

Fiction

*After You,  
My Dear Alphonse*

SHIRLEY JACKSON

**Examine What You Know**

As you will see in this selection, prejudice is not always an open act of discrimination. Falsely assuming something about someone can be a subtle form of prejudice. Make up an example that illustrates an instance in which someone makes false judgments about another person. Share your example with your classmates.

**Expand Your Knowledge**



The title of this selection, "After You, My Dear Alphonse," is an expression that comes from *Alphonse and Gaston*, an American comic strip that first appeared in 1905. The words describe a situation in which two people, out of respect for each other, both suggest that the other go first. Often the expression is used to describe a comic situation, such as two baseball players letting a pop fly fall between them.

**Enrich Your Reading**

**Identifying Assumptions** When you make an assumption, you are supposing that something is a fact with little or no evidence to back up your belief. One of the characters in the story you are about to read makes many false assumptions concerning black people. Identify these assumptions as you read Shirley Jackson's short story.

■ A biography of the author can be found in the Reader's Handbook.

# After You, My Dear Alphonse

SHIRLEY JACKSON

**M**rs. Wilson was just taking the gingerbread out of the oven when she heard Johnny outside talking to someone.

"Johnny," she called, "you're late. Come in and get your lunch."

"Just a minute, Mother," Johnny said. "After you, my dear Alphonse."

"After *you*, my dear Alphonse," another voice said.

"No, after *you*, my dear Alphonse," Johnny said.

Mrs. Wilson opened the door. "Johnny," she said, "you come in this minute and get your lunch. You can play after you've eaten."

Johnny came in after her, slowly. "Mother," he said, "I brought Boyd home for lunch with me."

"Boyd?" Mrs. Wilson thought for a moment. "I don't believe I've met Boyd. Bring him in, dear, since you've invited him. Lunch is ready."

"Boyd!" Johnny yelled. "Hey, Boyd, come on in!"

"I'm coming. Just got to unload this stuff."

"Well, hurry, or my mother'll be sore."

"Johnny, that's not very polite to either your friend or your mother," Mrs. Wilson said. "Come sit down, Boyd."

As she turned to show Boyd where to sit, she saw he was a Negro boy, smaller than Johnny but about the same age. His arms were loaded with split kindling wood. "Where'll I put this stuff, Johnny?" he asked.

Mrs. Wilson turned to Johnny. "Johnny," she said, "what did you make Boyd do? What is that wood?"

"Dead Japanese," Johnny said mildly. "We stand them in the ground and run over them with tanks."

"How do you do, Mrs. Wilson?" Boyd said.

"How do you do, Boyd? You shouldn't let Johnny make you carry all that wood. Sit down now and eat lunch, both of you."

"Why shouldn't he carry the wood, Mother? It's his wood. We got it at his place."

"Johnny," Mrs. Wilson said, "go on and eat your lunch."

"Sure," Johnny said. He held out the dish of scrambled eggs to Boyd. "After you, my dear Alphonse."

"After *you*, my dear Alphonse," Boyd said.

"After *you*, my dear Alphonse," Johnny said. They began to giggle.

"Are you hungry, Boyd?" Mrs. Wilson asked.

"Yes, Mrs. Wilson."

"Well, don't you let Johnny stop you. He always fusses about eating, so you just see that you get a good lunch. There's plenty of food here for you to have all you want."

"Thank you, Mrs. Wilson."

"Come on, Alphonse," Johnny said. He pushed half the scrambled eggs onto Boyd's plate. Boyd watched while Mrs. Wilson put a dish of stewed tomatoes beside his plate.

"Boyd don't eat tomatoes, do you, Boyd?" Johnny said.

"Doesn't eat tomatoes, Johnny. And just because you don't like them, don't say that about Boyd. Boyd will eat *anything*."

"Bet he won't," Johnny said, attacking his scrambled eggs.

"Boyd wants to grow up and be a big, strong man so he can work hard," Mrs. Wilson said. "I'll bet Boyd's father eats stewed tomatoes."

"My father eats anything he wants to," Boyd said.

"So does mine," Johnny said. "Sometimes he doesn't eat hardly anything. He's a little guy, though. Wouldn't hurt a flea."

"Mine's a little guy, too," Boyd said.

"I'll bet he's strong, though," Mrs. Wilson said. She hesitated. "Does he . . . work?"

"Sure," Johnny said. "Boyd's father works in a factory."

"There, you see?" Mrs. Wilson said. "And he certainly has to be strong to do that—all that lifting and carrying at a factory."

"Boyd's father doesn't have to," Johnny said. "He's a foreman."

Mrs. Wilson felt defeated. "What does your mother do, Boyd?"

"My mother?" Boyd was surprised. "She takes care of us kids."

"Oh. She doesn't work, then?"

"Why should she?" Johnny said through a mouthful of eggs. "You don't work."

"You really don't want any stewed tomatoes, Boyd?"

"No, thank you, Mrs. Wilson," Boyd said.

"No, thank you, Mrs. Wilson, no, thank you, Mrs. Wilson, no, thank you, Mrs. Wilson," Johnny said. "Boyd's sister's going to work, though. She's going to be a teacher."

"That's a very fine attitude for her to have, Boyd." Mrs. Wilson restrained an impulse to pat Boyd on the head. "I imagine you're all very proud of her?"

"I guess so," Boyd said.

"What about all your other brothers and sisters? I guess all of you want to make just as much of yourselves as you can."

"There's only me and Jean," Boyd said. "I don't know yet what I want to be when I grow up."

"We're going to be tank drivers, Boyd and me," Johnny said. "Zoom." Mrs. Wilson caught Boyd's glass of milk as Johnny's napkin ring, suddenly transformed into a tank, plowed heavily across the table.

"Look, Johnny," Boyd said. "Here's a foxhole. I'm shooting at you."

Mrs. Wilson, with the speed born of long experience, took the gingerbread off the shelf and placed it carefully between the tank and the foxhole.

"Now eat as much as you want to, Boyd," she said. "I want to see you get filled up."



ON THE RED TABLE I 1983  
Daniel Quintero Private  
collection Courtesy of Marlborough  
Gallery, New York.

"Boyd eats a lot, but not as much as I do," Johnny said. "I'm bigger than he is."

"You're not much bigger," Boyd said. "I can beat you running."

Mrs. Wilson took a deep breath. "Boyd," she said. Both boys turned to her. "Boyd, Johnny has some suits that are a little too small for him, and a winter coat. It's not new, of course, but there's lots of wear in it still. And I have a few dresses that your mother or sister could probably use. Your mother can make them over into lots of things for all of you, and I'd be very happy to give them to you. Suppose before you leave I make up a big bundle and then you and Johnny can take it over to your mother right away . . ." Her voice trailed off as she saw Boyd's puzzled expression.

"But I have plenty of clothes, thank you," he said. "And I don't think my mother knows how to sew very well, and anyway I guess we buy about everything we need. Thank you very much, though."

"We don't have time to carry that old stuff around, Mother," Johnny said. "We got to play tanks with the kids today."

Mrs. Wilson lifted the plate of gingerbread off the table as Boyd was about to take another piece. "There are many little boys like you, Boyd, who would be very grateful for the clothes someone was kind enough to give them."

"Boyd will take them if you want him to, Mother," Johnny said.

"I didn't mean to make you mad, Mrs. Wilson," Boyd said.

"Don't think I'm angry, Boyd. I'm just disappointed in you, that's all. Now let's not say anything more about it."

She began clearing the plates off the table, and Johnny took Boyd's hand and pulled him to the door. "Bye, Mother," Johnny said. Boyd stood for a minute, staring at Mrs. Wilson's back.

"After you, my dear Alphonse," Johnny said, holding the door open.

"Is your mother still mad?" Mrs. Wilson heard Boyd ask in a low voice.

"I don't know," Johnny said. "She's screwy sometimes."

"So's mine," Boyd said. He hesitated. "After you, my dear Alphonse." ❧

## I N S I G H T

### Incident

COUNTEE CULLEN

Once riding in old Baltimore,  
Heart-filled, head-filled with glee,  
I saw a Baltimorean  
Keep looking straight at me.

Now I was eight and very small,  
And he was no whit bigger,  
And so I smiled, but he poked out  
His tongue and called me, "Nigger."

I saw the whole of Baltimore  
From May until December:  
Of all the things that happened there  
That's all that I remember.

# e x p l a i n

## Responding to Reading

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### First Impressions

1. How do you respond to the character of Mrs. Wilson? Explain your answer.

### Second Thoughts

2. What does Mrs. Wilson believe is true about all black people? Look back at the assumptions you identified as you were reading.
3. How would you describe the friendship between Johnny and Boyd?

#### Think about

- what the title suggests
- how they play together
- how they react to Mrs. Wilson

4. Why doesn't Boyd get angry at Mrs. Wilson?

#### Think about

- Boyd and Johnny's friendship
- what Boyd does and doesn't understand about Mrs. Wilson
- what we know about Boyd's family

5. Why do you think that Mrs. Wilson becomes angry and disappointed with Boyd?

### Broader Connections

6. What are some subtle forms of prejudice that you have seen or experienced?

## Writing Options

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1. Imagine that after Boyd gets home he tells his mother about the offer of clothes and about other happenings at the Wilsons. Compose a letter that Boyd's mother mails to Mrs. Wilson.
2. Through Boyd's answers to Mrs. Wilson, you learn a number of facts about his family. Expanding on these details, describe Boyd's family and home.
3. What would have happened had Mrs. Wilson convinced Boyd to take home the clothes? Describe the thoughts that run through his mind as he walks home carrying these handouts.
4. Write a new title for this story. Explain why your title helps a reader understand and appreciate the story.

