Great American Short Stories

edited by Wallace
and Mary Stegner

Great American Short Stories

edited by Wallace
and Mary Stegner

A LAUREL BOOK
Published by
Dell Publishing Co., Inc.
1 Dag Hammarskjold Plaza
New York, New York 10017

ISBN: 0-440-33060-2

Printed in the United States of America

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS The following selections in this collection are reproduced by permission of the authors, their publishers, or their agents:

"A Municipal Report" from *Strictly Business*, by O. Henry. Copyright 1910, 1938 by Doubleday & Company, Inc. Reprinted by permission of Doubleday & Company, Inc.

"Roman Fever" from *The World Over* by Edith Wharton. Copyright, 1934, *Liberty Magazine*. Copyright, 1936, D. Appleton-Century Company, Inc. Reprinted by permission of the publishers, Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc.

"Unlighted Lamps" from *The Triumph of the Egg*, by Sherwood Anderson. Copyright © 1921 by Eleanor Anderson. Reprinted by permission of Harold Ober Associates.

"The Man Who Saw through Heaven," copyright 1925, 1953 by Wilbur Daniel Steele. Reprinted by permission of Harold Matson Company.

GREAT AMERICAN SHORT STORIES

"What started as an American invention has become an American specialty: Of all the practitioners of the short story in English, the great ones, with perhaps a half-dozen exceptions in 125 years, have been Americans.

"And if we have a literary form that most expresses us as a people, it is this nervous, formal, concentrated, brief, and penetrating one of the short story."

—from the Introduction

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

1

A century and a quarter ago, on January 14, 1832, Edgar Allan Poe published in the Philadelphia *Saturday Courier* the story "Metzengerstein," in which he utilized for the first time the techniques of the single effect upon which the modern short story has been built. What began as an American invention has remained an American specialty: of all the practitioners of the short story in English, the greatest ones, with perhaps a half dozen exceptions in 125 years, have been Americans. Of the six exceptions, Kipling was an Indian colonial, Conrad a deracinated Pole, Joyce and O'Connor Irishmen, Katherine Mansfield a New Zealander, and only D. H. Lawrence a bona fide Englishman. In the same years America has produced not only Poe and Hawthorne, who together created the short story as a form, but Henry James, Stephen Crane, Sherwood Anderson, Ring Lardner, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, Katherine Anne Porter, and two dozen less well known but greatly talented writers, who have taken what Poe and Hawthorne bequeathed them and enriched and enlarged and subtilized and intensified it. Partly because of this early start, partly because of the conditions of American diversity and the nature of American journalism, the general level of accom-

plishment in the short story is probably higher in America than anywhere in the world, and if we have a literary form that most expresses us as a people, it is this nervous, formal, concentrated, brief, and penetrating one of the short story.

Inevitably there are some familiar stories in this anthology. To read through hundreds or thousands of stories from the 19th-century gift books, annuals, magazines, and collections is to acquire respect for the processes by which time and the anthologists have sifted good from bad. It often happens that, as in the case of Washington Irving, the best is also the best known: he never matched, much less bettered, "Rip Van Winkle" and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow." With other writers, too, it has proved impossible to find a little-known story which is also one of its author's best. For this collection we have chosen, in most cases, and especially from writers of the 19th century, the single story which we most admire, without inquiring how many times it may have been anthologized before. The criteria have actually been double: the excellence of a story in itself, and its representativeness in the chronicle of story development within the United States.

These criteria have eliminated certain things that a full chronological and historical survey would have had to include, for some stories and some tendencies much admired in their own time have lost their savor and revealed their lack of importance. Fitz-James O'Brien, nimbly manipulating the pseudo-science and the verisimilitude of Poe, hardly speaks compellingly enough even in his best story, "The Diamond Lens," to demand entrance. Edward Everett Hale, with the patriotic sentiments of "The Man without A Country" or the amusing artifice of "My Double and How He Undid Me," does not seem to look forward to anything or to represent anything essential in himself. Frank R. Stockton, a prolific hack and teller of fables for children, happened to strike the fancy of his generation with "The

Lady, or the Tiger?" which got embedded in the tradition, apparently immovably. Yet "The Lady, or the Tiger?" is not a modern story at all; if it is anything, it is an Italian novella of the kind that might have been told by Boccaccio, dressed up with a little journalistic editorializing. Thomas Bailey Aldrich's greatly admired "Marjorie Daw," which it was said changed the literary practice of a decade, seems now a genteel, pleasant, mildly amusing, inconsequential piece of contrivance, without any of the penetration into character, richness of background, psychological depth, or "effect" of any kind, that one might ask of a story in the great tradition. A well-bred practical joke in story form, it evades what has been a rather compulsive element in the American story, an element that Hawthorne first added. This is moral or intellectual weight, what Henry Seidel Canby has called "specific gravity." Even in its humorous moments, the typical American story asks to be taken seriously as a reflection of life, manners, morals, national character or aspiration, or as an instrument of psychological insight. All stories which have seemed to us merely skillful without this characteristic weight we have omitted from this collection.

2

Since these stories are intended as much for students, in or out of classrooms, as for general readers, let us risk detailing the obvious and repeating the well-known by summarizing the tradition which they illustrate.

For the orderly tale of linked incidents chronologically treated, the sort of tale of which "Rip Van Winkle" is one of the most graceful, humorous, and urbane examples, Poe substituted something else: the concentrated tale of effect, its single, preconceived impression attained with the greatest economy and directness of means, its action focused upon the climactic

moment, its mood controlled from first to last, its improbabilities made plausible by a concreteness as great as Defoe's, and a sensuous impressionism learned from the romantic poets. The technique which he began developing in "Metzengerstein" and gave critical definition in his review of Hawthorne's *Twice Told Tales* ten years later was pre-eminently designed to make the incredible credible; and though time has not dealt too kindly with Poe's particular kinds of effects, which are related too consistently to the horrors and sensationalism of the German romantics and are heavily draped in Gothic black, it must be said that the short story probably would not have developed as it did without these vivid sensationalisms to demand vivid means of expression.

Poe said that his terror was "not of Germany but of the soul," but for most modern readers the effects he produces seem no deeper than gooseflesh. He was not actually a very profound psychologist; his "madness," that undifferentiated aberration that so many of his characters share, is more literary than observed. His habit of rather cold and unrealistic contrivance, his concentration on effects that are merely physiological, and the restriction of his subject matter to the horrific and the "ratiocinative," mean that he now has more readers among the young than among adults. But what he called the tale of ratiocination, which is the immediate parent of the detective story complete with its Watson, its dumb cop, its super-intelligent amateur detective, and its delightful game of false clues and miraculous deductions, is as lively as when he made it in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue." That it is a lesser literary genre should not lead us to underestimate Poe's importance as an innovator. His horror tales are likewise a lesser literary genre—like the tales of ratiocination, they represent great skill devoted to fairly trivial ends. Before Poe could make his terror truly the terror

of the soul he would have had to know more souls than his own—a thing which he never did. His best effects are claustrophobic, as he was himself.

But if his effects are limited, the technique he developed for achieving them is not. The focus upon a single intense impression was a trick that in other hands could be devoted to other and often deeper purposes. In the hands of Fitz-James O'Brien neither intention nor technique changed greatly: "The Diamond Lens" shows the same mad protagonist, the same pseudo-science, the same attempt at persuasive verisimilitude. In the hands of Ambrose Bierce it is made to produce effects even more chilling, though less Gothic, than Poe's own. But leap a long way ahead, to such modern stories as Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery," or Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," and you may detect the same techniques of persuasiveness used to quiet our disbelief, in circumstances and for effects quite different from Poe's.

The influence of Poe is so pervasive that it is impossible to overestimate it; he has influenced everybody, practically, who writes stories. Both the influence and the modification of it are demonstrated in such a story as Conrad Aiken's "Silent Snow, Secret Snow"—superficially like Poe in that it is the record of an individual going "mad." But Aiken's effect is human, not artificial; his tone is understanding and compassionate, not chilling. If it were merely a clinical record of a boy slipping over the edge into a schizophrenic withdrawal, the story would not move us as it does. It moves us because its terror is really, as Poe's was not, of the soul.

"The Fall of the House of Usher" seems to us to represent Poe at his best. It has all the Gothic trappings, nearly ad nauseam; and yet this doomed mansion with its diseased and obsessive figures, its bizarre learning, its compulsions and phobias, its flitting terrors, may be taken as the true habitation of Poe's own tormented

nature; and in skill—especially in that deadly inverted image of the fateful house reflected in the tarn—it is not easy to match.

Both "The Fall of the House of Usher" and Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" are built on a journey and a return, an arrival and departure; both move from light into darkness and back into light, or light of a sort. But where Poe's darkness is the theatrical dark of the horror tale, Hawthorne manages to communicate his sense of the dark wood as the darkness of the soul, the forest of sin and evil. Young Goodman Brown's initiation into the abiding sinfulness of all mankind, his conviction that virtue is a mask and all men are guilty, is not much more obviously "realistic" than much of Poe. But observe how this witchcraft of Hawthorne's translates into other terms, how naturally Brown comes to represent all the cheerless, life-hating coldness of Puritanism, how his venture into witchcraft can be read as every man's experience with temptation and the nature of evil, every man's descent into his own unconscious "heart of darkness." Young Brown's destruction is of another kind than he feared, but is even more complete. And in "specific gravity" this story, by comparison with the Poe story, is as granite to pine. The New England anatomist of guilt and sin and the sick soul knew more and felt more than the Virginia manipulator of sick minds, and the Puritan darkness in the end is much closer to human reality than the Gothic.

Nevertheless, Hawthorne was not so impeccable a craftsman as Poe; Poe would never have left this story, which up to the time of Brown's return is tight, concentrated, sensuous, sharply visualized, to end lamely with an anticlimactic appendix.

Henry Seidel Canby, whose *The Short Story in English* is one of the few serious and extended studies of the form, long ago pointed out an element of Hawthorne's contribution that is quite as significant for the future as

his moral earnestness and his symbolic depth. This is his habit of making stories which are neither the gracefully linked incidents of Irving nor the contrived effects of Poe, but exposed or probed *situations*. In its whole course of development, and not simply in America, the short story as a distinctive form has turned away from plot, and has tended to become less a complication resolved than what Henry James was to call a "situation revealed." This kind of story, necessarily more static, has greater possibilities for character development and analysis of motives, for attention to atmosphere, setting, and theme. Often it invites its author to make the process of writing into an act of knowing, of intellectual or moral or emotional exploration. Form becomes less contrivance than discovery, and the end of the story less an "effect" than an illumination.

In this pattern it is easy to recognize what is perhaps the most characteristic habit of the contemporary short story. Hawthorne began what James, Chekhov, Joyce, Mansfield, and a crowd of the moderns would spend a century and more expanding. But from Hawthorne to James the gap is very little populated. There is only the lonely, difficult, and unhappy figure of Melville—not primarily a writer of short stories and certainly not influential upon the short story habits of his own or any other generation. Some of his *Piazza Tales* were published in *Putnam's Magazine* from 1853 to 1855 after the failure of *Moby Dick* and *Pierre* had driven Melville to try the possibilities of magazine money-making. Perhaps all are short stories by Poe's definition; at least they can be read at a single sitting. But some are novelettes by contemporary standards, and indeed have been collected, with others, under the title of "shorter novels." "Bartleby the Scrivener" demonstrates as well as any of the longer ones the moral and intellectual weight, the intent probing of a situation (what shall one do with the steadfast, desperate and isolated nay-

sayer?), and the psychological and symbolic insight, that permit us to use Melville the short story writer as a solid bridge between Hawthorne and James.

Henry James's career began in the late 1860's, when Hawthorne's had just closed and while Melville was mute in his customs house. Its productions cover a full half century until he died in England in 1916; and his contributions to the art of prose fiction—whether novel or short story or his "blessed nouvelle"—are too well known to need extensive summary. He was less innovator than polisher: he took the serious story of situation, with its moral and ethical preoccupations, from Hawthorne, and he refined it until he had made himself in very truth the "historian of fine consciences" that Conrad called him. He took Poe's concentration and singleness, discarded the Gothic machinery and sensational subject matter, and applied the method to situations from observed experience. What he could do with a situation he wanted to "reveal" may be seen in such stories as "The Madonna of the Future" or "The Beast in the Jungle," which have all of Poe's virtues plus a psychological insight infinitely more subtle and discriminating.

As a technician, James experimented above all with the limitation of point of view, discarding the omniscient author in favor of narrators, "registers," "central intelligences," and propping these up very often with confidantes or "ficelles." He forced his story through smaller and smaller outlets, until like water shot through a nozzle instead of being allowed to run freely from the hose, it acquired a special concentration and force. Unwearyingly he painted himself into technical corners and then contrived ways of getting out again: much of his technical invention was spent on plausible means of communicating expository and background material and the sort of comment which, having abdicated omniscience, he could no longer make in his person as author. Like a man who has disturbed the bal-