PEARL GASARCH / RALPH GASARCH

FICTION

The Universal Elements

FICTION

THE UNIVERSAL ELEMENTS

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PREFACE

IDEALLY, the literary experience should illuminate and expand the reader's life experience. Yet for many of today's students the standard fiction anthologies fail, with their explication of technique and literary history, to forge that connection between literature and life which is so vital to the discovery that reading good fiction is a means of learning more about one's life and the lives of all men.

In *Fiction: The Universal Elements,* we have grouped 31 stories around five universal life stages, and we have carefully searched out authors with diverse backgrounds. Our rationale has been that universality in fiction is most accessible to the broad spectrum of the present-day student body when it is presented in the language, styles, and themes of a greater diversity of writers than one finds in most anthologies.

The book therefore reflects our conviction that, for fiction to evoke an awareness of universal meanings in the student, he must be able to identify with a significant portion of the immediate reality of the literary work. Accordingly, the stories assembled here treat stages of the life cycle which we have found to be of greatest interest to contemporary youth: the decline of innocence in childhood, the search for identity in adolescence, the experience of love, the sharing of one's life with another person, and the complexities of later life.

Beyond this, the authorship includes representative literary expression from, for example, the black and Spanish-American experiences, which we have found highly effective when read in conjunction with more commonly anthologized fiction. The interesting paradox seems to be that, just as the successful writer derives his universal power from the selective reworking of a particular reality, so the reader's recognition of that power is best promoted through a variety of regional, ethnic, and other literary perspectives which are still slighted in many anthologies.

In a number of cases we were able to obtain from living writers whose work appears here statements about their lives and their work which they thought would interest readers of a collection such as we have assembled. Their commentaries appear within the editorial remarks about the author that precede each story.

We elected to restrict the book to short fiction, but we have included three longer stories ("The Bear," "The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner,"

and "The Death of Ivan Ilych") which are usually classified as novellas, to provide experiences with a somewhat more extended fictional form.

Once a reader has experienced the satisfaction that comes from rethinking his own experience in the larger perspective provided by literature, some consideration of the formal elements of fiction may add another dimension to his appreciation. The conclusion of the book (page 442 and following) therefore provides an alternate table of contents arranged by formal elements, as well as an introductory discussion of the chief formal devices in fiction, each of which is illustrated with reference to stories in this book.

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TO THE READER:

A Note on Universality

THE BEST REASON for putting a collection of fiction together is to give pleasure to the reader. Our students—and we—have been delighted, astonished, distressed, and humbled by the stories gathered here. They are all different—in length, language, place, and "feel." Yet each rewarded us in some special way as we read and reread it. So we wanted each to have a larger audience because we had found it a source of pleasure.

The pleasures of reading are not altogether like the pleasures of hearing a favorite record or lounging on a beach. There is, to be sure, the sheer delight in enjoying the sounds and rhythms of well-constructed language or the skillful verbal depiction of sensory experience. But the most enduring pleasures of reading go deeper. They go as deep as the reader's experience is deep. And that, we believe, is what makes the stories that follow especially rewarding. Each has the power to jolt you out of your own experience and into the action of the story—then right back into your own feelings. Each writer knows at least a few things that you already know. Each can surprise you by using an idea or emotion that you have experienced and shaping it into a new notion that will fascinate you. You can find *yourself,* if you look, in these stories.

Discovering your own experience mirrored in a story is different from the uses to which fiction is often put. Because the simplest way to cope with painful or dull reality is to escape, stories are sometimes read simply to transport us to other places, other times, other ways of life, where we can temporarily forget the troubles of our here and now. But escapist pleasures fade all too quickly, and we return to the real world with nothing to show for our trip except the passage of an hour's time. This is not surprising, for our goal was to be taken *away from* rather than *into* our immediate reality.

The best stories, as far back as we can trace the tales, myths, and dramas of man, have always worked both ways. They sweep us out of our world into a new, intriguing setting, yet in the final analysis they return us to our present lives by reminding us of truths, character types, and patterns of experience we already recognize in our own existence. In this way, good stories help us to order our lives.

And we are eager for order, which often seems lacking in real life. Most of us are too much in the middle of things to find much meaning in them. Viewing our reality from one narrow point of view—our own—we often fail to see a single incident in perspective, or to relate it to other experiences—much less to the general condition of mankind.

Sometimes, looking back, we pause, reexamine, gain fresh insights. This is the point at which we begin to engage in something like the literary process that writers use. The author's raw material, like ours, is the disorder of life. But with his literary license an author is not restricted to the randomness, the uncertainties, the emotional blinders, and the gaps in knowledge that becloud any attempt to understand life while it is going on. Like an all-knowing god, he isolates a specific experience (from his own life or from his observation), gives it a past and a future, views it as it might appear through a particular pair of eyes he chooses, and, already knowing its final outcome, weaves a pattern through which we can recognize something that once happened to us.

Our first reaction is a response to the story's immediately familiar elements: setting, incidents, characters, the way of life depicted. At the same time, we react with interest about the unfamiliar: an earlier era, a foreign place, strange customs and traditions, a different point of view. Beneath the surface reality in a good story (strange as it may seem at first) we sense an identification. We may identify with a recognizable dilemma (facing an English reform-school boy), a familiar character trait (in a dying nineteenth-century Russian bureaucrat), or a similar memory (a Dublin adolescent worshiping his beloved from afar).

These underlying universal elements in fiction, feeding back as they do to our own experience, can expand our knowledge of ourselves in the larger context of mankind. How much of this analysis is stimulated by a work of fiction is a measure of its achievement. How much it changes the reader's view of himself and of life is a measure of its significance. That is what we mean when we say that reading a good story can be intensely pleasurable.

The forms of fiction are many. This book presents a sampling, including a wide representation of *short fiction,* which most readers find easiest to start with.

Limitation of length in a short story forces the author to view life from the other end of the telescope. A short story contracts reality to squeeze out the truth to be found in a mere thread of experience. Restricted in length, it can probe only a fragment of life: *one* sequence of events, usually illuminating *one* character trait, illuminating *one* aspect of reality. A few of the pieces of fiction in this book are longer than the average short story. You will probably not be particularly aware of length as you read, but you may find yourself thinking afterward that the author treated his subject differently from the way he might have treated it in half the space.

The themes of fiction are as various as life itself. We have arranged the stories that follow around five universal elements in the life of every person: childhood, youth, the search for love, marriage, and later life. Each story in a

group is unique, yet each shares something with the others because of the life stage they all portray.

Within these five groupings you will find rich variety in style, setting, point of view, character, and way of life in stories dealing with a similar theme. At the same time, you will probably recognize universalities of the human condition that go beyond time and place. Although the stories reflect more than a century of writing and range in setting from the throne of the Almighty in heaven to the streets of Bayonne, Louisiana, they share common concerns which are boundless in time and space.

To help suggest how much of a writer's material is shaped not simply out of his imagination but out of his own direct experience, we attempted to contact each of the living writers represented here. We asked them to share with readers of this book whatever they thought would be of interest, either in their own life experience or in their writing. The majority have responded with messages that reveal the man or woman behind the writing. Others declined to comment, in the belief that no author can speak for a story or for himself better than the story itself can.

Our first criterion in choosing stories for this collection was their ability to communicate the universality that can be found in life's diversity. We also attempted to draw stories from a broad range of experiential sources, from a wide selection of authors with dissimilar backgrounds. If we have chosen well, you should not go very far in this book without encountering something that rings a bell, no matter what your own unique background may be.

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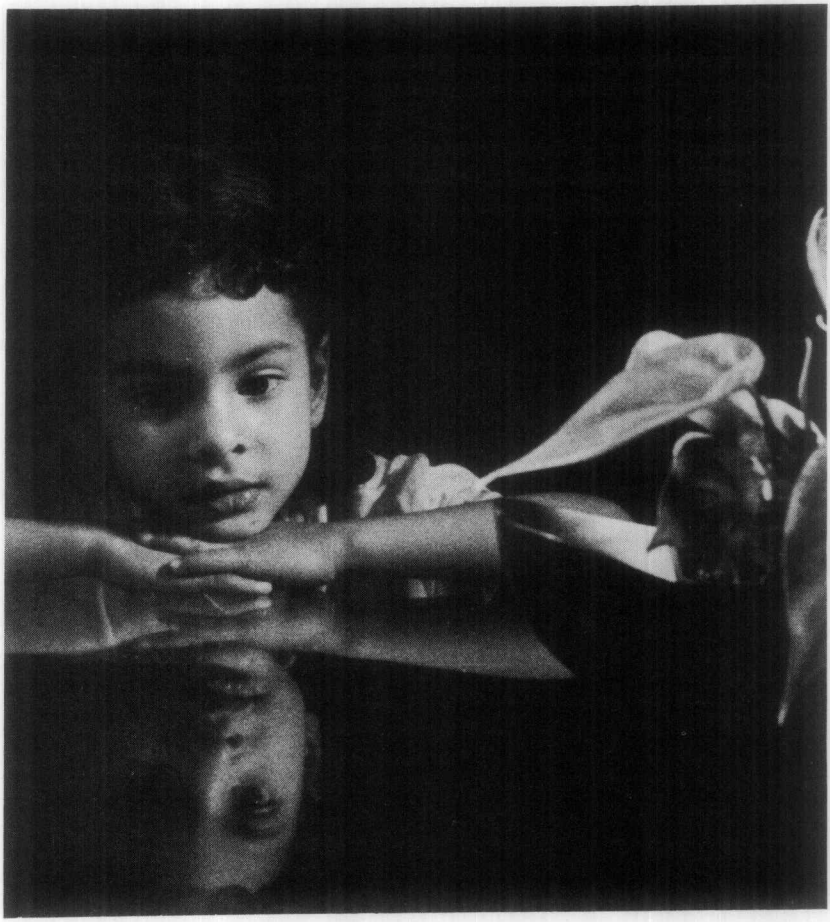
THE UNIVERSAL ELEMENTS



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Childhood

The Loss of Innocence

A child is born in a state of innocence. That moment when he senses a difference between what the adult world has previously told him is true and what his own experience now tells him is true marks his first intimation of maturity. It is the beginning of his loss of innocence.

FRANK O'CONNOR (1903–1966)

Frank O'Connor was born in Ireland and lived and wrote there most of his life. Until he established his reputation as an author with his first collection of stories, Guests of the Nation *(1931), he was active in the Irish revolutionary movement and literary revival, during which time he supported himself by working as a librarian. Though best known for his short stories, he was also a novelist, playwright, and translator of ancient and contemporary century Gaelic poetry and prose.*

O'Connor's settings and the lilt of his language are unmistakably Irish, yet his insight into the ironies of human behavior is universal. His observation of the complexities and fallibilities of human nature is communicated with compassion and humor.

"My Oedipus Complex" is a warm and amusing presentation of a five-year-old boy's attempt to cope with the threat posed by a strange man (his father) returning from the wars to displace him in his mother's bed.

My Oedipus Complex

FATHER was in the army all through the war—the first war, I mean—so, up to the age of five, I never saw much of him, and what I saw did not worry me. Sometimes I woke and there was a big figure in khaki peering down at me in the candlelight. Sometimes in the early morning I heard the slamming of the front door and the clatter of nailed boots down the cobbles of the lane. These were Father's entrances and exits. Like Santa Claus he came and went mysteriously.

In fact, I rather liked his visits, though it was an uncomfortable squeeze between Mother and him when I got into the big bed in the early morning. He smoked, which gave him a pleasant musty smell, and shaved, an operation of astounding interest. Each time he left a trail of souvenirs—model tanks and Gurkha knives with handles made of bullet cases, and German helmets and cap badges and button-sticks, and all sorts of military equipment—carefully stowed away in a long box on top of the wardrobe, in case they ever came in handy. There was a bit of the magpie about Father; he expected everything to come in handy. When his back was turned, Mother let me get a chair and rummage through his treasures. She didn't seem to think so highly of them as he did.