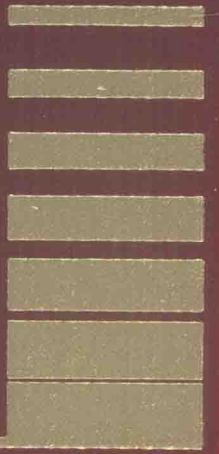


Short Story Criticism



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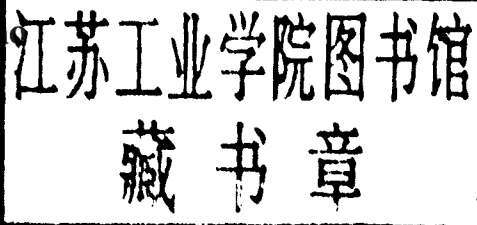


Volume 67

Short Story Criticism

Criticism of the
Works of Short Fiction Writers

Joseph Palmisano
Project Editor



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Short Story Criticism, Vol. 67

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Preface

Short Story Criticism (SSC) presents significant criticism of the world's greatest short story writers and provides supplementary biographical and bibliographical materials to guide the interested reader to a greater understanding of the authors of short fiction. This series was developed in response to suggestions from librarians serving high school, college, and public library patrons, who had noted a considerable number of requests for critical material on short story writers. Although major short story writers are covered in such Gale series as *Contemporary Literary Criticism* (CLC), *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* (TCLC), *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism* (NCLC), and *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800* (LC), librarians perceived the need for a series devoted solely to writers of the short story genre.

Scope of the Series

SSC is designed to serve as an introduction to major short story writers of all eras and nationalities. Since these authors have inspired a great deal of relevant critical material, SSC is necessarily selective, and the editors have chosen the most important published criticism to aid readers and students in their research.

Approximately eight to ten authors are included in each volume, and each entry presents a historical survey of the critical response to that author's work. The length of an entry is intended to reflect the amount of critical attention the author has received from critics writing in English and from foreign critics in translation. Every attempt has been made to identify and include the most significant essays on each author's work. In order to provide these important critical pieces, the editors sometimes reprint essays that have appeared elsewhere in Gale's Literary Criticism Series. Such duplication, however, never exceeds twenty percent of an SSC volume.

Organization of the Book

An SSC entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author's actual name given in parentheses on the first line of the biographical and critical introduction. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by the title of the work and its date of publication.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author and the critical debates surrounding his or her work.
- A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The first section comprises short story collections, novellas, and novella collections. The second section gives information on other major works by the author. For foreign authors, the editors have provided original foreign-language publication information and have selected what are considered the best and most complete English-language editions of their works.
- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. All short story, novella, and collection titles by the author featured in the entry are printed in boldface type. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the

beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.

- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism. Source citations in the Literary Criticism Series follow University of Chicago Press style, as outlined in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 14th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993).
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

Indexes

A **Cumulative Author Index** lists all of the authors that appear in a wide variety of reference sources published by the Gale Group, including *SSC*. A complete list of these sources is found facing the first page of the Author Index. The index also includes birth and death dates and cross references between pseudonyms and actual names.

A **Cumulative Nationality Index** lists all authors featured in *SSC* by nationality, followed by the number of the *SSC* volume in which their entry appears.

An alphabetical **Title Index** lists all short story, novella, and collection titles contained in the *SSC* series. Titles of short story collections, separately published novellas, and novella collections are printed in italics, while titles of individual short stories are printed in roman type with quotation marks. Each title is followed by the author's last name and corresponding volume and page numbers where commentary on the work is located. English-language translations of original foreign-language titles are cross-referenced to the foreign titles so that all references to discussion of a work are combined in one listing.

In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Gale also produces an annual paperbound edition of the *SSC* cumulative title index. This annual cumulation, which alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in the series, is available to all customers. Additional copies of this index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

Citing Short Story Criticism

When citing criticism reprinted in the Literary Criticism Series, students should provide complete bibliographic information so that the cited essay can be located in the original print or electronic source. Students who quote directly from reprinted criticism may use any accepted bibliographic format, such as University of Chicago Press style or Modern Language Association (MLA) style. Both the MLA and the University of Chicago formats are acceptable and recognized as being the current standards for citations. It is important, however, to choose one format for all citations; do not mix the two formats within a list of citations.

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Brossard, Nicole. "Poetic Politics." In *The Politics of Poetic Form: Poetry and Public Policy*, edited by Charles Bernstein, 73-82. New York: Roof Books, 1990. Reprinted in *Short Story Criticism*. Vol. 57, edited by Janet Witalec, 3-8. Detroit: Gale, 2003.

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Suggestions are Welcome

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African Diasporic Short Fiction

Fictional literature that is influenced by the diasporic or migratory experiences of displaced black communities, typically as a result of forced slavery.

INTRODUCTION

At the time of their forced migration, African diasporic storytellers relied on oral narratives to relate stories of their native lands—its traditions, folklore, mythology—as well as music and other forms of storytelling. Later emerging as a popular Western literary form, slave narratives were the first widely published example of African diasporic literature. As firsthand accounts of slave life, these narratives exposed the brutality of the chattel system and demonstrated the dignity of black men and women at a time when their humanity was often questioned by whites. As African diasporic peoples struggled for freedom and equality under the law in their new lands, African diasporic literature developed through the years to reflect changing social, political, and cultural realities while retaining a connection to a common cultural heritage.

The era of the transatlantic slave trade began in the early 1500s by the Portuguese and Spanish when the first shiploads of African slaves were brought to Latin America. By the seventeenth century, numerous European countries had also entered the trade in order to meet the labor demands of their commercial interests in the Americas and the Caribbean. Even after winning its independence from England, the United States took part in the trade until Congress barred the importation of slaves in 1808. (The English Parliament passed the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act in 1807.)

The infamous “Middle Passage” was the second leg of this three-part slave voyage that served to underdevelop Africa and brought between ten and thirty million Africans to North America, Central America, South America, and the Caribbean. Fully loaded with its human cargo, European and American ships set sail for the Americas, where the slaves—those that had survived the inhumane conditions of the voyage—were exchanged for sugar, tobacco, and other raw materials. In the New World, enslaved Africans were forced to work on sugar, coffee, cocoa, and cotton plantations, gold and silver mines, rice fields, and as house servants.

In 1823 Chile became the first Spanish American republic to emancipate enslaved Africans. The Central American Federation, from which the countries of Costa

Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua were eventually formed, ended servitude within its territories the following year. In 1829 Mexico abolished slavery in all of its states, with the exception Texas as a way to pacify the United States. In the United States, slavery as an institution was not outlawed until President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, which took effect on January 1, 1863. Cuba abolished slavery in 1880, but replaced it with *patronato*, a system under which former enslaved Africans were apprenticed to their owners for a period of eight years. In 1886, however, the *patronato* was ended prematurely, bringing freedom to all Cubans. Ironically, the former Portuguese (and from 1580 to 1640, Spanish-controlled) colony of Brazil was the one of the last strongholds of slavery, abolishing the institution in 1888. Even after slavery was outlawed in each of these countries, however, migrated blacks continued to be victimized by institutionalized discrimination in political, economic, social, and cultural arenas.

While continuing the African tradition of oral and written literature, African diasporic writers over time began assimilating many cultural and intellectual practices of their adopted countries into novels, short stories, drama, and poetry. Yet, a resonating theme in many of their works was the transition of their ancestors from the homeland by means of the Middle Passage. Literary critics assert that this forced and, oftentimes, violent dispersal had a tangible effect on the culture and aesthetics of migratory African populations and became a unifying theme in many writings of the African diaspora. People that were hitherto diverse, ethnically and geographically, were now perceived as belonging to one common land and viewed collectively as Africans, be it African Americans or Afro-Brazilians. In addition to the oppression that resulted from enslavement, racial discrimination was another powerful uniting factor among the displaced people of Africa, and it continued to be a strong thematic element of many diasporic stories. Scholars also point to other common elements within this body of literature, including kinship, family, and spirituality. Despite these similarities, other literary critics counter that it is difficult to find a common thread among African diasporic writings.

As a result, much of the discussion surrounding the African diaspora concentrates on the United States, with little effort put into examining the development of diasporic literature in Canada, Central America, South America, and the Caribbean. Many commentators propose that in order to define a collective black identity, it

is crucial that other descendants of the Middle Passage besides those settled in the United States are studied. It is only then that an increased level of understanding can be reached regarding both the past and present state of African diasporic literature.

REPRESENTATIVE WORKS

Anthologies

The Best Short Stories by Negro Writers: An Anthology from 1899 to the Present [edited by Langston Hughes] (anthology) 1967

The Black Woman: An Anthology [edited by Toni Cade] (anthology) 1970

From the Roots: Short Stories by Black American [edited by Charles L. James] (anthology) 1970

Ten Times Black: Stories from the Black Experience [edited by Julian Mayfield] (anthology) 1972

Black-Eyed Susans: Classic Stories by and for Black Women [edited by Mary Helen Washington] (anthology) 1975

Caribbean New Wave: Contemporary Short Stories [edited by Stewart Brown] (anthology) 1990

Short Fiction by Black Women, 1900-1920 [edited by Elizabeth Ammons] 1991

Daughters of Africa: An International Anthology of Words and Writings by Women of African Descent from the Ancient Egyptian to the Present [edited by Margaret Busby] (anthology) 1992

Calling the Wind: Twentieth Century African-American Short Stories [edited by Clarence Major] (anthology) 1993

The Sleeper Wakes: Harlem Renaissance Stories by Women [edited by Marcy Knopf] (anthology) 1993

Centers of the Self: Stories by Black American Women, from the Nineteenth Century to the Present [edited by Judith A. Hamer and Martin J. Hamer] (anthology) 1994

Fiery Spirits: A Collection of Short Fiction and Poetry by Canadian Writers of African Descent [edited by Ayanna Black] (anthology) 1994

Ancestral House: The Black Short Story in the Americas and Europe [edited by Charles H. Rowell] (anthology) 1995

Revolutionary Tales: African American Women's Short Stories, from the First Story to the Present [edited by Bill Mullen] (anthology) 1995

Black American Short Stories: One Hundred Years of the Best [edited by John Henrik Clarke] (anthology) 1999

The African American West: A Century of Short Stories [edited by Bruce A. Glasrud and Laurie Champion] (anthology) 2000

Ebony Rising: Short Fiction of the Greater Harlem Renaissance Era [edited by Craig Gable] (anthology) 2004

Tina McElroy Ansa

"Willie Bea and Jaybird" (short story) 1991

James Baldwin

Going to Meet the Man (short stories) 1965

This Morning, This Evening, So Soon (novella) 1967

Toni Cade Bambara

Gorilla, My Love (short stories) 1972

The Sea Birds Are Still Alive: Collected Stories (short stories) 1977

Marita Bonner

Frye Street and Environs: The Collected Works of Marita Bonner Occomy (essays and short stories) 1987

Dionne Brand

Sans Souci, and Other Stories (short stories) 1989

Margaret Taylor Goss Burroughs

"Private Jeff Johnson" (short story) 1944

Octavia E. Butler

Bloodchild and Other Stories (short stories and essays) 1995

Charles W. Chestnutt

"The Goophered Grapevine" (short story) 1887

The Conjure Woman (short stories) 1899

The Wife of His Youth, and Other Stories of the Color Line (short stories) 1899

Austin C. Clarke

When Women Rule (short stories) 1985

Nine Men Who Laughed (short stories) 1986

Choosing His Coffin: The Best Stories of Austin Clarke (short stories) 2003

Michelle Cliff

Bodies of Water (short stories) 1990

The Store of a Million Items: Stories (short stories) 1998

Eugenia Collier

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Merle Collins

Rain Darling (short stories) 1990

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Krik? Krak! (short stories) 1995

- Rita Dove
Fifth Sunday (short stories) 1985
- Henry Dumas
Ark of Bones and Other Stories (short stories) 1970
Rope of Wind and Other Stories (short stories) 1979
- Paul Laurence Dunbar
The Strength of Gideon and Other Stories (short stories) 1900
In Old Plantation Days (short stories) 1903
The Heart of Happy Hollow (short stories) 1904
- Alice Moore Dunbar-Nelson
Violets and Other Tales (short stories and poems) 1895
The Goodness of St. Rocque and Other Stories (short stories) 1899
Women and Men (short stories) circa 1900
The Annals of 'Steenth Street (short stories) circa 1900
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Black on Black: Baby Sister and Selected Writings (short stories) 1973
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- Langston Hughes
The Ways of White Folks (short stories) 1934
Simple Speaks His Mind (short stories) 1950
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Mules and Men (short stories) 1935
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Soulcatcher and Other Stories (short stories) 2001
- Edward P. Jones
Lost in the City (short stories) 1992
- Gayl Jones
White Rat (short stories) 1977
- William Melvin Kelley
Dancers on the Shore (short stories) 1964
- Randall Kenan
Let the Dead Bury the Dead and Other Stories (short stories) 1992
- Jamaica Kincaid
At the Bottom of the River (short stories) 1983
- Nella Larsen
An Intimation of Things Distant: The Collected Fiction of Nella Larsen (novels and short stories) 1992
- Earl Lovelace
A Brief Conversation and Other Stories (short stories) 1988

Clarence Major
Fun & Games (short stories) 1990

Paule Marshall
Soul Clap Hands and Sing (novellas) 1961
Reena and Other Stories (short stories) 1983

Colleen McElroy
Jesus and Fat Tuesday and Other Short Stories (short stories) 1987

Claude McKay
Gingertown (short stories) 1932

Reginald McKnight
Moustapha's Eclipse (short stories) 1988
The Kind of Light That Shines on Texas (short stories) 1992
White Boys (short stories) 1998

James Alan McPherson
Hue and Cry (short stories) 1968
Elbow Room (short stories) 1977

Pauline Melville
Shape-shifter (short stories) 1990

Adalberto Ortiz
La mala espalda (short stories) 1952
La entundada y cuentos variados (short stories) 1971

Connie Porter
"Hoodoo" (short story) 1988

Ann Petry
Miss Muriel and Other Stories (short stories) 1971

Marlene Nourbese Philip
"Stop Frame" (short story) 1993

Sonia Sanchez
"After Saturday Night Comes Sunday" (short story) 1971

Olive Senior
Summer Lightning and Other Stories (short stories) 1986
Discerner of Hearts (short stories) 1995

Ntozake Shange
Sassafrass (novella) 1977
"comin to terms" (short story) 1979

Ann Allen Shockley
The Black and White of It (short stories) 1980

Jean Toomer
Cane (poetry and short stories) 1923

Ana Lydia Vega
Encancaranublado y otros cuentos de naufragio (short stories) 1983
Pasión de historia y otras historias de pasión (short stories) 1987
True and False Romances (short stories) 1994

Mary Elizabeth Vroman
"See How They Run" (short story) 1951

Alice Walker
In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women (short stories) 1973
The Complete Stories (short stories) 1994

Eric Derwent Walrond
Tropic Death (short stories) 1926

Dorothy West
"The Typewriter" (short story) 1926

John Edgar Wideman
Damballah (short stories) 1981
Fever (short stories) 1989

Richard Wright
Uncle Tom's Children: Five Long Stories (novellas) 1938
Eight Men (short stories) 1961
Rite of Passage (novella) 1994

OVERVIEWS AND GENERAL STUDIES

Judith A. Hamer and Martin J. Hamer (essay date 1994)

SOURCE: Hamer, Judith A. and Hamer, Martin J. Introduction to *Centers of the Self: Stories by Black American Women, from the Nineteenth Century to the Present*, edited by Judith A. Hamer and Martin J. Hamer, pp. 3-19. New York: Hill and Wang, 1994.

[In the following essay, Hamer and Hamer trace the development of African American women's short fiction from the nineteenth century to the present.]

We are the subjects of our own narrative, witnesses to and participants in our own experience, and, in no way coincidentally, in the experiences of those with whom we have come in contact . . . And to read imaginative

literature by and about us is to choose to examine centers of the self and to have the opportunity to compare these centers with the "raceless" one with which we are, all of us, most familiar.

—Toni Morrison, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature"

And what is wrong in woman's
life

In man's cannot be right.

—Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, "A Double Standard"

Anna Julia Cooper (1858-1964), whose 1892 book of essays, *A Voice from the South*, is considered to be one of the earliest texts of the black feminist movement, set down what can serve as the justification for this anthology when she wrote, "It is not the intelligent woman vs. the ignorant woman; nor the white woman vs. the black, the brown, and the red—it is not even the cause of woman vs. man. Nay, 'tis woman's strongest vindication for speaking that *the world needs to hear her voice*."¹

More than half a century later, in 1950, that "voice" was heard when Gwendolyn Brooks became the first black American to win the Pulitzer Prize for poetry. Twenty years later, in 1970, black women opened a floodgate that changed African-American literature forever. Toni Cade Bambara published the anthology *The Black Woman*, the first of its kind to allow women to speak their minds on issues relevant to their lives. That same year, as if on cue, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* rounded out the triumvirate that would begin a renaissance. Now, exactly a century and two years after Cooper's prophetic remark, Toni Morrison has become the first black woman to be awarded the Nobel Prize. The growing success of black women's writing in the past twenty years is awesome. In 1992 they had three books on the best-seller list at the same time: Terry McMillan's *Waiting to Exhale*, Morrison's *Jazz*, and Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. Phenomenal sales figures indicate that their work has been accepted by an audience more sophisticated and integrated than has ever existed for black male writers.

Black women writers have also produced an impressive body of short stories. Some were published at the turn of the century, when their writings enjoyed modest popularity. Many were published during the Harlem Renaissance and in the years after the 1970s, as women writers gained increased access to the marketplace. Together, these short stories from the past and the present represent a unique body of literature that has not been adequately recognized.²

The twenty-seven short stories in this anthology document some of the thoughts and deeds of nineteenth- and twentieth-century black women. Read against the black

American concerns and feminist aspirations that existed when each piece was published, these stories provide a sense of black women's attitudes that expands the views provided in novels by black women.³ Most of the stories fall into the general category of social realism, where the writer arranges the elements in the story to give the illusion of actual experience. These stories explore various themes: among them, the results of men's mistreatment of women (S. A. Williams's "Tell Martha Not to Moan" and Colleen McElroy's "Sister Detroit"), family love (Walker's "To Hell with Dying" and Paule Marshall's "To Da-Duh, in Memoriam"), erotic love (Dove's "Damon and Vandalia" and Jamaica Kincaid's "Song of Roland"), and the complexities of relationships (Marita Bonner's "One Boy's Story," Toni Cade Bambara's "My Man Bovanne," and Gayl Jones's "Jevata"). Others, like Fannie Barrier Williams's "After Many Days" and Jessie Redmon Fauset's "Mary Elizabeth," belong to a radically different category, domestic allegories. Rather than attempting to imitate reality, they present a fictive society where blacks gain acceptance by hard work, frugality, and spirituality. With their perfect-world themes, these works resemble the white utopian novels of the post-Reconstruction years. Three other early stories are as meaningful today as when they were first published. Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's "Two Offers" asks whether marriage is preferable to social activism and spinsterhood; Angelina Weld Grimké's "Goldie" examines the futility of revenge; and Nella Larsen's "Sanctuary" questions the age-old homily that blood is thicker than water.

The significance of the short story as a literary genre cannot be overstated. If one of the functions of art is to help society look at itself, to raise levels of consciousness by exposing beliefs that have too long been taken for granted, then the short story serves this function well. It focuses intensely on specific situations. It frequently reflects current circumstances, since it can often be written in a matter of months, and it provides a many-faceted journal of everyday life, a window on society. For example, in the anthology *Short Fiction by Black Women, 1900-1920*, edited by Elizabeth Ammons, the stories deal with a host of early twentieth-century black concerns, including

the church, schoolteaching, love, poverty, lynching, passing, sisterhood, uplift, slavery, marriage, mothering, dreaming, lying, laughing, dying . . . They voice opinions on political issues . . . [discuss] black men's sexism, color prejudice within the black community, votes for women, and the sexual exploitation of black women by white men.⁴

Finally, because the short story is generally published by black-owned magazines and journals, it more readily reflects the moods and attitudes of black people.

None of these attributes of the short story is unusual once it is realized that, although the modern story is a

literary convention barely a century and a half old, its origins lie in myths and ancient folktales that go back thousands of years. The earliest form of the short story is generally thought to date back to the jataka, fables of the births of the Buddha in various animal guises, which were set down around 483 B.C.⁵ From this source came such stories as "The Goose That Laid the Golden Eggs." Other traditional stories came from Greek myth and *The Arabian Nights*. Still others were first collected and written down by the Grimm brothers and philologists in Italy and France. Their tales include the stories about Bluebeard, Cinderella, and Sleeping Beauty.

Perhaps the most stunning information to emerge from the research on the ancient short story is that the substance of a number of the Grimms' tales can be found among most racial and ethnic groups, including the Native North Americans, East and West Africans, Maoris and Samoans, and even the ancient Egyptians, as attested to by papyri found in tombs.⁶ The short story, then, be it myth or legend, proverb or anecdote, an ancient story or a modern one told after dinner, seems to serve a fundamental function in all societies. It is a way to celebrate our fantasies, to mark our presence in time, to pass down our loves, fears, and foibles from one generation to the next.

Edgar Allan Poe, considered the father of the modern short story, defined it in 1842 when he suggested criteria for its length and dramatic design. It should be short enough to be read at one sitting, thereby taking advantage of the "immense force derivable from totality"—a force so powerful that it can make the body tense, raise the blood pressure, so engross the reader that she may not even hear another person enter or leave the room. Poe believed that, "in the whole composition there should be no word written of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one pre-established design."⁷ For like poetry, if a word is misplaced or is superfluous or if there is a loss of balance or the momentum is not right, the story will not work.

In 1842, the same year that Poe published his critical essay, the Russian writer Nicolai Gogol published "The Overcoat," which dramatically changed the short story's subject matter. Poe's stories focus on one of three subjects: the study of passive horror ("The Pit and the Pendulum," about the Spanish Inquisition), the murder mystery ("The Murders in the Rue Morgue"), and scientific puzzles and thrills ("The Gold Bug"). Gogol, however, in writing about a clerk who makes sacrifices in order to buy a new overcoat only to have it stolen the first evening he wears it, moved the short story from romanticism to realism. Many critics believe that this story was the first to present the "little man" and that it brought an end to the ancient short stories where heroes were always kings or gentlemen. Today's short story is so routinely about common people that the

Russian phrase "We all spring from Gogol's 'Overcoat'" cannot be taken lightly.

Since brevity and drama are hardly enough to define the short story, over the years critics have added other criteria. Many—such as trope (e.g., metaphor, metonym), topoi (theme), motif (subtheme), characterization (the development of characters with whom the reader strongly identifies, either positively or negatively), and plot (how is this story going to turn out?)—are taken from the novel. Others, like believability, eloquent use of the vernacular, showing as opposed to telling, were added as twentieth-century critics strove to better define the form.

There has long been a movement away from the tight plot. Chekhov is credited with having struck out the beginning and the end of the story, leaving us with the so-called plotless middle action. The plotless story gives us another variation, where nothing is resolved and a particular, isolated action simply moves to a more general plane. Or it allows the author to begin as near as possible to the end of an action, compressing an event in an attempt to reach its core. In other plotless tales, the "action is small, [but] its meanings are large."⁸ Yet none of these criteria has limited this increasingly sophisticated art form. For the short story, Nadine Gordimer tells us, has the power to show us exactly "that quality of human life where contact is more like the flash of fireflies . . . where the only thing one can be sure of [is] the present moment."⁹ The short story can also probe the labyrinthine recesses of the tormented soul. Perhaps that is why revelation, epiphany, and the moment of illumination are so appropriate to the genre, for in life as in this art insights often occur during that one moment of focused intensity.

Thus, we have two sets of criteria: the denotative definitions laid down by Poe and elaborated upon by later critics, and the connotative standards developed by writers as they experiment with the form. These criteria, of course, are race- and gender-neutral. To claim anything else—that because the criteria were established by white writers they do not apply to blacks, or that black women should be held to different standards—marginalizes the importance of all black writers' work. While one's liking a story or not is often a matter of personal taste, a knowledge of criteria can only help in making a decision. As the black critic George Kent eloquently states, a critic is

a kind of intelligent (hopefully) reader mediating between the writer and the audience, with very strong obligations to both. Obligations to the writer in trying as hard as you can to know what he's doing, and obligations to the audience . . . to try to speak stimulatingly enough about the work so that the audience will understand [its] particular customs and conventions . . . and how [it] relates . . . to its own tradition.¹⁰

Hence, we offer the following critical road map.

In 1859 Frances Ellen Watkins Harper published "The Two Offers." Although African-American men had already published three tales, none qualifies as a modern short story. The first two strain a reader's willing suspension of disbelief. Lemuel Hayes's narrative, published in the then-equivalent of a modern-day paperback and entitled *Mystery Developed; or, Russell Colvin, (Supposed to Be Murdered,) in Full Life; and Stephen and Jesse Boorn, (His Convicted Murderers,) Rescued from Ignominious Death by Wonderful Discoveries* (1820), fails to explain crucial murder evidence.¹¹ Frederick Douglass's "The Heroic Slave" (1840), also published as a paperback, expects the reader to believe that an escaped slave and a white man who helps him could run into each other by pure chance three times in as many states over the course of more than five years. The odds of this happening are remote, and credibility is a key requirement of the modern short story. The third tale, William Wells Brown's "A True Story of Slave Life," which appeared in the *Anti-Slavery Advocate* (1852), is, based on our research, a true story. It tells of a ten-year-old fair-skinned slave girl who is abandoned by her white "master" and father. She is taken in by the family of a "coloured gentleman," Robert Purvis, and four years later is placed in the family of "his father-in-law, the late venerable James Forten." Mrs. Forten encourages the girl's father to visit her, and, smitten by her beauty and surprised that she has lost "the uncouthness of the Southern slave life," he agrees to her future support.¹²

Harper's story about marriage, however, meets the criteria for a modern short story: It is well structured, having a beginning, a middle, and an end. It credibly dramatizes the lives of three common people, such as the husband of one of the women: "And yet moments of deep contrition would sweep over him, when he would resolve to abandon the wine-cup forever, when he was ready to forswear the handling of another card . . ." And it raises important questions: Is marriage preferable to social commitment and spinsterhood? Is a woman's place only in the home? The pre-Civil War readers of Harper's day "assumed that the aim of literature was education. They expected it to . . . argue . . . or exhort, to point out the lessons in their everyday experiences . . ."¹³ Harper's story appeared in the *Anglo-African American*, a magazine designed to educate and to encourage, to speak for and to black Americans. It undoubtedly reached free blacks, like herself, living and working in the North. By deliberately making the story ethnically neutral,¹⁴ Harper provokes a discussion about class, equality, and equal opportunity rather than one specifically about racial injustice. Harper raised questions that were probably central to the lives of many women. Her story, then, is essentially about choices a woman must make.

The two largest secular outlets for black women's fiction did not appear until the turn of the century. *The Colored American Magazine*, founded in 1900, and *The Crisis*, founded in 1910 as the official organ of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People,¹⁵ were started during the darkest days of post-Reconstruction, when African Americans were rapidly losing faith in their newly won freedom. However, the literary critic Claudia Tate, whose *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire* examines black women's novels of this period, points out that many African Americans still believed they could realize their desire to become full citizens by simply adopting the middle-class values of the dominant society. Despite the lynching of some four thousand blacks between 1889 and 1920,¹⁶ many African Americans saw goals such as marriage, voting, professional attainment, and intellectual and cultural refinement as more important than an individual's racial designation.¹⁷ Thus some of the writers, in order to encourage these values, created domestic allegories in which blacks participated in the social institutions of the period. Fannie Barrier Williams's "After Many Days" (1902) tells the story of a well-bred young woman who, though she appears to be white, is unknowingly a fair-skinned "negro." Betrothed to a white man, she learns of her race by accident from a servant, and puts the matter before her intended to test his love for her. If he marries her, his decision will show that race is less important than education and class and, by inference, that the respectability of marriage is within reach of all "negroes," providing they have skills and social graces.

Jessie Redmon Fauset's "Mary Elizabeth" (1919) also stresses the value of participating in white society's social institutions through marriage. Like "After Many Days," this piece is also a domestic allegory: in both stories the black middle-class women learn something from black servants. The structure of "Mary Elizabeth," a story within a story, is an age-old technique (used most effectively in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*) in which the narrator introduces a storyteller, whose tale has greater credibility since it does not appear to be the voice of the author. In this case the apparent story, narrated by a solidly middle-class black woman named Sally and occurring in the present, examines the importance of marriage. The secondary story, however, has greater impact because it is told by Sally's maid, Mary Elizabeth, and for added emphasis it is told in dialect. Its theme is slavery's effect on the lives of Mary Elizabeth's parents. Though in love with one another, they were sold separately. Twenty-six years later, freed and married to newfound mates, they are miraculously reunited, and the question they must answer is whether they should leave their present spouses to resume their first love. Their decision not to leave their spouses may have been a way of pointing out to readers the importance of the Christian marriage ceremony—as far more