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SHORTFICTION

An International Collection THOMAS A. QUILLASON LEONARD CASPER

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THE WORLD OF SHORT FICTION

An International Collection

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For Edward and Gretchen

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Introduction

The world of fiction is a world in motion. The reader, through gradual refinement of his sensibility, advances toward mature understanding even when the central character of a story shows a decline in his powers of insight. Fiction involves us not in the logical arrangements common to exposition or to direct argument, but in life as a developing process. The reader experiences the passage of time and the evolution of meanings made visible through the fullness of human event. Reoriented by the action of the story, the reader moves toward a moral and social awareness of his own.

However abstract other modes for organizing thought may tend to be, narration is forced by its nature to reproduce or at least approximate some recognizable level of concrete reality. We must feel the truth of fiction on our fingertips. A story derives both clarity and persuasiveness from its capacity to make even the most subtle truth tangible through assembled human circumstance. It tests, in the flesh, every initial insight—and abolishes, verifies, or modifies. It searches for constants, but respects the unique.

The human figure—the character as our other self—is the center of fiction. All the rest is subordinate, though essential. Each full character is defined, as man is, by variables of time and of place (setting); by sequential action (plot); by the significant evolving design (theme) of events in which he participates,

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whether or not the focal character (point of view) is permitted an equal consciousness of that significance. It is this human presence, in action, which ultimately decides all questions of credibility and which distinguishes between the tale of entertainment (where there is no disbelief to suspend) and the truth of fiction (where it is impossible to withhold belief). It is this same human presence which allows the reader, to the degree determined by personal and cultural sensitivity, his entrance into that act of awakening or maturing which every story presents.

The movement of reader and character toward understanding, as the forms of fiction recognize, is usually minute, piecemeal, sidelong. The action of a short story has adequate duration, commonly, to define one stage only in this tremulous growth. Yet even when a story's occasion seems momentary, its implications can be momentous. The professional author makes no effort to compensate for brevity by melodramatic incident or violent climax. Instead, he deliberately chooses the restrictions imposed by the short story or novella to temper some small portion of the universe's rampant energy, to corner its meanings in some narrow, bright chamber of comprehension.

Consequently, the criteria of selection for The World of Short Fiction have been quality of insight and authentic intensity, rather than sensationalism or "historical interest" academically considered. A number of the authors included are seminal figures. Maupassant's well-plotted stories, rooted in the world of everyday reality, as well as Chekhov's "plotless" stories, dependent on characterization by suggestion, have become models for later writers everywhere. Yet The World of Short Fiction does not attempt to trace the chronological growth of a genre. Chekhov is presented first not because he was one of the earliest moderns, but because he still ranks among the most accomplished. His attention to telling detail, his delightful sense of immediacy prevent the foreign from appearing remote.

More importantly, however, The World of Short Fiction begins with Chekhov because his "stories of inexperience" in some ways resemble the uninitiated student's own feeling for exploration, with its attached frustrations and slight triumphs. Dostoevsky is offered next because one of the collection's prin-

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ciples of organization is to place side by side nationals of the same country or representatives of what can be considered the same culture in spite of intervening political boundaries. However, since the assumption is, in every case, that one writer complements another, each partner in a pair is represented by only two stories. Others—like Joyce—who are solitary spokesmen for a group or area are represented by three stories. In this way, some range in every author and in every geographical or ethnic unit is suggested. Variety of another sort will be evident in the alternation of novellas with shorter fiction.

In addition to such groupings according to author, the present arrangement tries to interlock the works themselves on the basis of related themes or techniques. For example, both Conrad and Crane use stories of action as a base of operations for the exploration of larger meanings, while Crane's imagery prepares for Porter's denser symbols; the private murmur of social accusation audible in Nadine Gordimer becomes a public reverberation throughout Lusin; Mann's study of his contemporary society's spiritual decay can be read as a stage in Kafka's more cosmic vision; and Maupassant's ironic reflections on the surface relations betwen men and women expands to more tense and complex psychological combat in Lawrence. At the same time the student might compare the stories in a number of equally valid ways: according to the degree of technical experimentation attempted, as the burden of expressing human subtlety compels deviation from straightforward narration; according to construction of several levels of meaning, through the use of impressionistic images, clusters of symbols, or the satirical concealment of fact behind façade; according to shifting emphases on psychological or mythological pattern; and the like.

One special category which emerges in this collection owes much, undoubtedly, to the fact that the short story is a relatively modern art form. Contemporary man's prolonged search for identity and self-assurance is manifest in the recurring theme of the alien abroad, brought to the moment of decision in the Mexico of Porter, Gordimer's South Africa, or Conrad's Micronesia. The sense of place in each of these stories (something far more intimate than the term "setting" can indicate) is presented not to satisfy some tourist curiosity about local color,

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though the reader's interest may have its origins there. However authentic the story's surface, it conveys not so much the place perceived as it does the perceiver's inner state. "Objective" description becomes a mode of insight into the onlooker. In strange situations even the best human motives take on such protective coloration that the whole truth of a character may be hidden from himself, and the delicate perspective of irony is required of the author to insinuate what is otherwise withheld. Commonly, too, the innocent character who expected to remain pure bystander becomes thoroughly involved, just as surely as the reader becomes entangled in what is supposedly "only a story," a "vicarious" experience. "Nothing human is alien to me," the writer says, confirming the classics.

The World of Short Fiction includes several stories in which authors describe not just home thoughts and the native scene but their wandering countrymen far abroad, suddenly shaken into self-consideration by unforeseen circumstances. Henry James explored this technique of observation in a number of stories about Americans in Europe and conveyed a double perspective into several societies simultaneously. Here, more engaging writers have been substituted for James. Consequently the collection is international in a second sense, inasmuch as it deals with the psychospiritual impact of traffic between cultures, whether by expatriate or holiday traveler. Such Outsiders, marked by a sense of displacement, clearly show a family resemblance to Kafka's cosmic exile or Maupassant's ostracized prostitute or Joyce's rejected adolescent, or others alienated from themselves or their surroundings.

The "international rub" is only a species of that resistance, that constant measurement of one man against others in actuality or in the imagination essential to all fiction as "conflict." It may not be coincidental that a modern art form such as the short story, in image and motif, so often reminds us of the moral consequences of man's mobility today and his global commitments. A prolonged tour abroad no longer is successful as flight but becomes, instead, appointment and confrontation, an opportunity for self-assessment. Everywhere man sees his own reflection, for better or for worse. Thus, the "international rub" recapitulates the reader's own unconscious involvement in fic-

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tion, as well as the changeover in his own motives as his experience ripens.

"International exchanges"—multiple insights—of a different sort appear at the end of the collection. Lawrence's incisive thoughts on Mann, Mann on Kafka, Conrad on Maupassant and Crane—here are conversations in which readers can participate. The views presented are considered opinions, without being definitive. They are as informative about the esthetic and personal philosophy of the writer-critic as about the criticized writer.

Throughout, the dual perspectives—the world of fiction and fiction of the world—collaborate in the same way that the editors themselves have collaborated, with their complementary interests in the art of writing and in comparative literature. While no attempt has been made to create a little "united nations of literature" at the expense of quality in fiction, major arcs have been selected in the great circle of Western readers' special interests.

The reasoned order of stories, the critical biographies, the excerpted commentaries of author on author—all are planned to bring reader, accomplished author, and potential writer together, with the aftermath of that meeting to depend on the infinite possibilities of student motives and classroom directives. A variety of opportunities have been provided to help the student stretch his imagination, refresh his attitudes, and move toward his own self-development.

We wish to thank Professor W. R. Keast, of Cornell University, for his very helpful suggestions and comments during the preparation of this volume.

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LEONARD CASPER

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THE STORIES



Anton Chekhov

[1860-1904]

THOUGH HIGHLY CIFTED as a dramatist—Uncle Vanya (1897) and The Cherry Orchard (1903–1904) rank with the world's best—Anton Chekhov has won his greatest fame with nearly 800 short stories. By some he is called the "Russian Maupassant," and while there are points of similarity between the two, they are markedly different as storytellers. Chekhov's tales are rooted in the Russian character; yet he has a greater reputation in England and America than in his own native land, and for different reasons. To his countrymen he is known primarily as a writer of comic anecdotes, many of which have not been translated into English; to the English-speaking world he is regarded as a master of tragic-pathetic stories.

Born one year before the liberation of the serfs, Chekhov spent much of his brief life searching for freedom and dignity. His grandfather, born a serf, had earlier bought the family's freedom. But as a child in Taganrog, Chekhov was treated like a convict and beaten almost daily by a well-intentioned yet despotic father. This harsh treatment turned him into an uncommunicative recluse; years later he reflected sadly: "People must never be humiliated—that is the main thing." He found some solace from his kindly, sensitive mother. Once, he summed up the influence of his parents and recognized the effects of his father's love for music and art: "We owe our gifts to our father, our capacity for feeling to our mother."

His father had to flee to Moscow to escape creditors when his grocery business collapsed in 1876, and young Chekhov suddenly found himself independent. Left behind to finish his schooling at Taganrog, Chekhov became engrossed in the theater. He successfully organized an amateur production of Gogol's The Government Inspector. And though he preferred acting and directing plays, he had to find a way to support himself and his destitute family in Moscow, so, in 1877, he began sending anecdotes to his brother Alexander, who placed them in the humorous journal, The Alarm-Clock.

Medicine, however, finally became his profession. As early as 1876 when he suffered his first major illness—in 1884 it proved to be tuberculosis—he was attracted to science. His background as a medical student made him revere realism; later it was to make him highly critical of Zola and Tolstoy, because he felt they often wrote about things they did not know. When Chekhov started his medical practice, he had close contact with the common people and with provincial life; he widened his sympathetic understanding of human suffering; he became "doctor of the soul"—all important to his future success as a writer.

Chekhov could not support his family nor himself adequately enough as a doctor. He kept on writing comic sketches of about 100 lines for the humorous magazines. But in 1886 he became critical of his success: "I don't recall a single story upon which I have spent more than twenty-five hours. . . . I have composed my stories as reporters write their accounts of fires, mechanically, half unconsciously, with no concern either for the reader or myself." In 1887 he largely abandoned comic writing to write only serious stories. This was probably due to the tragedies he had witnessed among the common people and his discovery of Tolstoy's humanitarian philosophy and Turgenev's moving stories of peasant life. He did not abandon comedy altogether, for Gogol's satiric genius always remained with him. Chekhov improved his art of fiction by rewriting some of Tolstoy's and Turgenev's works.

Only after his journey to Sakhalin, Russia's Devil's Island, in 1890 did Chekhov move away from his imitative period. This journey resulted in an impressive book on prison reform; more important, it meant the end of Tolstoyan influence. Tolstoy's philosophy of nonresistance to evil seemed puerile, as did his Anton Chekhov 5

controversial remarks on love and marriage. Chekhov wrote The Duel (1891) to mock Tolstoy's arguments in The Kreutzer Sonata, and Ward No. 6 (1892) to renounce his philosophy of nonresistance to evil. Now independent as an artist, he wrote his best stories in the 1890s.

Though adept at many types of stories, Chekhov excels in those dealing with love. His many tempestuous affairs with women gave him mastery of his subject. Once he said: "I am finishing a story which is very boring, because woman and the element of love are quite lacking in it. I don't like that sort of story."

Like his famous plays, his stories are compact, understated, indirect-action mood dramas full of poetry and symbol. They are tales of delayed action, seemingly abrupt and incomplete. They are like life: trivial yet meaningful everyday experiences that are not solved, merely stated. One of his favorite themes is, as Prince Mirsky puts it, "the mutual lack of understanding between human beings, the impossibility for one person to feel in tune with another." He illuminates a soul's life with a psychology different from Dostoevsky's, which he considered "pretentious." His characters, not highly individualized, reflect Chekhov's pessimism; they are sad, pathetic people whose lives of quiet desperation bring "tears through laughter."

The Kiss

AT EIGHT O'CLOCK on the evening of the twentieth of May all the six batteries of the N— Reserve Artillery Brigade halted for the night in the village of Mestechki on their way to camp. At the height of the general commotion, while some officers were busily occupied around the guns, and others, gathered together in the square near the church enclosure, were receiving the reports of the quartermasters, a man in civilian dress, riding a queer horse, came into sight round the church. The little dun-colored horse with a fine neck and a short tail came, moving not straight forward, but as it were sideways, with a sort of dance step, as though it were being lashed about the legs. When he reached the officers the man on the horse took off his hat and said:

"His Excellency Lieutenant-General von Rabbeck, a local landowner, invites the officers to have tea with him this minute. . . ."

The horse bowed, danced, and retired sideways; the rider raised his hat once more and in an instant disappeared with his strange horse behind the church.

"What the devil does it mean?" grumbled some of the

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officers, dispersing to their quarters. "One is sleepy, and here this von Rabbeck with his tea! We know what tea means."

The officers of all the six batteries remembered vividly an incident of the previous year, when during maneuvers they, together with the officers of a Cossack regiment, were in the same way invited to tea by a count who had an estate in the neighborhood and was a retired army officer; the hospitable and genial count made much of them, dined and wined them, refused to let them go to their quarters in the village, and made them stay the night. All that, of course, was very nice-nothing better could be desired, but the worst of it was, the old army officer was so carried away by the pleasure of the young men's company that till sunrise he was telling the officers anecdotes of his glorious past, taking them over the house, showing them expensive pictures, old engravings, rare guns, reading them autograph letters from great people, while the weary and exhausted officers looked and listened, longing for their beds and yawning in their sleeves; when at last their host let them go, it was too late for sleep.

Might not this von Rabbeck be just such another? Whether he were or not, there was no help for it. The officers changed their uniforms, brushed themselves, and went all together in search of the gentleman's house. In the square by the church they were told they could get to his Excellency's by the lower road—going down behind the church to the river, walking along the bank to the garden, and there the alleys would take them to the house; or by the upper way—straight from the church by the road which, half a mile from the village, led right up to his Excellency's barns. The officers decided to go by the upper road.

"Which von Rabbeck is it?" they wondered on the way. "Surely not the one who was in command of the N——cavalry division at Plevna?"

"No, that was not von Rabbeck, but simply Rabbe and no 'von.'"

"What lovely weather!"

At the first of the barns the road divided in two: one