

The Short Story & You

An Introduction to
Understanding and Appreciation

John S. Simmons/Malcolm E. Stern

William Melvin Kelley
William Carlos Williams
Stephen Crane
Jack London
John Updike
Shirley Jackson
Toni Cade Bambara
Robert Cormier
Maureen Daly
Edgar Allan Poe
Ray Bradbury
W. W. Jacobs
Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.
Borden Deal
Paul Laurence Dunbar
Langston Hughes
Murray Heyert
Zoa Sherburne
William Saroyan
Carson McCullers

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The Short Story & You

Short Stories and You

The focus of this book is twofold—short stories and you. Through reading and enjoying these stories, you are encouraged to grow in your understanding of yourself and your world. For as long as there have been people, there have been stories about people. From our earliest beginnings, human beings have been curious about each other and have satisfied that curiosity with myths, legends, adventure tales, fantasy—stories. People respond to stories that have a special enduring quality—a sparkle of life, a bit of truth, a glimpse of ourselves.

All stories trace their origin to an oral tradition. For centuries, people shared accounts of their cultures through storytelling. They entertained each other with tales of great battles, of the exploits of noble ancestors and, through their stories, they kept alive their heritage. When people began to write stories, a variety of forms appeared. The form of the stories was unimportant to most audiences. The main purpose was entertainment, yet the stories also satisfied a human need to know more about human behavior.

By the nineteenth century, the loose, episodic tales of early times were replaced with a more artistic form—the short story. It is a relatively recent literary form and one that can truly be called American. The American short story as we know it was shaped by many pens, including those of Nathaniel Hawthorne, O. Henry, Jack London. Among them, the primary creator of the new genre was Edgar Allan Poe.

Poe felt that the short story should be written to stand alone and that it need not be related to a previous or subsequent episodes. He said that a story should be of such length that it could be read at one “sitting”. . . a real “short” story. Poe felt that the story should have a

definite internal unity; it should create a single effect and every part should reinforce that effect. For Poe, the single effect was usually terror. “The Fall of the House of Usher” offers an opportunity for you to see how well Poe put his theory into practice.

In our contemporary world, the short story has grown in popularity and surpassed many other forms of expression in terms of literary appeal. Because of its handy length, a short story can be read in a relatively brief span of time. But there is a more important feature that accounts for its popularity. It contains an intensity that draws the reader onward from the beginning of the conflict to the climax and then to the resolution. As we identify with the human situation of a particular story, we are compelled to satisfy our curiosity about how the story will end.

If reading stories were an end in itself, there might be little reason for us to read many of them. But there is more to the short story than the narration of a plot. The overall idea of a short story makes an impression on us, calling to mind similar struggles and situations when we have had to make choices. Like Sucker, we have had our feelings hurt; like Ollie in “Happy Birthday,” we have all been disappointed. By experiencing these emotions through the actions of fictional characters, we can re-examine these unavoidable situations. We feel a kind of safety in our separation from the conflict and are able to draw more detached, unemotional conclusions about the best way to respond to everyday conflicts.

The five Parts of this book contain stories chosen just for you—stories of a variety of characters, such as a bridegroom of the Old West, a Yukon trailblazer, a teenage grocery clerk, a young black scholar, a German war orphan. As you read, consider the persons who took the time to compose each work and the reasons they thought a small glimpse of a make-believe world might be worth the effort. Is there something about a character’s decision that is designed to make you consider your own choices? Is there a message in the way the characters learn from their failures? Is there a way you can relate to their situations by putting yourself in their shoes—just for the moment?

If you can, let go of your hold on the real world and immerse yourself in fiction. Examine the motivations of the characters. Ask yourself why they choose a particular path, even when the way leads to pain or disillusionment. Speak aloud their words. Empathize with the people you read about for the short duration of the story. Then examine the questions that accompany each selection. As you refresh your memory of the facts, delve deeper into the purpose of the story, the reason for

the conclusion.

When you finish each Part, consider its theme—facing conflict, adjusting to life, encountering the unexpected, confronting prejudice, getting along. How does each story express a unique thought, yet contribute to your understanding of the unifying idea? Is it possible for so many points of view to exist? Is any one answer correct? Why don't we all think alike?

If you find yourself wondering whether there are answers to these questions, you will have arrived at an important point in your personal growth. Truly, there have always been quandaries that have left people with no conclusion. At times, the questions themselves have inspired more questions, such as why is there violence, why must we suffer pain, and why do we cause suffering to others. The existence of these questions in the human spirit is the reason for our desire to know more. As long as there are people, there will be questions. As long as there are questions, there will be stories.

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Facing Conflict

The theme of conflict is a good place to start because it is truly universal. Rich and poor, young and old, famous and little-known, all people face conflicts. We must each decide how important a conflict is and how to deal with it. Conflicts can involve personal welfare, reputation, beliefs, wealth, family. Some decisions are arrived at very quickly; others require time to consider choices. In the final analysis, each of us must deal with conflicts in our own experience to ease burdens, uncomfortable situations and personal struggles.

Literature reflects the whole range of human experience through four basic kinds of conflicts—people against people, people against nature, people against fate, and people against themselves. It is important to sort out which conflicts are operating in each literary selection as well as in life situations because the nature of the struggle determines how we choose to combat it. In reading short stories, you can observe up close how people similar to you face conflicts and decide a course of action.

Please note that in some stories there are several kinds of conflict. In “The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky,” for example, Jack, the main character, faces three conflicts: the possibility of a fight with Scratchy Wilson, his old enemy; the problem of introducing his wife to her new home; and his own feelings. Often it is the person’s concern with thoughts and emotions that demands the closest attention from the reader.

Keep in mind the inner workings of each character as you read the stories and answer the questions that follow. As you formulate your responses, review the types of conflicts in each story so that you can derive the greatest understanding of each struggle.

William Carlos Williams (1883–1963)

In addition to earning a medical degree from the University of Pennsylvania and maintaining a successful pediatrics practice in his hometown of Rutherford, New Jersey, William Carlos Williams pursued a parallel career in writing. He earned fame for startlingly realistic images in *Poems* (1909), *Sour Grapes* (1921), *Spring and All* (1922), and a Pulitzer Prize for poetry in *Pictures From Brueghel and Other Poems* (1963). His most famous poems, such as “The Red Wheelbarrow,” are fresh, direct impressions of the sensuous world.

Three of his novels—*White Mule* (1937), *In the Money* (1940), and *The Build-up* (1952)—form a trilogy about a single family. His short stories, which probe the strange facets of human behavior, appear in a collection, *The Farmers’ Daughters* (1961). In addition, he published an autobiography, a book of essays, and notable letters. His realistic descriptions of commonplace situations, such as the one in “The Use of Force,” reflect long hours spent in observing his patients, diagnosing their ailments, and healing their ills.

The Use of Force

William Carlos Williams

They were new patients to me, all I had was the name, Olson. Please come down as soon as you can, my daughter is very sick.

When I arrived I was met by the mother, a big startled-looking woman, very clean and apologetic who merely said, Is this the doctor? and let me in. In the back, she added. You must excuse us, doctor, we have her in the kitchen where it is warm. It is very damp here sometimes.

The child was fully dressed and sitting on her father's lap near the kitchen table. He tried to get up, but I motioned for him not to bother, took off my overcoat and started to look things over. I could see that they were all very nervous, eyeing me up and down distrustfully. As often, in such cases, they weren't telling me more than they had to, it was up to me to tell them; that's why they were spending three dollars on me.

The child was fairly eating me up with her cold, steady eyes, and no expression to her face whatever. She did not move and seemed, inwardly, quiet; an unusually attractive little thing, and as strong as a heifer in appearance. But her face was flushed, she was breathing rapidly, and I realized that she had a high fever. She had magnificent blonde hair, in profusion. One of those picture children often reproduced in advertising leaflets and the photogravure sections of the Sunday papers.

She's had a fever for three days, began the father and we don't know what it comes from. My wife has given her things, you know, like people do, but it don't do no good. And there's been a lot of sickness around. So we tho't you'd better look her over and tell us what is the matter.

As doctors often do I took a trial shot at it as a point of departure. Has she had a sore throat?

Both parents answered me together, No . . . No, she says her throat don't hurt her.

Does your throat hurt you? added the mother to the child. But the little girl's expression didn't change nor did she move her eyes from my face.

Have you looked?

I tried to, said the mother, but I couldn't see.

As it happens we had been having a number of cases of diphtheria in the school to which this child went during that month and we were all, quite apparently, thinking of that, though no one had as yet spoken of the thing.

Well, I said, suppose we take a look at the throat first. I smiled in my best professional manner and asking for the child's first name I said, come on, Mathilda, open your mouth and let's take a look at your throat.

Nothing doing.

Aw, come on, I coaxed, just open your mouth wide and let me take a look. Look, I said opening both hands wide, I haven't anything in my hands. Just open up and let me see.

Such a nice man, put in the mother. Look how kind he is to you. Come on, do what he tells you to. He won't hurt you.

At that I ground my teeth in disgust. If only they wouldn't use the word "hurt" I might be able to get somewhere. But I did not allow myself to be hurried or disturbed but speaking quietly and slowly I approached the child again.

As I moved my chair a little nearer suddenly with one cat-like movement both her hands clawed instinctively for my eyes and she almost reached them too. In fact she knocked my glasses off and they fell, though unbroken, several feet away from me on the kitchen floor. Both the mother and father almost turned themselves inside out in embarrassment and apology. You bad girl, said the mother, taking her and shaking her by one arm Look what you've done. The nice man . . .

For heaven's sake, I broke in. Don't call me a nice man to her. I'm here to look at her throat on the chance that she might have diphtheria and possibly die of it. But that's nothing to her. Look here, I said to the child, we're going to look at your throat You're old enough to understand what I'm saying. Will you open it now by yourself or shall we have to open it for you?

Not a move. Even her expression hadn't changed. Her breaths however were coming faster and faster. Then the battle began. I had to do it. I had to have a throat culture for her own protection. But first I told the

parents that it was entirely up to them. I explained the danger but said that I would not insist on a throat examination so long as they would take the responsibility.

If you don't do what the doctor says you'll have to go to the hospital, the mother admonished her severely.

Oh yeah? I had to smile to myself. After all, I had already fallen in love with the savage brat, the parents were contemptible to me. In the ensuing struggle they grew more and more abject, crushed, exhausted while she surely rose to magnificent heights of insane fury of effort bred of her terror of me.

The father tried his best, and he was a big man but the fact that she was his daughter, his shame at her behavior and his dread of hurting her made him release her just at the critical times when I had almost achieved success, till I wanted to kill him. But his dread also that she might have diphtheria made him tell me to go on, go on though he himself was almost fainting, while the mother moved back and forth behind us raising and lowering her hands in an agony of apprehension.

Put her in front of you on your lap, I ordered, and hold both her wrists.

But as soon as he did the child let out a scream. Don't, you're hurting me. Let go of my hands. Let them go I tell you. Then she shrieked terrifyingly, hysterically. Stop it! Stop it! You're killing me!

Do you think she can stand it, doctor! said the mother.

You get out, said the husband to his wife. Do you want her to die of diphtheria?

Come on now, hold her, I said.

Then I grasped the child's head with my left hand and tried to get the wooden tongue depressor between her teeth. She fought, with clenched teeth, desperately! But now I also had grown furious—at a child. I tried to hold myself down but I couldn't. I know how to expose a throat for inspection. And I did my best. When finally I got the wooden spatula behind the last teeth and just the point of it into the mouth cavity, she opened up for an instant but before I could see anything she came down again and gripping the wooden blade between her molars she reduced it to splinters before I could get it out again.

Aren't you ashamed, the mother yelled at her. Aren't you ashamed to act like that in front of the doctor?

Get me a smooth-handled spoon of some sort, I told the mother. We're going through with this. The child's mouth was already bleeding. Her tongue was cut and she was screaming in wild hysterical shrieks. Perhaps I should have desisted and come back in an hour or more. No

doubt it would have been better. But I have seen at least two children lying dead in bed of neglect in such cases, and feeling that I must get a diagnosis now or never I went at it again. But the worst of it was that I too had got beyond reason. I could have torn the child apart in my own fury and enjoyed it. It was a pleasure to attack her. My face was burning with it.

The damned little brat must be protected against her own idiocy, one says to one's self at such times. Others must be protected against her. It is a social necessity. And all these things are true. But a blind fury, a feeling of adult shame, bred of a longing for muscular release are the operatives. One goes on to the end.

In a final unreasoning assault I overpowered the child's neck and jaws. I forced the heavy silver spoon back of her teeth and down her throat till she gagged. And there it was—both tonsils covered with membrane. She had fought valiantly to keep me from knowing her secret. She had been hiding that sore throat for three days at least and lying to her parents in order to escape just such an outcome as this.

Now truly she was furious. She had been on the defensive before but now she attacked. Tried to get off her father's lap and fly at me while tears of defeat blinded her eyes.

Check Your Reading

1. What details does the doctor notice when he enters the Olson's kitchen?
2. How does Mathilda manage to thwart the doctor's attempts to examine her throat?
3. What methods of persuasion does the doctor use?
4. How do the parents hinder the doctor's progress?
5. What secret is Mathilda hiding from her parents and the doctor?

Further Exploration

1. What might have happened if the doctor had examined Mathilda without the presence of her parents?
2. Imagine that you are the doctor. What methods would you try if you were examining Mathilda? Are there ways to remove fear from terrified patients?
3. Is a doctor's "use of force" ever justified? Describe a situation in which a professional person might resort to force.
4. How would Mathilda describe this same episode? Would Mrs. Olson share Mathilda's point of view if she were the narrator?
5. Why is Mathilda crying "tears of defeat" at the end of the story? How might Mathilda see the doctor's diagnosis as a victory?

Stephen Crane (1871–1900)

Following the example of his parents and two brothers, all of whom wrote for a living, Crane left school for a few semesters at Lafayette College and Syracuse University to pursue a career in freelance reporting in New York City for the *Herald* and the *Tribune*. Close contact with the saloons and slums of his beat resulted in a masterly command of naturalistic detail, a type of writing he made famous in his first novel, *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893), and also in his classic novel of youth and war, *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895). As a result of his achievement he was hired to cover war news during the Cuban Revolution, the Greco–Turkish War, and the Spanish–American War.

In addition to novels, Crane produced verse and a collection of Civil War stories, *The Little Regiment* (1896). His best known work, “The Open Boat,” resulted from a 50-hour struggle with the sea in a small dinghy after his ship was sunk near Cuba. Suffering the effects of his ordeal and of tuberculosis, Crane went to England and published two collections of stories—*The Open Boat* (1898) and *The Monster* (1899). He sought a cure for his ill health in Germany but died at the age of twenty-nine.

The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky

Stephen Crane

I

The great Pullman was whirling onward with such dignity of motion that a glance from the window seemed simply to prove that the plains of Texas were pouring eastward. Vast flats of green grass, dull-hued spaces of mesquite and cactus, little groups of frame houses, woods of light and tender trees, all were sweeping into the east, sweeping over the horizon, a precipice.

A newly married pair had boarded this coach at San Antonio. The man's face was reddened from many days in the wind and sun, and a direct result of his new black clothes was that his brick-colored hands were constantly performing in a most conscious fashion. From time to time he looked down respectfully at his attire. He sat with a hand on each knee, like a man waiting in a barber's shop. The glances he devoted to other passengers were furtive and shy.

The bride was not pretty, nor was she very young. She wore a dress of blue cashmere, with small reservations of velvet here and there, and with steel buttons abounding. She continually twisted her head to regard her puff sleeves, very stiff, straight, and high. They embarrassed her. It was quite apparent that she had cooked, and that she expected to cook, dutifully. The blushes caused by the careless scrutiny of some passengers as she had entered the car were strange to see upon this plain, underclass countenance, which was drawn in placid, almost emotionless lines.

They were evidently very happy. "Ever been in a parlor car before?" he asked, smiling with delight.

"No," she answered, "I never was. It's fine, ain't it?"

"Great! And then after a while we'll go forward to the diner, and