

武汉大学英文系英美文学系列教材



英语短篇小说选读

Selected Readings of
English Short Stories

马建军 编著

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Preface

This is a book for the Chinese college students who major in English language and literature as well as for those non-English majors who are interested in English literature. The aim of the book is threefold: to teach students English short fiction through textual studies; to present some of the best English short stories by great writers in this field; and to give students and readers good stories they can enjoy.

The book contains a brief introduction to the history of English short fiction and the basic elements in the writing and reading of short fiction and the reading texts. The fifteen stories selected here, varying widely in theme, form and style, are all well-known and frequently anthologized in Western countries. They not only trace the development of English short fiction in the past hundred years, but also demonstrate the highest achievement in this young and yet flourishing literary genre.

The organization of the book is primarily based on a teaching syllabus of 16 to 18 weeks. Generally, the students are supposed to read each story beforehand and come to the classroom for discussion. The brief introduction to the author and the story and the notes and reference questions that sandwich the story are intended to aid the students and readers in their reading and comprehension. They are meaningful directions to the way to becoming a good reader.

This book has been in use in the past four years in the English Department, Foreign Studies School, Wuhan University. Suggestions and criticisms are welcomed.

Ma Jianjun

1999, 12

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A Brief History of the Short Fiction

Stories, in one form or another, have existed throughout the human history. Either factual or fictional, the first tales we know of are those of the oral tradition, about the creation myths of tribal peoples who were trying to explain how things got started. Then there were the beast fables, stories in which animals are shown acting like humans in order to teach a moral lesson. The fables of the Greek slave Aesop (c. 620—560 B.C.) are still well known, and the beast fable form is still used occasionally by modern writers.

Another very early form of the story is the religious parable, meant as explicit didactic lessons justifying the ways of God, as those stories in the *Old* and *New Testament*.

In the classical and post-classical literature of Greece and Rome, brief tales were often included in larger narrative collections, such as *The Satyricon* of Petronius in the first century A.D. and the *Metamorphoses* of Apuleius in the second century. Such early stories were usually mixture of various centuries, being translated from language to language.

In the medieval Europe, short stories were mostly written in verse, while prose was reserved for devotional and instructive pieces until the fourteenth century. Around that time a great variety of secular tales in both verse and prose became popular, most notably the short prose tales of the Italian writer Giovanni Boccac-

cio (1313—1375). His best-known book is *The Decameron*, a series of one hundred tales told by seven ladies and three gentlemen who fled the plague that devastated Florence in 1348. In the same century, the Englishman Geoffrey Chaucer (? —1400) wrote *The Canterbury Tales*, a collection of religious and secular tales, which includes several different short fictional genres such as the religious parable, the romance and the fabliau.

Boccaccio and Chaucer took great care to ensure that their stories would give both pleasure and moral instruction. The medieval distrust of stories as entertainment took hundreds of years to overcome. Most of the Renaissance storytellers in Italy, England, France and Spain were part of the Boccaccian tradition and included a structure of moral and religious values in their narratives.

2 And yet, the history of short story as an established literary form we know today is brief. It wasn't until the eighteenth century, after secularization had gathered force in Europe, that fictional narratives were given the opportunity to evolve into forms we recognize as closer relations of modern stories and novels. These prose forms developed in periodicals popular with European readers from the emerging middle class, who had the education and the leisure to enjoy them. The new periodicals printed a variety of prose—character sketches, satires, gothic tales, rogue stories, simple adventure stories, and sentimental sketches with predictable moral outcomes in which the hero or heroine is rewarded and the villain is punished. In France, Voltaire also wrote philosophical tales, Diderot and the Marquis de Sade wrote stories to illustrate their theories of morality and psychology.

In the romantic period in Europe, when originality and imag-

ination were valued above all other qualities in writing as a reaction to the emphasis on tradition and reason that shaped the attitude of the eighteenth-century neo-classical writers, gradually narratives opened up to include more moral and social awareness, satire and the realm of the fancy and romantic imagination.

In view of the long development it seems foolish to name one person as the founder of the short story or to credit one nation with its development. A form which comes to us from the ancient past and was known in both the Orient and the Occident has too rich and complicated an origin to be thus simply defined. Yet in the nineteenth century, a group of writers did consciously formulate the short story as an art form. Notable among them are Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allan Poe in America, Merimee in France, and E. T. A. Hoffman (1776—1822) in Germany. This development gained such speed and force in America that the modern short story is often called an American art form.

The mid-nineteenth century was a time of great transition in literature as the earlier mode of romanticism slowly gave way to realism, popular magazine tale slowly gave way to the more realistic story. Around the end of the century the tightly constructed “surprise-ending story” of O. Henry became the fashion and Ambrose Bierce ventured close to the stream-of-consciousness technique to be developed by later modernist writers and wrote stories that combined elements of romanticism, realism and modernism. At the end of the century, realists predominated the short fiction. Two Europeans, the French Guy de Maupassant and the Russian Anton Chekhov were the most influential writers of short fiction. They brought remarkable innovations to the content and form of the short fiction.

Experimental writers of the next generation were primarily influenced by Chekhov, developing his less sharply detailed, more subtly impressionistic atmosphere in their works. There were some famous modernist writers in the early years of the century. In Europe, this group includes Isaac Babel, Joseph Conrad, James Joyce, Franz Kafka, D. H. Lawrence, Katherine Mansfield and Virginia Woolf, and in America, Sherwood Anderson, William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, Katherine Ann Porter and Richard Wright. Adopting an interiorized plot, they tried to represent the complicated, isolated, formless and meaningless life of the modern time.

Today's short stories tend to be varied. Roughly, they are categorized into two: 1) the "traditional" ones, including the "surprise-ending story" of de Maupassant and O. Henry, and the tale of a "single effect" of Poe, which are plotted and closed, and 2) the "modern" ones, including "the slice of life" story of Chekhov, Katherine Mansfield, Sherwood Anderson and James Joyce, the symbolic and mythic stories, stories of stream-of-consciousness, and others, which are less plotted and more open.

The Elements of Fiction

A short story is a relatively brief fictional narrative in prose. It may range in length from 500 words (usually known as short short story) up to 12 000 or 15 000 words. It has certain format development or elements that mark it out as a distinguished art form. To be able to appreciate or write a short story, it is necessary to know the important elements of short fiction.

Plot

Plot is the sequence of events in a story and their relation to one another. Because of its limited space, it usually tends to move toward what Edgar Allan Poe called “the single effect”, a culmination that pulls together and resolves the tensions created by the characters and their situations. It can be arranged chronologically or in flashbacks. Sometimes, it is made up of two or more plots which run parallel or subsidiary to the other(s). Whatever the strategy, it always includes the basic pattern of a beginning, a middle and an end coming in natural sequence. Usually, there is a set-up, or *exposition*, in which the characters, the scene, the time, and the situations are introduced. This is followed by the *rising action*, which poses and then intensifies the complications, building toward a *climax* or *turning point* of the story. This is the moment of the highest tension, the point after which the circum-

stances must change. After the climax comes *resolution*, also known as the *falling action*. The resolution tells the reader how things have turned out. Sometimes an author will attach the *denouement*, a further explanation about the outcome. The traditional story's ending contains an element of surprise, but most authors, especially the modern writers, prefer to leave the novel open, to leave the meanings and implications for the reader. They would rather suggest than tell the answer.

In the development of plot, writers are fond of using dramatic irony and suspense around characters and events. They provide expectation through holding back information, although there is a promise of revelation to come: the promise is implicit in the situation or foreshadowed somewhere in the past. So close watch is needed to follow the plot of the story.

Another point to be noted is that plot does not emerge just through the description of events; it can also be carried forward in dialogue, such as in the stories of Ernest Hemingway and many other writers.

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Character

Character is an essential element of short fiction. As the Greek philosopher Heraclitus said, "Character is destiny," it determines the development of plot. One person will face circumstance in a way that brings triumph; another, in the same situation, will make decisions that lead to tragedy. Owing to the limited space, a short story writer must economize, using few characters and situations. Most stories have a central figure, or *protagonist*, and one or more secondary figures. Depending on the author's choice of point of view, the protagonist can be pre-

sented either in the third person—in which case we see the person from the outside—or else in the first person, as the narrator. But there are exceptions. A story can be told in the first person but be centered upon a third-person protagonist. Mark Twain makes use of a complex variation of this in “The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County,” in which his narrator meets a man who tells a story about another man with a compulsion for betting. It is the story within the story that engages our interest, and the betting man is the true protagonist.

As a rule, characters in fiction are divided into several types. First, there are rounded and dynamic characters, who are lifelike and capable of alternatives in terms of behavior and motivation. They have dimension, so they are rounded. A dynamic character is one who undergoes some significant change during the course of plot development. He or she is generally rounded, but not definitely dynamic. The test is whether the character is fundamentally the same at the ending of the story as at the beginning. Then there are also flat and static characters. They are usually used as foils to the protagonist, to heighten the distance between the foreground and background or to set off in contrast with the roundness and dynamism of the protagonist. Their function is limited, but necessary.

Sometimes, as in folk tales and early short stories, there is another kind of character: the *antagonist*. This figure, flat or rounded, is set up in opposition to the protagonist. He or she is generally intent upon blocking or frustrating the protagonist's aims. The mutual reaction of the protagonist and antagonist creates the tension that drives the narrative forward. But in many stories today this figure is not necessarily present, giving place to

the more impersonal, less tangible factors.

Theme

Theme is the generalization about the meaning of a story. It is the real meaning of a story which aims at telling not just of some happening but, through it, the author's own vision of the meaning of life. As readers, we have to recognize that thematic elements are often complex and shaded around with ambiguity. In many cases they are woven deeply into the fabric of the whole work and can't be easily got. Sometimes not just one theme, but two, or even more, entwined within the story as they are in real life.

The difficulty in defining the theme of a story is self-evident. Yet the reader has to remember that there is no such thing as a "right answer." Works of literature are not puzzles to be solved, and they should not be approached that way. They are expressions awaiting our interpretations, and the process of inquiry is very often as meaningful as the conclusions we reach.

Setting

Setting refers both to the time and place of the events in a story. It not only gives the reader the impression of verisimilitude, but also gives the reader the opportunity to glimpse at a truth about internal life from the characters and the plot, though it sometimes is merely the backdrop for the action. The setting also has a dramatic use to affect characters or plot and the function to enhance the theme either through suggestion or more direct symbolism. But important distinctions must be made between

the literal, suggestive, and symbolic uses of setting. The lines of interpretation are not always easy to draw.

Point of View

Point of view refers to the way the story is told. In narration, the writer must first decide what point of view to use, whether to use a *first-person* narrator, using the pronoun “I”, or a *third-person* narrator, or the pronouns “I”, “he”, “she”, or “they”. (The second-person narrator is rarely used.) The first-person narrators can be a major or a minor character in the story. Their advantage is that they are actually “in” and can move freely in the fictional world. Their narration sounds immediate and compelling. Their authority, however, is limited. They, as eye-witnesses, can not really understand others except through observation, and their own account of their conduct and meditation, being personal and subjective, are not always trustworthy.

The third-person narration is the most widely used vantage in fiction. The narrator is usually presumed to be the author, standing outside the events of the narration. There are two kinds of third-person narration. One is the *omniscient* point of view when the narrator knows everything about the characters both inside and out, knows what they think and feel as well as what they do. This demands the great imagination and moral sense of the author. The other is the *limited omniscient* point of view, when the narrator assumes partial knowledge of characters or knowledge of certain characters, or restricts him or her self to the position of a pure observer, taking in exteriors and noting actions and conversations.

However, many writers today are able to shift from one van-

tage to another, thus achieving a texture of great complexity and mounting psychological force. Stream-of-consciousness technique is adopted to add to the complexity and force. The reader should be alert for the clues about the narrator's own personality and strive to measure the truth of what is told accordingly.

Style

Style is the language the author uses in narration. It is made up of various elements, including *tone*, and the use of *symbols*.

The tone of a work of fiction might be defined as the way the writer uses words to convey unstated attitudes towards the subject. Is the story told in a neutral, straightforward manner or humorously? Is the narrator calm and reflective or anxious or excited? Is the address colloquial or formal? How about the diction? While tone is directly related to point of view—for example, the third-person narration automatically presumes a certain degree of objectivity, it is usually neutral and straightforward and the narrative voice often sounds calm and detached—the key to assessing tone is diction. The reader has to look into the choice of words and also at the level of the diction to learn about the narrator.

Literary symbols, conventional or private, carry powerful condensed meanings. Though often concrete emblems—a rose, a house—they are not always understood the same way by different readers. For instance, a gun, a weapon, may symbolize destruction and violence, but it is also associated, at least in Freudian psychology, with sexual potency. Faith's pink ribbons in "Young Goodman Brown", apparently realistic detail, may symbolize her youth and innocence to one reader, and her femininity and coquettishness to another. She is such an abstract character that ei-