American Short Fiction: Readings & Criticism

Edited by James K. Bowen and Richard VanDerBeets

Short Fiction

(Readings and Criticism)

Edited by
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Foreword

Short stories are not American in invention, nor is analysis of them singularly a native art; but, like the English sparrow, the short story has found sturdy nurture among us, increasing in number, and sometimes in excellence, beyond what it had ever been before. Its length often fits exactly to our mood, or to our requirement that something be succinctly said. In the hand of a master, it becomes consummately an art, suggesting more than it seems at first to reveal.

As an art form, the short story has attracted critics almost beyond number, who probe to analyze or explain, and much of their criticism provides a kind of useful calisthenics, both graceful and rewarding. Indeed, so much has been written about our better stories, that the criticism concerning any one of them might in itself fill a volume. For that reason alone, the compilers of the

present critical anthology are to be congratulated, having supplied so much in the form of abstracts of many penetrating critical interpretations, providing thereby breadth and diversity of informed opinion not to be found in other collections.

The presentation of a large range of viewpoints, economically packaged, is sufficient reason for congratulation, and gratitude; but other reasons for intelligent use of abstracts come to mind: when deftly done, they are creations in themselves, exemplars for student imitation; they cut through difficulties of time and space, allowing a generously wide sampling of approaches and attitudes; they make plain what is sometimes excessively difficult to comprehend because of specialized language. Critics can often become so involved in what they are saying that they seem to be talking among themselves, addressing what they have to say to other critics, and in terms that are not immediately understood by ordinary readers. To have reduced, translated, and made clear in summary the substance of each critical essay is in itself a boon to the ordinary reader. By the time he has completed reading and studying in this collection, the reader should be prepared to discuss literature intelligently with other ordinary readers or with professional critics, whose ranks he may in some sense be thought to have joined. Precision is gained, along with insight and vocabulary, and these three are cornerstones of a liberal education—indeed, of any education at all.

For education is finally a leading-out, not just a filling-in—that is, learning is a good and necessary thing, but not the goal. To learn traditional critical vocabulary and critical methods is a first step, and one that this collection generously encourages. But then, to apply these terms and these methods, led by the ideas rather than just by the words of other commentators, is to discover that literature can be many-splendored, capable of supporting varied and various approaches. With the tools in hand, the reader may then shape his own critical interpretations, testing, revising, or expanding what others—even his teachers—have said before. He will discover that literature, when it is excellent, is indestructible: no picking at it, no analysis, no close reading nor discussion can harm it in the least.

But to study literature is in a large sense to learn to talk about literature. To read it, simply for enjoyment, is the good thing, and enjoyment that becomes insight is perhaps the greatest gift literature has to offer. Inevitably, however, the intelligently inquiring reader will want to talk with someone about what he has read, to be able to explain what it is that he likes and why he likes it, or why someone else would receive refreshment from reading it. This is sometimes a difficult undertaking, because the words to express what one wants to say are not easily come on; it is because of this that the presentation of traditional critical vocabulary and method in the variety of examples that abstracts make possible is so wel-

come an innovation. The abstracts provide not only theoretical, but practical, examples of how literature has been discussed: these things have been said, these insights set forth, these ideas expressed; what now is there for me to say? The answer is that there is a great deal to say, for short stories such as those presented in this collection are multiple-faceted, and their chronological arrangement allows for judgment, not only on each story itself, but on the development of new ways of saying or suggesting things over the more than one hundred years represented by the stories chosen for study.

Having heard what critics have said about one story, the reader is then on his own in discovering what there is to be said about a second (or, with some adventuring, a third, or a fourth, or a fifth) story by the same author. Users of this anthology are to be envied for the opportunities that it presents for intelligently controlled, independent judgment. They will not need to be reminded that the literature is primary, and the talk about it only a means of discovering what richness it can disclose.

Lewis Leary

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J. K. B.

R. VDB.

Introduction

This book attempts to provide a useful common ground for encountering the best of American short fiction and the criticism that it generates. To enable an unusually broad representation of both, a technique new to collections of this kind is introduced: the abstract. The value of the abstract as a critical tool to aid the study of literature is now generally acknowledged; the existence of such periodicals as *Abstracts of English Studies*, *Abstracts of Folklore Studies*, and *American Literature Abstracts* testifies to the widespread use of abstracts within the scholarly community. The transition from scholarly to textbook use of abstracts is a natural and inevitable one, and this critical anthology is the first of its kind to apply the technique of abstracts as critical apparatus directly to the classroom.

Each of the seventeen stories in Part One is accom-

panied by four abstracts of critical articles bearing on interpretation, analysis, or judgment of that story. Abstracts—concise, readable, nonevaluative summaries of approximately four hundred words—can be presented in sufficient number as to afford a breadth and diversity of opinion not otherwise possible; abstracts render the substance of critical articles, intended for an audience of mature scholars, into readable and meaningful terms for the student; and, of course, abstracts serve as detailed and reliable bibliographic guides in determining the relevance and value of original materials for further study and research. From the wealth of materials available, the abstracts here presented were chosen to reflect as wide a range of criticism and critical approaches as possible; the many excellent articles not selected for abstract were excluded not out of ignorance or bias but rather because those included better fit the particular demands of this collection.

Part Two is organized on a principle of matching arrangement whereby less familiar, less frequently anthologized, and less critically attended stories by the same authors represented in Part One are offered (with the exception of Hemingway, for which the Fitzgerald story is substituted) for comparison and independent analysis without critical apparatus.

The abstracts can be profitably employed in a number of ways, and the variety of uses to which the materials lend themselves can only be suggested here. For example—and using as an illustration Poe's "Ligeia" and its accompanying abstracts—study, discussion, or writing might involve the following: 1. develop the general observations in each or any of the four abstracts accompanying "Ligeia" by providing specific details from the story that substantiate them; 2. in the light of the Basler, Gargano, and Morrison approaches to the story, evaluate Lauber's "A Plea for Literalism"; 3. to what extent may the central thesis of the Gargano abstract be applied to Poe's other story, "William Wilson"? 4. of the four approaches to the story reflected in the abstracts, defend a choice of the most cogent. Topics may also be broadened beyond a particular story and set of abstracts by considering, for example, 1. the psychological interpretation of fiction as it is demonstrated in abstracts relating to "Rip Van Winkle," "Ligeia," "My Kinsman, Major Molineux," "Bartleby," "Flowering Judas," and others; 2. or by undertaking a discussion of the use of the supernatural in "Ligeia," "William Wilson," "Drowne's Wooden Image," "Rip Van Winkle," and others; 3. or by tracing elements of the Gothic in "Ligeia," "William Wilson," "The Boarded Window," and "A Rose for Emily." Similar investigations, aided by the critical focus of appropriate abstracts, can be made into such areas as mythic/archetypal, sociocultural, and historical approaches to fiction. Further, chronological arrangement of stories provides an overview for considering the development of American short fiction as genre. Many and varied ways to use the

stories, abstracts, and matching stories will present themselves to users of this anthology.

As these suggestions for study and writing indicate, the abstracts here collected present critical terminology and methods not in theory but as they are practically applied: the demonstrable applications of a variety of approaches and systems. Acquaintance with these critical principles and practices can greatly enhance the appreciation of literature, for *criticism* is a term that can be said to relate to the description, analysis, or judgment of literature; and the *critic*, one who performs such analysis and exercises such judgment on the value and quality of literary works. The critic may employ any of a number of varying theories of art.

Literary and critical historians generally divide criticism, especially contemporary criticism, into *types*, of which the most pertinent to the purposes of this anthology are historical, formalistic, sociocultural, psychological, and mythic.*

Historical criticism holds as its basic principle that no work of literature can be critically regarded as if it were complete in itself; that is, each work must be examined in its entire context, in the whole range of available information related to it: the author's life and career, his literary sources and the influences of other writers, the age or culture in which the work was written, and the place of the work in a literary tradition, convention, or genre. *Formalistic criticism* (formalism or the "new criticism"), on the other hand, maintains that every work of literature contains within itself all that is necessary for complete understanding and appreciation and must be regarded without reference to extra-literary values or information outside the particular work. Formalistic criticism, consequently, relies heavily upon close textual analysis (*explication de texte*) for interpretation and judgment. Believing that the nature of the literary work itself must not be confused with its origins or effects, the formalistic critic indicts historical criticism with both the "intentional fallacy"—the error of judging the meaning of a literary work by the author's expressed or presumed intention in writing it—and the "affective fallacy"—the error of judging a literary work in terms of its results, particularly its emotional effect. *Sociocultural criticism* is related in some basic ways to the historical, but the central concern of the sociocultural critic involves both the literary work's social, economic, and political significances and its moral and cultural significances. The sociocultural critic holds the view that every work of literature reflects the interplay of a variety of social and cultural factors, that the form and technique of a work of literature are no more important than its ideas, and that enduring literary works are in the deepest sense

* Sheldon Norman Grebstein, *Perspectives in Contemporary Criticism* (New York, 1968).

moral, for they are involved with, and evaluate responses to, life. *Psychological criticism*, of all critical approaches, relies most upon a science or a scientific discipline—psychoanalysis/depth psychology and the development of Freudian thought and principles. The psychological critic studies a literary work as a projection of the personality of its author, demonstrates the relationship between that personality and subject matter, style, and character; or he delineates literary symbolism in terms of the Freudian view of the primacy of sex as a motivating factor in human behavior and the symbolic content of most human acts. *Mythic*, or "*archetypal*," *criticism* draws its materials from a variety of areas of knowledge—cultural anthropology, psychology, history, and philosophy among others. The purpose of the mythic critic is to demonstrate the relationship between ritual, myth, dream, and literature and to uncover the archetypal patterns in a literary work. The mythic critic views literature as the recurrent manifestation of archetypes: characters, images, symbols, scenes, and plots. The term *archetype* derives from Carl Jung, a disciple of Freud, and is used to describe a primordial image, shaped by the repeated experience of our ancestors, which is a part of the collective unconscious of the race of man. Great works of literature, in this view, gather their materials from the collective unconscious and combine individual experience with racial-archetypal experience.

These types of criticism are not mutually exclusive and this brief discussion of them only indicative of the variety of methods employed by critics in approaching a work of literature. Basic approaches are reflected in the abstracts accompanying the stories collected here, and the student is encouraged to make use of them first for their particular insights and illuminations, for their aid in developing and refining his own critical faculties, and, ultimately, as touchstones for deeper individual appreciation of the fiction itself.

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