

## PREPARING to Read

# Gary Keillor

Autobiographical Story by GARRISON KEILLOR



### Comparing Literature

#### Traditions Across Time: Whitman's Heirs Express the Self

Garrison Keillor is a popular radio host and writer. His story "Gary Keillor" is about a love-smitten teenager out to impress the girl of his dreams. Though this light story is a departure in style from the pieces in the first part of this subunit, it too celebrates the self.

**Points of Comparison** Consider this story's message about individuality and self-expression. Try to connect Keillor's ideas to those of Whitman, Emerson, and Thoreau.

### Build Background

**Whitman's Elegy for Lincoln** The assassination of Abraham Lincoln in 1865, shortly after the close of the Civil War, shocked and grieved the nation. To honor Lincoln's memory, Walt Whitman wrote "O Captain! My Captain!" In this poem Whitman compared Lincoln to a ship's captain who falls dead after guiding his ship safely through a horrific storm. Whitman's elegy figures prominently in the story you are about to read.

Like the main character in Keillor's story, generations of students have memorized Whitman's elegy for Lincoln. Some, like the students in the film *The Dead Poets' Society*, have even declaimed it to the delight of their peers. Here is the first stanza:

*O Captain! my captain! our fearful trip is done,  
The ship has weathered every rack, the prize we sought is won.  
The port is near, the bells I hear, the people all exulting,  
While follow eyes the steady keel, the vessel grim and daring;  
But O heart! heart! heart!  
O the bleeding drops of red,  
Where on the deck my Captain lies,  
Fallen cold and dead.*

### Focus Your Reading

**LITERARY ANALYSIS HUMOR** A literary work that is intended to induce laughter or amusement in the reader is said to be humorous. If you laugh while reading this story, think about why.

**ACTIVE READING PURPOSE FOR READING** In school you are asked to read for a variety of purposes—to find out information, to understand a period in history, to interpret a theme, to take action on an issue, or to discover models for writing. This time your purpose is different. Read this story for enjoyment.

**READER'S NOTEBOOK** After you finish the story, take a few minutes to make notes about the parts you found most entertaining.

# GARY KEILLOR

Garrison Keillor

When I was sixteen years old, I stood six feet two inches tall and weighed a hundred and forty pounds. I was intense and had the metabolism<sup>1</sup> of a wolverine. I ate two or three lunches a day and three full dinners at night, as my family sat around the kitchen table and observed, and I cleaned off their plates too when they had poor appetites or were finicky. There was no food I disliked except muskmelon, which smelled rotten and loathsome. Everything else I ate. (It was Minnesota so we didn't have seafood, except fish sticks, of course.) I was a remarkable person. I was a junior in high school, Class of 1960. I was smart, so smart that poor grades didn't bother me in the slightest; I considered them no reflection on my intelligence. I read four books a week, and I sometimes walked home from school, all twelve miles, so I could relive favorite chapters out loud, stride along the shoulder of the highway past the potato farms, and say brilliant and outrageous things, and sing in a big throbby voice great songs like "Til There Was You" and "Love Me Tender."

I had no wish to sing in front of an audience, songs were a private thing with me. I was an intense person, filled with powerful feelings, and assumed that I would live alone for the rest of my life, perhaps in a monastery, silent, swishing

around in a cassock,<sup>2</sup> my heart broken by a tragic love affair with someone like Natalie Wood,<sup>3</sup> my life dedicated to God.

I was a lucky boy. I had learned this two years before on a car trip to Colorado. My Uncle Earl and Aunt Myrna drove there that summer—he had been stationed in Colorado Springs during the war—along with my cousins Gordon and Mel, and I got to go too. I won that trip by dropping over to their house and being extremely nice. I'd say, "Here, let me wash those dishes." I'd say, "Boy, I'm sure in a mood to mow a lawn." And then she'd offer me a glass of nectar and a piece of angel food cake and I'd eat it and say, "Boy, I was looking at *National Geographic* the other night and they had a big article on Colorado. It was so interesting. Just the different rock formations and things. I don't see how people can look at those mountains and not know there's a God." And she'd smile at me, a good boy who mowed lawns and whose faith was pure, and I got to go. Of course my brothers and sisters were fit to be tied. "How come he gets to go? We never get to go. Oh no, we have

1. metabolism (mĕ'tăb'ə-lĭz'əm): the set of processes by which food is transformed into energy.
2. cassock: an ankle-length garment worn by clergymen.
3. Natalie Wood: a glamorous American movie star.

to stay here all summer and work in the garden while he goes riding out to Colorado.” They just didn’t get it. Trips to Colorado don’t fall in your lap. You’ve got to go out and earn Colorado.

We took off on the trip, and I was a very good passenger. I sat in the favored front seat between my aunt and uncle, looking at the scenery for hours, no stains on my clothes, my face clean, a good strong bladder, never got carsick, and had a subtle sideways technique for picking my nose—you’d never see it even if you looked straight at me. Far off, the mountains appeared, shining on the horizon for almost a whole day, and then we rose up into them—snowcapped peaks, like the last scene in a western in which justice and romance prevail, and when we reached Denver (*EL.5280*, the sign said, exactly a mile), we ate dinner at a Chinese restaurant and my fortune cookie said: “You are enterprising—take advantage of it.” Well, there it was in a nutshell.

The mountains were startling in their whiteness and steepness, the valleys dark in the late afternoon, the peaks glittering in pure sunlight, beautiful stands of light gray-green aspen floating like fog, and my aunt took a picture of me with trees and mountains behind me. Just me, tall and intense. You would never guess I was from Minnesota. I thought, “This is my lucky picture. I’ll keep it the rest of my life.”

**M**y family lived in the country, along the Mississippi River between Minneapolis and Tryon, and I attended New Tryon High School, which was bulging under a tidal wave of children from new subdivisions on the other side of the river, places with names like Riverview Estates and Woodlawn and Forest Hills. Our side, South Tryon Township, along the West River Road, was still rural, truck farms, and scattered houses on big rolling tracts, and we West River Roaders were the cream of the school. The editor of the school paper, *The Beacon*, Elaine Eggert, was one of us; so were the stars of

the debate team and the speech team, three of the class officers, and the chairperson of the spring talent show, Dede Petersen, who rode on my bus.

I had been in love with Dede for two years, in an intense and secret way. She had bouncy blonde hair and wore soft sweaters, plaid skirts, penny loafers and knee socks. One winter day I wrote her a fourteen-page letter (single-spaced) saying that she was my ideal of womanhood, a person of pure taste, excellent judgment, stunning beauty, and natural intelligence, a woman to whom I could pledge myself in a spiritual friendship that would last forever no matter what. If the friendship should turn into physical love, good, and if not, fine. We would be friends for the rest of our lives, our souls communing<sup>4</sup> over vast distances.

I did not, after long thought, give her the letter. I guessed that she might laugh at it and also that her boyfriend Bill Swenson might pound me into the ground. He was an intense person too.

One afternoon riding home on the bus, sitting behind her, I heard her complain to her pal Marcy about the miseries of planning the April talent show. Bill Swenson would be in it, lip-synching “All Shook Up,” and he was terrific, but there wasn’t much other talent around, nothing compared to last year, when all those guys sang “Bali Hai” with the coconuts on their chests,<sup>6</sup> and the skit about school lunch when the kids pretended to vomit and out came green confetti, and of course last year there had been Barbara Lee. Barbara Lee was the most talented person ever to graduate from our school. She danced, she sang, she did the splits, she played

4. **enterprising**: willing to undertake new projects; ambitious.

5. **communings** (*kə-myoo’ning*): talking or meeting in close understanding.

6. **guys sang . . . chests**: In the musical *South Pacific*, sailors stationed on a remote island sing about women while wearing coconut shells (to imitate breasts) and grass skirts; later, a woman sings “Bali Hai,” a song about a beautiful, magical island.



Detail of *Play Within a Play* (1963), David Hockney. Oil on canvas and plexiglass, 72" x 78". Copyright © David Hockney.

the marimba.<sup>7</sup> She was Broadway bound, no doubt about it.

I leaned forward and said, "Well, I think we have lots of talent." Oh? like who, for example? she said. I said, "Well, I could do something." *You?* she said. "Or I could get together with some other kids and we could do a skit." *Like what?* she said. I said, "Oh, I don't know. Something about the school burning down. It all depends."

"That doesn't sound funny to me," she said.

Marcy didn't think it was funny either.

What burned my toast was her saying "*You?*" when I volunteered to be in her talent show. I was only being helpful, I was not claiming to be another Barbara Lee. I had no interest in the stage at all until I heard her incredulity<sup>8</sup> and amusement—"You?"—and then I was interested

7. marimba (mə-rīm'bā): a large wooden percussion instrument resembling a xylophone.

8. incredulity (ɪn'krɪ-dō'ly-tē): disbelief.

in being interested. A spiritual friendship with Dede was out of the question, if she thought I was the sort of guy you could say “You?” to.

No one in our family sang or performed for entertainment, only for the glory of God and only in groups, never solo. We were Christian people; we did not go in for show. But I was an intense young man. Intensity was my guiding principle. And when I thought about joining that monastery after Natalie Wood rejected me and spending my life in the woodshop making sturdy chairs and tables, I thought that perhaps I ought to get in the talent show at New Tryon High first, get a whiff of show business before I gave my life to God.

It was one of those ugly and treacherous springs in the Midwest, when winter refuses to quit, like a big surly<sup>9</sup> drunk who heads for home and then staggers back for another round and a few more songs that everyone has heard before. It was cold and wet, and we sat day after day in dim airless classrooms, the fluorescent lights turned on at midday, the murky sky and bare trees filling the big classroom windows, pools of oil-slicked rain in the parking lot, the grass in front dead, the Stars and Stripes hanging limp and wet like laundry. In plane geometry, I was lost in the wilderness, had been lost since Christmas, and in history, we were slogging through World War I, and in English class, we were memorizing poems. “These are treasures you will carry with you forever,” said Miss Rasmussen, a big woman in a blue knit suit. In her wanderings around the classroom as she talked about poetry and metaphor, she often stopped in the aisle and stood looming above me, her voice overhead, her hand resting on my desk, her puffy white hand and red knuckles and short ringless fingers. Her stopping there

indicated, I knew, her fondness for me. I was the only student of hers who wrote poems. She had even suggested that I memorize and recite one of

my own poems. I declined. Part of the memorization assignment was reciting the poem in front of the class. My poems were far too intense and personal to be said out loud in front of people. I was memorizing Whitman’s elegy<sup>10</sup> on the death of Abraham Lincoln, “O Captain! My Captain!” walked home through the rain one cold day crying out “O Captain! my Captain! our fearful trip is done,/The ship has weather’d every rack,<sup>11</sup> the prize we sought is won.”

**“Never give up on beauty,” she said.  
“Never compromise your standards out of fear that someone may not understand.” Teachers were full of useless advice like that.**

One day a fuel oil truck backed into our driveway and got stuck in the mud and the driver put it into forward gear and got dug in deeper. He gunned it in reverse and gunned it forward and rocked the truck loose and pulled forward and unwound his hose and started filling our fuel oil tank, but meanwhile he had left deep ruts in my mother’s garden and the front yard. She was home alone, washing clothes. She heard the grinding and roaring from down in the laundry room and came outdoors to find her garden dug up and the tulips and irises destroyed, and the driver looked at her and said “You ought to do something about your driveway.” Not a word of apology, acted like it was the driveway’s fault. My mother was the quietest, politest person ever, she felt that raising your voice indicated a flawed character, but she put her hands on her hips and said, “Mister, if

9. surly: bad-tempered; rude.

10. elegy (el’ə-jē): a poem lamenting a person’s death.

11. rack: buffeting (as by a storm).

you can't figure out how to drive a truck, then they oughta find you a job you'd be able to handle." And she told him to get out and she would be sending the company a bill for the flower garden. And he did. And she did. And the company sent us a check and an apology from the general manager, a Harold L. Bergstrom.

It was the first time in my memory that my mother had fought back and raised her voice to a stranger, a watershed<sup>12</sup> moment for me. I heard the story from our neighbor, Mr. Couture, and I admired her so much for standing up to the jerk and defending our family's honor. Her principles had always told her to be quiet and polite and turn the other cheek and never make trouble, but there comes a time to let go of principle and do the right thing. To me, this seemed to open the door to show business.

And then, about a week before the talent show, suddenly I was in. The real power behind the show wasn't Dede, it was Miss Rasmussen, my teacher, the adviser to the talent show, and the day I stood before the class and recited "O Captain! My Captain!" she told Dede to put me in the show. The next day, Miss Rasmussen had me stand up in class and recite it again. It was one of the finest pieces of oral interpretation she had ever seen, she said. She sat in a back corner of the room, her head bowed, her eyes closed, as I stood in front and with dry mouth launched the Captain's ship again, and she did not see the kids smirking and gagging and retching and pulling long invisible skeins of snot from their nostrils when my Captain died and I got to "O the bleeding drops of red,/Where on the deck my Captain lies,/Fallen cold and dead," they rolled their eyes and clutched at their hearts and died. Then, when she stood up, her eyes moist, and clapped, they all clapped too. "Wasn't that good!" she cried. "You really liked it, didn't you! Oh, I'm glad you did! He's going to recite it in the talent show, too! Won't that be nice!" A couple of boys in front clapped their hands over their mouths and pretended to lose

their lunch. They seemed to speak for most of the class.

So I was in the talent show, which I wanted to be, but with an inferior piece of material. I suggested to Miss Rasmussen that "O Captain! My Captain!" might not be right for the talent show audience, that maybe I could find a humorous poem, and she said, "Oh, it'll be just fine," not realizing the gravity<sup>13</sup> of the situation. "Never give up on beauty," she said. "Never compromise your standards out of fear that someone may not understand." Teachers were full of useless advice like that.

I tried not to think about "O Captain." I experimented with combing my hair a new way, with the part on the right. I was handsome at certain angles, I thought, and a right-hand part would emphasize a good angle. I stood at the bathroom mirror, a small mirror in my hand, and experimented holding my head cocked back and aimed up and to the right, a pose favored by seniors in their graduation pictures, which looked good from either side, and reciting "O Captain" with my head at that angle. I had good skin except when it flared up, which it did two days before the show, and it took a long time to repair the damage. There were six children in our family and only one bathroom, but I spent fifteen minutes behind a locked door doing surgery and applying alcohol and cold packs and skin-toned cream. The little kids stood banging on the door, pleading to use the toilet. I said, "Well, how bad do you have to go?" I was the one in show business, after all.

I worked on "O Captain" so that every line was set in my head. I recited it to myself in the mirror ("O Captain! O Captain! the fateful day is done,/Your blemishes have disappeared, the skin you sought is won") and for my mother, who said I was holding my head at an unnatural angle, and then, the Friday night before the

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12. watershed: marking an important turning point.

13. gravity: seriousness or importance.

show, I recited it at a party at Elaine Eggert's house, and there my interpretation of "O Captain! My Captain!" took a sharp turn toward the English stage.

Miss Rasmussen loved a recording of Sir John Gielgud<sup>14</sup> reading "Favourites of English Poetry" and she played it once for our class, a whole hour of it, and from that day, all the boys in the class loved to do English accents. A little lisp, endless dramatic pauses, inflections including shrill birdlike tones of wonderment, and instead of the vowel *o* that delicious English *aaoooww*, a bleating sound not found anywhere in American speech. In the cafeteria, when my friend Ralph Moody came to the table where all of us West River Road rats sat, he stood holding his tray, peering down at us and the welter of milk cartons and comic books and ice cream wrappers and uneaten macaroni-cheese lunches, and after a long pause he cried "Aaaaooooowww," with a shudder, a great man forced to sit among savages. So at the party, surrounded by kids from the debate team and the newspaper, the cream of West River Road society, when Elaine had said for the sixth time, "Do the poem you're going to do on Monday," I reached back for Ralph's *Aaoooww* and did "O Captain" as Sir John might have done it:

*Aoooww Cap-tin, myyyyyy Cap-tin,  
 aower \_\_\_\_\_ feeah-fool twip eez  
 done!  
 Th' sheep has wethah'd \_\_\_\_\_ eviddy  
 rack!  
 th' priiiiiiize we sot \_\_\_\_\_ eez won!  
 But \_\_\_\_\_ aaaaooooooooowwwww  
 th' bleeeeeeeding drrrops \_\_\_\_\_ of  
 rrrred \_\_\_\_\_  
 wheahhhh \_\_\_\_\_  
 on th' deck \_\_\_\_\_  
 myyyy Captin liiiiiiiies \_\_\_\_\_  
 fallin \_\_\_\_\_  
 caaaooooowwld \_\_\_\_\_  
 and \_\_\_\_\_ ded!*

It was a good party poem. I recited it in the basement, and then everyone upstairs had to come down and hear it, and then Elaine had to call up a friend of hers in the city and I did it on the phone. It got better. "Miss Rasmussen is going to burst a blood vessel," said Elaine. She was a true rebel, despite the editorials she wrote extolling<sup>15</sup> the value of team play and school spirit. I was starting to see some of the virtues in her that I had previously imagined in Dede Petersen.

**b**ill Swenson had worked for weeks on "All Shook Up," and he looked cool and capable backstage before the curtain went up. His hair was slicked down, he wore heavy eye makeup, and he was dressed in a white suit with gold trim, without a single wrinkle in it. He stood, holding his arms out to the sides, avoiding wrinkling, and practiced moving his lips to "A-wella bless my soul, what'sa wrong with me? I'm itching like a man on a fuzzy tree." Dede knelt, shining his black shoes.

He pretended to be surprised to see me. "What are you doing here? You running the p.a. or what?"

I told him I would be in the show, reciting a poem by Walt Whitman.

"Who? Twitman?" No. Whitman, I said.

"Well, I'm glad I don't have to follow that," he said, with heavy sarcasm. He glanced at my outfit, brown corduroy pants, a green plaid cotton shirt, a charcoal gray sweater vest, and said, "You better change into your stage clothes though."

"These are my stage clothes," I said.

"Oh," he said, his eyebrows raised. "Oh." He smiled. "Well, good luck." He did not know

14. Sir John Gielgud: a highly respected British actor and director.

15. extolling (ɪk-stŏ'ɪŋ): praising highly.



Illustration by Todd Schorr.

how much luck I had. I had my lucky picture in my pocket, the one of me in the mountains.

Dede brushed his forehead with face powder and poofed up his hair. She gave him a light kiss on the lips. "You're going to be great," she said. He smiled. He had no doubt about that. She had put him high on the program, right after "America the Beautiful," a dramatic choral reading from *Antigone*,<sup>16</sup> a solo trumpet rendition of "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen," and a medley of Rodgers and Hammerstein songs performed on the piano by Cheryl Ann Hansen. Then Bill would electrify the crowd with "All Shook Up," and then I would do "O Captain."

He was Mr. Cool. After Cheryl Ann Hansen's interminable<sup>17</sup> medley, which kids clapped and

cheered for only because they knew that her mother had recently died of cancer, Bill grinned at Dede and bounced out on stage and yelled, "Helllllll-ooo baby!" in a Big Bopper<sup>18</sup> voice, and the audience clapped and yelled, "Hellllloo baby!" and he yelled, "You knowwwwwwwww what I like!" and he was a big hit in the first five seconds. He said it again, "Hellllllllllloo baby!" and the audience yelled back, "Hellllllllloo baby!" And then Dede carefully set the phono-

16. *Antigone* (än-t'ĭg'ə-nē): an ancient Greek tragedy by Sophocles.

17. interminable (ĭn-tūr'mə-nə-bəl): endless.

18. Big Bopper: a popular singer of the late 1950s.



graph needle on the record of “All Shook Up” and Elvis’s hoody voice blasted out in the auditorium and Bill started shimmying across the stage and tossing his head like a dustmop. “My friends say I’m acting queer as a bug, I’m in love—huh! I’m all shook up,” and on the *huh* he stuck both arms in the air and threw his hip to the left, *huh*, and the audience sang along on the “hmm hmm hmm—oh—yeah yeah”—he was the star of the show right there. Dede ran to look out through a hole in the curtain, leaving me standing by the record player. She was so thrilled, she hopped up and down and squealed.

I could see part of him out there, his white suit

hanging loose, the red socks flashing, him pulling out the red satin hanky and tossing it into the audience, *hmmm hmmm hmmm oh yeah yeah*, and at the end the whole auditorium stood up and screamed. He came off stage bright with sweat, grinning, and went back out and made three deep bows, and threw his hip, *huh*, and

came off and Dede wiped his face with a towel and kissed him, and the audience was still screaming and whistling and yelling, “More! More!” and right then Bill made his fateful decision. He went out and did his other number.

It was “Vaya con Dios” by the Conquistadores.<sup>19</sup> Dede put the needle down and the guitars throbbed, and the audience clapped, but Bill hadn’t worked as hard on “Vaya con Dios” as on “All Shook Up” and his lips didn’t synch very well, but the main problem was that “Vaya con Dios” was “Vaya con Dios,” and after “All Shook Up” it seemed like a joke, especially since the Conquistadores were a trio and Bill wasn’t. Kids started to laugh, and Bill got mad—perhaps “Vaya con Dios” meant a lot to him personally—and his grim face and his clenched fists made “Vaya con Dios” seem even zanier.

Dede ran to the hole in the curtain to see where the hooting and light boing were coming from and there, standing by the record player, I thought I would help poor Bill out by lightly touching the record with my finger and making the music go flat and sour for a moment.

It was miraculous, the effect this had, like pressing a laugh button. I touched the black vinyl rim and the music warbled, and fifty feet away, people erupted in fits of happiness. I did it again. How wonderful to hear people laugh! and to be able to give them this precious

gift of laughter so easily.

Then I discovered a speed control that let me slow it down and speed it up. The singers sounded demented,<sup>20</sup> in love one moment, carsick the next. The audience thought this was a stitch. But Bill sort of went to pieces. One prime qualification for a show business career, I would

think, is the ability to improvise and go with the audience, but Bill Swenson did not have that ability. Here he was, rescued from his drippy encore, magically transformed into comedy, and he was too rigid to recognize what a hit he was. His lips stopped moving. He shook his fist at someone in the wings, perhaps me, and yelled a common vulgar expression at someone in the crowd, and wheeled around and walked off.

I didn’t care to meet him, so I walked fast right past him onto the stage, and coming out of the bright light into the dark, he didn’t see me until I

**“More! More!”  
and right then Bill  
made his fateful decision.  
He went out and  
did his other number.**

19. “Vaya con Dios” (vī’ā kōn dē’òs) by the Conquistadores: A song (whose title is a Spanish expression of farewell, literally “Go with God”) that was the biggest hit for this singing group of the 1950s and 1960s.

20. demented: mentally ill; insane.

was out of reach. There was still some heavy booing when I arrived at the microphone, and I made a deep English-actor type of bow, with princely flourishes and flutters, and they laughed, and then they were mine all the way. I held on to them for dear life for the next two minutes. I sailed into “O Captain,” in my ripest accent, with roundhouse<sup>21</sup> gestures, outflung arms, hand clapped to the forehead \_\_\_\_\_ I cried:

AOOWWW CAP-TIN, MYYYYY CAP-TIN,  
 AOWER \_\_\_\_\_ FEEAH-FOOL  
 TWIP EEZ DONE!  
 TH' SHEEP HAS WETHAH'D  
 \_\_\_\_\_ EVIDDY RACK!  
 TH' PRIIIIIIZE WE SOT \_\_\_\_\_  
 EEZ WON!  
 BUT \_\_\_\_\_  
 AAAAOOOOOOOOWWWW  
 TH' BLLEEEEEEEEDING DRRROPS  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 OF RRRED \_\_\_\_\_  
 WHEAHH \_\_\_\_\_  
 ON TH' DECK \_\_\_\_\_  
 BEEEL SWEN-SON LIIIIIIES  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 FALLIN \_\_\_\_\_  
 CAAAOOOOOWWLD  
 \_\_\_\_\_ AND \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_ DED!

It wasn't a kind or generous thing to do, but it was successful, especially the “AAAAOOOOO OOWWWW” and also the part about Bill Swenson, and at the end there was shouting and whistling and pandemonium, and I left the stage with the audience wanting more, but I had witnessed the perils of success, and did not consider an encore. “Go out and take a bow,” said Miss Rasmussen, and out I went, and came back off. Dede and Bill were gone. Dede was not feeling well, said Miss Rasmussen.

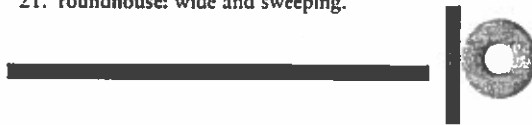
I watched the rest of the show standing at the back of the auditorium. The act after me was a

girl from the wrong side of the river who did a humorous oral interpretation entitled “Granny on the Phone with Her Minister.” The girl had painted big surprise eyebrows and a big red mouth on her so we would know it was comedy, and as the sketch went on, she shrieked to remind us that it was humorous. The joke was that Granny was hard-of-hearing and got the words wrong. Then came an accordionist, a plump young man named David Lee, Barbara's cousin, who was a little overambitious with “Lady of Spain” and should have left out two or three of the variations, and a tap dancer who tapped to a recording of “Nola” and who made the mistake of starting the number all over again after she had made a mistake. I enjoyed watching these dogs, strictly from a professional point of view. And then the choir returned to sing “Climb Every Mountain,” and then Miss Rasmussen stood and spoke about the importance of encouraging those with talent and how lucky we should feel to have them in our midst to bring beauty and meaning to our lives. And then the lights came up, and my classmates piled into the aisles and headed for the door and saw me standing in back, modest me, looking off toward the stage. Almost every one of them said how good I was as they trooped past—clapped my shoulder, said, hey, you were great, you should've done more, that was funny—and I stood and patiently endured their attention until the auditorium was empty and then I went home.

“You changed the poem a little,” Miss Rasmussen said the next day. “Did you forget the line?” “Yes,” I said. “Your voice sounded funny,” she said. I told her I was nervous. “Oh well,” she said, “they seemed to like it anyway.”

“Thank you,” I said, “thank you very much.” ❖

21. roundhouse: wide and sweeping.



## Connect to the Literature

### 1. What Do You Think?

What was your reaction to the outcome of the talent show? Share your comments with classmates.

### Comprehension Check

- What is Gary Keillor's lucky picture?
- What is Gary's act in the talent show?
- What does Gary do to Bill Swenson at the talent show?

## Think Critically

2. **ACTIVE READING PURPOSE FOR READING** What part or parts of this story did you enjoy the most, and why?
3. At the end of the story, why does Gary say to Miss Rasmussen, "Thank you, thank you very much"?
4. How would you describe the most important way in which Gary changes as a result of participating in the talent show?
 

THINK ABOUT

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  - his description of himself as an "intense person" early in the story
  - his popularity with other students before and after the talent show
  - his attitude toward Bill Swenson
5. Consider the important female **characters** in Gary's life: Dede Petersen, Miss Rasmussen, and his mother. Which of them do you think influences him the most? Explain the reasons for your choice.
6. Miss Rasmussen says that talented people "bring beauty and meaning to our lives." Explain whether you agree with her opinion.

## Extend Interpretations

7. **What If?** Suppose Gary had recited Whitman's elegy in a serious way. Would his performance have been so successful? Why or why not?
8. **Connect to Life** How would you compare Gary's experiences of performing in front of the class with your own experiences?
9. **Points of Comparison** What connections do you see between Gary's conduct in this story and Emerson's ideas in the excerpt from "Self-Reliance"?

## Literary Analysis

**HUMOR** Humor is a term applied to a literary work whose purpose is to entertain and to evoke laughter. In literature there are three basic types of humor, all of which may involve exaggeration or irony.

**Humor of situation** is derived from the plot of a work. It usually involves exaggerated events or situational irony, which occurs when something happens that is different from what was expected. **Humor of character** is often based on exaggerated personalities or on characters who fail to recognize their own flaws, a form of dramatic irony.

**Humor of language** may include sarcasm, exaggeration, puns, or verbal irony, which occurs when what is said is not what is meant.

**Paired Activity** Get together with a partner and review your answers to question 2, about the parts of the story that you enjoyed the most. Then choose a passage that you find particularly funny. Reread the passage carefully and identify the source or sources of its humor: plot, character, or language. Then prepare an oral presentation of the passage for your class. As you practice reading the passage, keep in mind that the way the story is told is an important part of its humor. Record and then critique your presentation and those of your classmates.

## Writing Options

### 1. Points of Comparison

How do you imagine Whitman would have responded to Gary's comic recitation of his immortal poem? Write a dialogue between Whitman and Gary, showing Whitman's response. Be true to the ideas about individuality that Whitman expressed in his poetry.

**2. Story Sequel** Write a sequel to this story showing what happens when Gary and Dede Petersen or Bill Swenson meet the next time.

**3. Literary Review** In commenting on Lake Wobegon, Keillor's fictional home town, newspaper

columnist Mary T. Schmich observed, "[It is] a town that lies not on any map but somewhere along the border of his imagination and his memory." Which elements in "Gary Keillor" might have been based on actual memories? Which might have been a product of Keillor's imagination? Write a review of the story, expressing your views.

## Activities & Explorations

**1. Drawn-Out Story** With a small group, paint or sketch a series of scenes that recapture the major

incidents of the story. - ART

**2. Comic Recitation** Choose another poem that has become a classic, and perform a comic recitation of it for your classmates. - PERFORMING

## Art Connection

David Hockney's paintings use the stage and stage curtains as intriguing metaphors. Look again at *Detail of Play Within a Play* on page 427. What feelings about performing on stage does this painting suggest? How would you compare these feelings with Gary's in this story?



## Garrison Keillor

1942-

### Other Works

*Lake Wobegon Days*

*Happy to Be Here*

*Leaving Home*

*We Are Still Married*

*WLT: A Radio Romance*

**A Lover of Language** The storyteller, writer, and radio-show host Garrison Keillor (kē' lər) was born in Minnesota. He and his family were members of the Plymouth Brethren, a strict religious sect that frowned on dancing, card playing, and other forms of entertainment. As a child, however, Keillor fell in love with both the written and the spoken word. He enjoyed listening to religious parables and tales told by his relatives and other adults, and he developed a keen appetite for reading and writing. "When I was fourteen, I was happy to read all day every day and into the night." In the eighth grade, he submitted poems to the school paper under the name Garrison instead of his given name, Gary, "to hide behind a name that meant strength."

**Radio Career** In addition to reading and writing, Keillor's other childhood passion was listening to the radio. While attending the University of Minnesota, he worked for the campus radio station, and after graduating from college, he became the host of a classical music show on Minnesota Public Radio. In 1974, Keillor launched the immensely popular radio show *A Prairie Home Companion*, set in the mythical Midwestern town of Lake Wobegon.

**Celebrity and Writer** In addition to working as the host and writer of *A Prairie Home Companion*, Keillor has written several books. "Gary Keillor" is taken from his 1993 collection of stories, *The Book of Guys*.

## Author Activity

**Good Humor** Keillor is acclaimed for his storytelling skills. Listen to a recording of a humorous story he told on his radio show, *A Prairie Home Companion*. Compare the sources of humor in this oral performance with those in "Gary Keillor."