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Gwendolyn Brooks

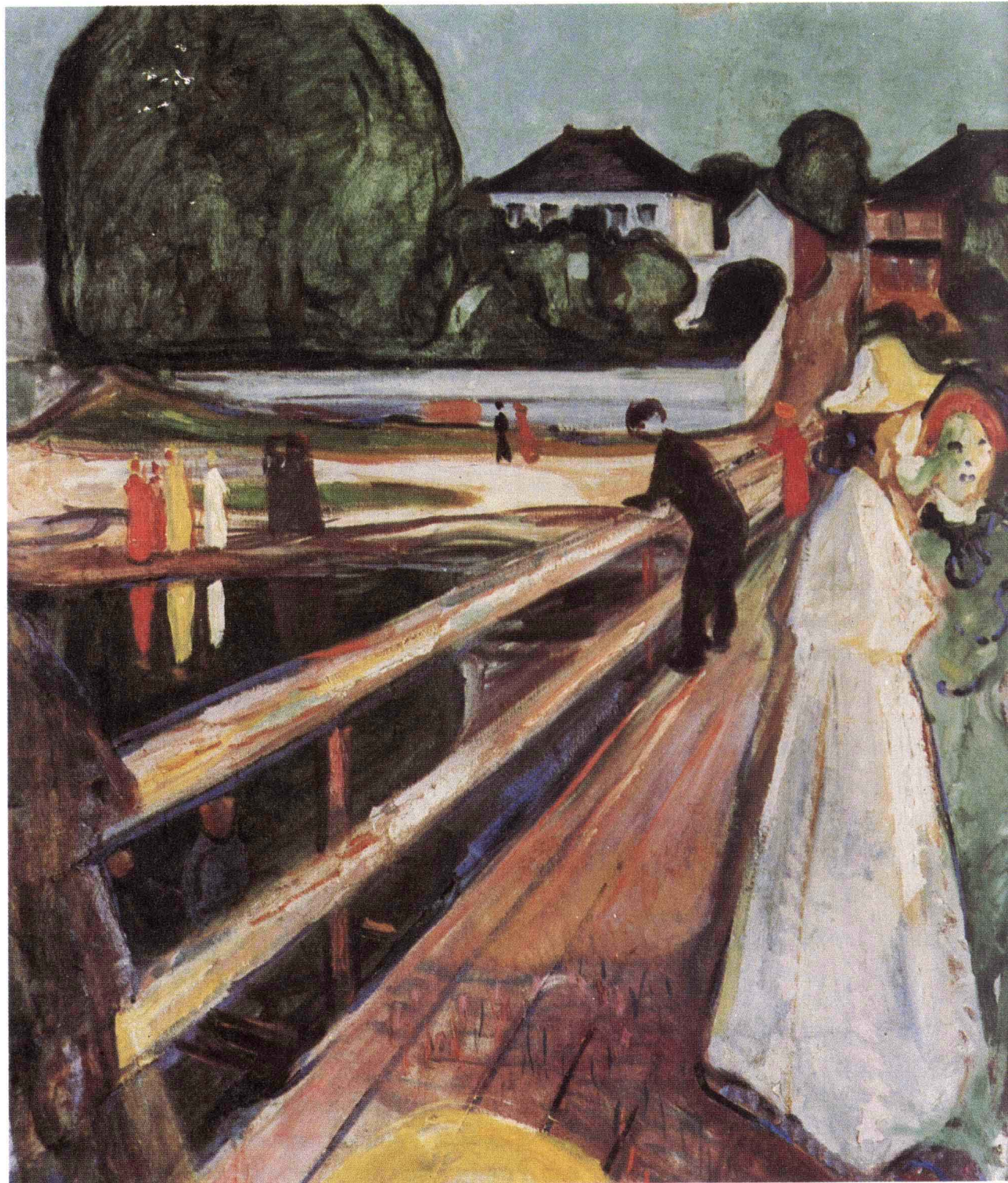
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GIRLS ON THE JETTY
Edvard Munch
Three Lions

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SHORT STORIES

Originally *fiction* meant anything made up, created, or shaped. Today we have refined the definition to mean a prose story based on the imagination of the author. While many writers of fiction may imitate the forms of nonfiction or may use true or historically accurate details in their stories, they write not to recreate reality but to entertain and perhaps to say something significant about human existence.

One of the most popular forms of fiction, the short story was first defined by Edgar Allan Poe. He was sure that “worldly interests” prevented most readers from concentrating on reading, so he felt that a short, concentrated tale that could be read in a single sitting and that created a single, powerful impression was the best type of fiction. Today, innumerable writers have followed Poe’s recommendations, creating stories on a vast array of subjects. For instance, this unit presents short stories ranging from a tale of three wishes to a story of an empty house after a nuclear war.

As opposed to other types of fiction, short stories are characterized by a limited number of characters, restricted settings, and a narrow range of action, but short stories share common elements with other forms. Seven of those elements are examined in this unit—plot, characterization, point of view, setting, symbols, tone and irony, and theme. *Plot* refers to the series of events that make up the story. *Characterization* is the creation of reasonable facsimiles of human beings with all their warts and smiles. *Point of view* is the perspective of the story, the voice or speaker who is doing the narrating. *Setting* refers to the natural or artificial environment in which the story takes place, while a *symbol* is a thing that may be understood to mean something beyond itself. Every short story has a tone or attitude that the writer conveys toward the story itself and toward you, the reader. A special element sometimes used in creating tone is *irony*, in which writers use language or situations that are the opposite of what is expected to create impact. Finally, *theme* is what the short story reveals about life, the central idea presented throughout the work.

These, then, are the major tools short story writers have at their disposal. Understanding the elements of the story will help you discover the author’s intentions and what is being said about life and the human experience. However, while you the reader might be studying one of the elements, it is important to realize that a short story is unified, that all elements happen at once in the tale. As you read, look for the whole as well as the parts.



The Short Story

"Fiction is like a spider web," wrote Virginia Woolf, "attached ever so slightly perhaps, but still attached to life at all four corners." In other words, fiction has a certain verisimilitude, or resemblance to life. This means that when you read a short story, you can bring your own life experiences to it and become actively involved with it.

The following strategies will help you become an active reader. Remember that the more you put into a short story, the more you are likely to get out of it.

Question

Formulate questions as you read. Put yourself in the story and ask questions about what is happening. Try to determine what the characters are like and why they act as they do. Question the effect that setting has on the characters and the plot. Read between the lines and try to figure out the tone, or attitude, of the writer.

Predict

Make predictions as you read based on what you know about life. Use your knowledge of how a story works to guess at the way events will turn out. Take risks with your predictions. Although your predictions should be reasonable, they need not always turn out to be accurate.

Clarify

Monitor your reading. Take time to answer your questions and to check your predictions. When something in the story isn't clear to you, stop and try to clarify the confusion, even if this means rereading earlier parts of the story. Remember, though, that you will not always be able to clarify, because literature, like life, does not always have cut-and-dried answers.

Summarize

At appropriate points in the story, stop to review what has happened so far. Identify what seems to be important and try to determine how that piece of information works with everything else in terms of how the story is developing.

Pull It Together

Find the central idea of the story. The success of a short story depends on its effect on the reader. What did the story say to you? How did you react to it?

On the following pages is a model with comments in the margin showing how an active reader might read a short story.

The Piece of String

Guy de Maupassant

Questions: Why is this story called "A Piece of String"? Why would a piece of string be important?

Along all the roads around Goderville the peasants and their wives were coming toward the burgh¹ because it was market day. The men were proceeding with slow steps, the whole body bent forward at each movement of their long twisted legs; deformed by their hard work, by the weight on the plow which, at the same time, raised the left shoulder and swerved the figure, by the reaping of the wheat which made the knees spread to make a firm "purchase," by all the slow and painful labors of the country. Their blouses, blue, "stiff-starched," shining as if varnished, ornamented with a little design in white at the neck and wrists, puffed about their bony bodies, seemed like balloons ready to carry them off. From each of them a head, two arms and two feet protruded.

Question: Will this story be about one of the peasants?

Some led a cow or a calf by a cord, and their wives, walking behind the animal, whipped its haunches with a leafy branch to hasten its progress. They carried large baskets on their arms from which, in some cases, chickens and, in others, ducks thrust out their heads. And they walked with a quicker, livelier step than their husbands. Their spare straight figures were wrapped in a scanty little shawl pinned over their flat bosoms, and their heads were enveloped in a white cloth glued to the hair and surmounted by a cap.

Clarification: *Purchase* here means a hold on the ground to keep from slipping.

Then a wagon passed at the jerky trot of a nag, shaking strangely, two men seated side by side and a woman in the bottom of the vehicle, the latter holding onto the sides to lessen the hard jolts.

In the public square of Goderville there was a crowd, a throng of human beings and animals mixed together. The horns of the cattle, the tall hats, with long nap, of the rich peasant and the headgear of the peasant women rose above the surface of the assembly. And the clamorous, shrill,

1. **burgh** (berg) *n.*: Small town.



THE MARKETPLACE IN FRONT OF THE TOWN HALL AT PONTOISE, 1876
Ludovic Piette
Musées de Pontoise

Clarification: It seems the story will be about Maître Hauchecome. And here is the piece of string mentioned in the title.

screaming voices made a continuous and savage din which sometimes was dominated by the robust lungs of some countryman's laugh or the long lowing of a cow tied to the wall of a house.

All that smacked of the stable, the dairy and the dirt heap, hay and sweat, giving forth that unpleasant odor, human and animal, peculiar to the people of the field.

Maître² Hauchecome of Breaute had just arrived at Goderville, and he was directing his steps toward the public square when he perceived upon the ground a little piece of string. Maître Hauchecome, economical like a true Norman, thought that everything useful ought to be picked up, and he bent painfully, for he suffered from rheumatism. He took the bit of thin cord from the ground and began to roll it carefully when he noticed Maître Malandain, the harness maker, on the

2. Maître (me' trə): Mister, a term of address.

threshold of his door, looking at him. They had heretofore had business together on the subject of a halter, and they were on bad terms, both being good haters. Maître Hauchecome was seized with a sort of shame to be seen thus by his enemy, picking a bit of string out of the dirt. He concealed his “find” quickly under his blouse, then in his trousers’ pocket; then he pretended to be still looking on the ground for something which he did not find, and he went toward the market, his head forward, bent double by his pains.

He was soon lost in the noisy and slowly moving crowd which was busy with interminable³ bargainings. The peasants milled, went and came, perplexed, always in fear of being cheated, not daring to decide, watching the vendor’s eye, ever trying to find the trick in the man and the flaw in the beast.

The women, having placed their great baskets at their feet, had taken out the poultry which lay upon the ground, tied together by the feet, with terrified eyes and scarlet crests.

They heard offers, stated their prices with a dry air and impassive face, or perhaps, suddenly deciding on some proposed reduction, shouted to the customer who was slowly going away: “All right, Maître Authirne, I’ll give it to you for that.”

Then little by little the square was deserted, and the Angelus⁴ ringing at noon, those who had stayed too long scattered to their shops.

At Jourdain’s the great room was full of people eating, as the big court was full of vehicles of all kinds, carts, gigs, wagons, dumpcarts, yellow with dirt, mended and patched, raising their shafts to the sky like two arms or perhaps with their shafts in the ground and their backs in the air.

Just opposite the diners seated at the table the immense fireplace, filled with bright flames, cast a lively heat on the backs of the row on the right. Three spits were turning on which were chickens, pigeons and legs of mutton, and an appetizing odor of roast beef and gravy dripping over the nicely browned skin rose from the hearth, increased the jovialness and made everybody’s mouth water.

Prediction: This action of hiding the string will cause some trouble later on.

Prediction: Here are people who do not trust one another. Suspicion and lack of trust will play a major role in this story.

3. interminable (in tər' mi nə b'l) *adj.*: Endless.

4. Angelus (an' jə ləs) *n.*: Bell rung to announce the time for a prayer said at morning, noon, and evening.

Question: What does this drumbeat mean?

Clarification: The drumbeat announces the presence of the public crier. He tells the people of the lost pocketbook and the reward.

Prediction: Here comes the trouble predicted earlier. Now Maître Hauchecome will be accused of finding the pocketbook.

All the aristocracy of the plow ate there at Maître Jourdain's, tavern keeper and horse dealer, a rascal who had money.

The dishes were passed and emptied, as were the jugs of yellow cider. Everyone told his affairs, his purchases and sales. They discussed the crops. The weather was favorable for the green things but not for the wheat.

Suddenly the drum beat in the court before the house. Everybody rose, except a few indifferent persons, and ran to the door or to the windows, their mouths still full and napkins in their hands.

After the public crier had ceased his drumbeating he called out in a jerky voice, speaking his phrases irregularly:

"It is hereby made known to the inhabitants of Goderville, and in general to all persons present at the market, that there was lost this morning on the road to Benzeville, between nine and ten o'clock, a black leather pocketbook containing five hundred francs⁵ and some business papers. The finder is requested to return same with all haste to the mayor's office or to Maître Fortune Houlbrequé of Manneville; there will be twenty francs reward."

Then the man went away. The heavy roll of the drum and the crier's voice were again heard at a distance.

Then they began to talk of this event, discussing the chances that Maître Houlbrequé had of finding or not finding his pocketbook.

And the meal concluded. They were finishing their coffee when a chief of the gendarmes⁶ appeared upon the threshold.

He inquired:

"Is Maître Hauchecome of Breaute here?"

Maître Hauchecome, seated at the other end of the table, replied:

"Here I am."

And the officer resumed:

"Maître Hauchecome, will you have the goodness to accompany me to the mayor's office? The mayor would like to talk to you."

The peasant, surprised and disturbed, swallowed at a draft his glass, rose and, even more bent than in the morning,

5. francs (frāṅks) *n.*: Unit of money in France.

6. gendarmes (zhān' dārmz) *n.*: French police.