

Selected Readings of
the 20th Century
British and American
Short Stories

二十世纪 英美短篇小说 选读

沈 炎◎选编



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内 容 提 要

本教材以(短篇)小说基本要素,如描述(description),叙述(narration),情节(plot),人物与人物塑造(character & characterization),背景(setting),叙事角度(point of view),主题(theme),和象征(symbolism)等为轴线,选取经典英美短篇小说介绍小说阅读技巧,以提高学生文学阅读和欣赏的能力。本教材由两部分组成:① 理论讲解;② 23 篇短篇小说。本教材为全英语教材。

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PREFACE

Many years ago I was asked by a student a question which, properly answered, could probably provide a clue to the mystery of story reading. It was in the middle of an English writing class and I was dwelling on the basics of essay writing. A hand shot up. A boy stood up and said in an impatient tone, “Teacher, you could make your points clearer, if you put essays and stories together and compare them. We know a lot more about stories. What’s the difference between them? ”

The question struck me almost dead for a moment or two. I don’t remember how I brushed it aside as irrelevant and went on with my lecture. But the question, dismissed though, churned incessantly in my mind. It gradually dawned on me that the question, far from being extraneous, was in fact a good starting point for Chinese students who have not learnt to read stories intelligently. The student’s demand for clarification on the difference between stories and essays became increasingly reasonable, and even imperative, for a teacher of writing and literature (and I was then also teaching a literature class), for it benefits not only students who learn to write, but also those who take literature courses.

Our reading experience encourages the idea that stories are easy to read. The majority of people, if not all, begin meaningful life with stories (fables, fairytales, and parables), reading or being read. Stories look like life. There are characters, who eat, sleep, and work; there are wishes to fulfill, to make money, to fall in love, to attain power; there are forces that try to prevent the fulfillment of the wishes; the other characters, the whole society, the nature, or even one’s own personality traits. As stories are similar to life in so many aspects, many people naturally regard stories as another form of life. Who doesn’t understand life (even though many people become increasingly perplexed at the meaning of life when they come closer to the end of their existence)?

But stories as a written form are different from life; they are but writers’ way of expressing their views about life. And they are very different, too, from another way—essays—in which writers air their views about certain subjects about life. Stories and essays often share the same subjects, all human subjects—love, death, frustration, rebellion, etc., but they treat their subjects in different manners. They differ in the way the author expresses the main idea, and in the way the author provides the evidence to support the main idea.

When we read an essay, we can almost always locate the thesis, or the main idea of an essay, somewhere in the passage. The thesis is explicitly stated.

But this is not the case with a story. Very few story writers present the theme, or the main idea of a story, directly. It is implied, requiring inference and deduction on the part of the reader.

The Communist Manifesto, for example, one of the most well-known essays in the world, clearly articulates its thesis that it is imperative to destroy the capitalist society and replace it with a communist or socialist society. Anyone who reads it carefully will not miss it or misunderstand it. And this straightforwardness is deliberately intended by its authors. On the other hand, however, in the equally famous *Hamlet*, Shakespeare never says in so many words what idea he wants to convey. He is content to tell what is happening to a character called Hamlet, and how Hamlet would react. Readers are left to infer by themselves as to what Shakespeare means to express with the story, or maybe Shakespeare does not mean to say anything, and he is satisfied to only tell a story.

Another very important difference between essays and stories lies in the fact that an essay offers only one single thesis while readers of a story may come up with several themes. A reader of *The Communist Manifesto* cannot extract another thesis other than the one we have mentioned in the previous paragraph, no matter who reads it, no matter when he/she reads it—in the time when it was first published, or in the twenty-first century. There is only one thesis. Yet a story has a potential of being interpreted differently, as, again, for example, in the case of *Hamlet*. Some critics consider Hamlet as an idealist unsuited for a world full of fallible people. Some see Hamlet as an indecisive man while the opposed theory maintains that Hamlet is a man of action. Many modern critics emphasize Hamlet's psychoneurotic state, a condition that results from the moral complexities that he confronts.

Many students who have taken literature courses confess that, given the multiplicity and uncertainty of themes, stories are indeed difficult to read and interpret. They, therefore, crave for a reliable system which they can use to analyze a story to the effect that they can claim that they have thoroughly understood it. Unfortunately, however, system of this kind does not exist. (It is yet fortunate too because part of the charm of reading stories lies in the endless combinations of similar events, characters, and settings, which defy any definite interpretation.) This, however, does not mean that literary critics all act inconsistently. It means that no single method in literary criticism is capable of covering all fields. You can always find a story, a truly good story, a truly universally acclaimed story that resists interpretation in terms of one particular existing methodology. We therefore speak of story reading as an art, an act that requires a combination of such variables as skill, experience, and understanding of life, but not as a science, the result of whose experiment can be predictably repeated and verified.

However, we do have in our possession some maps (methods) that can

guide us in our literary exploration, maps that may lead us to literary treasures whose existence we may not even be aware of.

For most people, it is almost an instinct to be attracted to stories. Can you imagine a life without stories (novels, movies, TV series)? But many people remain in that state of instinct when it comes to understanding stories consciously and intelligently. There is certainly nothing wrong to proceed with self-imposed ignorance. We don't live our lives with thorough knowledge about everything that makes our days easy and smooth, do we?

This book, however, is not a presumptuous attempt to address the problem, but rather an effort to show Chinese students who study English one way to approach literature, short stories in particular. It is an effort to provide those students who wish to become well-informed when engaged in reading stories with an approach that will lead to better appreciation of the genre.

Nor is the book strictly academic (in order not to scare or deter student readers) and consequently it does not cover as comprehensively as many books of the same nature do. The deliberate leaving out of some of the fictional elements is to relieve the burden for students, who must deal with both language and reading strategies at the same time.

The book consists of two parts. The first part focuses on the most essential component parts of a story, with excerpts and sometimes entire stories used to illustrate how those parts function together to make a story work. The second part is an anthology of the twentieth century English and American short stories, stories that are considered canonical, universally acclaimed for their subjects and craftsmanship.

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Part One

Elements of Fiction

For many people, story-reading is probably one of the greatest paradoxes in life: it is the most familiar, yet the least known. Who has not read stories, or been engaged in watching its variant forms—TV series and movies? (The monthly magazine *Stories* published in Shanghai boasts subscriptions of more than four million.) Yet, how many people can say for sure and with confidence that they can talk intelligently about their experience of reading except for emotional outbursts.

Worse yet, many people laugh at the idea that stories should or need to be analyzed systematically, and that the systematic analysis could result in better appreciation of what one reads. They believe that story-reading is best carried out with least intellectual interference. It's true that, for either common readers or professional critics, story-reading involves a great deal of emotion, but it is also true that intellect plays an important role in our reading experience, just as it does in any human activity. When you fall in love with someone, you do so with both heart and head, don't you? It becomes a blind pursuit when you charge ahead with nothing but emotion, and blind pursuits lead you anywhere and nowhere. Also, writers write stories with both emotion and intellectual considerations, and those who write following only their emotions don't write good stories. Good stories are the result of the combination of emotional involvement and intellectual planning.

How do we then read a story intelligently? Literary critics and university professors often present lists of methods that might intimidate or confuse ordinary readers, methods that involve abstruse and complex terms and ideas invented seemingly to discourage their comprehension. The most practical way to approach a story then is to identify the most important and prominent components of a story. The story is a structure, like a table, which consists of two parts, the top and the leg. The top can be of different sizes and shapes, with small or large number of legs. Some tables have additions like drawers or are covered with tablecloths, but the basic components remain the same. Similarly, the story can be long or short, of different subjects, but its structure remains stable with its basic components. To identify those components, let's first read the following story.

The Dinner Party

Mona Gardner

I first heard this story in India, where it is told as if true—though any naturalist would know it couldn't be. Later I learned that a magazine version of it appeared shortly before the First World War. This account, and its author, I have never been able to track down.

The country is India. A colonial official and his wife are giving a large dinner party. They are seated with their guests—army officers and government attaches and their wives, and a visiting American naturalist—in their spacious dining room, which has a bare marble floor, open rafters, and wide glass doors opening onto a veranda.

A spirited discussion springs up between a young girl who insists that women have outgrown the jumping-on-a-chair-at-the-sight-of-a-mouse era and a colonel who says that they haven't.

"A woman's unfailing reaction in any crisis", the colonel says, "is to scream. And while a man may feel like it, he has that ounce more of nerve control than a woman has. And that last ounce is what counts".

The American does not join in the argument but watches the other guests. As he looks, he sees a strange expression come over the face of the hostess. She is staring straight ahead, her muscles contracting slightly. With a slight gesture she summons the native boy standing behind her chair and whispers to him. The boy's eyes widen; he quickly leaves the room.

Of the guests, none except the American notices this or sees the boy place a bowl of milk on the veranda just outside the open doors.

The American comes to with a start. In India milk in a bowl means only one thing—bait for a snake. He realizes there must be a cobra in the room. He looks up at the rafters—the likeliest place—but they are bare. Three corners of the room are empty, and in the fourth the servants are waiting to serve the next course. There is only one place left—under the table.

His first impulse is to jump back and warn the others, but he knows the commotion would frighten the cobra into striking. He speaks quickly, the tone of his voice so arresting that it sobers everyone.

"I want to know just what control everyone at this table has. I will count three hundred—that's five minutes—and not one of you is to move a muscle. Those who move will forfeit 50 rupees. Ready!"

The 20 people sit like stone images while he counts. He is saying "... two hundred and eighty ..." when, out of the corner of his eye, he sees the cobra emerge and make for the bowl of milk. Screams ring out as he jumps to slam the

veranda doors safely shut.

“You were right, Colonel!” the host exclaims, “A man has just shown us an example of perfect control.”

“Just a minute,” the American says, turning to his hostess. “Mrs. Wynnes, how did you know that cobra was in the room?”

A faint smile lights up the woman’s face as she replies: “Because it was crawling across my foot.”

A story is an account of something that happened. In this something, we see several elements operating together to make the whole process work. Let’s now look at “The Dinner Party” to see what those elements are and how they work. First, there are characters (people in a story) who are in trouble and who are doing something about the trouble. The American naturalist and Mrs. Wynnes are the main characters in “The Dinner Party”, who are faced with a dangerous cobra, and who are trying to save the dinner party guests from the cobra. Second, what the characters are doing must occur at certain time and in some place, which we call setting. The dinner party is held in India at the turn of the twentieth century. Third, a story must be told in a particular way, which very often determines how effective a story can be. “The Dinner Party” is told in the third person limited omniscient point of view (the American naturalist’s point of view). If, however, the story was told in the omniscient point of view, readers would have the same story, but the suspense would be destroyed and the readability reduced. Finally, a story inevitably conveys a message, directly, or most likely, indirectly. Placed side by side, in “The Dinner Party”, man, woman and snake evoke memory of the Garden of Eden, and Eve is somehow redeemed by Mrs. Wynnes. There are, of course, many other elements involved in telling a story, but the above four components are the most important and appear in every story without exception. Understanding of these fundamental elements will ensure a better appreciation of stories.

1. Characters

A story without characters is unthinkable. Every story is necessarily one in which some characters are doing something, to one another, or to themselves, or responding to some kind of situation they are involved in. Shakespeare's Hamlet, for example, takes revenge on his uncle, who murders his father; Oedipus in the Greek tragedy *Oedipus the King* attempts to find out the murderer of his father and, once the truth is known, blinds himself. In "The Dinner Party", the American naturalist responds to a crisis. These stories are all about characters, the only reason for the existence of stories.

However, a story with characters is not necessarily a successful or interesting one. A story about a person who gets up at six, eats breakfast at seven, goes to work at eight, has lunch at twelve, goes home at five, and finally goes to bed at eleven to call a day makes a dull story which nobody cares to read, let alone pays to peruse. In real life, we want everything to go smoothly. We want to be born in an affluent family of loving parents, go to a prestigious university, find a high-paying job, marry a faithful, good-looking, rich person, have caring children, and die a natural death. But a tranquil and contented life or stable situation is nothing but poison to a story.

To make a story interesting or entertaining, one more element is necessary and essential, that is, conflict, conflict between or among characters, or between or among different forces that determine the fate of the characters in the story. Hamlet is in conflict with his uncle, and Oedipus is in conflict with the mystery of the murderer of his father. In love stories where three people are involved, the two rivals are in conflict with each other competing for the affection of the third party. The American naturalist in "The Dinner Party" is in conflict with the cobra (symbol of nature) and time (a force of nature beyond human control). In short, an interesting story calls for trouble.

Experienced readers are, therefore, looking for a troubled character, or one who is in conflict with the forces that try to defeat or destroy him or her. Good stories are about characters who are extremely troubled. Hamlet, indecisive about killing his uncle, utters the line of "to be or not to be". Oedipus, despairing at the sight of the children he begets with his own mother, blinds himself. The American naturalist in "The Dinner Party" acts against the poisonous snake that would strike if not properly handled. Trouble, or conflict, in stories generates interest or curiosity on the part of the reader, the precondition for the survival of a story.

The characters' actions to accomplish their purposes involve two kinds of conflict: external conflict and internal conflict. The conflict is external when

the character is pitted against forces outside him/herself, against another individual, against society, against nature, against machines, against god, etc. The internal conflict takes place within the mind of the character and is usually confined to the main character, the protagonist. Odysseus in Homer's *Odyssey*, for instance, wrestles inwardly with various kinds of temptations on his way home from the city of Troy.

The forces in a conflict are usually embodied by characters and this is where the two elements of stories come together and become one. Characters are the people in narratives, and characterization is the author's presentation and development of characters. Writers of fiction present characters in two basic ways: telling and showing. In telling, the author simply tells the reader what the character is like. The American writer Washington Irving, for example, tells the reader directly what Ichabod Crane, the main character in "The Legend of Sleep Hollows," is like in the following two paragraphs:

In this by-place of nature, there abode, in a remote period of American history, that is to say, some thirty years since, a worthy wight of the name of Ichabod Crane; who sojourned, or as he expressed it, "tarried," in Sleepy Hollow, for the purpose of instructing the children of the vicinity. He was a native of Connecticut, a State which supplies the Union with pioneers for the mind as wells as for the forest, and sends forth yearly its legions of frontier woodsmen and country schoolmasters. The cognomen of Crane was not inapplicable to his person. He was tall, but exceedingly lank, with narrow shoulders, long arms and legs, hands that dangled a mile out of his sleeves, feet that might have served for shovels, and his whole frame most loosely hung together. His head was small, and flat at top, with huge ears, large green glassy eyes, and a long snipe nose, so that it looked like a weathercock perched upon his spindle neck, to tell which way the wind blew. To see him striding along the profile of a hill on a windy day, with his clothes gagging and fluttering about him one might have mistaken him for the genius of famine descending upon the earth, or some scarecrow eloped from a corn-field.

His school-house was a low building of one large room, rudely constructed of logs; the windows partly glazed, and partly patched with leaves of old copy-books. It was most ingeniously secured at vacant hours by a withe twisted in the handle of the door, and staked set against the window-shutters; so that, though a thief might get in with perfect ease, he would find some embarrassment in getting out; an idea most probably borrowed by the architect, Yost Van Houten,

from the mystery of an eel-pot. The school-house stood in a rather lonely but pleasant situation, just at the foot of a woody hill, with a brook running close by, and a formidable birch-tree growing at one end of it. From hence the low murmur of his pupils' voices, conning over their lessons, might be heard on a drowsy summer's day, like the hum of a bee-hive; interrupted now and then by the authoritative voice of the master, in the tone of menace or command; or, peradventure, by the appalling sound of the birch, as he urged some tardy loiterer along the flowery path of knowledge. Truth to say, he was a conscientious man, and ever bore in mind the golden maxim, "Spare the rod and spoil the child."—Crane's scholars certainly were not spoiled.

Crane's personality traits are fixed once and for all by Washington Irving, who then proceeds to construct events that illustrate Crane in action.

Authors characterize by showing through dialogue (what characters say) and action (what characters do). When a female character says "My husband isn't a wildly exciting lover," she reveals things about her husband and herself, a woman who is slightly disappointed and frustrated at her husband's insensitivity to her romantic temperament. Here is another example which illustrates how an author uses dialogue to characterize.

In fact, he hardly ever stopped talking, and we kids watched the spit foam at the corners of his mouth...It was more like a lecture than a conversation...

"Actually these aren't dreams or plans," Uncle Bun said. "I'm making predictions about ineluctabilities. This Beautiful Nation, this Gold Mountain, this America will end as we know it. There will be one nation, and it will be a world nation. A united planet. Not just Russian Communism. Not just Chinese Communism. World Communism."

He said, "When we don't need to break our bodies earning our daily living any more, and we gave time to think, we'll write poems, sing songs, develop religions, invent customs, build statues, plant gardens and make a perfect world." He paused to contemplate the wonders.

"Isn't that great?" I said after he left.

"Don't get brainwashed," said my mother. "He's going to get in

trouble for talking like that.” (Maxine Hong Kingston, *China Man*)

Here three members of a Chinese-American family are engaged in a conversation talking about politics, but what one says and how the others respond reveal much more than their attitudes toward politics. Uncle Bun is idealistic and paranoid (“predictions about ineluctabilities”); the narrator’s admiration, uncertainty and politeness expressed in her response (“Isn’t that great?”) to Uncle Bun’s eloquence makes her innocent and uncertain; the mother is hot-tempered and practical. This passage of dialogue also reveals the conflict between the mother on the one side and Uncle Bun and the daughter on the other side when the mother warns the daughter against Uncle Bun.

Characterization through action is probably the most important aspect of storytelling. To quote the American novelist Henry James, “What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character?” For James, what a person does, either consciously or unconsciously, reveals what he or she is, for behavior is the best indication of personality.

The incident meant by James is generally referred to as events in a story. A story may have one event as in many short stories, or several events as in novels. Events are narrated at different paces, fast or slow. Fast-paced narration, called summary, as defined by Janet Burroway in *Writing fiction*, “covers a relatively long period of time in relatively short compass;” and slow-paced narration, called scene, as Burroway defines, “deals with a relatively short period of time at length.”

There are two kinds of summary: sequential and circumstantial. The following two passages illustrate, respectively, how sequential and circumstantial summaries usually operate.

(1) The Don was a real man at the age of twelve. Short, dark, slender, living in the strange Moorish-looking village of Corleone in Sicily, he had been born Vito Andolini, but when strange men came to kill the son of the man they had murdered, his mother sent the young boy to America to stay with friends. And in the new land he changed his name to Corleone to preserve some tie with his native village. It was one of the few gestures of sentiment he was ever to make.

In Sicily at the turn of the century the Mafia was the second government, far more powerful than the official one in Rome. Vito Corleone’s father became involved in a feud with another village who took his case to Mafia. The father refused to knuckle under and in a public quarrel killed the local Mafia chief. A week later he himself was found dead, his body torn apart by *lupara* blasts. A month after the

funeral Mafiia gunmen came inquiring after the young boy, Vito. They had decided that he was too close to manhood, that he might try to avenge the death of this father in the years to come. The twelve-year-old Vito was hidden by relatives and shipped to America. There he was boarded with the Abbandos, whose son Genco was later to become *Consigliere* to his Don.

Young Vito went to work in the Abbando grocery store on Ninth Avenue in New York's Hill's Kitchen. At the age of eighteen Vito married an Italian girl freshly arrived from Sicily, a girl of only sixteen but a skilled cook, a good housewife. They settled down in tenement on Tenth Avenue, near 35th Street, only a few blocks from where Vito worked, and two years later were blessed with their first child, Santino, called by all his friends Sonny because of his devotion to his father. (Mario Puzo, *The Godfather*)

(2) My father was always away during the middle of the week, my little brother spent two or three days at a time with my grandmother, who idolized him, and so Grace and I were often alone together. The people who lived in the houses all up and down the street were either related to her or close friends. They were in and out of one another's houses all day long, and several afternoons a week they sat down to bridge tables. Expertly shuffling and reshuffling cards, they went to work. Auction, this was. Contract bridge hadn't yet supplanted it...The women serenely doubled and redoubled each other's bids without ever losing their way in the intricacies of some piece of gossip, and the one who was adding up the score was still able to deplore, with the others, the shockingness of some new novel that they had all put names down for at the library. (William Maxwell, *So Long, See You Tomorrow*)

In the first passage, an example of sequential summary, the three paragraphs relate events in their sequence but compress them; that is what happened to the godfather, from the age of twelve when his father was killed and he was sent to America, to eighteen when he was married, to twenty when the first child was born—eight years of life covered in three short paragraphs. The second passage, an example of circumstantial summary, describes the general circumstances during a period of time; this is how things were, this is what usually happened to the narrator when he was a boy; his salesman father was away, his younger brother stayed with his grandmother, his stepmother Grace played bridge with her friends in the house, gossiping pleasantly.

In both passages we see characters carefully developed: the godfather who is both the victim and beneficiary of the circumstances, and the sensitive young boy who feels overwhelmingly lonely. However, characterization, and story, for that matter, rely more on scene than summary. Burrouway comments pithily on the relative importance of the two narrative strategies:

Summary is a useful and often necessary device: to give information, fill in a character's background, let us understand a motive, alter pace, create a transition, leap moments or years. Scene is always necessary to fiction. A confrontation, a turning point, or a crisis occurs at given moments that take on significance as moments and cannot be summarized. The form of a story requires confrontation, turning points, and therefore requires scenes. It is quite possible to write a short story in a single scene, without any summary at all. It is not possible to write a successful story entirely in summary. (*Writing Fiction*)

Scene is where characters show (speak and act) and present themselves to the reader. The following story "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" illustrates how the main character is characterized in a series of scenes.

The Secret Life of Walter Mitty

James Thurber

"We're going through!" The Commander's voice was like thin ice breaking. He wore his full-dress uniform, with the heavily braided white cap pulled down rakishly over one cold gray eye. "We can't make it, sir. It's spoiling for a hurricane, if you ask me." "I'm not asking you, Lieutenant Berg," said the Commander. "Throw on the power lights! Rev her up to 8,500! We're going through!" The pounding of the cylinders increased: ta-pocketa-pocketa-pocketa-pocketa-pocketa. The Commander stared at the ice forming on the pilot window. He walked over and twisted a row of complicated dials. "Switch on No. 8 auxiliary!" he shouted. "Switch on No. 8 auxiliary!" repeated Lieutenant Berg. "Full strength in No. 3 turret!" shouted the Commander. "Full strength in No. 3 turret!" The crew, bending to their various tasks in the huge, hurtling eight-engined Navy hydroplane, looked at each other and grinned. "The old man will get us through," they said to one another. "The Old Man ain't afraid of Hell!" ...

"Not so fast! You're driving too fast!" said Mrs. Mitty. "What are you driving so fast for?"