

# *The Short Story*

AN INTRODUCTION



Stone

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An Introduction

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# Preface

We had two objectives in mind in making this book. First, we aimed to gather a collection of stories richly representative of the short story genre; second, we aimed to make a book that would be, owing to its critical and introductory material, as useful to the beginning writer as to the critical reader and teacher.

Any gathering that covers so many years (roughly from 1800 to the present—with bows to a farther past) represents some painful compromises and omissions. We have steadfastly tried to adhere to the following two tests for inclusion: Is the story good in and of itself, that is, is it an outstanding achievement as a work of art? And is it representative, that is, does it in its writing, technique, or theme represent an important event in the historical development of the short story? We believe that, in the main, our goals have been achieved.

We have prefaced the book with a fairly long introduction which provides, among other things, most of the information about technique that the reader (or writer) needs to know. The work of each writer is preceded by a short introduction which provides biographical information together with enough critical discussion about the particular story to get the student-critic on his way. At the end of the book is a Thematic Table of Contents—which will assist the reader who wants an entry into the range of human experiences the stories deal with—a Brief Glossary of Terms, and a List of Useful Books. Finally, we have tried to make our Index genuinely valuable by listing there all critical terms or

other matters from the introductions that we thought would be useful. We have avoided the detailed questions and other apparatus that can make a book like this look more like an instrument of pedagogy than a book of wonderful readings. When the life of the reader intersects with the life of the story—that is when criticism ought to begin. In designing our critical aids, we have attempted to enhance rather than to stifle that moment.

We think it is worth mentioning that the editors of this volume include a short story writer as well as two persons with more usual academic credentials and experience. We hope that the crossing of the critical and creative strains has brought a useful focus to what we have selected and to what we have written. In the short introductions no attempt has been made to “homogenize” the writing styles of the three editors.

Many people have helped us, in large and small ways. We hope that a mere listing of their names will signal our genuine gratitude: Barbara Baer, Nancy Bazin, Betty Brereton, George Brown, Christine Gwynn, John Felstiner, Suzanne Ferguson, Guelfo Frulla, Roger Harm, Arturo Islas, Dana Levitt, Eric Lindquist, Dagmar Logie, Tom Moser, Emily Olmstead, Thomas G. Parker, Lawrence Ryan, Scott Turow, and Stephanie Vaughn.

*Wilfred Stone*  
*Nancy Huddleston Packer*  
*Robert Hoopes*

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# Introduction

## 1

Storytelling is as old as campfires. The need for human beings to cast their experience in narrative form is probably as old as consciousness itself. Gathered about the tribal fire, bonded by their common struggle for survival, our early ancestors gave voice in story form to their fears and beliefs—and thus helped make for themselves a magic defense against the trials of life. The earliest stories, traveling from campfire to campfire, across seas and down the generations, registered humanity's slow emergence from animal status. The forms of these stories, like the forms of other rituals, were the structures of each teller's history and identity—part of the creative impulse that made men and women consciously human.

All “primitive” cultures have their myths and legends—narratives of how things began, how the humans came, how the tribe survived, how the gods were dealt with, how the heroes fought. Though these tales are sometimes funny, their purpose is intensely serious. For the tribe that related them, they were part of the sacred word—matter not of make-believe but of belief itself. Since we no longer see the world as primitive storytellers did (though the word “primitive” is less and less a pejorative term), a lot of this folklore can seem naive and strange, a matter of superstition. But increasingly, as the “modern” continues to sweep over us, we read such lore with nostalgia, and are moved by a sense of things we have lost—our kinship with nature, a sense of community, the certainty of belief.

Many of our earliest written narratives—the Gilgamesh epic, the Old Testament

stories, the Greek and Roman myths, Beowulf—borrow heavily from such prehistoric lore. They are in great part the forms of such stories that have been developed, sophisticated, and written down.

But “modern” fiction has come a long way from those early beginnings (though it often reshapes those ancient forms to new uses). One cannot read a modern novel or story after an ancient myth without realizing that it exists in a vastly different world of value. Myths, as Frank Kermode points out, are for explaining things “as they are and were,” whereas fictions “are for finding things out.” “Myths are the agents of stability, fictions the agents of change. Myths call for absolute, fictions for conditional assent.” Today in the West we accept no one or no “correct” way to view truth or reality. Our culture for the past three hundred years has been one of fantastic change and instability. The forces of science, industry, capitalism, and democracy that swept away the feudal order (along with many of its injustices) also swept away many of the traditional grounds for human confidence. Centuries-old beliefs were challenged, institutions radically altered or destroyed, and the Christian myths that supported the old order lost much of their power to explain and comfort. The new age became as much an age of anxiety as of optimism, and in this century it has seemed to many like an age of despair. It is the age of fiction.

The impulses that make the modern fiction writer are probably, at heart, no different from those of the “primitive” storyteller. He too would like to be a myth maker, and often is, but his problem is vastly complicated. Early stories were vehicles of assertion. Modern fiction is one of search. Early stories spoke for a whole community, modern fiction is the work of individuals called “authors.” Myths record a completed vision of something true; fiction often represents, for writer and for reader, a crisis of belief and a groping for certainty. The modern writer does not receive his worldview, he discovers it. He does not, like the ancient myth maker, inherit his rituals, he invents them. But—and this is the vital point—though he may not give voice to universal truths, he is nevertheless making a statement about values. “Our whole age,” said the poet Mallarmé, “is seeking to bring forth a sacred book.”

Gogol’s “The Overcoat” may not, like the myth of Adam and Eve in the Garden, identify the source of original sin, but it unforgettably reminds us of the perversity that prevents people from being their brother’s keepers. Babel’s “The Sin of Jesus” betrays a ragged sense of Christian ethics, yet it expresses a passionate longing for human justice. Beckett’s “The End” offers no hint that life has meaning or that afterlife has either existence or consolation, but these negations cry out for some denial from the reader. Though the human sacrifice in Mishima’s “Patriotism” is a traditional samurai ritual, it has lost its redemptive power and seems absurd in its anachronistic modern setting. Finally, Heinrich Böll’s “Like a Bad Dream” shows an evil act reduced to the banality of business-as-usual, but the evildoer does not get off scot-free: he experiences something “like a bad dream,” which we might, at a stretch, call his conscience.

Stories are not sermons. They tend to present rather than to preach; their values are more often implicit than explicit. Yet no matter how objective a writer is, no matter how given to *showing* over telling, his values seep into his story—into his subject matter, his style, his characterization, his plots, his very tone of voice. The careful reader will learn to read these signs.

When Guy de Maupassant writes that the mother in “A Country Outing” uncovered “a leg whose erstwhile slenderness was vanishing under the invasion of flesh coming down from her thighs,” but writes that the daughter was “one of those women who, met in the street, fill a man with a sudden, whipping desire and leave that vague disturbance and agitation of the senses with him until he goes to sleep,” he tells us what

he valued, giving voice to the unrefined sexual code of what the French call *l'homme moyen sensuel*.

When Updike in "Leaves" appeases his guilt by contemplating nonhuman things—the birds and leaves he sees out the window—he is making of them emblems (see p. 8) of value, holy signs through which he tries to gain a degree of redemption.

As the stories of this volume progress toward the present day, the values they express become more difficult to decipher. A story like "Gogol's Wife" may seem no more than a gag, a *jeu d'esprit*. Delmore Schwartz's "In Dreams Begin Responsibilities" may seem, in its semicomical and multimirrored surrealism, absurdly Freudian. And Barth's "Petition," which violates all normal expectations for character and theme sequence, may seem only the game playing of some clever wordsmith.

Certainly in such works there is a radical turning away from "realism," from the "manners and morals" that Lionel Trilling called the proper subject for fiction, toward fantasy, absurdity, and far-out invention. Many of these writers—especially American writers of the last two decades—are responding to their sense of cultural break-up, and to a sense that the old fictional conventions are inadequate for expressing it. Writers like Barthelme are especially sensitive to what they feel to be the corruption of language by the mass media, government, and advertising; to that world of Doublespeak where peace is war, the lie merely something "inoperative," aggression against the enemy a "protective reaction strike," and official illegalities merely "inappropriate." To such writers the modern "wasteland" is a waste of words, a flood of *dreck* in Barthelme's terms, and they have sought their artistic integrity partly through opposing that flood: by eliminating plot, fracturing syntax, and in every way imaginable and unimaginable defying the lexical and fictional patterns that were conventional in earlier decades. They are responding not only to the corruption of language, but to its shrinkage. As George Steiner says:

Large areas of meaning and praxis now belong to such non-verbal languages as mathematics, symbolic logic, and formulas of chemical or electronic relation. Other areas belong to the sublanguages or antilanguages of nonobjective art and *musique concrète*. The world of words has shrunk.

All the arts have reflected these trends, and the short story is no exception.

But it would be a mistake to suppose that these writers have abandoned values. To say that they have atomized the conventional short story is not to say that they have made nihilism or pointlessness or craziness their new creed. They are, it is true, deeply aware of what T. S. Eliot has called "the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history," and, ironically, their reaction has been largely apolitical and personal rather than polemical and engaged. Yet they are making their positive comment, though making it in surprising, and sometimes shocking, new ways.

Barthelme's "At the End of the Mechanical Age," for example, shows a couple who come together without courtship and part without pain, as emotionless, even in their "clinging and clutching," as a computer. They are the robots of a mechanical age, and their joining is that of socket and plug. Yet we laugh, as Henri Bergson said we should, at this sight of the mechanical being encrusted on the living—and that laughter is the assertion of a protest and a counter-value. In "The Shore," Alain Robbe-Grillet gives us a story from which he has removed any human observer, a fitting device for depicting a depersonalized culture. And John Barth's "Petition" shows human beings in a state of grotesque humiliation, yet Barth tells his story in language that we can't help but laugh at.

In all these tales there is the implicit wish that *things were not this way*. "I want to go to some other country . . . I want to go somewhere where everything is different," says a character in one of Barthelme's early stories, and that unspoken desire almost defines these modernist writers, and perhaps tells us why they have gone in for fantasy.

These experimental writers deserve our careful attention, whether or not they express experiences the reader can easily share. For the form of fiction as well as the content, the technique as well as the subject matter, are vital indicators of what is happening to us—and vital purveyors of value. In his important anthology *Anti-Story*, Philip Stevick has rightfully classified these antitraditional tendencies as a series of negations:

- "Against Mimesis" or dismissal of the traditional goal of imitating "real life." (Compare Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener" with Landolfi's "Gogol's Wife.")
- "Against Reality" or the indulgence in fantasy and dreams. (See Schwartz's "In Dreams Begin Responsibilities" or Borges's "Everything and Nothing.")
- "Against Event" or a tendency in the direction of plotless stories. (See Paley's "Friends" or Updike's "Leaves.")
- "Against Subject" or fiction in search of something to say. (See Barthelme's "At the End of the Mechanical Age.")
- "Against the Middle Range of Experience" or new forms of extremity. (See Beckett's "The End" or Barth's "Petition" or Ozick's "The Shawl.")
- "Against Analysis" or the objective depiction of the phenomenal world. (See Robbe-Grillet's "The Shore.")
- "Against Meaning" or forms of the absurd. (See Cortázar's "Axolôtl" or Landolfi's "Gogol's Wife.")
- "Against Scale" or the minimal story, the epigram. (See Brown's "Solipsist" or consider the entire "minimal" story that follows; it is "Taboo" by Enrique Anderson Imbert:)

His guardian angle whispered to Fabián, behind his shoulder:

"Careful, Fabián! It is decreed that you will die the minute you pronounce the word *doyen*."

"Doyen?" asks Fabián, intrigued.

And he dies.

Negation—even perverse negation—is a sign that the moral sense is not dead. It is too early to say whether these experimental stories are classics or these trends permanent. It is enough to say that they represent something undeniably present in our culture: a sense of despair, break-up, horror, absurdity, violence, and often as well a saving humor. But not all contemporary writers are working with these "against" techniques, for the good reason that they do not all share this kind of vision. Traditional techniques and traditional attitudes toward the human condition seem to go hand in hand. The contemporaries using more traditional techniques—Welty, Malamud, Cheever, O'Connor, Updike—seem less concerned with the forces breaking up our culture than with the forces holding it together.

Flannery O'Connor wrote: "People without hope not only don't write novels, but what is more to the point, they don't read them." The act of writing is in itself a kind of act of faith. The search for redemption, if we look deeply and tolerantly enough, can be found in all the stories in this book.

## 2

What is the short story? Is it only a truncated and incomplete version of the novel? Or is it a genre, a category of art with a distinctive content, form, and style? This question has preoccupied a great many thoughtful practitioners of the form, Frank O'Connor, Sean O'Faolain, H. E. Bates eminent among them. Generally speaking these writer-critics do not think of a story as merely a work that happens to be short, but as a unique literary form, with techniques and effects that cannot be achieved through another medium. What are those effects, those techniques?

One of the most useful answers came from Edgar Allan Poe in 1842 when the short story was in its infancy. He believed that the prose tale stood just below the lyric poem in the hierarchy of literary art. For Poe, the "unity of effect or impression" was of prime importance, but, he felt, this unity could be obtained only in works that could be read "at one sitting." For Poe, the novel does not have this unity, cannot achieve the "immense force derivable from *totality*." Poe believed the short story is different from the novel, and superior to it. Not shortness, but intensity of impact was what Poe the romantic valued most highly.

Although Poe's concern with effect, particularly the effects he chiefly sought—terror, passion, horror—has had little influence on important writers of the short story, his views on singleness and unity are widely shared. Elizabeth Bowen wrote in *Collected Impressions*:

The story should have the valid central emotion and inner spontaneity of the lyric. . . . It must have tautness and clearness. . . . Poetic tautness and clarity are so essential to it that it may be said to stand at the edge of prose.

While this analogy with lyric poetry is a tricky one, it is also illuminating, and a great many writers have suggested it. Faulkner, no doubt only half in earnest, said in his *Paris Review* interview (1956):

Maybe every novelist wants to write poetry first, finds he can't, and then tries the short story, which is the most demanding form after poetry. And, failing at that, only then does he take up novel writing.

Like a fine lyric poem, the short story requires the reader's utmost attention, a focusing of the mind on each detail in order to realize the final fullness of effect. The short story depends on concreteness, on sensual impressions that deliver their meaning without waste. Like the lyric, it is a lean form; it can tolerate little if any digression, and it stays within the world it creates. The action of a conventional short story is compressed within a short (usually continuous) time frame and space. The characters, few in number, are revealed, not developed. The background and setting are implied, not rendered. Like most drama, the short story's action begins *in medias res*. The story gets going as quickly as possible: "Once upon a time in a distant land there lived a princess . . ." and the story is off and running. ("Beginners," said Chekhov, "often have to . . . fold in two and tear up the first half. . . . The first half is superfluous.") The effects are, as Poe said, intense and total.

Consider Chekhov's brilliant "Ninotchka." In fewer than 2,000 words we are given an ironic minidrama—a love triangle in which the cuckolded husband, miserable over his wife's infidelity with his best "friend," goes helplessly to that friend for advice.

("Tell me, what is Ninotchka supposed to do now? Should she go on living with me, or do you think it would be better if she moved in with you?") The solution is given without emotion, the writer carefully repressing his pity so the reader can provide it himself:

Having deliberated briefly, we left it at this: Ninotchka would continue to live at Vikhlyenev's; I would go to see her whenever I liked, and he would take the corner room, which formerly had been the storeroom, for himself. This room was rather dark and damp, and the entrance to it was through the kitchen, but, on the other hand, he could perfectly well shut himself up in it and not be a nuisance to anyone.

If a writer attempted that kind of concentration of energy for, say, 300 pages, he would surely exhaust the reader, and would not in any case be able to maintain such emotional tension. The pace of a novel can be leisurely, its settings, characters, and events slowly developed until fully rendered.<sup>1</sup> The novelist—at least the conventional novelist—can tolerate subplots and digressions from the main thrust of his story; he can even desire them in order to achieve changes in pace and intensity. But that kind of pacing and development is not appropriate to the short story, and it is revealing that great novelists like Henry James, Joseph Conrad, and Thomas Mann found the short-story form troublesome. They were sticklers for fullness of presentation, for the richly rendered context, and for the slow unfolding. The James and Mann stories in this volume will indicate how difficult it was for these authors to squeeze into the short-story form, to sacrifice expansiveness to compression.

There are in the main three qualities that mark the short story as clearly different from other forms of prose fiction, that make it a "genre." The first quality is of course brevity. The second is its power of compensating for the consequences of shortness. And the third is the interaction of one and two.

How does the story manage to tell it all in such a brief space? Such a fine story as Gogol's "The Overcoat" seems quaintly old-fashioned today: the lengthy biography of the main character, the thorough development of each scene, the slow pacing of the action. Even Chekhov, that master of the form, was sometimes unwilling to sacrifice such embellishments for tautness.

But the development of the form has been toward greater and greater compression. A comparison of "The Lady with the Pet Dog" by Chekhov and "Hills Like White Elephants" by Hemingway will suggest just how far compression has gone. Chekhov's story starts far back, when Gurov and Anna first meet at Yalta. Through four chapters, we watch their relationship develop from idle seduction to the mature, though heart-breaking, love they come to recognize. Along the way Chekhov has described three different physical settings and a variety of characters. He tells us a good deal about the lives of both Gurov and Anna. Along the way he describes several settings in each of three different towns, and he introduces a number of characters. Hemingway's story takes place in a few minutes at one crossroads community and between two characters. We don't know the characters' names or their history—we can't be sure they are married. There is no buildup to the drama and no explanation. We know the characters

<sup>1</sup> There is a fictional form called the "lyrical novel" which includes such books as Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*, Herman Hesse's *Demian*, and André Gide's *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*, and there are modern novelists like John Hawkes who would like to eliminate "plot, theme, character, and structure," thus carrying fictional compression almost to the point, if such wishes could be fulfilled, of nihilism. But these facts do not, we believe, contradict seriously the above generalizations.



and the situation not because we are told—as Chekhov told us—but because we overhear them when they speak revealing words and we see them perform revealing acts. The man in the story repeats the word “perfectly”—and we realize he is a hypocrite. He stops to have a drink alone—and we understand that in an important way he is divorcing himself from the woman. A very little—a word, a gesture, a description—stands for so much. Hemingway has followed Chekhov’s advice to “fold in two and tear up the first half.” His story begins in the middle—the struggle between the man and the woman is in progress—and the rising action is uninterrupted until the drama is complete.

How to choose between the Chekhov style and the Hemingway style? One cannot, of course. Both are brilliant examples of the art. Yet in the hands of a lesser writer than Hemingway, the cost of compression can be high. Elizabeth Bowen says that the short story’s disadvantage is an “emotional narrowness.” Compression can distort human experience and undercut the richness, ambivalence, complexity of human beings.

Writing in 1917, Herbert Ellsworth Cory said, “The very technique of the short-story is pathological, and titillates our nerves in our pathological moments. The short-story is the blood kinsman of the quick-lunch, the vaudeville, and the joy-ride.” No doubt the short story is one manifestation of the modern speedup, though Cory’s rather shuddering vision of a world full of “pathological moments” is one that even Kafka might reject. However, he does touch on the short-story writer’s chief difficulty: how to be succinct without being shallow, how to create a single effect without creating a merely transitory one.

How does the short story achieve depth, or the feeling of depth? As we have noted, the short-story writer cannot, like certain novelists, stop his narrative while his characters’ psyches are analyzed or their portraits painted. He cannot take time out to draw a scene. The story writer must intimate the setting, imply the complexity, insinuate the character, and the reader must infer the rest. When a story writer violates these practices—as when Melville in “Bartleby, the Scrivener” stops the story to summarize background—the result seems awkward and static, inimical to the spirit of the short story (however fitting to that of the novella). There are ways of avoiding such summarization, and they are all encompassed in one vital word: *suggestion*. The story reveals the “tip of the iceberg” in Hemingway’s phrase: the rest of the iceberg is *suggested*. Consider that haunting dialogue between the old man and the boy in McCullers’ “A Tree \* A Rock \* A Cloud” in which the old man, battered by life, tells the boy about love, and about the “science of love” he found could heal the hurt of being abandoned by the one woman he ever loved. His whole life is encompassed in those five pages, yet we learn only a few facts. When he tells the boy that, in trying to love a woman, he had begun at “the wrong end” of love, at the “climax,” and that love should be begun with “A tree. A rock. A cloud,” we are by these few words taken into the very center of his life and into the heartbreak that defined it. His “science” is the last desperate resource of an alienated man:

Son, I can love anything. . . . I see a street full of people and a beautiful light comes in me. I watch a bird in the sky. Or I meet a traveller on the road. Everything, Son. And anybody. All stranger and all loved! Do you realize what a science like mine can mean?

Was he drunk? Was he a dope fiend? the boy wanted to know. Was he crazy? Leo, the stingy café owner, answered no to the first two questions, but was silent as to the third, though he felt himself to be an expert on craziness. But the reader must answer, for the