

SHORT STORY

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AN INTRODUCTION TO LITERATURE

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John Ciardi and Wallace Douglas*

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PREFATORY NOTE

(To the Complete Edition)

There are many volumes designed to introduce college students to literature. What novelty can be claimed for this book comes from its plan. The four skilled and experienced teachers who have served as editors were not limited in their work by any imposed uniformity of treatment. They were asked instead to organize their approaches to fiction and drama, to poetry and prose, exactly as they would their own courses in these kinds of writing.

The result is four highly idiosyncratic presentations, ranging from Mr. Barrows's catholic and persuasive survey of the short story to Mr. Douglas's lively polemic for modern prose, from Mr. Heffner's detached and orderly analysis of drama to an examination of poetry marked by all the brilliance and conviction readers have come to expect from that poet and defender of poetry, Mr. Ciardi. The customary teaching materials are here. The characteristics, the conventions, and the special effects of each kind of writing are set forth, and the necessary critical terms are introduced. But each editor has done this in his own way.

Yet the book does have a deeper unity, which derives from certain assumptions shared by the editors. I recall some twenty years ago being a member of a group of graduate students in English to whom Robert Frost offered this advice: "Don't work. Worry!" This was his counsel to poets, he said, and he thought it might apply to us as well. One or two of our professors regarded his words as subversive of discipline, but we took them, I am sure correctly, as a clue to the kind of understanding of literature that makes its study really valuable. In like manner the editors of this book see literature as an unending source of delight, not merely as a "subject" to be pursued systematically like any other. They propose formal analysis to the student, not as an end in itself, but as a means of widening his range of comprehension and deepening his enjoyment of the thing comprehended. The beginning student, eager and curious, but largely unread and uninformed, will find them reliable guides to the "extension of life" which literature uniquely offers.

GORDON N. RAY

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READING

THE

SHORT STORY



THE STORIES IN THE FOLLOWING COLLECTION are offered for study in a college literature class, and this is certainly a different purpose from that for which they were written. That purpose, even though the individual writers represented here might give quite different answers to the question of why they wrote, is in general to give pleasure to an individual reader who has come to the particular story with the hope of being entertained by it. Now, exactly what that entertainment consists in is a complex question, though to discover the answer to it ought to be one of our aims in studying the short story. But first of all it may be helpful to say a word about the relation between “studying” short stories and simply reading them—by ourselves and “for pleasure.”

In the first place, *all* our reading of imaginative literature ought to give us pleasure. A sense of delighted absorption in what we are reading is a primary ingredient in our response to the greatest works we read as well as to the most humble. It is true that the greatest works of literature—the Greek drama, for instance, or *The Divine Comedy*, or the plays of Shakespeare—hold their high place because of the power and completeness with which they present a view of the truth about man’s life and

man's destiny. Yet however austere and profound these works may be, they are not philosophical treatises but works of literature, works of art, and this means that in the rather mysterious way that is common to all works of art they make their effect on us through the mode of pleasure, of delight in an artistic object with all its manifold appeal to our imagination, our feelings, and our senses as well as to our intellect. Such works as these are surely to be counted among the greatest achievements of the human spirit, and it may seem like a betrayal of their ultimate value to say that they must give us "pleasure," using a word that we might prefer to keep for more trivial pursuits and more fleeting impulses. Nevertheless, it is the fact that to be effective for us they *must* do so, that such a work as *Hamlet* or *The Inferno* or *Oedipus the King* will have no value whatever to the reader who plods through it, his imagination and his senses and his human curiosity closed up or shut off, just to see what Shakespeare or Dante or Sophocles was really "saying" underneath the plot, the words, and the tale of specific human destiny.

Now, there are many differences, not only of magnitude but of essential aim, which separate such works as those just mentioned from even the finest of modern short stories. Yet there are certain elements which are likely to be present in the situation of a reader who faces a work of literature that is new to him, almost without regard to the scope of the work. Although we become good readers by actually doing a good deal of reading, over a long period of time, rather than by theorizing about what the process consists in, still it is possible that a frank awareness on a theoretical level of just what is involved may be useful. There is a question—or call it a doubt, a perplexity—that sometimes troubles even the most eager and intellectually curious student when he is first asked to *study* literature, to subject stories or poems or novels to a critical analysis rather than just to read them. Sometimes the question goes like this: "Doesn't it spoil stories—or poems—to tear them apart?" This question should be respected, because it usually springs from honest doubt and because it comes from the student who sees how much there is to spoil.

To find the answer, or to help the student find it, we have to realize that it is in the very nature of works of literature both to offer us something and to demand something from us. We realize, when we first try to read Shakespeare as adults, that we can't just open one of the plays and read it through with perfect ease from the first word to the last, that we have to learn many things about Shakespeare's language, about the background of life and thought in his time. But even aside from such matters, the plays are complex, profound, and subtle, and we cannot take them in all at once in all their dimensions, so we analyze them, we study them; and perhaps, if we perform these operations with a decent respect for the plays themselves and for what we eventually hope to derive from them, it won't seem that we are merely tearing them apart.

But Shakespeare's plays, after all, present rather a special case. Surely it is one thing to read *King Lear*, which offers a formidable challenge to

any mind and imagination, and quite another to read a short story which may originally have been published in a weekly or monthly magazine. Yet the relevant fact here is that a given short story, for a given reader, may present elements of meaning or technique that are so unfamiliar as to prevent him from taking the story in, from responding to it fully and directly on one reading. The reader then has a choice: he can drop the story completely, turning back to stories he already knows "how to read," or he can try it once more, making a conscious effort to see it for what it is, to discover where its own special values lie—values which he may not have perceived at first because they are so different from those found in any of the stories he has previously been acquainted with. If he does this, even if he does it entirely on his own, he will be "studying" the story in question quite as much as if he approached it in a classroom with the help of a teacher and the cooperation of other students. And his method of study will be the only method there is, analysis: which means, really, no more than attending to one aspect, one feature of the story at a time instead of trying to take it in completely and intuitively at a single reading.

Our acquaintance with works of literature, or with works of art of any kind, involves us, once the initial interest has come into play, in a gradual process of development. At any given stage in this development we have available to us, in general, works of two kinds, those we already know how to enjoy, and those with which we are as yet not entirely at ease but which we feel we could enjoy as fully as the others once we have come to understand them better, to see into their meaning and their form more clearly and sensitively. At any stage of this development, moreover, we should make sure that we are finding a place for both kinds of reading, for both kinds of literary experience. We should continue to read books of the kinds we already enjoy and appreciate, but without being merely self-conscious and snobbish about it, we should also try works that will stretch our capacities, works that are apparently deeper or more subtle than anything we have read so far, or works that present some innovation of form or viewpoint that is baffling at first sight. (And, as a general rule, we should be willing to try *anything*, never mind whether or not it seems to be the right work for us at the present "stage.")

Now, intuition, of the kind that leads to direct appreciation, is better than the kind of response which comes only after more or less painstaking analysis, but the point is that by analyzing a certain story or poem today we are making it possible for ourselves to respond directly and intuitively to another work of the same kind tomorrow. For we should never forget that what we are seeking, in the end, is the *enjoyment* that the work can offer us. In studying literature, in familiarizing ourselves with the methods of critical analysis, what we are really doing is working to increase our capacity for enjoyment, to enlarge the range of works which make their appeal to us directly and fully. And in our eagerness to assimilate new forms of literature, to make the very considerable in-

tellectual effort which they often require, we should not forget what we already know, from our pre-college experience, about the love of reading. The chances are that the love of reading, if we're lucky enough to have it at all, was developed, during our first reading years, on very humble materials: on the exploits of the Hardy boys or Nancy Drew, on western stories or detective stories, on out-of-date best sellers left lying about by older readers, on all kinds of magazine fiction. From such reading as this, undertaken solely for the immediate enjoyment it provided, with no thought of improvement or of learning anything whatever, we may have been lucky enough to learn the most important lesson of all: how the imagination is fed and fostered by the printed word, what it feels like to love reading. A love of reading and a love of good literature are not always the same thing, but it is doubtful that anyone has ever attained the second who did not possess the first. And therefore we should be careful, when we first begin to make a conscious effort to improve our understanding and appreciation of literature, not to assume that, while the new experiences will be austere improving, they can scarcely be expected to be pleasurable. They can be pleasurable, and eventually they will be so—otherwise they would not be worth bothering with. What we are trying to learn is to see new works clearly enough, both in their inner structure and in their relation to the world they reflect, so that we can respond to them directly and fully and on their own terms: so that we can read them with pleasure.

* * *

The modern short story, as we encounter it in the pages of magazines, in collections of stories by a single author, or in anthologies of stories by several authors, has not had a very long history. It is perfectly true that the story-telling habit is as old as civilization itself, and that it seems to be a deep and permanent instinct to catch hold of an event, an incident that is in any way remarkable, and to share it with someone else, as a way of pointing out how full of unexpectedness—or even of expectedness—the world is, how rich in interest and resourcefulness are the men who inhabit it, how mysterious the workings of the forces which govern it. Now, insofar as they reflect and satisfy this deep-lying instinct by *telling a story*, all mythologies, certain portions of many Sacred Books, and later collections of tales like *The Decameron* or *The Canterbury Tales*, have something in common with the stories of any modern practitioner whatever. Yet though they have something in common, these works are so widely different both from one another and from the modern short story in their scope, in their relation to the societies which produced them, and in their form, that to insist on their one fundamental point of similarity in order to construct for the short story an ancestry as old as the history of literature, is to blur essential values rather than to isolate and establish them.

The effective, relevant tradition of the modern short story goes back

scarcely more than one hundred and fifty years, and may conveniently be seen as having been initiated by two writers, one Russian and one American, whose life spans coincided almost exactly: Nikolai Gogol, who lived from 1809 to 1852, and Edgar Allan Poe, who lived from 1809 to 1849. These two writers did not "invent" the short story, but they carried it through the most important stage in its development by virtue of producing a considerable number of excellent stories, thus revealing the potentialities of the form and establishing, in a practical way, its external shape and dimensions. Moreover, because their personal visions, interests, and experience were in many respects so very different, their respective practices of the short story illustrate at the very outset one of the form's most gratifying features: its ability to accommodate the most widely diverse kinds of subject-matter, to present visions of life which lie as far apart from one another as Poe's fantasy-world from Gogol's specifically evoked early-nineteenth-century St. Petersburg.

The history of the short story is the history of what individual practitioners have made of the form, the story of how each of them has made it a vehicle for the presentation of his own individual view of what is interesting, significant, amusing, or moving in the areas of life and the aspects of human nature which have presented themselves to his notice. That history, since to tell it even superficially would be to describe the individual use of the form made by a host of writers in Europe and America, cannot be told here. Nevertheless, another pair of names must be mentioned, since they are the names of the two writers who have thus far come closest to achieving unqualified literary "greatness" as writers of the short story: De Maupassant (1850-1893) and Chekhov (1860-1904). A number of great writers—Henry James, for instance—have devoted a part of their time to writing short stories, and many writers not of the first rank, such as Katherine Mansfield, have made the short story their only form and have practiced it with distinction and grace. But so far only De Maupassant and Chekhov (though both of them owe a part of their fame to their work in other forms) have left a body of short stories which, for realization of the artistic possibilities of the form, for fundamental seriousness and penetration of vision, for scope and variety of content, and for the sheer quantity of first-rate stories which the total work of each writer contains, seems to constitute a major achievement.

There has been a tendency in recent discussions of the short story to make De Maupassant and Chekhov the leaders of rival camps: De Maupassant, on the basis of such inferior stories as "The Necklace," is made to represent the contrived sort of story where more important values are sacrificed for the sake of a surprise ending, while Chekhov is seen as a writer who suppresses interest in plot or narrative in order to capture a certain momentary mood or to present a rather low-keyed vignette of "life as it is." There is some truth in these distinctions, but not a very important truth. Despite their differences of aim and practice, De Maupassant and Chekhov resemble one another in having created in

their stories an enormously detailed and vivid world in which human motives, conditions, and hopes are probed with great delicacy and penetration and judged—when they are judged at all—with intelligence and compassion. Many other writers have written single stories as good as any of theirs, and some have written single volumes—one thinks of James Joyce's *Dubliners*—which can rival any single volume by De Maupassant or Chekhov, yet theirs remain the greatest single achievements in the form, and the achievements which have given the widest extension to our idea of what a given writer can achieve within it.

Of course this does not mean that the short story as a form reached a dead-end once the accomplishment of these two writers was complete. Probably the single truth most important to remember about any art form is that merely to have seen what has been accomplished within it in the past is no guarantee of knowing what may be done with it in the future. For example, any general description of the way fiction uses and alters the actuality of experience for its own ends would have to be ever so slightly different after Franz Kafka (1883-1924) had written his novels and stories than it would have been before, because Kafka's work, although it is not entirely without precedent and ancestry in earlier fiction, did present a new emphasis, a new way of combining more or less recognizable elements of realism and fantasy into a new and highly individual vision. Similarly, Hemingway's first volume of stories, *In Our Time* (1925), demonstrated a brilliant new style which seemed to make possible a far more *direct* transcription of sensory and emotional experience than had been possible before, even to Stephen Crane or Joseph Conrad, and it is certain that Hemingway's style has had a marked effect on a great many novels and stories which have been written since his early books appeared, in Europe as well as in America. Yet such innovations as these, powerful and decisive as they are seen to be in retrospect, are often neither understood nor welcomed at first, for readers as a whole, especially older readers who are in positions where they can lay down the literary law, are apt to prefer what they are familiar with to something that demands a new effort, a new response. Yet any art form, if it is to remain alive, will from time to time confront us with works that seem disconcertingly strange, and it behooves us to try to make the appropriate new response.

It may be, then, that some day the short story will undergo changes that are impossible to predict now. Nevertheless, of the short story as it has been in the one hundred or so years of its history and as we know it today, it is possible to offer a generally applicable preliminary description. Granted the enormous and very attractive variety of practice that exists from one short-story writer to another, there are a certain few expectations which we legitimately have of the short story and which, taken together, constitute about as complete an *a priori* description of the form as it is desirable to offer.

Put briefly, we expect a short story to be *short*. Second, we expect it, whatever else it does, to tell a story that is worth telling *as a story*. Third, we expect it to offer some kind of illumination, however indirect or oblique, on the experience of life in this world as the author sees it: that is, it has to have significance. And fourth, we expect it to make its effects, to interest us, to tell us what it has to tell us, not by direct expository statement as the essay does, but by the dramatic or narrative presentation of imagined, created characters, moving in surroundings which the writer has described or evoked with sufficient vividness and circumstantiality so that we may have the illusion of standing within it, imaginatively, as we read. Demands of individual readers may vary on this last point, but it may be at least suggested that a basic requirement of fiction is that it take us into a world that is both *possible* (that is, recognizably related to the world as we know it) and *new* (that is, not a statistical replica of any segment of reality).

In one sense, the first of these expectations is merely a matter of definition. We expect the form of literature which we call a short story to run from about three or four pages—any shorter and it becomes an anecdote, or a germ for a story rather than the story itself—to something no more than a hundred pages, and usually not more than fifty or sixty—any longer and it becomes a novella or short novel. But in another sense, this question of the short story's *shortness* involves the essential aesthetic of the form. Moreover, it is the one aspect of the short story which sets it apart from the novel. Much of what we shall have to say about the other three expectations with which we habitually approach the short story will be found to apply about equally well to the novel (though the requirement that there be a story to be told has a special relevance to the short story that does not carry over quite intact to the novel). But in deciding to work within the length proper to the short story, a writer accepts a particular challenge which, if he is capable of meeting it, will bring with it a particular strength, the strength of a unique art form.

Reviewing Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales* in 1842 (the review is discussed at some length in the note on Poe to be found on pp. 48-51 below), Poe worked out this point in the aesthetic of the short story once and for all. One of Poe's central principles of poetic composition was that there is no such thing as a long poem, that works to which we apply the term are actually collections of short poems strung together by passages in which there is no sign of the true poetic impulse. The poetic impulse, he believed, is so intense that it can be maintained only for brief periods, and this principle of a brief intensity governs the reading of poems as well as the writing of them. For Poe, in accord with this principle, the highest form of literary composition was the short poem, and the second highest form was the short prose tale. The tale must be short enough to be read at a single sitting, long enough to allow the writer to create for his reader a controlled and unified effect.

The important implication in Poe's specifications is that the short story is *not* to be seen as something loose, anecdotal, and essentially trivial, but as an art form in which the writer carefully calculates his effects in order to make a unified appeal to the total emotional and intellectual nature of the reader: the appeal can be thus unified, and can be made with an intensity that involves a deep emotional response, *only* if the story is kept short. In Poe's estimation, the novel was an inferior form because, too long to be read at one sitting, it could not create in the reader the sustained, self-contained, unified response which he deemed essential to any work of literature which set out to realize the highest possible aims.

Poe's prescription has found the most abundant justification and exemplification in the work of many short-story writers who, entirely diverse in temperament, outlook, and choice of subject-matter, are yet alike in their devotion to his principle: that the short story, as a result of its brevity, has available to it an intensity that resembles the intensity of poetry. This is one of the first lessons we have to learn when we approach the work of many of the best practitioners of the short story—writers like Chekhov or Joyce or Hemingway—: that their work is not loosely anecdotal, each story to be read through idly and quickly with the one aim of seeing "how it comes out," but highly controlled and demanding the most attentive and sensitive response we are capable of giving. As readers, we must learn to see what Poe saw as critic and writer: that the *brevity* of the short story makes possible an intensity and concentration of artistic effect that, in turn, allow the form to work in a very high range of values and significance.

But since so much has been said about the possibility of concentration which is inherent in the very shortness of the short story, a word must be said on the other side of the question before we go on to consider the other expectations we customarily bring to the reading of short stories. It must not be forgotten that, although the short story can aim at ultimate effects comparable in some degree to those of poetry, these effects must be gained by means appropriate to fiction. A short story is a short story, after all, and not a poem, and if a writer forgets that fact and aims too directly at a "poetic" expressiveness, ignoring or minimizing the properly fictional aspects of his work in doing so, he will produce something that is neither poetry nor a short story and the reader will inevitably feel that he has been cheated.

For we approach fiction—both short stories and novels—with a number of attitudes that are scarcely present when we read poetry. We approach it with an interest in narrative, a desire to watch things happen, a curiosity to see how events turn out, and we want the *details* of a situation, we want to see the situation treated expansively, even discursively. All this may seem to be in direct contradiction to what has been said about concentration of effect, but actually it is not. A story like Walter Van Tilburg Clark's "The Indian Well" affords a clear illustra-

tion of the compatibility of Poe's demands for unity of effect with the demands for narrative interest and multiplicity of detail which as readers we all make of the short story. When we come to the end of that story, as of any good story, a consistent mood has been created, our consciousness of certain aspects of life has been intensified or even altered, and we are aware of the story as a controlled artistic entity. But Clark has accomplished these ends by making it possible for us to follow his narrative with interest and excitement and to become absorbed in a highly detailed presentation of the specific world in which the action takes place. In this story, as in any really successful story, the ultimate artistic value is achieved as a result of successful attention to the immediate aims appropriate to the medium, and here we come to the other elements—story-telling interest, significance, and specificity—which have already been referred to. In actual practice, of course, these elements will be inextricably woven together, but for the moment let us consider them one at a time.

Whatever else happens to us as we read a short story, then, ought to happen as a result of our being *interested* in the story that is told, of our wanting to read to the end, to follow the events until they have passed through a point of climax and been resolved in such a way as to leave the characters *different* in some way—however externally slight—from what they were at the beginning. The short-story writer must have many gifts and powers at his disposal: he must have a genuine understanding of human nature, he must have a keen eye for significant appearances and an ability to render them in his work, he must have the power to grasp and reveal the meaning of the incidents and experiences which have caught his attention. But first of all, he must have a story to tell. No amount of distinguished writing, no amount of philosophic penetration or social insight will suffice to make a short story in the absence of this primary ingredient. To say this is not at all to reduce the scope or value of the short story to a mere satisfying of curiosity or of a demand for the sensational. From a good short story, quite as much as from any other form of literature, we can derive all the varieties of profit and pleasure that are provided by a writer's mastery of form and style, by his possession of an original mind, a keen understanding of life and human nature—and in fact, if we derive none of these things, in any degree whatever, it won't be much of a story. Yet it is the *primary* requirement of this form of literature, as distinguished from the essay or the prose-poem or the descriptive sketch, that it tell a story, that it make its total effect as a result of capturing our interest for a particular sequence of imaginary events with a beginning, a middle, and an end.

To remain theoretical for just a moment longer, it is possible to describe the general conditions under which this essential story-telling interest is aroused and held. Any incident or narrative which is to interest us in the way we expect of a short story, ought to contain elements both of the familiar and of the unfamiliar. What we like, what we re-

spond to in reading or listening to a story, is to see something a little strange, a little extreme, a little out of the ordinary, taking place under conditions which we recognize as being the conditions which govern life as we know it. Even in fantasy, even in tall tales like those which describe the exploits of Paul Bunyan or Davy Crockett, even in science fiction, there has to be an *ultimate* applicability to human nature, to human life as we know it; the convention between the reader and the writer of such fiction is that credibility should be stretched just as far as it can possibly be stretched without being abandoned altogether. And by the same token, even in stories where the conditions of actual life in a particular time and place are rendered with documentary faithfulness there has to be given *some* little lift of novelty, of the unusual, some intensification of a particular human quality, without which we shall feel that we have not really been offered a story.

Nobody can prescribe for the short-story writer a formula or a method whereby his stories can surely be made interesting, nor are we trying to lay down any such prescription here. But once the story has been written, we shall certainly discover that if it is a *good* story it is an *interesting* story, by which we mean that the writer has achieved the right, engaging balance between what is familiar to us and what is new. As to the familiar: we expect that the particular events and reactions of the story will take place under the general laws which we recognize as governing human nature and human life in this world, since it is this life which concerns us. But we also want to be offered something *new* when we read, not absolutely new, perhaps, because human nature doesn't change very much, but at least a new combination of human traits, a new illustration at least of how human beings behave, of just how much they are capable of—in any one of perfectly innumerable directions. Perhaps it is not too much to say that we expect each story to offer us a revelation, in dramatic, fictional terms, of what human nature and human life are capable of, for good or for evil, and that the story's power to arouse our interest is not going to be a matter of multiplying wildly exciting events but rather one of convincing us that such a revelation has actually taken place.

The revelation takes place, for instance, in one of Katherine Mansfield's best known stories, "The Doll's House," a story which demonstrates how little the short story depends on grandiose subject-matter for arousing the interest essential to fiction. Externally considered, "The Doll's House" does no more than tell the story of two socially unacceptable little girls, in a snobbish middle-class world where the adults' false and cruel social values touch even the children's uncomprehending lives: all that "happens" is that the two children are at first excluded from seeing a new doll's house with all its wonders and then are allowed a brief, ecstatic, and perilous glimpse of it. Yet in this story, as much as in any story ever written, what has happened is made to seem momentous, there is a story to tell. We are taken completely into the little world

where being allowed to inspect the splendors of the doll's house is a symbolic act which separates those who have from those who have not, and at the end of the story, when the two little Kelveys have been chased out of the back yard by an aunt with a nervous headache and sit by the side of the road, breathless and humble, thinking over the glimpse of felicity which has so grudgingly and selfishly been offered them, we are present at a revelation which has been arrived at through the means of a dramatic conflict between opposing forces. Within the very slight dimensions of the story, those who have been made selfish and callously inhumane by good fortune are confronted by the humble who have a greater capacity than they both for joy and for pain, and at the end we have seen perhaps not a *new* truth, but at any rate a new and specific instance of an old truth, about how human nature will grasp hold of joy under even the most unpromising circumstances. But however much the story's ultimate value may depend on Katherine Mansfield's grasp of this truth, its *primary* value, the value for which in the first instance we read it at all, depends on her having been able to tell it to us in a dramatically effective way, *as a story*, that is, on her power to present the abstract conflict in a new set of concrete terms, to make us care how these two highly specific little girls will emerge from their uneven struggle. She has been able to take us with her, to involve our sympathy and our judgment, as she leads certain human beings through a crisis in their lives, and it is precisely this which *having a story to tell* will always be found to consist in.

It is virtually impossible to talk about any one of the demands we make of the short story without bringing in the others. In our attempt to describe the basic interest which makes a story worth telling, we have already been obliged to mention the elements of truth and specificity. Perhaps there is only one point that needs to be stressed about the demand for truth in—paradoxically—fiction. That is that while fiction—again paradoxically—ought to tell the truth, it must do so in terms of fiction. When we say that we look for truth in fiction, we mean that we expect the stories and novels we read to be based, however indirectly or remotely, in life and human nature as we know them. This law is obeyed by even the most frankly escapist literature, and the tired housewife who reads a so-called “true romance” is still seeing her world, the world of human relationships, even though she is seeing it not as it is but only as she wishes it might be: it is “romance,” but it is “true” romance. In fiction of a higher order, fiction which we read with our whole mind rather than merely with our capacity for day-dreaming, life as it goes on about us and as we ourselves live it is constantly being illuminated, our understanding of it is constantly being confirmed or modified or, it may be, contradicted. But all this the short-story writer must do indirectly, by presenting an *imitation* of life, with characters and situations so conceived that they will present a faithful and revealing commentary on some aspect of life, and the truth of that life, as the writer

sees it. Another reader might see a different "truth" emerging from "The Doll's House" than the one sketched briefly above, but the point is that Katherine Mansfield leaves her characters and events to speak for themselves, through the pattern she has given them, and never comes forward in her own person to say "This is what my story means." Moreover, the value of her story is not to be reduced to the ultimate value and applicability of any truth that may be disengaged from it and considered abstractly, but must be seen as inhering in its total power to live and to create in its readers a sense of witnessing the life and the action that it presents.

Again closely related to the requirements already discussed, is the final requirement in our list: that a short story should have a high degree of specificity, or at any rate that one of the most satisfying features of a good many short stories is that they take us into specific areas and circumstances of life which are rendered in faithful and convincing detail. It is one of the great pleasures of fiction that it takes us into more places, more walks of life, more varieties of human activity than we shall ever know directly. Nor do we enter those places as total strangers, for the writer is there to make us aware not only of what is new about them but also of what is perfectly familiar because fundamentally true to human nature in all places and all times. But the very *specificity* with which the writer renders the particular world, the particular circumstances in which his story takes place, is one of the elements which most strongly attract us to reading it. In reading F. Scott Fitzgerald, for example, we enjoy the lively way in which he evokes the brassy, zestful, superficial—and often tragic—life of a certain social class in American cities and European tourist spots in the 1920's, just as with Ring Lardner we enjoy a detailed rendering of the very tone and quality of life at the same time, and in some of the same places, but at a lower economic level and viewed, of course, by a wholly different temperament. These two segments of life are already beginning to be remote from us in time, though they certainly have their counterparts in American society today. But the short story makes it possible for us to feel that we have been given a glimpse of life in places and times that are far more distant from us than Fitzgerald's country clubs or theaters or hotels of the 1920's: they take us, for example, to Chekhov's Russian cities and towns and hamlets in the nineteenth century, or to Hemingway's Spanish cities with the bull-ring at their center, or to Paul Bowles' Indian villages and ancient forests in Latin America. They take us anywhere, in fact, where a short-story writer's knowledge and imaginative power have allowed him to penetrate.

The ultimate importance and value of a story may depend more decisively on one of the story's other elements—on its power to catch and hold our interest as a story told, or on the penetration or subtlety of its grasp of the truth of human nature—but even these elements will depend for their effectiveness on the writer's ability to create in us as we

read the illusion of entering a *specifically* imagined world. Even in the most completely naturalistic stories, this world is of course, in one sense, only make-believe, just as even in the most thorough-going fantasies, such as the stories of Poe, or in such a combination of fantasy and realism as we find in the stories of Kafka, the make-believe must be capable of *seeming* real as we read. If we analyze our response to any short story which has given us pleasure, we shall see that it is to be accounted for at least to some extent by the writer's having had the power to create the specifically imagined world which fiction presupposes.

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The study of the short story does not demand that we familiarize ourselves with a long list of technical terms. The words we use in analyzing any short story, that is, in isolating its various facets so that in the end we may have a more articulate and explicit understanding of how it works as a whole, are perfectly familiar to us from their use in other contexts: character, plot, setting, theme, narrative, symbol. Short stories are about people, whom we usually refer to as the *characters* of the story, *distinguishing* between the central characters, in whom we are chiefly interested, and minor characters who have subordinate or incidental roles. What happens in the story, from beginning to end, constitutes the story's *narrative*. A writer may choose to tell his story in straightforward chronological order, or he may choose to begin it at some point on the continuum other than the very beginning and then go back to the earliest relevant events later in the story. He may choose to describe the events of the story from the point of view of a single character who is taking part in them, or he may alternately adopt the points of view of two or more characters, or he may station himself above the events in the position of the omniscient author. *Plot* may be distinguished from *narrative* by noting that by narrative we refer to events in sequence and by plot we refer to events in their causal relationships to one another. E. M. Forster has given a vividly brief explanation of the difference between the two elements in his book *Aspects of the Novel*: if we say, "The king died, and then the queen died," we have narrative; if we say, "The king died and then the queen died of grief," we have plot. Or think of the intricate causal relationship between the particular events in one of O. Henry's well known stories: "The Gift of the Magi," for instance, which depends so completely for its interest on the deadly clicking into place of all the elements in a very intricate plot. (In this story, a young husband and wife, very poor, wish to give each other a Christmas present. The wife cuts off her beautiful long hair, of which both she and her husband are very proud, in order to buy a watch-chain for her husband's watch, of which they are again both very proud; the husband meanwhile has sold the watch in order to buy an elaborate set of combs for his wife.)