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Thomas Wolfe

SHORT STORIES

FOR ENGLISH COURSES

Short Stories

FOR ENGLISH COURSES

Edited by
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REVISION
AND STUDY GUIDES BY
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597 Fifth Avenue, New York 17, New York

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C-10.63[V]

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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To the Student

INTRODUCTORY NOTE

You inhabit two worlds. One is the outer world, filled with people and in this century dominated by the machine. This world offers you today an almost unbelievable variety of experience. The other world that you inhabit is an inner one—the world of your feelings, thoughts, hopes, and ambitions. Stories help you explore both these worlds.

Many stories are based on the inner world of the main character. A short story, for example, may be built upon a single feeling, such as the jealousy of one athlete for another, the pride of a craftsman in his work, the loyalty of a boy to the newspaper on which he works. As you read the stories, you may come to understand more about your own capacity for loyalty, the things in which you take pride, or the things that make you jealous. In this way you learn more about your own inner world.

The people in a story may remind you in one way or another of people you know. What you learn about the story characters could help you to understand, and improve your relationships with, other human beings. This is an example of how short stories help you learn more about the outer world.

There is another way in which thoughtful reading helps you. In an age when mechanization is reducing men and

women to cogs in a machine or automatons in offices, it is important to form your own personality. One way in which you may do this is by developing your own tastes in reading, music, art, the theater, and other leisure-time occupations. In order to discover your tastes, you must experiment. Reading is an excellent method of such experimentation. In this book you will find many different kinds of short stories.

Almost all the stories in this collection have been enjoyed by thousands of readers. Only two are so recent that they have not had the test of time, but you may find them as worthwhile as the others. Many of the stories are by famous writers. Some are humorous; some are tragic; some depict character. You must read and discover for yourself.

Yet it is not enough to read and then dismiss the novel or story as good or bad, interesting or dull. You must exercise your powers of judgment and consider what gives the story its value. Does it offer wholesome entertainment? Does it have moral values? Does it increase your insight into the lives of others? Does it give you an appreciation of good writing?

You will find an introduction at the beginning of each story and questions and a word list at the end. All these materials will help you develop your powers of critical reading and thinking.

The words a storyteller chooses and the way in which he uses these words are two of the considerations that make up what is known as his *style*. An author may choose words that are heard in everyday speech. He may choose literary words or dialect or slang. He may search, as did Poe, for learned and fantastic words. The skillful writer also gives

careful thought to the way in which he uses words. He may use words sparingly, just to tell the story. He may use words to embellish, or decorate. Again, he may use words as poets do, to stir the emotions. Some of the significant words and phrases are called to your attention in the list at the end of each story. Others you will notice for yourself.

The questions are meant to be used for class discussion because through listening attentively to the opinions of your classmates, you develop your powers of discernment. Moreover, your comments, opinions, and questions will help others. As you develop the habit of exchanging views with someone else, especially if your views are not identical with his, you will find that you have more to say and that you can express your ideas more easily. This is another way, and perhaps the most important way, in which the study of the stories in this book may help you.

REQUIREMENTS OF THE SHORT STORY

CRITICS have agreed that the short story must conform to certain conditions. First of all, the writer must strive to make one and only one impression. His time is too limited, his space is too confined, his risk of dividing the attention of the reader is too great to admit of more than this one impression. He therefore selects some moment of action or some phase of character or some particular scene and focuses attention upon that. Life not infrequently gives such brief, clear-cut impressions. We pass two men who are talking on a street corner, and from a chance sentence or two we form a strong impression of the character of one or both. Sometimes a sight is so desolate and depressing or so lovely that the effect is never forgotten. To capture this single strong impression in a short story, the writer must decide which of the three essentials—plot, character, or setting—is to have first place.

PLOT

Because action appeals strongly to most people, and often adequately reveals character, the short-story writer may decide to make plot pre-eminent. He accordingly chooses incidents carefully. Any incidents that do not really aid in developing the story must be cast aside, no matter how interesting or attractive they may be in themselves. This does not mean that an incident which is detached from the train

of events may not be used. But such an incident must have the proper relationships provided for it. Thus the writer may wish to use incidents that belong to two separate stories because he knows that by relating them, he can produce a single effect. But he sees to it that the incidents fit into the chain of cause and effect. The reader will insist, as the writer knows, that the story be logical—that incident 1 shall be the cause of incident 2, incident 2 of incident 3, and so on to the end.

If the ending is not the logical outcome of the events, the reader feels cheated. He does not want the situation to be too obvious, for he likes the thrill of suspense. But he wants the hints and foreshadowings to be sincere so that he may safely draw his conclusions from them. This does not condemn, however, the “surprise” ending, so admirably used by O. Henry. The reader, in this case, admits that the writer has “played fair” throughout and that the ending which has so surprised and tickled his fancy is as logical as the ending which he himself had forecast.

The novelist may introduce many characters because he has time and space to care for them. Not so the short-story writer; he must employ only one main character and a few supporting characters. However, when the plot is the main thing, the characters need not be remarkable in any way. Sometimes, after reading a story that has a thrilling plot, we find that we do not readily recall the appearance or the names of the characters; we recall only what happened to them.

Setting may or may not be an important factor in the story that emphasizes plot or incident. Often time and place are

given with exactness. Thus Bret Harte says: "As Mr. John Oakhurst, gambler, stepped into the main street of Poker Flat on the morning of the twenty-third of November, 1850, he was conscious of a change in its moral atmosphere since the preceding night." This definite mention of time and place gives an air of reality to the story. As to descriptions, the writer sifts them in, for he knows that few people will bother to read paragraphs that are solely descriptive. He often uses *local color*, by which we mean the employment of epithets, phrases, and other expressions that impart a "feeling" for the place. This use of local color must not be confused with that intended to produce what is called an "impressionistic" effect. In the latter case the writer subordinates everything to this effect of scene.

CHARACTER

Perhaps the writer wishes to make character the dominant element in his story. Then he subordinates plot and setting to this purpose and makes them contribute to it. In selecting the character he wishes to reveal, he has a wide choice. "Human nature is the same, wherever you find it," we are fond of saying. So he may choose a character who is not out of the ordinary—someone he knows—and having made much of some one trait and ignored or subordinated others, he will bring the character before us at some moment of decision or in some strange, perhaps hostile, environment. Or the author may take some character quite out of the ordinary: the village miser, the recluse, or a person with a peculiar mental or moral twist. But, whatever his choice, it

is not enough that the character be actually drawn from real life. Indeed, such fidelity to what literally exists may be a hindrance to the writer. The original character may have done strange things that cannot be explained, but in the story all inconsistencies must be removed, and the conduct of the character must be logical. Life seems inconsistent to all of us at times, but it is probably less so than it seems. People puzzle us by their apparent inconsistencies, when to themselves their actions seem perfectly logical. The law of cause and effect, which we found indispensable in the story that depends on plot, we find equally important in the story of character. There must be no sudden and unaccountable changes in the behavior or sentiments of the people in the story. On the contrary, there must be a credible reason behind all they say and do.

Another demand of the character story is that the characters be lifelike. In the story that emphasizes plot or setting, we may accept the flat figures on the canvas; our interest is elsewhere. But in the character story we must have real people whose motives and conduct we discuss pro and con with as much interest as if we knew them in the flesh. A character of this convincing type is Hamlet. He has always been a controversial figure; hence it is difficult to think of him save as a real man. Whenever a writer finds that the characters in his story have caused the reader to wax eloquent over their conduct, he knows that he has accomplished his purpose. He has made his people lifelike.

Setting in the character story is important, for it is in the setting that the chief actor moves and has his being. His

environment is continually causing him to speak and act. The incidents selected, even though some of them may seem trivial in themselves, must reveal depth after depth in his soul. Whatever the means by which the author reveals the character—whether by setting, conduct, analysis, dialogue, or soliloquy—his task is a hard one. In “Markheim” we have practically all of these used, with the result that the character is unmistakable and convincing.

SETTING OR ATMOSPHERE

Stories that emphasize setting are neither so numerous nor so easy to produce successfully as those of plot and character. What is meant by setting? It is an inclusive term. Time, place, local conditions, and sometimes descriptions of nature and of people are parts of it. When these are handled well, we get an effect called “atmosphere.” We know the effect that the atmosphere has upon objects. Anyone who has observed distant mountains knows that while they remain practically unchanged, they never look the same on two successive days. Sometimes they stand out hard and clear, sometimes they are soft and alluring, and sometimes they look unreal and almost melt into the sky behind them.

A certain place may so profoundly impress a writer that its demands may not be disregarded. Robert Louis Stevenson strongly felt the influence of certain places. “Certain dank gardens cry aloud for murder; certain old houses demand to be haunted; certain coasts are set apart for shipwreck. Other spots seem to abide their destiny, suggestive and impenetrable.” Perhaps all of us have seen some place of which

we have exclaimed: "It is like a story!" Therefore, when scene is to furnish the dominant interest, plot and character become relatively insignificant and shadowy. "The Fall of the House of Usher," by Edgar Allan Poe, is a story of this kind. It is the scene that affects us with dread and horror; we have no peace until we see the house swallowed up by the tarn and have fled out of sight of the tarn itself. The plot is extremely slight, and the lady Madeline and her unhappy brother are hardly more than shadows.

It must not be supposed from the foregoing explanation that the three essentials of the short story are ever really divorced. They are happily blended in many of our finest stories. Nevertheless, analysis of any one of these will show that in the mind of the writer one purpose was pre-eminent. On this point Robert Louis Stevenson has said: "There are, so far as I know, three ways and three only of writing a story. You may take a plot and fit characters to it, or you may take a character and choose incidents and situations to develop it, or, lastly, you may take a certain atmosphere and get actions and persons to express and realize it." When to this clear conception of his limitations and privileges the author adds an imagination that clearly visualizes events and the "verbal magic" by which good style is secured, he produces the short story that is a masterpiece.

To the Teacher

ALTHOUGH every teacher uses a short-story collection according to the needs and interests of the individual class, it may not be amiss to indicate various possibilities for the use of this book. First, of course, the stories may be studied in their own right as a unit in literature. Second, this collection may serve to encourage students to undertake outside reading of short stories over an extended period of time. Third, the collection may provide working models for students in a creative writing course. Fourth, a book of this kind may be used in a television course or in a unit on television. Finally, students may study the stories critically in historical perspective. Further clarification of these five different uses follows.

INTENSIVE STUDY

In recent years, psychological rather than aesthetic considerations have been emphasized in the study of literature. A primary purpose, therefore, of the study of short stories must be to give students a better understanding of human nature. For this reason, questions for stimulating class discussion have been placed at the close of each story. As often as possible, the questions extend discussion into a consideration of social and ethical behavior. The study of the character of Basil Duke Lee, for example, may easily lead into consideration of some of the anxieties that assail the maturing