of the Writer

Much of the early portion of the story deals with the writer making notes about the world around him, and the writer's role in them, both as participant and observer. He talks about his process, even the very idea of revision as he rewrites the opening of his story to make it clearer, with simpler language. This shows that he values clarity and brevity, and rejects the classic "show-don't-tell" model of writing in favor of the oral tradition.

He emphasizes that he believes writers are first and foremost observers, reporters of the things they encounter. This puts him at odds with what he sees being printed in magazines by the big-name authors, among them Hemingway, Grey, Mencken, and Lewis. He mentions that his intention is not to write a great story, but to record things he's seen and then use that story to relay the idea of a "brotherhood of man." He notes that he is "writing a letter to common people, telling them in simple language things they already know. I am merely making a record, so if I wander around a little, it is because I am in no hurry and because I do not know the rules." He notes that he is repeating the words of the barber exactly, so as not to flavor them with his own thoughts.

He also seems to be saying that the role of the writer is to up-lift, and specifically to remind the reader about the brotherhood of mankind. Saroyan does this in several ways, including directly saying it. He highlights his interactions that are positive and is not concerned with exterior events that would paint a negative light on those characters he interacts with. He makes a point to show that he attempts to treat everyone well, those of high and low status, and that he will only pass along information that he believes will benefit the reader. Perhaps referencing others writers not known for their egalitarianism makes a powerful comment.

Links

The Story

70,000 Assyrians - http://www.zindamagazine.com/html/archives/2007/06.03.07/pix/Saroyan.pdf

A Brief History of The Assyrian People

http://www.aina.org/brief.html

A look at modern Assyrian people

https://www.culturalsurvival.org/publications/cultural-survival-quarterly/assyrians-3000-years-history-yet-internet-our-only-home

“Study Guide: 70,000 Assyrians”

was written by Christopher J. Garcia, Archivist: Forever Saroyan, LLC., August 2021.

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