

CLASSIC SHORT FICTION

Charles H. Bohner

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University of Delaware

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Preface



Classic, a word with a long and distinguished history, has been sadly debased by current usage. Nowadays golf tournaments are classic, as are horse races, cocktail dresses, and antique automobiles. In choosing it for the title of this collection of short stories, I have intended it in the ancient and honorable sense of designating a work of art that is an enduring triumph of the human spirit.

Of course, in choosing stories that I believe to be classics, I do not expect everyone to agree with me. I have discovered, as have all students of short fiction, that certain titles will appear on almost everybody's list of classics, and most of those will be found in this book. But debate concerning what constitutes the "best" continues to rage, demonstrating if nothing else that the ideal of the classic is alive and well. I hope that this anthology will prove to be a contribution to that continuing debate.

In one respect I have broadened the definition of classic for the purposes of this anthology. Traditionally we think of the classic work as one tested by the passage of time. Indeed, the surest test of the classic is that readers feel compelled to return to it, finding that it continues to speak to succeeding generations. In this collection, however, I have taken the liberty of including stories much too recent to be judged by that most demanding of all standards. These contemporary stories seem to me each to be excellent in its own way, and all have a chance to endure. But as is the case with all classic literature, only time will tell.

If excellence has been the first consideration in choosing stories for this anthology, variety has been the second. The collection is intended for college courses in which short fiction is studied, and in making my selections I have tried to bear in mind the differing approaches to the subject. The 111 stories appear alphabetically to enable the teacher to have maximum flexibility in shaping the syllabus. The works are drawn from many cultures, and they illustrate the richness of theme and technique which has characterized the genre from its beginning. Twenty-one authors are represented by more than one story. Teachers can thus give their students the opportunity to consider the range and depth of achievement of the major figures in the tradition.

The research of a new generation of scholars has called attention to the remarkable contribution of women to short fiction, a contribution represented in these pages by thirty-four important stories. Teachers interested in the historical approach will find among the selections from Alexander Pushkin (1799-1837) to Perri Klass (b. 1958) many of the landmarks in the development of the form. A chronological table of contents has been provided as an aid to this approach.

In order to make the book as useful to the classroom teacher as possible, I have

included an introduction to the elements of fiction, biographical notes on each of the eighty authors, and a glossary of literary terms. Teachers of composition may find helpful a chapter on writing about fiction. An instructor's manual is available upon request from Prentice-Hall.

In the course of preparing this anthology, I have incurred many debts. I should like to express my gratitude to Phil Miller at Prentice-Hall, whose advice made this a better book.

My colleagues at the University of Delaware have been unfailingly helpful. With particular problems I have been assisted by Hans Peter Breuer, Zack and Lindsey Bowen, Richard and Milena Davison, Jay Halio, Dennis Jackson, Kevin Kerrane, Stephen Lukashevich, George Miller, Edward Nickerson, Cruce Stark, and Jeanne Walker. My wife, Jean, who is also my colleague at Delaware, prepared the chapter on writing about fiction. My sincere thanks to them all.

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Charles H. Bohner
Newark, Delaware

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Introduction



"Listen! Have I got a story to tell you."

How often we hear these words. A friend, eyes bright with anticipation, leans across the lunch table and demands our attention. Or we pick up the telephone and a familiar voice, a little breathless, comes over the line: "Listen!"

So we listen, hoping to be diverted, entertained, instructed. And when the storyteller finishes the tale, we may, in turn, have a story of our own to tell. For stories raise us above the humdrum of ordinary existence to give meaning and color and excitement to our lives. From early childhood we are curious to learn of the great world beyond the horizon, a craving that stories abundantly satisfy. Nobody opening this book is coming upon stories for the first time.

Stories do, in fact, play a key role in human history. Rooted in the oral tradition of the distant past and interwoven with the growth of language itself, stories seem always to have existed. Egyptian papyri six thousand years old contain "Tales of the Magicians." The Bible and the epics of Greece and Rome are magnificent collections of stories—fables, parables, tales of adventure, histories of a people. Later came the romances of the Middle Ages and the tales that Chaucer's pilgrims told one another on their way to Canterbury. The desire to tell stories continued throughout the Renaissance and into the eighteenth century, with short fiction assuming an even greater variety of forms. As we approach our own time, the tradition of storytelling becomes the dominant mode of literary expression. Looking back at this long history of narrative art, we can only conclude that the desire to hear and to tell stories is among the oldest and deepest of human pleasures.

Curiosity is the fundamental motive for reading fiction. Our tastes, our moods, our passing interests may draw us to one kind of story or another. But whatever the subject, we look forward to being entertained. Of course reading fiction has other benefits: We may learn things we did not know and perhaps gain insight into human character and motivation. These benefits, however, are secondary to the simple and immediate pleasure derived from reading stories.

Stories offer a variety of pleasures. The attentive and imaginative reader soon discovers the fascination of watching that enchanter, the storyteller, cast his or her spell. Through the power of words, the storyteller holds us in thrall, and we are drawn back to the story to try to fathom the source of its author's magic. We discover, in other words, the pleasure of rereading.

All stories are not literature, but much literature begins as a story or develops into one. A certain sign that we are reading literature is that, coming to the end, we want to read the work again. The world is filled with writing—tax forms, catalogues, instruction manuals—that we read and gladly forget. But literature draws us ines-

capably back to try to understand, for understanding is among the most profound of pleasures. In this, literature resembles the other arts. When we hear a song we like, we wish to hear it again—and again. We hang paintings on our walls so that we may constantly reexperience them. In the same way, a story yields its deepest pleasures when we return to it, like some sorcerer's apprentice, to try to discover exactly how we have been beguiled. The idea is as familiar as the instant replay on television. We gain our initial pleasure from seeing the winning play, especially if it is made by our team. But we remain dissatisfied, for we wish to know how the play was accomplished. The camera obliges by repeating the action, perhaps from several angles, and our pleasure is increased as our understanding deepens.

WHAT IS A SHORT STORY?

What is a short story? The obvious answer, "A story that's short," is not as flippant as it may sound. For we shall find the form capable of so many variations that any definition will be too narrow. We will not go too far wrong, however, if we begin by defining a short story as "a relatively brief fictional narrative in prose." But to distinguish a short story from a mere anecdote or a sketch, we need to discuss some of the specific characteristics of short stories.

CONFLICT

The indispensable ingredient of any story is **conflict**. All stories, all the arts for that matter, come out of conflict. Without conflict there can be no growth, no movement—no story.

As human beings, we are singularly ambivalent about conflict. One side of our nature hungers for order and repose. At the same time, another side of our nature seeks challenge and action. We long to test our powers, to put our lives at risk. Not surprisingly, then, a story begins when a character is jolted out of his daily routine by a change that demands a choice. We call that event the **activating circumstance**. In the ensuing struggle, the character may or may not be forced into action but, as a consequence of the experience, will undergo a change and perhaps learn something of his or her essential self.

The sources of conflict are as varied in fiction as they are in life. One character clashes with another or with society. Or a character may be torn by divergent impulses and values within himself or herself. The suspense generated by the character's attempt to resolve the conflict keeps the reader turning the pages. Every story in this collection, and in every collection, provides an example of conflict. No conflict, no story.

PLOT

The **plot** is the series of incidents that follows from the activating circumstance. Unlike life, which is random and unpredictable, the short story will usually be shaped by a chain of events, one leading inevitably to another in a line of rising action to a moment of crisis—the **climax**. The outcome of that climax we call the **denouement**, a French word meaning the untangling of a knot.

For the reader, the plot is the underlying pattern in a work of fiction, the structural element that gives it unity and order. For the writer, the plot is the guiding principle of selection and arrangement. The writer will usually add coherence to the

plot by signaling to the reader in advance the outcome of the action. We call these hints **foreshadowing**. Or the author may interrupt the action in a **flashback** in order to describe crucial events that occurred earlier. The flashback is one form of **exposition**, the process of giving the reader necessary information concerning characters and events existing before the action proper of a story begins.

John Updike's "A & P" is an excellent illustration of the traditional plot. The sudden appearance of three girls at the grocery store starts a chain reaction that builds to a climax in which the youthful cashier, Sammy, quits his job. In the denouement Sammy realizes how quixotic his action was and assesses how costly the decision will be to him.

Although many writers have felt constrained to use the traditional plot in their short stories, some recent writers, among them John Barth and Robert Coover, have begun to experiment with new patterns and structures. (See Barth's "Lost in the Funhouse," p. 95 and Coover's "The Magic Poker," p. 264.)

CHARACTER

Not the least remarkable thing about reading fiction is that we may find ourselves arguing passionately about the people who inhabit stories, the **characters**, forgetting for the moment that they exist only in the imaginations of the author and the reader. Some fictional characters have achieved the status of historical figures—Don Quixote, Robinson Crusoe, Rip Van Winkle—and may exist vividly for us even though we may never have read the works in which they appear. Nothing is a greater tribute to the storyteller's art than his or her ability to create characters in whom we implicitly believe and about whom we care deeply. And in no aspect of literary discussion will we probably feel more challenged than in our efforts to understand the motives of fictional characters.

The first clue to character in fiction, as in life, is action. Actions do speak louder than words, and the way the central character in the story, the **protagonist**, reacts to the conflict will be an important indication of his or her essential nature. If the problem confronting the protagonist is largely centered in another character, we call him or her the **antagonist**. In Updike's "A & P," the protagonist, Sammy, is brought into conflict with the antagonist, Lengel, the manager of the grocery store. Sammy's action, quitting his job, is the decisive and irrevocable event in the narrative.

But actions, as we know, are not the only clue to character. Language, too, is revealing, and a character's vocabulary, fluency, and speech rhythms will reveal a great deal. Almost all writers, therefore, will allow us to hear, or overhear, the characters through dialogue. At the opening of Somerset Maugham's "The Outstation," a young recruit to the British civil service meets his superior for the first time in remote Malaysia, and the two men enter into a fateful relationship. Cooper, the young man fresh from England, speaks first:

"Here we are at last. By God, I'm as cramped as the devil. I've brought you your mail."

He spoke with exuberant joviality. Mr. Warburton politely held out his hand.

"Mr. Cooper, I presume."

"That's right. Were you expecting any one else?"

The question had a facetious intent, but the Resident did not smile.

"My name is Warburton. I'll show you your quarters. They'll bring your kit along."

INTRODUCTION

He preceded Cooper along the narrow pathway and they entered a compound in which stood a small bungalow.

"I've had it made as habitable as I could, but of course no one has lived in it for a good many years."

"This'll do me all right," said Cooper.

"I daresay you want to have a bath and change. I shall be very much pleased if you'll dine with me to-night. Will eight o'clock suit you?"

"Any old time will do for me."

The speech of Cooper, given here in italics for emphasis, is slangy and colloquial, the inevitable result of his background and training. The Resident, Mr. Warburton, speaks formally, even coldly, as befits his personality and station. The differences in class, age, and temperament, clearly foreshadowed in the dialogue, prove irreconcilable and lead to tragedy.

The author, going beyond action and dialogue, may aid our understanding through direct character analysis. Again in "The Outstation," Maugham himself occasionally enters into the narrative to generalize about human conduct.

Mr. Warburton expected that his subordinate would take the first opportunity to apologize for his rudeness, but Cooper had the ill-bred man's inability to express regret; and when they met next morning in the office he ignored the incident.

Such straightforward analysis we call an authorial comment.

THEME

If we ask an author why she writes, she might reply, "Because I have something to say." What she has to say is the **theme**, the central and dominating idea in a short story. In some stories, the theme will be stated clearly by the author. At the end of James Joyce's "Araby," the protagonist, an older man looking back on his youth, tells us quite specifically what he has learned about himself as the result of his obsession with a girl and of his desire to bring her a token of his love from a bazaar. "Gazing up into the darkness," he says, "I saw myself as a creature driven and derided by vanity; and my eyes burned with anguish and anger."

In other stories we may find no such convenient and explicit statement of what the story is all about. With such stories the rich interplay of elements often requires all our resources for attentive reading. And since our interpretation of a story will necessarily depend on our experience, sensitivity, and intelligence, we may find, as we return to stories, that their themes grow more subtle and deeper as we become more imaginative readers.

SETTING AND ATMOSPHERE

Every story must take place somewhere. Even the fantastic lands of science fiction or the ideal worlds of utopian communities must have some context, some tie to the world of our experience if we are to enter into the story and to identify with its characters. The stage against which the story unfolds we call the **setting**. In its narrowest sense, setting is the place and time of the narration, but eventually it encompasses the total environment of the work.

A setting described vividly and memorably predisposes the reader to accept the characters and their behavior. If, as in Sherwood Anderson's "I Want To Know

Why," the story is laid in a small Kentucky town at the turn of the century, the reader will automatically draw certain conclusions not only about the scenery and architecture but also about the daily lives of the townsfolk and their social and religious attitudes. By contrast, in Toni Cade Bambara's "The Lesson," set in Manhattan in the 1950s, the reader will draw conclusions that call out a very different set of images and assumptions.

Closely related to setting is **atmosphere**, the aura or mood of a short story. Atmosphere, however, goes beyond setting by establishing the general pervasive feeling aroused by the work, which shapes the reader's attitudes and expectations. The ghost stories of childhood provide a familiar example. Such trappings as creaking doors, blood-curdling shrieks, and the sound of mysterious footsteps in dark corridors evoke an atmosphere of terror. Edgar Allan Poe was a master of such effects, as the opening sentences of "The Fall of the House of Usher" demonstrate.

During the whole of a dull, dark, and soundless day in the autumn of the year, when the clouds hung oppressively low in the heavens, I had been passing alone, on horseback, through a singularly dreary tract of country; and at length found myself, as the shades of the evening drew on, within view of the melancholy House of Usher. I know not how it was—but, with the first glimpse of the building, a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit. I say insufferable, for the feeling was unrelieved by any of that half-pleasurable, because poetic, sentiment, with which the mind usually receives even the sternest natural images of the desolate or terrible. I looked upon the scene before me—upon the mere house, and the simple landscape features of the domain, upon the bleak walls, upon the vacant eye-like windows, upon a few rank sedges, and upon a few white trunks of decayed trees—with an utter depression of soul which I can compare to no earthly sensation more properly than to the after-dream of the reveller upon opium: the bitter lapse into everyday life, the hideous dropping off of the veil. There was an iciness, a sinking, a sickening of the heart, an unredeemed dreariness of thought which no goading of the imagination could torture into aught of the sublime. What was it—I paused to think—what was it that so unnerved me in the contemplation of the House of Usher.

Atmosphere, as this passage illustrates, does not depend on setting alone. The rhythm of the sentences, the brooding tone of the narrator, and the figures of speech ("vacant eye-like windows") all contribute to the atmosphere of impending evil.

POINT OF VIEW

In the writing of short stories, the first question the author must ask is, "Who tells the story?" The answer to that question determines what we call the **point of view**.

Perhaps the first answer to the question might be, "Let the protagonist tell his or her own story." In making this choice, the author decides to employ the **first-person point of view**, as in the opening of James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues."

I read about it in the paper, in the subway, on my way to work. I read it, and I couldn't believe it, and I read it again. Then perhaps I stared at it, at the newsprint spelling out his name, spelling out the story. I stared at it in the swinging lights of the subway car, and in the faces and bodies of the people, and in my own face, trapped in the darkness which roared outside.

In selecting such a vantage point to present the action, the writer enjoys a number of advantages. First, he creates an immediate sense of reality. Because we are listening to the testimony of someone who was present at the events described, we are inclined to trust the narrator and to enter into the experience. Second, the writer has a ready-made principle of selection. No story can tell everything there is to tell. The writer must make choices. A story told in the first person is necessarily limited to what the narrator has seen, heard, or surmised.

The difficulties of first-person point of view may only strike us when we try to write stories ourselves. For example, the narrator must be present at all the essential events, or the author must invent a way of supplying the information. This can lead to the contrivances we have all come across in our reading of fiction—overheard conversations, letters opened by mistake—that strain credibility. Coincidences occur in fiction as in life, but the writer who relies too heavily on coincidence to extricate the hero from the conflict risks losing the reader's faith.

First-person point of view presents yet another difficulty. Ordinarily, we expect that the narrator should be a good judge of character and be reasonably gifted with words. A stupid or an inarticulate narrator seems a contradiction in terms. But what of the storyteller who is dishonest or is deluded by other characters in the story? Should such a storyteller be barred from the role of narrator? Not always. A gifted writer may create some of the most telling effects when the reader grasps the truth that a narrator is deceitful or fails to understand the implications of her own tale.

In trying to avoid some of the problems inherent in first-person point of view, the author may elect to have a minor character tell the major character's story. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle used such a method in "The Red-Headed League."

I had called upon my friend, Mr. Sherlock Holmes, one day in the autumn of last year, and found him in deep conversation with a very stout, florid-faced elderly gentleman, with fiery red hair. With an apology for my intrusion, I was about to withdraw, when Holmes pulled me abruptly into the room, and closed the door behind me.

"You could not possibly have come at a better time, my dear Watson," he said cordially.

This method turns the narrator into a historian, reconstructing the events after the fact. Such stories maintain a strong illusion of reality, and perhaps some heroes are set off to advantage if seen from a certain distance.

Authors may at times feel the need for greater scope than first-person point of view affords. They wish to be the all-knowing creator, not limited by time, place, or character, but free to roam and comment at will. Such a point of view is called **third-person omniscient**. The narrator, evidently the author, sees all, knows all, and, presumably, tells all. In this collection, Willa Cather's "Paul's Case" illustrates third-person omniscient point of view.

While the omniscient point of view might seem at first glance the most flexible and functional, the author who adopts it pays a price. The reader may very well feel remote from the action. Certainly the reader will not as easily identify with the protagonist. The author who does not wish to sacrifice omniscience but who still hopes for greater reader identification with the protagonist may elect to tell the story from the **limited-omniscient point of view**. Although continuing to write in the third person, the author limits himself or herself to what is known by one character. Kath-

erine Anne Porter uses the limited-omniscient point of view with notable success in "The Grave."

One further method of telling the story should be mentioned here—the **objective point of view**. In this technique the author, like a camera, records in the third person what is taking place but does not enter into the minds of the characters. The action is played out before the reader without authorial comment.

Such a method makes great demands on the reader but at the same time promises great rewards, since it offers us a greater share in the creative process. Many of Ernest Hemingway's stories are superb examples of the objective point of view, and none is better than the one included in this collection, "Hills Like White Elephants."

The use of point of view has been an extremely fruitful source of experimentation for the modern writer. The variations and shadings are infinite. Readers of this collection may come to feel that of all the elements of fiction, the point of view of a story most readily leads them into a consideration of the meaning of the work. Certainly this collection is a rich variety of the different ways to tell a story.

SYMBOLISM

All readers recognize the power of language in fiction, and its ability to move us to laughter and to tears. That language, a system of abstract sounds and signs, should affect us so powerfully remains one of the mysteries of human nature. Language gains its emotional power from the fact that it is symbolic. A symbol is a sign, something that stands for more than itself. The letters *flag* form a word that stands for a particular objective reality. A flag, in turn, is a colored cloth that represents a nation. But a flag is more than an identifying sign. The stars and stripes and the hammer and sickle trigger strong and predictable emotional vibrations. Our lives are filled with such conventional symbols, and we are largely in agreement as to their meaning. The rose stands for love, the diamond ring for betrothal, the wedding band for marriage.

Such conventional symbols appear in fiction just as they appear in daily speech. But in fiction, writers also employ symbols in a more specialized way and for a particular purpose. When a writer sets out to tell a story, he uses language to describe the world of everyday experience he shares with his readers. At the same time, he recognizes that the words and phrases he selects for his tale will have implications that go well beyond the immediate action or character being described. In fact, the writer selects a word or phrase precisely because of its implications, because it enables him to transcend the action or character he is describing and give his story the greatest possible meaning.

In "A Rose for Emily," William Faulkner traces the career of Miss Emily Grierson through three generations of the American South. Miss Emily has her virtues and her defects. She is independent, uncompromising, and loyal; she is also proud, provincial, and vain. She despises the townsfolk, and they know it. She triumphs over their petty schemes to bring her down. They think she is crazy.

And yet, these same townsfolk admire Miss Emily and even revere her. To them, she is "an idol." She bears a "resemblance to those angels in colored church windows." Her face looks "as you imagine a lighthouse-keeper's face ought to look," like a person isolated from the town yet keeping a protective light burning in the darkness. An idol, an angel, a lighthouse-keeper. Such images are repeated throughout the story until the reader comes to see that the townsfolk admire not only Miss Emily's life but also what that life represents—what it symbolizes. Part of