

SHORT STORIES OF TO-DAY

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*"He cometh unto you with a tale which
holdeth children from play, and old
men from the chimney corner."*

SIR PHILIP SIDNEY

PREFACE

THIS book is intended to be not merely a short-story anthology, but a laboratory manual for the guidance of students in intelligent reading and original composition. It offers, for the purpose of study, many good stories of recent date selected for their literary merit as well as for their intrinsic interest, and suggests, in appended lists, many others for review, which a library may supply. At least one question upon each story suggests another story, usually an older one, with which it may be profitably compared. Others for like comparison may be collected by the teacher in a canvass of the class. A class library of such stories will double the efficiency of the book. The suggestions for original writing which follow each story offer opportunities for creative work. Growing as it did from actual classroom experience, this collection should make a direct appeal to students. If other teachers using this book find, as its editor has done, that the stories it contains impart genuine enjoyment to their classes, and its suggestions for study lead to a more critical evaluation by the student of the mass of fiction constantly being published in our magazines, the aim of the book will have been realized.

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TO THE PUPIL

THIS introduction, as well as the stories here collected, is intended for you, the student who has elected a course in the short story or been hurled into such a course by curriculum demands. However guilty you may have been in times past in the matter of skipping introductions, you are asked to read carefully these few introductory pages, and to master the technical information found here, that you may bring to the reading of the stories in the collection a more intelligent appreciation.

Every student reads short stories. Their brevity and accessibility commend them as a pleasant means of passing idle moments. Last year thousands of short stories were published in American magazines and hundreds more in book form. Many of these you may have read. Did you enjoy all alike, or did you read with discrimination, realizing that in such a mass of material there were both chaff and wheat? Are you trying to set a standard by which you may judge a story, or are you content with such criticism as "good story" or "I don't think much of that"? Wide reading followed by casual criticism has its worth, since it affords familiarity with many examples; but careful reading and evaluation are of greater importance to the student. Could you select from your last year's reading five short stories of marked distinction, and defend your choice by definite reasons? Could you name five older short stories of recognized worth and show why they have outlived their contemporaries in popular favor? These two questions suggest the double purpose of this collection — to select for you from recent publications short stories which are well-constructed, vital in content, and worthy of study, and through these to direct you to the reading of good stories of an earlier date. The book is in your hands, completed as to form, but demanding your coöperation for its final success. In one small volume it is impossible to give more than a few notable examples. You should not feel, however, that you have completed the course when you have read the stories here reprinted.

If you fail to read and study an equal number of the older short stories suggested in lists and study helps, you will have used the book at only half its intended worth. Likewise if you fail to make your own the minimum of technical information which the editor has seen fit to include in the introduction, you will have neglected an obvious means of strengthening your standards of judgment.

By all means read the story first for mere enjoyment, finishing it at a sitting without thought of technical terms or critical analysis. Then turn to the Suggestions for Study and see if they do not send you back to the story for a second reading. Finally, take part in the class discussion, defend or alter your opinions as the case may be, and try to gain from your study a more just appreciation of what is good and a more intelligent condemnation of what is bad or merely futile.

The original writing suggested after each story should take the place of formal written reports upon the stories here reprinted. In the case of other stories chosen from the appended lists formal reports may follow the form below suggested, which will prove more convenient than haphazard notes.

1. *Name of Story* — *Author*.
2. *Principal Characters*. Follow each with a characterizing sentence, a quotation from the story if you wish.
3. *The Plot*. Condense the plot to a few sentences. This may require practice, but it will prove an excellent exercise in straight thinking.
4. *The Setting*. State where the story takes place and discuss briefly the relation of the setting to the plot.
5. *Personal Comment*. This is the most important item in the report. If you do not like a story, say so. If you have read another story somewhat similar, compare the two. If the reading has stirred you to thought along any line, express your thoughts here. Be yourself. Say what you think. The first four items are merely a matter of record; the last is your own reaction to the story and should bear the stamp of your originality.

TO THE TEACHER

WITHIN recent years courses in the short story have become general in our schools and colleges. Although good stories have been told or written in every age, the short story as a clearly differentiated type is a comparatively modern conception, and was given a place of its own in the course of study only after it had gained general recognition and had gathered about itself a considerable mass of technical theory. Having once broken into the school curriculum, it has shown remarkable ability to hold its own. The reasons for its popularity are not hard to find. Its compact form offers unique opportunities for the study of narrative structure, and its simplicity surpasses for laboratory purposes the more complex form of the novel with its more involved plot, numerous characters, and elaborate setting. It is, as well, less formidable to the pupil as an example of narrative composition. Many a student who would never dream of attempting to write a novel will try the shorter form to the enrichment of his powers of appreciation and expression. The chief reason, however, for the popularity of the short story in courses of study in high schools and colleges is not its convenience as a unit of study, but its inherent appeal to the student. The short story is very close to life. It reflects the many phases of our complex modern existence, reproduces its dramatic situations, points its meanings, throws the light of a new interpretation upon its commonplace content. The young student has a right to know literature in the making as well as in the past, not that he may learn to despise anything that bears the stamp of age, but that he may intelligently compare past and present and choose from each what seems to him worth while. The eagerness with which high-school and college students have hailed courses in the short story is only one phase of their insistence upon this right of individual judgment and selection.

The study of the short story does not require an elaborate manual of technical information. Enjoyment of a good story is possible without comprehension of the laws underlying its

structure. For that matter, enjoyment of any art is possible without technical knowledge, but who will say that such knowledge does not increase both degree and quality of appreciation? An understanding of the accepted requirements of the short story, familiarity with the terms commonly used in its analysis and criticism, and a general knowledge of its development as a separate type are merely the tools with which a student should provide himself before beginning the study of the short story. This introduction attempts to provide those tools in a simple and usable form.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SHORT STORY

DEFINING THE SHORT STORY

WHAT are the characteristics which distinguish the short story from other literary forms? The term *short story* is so often loosely used to designate any form of prose narrative that the student can with profit attempt some answer to this question. Yet in the work of definition he finds himself obliged to proceed warily; on the one hand is the danger of defining too broadly, on the other the equal danger of limiting too narrowly. If he recognizes the short story as a distinct literary form, he must exclude from classification with it such kindred forms as the sketch, the tale, and the short novel. At the same time, he must remember that the short story is a variable, growing form and not a scientific specimen to be labeled too exactly. "The short story is a short prose narrative," is too inclusive a definition. "A short story is a prose narrative dealing with a single character and presenting one action in one place on one day," fails just as surely as a definition, since it excludes at once many short stories justly regarded as excellent examples of the type. If the student should compose a satisfactory definition, couch it in learned terms, and fancy that he had achieved a formula which would apply in all cases, what would happen? Straightway some one with a tale to tell and a spark of genius to light the telling would defy his hard-and-fast definition and produce a masterpiece which would laugh at formulæ. Genius can always laugh at definitions. Perhaps the safest course for the young student would lie in comparing what others have said by way of definition, thus thrusting the burden upon older and more experienced critics. If critics are at all agreed, the student should find in the elements common to their definitions an enumeration of the characteristics of the short story.

W. B. Pitkin emphasizes two elements, the single effect and the dramatic quality, and sums up his conclusions in this single sentence: "The short story is therefore a narrative drama with a single effect."¹

¹ *Short Story Writing*, p. 21. The Macmillan Company, 1912.

Blanche Colton Williams says: "The short story is a narrative presenting characters in a struggle or complication which has a definite outcome."¹

J. B. Esenwein, after tabulating the characteristics of the short story, combines them in this didactic statement: "A short story is a brief, imaginative narrative, unfolding a single predominating incident and a single chief character, by means of a plot, the details of which are so compressed and the whole so organized that a single impression is produced."²

Clayton Hamilton says by way of definition: "The aim of a short story is to produce a single narrative effect with the greatest economy of means that is consistent with the utmost emphasis."³

Dr. Henry Seidel Canby wisely avoids a formal definition, but gives as the distinguishing characteristic of the short story "a conscious impressionism, a deliberate attempt to convey a single impression of a mood, or emotion, or situation, to the reader." The short story, he asserts, has its rise in "situations requiring swift, brief, and vivid narrative."⁴

The short story has, it would seem from these statements, certain generally accepted characteristics, a summary of which will prove more practical than a formal definition.

1. The short story is a brief prose narrative developing a single dramatic incident.
2. It presents a single chief character or a unified group of characters in a situation involving struggle or conflict.
3. It moves forward with such artistic selection and compression of detail as to leave with the reader a single impression.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE SHORT STORY

Edgar Allan Poe was the first writer to formulate the theory of the short story as a distinct form. In a magazine article published in 1842, he stated the principles which he believed should govern the construction of the short story. One passage is especially significant.

¹ *A Handbook on Storywriting*, p. 7. Dodd, Mead & Co., 1917.

² *Writing the Short Story*, p. 30. The Home Correspondence School Press, 1908.

³ *Materials of Fiction*, p. 173. Doubleday, Page & Co., 1912.

⁴ *The Short Story in English*, chap. xv. Henry Holt & Co.

"A skillful artist has constructed a tale. If wise, he has not fashioned his thoughts to accommodate his incidents; but having conceived, with deliberate care, a certain unique or single effect to be wrought out, he then invents such incidents — he then combines such events as may best aid him in establishing this preconceived effect. If his initial sentence tends not to the out-bringing of this effect, then he has failed in his first step. In the whole composition there should be no word written, of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the preëstablished design. And by such means, with such care and skill, a picture is painted which leaves in the mind of him who contemplates it with kindred art, a sense of the fullest satisfaction."

In this passage Poe emphasizes the single effect. To produce such an effect the writer must first of all possess clearness of vision, must see with absolute certainty the exact impression which he wishes to create. To this foresight must be added the gift of originality which will enable him to invent belief-compelling incidents and to combine these with the skill necessary to force home the desired impression. Because he is concerned chiefly with this singleness of effect or unity of impression, economy in material becomes necessary. Not a detail of plot or setting or characterization must be included unless by its inclusion the unity of the whole is perfected. There must be economy, too, in the number of characters. Usually a single character dominates the story, and the lesser characters are important only as they affect this major character. Singleness of effect demands, moreover, concentration even in the treatment of the dominant character. A single situation in his life becomes the plot, a single trait in his character determines his action in the given situation. *The Luck Piece*, by Irvin S. Cobb, concerns the pursuit by the New York police of a man who has committed a murder. So cleverly has the murderer covered all evidence of his crime that the police are puzzled. But the murderer is superstitious, and his superstition sends him back over his trail in search of a luck piece which he dares not lose. The man was a criminal with material for many stories in his past, with many characteristics also which might equally well have motivated a plot, but for the purpose of this story the author chooses one incident, his escape after a murder,

and one characteristic, the superstition which leads to his return and finally to his capture. The unity of the whole is emphasized in the title, *The Luck Piece*.

Brander Matthews says: "No one has ever succeeded as a writer of short stories who had not ingenuity, originality, and compression; and most of those who have succeeded in this line had also the touch of fantasy."¹ Such statements as this and the passage from Poe quoted above may discourage the young writer. "No use for me to try," he may say. But let him remember that critics from Poe to Brander Matthews have been speaking of skilled workers, men and women who have perfected their art through long effort. In order to produce the artistic results which so satisfy the critics they have mastered certain technical requirements. Consciously or unconsciously, they have conformed to the accepted principles of short-story structure. The young writer has his apprenticeship before him; he also may learn the craft, and, if it so happens that genius is added to his knowledge, he may exalt craft to art and become a master. For such young writers and for students who wish to understand rather than to produce, the principles governing short-story structure are next to be considered under three divisions: plot, characterization, and setting.

PLOT

In simplest terms plot may be defined as what happens in a story. But for the student of short-story structure such a definition needs qualification. A man desires to purchase a certain old house. If he has the money and all parties to the transaction are satisfied, he buys the house, but no story exists. No obstacle has appeared to disturb the orderly course of events and to create a plot situation. Let us suppose, however, that the matter is not so simple. One of two old ladies who own the house refuses to sell. Despite her need of money, she cannot bring herself to part with a house which has so long been the home of her family. The man, moreover, has a strong motive for desiring the house, having reason to believe that a valuable paper is hidden there in a secret drawer. The element of conflict or struggle has entered into the situation and made a story

¹ *The Philosophy of the Short Story*. Longmans, Green & Co.

possible. In other words, plot exists where before it did not. To entangling circumstances such as the man's motive for wishing to buy and the old lady's obstinate refusal, the term *complication* is technically applied. In its derivation *complication* means a folding together or twisting of threads or lines, in our supposed case the entanglement of the man's line of interest with that of the old lady. If the story is to have unity, one of these lines must be subordinated to the other. The author's purpose, the single effect desired, would determine which is to be of primary importance. If the story is to hinge upon the discovery of hidden treasure, the man's line of interest becomes primary, the old lady's secondary. The author may, on the other hand, wish to write a story of character in which the old lady's obstinate attachment to the home leads to the discovery of a long-sought deed and saves her family from poverty. In such a case the old lady becomes the dominant character in the story, and the would-be purchaser's line of interest is subordinated to hers. In either case such a complication as has been imagined must lead to a determining *crisis*. Something must happen either to give the man his way and allow him to find the hidden paper or to permit the old lady to save her family home. Complication in a story should lead inevitably to a crisis or a crucial situation which determines the rest of the story. The terms *climax* and *crisis* are often used interchangeably, but exact analysts of the short story distinguish between them, considering crisis as a critical situation in the story and climax the single point of intense interest, usually occurring just after the crisis and resulting from it. The series of incidents leading up to the major crisis is technically called the *involution* of the plot. The *resolution* or *evolution* of the plot follows the crisis and tells what happens to the characters because of the crisis.

The Necklace, by Guy de Maupassant, is an excellent story for the study of plot. M. Loisel, a petty government clerk in Paris, is married to a pretty, ambitious young wife. In such a situation there are obvious plot possibilities, but some inciting force is needed to set the action going. Such a force is supplied when the young couple receive an invitation to a ball. As a result of this, two events, of sufficient significance to be called minor crises, involve the young couple in a tragic entanglement; the

wife borrows a necklace from a friend and after the ball discovers that it has been lost. The poor couple, despairing at last of finding the necklace, resolve to replace it. Having borrowed five hundred francs here and three louis there, given notes, and mortgaged his earnings for years to come, M. Loisel "went for the new necklace and put down upon the merchant's counter the thirty-six thousand francs." Here is the major crisis, the point of change which determines the future of the young couple. Up to this point the reader's interest has been absorbed in the one question, "What will happen next?" There is now a shifting of the interest and the dominant question becomes, "What will be the effect of these events upon the young couple?" We are interested first in how the characters get into difficulties, and next in how they get out and with what results; in other words, in the involution and evolution of the plot. The climax occurs, not, as in most stories, immediately after the major crisis, but at the very end of the story.

Some form of conflict is essential to plot. This conflict need not be with a human or visible enemy. The plot of *The Necklace* had its inception in the lack of harmony between the social ambition of Mme. Loisel and the conditions of her life; and it moved forward to its dramatic conclusion through a series of struggles against material obstacles and an ironic fate. Out of the struggle of Selina Jo with her environment grew the story of *Prelude*. In the conflict between Tedge and the Nemesis which pursues the evil doer to his ruin, the story, *The Man Who Cursed the Lilies*, achieves its intense dramatic effect. In *The Heart of Little Shikara* the plot concerns the struggle between man and animal, or, as the author expresses it, between civilized man and "the gods of the jungle always waiting with drawn scimitar for the unsuspecting." Even in a humorous story, such as *A Man in the House*, by Elsie Singmaster, the humor arises from the clash of emotions in the hearts of the two old ladies, their long-cherished aversion to dogs in conflict with their fear of invasion by strangers. *The Face in the Window* illustrates in a threefold way the significance of conflict in plot structure. We are interested successively in Cora McBride's struggle with herself before deciding to set out in search of the criminal, her battle with the cold in the snow-covered Vermont

hills, and her encounter with the maniac in the deserted cabin. These three phases of conflict are the steps by which the story marches forward to the climax, the appearance of the silhouette at the window and the collapse of Hap Ruggam.

SUSPENSE

In a story of plot the first purpose is to excite and hold the reader's interest. The author who handles his plot well will arouse throughout his story a feeling of *suspense*, a consciousness at each new incident that important consequences are to follow. In a story of slight plot, the element of suspense is only a quiet interest in what will happen next; in a horror story such as Poe loved to create suspense becomes a breathless absorption in the outcome. This quality is one to be used sparingly by the inexperienced writer. If overstrained or obtained by artificial means, suspense tends only to arouse in the reader distrust of the author's sincerity. "Why all this stir about nothing?" he asks. Suspense must come naturally and be excited primarily by the inherent dramatic quality of the plot.

A good example of the restrained use of suspense is found in *The Necklace*. Mme. Loisel has borrowed a necklace to wear to a ball. After her return from the ball she discovers that the necklace is lost and her husband goes in search of it.

"I shall go back on foot," said he, "over the whole distance we walked, to see if I can't find it."

And he went out. She sat there on a chair in her ball dress, without strength to go to bed, overwhelmed, without fire, without thought.

Her husband came back about seven o'clock. He had found nothing.

There is real suspense here. Upon the outcome depends the future happiness of the young couple, but there is no sentimental agonizing on the part of the author. The picture of the wife overwhelmed by her misfortune is followed by the single sentence announcing the failure of her husband's search. Our feeling of suspense comes from our consciousness of the importance and intense reality of the situation. Later in the story suspense is further heightened by the author's device of holding back the climax until the very end of the story when, after ten years of grinding poverty, the wife learns that the necklace was of paste and worth at most five hundred francs.