# READING AND WRITING ABOUT SHORT FICTION

EDWARD PROFFITT

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*Manhattan College*

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**for Christopher**
**and Elizabeth**
**more precious than rubies."**

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# Preface

This book provides an introduction to writing, an introduction to fiction, and an anthology of eighty-six stories. Chapter 1 focuses on the principles and process of writing—of both the paragraph and the essay—using Cynthia Ozick's powerful short story "The Shawl" as a reference point. In the course of chapter 1, the student also encounters all of the elements of fiction—plot, character, and so forth. Chapters 2 through 7 then examine in depth the central idea of theme and the various elements of fiction, always with an emphasis on the student's writing as well as reading. From eleven to fifteen very short stories follow each chapter introduction, enough to exemplify the points central to the chapter. Chapter 8 consists of ten widely taught longer stories, each with questions and writing assignments aimed at helping students consolidate the understanding they have gained from the previous chapters.

The use of very short stories (all under six pages) in chapters 2–7 offers several benefits. Because in these stories one or another of the elements of fiction tends to dominate, the instructor can illustrate the workings of fiction with exceptional ease and clarity. The stories are well suited for writing assignments for the same reason: it is easier for students to keep a character or a theme, say, in focus when reading a five-page story than a twenty-page one, and thus easier for them to keep a character, theme, plot, or whatever in focus when they write. Then, too, whereas only a handful of longer works can be treated in a semester, a great many stories of the length found in chapters 2–7 can be assigned (perhaps in combination with a few longer stories from chapter 8 and/or a novel), thereby allowing students a better view of the variety that fiction offers and the many possibilities for writing that it affords.

There is a subtler benefit for student writers as well: the great variety of structures that students will encounter in a semester can heighten their sense of structure generally. Finally, the stories assigned can easily be read several times, resulting in students' increased appreciation for detail not only in literature but in their own writing.

Throughout, then, the purpose of this book is dual. One aim is to help students toward a greater understanding, and therefore enjoyment, of fiction. The other aim, no less important, is to instruct students in the writing process. Both the writing assignments in each chapter introduction and the questions and assignments after each story embody these two aims, offering practice in working with a given element of fiction and, simultaneously, with the various types and structures of expository prose. Students will find help with terminology in the "Glossary of Literary and Writing Terms" on pages 589–94. The "Alternate Groupings for Comparison: Theme and Mode," on pages 581–88, suggest some of the many connections, thematic and formal, that can be made among the stories for purposes of discussion and, especially, writing. The "Appendix: A Brief Guide to the Use and Documentation of Sources and Related Matters," pages 558–80, offers advice on quoting, paraphrasing, summarizing, and documenting sources; it adheres to the style adopted by the Modern Language Association of America (MLA) in 1984.

We who have the opportunity to introduce students to the joys of reading literature and the excitement of discovering its inner workings through writing about it are fortunate indeed. My hope is that my own love of these endeavors as transmitted in this book will prove contagious.

## Acknowledgments

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E. P.

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# ·1·
# READING AND WRITING

"HOW can I know what I think till I see what I say," says a character in an E. M. Forster novel. Exactly so. In large part we write in order to know, especially to know ourselves. Of course, we write as well to let others know what we think; and as writers we must never forget the audience whom we are addressing. Still, the most wonderful potential of writing is that it can show us ourselves.

For the purposes of writing, however, you might wonder why you should read fiction. After all, you are unlikely to be called upon to write a story outside of your English class, though you might choose to do so for your own reasons. One answer is that reading anything worth reading enlarges the reader's capacity for handling language. As to fiction specifically, because so many great writers have written fiction, reading fiction is one of the best ways of coming to understand the possibilities of sentence structure, for instance, or prose style. Moreover, to put it simply, fiction is fun. Everybody likes stories, so the reading of fiction in connection with writing combines instruction with pleasure.

As a subject to write about, fiction offers further advantages. Even the shortest story provides an abundance of materials to write on. Granted, the same is true of other types of writing (for example, the essay). Fiction's edge lies in its giving us something concrete to hold on to—plots, characters, narrators, and so forth. That is, while it stimulates ideas and thus gives the

reader something to write about, it also limits what can be said and so helps to organize the ideas it stimulates.

## READING FICTION

Before we move to a more detailed discussion of fiction and the writing process, a few comments on reading fiction might prove helpful. These summary comments will be fleshed out in the chapters that follow. First, then, fiction asks you to be active as you read: to bring to your reading your experience of the world and also to open yourself to new experience as you actively construct in your mind scenes, actions, characters. As you read, bring to bear what you already know about people and the ways people behave; try to participate even when you come to stories whose characters seem alien, with values different from yours. All fiction asks is that you understand, not that you believe. Fiction is the reverse of propaganda, which seeks to close the mind to everything except the values its creators would have us accept. By asking us actively to participate in its unfolding design, fiction aims to expand our understanding of others and deepen our knowledge of ourselves.

"To participate in its unfolding design"—this phrase brings us to a central point about active reading. Part of coming to terms with a story is looking to see how it is constructed: which of the elements of fiction the author is working with and how. Somewhere along the line, active readers ask of stories questions like those that follow.

*Of plot*: What happens in the story? How are its incidents linked? What is the significance of what happens?

*Of character*: What kind of people does the story present? How are they drawn? What makes them do what they do? Is there anything to be learned from them?

*Of narrators and narration*: Who tells the story? Is the narrator one of its characters? Can the narrator be trusted? What is the narrator's (or narrative) point of view? Does the narrator somehow shed light on the story's meaning?

*Of mood*: What does the story make me feel? Why this mood (for instance, comic, grim, nostalgic, tragic)? How does the story's mood help establish its meaning?

*Of style*: What kinds of sentence structure does the author use? What kinds of vocabulary? Is the story's language figurative or mainly literal? What is the effect of the story's style? Why?

*Of setting*: Where does the story take place? Is its setting merely backdrop or does it have some particular significance? If the latter, what?

*Of symbol*: Is there anything in the story—an object, perhaps, or a descriptive detail—that could have meaning beyond its literal function in the story? In the context of the story, what special significance might this object, detail, or whatever have?

*Of theme*: What is the general, or overall, meaning of the story—the "big idea" that the elements in combination serve to establish?

Read a story first for pleasure, for its effect. Let it sink in. Then question how the story is made, for the meaning of a story depends immediately on how that story is put together. Students often ask about the "intention" of an author. The answer is that we can never know the author's intention directly; so we speak of the "implied intention," implied by how a story is constructed. Because no author has to write a story in a set way, the choices made by an author allow us to infer intention and arrive at meaning. But first we must observe what choices were made, or, again, actively consider the elements from which a story is molded.

The word *infer* brings us to a final point: active reading means the drawing of inference. Like life, fiction requires that we draw a host of conclusions from the evidence available, the difference being that even the densest of fictions directs us toward the proper conclusions, which life never does. Because a story is under the control of a writer, who can include or exclude anything, fiction is always a good deal more coherent than life. But we must be alert to the implications of what is before us. Sean O'Faolain, two of whose stories appear in this book, writes that

> a short-story writer does not directly tell us things so much as let us guess or know them by implying them. The technical advantage is obvious. It takes a long time to tell anything directly and explicitly, it is a rather heavyhanded way of conveying information, and it does not arrest our imagination or hold our attention so firmly as when we get a subtle hint. Telling never dilates the mind with suggestions as implication does. (151)

Implication is the writer's way of involving the reader, of creating an effect *in* the reader rather than just conveying information. But the reader must be sensitive to implications and make the appropriate inferences. Much of this book is aimed at helping you do that.

## READING FOR WRITING

After you have read a story once for its effect, read it again, jotting down any ideas or questions it brings to mind and noting whatever feelings it evokes in you. Then, with the story as a whole in mind, consider its elements by asking the kinds of questions we looked at earlier. Mull over your jotted ideas and questions, seeking answers to the latter, and test the aptness of your feelings and responses. You might even wish to read the story a third time to carry out this testing and checking. Finally, taking everything into account, try to articulate the meaning of the story overall. Write down a few sentences about its theme and indicate why you now interpret it as you do, perhaps noting details in the story that have led you to your conclusions. Because most of the stories in this book are very short, following through on the plan just outlined should not prove unduly taxing.

Moving step by step, these activities fall under the heading of "prewriting." By following through on them as you read a story, you should arrive at a conscious awareness of your feelings about the story, some tested ideas that you could use in your writing on the story, and perhaps even a sense of direction in which your thoughts and feelings might take you as you write. As you turn to Cynthia Ozick's "The Shawl," go through the steps just outlined. Then, follow me as I go through them myself.

# The Shawl

## *Cynthia Ozick*

Stella, cold, cold, the coldness of hell. How they walked on the roads together, Rosa with Magda curled up between sore breasts, Magda wound up in the shawl. Sometimes Stella carried Magda. But she was jealous of Magda. A thin girl of fourteen, too small, with thin breasts of her own, Stella wanted to be wrapped in a shawl, hidden away, asleep, rocked by the march, a baby, a round infant in arms. Magda took Rosa's nipple, and Rosa never stopped walking, a walking cradle. There was not enough milk; sometimes Magda sucked air; then she screamed. Stella was ravenous. Her knees were tumors on sticks, her elbows chicken bones.

Rosa did not feel hunger; she felt light, not like someone walking but like someone in a faint, in trance, arrested in a fit, someone who is already a floating angel, alert and seeing everything, but in the air, not there, not touching the road. As if teetering on the tips of her fingernails. She looked into Magda's face through a gap in the shawl: a squirrel in a nest, safe, no one could reach her inside the little house of the shawl's windings. The face, very round, a pocket mirror of a face: but it was not Rosa's bleak complexion, dark like cholera, it was another kind of face altogether, eyes blue as air, smooth feathers of hair nearly as yellow as the Star sewn into Rosa's coat. You could think she was one of *their* babies.

Rosa, floating, dreamed of giving Magda away in one of the villages. She could leave the line for a minute and push Magda into the hands of any woman on the side of the road. But if she moved out of line they might shoot. And even if she fled the line for half a second and pushed the shawl-bundle at a stranger, would the woman take it? She might be surprised, or afraid; she might drop the shawl, and Magda would fall out and strike her head and die. The little round head. Such a good child, she gave up screaming, and sucked now only for the taste of the drying nipple itself. The neat grip of the tiny gums. One mite of a tooth tip sticking up in the bottom gum, how shining, an elfin tombstone of white marble, gleaming there. Without complaining, Magda relinquished Rosa's teats, first the left, then the right; both were cracked, not a sniff of milk. The duct crevice extinct, a dead volcano, blind eye, chill hole, so Magda took the corner of the shawl and milked it instead. She sucked and sucked, flooding the threads with wetness. The shawl's good flavor, milk of linen.

It was a magic shawl, it could nourish an infant for three days and three nights. Magda did not die, she stayed alive, although very quiet. A peculiar smell, of cinnamon and almonds, lifted out of her mouth. She held her eyes open every moment, forgetting how to blink or nap, and Rosa and sometimes Stella studied their blueness. On the road they raised one burden of a leg after another and studied Magda's face. "Aryan," Stella said, in a voice grown as thin as a string; and Rosa thought how Stella gazed at Magda like a young cannibal. And the time that Stella said "Aryan," it sounded to Rosa as if Stella had really said "Let us devour her."

But Magda lived to walk. She lived that long, but she did not walk very well, partly because she was only fifteen months old, and partly because the spindles of her legs could not hold up her fat belly. It was fat with air, full and round. Rosa gave almost all her food to Magda, Stella gave nothing; Stella was ravenous, a growing child herself, but not growing much. Stella did not menstruate. Rosa did not menstruate. Rosa was ravenous, but also not; she learned from Magda how to drink the taste of a finger in one's mouth. They were in a place without pity, all pity was annihilated in Rosa, she looked at Stella's bones without pity. She was sure that Stella was waiting for Magda to die so she could put her teeth into the little thighs.

Rosa knew Magda was going to die very soon; she should have been dead already, but she had been buried away deep inside the magic shawl, mistaken there for the shivering mound of Rosa's breasts; Rosa clung to the shawl as if it covered only herself. No one took it away from her. Magda was mute. She never cried.

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