

The Short Story in English



Edited by
Neil Besner and David Staines

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Preface

What is the short story? It is a comparatively modern literary genre, dating back only to the mid-nineteenth century. By that time the novel – with its wide scope, its capacity for panoramic social depiction, and its seemingly stronger commitment to realism – had already been developed. Because of its brevity, the short story does not aspire to the larger dimensions of the novel, nor does it usually concern itself with the social implications of the novel's universe. And it does not cleave so closely to the kind of realism evident, for example, in the British novel of the nineteenth century.

The short story had its first flowering in the writings of Edgar Allan Poe, who also gave it one of its most enduring descriptions. In the May 1842 issue of *Graham's Magazine*, Poe reviewed Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales* and set out the earliest definition of the short story: 'the short prose narrative, requiring from a half-hour to one or two hours in its perusal'. His emphasis on the reader's participation is strikingly modern, and his focus on the shortness of the form leads directly to his understanding of the story's major advantage over the novel:

The ordinary novel is objectionable, from its length. . . . As it cannot be read at one sitting, it deprives itself, of course, of the immense force derivable from *totality*. Worldly interests intervening during the pauses of perusal, modify, annul, or counteract, in a greater or less degree, the impressions of the book. But simple cessation in reading would, of itself, be sufficient to destroy the true unity. In the brief tale, however, the author is enabled to carry out the fulness of his intention, be it what it may. During the hour of perusal the soul of the reader is at the writer's control. There are no external or extrinsic influences – resulting from weariness or interruption.

Such uninterrupted communion between writer and reader allows for the 'unique or single *effect*' of the story's concentrated focus:

A skilful literary 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.

The short-story writer, according to Poe, has in the limited space and focus of the form the ability 'to carry out the fulness of his intention, be it what it may'.

As a creator of both the horror story and the detective story, Poe found the form the perfect vehicle for his relentless exploration of the terrors hidden within the human soul.

Poe's theories about the short story originate in his close and intelligent reading of the tales of Hawthorne, who allowed for a movement away from strict realism in his own fiction in order to discover the 'truth of the human heart'. Herman Melville, Hawthorne's contemporary and close friend, identified the power of 'blackness, ten times black' in Hawthorne's work and sought in fiction not strict realism, which he defined as 'severe fidelity to real life', but heightened reality, another world that is a part of and yet apart from everyday life, where the reader finds 'nature unfettered, exhilarated, in effect transformed'.

This American strain of romance, as Hawthorne named it, as opposed to the realism of nineteenth-century British fiction, finds its completion in many of Henry James's novels and novellas. Romance, James maintained in the preface to the New York edition of *The American*, offers a welcome disentanglement from the experience the realist writer wishes to render in fiction, and presents

experience liberated, so to speak; experience disengaged, disembroiled, disencumbered, exempt from the conditions that we usually know to attach to it and, if we wish so to put the matter, drag upon it, and operating in a medium which relieves it, in a particular interest, of the inconvenience of a *related*, a measurable state, a state subject to all our vulgar communities.

An accomplished realist himself, James recognized in romance an opportunity to present a reality that only seems to be 'fidelity to real life':

The balloon of experience is in fact of course tied to the earth, and under that necessity we swing, thanks to a rope of remarkable length, in the more or less commodious car of the imagination; but it is by the rope we know where we are, and from the moment that cable is cut we are at large and unrelated: we only swing apart from the globe — though remaining as exhilarated, naturally, as we like, especially when all goes well. The art of the romancer is, 'for the fun of it', insidiously to cut the cable, to cut it without our detecting him.

In his own short stories — and he wrote more than one hundred — he often leaves the 'cable' intact when his purpose shifts and he leaves the realm of romance in order to become a chronicler of manners and social behaviour, especially of people in foreign environments. In this pursuit James is followed by such writers as Sara Jeannette Duncan, whose perspective on manners and codes of conduct abroad is both British and Canadian, and whose stories are infused with a sentimentality less noticeable in James's own fiction. And Stephen Leacock's stories, indebted to the comic sketches of Dickens and Thackeray, ground their humorous and hyperbolic flights more firmly on

Canadian soil, at once cutting James's 'cable' and deftly skewering individual and social pretensions.

The stories of James Joyce return to and advance from Poe's 'unique or single effect' to reach the most enduring modern incarnation of Poe's definition. For many readers, the major reward of the short story is its culmination in a moment of insight—a seemingly spiritual moment in which reality reveals itself, in which a perception, often as fleeting as it is powerful, illuminates a relationship, a state of mind, a setting. Joyce's term for such a moment, borrowed from a religious frame of reference, is 'epiphany', and he first defined this moment in his novel, *Stephen Hero*, to be the one in which 'we recognize that it is *that* thing which it is. Its soul, its whatness, leaps to us from the vestment of its appearance.' Like Gabriel Conroy in 'The Dead', Joyce's characters often reach such a moment in isolation, in reflection, or in reverie. And the depiction of human loneliness and isolation, along with the often tenuous connections between individuals and their societies, has been central in the twentieth-century short story.

Virginia Woolf's fiction turned away from the nineteenth-century realism that governed the British novel. Her stories show how her imagination appropriates the form to explore consciousness in a new way. In her 1919 essay 'Modern Novels', Woolf instructs the writer to examine the inner life:

The mind, exposed to the ordinary course of life, receives upon its surface a myriad impressions—trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms, composing in their sum what we might venture to call life itself; and to figure further as the semi-transparent envelope, or luminous halo, surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. Is it not perhaps the chief task of the novelist to convey this incessantly varying spirit with whatever stress or sudden deviation it may display, and as little admixture of the alien and external as possible? We are not pleading merely for courage and sincerity; but suggesting that the proper stuff for fiction is a little other than custom would have us believe it.

With D.H. Lawrence's stories, realism is refashioned again, this time to serve his purpose of revealing moral obtuseness and the encroachments of materialism. For Lawrence, the short story offered itself as an ideal form for the depiction of childhood and adult fantasies and obsessions that reveal the social realities suppressing love and sexuality.

Katherine Mansfield's New Zealand stories also widen the bounds of the form, both in their depictions of the decline of the Empire and in their 'slice of life' realism. In her fiction, detailed renderings of consciousness coalesce with a heightened apprehension of natural settings. The exploration of class, which informs a story such as 'The Garden-Party', is a reminder that the short story can offer sharp insights into social reality.

The short stories of William Faulkner, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Ernest Hemingway offer three related American incarnations of the genre. Faulkner shows how powerfully short fiction can serve the purposes of a regional vision, imbued, as in Lawrence's stories, with the resonances of a local setting and society. In 'Babylon Revisited', Fitzgerald's vision of the American experience in Europe reshapes James's earlier renditions of the theme, and 'Winter Dreams' reveals how the short story, as distinct from the novel, renders the rhythms of a North American initiation. Hemingway's fiction explores isolation not only as a modern condition, but as the spur for a way of seeing and being, an apprehension of a circumscribed reality that Hemingway evokes through his use of a spare and terse style.

Hemingway has been traditionally recognized as the originator of the laconic style often associated with his concept of a male code of honour. Morley Callaghan, his friend and contemporary, used an even sparer style to record the dramas in ordinary lives and their moral consequences; his characters struggle to act with dignity in a world of often hostile social forces and institutions. In Raymond Carver's stories, an equally spare style takes the reader into the lives of American working-class people frustrated by glimpses of the narrow possibilities for love, insight, and self-transformation. Joyce Carol Oates's explorations of American middle-class alienation focus on young women trapped in a violent, urban, male-dominated world.

In Canada as in the United States, the regional vision has found powerful expression in the short story. The prominence of regionalism is no accident; it may well be related to the propensity of the form for depictions of isolated characters, groups, and settings. In Sinclair Ross's stories, the prairie and small-town milieu of Western Canada finds one of its more evocative renditions. For Ross and other regionalists, setting becomes the imaginative ground for their stories' explorations of character. And just as Ross's fiction opened the way for Margaret Laurence's Canadian stories, Faulkner's renditions of the American South are refashioned in Eudora Welty's stories and, in a form shaped more explicitly by the religious dimensions of her characters' actions, in Flannery O'Connor's stories too. And the short fiction of Bernard Malamud and Bharati Mukherjee provides an ethnic counterpart to such regionalism.

The aims of realism and regionalism are, of course, never mutually exclusive, and Alice Munro and Alistair MacLeod, with stories set in different Canadian regions, rely on a precise rendering of detail to capture what Munro describes as the 'emotional core' of the short story. Realism is shaped to another end in Mavis Gallant's stories, where her characters' memories come into conflict with the forces of history. Doris Lessing, who believes that the 'realist story' is the 'highest form of prose writing', reveals her characters in all their troubled complexity without explaining away their isolation in psychological terms.

And in the fiction of Ethel Wilson, Edna O'Brien, and Margaret Atwood, the short story often accommodates itself to an ironic stripping away of

illusion as women's perceptions of their relationships undergo painful revision when their self-deception is suddenly revealed to them.

What, then, is the short story? It is a comparatively modern literary genre that defies any simple or singular definition.

When Nadine Gordimer published her *Selected Stories* in 1975, she cautioned her readers in the Introduction:

Nobody has ever succeeded in defining a short story in a manner to satisfy all who write or read them, and I shall not, here. I sometimes wonder if one shouldn't simply state flatly: a short story is a piece of fiction short enough to be read at one sitting? No, that will satisfy no one, least myself. But for me certainly there is a clue, there, to the choice of the short story by writers, as a form: whether or not it has a narrative in the external or internal sense, whether it sprawls or neatly bites its own tail, a short story is a concept that the writer can 'hold', fully realized, in his imagination, at one time. A novel is, by comparison, staked out, and must be taken possession of stage by stage; it is impossible to contain, all at once, the proliferation of concepts it ultimately may use. For this reason I cannot understand how people can suppose one makes a conscious choice, *after* knowing what one wants to write about, between writing a novel or a short story. A short story *occurs*, in the imaginative sense. To write one is to express from a situation in the exterior or interior world the life-giving drop—sweat, tear, semen, saliva—that will spread an intensity on the page; burn a hole in it.

For Gordimer, the short-story writer can hold the concept of the story, 'fully realized, in his imagination, at one time'. For Poe, the short story must be a fiction that can be read—'perused'—at a single sitting. The emphasis, both contemporary and traditional, falls on both writers' and readers' perspectives on the short story's singleness of focus amid the seemingly infinite variety of its forms.

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Nathaniel Hawthorne

1804-64

In his preface to *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), Nathaniel Hawthorne distinguished between the novel and the romance. The novel 'is presumed to aim at a very minute fidelity, not merely to the possible, but to the probable and ordinary course of man's experience.' The romance, Hawthorne's preferred genre, allows 'a certain latitude, both as to its fashion and material,' but 'sins unpardonably so far as it may swerve aside from the truth of the human heart.' As long as the writer remains true to the human heart, 'he has a right to present that truth under circumstances' that are of his 'own choosing or creation.' Hawthorne's world, then, is the realm of the human heart with all its hidden recesses and shadows.

Born in Salem, Massachusetts, Hawthorne attended Bowdoin College in Maine, where he began his writing. He published his first novel, *Fanshawe*, in 1828, then continued to write while holding a variety of jobs, including customhouse officer in Boston and later in Salem. Summarily dismissed from the Salem position in 1849, he turned his full-time attention to fiction and produced *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), which won immediate acclaim. In 1853 President Franklin Pierce, another Bowdoin graduate, appointed Hawthorne to the consulship in Liverpool, England, where he lived for five years before moving to Italy. He returned to the United States in 1860 and died in Plymouth, New Hampshire.

Throughout Hawthorne's fiction broods the Puritan obsession with evil and doom. Often Hawthorne turned to the past in American history, not as history, but as a setting to examine the deepest secrets of the human heart. 'This great power of blackness in Hawthorne derives its force from its appeals to that Calvinistic sense of Innate Depravity and Original Sin, from whose visitations, in some shape or other, no deeply thinking mind is always and wholly free,'

concluded Herman Melville.

Beneath this 'power of blackness' in Hawthorne's fiction is an ultimately life-affirming vision. For Hawthorne, the heart is a cavern with depths that are bright and peaceful: 'the gloom and terror may lie deep; but deeper still is the eternal beauty.' The artist must present both good and evil as they appear in this life. 'Purify that inward sphere,' Hawthorne commented, 'and the many shapes of evil that haunt the outward, and which now seem almost our only realities, will turn to shadowy phantoms and vanish of their own accord.'

'My Kinsman, Major Molineux' presents Robin's journey of initiation into an unfamiliar world of evil. From its dreamlike atmosphere at the beginning, 'It was near nine o'clock of a moonlight evening,' to the similar atmosphere at the end, the tale centres on the night of a planned riot in Boston when the inexperienced protagonist embarks on his search for his kinsman, Major Molineux, who, Robin expects, will help to advance him in the city. But the city turns out to be a waste land, and Robin loses his innocence through the night's experience.

Melville regarded 'Young Goodman Brown' as the strongest of all of Hawthorne's tales and as 'deep as Dante' in its exploration of the mystery of evil. Like Robin, Young Goodman Brown also sets out on a journey of initiation, though he does so willingly and proudly, bent 'on his present evil purpose.'

'My Kinsman, Major Molineux' was first published in the fiction anthology *The Token: A Christmas and New Year's Present* (1831) and then collected in *The Snow-Image, and Other Twice-Told Tales* (1851). 'Young Goodman Brown' was first published in the April 1835 issue of *New-England Magazine* and then collected in *Mosses from an Old Manse* (1846).

My Kinsman, Major Molineux

After the kings of Great Britain had assumed the right of appointing the colonial governors, the measures of the latter seldom met with the ready and general approbation, which had been paid to those of their predecessors, under the original charters. The people looked with most jealous scrutiny to the exercise of power, which did not emanate from themselves, and they usually rewarded the rulers with slender gratitude, for the compliances, by which, in softening their instructions from beyond the sea, they had incurred the reprehension of those who gave them. The annals of Massachusetts Bay will inform us, that of six governors, in the space of about forty years from the surrender of the old charter, under James II, two were imprisoned by a popular insurrection; a third, as Hutchinson inclines to believe, was driven from the province by the whizzing of a musket ball; a fourth, in the opinion of the same historian, was hastened to his grave by continual bickerings with the House of Representatives; and the remaining two, as well as their successors, till the Revolution, were favoured with few and brief intervals of peaceful sway. The inferior members of the court party, in times of high political excitement, led scarcely a more desirable life. These remarks may serve as preface to the following adventures, which chanced upon a summer night, not far from a hundred years ago. The reader, in order to avoid a long and dry detail of colonial affairs, is requested to dispense with an account of the train of circumstances, that had caused much temporary inflammation of the popular mind.

It was near nine o'clock of a moonlight evening, when a boat crossed the ferry with a single passenger, who had obtained his conveyance, at that unusual hour, by the promise of an extra fare. While he stood on the landing-place, searching in either pocket for the means of fulfilling his agreement, the ferryman lifted a lantern, by the aid of which, and the newly risen moon, he took a very accurate survey of the stranger's face. He was a youth of barely eighteen years, evidently country-bred, and now, as it should seem, upon his first visit to town. He was clad in a coarse grey coat, well worn, but in excellent repair; his under garments were durably constructed of leather, and sat tight to a pair of serviceable and well-shaped limbs; his stockings of blue yarn, were the incontrovertible handiwork of a mother or a sister; and on his head was a three-cornered hat, which in its better days had perhaps sheltered the graver brow of the lad's father. Under his left arm was a heavy cudgel, formed of an oak sapling, and retaining a part of the hardened root; and his equipment was completed by a wallet, not so abundantly stocked as to incommode the vigorous shoulders on which it hung. Brown, curly hair, well-shaped features, and bright, cheerful eyes, were nature's gifts, and worth all that art could have done for his adornment.

The youth, one of whose names was Robin, finally drew from his pocket the half of a little province-bill of five shillings, which, in the depreciation of that sort of currency, did but satisfy the ferryman's demand, with the surplus of a sexangular piece of parchment valued at three pence. He then walked forward into the town, with as light a step, as if his day's journey had not already exceeded thirty miles, and with as eager an eye, as if he were entering London city, instead of the little metropolis of a New England colony. Before Robin had proceeded far, however, it occurred to him, that he knew not whither to direct his steps; so he paused, and looked up and down the narrow street, scrutinizing the small and mean wooden buildings, that were scattered on either side.

'This low hovel cannot be my kinsman's dwelling,' thought he, 'nor yonder old house, where the moonlight enters at the broken casement; and truly I see none hereabouts that might be worthy of him. It would have been wise to inquire my way of the ferryman, and doubtless he would have gone with me, and earned a shilling from the Major for his pains. But the next man I meet will do as well.'

He resumed his walk, and was glad to perceive that the street now became wider, and the houses more respectable in their appearance. He soon discerned a figure moving on moderately in advance, and hastened his steps to overtake it. As Robin drew nigh, he saw that the passenger was a man in years, with a full periwig of grey hair, a wide-skirted coat of dark cloth, and silk stockings rolled about his knees. He carried a long and polished cane, which he struck down perpendicularly before him, at every step; and at regular intervals he uttered two successive hems, of a peculiarly solemn and sepulchral intonation. Having made these observations, Robin laid hold of the skirt of the old man's coat, just when the light from the open door and windows of a barber's shop, fell upon both their figures.

'Good evening to you, honoured Sir,' said he, making a low bow, and still retaining his hold of the skirt. 'I pray you to tell me whereabouts is the dwelling of my kinsman, Major Molineux?'

The youth's question was uttered very loudly; and one of the barbers, whose razor was descending on a well-soaped chin, and another who was dressing a Ramillies wig, left their occupations, and came to the door. The citizen, in the meantime, turned a long favoured countenance upon Robin, and answered him in a tone of excessive anger and annoyance. His two sepulchral hems, however, broke into the very centre of his rebuke, with most singular effect, like a thought of the cold grave obtruding among wrathful passions.

'Let go my garment, fellow! I tell you, I know not the man you speak of. What! I have authority, I have—hem, hem—authority; and if this be the respect you show your betters, your feet shall be brought acquainted with the stocks, by daylight, tomorrow morning!'

Robin released the old man's skirt, and hastened away, pursued by an ill-mannered roar of laughter from the barber's shop. He was at first

considerably surprised by the result of his question, but, being a shrewd youth, soon thought himself able to account for the mystery.

'This is some country representative,' was his conclusion, 'who has never seen the inside of my kinsman's door, and lacks the breeding to answer a stranger civilly. The man is old, or verily—I might be tempted to turn back and smite him on the nose. Ah, Robin, Robin! even the barber's boys laugh at you, for choosing such a guide! You will be wiser in time, friend Robin.'

He now became entangled in a succession of crooked and narrow streets, which crossed each other, and meandered at no great distance from the water-side. The smell of tar was obvious to his nostrils, the masts of vessels pierced the moonlight above the tops of the buildings, and the numerous signs, which Robin paused to read, informed him that he was near the centre of business. But the streets were empty, the shops were closed, and lights were visible only in the second storeys of a few dwelling-houses. At length, on the corner of a narrow lane, through which he was passing, he beheld the broad countenance of a British hero swinging before the door of an inn, whence proceeded the voices of many guests. The casement of one of the lower windows was thrown back, and a very thin curtain permitted Robin to distinguish a party at supper, round a well-furnished table. The fragrance of the good cheer steamed forth into the outer air, and the youth could not fail to recollect, that the last remnant of his travelling stock of provision had yielded to his morning appetite, and that noon had found, and left him, dinnerless.

'Oh, that a parchment three-penny might give me a right to sit down at yonder table,' said Robin, with a sigh. 'But the Major will make me welcome to the best of his victuals; so I will even step boldly in, and inquire my way to his dwelling.'

He entered the tavern, and was guided by the murmur of voices, and fumes of tobacco, to the public room. It was a long and low apartment, with oaken walls, grown dark in the continual smoke, and a floor, which was thickly sanded, but of no immaculate purity. A number of persons, the larger part of whom appeared to be mariners, or in some way connected with the sea, occupied the wooden benches, or leather-bottomed chairs, conversing on various matters, and occasionally lending their attention to some topic of general interest. Three or four little groups were draining as many bowls of punch, which the great West India trade had long since made a familiar drink in the colony. Others, who had the aspect of men who lived by regular and laborious handicraft, preferred the insulated bliss of an unshared potation, and became more taciturn under its influence. Nearly all, in short, evinced a predilection for the Good Creature in some of its various shapes, for this is a vice, to which, as the Fast-day sermons of a hundred years ago will testify, we have a long hereditary claim. The only guests to whom Robin's sympathies inclined him, were two or three sheepish countrymen, who were using the inn somewhat after

the fashion of a Turkish Caravansary; they had gotten themselves into the darkest corner of the room, and, heedless of the Nicotian atmosphere, were supping on the bread of their own ovens, and the bacon cured in their own chimney-smoke. But though Robin felt a sort of brotherhood with these strangers, his eyes were attracted from them, to a person who stood near the door, holding whispered conversation with a group of ill-dressed associates. His features were separately striking almost to grotesqueness, and the whole face left a deep impression in the memory. The forehead bulged out into a double prominence, with a vale between; the nose came boldly forth in an irregular curve, and its bridge was of more than a finger's breadth; the eyebrows were deep and shaggy, and the eyes glowed beneath them like fire in a cave.

While Robin deliberated of whom to inquire respecting his kinsman's dwelling, he was accosted by the innkeeper, a little man in a stained white apron, who had come to pay his professional welcome to the stranger. Being in the second generation from a French Protestant, he seemed to have inherited the courtesy of his parent nation; but no variety of circumstance was ever known to change his voice from the one shrill note in which he now addressed Robin.

'From the country, I presume, Sir?' said he, with a profound bow. 'Beg to congratulate you on your arrival, and trust you intend a long stay with us. Fine town here, Sir, beautiful buildings, and much that may interest a stranger. May I hope for the honour of your commands in respect to supper?'

'The man sees a family likeness! the rogue has guessed that I am related to the Major!' thought Robin, who had hitherto experienced little superfluous civility.

All eyes were now turned on the country lad, standing at the door, in his worn three-cornered hat, grey coat, leather breeches, and blue yarn stockings, leaning on an oaken cudgel, and bearing a wallet on his back.

Robin replied to the courteous innkeeper, with such an assumption of consequence, as befitted the Major's relative.

'My honest friend,' he said, 'I shall make it a point to patronize your house on some occasion, when—' here he could not help lowering his voice—'I may have more than a parchment three-pence in my pocket. My present business,' continued he, speaking with lofty confidence, 'is merely to inquire the way to the dwelling of my kinsman, Major Molineux.'

There was a sudden and general movement in the room, which Robin interpreted as expressing the eagerness of each individual to become his guide. But the innkeeper turned his eyes to a written paper on the wall, which he read, or seemed to read, with occasional recurrences to the young man's figure.

'What have we here?' said he, breaking his speech into little dry fragments. 'Left the house of the subscriber, bounden servant, Hezekiah Mudge—had on, when he went away, grey coat, leather breeches,