Fiction

FORM AND EXPERIENCE

30 Stories

WITH ESSAYS

JONES

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preface

This book is the result of years of teaching short stories. The immediate stimulus for it, however, was a course taught in the University of Missouri Honors College in conjunction with Dr. Frances McCurdy, whose enthusiasm encouraged me to put together the results of our joint investigation of the way in which the modern short story molds raw experience into artistic form. That is what the book is about, the way that readers and critics can examine, from various critical points of view, the art of the short story in order to see the experience that created the stories and the experience that may be derived from them. I hope the book will enable many students to read with new perceptivity one of the major art forms of our age.

In addition to the Honors students in the course and Dr. McCurdy, many others have contributed to the making of the text. Dr. George Gleason, Southwest Missouri State College, has offered me his usual astute comments on short story texts. Dr. Rick Renner, present director of the Honors College at the University of Missouri, along with many of my colleagues in the English department, has listened patiently to my plans. I am also grateful to those former students of mine with whom I have discussed matters of critical theory over the years: Donald Ricks, Utah State University; James C. Pogue, University of Missouri–Rolla; Dana Finnegan, Mary Washington University; Charles Cannon, University of Memphis.

As always, I am also grateful to those colleagues with whom I fought to formulate my own critical opinions: Don Ringe, University of Kentucky; Ralph Loomis, University of Michigan; Sidney Warhaft, University of Manitoba. Special advice has also been offered by Margery McKinney of the University of Missouri Press and Ann Holleran, not to mention, of course, my wife, who insisted that I finish the text even though she knows that I naturally prefer talking rather than writing.

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introduction

All short stories are attempts at communication. What is communicated may be a series of seemingly factual details, an emotional experience, or some truth so complex that the writer himself may be only vaguely aware of it. No matter what the author has to communicate, however, he has the right to expect the complete cooperation of his readers. A short story's existence depends on the conscientious participation of the reader and the writer, both of whom need to cultivate a number of specific skills. The writer must know how to build the right shape for his story, he must exclude irrelevant subject matter, and he must have the right language for his subject. The reader, to understand the work, must be able to respond intelligently to all the writer's artistic choices.

To help the short story reader cultivate his reading skills, various critical theories have been developed. Professional critics sometimes feel that they must ally themselves to a single critical school and oppose all others. Serious readers, unlike partisan critics, use whatever part of established critical theory they need to understand a piece of writing. Although there are a multitude of critical schools, much of what they offer the nonspecialist can be condensed into five major divisions. These five divisions approximate, to a large extent, five basic components of any story: narrative, character, setting, theme, and symbolic language. If these five components of a story are studied critically, the total meaning of the story usually becomes clear to the reader. After some conscious practice with each of these critical approaches, the reader will develop a competence that permits him to understand most stories without conscious effort. But first he must be aware of the full breadth of meaning within the short story form.

NARRATIVE MEANING
(*The Structural Approach*)

The shape of a story is its most obvious characteristic. A glance at a page is usually enough to reveal whether the writing on it is a short story rather than a play, a poem, or an essay. Although a reader may occasionally en-

counter a border-line case between short story and novel or between poem and play, most of the time these grosser aspects of structure need no study. A short story ordinarily uses a narrative for its basic structure. The story moves along a plot line from beginning to end of a series of events. In many stories action, the raw material from which narrative is made, is molded into a structure that originates with a conflict, leads to development and explanation of this conflict, and concludes with its final resolution. At its simplest, the conflict is completely external. The covered-wagon train is surrounded by Indians; there is no hope that the settlers can withstand the savage onslaught of arrows much longer. The conflict is between two opposing forces in the physical world. The resolution can take two courses. In a realistic story the settlers are slaughtered and scalped by the Indians. In a less realistic story the United States Cavalry, newly alerted by an Indian spy, rides to the rescue. Both conclusions resolve the conflict, but the first disappoints the romantic dreamer and the second disgusts the realist.

Such external conflict does not satisfy any reader for long. A more subtle type of conflict is internal conflict that moves away from obviously opposed physical forces to the intricacies of psychological struggle. An Indian, Harvard-educated and now returned to his own culture, or a wagon-trail leader who led these settlers into this particular canyon because of an ancient grudge against another member of the group, would turn the conflict away from the obvious to a more fruitful area for the development of a deeper plot intricacy.

The choice of structure is largely a matter for the writer, but the result has far-reaching consequences in terms of the success of the story. A good short story is better as a short story than as any other literary type. The right artistic structure for raw material is sometimes difficult to discover. Occasionally the writer himself wonders if he has made the right choice. Joseph Conrad began *Lord Jim* as a short story, but the character ran away with him and dragged him into a novel. Eudora Welty rewrote her novel *The Ponder Heart* into an even more successful play.

The narrative portion of a short story should be limited enough to be developed fully in a limited structure. Meaning, however, depends on a great deal more than simple plot. Other aspects of plot presentation contribute to narrative meaning. The structural critic looks not just at what events occur in the story, but also at the way they are placed along the plot line. Sentence structure, paragraph development, point of view, atmosphere and mood, tone, irony, rhythm, balance, color and movement are all a part of the total narrative meaning.

The individual sentence is a good place to begin a study of the struc-

ture of a short story. Take for example, the following excerpt from Ernest Hemingway's short story "Indian Camp."

> They were seated in the boat, Nick in the stern, his father rowing. The sun was coming up over the hill. A bass jumped, making a circle in the water. Nick trailed his hand in the water. It felt warm in the sharp chill of the morning.
>
> In the early morning on the lake sitting in the stern of the boat with his father rowing, he felt quite sure that he would never die.

This series of short sentences, concluded with a long one that is a paragraph in itself, convey the feeling of tightness followed by relaxation that is stated by the words themselves. In the long final sentence the seemingly casual physical details of the short sentences are summarized before the conclusion: "he felt quite sure that he would never die." When the sentence structure is so carefully suited to the material, the study of a few sentences can reveal much about the narrative meaning of the entire story. Sentence construction of the sort Hemingway uses is a major method of emphasizing central meaning.

Narrative emphasis is achieved by paragraph structure as well as by sentence structure. By arranging his paragraphs to harmonize with the material it contains, a writer can achieve a variety of emotional effects. The components of writing, paragraphs and sentences, contribute to the total narrative meaning a strength and vigor that determine to a large degree the success of the communication process.

For narrative meaning to be satisfactorily communicated, it must not only have well-structured sentences and paragraphs, but it must also have a consistently orderly "point of view." This term, when used in literary criticism, refers to the way in which a writer asks a reader to look at his work. At its simplest, the point of view is that of the author. "As I stood on the edge of the broad river," says the writer, "I gazed from left to right. To my left I saw. . . ." The reader simply looks through the writer's eyes at a particular physical scene.

The "I" of a quotation may be the writer, but it is more likely, in a complex short story, to be some other personality. The difference between the author's attitudes and those of the narrator, sometimes called the *persona,* is an important one. In Joseph Conrad's story *Youth* the man telling the story is called Marlow. This narrator's attitudes are not the same as Conrad's. Conrad has intruded another personality between his own and the reader. As a good writer, he probably had some reason for establishing this particular point of view. It is the job of the good reader to determine what this extra distance between author and reader contributes to the story.

The third-person point of view is more frequently used than the first-person. Here the writer stands aside and relates the experience: "He turned quickly, anxious to hide his emotion. When she saw that he was so moved, she slipped away." This third-person point of view offers the writer a number of possibilities. If the writer wishes, he can assume a complete knowledge of all his characters and let the reader look with him into all their thoughts that are relevant to the narrative. This omniscient point-of-view is used, for example, in the quote at the beginning of this paragraph. On the other hand, an author can restrict his comments to the external actions of all the characters but one, or several, if that limitation of knowledge serves his purpose better.

The author's point of view determines to a large extent the more intangible characteristics of a piece of writing, tone. Tone in writing is similar to tone in oral communication. The meaning of the actual words is shaped by the tone of the speaker's voice. In writing, as in speaking, experience with previous tones alerts the receiver of the information to the total meaning that underlies the visible structure. For example, Jonathan Swift's essay in which he advocates solving the meat shortage by eating Irish children has an emphatically serious appearance that, combined with the ludicrous central suggestion, sets up a tone of scornful wrath at the English who are mistreating the Irish in every other way but the selling of children for food.

The writer's attitude toward his audience, toward his subject matter, and toward himself can unite individual artistic choices by means of a single unified tone. When a writer changes his attitude in the course of his writing the resultant conflict in tonal quality is apparent to the reader who sees in the change of attitude a disunity of tone. In "Silent Snow, Secret Snow" Conrad Aiken sets a tone of fuzzy grayness. Nothing in the gradual alienation of reality contradicts this dominant color or tone.

The tone may also be tinged with irony. Ironic statement is that which twists the meaning to point up a contradiction or criticism. At its simplest, ironic statement is "What a pretty hat!" in a tone of voice that leaves no doubt about the meaning. At a more sophisticated level irony becomes an integral part of the total meaning of the story. Implicit in the total conception of John Updike's "A & P" is the irony of the noble gesture of a teen-age checker in a totally incongruous setting.

Almost as intangible, and yet as directly a result of structure as tone, are atmosphere and mood. The two terms, sometimes used synonymously, have a really quite different meaning. Mood is the term that describes the emotive force inherent in a short story. The writer feels it first and communicates it to his readers. Atmosphere is the structural means by which

the author conveys the mood. With specific descriptive details, appropriate characterization and dialogue, the writer can construct an atmosphere that will create a certain mood for the reader. For example, in the following paragraph by D. H. Lawrence a large number of details are so ordered as to create a specific emotional response.

> Ah! it was beauty, beauty absolute, at any hour of the day: whether the perfect clarity of morning, or the mountains beyond the simmering desert at noon, or the purple lumping of northern mounds under a red sun at night. Or whether the dust whirled in tall columns, travelling across the desert far away, like pillars of cloud by day, tall, leaning pillars of dust hastening with ghostly haste: or whether, in the early part of the year, suddenly in the morning a whole sea of solid mist from melted snow, ghost-white under the mountain sun, the world blotted out: or whether the black rain and cloud streaked down with sharp white stings on the horizon: or the cloud travelled and burst overhead, with rivers of fluid blue fire running out of heaven and exploding on earth, and hail coming down like a world of ice shattered above: or the hot sun rode in again: or snow fell in heavy silence: or the world was blinding white under a blue sky, and one must hurry under the pine-trees for shelter against that vast, white back-beating light which rushed up at one and made one almost unconscious amid the snow.

In this single paragraph Lawrence, by piling up details from a whole year in the American Southwest, gives the reader the mood the country originally evoked in him. Frequently, as in this paragraph, the mood is a product of descriptive detail, but it does not need to be; mood is the product of the entire story.

The structural approach to a story uses all the critical techniques examined in this section to try to arrive at some final conclusion about what the story accomplishes. If the artistic structure is a valid, integrated one, all the aspects of the story, plot, character, detail, point of view, mood, and others that will be studied as they appear in the stories of this collection, need to work together for some artistic totality that the reader can perceive underlying the choice of all the elements of the structure of the story.

CHARACTER MEANING
(*The Psychological Approach*)

Although the integration of character into the plot relates character to the structural approach, it is significant enough to warrant a special approach of its own. Because of its recent origin, the short story has developed concomitantly with modern psychology. The result for the short story is a fre-

quent emphasis by writers and critics on the psychological motivations of characters. The literature of Freudian psychology has done much to deepen the investigation of character portrayal in the short story.

The Freudian critics, who tend to see the characters of a short story as extensions of the author's own maladjustment, set themselves the task of approaching the characters in two ways by classifying personality according to types of neuroses and frustrations. These classifications are then applied to the characters, the authors, or both. Ernest Jones, for example, himself a professional analyst, sees new depths in the structure of *Hamlet* once he has established Hamlet's strong Oedipus complex, a subconscious sexual desire for his mother. Richard Ellman, in his biography of James Joyce, comes to Joyce's writing through the application of psychological techniques to the author's life.

Although pre-Freudian writers such as Shakespeare had no names for complexes, their study of human nature led them to recognize personality problems and include them in the construction of their characters. Modern authors sometimes incorporate the findings of psychology consciously into their stories. Conrad Aiken, in "Silent Snow, Secret Snow," creates a fictional case study of a schizophrenic.

In addition to the specifically psychological, there is much to be said for the more standard view of character as a basis for meaning in the short story. The author of a short story tends to see the conflict of the story as a result of the interplay of a group of personalities reacting to a specific situation that is usually the result of their own personalities. The success of the writer's story depends upon the validity of his characterization. In a story by O. Henry, such as "The Luck of Roaring Camp," where a whole town of roughnecks is transformed overnight into a group of delicate child-lovers, character portrayal is sacrificed for a clever plot. In a story, on the other hand, like Peter Taylor's "A Spinster's Tale," the entire story is devoted to revealing aspects of a personality that will obviously lead to the making of a spinster. Once a reader understands the way in which a writer presents his characters, whether like O. Henry or like Peter Taylor, he can begin to see into the total meaning of the story.

SOCIETAL MEANING
(*The Historical Approach*)

Although a short story continues to communicate through its plot and character after its author is dead, it nevertheless had its origin at a particular time and place. Therefore, says the historical critic, a story can be better understood the better the reader knows the social, political, spir-

itual world of the author, all the biographical information about him, the books that influenced him in his artistic choices, everything, in fact, that may have touched the author in any way.

Writers who write nearest the center of the vocabulary about lasting problems and values demand the least amount of historical knowledge from their readers. But every writer is to a large extent tied to his own time and writes for it. Unless we know that to the Greeks an unburied body dishonored the family that permitted such a sacrilege to one of its members, we think that Antigone is foolish to care so much about covering her brother's corpse. In a polygamous society Othello's worry over Desdemona's infidelity becomes ridiculous.

When stories need such historical background, footnotes and introductions usually supply it. These help the reader as a crutch helps a cripple; the aim of the careful reader is to provide from his own experience the needed knowledge, so that the story can communicate to him directly.

Knowing the age that produced a story, however, is only a part of the historical approach. The reader must know not only the age that produced the author, but also the author himself. He is the product of his culture, but he is also, more specifically, a unique individual, the product of one family and one set of experiences. Sometimes the author's biography offers a clue to one of his basic artistic choices. Edgar Allen Poe's own unhappy love affair is sometimes used to explain his preoccupation with dead beauty, the subject of "Ligeia." Even though the biographical content of a story may seem irrelevant to the final interpretation, some biographical fact may frequently reinforce an otherwise doubtful critical decision.

Along with social and biographical information, a knowledge of literary traditions also can lead to a fuller understanding of a story. Although the purest structuralist feels that the text of the story itself is enough to communicate, many critics believe that a knowledge of other stories that use the same literary conventions may prove useful in the analysis of a story. Every author writes under the influence of all that he has read; the more stories a reader has read then, the more likely he is to discover meaning in a story. If, for example, he has never read any other western stories, he may be unaware of the inherent irony in "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky." Especially in stories that satirize an existing tradition, some other reading in the same type is necessary.

The societal element in a short story then, while not necessarily essential to a basic understanding, can expand the appreciation of the story, either by an increased awareness of the society that produced it, of the man that produced it, or the literary tradition that produced it. This kind of increased comprehension of meaning is what every reader strives for in the analysis of a story.

THEMATIC MEANING
(The Philosophical Approach)

Behind the narrative, the plot, and the societal detail lies the larger pattern of the total story. The unifying factor in the artistic choices that go into a story is its theme. Although it will never be possible for a reader to arrive conclusively at a direct statement of the guiding thought that lay behind the author's construction of the story, any conclusion that is supported by all the elements in a story is a likely tenable theme. Every writer writes out of an integrated, momentary or permanent, view of the cosmos. What he presents in the individual story is the embodiment of that cosmic view in one set of characters and one situation. With some writers, such as William Faulkner, the stories are themselves part of a search for an adequate philosophy. With others, such as James Joyce, the stories are presentations of the writer's present attitudes. However much the author doubts, or trusts, there is a basic response to the external world expressed in the theme of each story.

In the simplest story, such as a fable or a parable, the theme may be embodied in a short moral truism. In a more intricate artistic pattern, however, the adequate verbalizing of the theme is always an oversimplifying of the theme, since the story itself is the only valid expression of that theme. In such a story as Erskine Caldwell's "The End of Christy Tucker," the theme may deal with social evil demonstrated in the story. The story becomes the visible evidence to support a sometimes simple, but frequently exceedingly intricate, philosophical or ethical conclusion.

The search for this theme begins with the analysis of the simplest elements of the story and concludes only with some hypothetical verbalizing of the theme, a verbalizing supported by everything in the story and contradicted by nothing in it. It is in the search for an adequate verbalizing of theme that much literary criticism and critical discussion is concerned. While, because of its intangible nature, there can never be a definite revelation of the total theme, discussion and writing can lead to a fuller understanding on the part of the reader.

SYMBOLIC MEANING
(The Mythic Approach)

The language of a story has many levels of communicative power. The literal transmission of fact is the most obvious of these, but language itself is symbolic. Every word of a story that evokes a picture of some object in the external world is an image-producing word. Beyond these words,

however, lies the possibility of a meaning larger than the literal. Words in a special context communicate a meaning particularized by their immediate verbal environment. Take, for example, the use of the mouse in the story "Arabesque: the Mouse," by A. E. Coppard. The mouse of the story is obviously at first just a mouse; but, as the story progresses, this mouse becomes representative of something more. Short stories build certain words into symbols so that the symbols, like the other elements of the story, may contribute to the total meaning.

Many kinds of symbols are available to short story writers. Some they make themselves out of previously neutral words, but many areas of life contain ready-made ones, political, religious, educational. The mythic critic, under the influence of the psychologist Karl Jung, points out that with all men certain universal symbols carry special power. These symbols deal with psychological verities untouched by cultural change. Jung felt that men from birth contain the ability to react to these symbols that can lead them toward psychic fulfillment. According to Jung, the inspired writer of every age has built upon these age-old truths, and the thoughtful reader has responded instinctively to the built-in truth symbols.

Contemporary writers, conscious of this mythic symbolism, sometimes construct their stories with these symbols. Eudora Welty, for example, in "Death of a Traveling Salesman," writes about a barren personality. This salesman, a representative of contemporary culture, is surrounded by symbols of sterility and fertility. His car wavers on the edge of reality and seems to change into the boat that carried King Arthur to Avalon. The yellow pine room in which a fertile marriage exists becomes for him the revealing, fertilizing power of the sun. Everywhere in the story the literal meaning is weighted with fertility-sterility symbolism such as this. Whether the reader is able to discover all the symbols of a story, the total effect is that of a strong symbolic reinforcement of the literal meaning.

contents

I NARRATIVE MEANING

The stories in this section should be compared with others in the book to illustrate various narrative techniques. They vary from the seeming simplicity of Williams' "The Use of Force," and Stephen Crane's account of a street brawl with their simple, direct narratives, to the sophisticated irony of John Updike's "A & P." In each of these stories the narrative line is clearly marked, whether it is intricately interwoven as in "No. 16" or related very simply. In spite of the varying degree of complexity of narrative movement, however, these stories all have some controlling meaning that has determined, in the first place, the choice of narrative material, and, in the second, the relationship of other elements of the structure to that narrative line.

What this meaning is can be discovered by following the narrative through to its conclusion while at the same time observing what portions of the narrative are given most attention. Consider the story "Studs," in section III, for example: the selected incidents recounted about Studs by the narrator have an orderly progression. What is important is not so much the character of Studs, but the narrated growth of the storyteller, whose changing relationship with the title character undergoes gradual development, from admiration through disillusionment to a pity that results from an unemotional evaluation. The narrative is finally summarized in one line: "'Joe, he was a slob.'"

Sometimes, as in the above, the narrative clearly illustrates its conclusion verbally. At other times, such as in the Updike and Bowen stories, the narrative alone conveys the meaning so that the reader must verbalize the conclusion for himself. In "A & P," for example, the humorous tone of the author's attitude toward his main character is part of the total effect. When there