

ELEMENTS OF FICTION

Introduction to the
Short Story

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OF FICTION

INTRODUCTION TO THE SHORT STORY

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ELEMENTS OF FICTION

ELEMENTS

*For Claire, Jessica, Zack,
Christopher, and Dan.*

Preface

This book develops from two closely related beliefs: first, that the chief purpose of art is to give pleasure; second, that as we increase our knowledge of an art, we increase the pleasure it gives us.

Love, sex, and marriage were not devised by the good God in order that there might be courses in "Family Living" in high schools and colleges. And similarly, no story worthy of the name was ever written or told so that it might be "learned" in a classroom. Stories are conceived to delight. They may delight by looking good, reading well, causing pleasant associations, or stimulating anticipations. They may delight too by increasing readers' understanding and appreciation—understanding and appreciation not only of the stories themselves, but of the reader's own life, love, surroundings, and experiences.

The stories in this volume were carefully selected for their capacity to delight readers, especially student readers. There are old stories here and new ones; stories by famous authors and by young writers just beginning their careers; there are stories by "teachable" old standbys such as Maupassant, Hawthorne, and Hardy, and challenging, rarer specimens by Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Cortázar, and Roditi; there are stories from Europe, Asia, Latin America, Africa, and the United States. This text offers a great variety of moods, themes, tones, techniques, thoughts, and characters, as well as a large and sufficiently diverse selection to please varying tastes. We are particularly pleased that despite the great diversity of stories, there are no "dogs" here; each story is good, and most, we think, are excellent.

In making our selections we have also chosen stories with an eye to juxtaposition and to relationships. The stories in some measure shed light on each other; and the understanding and the insight given the reader by one story will at times cause an understanding, a realization, an insight, as regards another story. We suggest several stories for comparison in the text and in the teacher's manual, but the teacher will find many other possible combinations.

Finally, we have chosen stories that are worth teaching, stories that help the student increase his reading pleasure by helping him understand the techniques of fiction. One of the strengths of this book is that it directly confronts the task of teaching the inexperienced reader how to read and enjoy the modern "plotless" story, the kind of story about which students often remark, "I didn't like it. Nothing happened."

We want students to come to these stories fresh, their minds free from "accepted critical opinion," so that they may form their own critical judgments and arrive at their own insights. Our teaching experiences have convinced us that a textbook for undergraduates can be overburdened with apparatus, with learned comment that prejudices (and sometimes confuses) the inexperienced reader. So we have attempted, without being pushy or getting in the way, to provide students with just enough discussion and stimulating questions to assist them unobtrusively to enjoy what is there in a story, to perhaps help them catch what they just might have missed without a nudge from us. At the same time we have attempted to discuss the larger principles of story construction in general. The instructor may, of course, change the order of chapters if, for example, he or she prefers to discuss theme and tone before character or plot. Our only recommendation is that students read Chapter 1, "Suspense and Tingles," before going on to other stories because Chapter 1 serves as a general introduction to the entire volume.

We also believe that students need to have examples before them of how to write about fiction, how to apply a critical method; therefore, we have included several extended analyses of stories. At the same time we have reserved much of the critical commentary for the instructor's manual, leaving scope for the ingenuity and insight of the individual teacher.

Finally, and perhaps most important, we want to emphasize that literary analysis is not an arcane discipline known only to English teachers, but a commonsense way of looking at what we read. We show the student that the questions he asks about a life experience can profitably be asked about a reading experience. And the questions he or she learns to ask from the reading may, indeed, help the student cope more understandingly with the vagaries of life in general. In other words, "delight" in reading should have echoes in the larger context of life as it is lived.

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GLOSSARY OF LITERARY TERMS

SUSPENSE AND TINGLES

Introduction: different from preface

"And what happened next?" That is our response when we are told about an exciting event—a robbery, a shipwreck, a romance. No one knows *why* human beings want to know what happened next, but they do. We are just plain curious. And not only do we want to know what happened in a robbery, a shipwreck or a romance; we want to know what happens next in stories about imaginary people doing imaginary things. Even very little children want to know "Did Mr. McGregor make rabbit stew out of Peter Rabbit?" "Did the man with the steam drill win the contest against John Henry and his sledge hammer?" "What happened next?" "Who won?" "Who dun'it?" So goes the refrain, and as long as people have asked such questions, someone has invented a tale to tell them. It is surely not an exaggeration to say that there is in human beings a basic urge to hear stories.

In addition to wanting to know what happened next, we also want stories to arouse us emotionally, to heighten our feelings. Children seated at night around a campfire or in a darkened room at a slumber party invariably tell ghost stories, the spookier the better. They seem to enjoy having their nerves jangled, teased, tensed, and exhausted. It is difficult to explain why anyone would want to be frightened—but sometimes we do, as attested by the number of "horror" movies at local theaters and "chiller" shows on TV. Fear is not the only emotion that people like to have aroused by stories and movies. How many readers have praised a story because it gave them "a good cry" or "made them feel good"? The point is, of course, that stories affect us, or to be more

precise, stories create effects in us; they can make us feel intensely, and not just in obvious ways, but also in very subtle, complex ones.

But you don't need a book of instruction to teach you to ask "what happened next?" You don't need a teacher to teach you to feel curiosity, suspense, or horror. Either a story holds your attention or it doesn't. If stories gave only these simple pleasures, you would not need a class on the short story, or even this "introduction." You could read some stories merely for fun and not be bugged by teacherly questions and belabored by academic terms. Stories, however, do more than titillate us. They do more than give us happy endings and sympathetic heroes to please our private fantasies. Good stories challenge readers intellectually, emotionally, aesthetically, and morally. They require of readers a degree of thoughtful participation in the complex fictional worlds they represent. They make us feel—and *think*. They help us see what we have never seen before, and experience the familiar in new ways. A good story can jolt readers with all the impact and confusion of life itself.

Good stories also make demands on the reader, and in order to meet these demands, we need to learn to ask more than "what happened next?" We need to learn what stories do and how they do it, and we need to acquire a vocabulary that helps us to ask trenchant questions and make precise statements.

The poet John Ciardi once wrote an insightful and rather lengthy explanation of Robert Frost's seemingly simple poem, "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening." Shortly thereafter he was inundated with letters telling him, in effect, that he was "murdering to dissect." "Get your big feet off my miracle," people wrote him. "You're spoiling a good thing by analyzing it." "I enjoyed the poem until you made a job of it." That was the spirit of the responses. Very wisely John Ciardi explained in reply that he wasn't murdering to dissect at all, but was analyzing in order to better understand and appreciate. Similarly, we all enjoy the soar and glide of a seagull, but the aeronautical engineer (who understands the principles of flight) may be in an even *better* position to see the beauty of that flight than is the layman. The aeronautical engineer knows the physical principles involved, and the miracle may seem to him even *more* miraculous than it does to others.

In a way, this same idea is the excuse for the present book. We may all enjoy a walk through the woods. But if we know something of the miraculous strength of seedlings pushing their way up to the light—well, then we have one more thing to enjoy. If we are alert to the chattering panic signals of the chipmunk and the squirrel, we have one more thing to hear. If we know the relationships among the various forest funguses and their hosts, we have one more thing to observe and to enrich our forest walk. Similarly, who can deny that a sailor alert to the interplay of

wind and waves has far more to watch, to see, to experience, than does his landlubber passenger. Each may be fully enjoying himself; but the man who knows what he is seeing is undoubtedly enjoying more things than his unknowing friend. The expert *sees* more because he *knows* more.

So, too, with literature—in our case, with stories. We all may enjoy a good yarn. But if, in addition, we have learned to recognize some of the virtuoso techniques of story telling, our enjoyment of the tale, far from being diminished, should be enhanced. It can even be argued that a better reader of stories is a better understander of human beings, and therefore may become a better human being. (The true test for this argument will be your own introspection after you have read many stories and perhaps been moved by some of them.)

In presenting a rather stringently abridged vocabulary for talking about literature, the editors are not giving you names to learn for learning's sake. It is our object to enhance your enjoyment of stories by bringing to the level of explicit consciousness some things you may be *feeling* about stories anyway, but for which you may not yet have words. You may sense a *mood*, a *tone*, even a *symbol*; and having acquired words for what you may be vaguely sensing, you may be better able to express to yourself your own feelings about a story that moves you.

Our objectives largely then are to give you more to enjoy, and to raise your level of awareness or of sensitivity when you do read stories, so that you will gain pleasure from things you might previously have bypassed. We want you to have two kinds of responses to the stories in this collection: first, the direct experience of reading for enjoyment; second, the conscious, analytical response based on the skills you acquire as you read more and more stories.

The first two stories in this collection are tales of horror and suspense, written by two masters of this type, Edgar Allen Poe and Ambrose Bierce. Both stories deal with the indispensable subject of horror tales—death; both build to surprise endings; both make only moderate demands on the reader. Neither is concerned with making profound statements about the human condition or with providing new knowledge about death. They are tales told purely for the delight of the reader; so the first time you read them, let the stories work on you, take you in. Then, on second reading, look for footprints the authors have left along the path to the surprise endings. Look for the techniques Poe uses to create the effects he seeks; try to figure out how Bierce manipulates the reader so that he is truly shocked at the story's conclusion.

The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar

Edgar Allan Poe

Of course I shall not pretend to consider it any matter for wonder, that the extraordinary case of M. Valdemar has excited discussion. It would have been a miracle had it not—especially under the circumstances. Through the desire of all parties concerned, to keep the affair from the public, at least for the present, or until we had farther opportunities for investigation—through our endeavors to effect this—a garbled or exaggerated account made its way into society, and became the source of many unpleasant misrepresentations; and, very naturally, of a great deal of disbelief.

It is now rendered necessary that I give the facts—as far as I comprehend them myself. They are, succinctly, these:

My attention, for the last three years, had been repeatedly drawn to the subject of Mesmerism; and, about nine months ago, it occurred to me, quite suddenly, that in the series of experiments made hitherto, there had been a very remarkable and most unaccountable omission:—no person had as yet been mesmerized *in articulo mortis*. It remained to be seen, first, whether, in such condition, there existed in the patient any susceptibility to the magnetic influence; secondly, whether, if any existed, it was impaired or increased by the condition; thirdly, to what extent, or for how long a period, the encroachments of Death might be arrested by the process. There were other points to be ascertained, but these most ex-

From *The Works of Edgar Allen Poe*, vol. 2. New York: P. F. Collier and Sons, 1903.

cited my curiosity—the last in especial, from the immensely important character of its consequences.

In looking around me for some subject by whose means I might test these particulars, I was brought to think of my friend, M. Ernest Valdemar, the well-known compiler of the “*Bibliotheca Forensica*,” and author (under the *nom de plume* of Issachar Marx) of the Polish versions of “*Wallenstein*” and “*Gargantua*.” M. Valdemar, who has resided principally at Harlem, N. Y., since the year 1839, is (or was) particularly noticeable for the extreme spareness of his person—his lower limbs much resembling those of John Randolph; and, also, for the whiteness of his whiskers, in violent contrast to the blackness of his hair—the latter, in consequence, being very generally mistaken for a wig. His temperament was markedly nervous, and rendered him a good subject for mesmeric experiment. On two or three occasions I had put him to sleep with little difficulty, but was disappointed in other results which his peculiar constitution had naturally led me to anticipate. His will was at no period positively, or thoroughly, under my control, and in regard to *clairvoyance*, I could accomplish with him nothing to be relied upon. I always attributed my failure at these points to the disordered state of his health. For some months previous to my becoming acquainted with him, his physicians had declared him in a confirmed phthisis. It was his custom, indeed, to speak calmly of his approaching dissolution, as of a matter neither to be avoided nor regretted.

When the ideas to which I have alluded first occurred to me, it was of course very natural that I should think of M. Valdemar. I knew the steady philosophy of the man too well to apprehend any scruples from *him*; and he had no relatives in America who would be likely to interfere. I spoke to him frankly upon the subject; and, to my surprise, his interest seemed vividly excited. I say to my surprise; for, although he had always yielded his person freely to my experiments, he had never before given me any tokens of sympathy with what I did. His disease was of that character which would admit of exact calculation in respect to the epoch of its termination in death; and it was finally arranged between us that he would send for me about twenty-four hours before the period announced by his physicians as that of his decease.

It is now rather more than seven months since I received, from M. Valdemar himself, the subjoined note:

MY DEAR P——,

You may as well come *now*. D—— and F—— are agreed that I cannot hold out beyond to-morrow midnight; and I think they have hit the time very nearly.

VALDEMAR.

I received this note within half an hour after it was written, and in fifteen minutes more I was in the dying man's chamber. I had not seen him for ten days, and was appalled by the fearful alteration which the brief interval had wrought in him. His face wore a leaden hue; the eyes were utterly lustreless; and the emaciation was so extreme, that the skin had been broken through by the cheekbones. His expectoration was excessive. The pulse was barely perceptible. He retained, nevertheless, in a very remarkable manner, both his mental power and a certain degree of physical strength. He spoke with distinctness—took some palliative medicines without aid—and, when I entered the room, was occupied in penciling memoranda in a pocket-book. He was propped up in the bed by pillows. Doctors D—— and F—— were in attendance.

After pressing Valdemar's hand, I took these gentlemen aside, and obtained from them a minute account of the patient's condition. The left lung had been for eighteen months in a semi-osseous or cartilaginous state, and was, of course, entirely useless for all purposes of vitality. The right, in its upper portion, was also partially, if not thoroughly, ossified, while the lower region was merely a mass of purulent tubercles, running one into another. Several extensive perforations existed; and, at one point, permanent adhesion to the ribs had taken place. These appearances in the right lobe were of comparatively recent date. The ossification had proceeded with very unusual rapidity; no sign of it had been discovered a month before, and the adhesion had only been observed during the three previous days. Independently of the phthisis, the patient was suspected of aneurysm of the aorta; but on this point the osseous symptoms rendered an exact diagnosis impossible. It was the opinion of both physicians that M. Valdemar would die about midnight on the morrow (Sunday). It was then seven o'clock on Saturday evening.

On quitting the invalid's bed-side to hold conversation with myself, Doctors D—— and F—— had bidden him a final farewell. It had not been their intention to return; but, at my request, they agreed to look in upon the patient about ten the next night.

When they had gone, I spoke freely with M. Valdemar on the subject of his approaching dissolution, as well as, more particularly, of the experiment proposed. He still professed himself quite willing and even anxious to have it made, and urged me to commence it at once. A male and a female nurse were in attendance; but I did not feel myself altogether at liberty to engage in a task of this character with no more reliable witnesses than these people, in case of sudden accident, might prove. I therefore postponed operations until about eight the next night, when the arrival of a medical student, with whom I had some acquaintance (Mr. Theodore L——), relieved me from farther embarrassment. It had been my design, originally, to wait for the physicians; but I was induced to