

美国短篇小说鉴赏

Understanding American Short Stories

苏兴莎

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Part One A Brief History of the Short Story

The short story is a kind of prose fiction, usually more compact and intense than the novel and the short novel. It is probably the oldest of literary forms, almost as old as language itself. *Tales of the Magicians*, a collection of Egyptian tales, was written before 2700 BC. Homer's *Odyssey* is a collection of short stories. *The Bible* is basically a selection of short stories from ancient times.

The evolution of the short story first began before man could write. The famous Babylonian tale *The Epic of Gilgamesh* was finished about 2000 BC. The earliest extant tales are mostly from Egypt, India, Middle West and Greece. The earliest tales of Egyptians were composed on papyrus at a comparable date. They seem to have written their narratives largely in prose, apparently reserving verse for their religious hymns and working songs. "The Shipwrecked Sailor" (c. 2000 BC) is one of the examples. The earliest tales from India are not as old as those from Egypt and the Middle East. Although *The Brāhmanas* (c. 700BC) and *The Jātaka* have a religious frame, their actual concern is generally with secular behavior and practical wisdom. The Hebrews, during the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th centuries BC, first wrote down some of their rather sophisticated narratives, which are known as a part of the *Old Testament* and the *Apocrypha*. The Greeks at this time also made a great contribution to the scope and art of short fiction. The most famous one is *Aesop's Fables*.

Nearly all of the ancient tales, whether from Israel, India,

Egypt or the Middle East, were fundamentally didactic. Some of these stories were presenting an ideal for readers to imitate, others tagged with a "moral" were more direct.

The techniques or forms of these ancient stories are stock phrases, fixed rhythms and rhyme, for example, ballad or verse form.

The short story flourished in the Middle Ages. At that time, short tales became an important means of diversion and amusement. From the Dark Ages to the Renaissance, various cultures adopted short fiction for their own different purposes. And the form of short fiction was various. Three popular types of medieval short stories were the racy fabliau, the romance, and the exemplum. Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and Boccaccio's *The Decameron* are the famous collections of medieval stories. We can say the Middle Ages was a time of the proliferation.

In Britain, the romantic imagination and high spirits of the Celts remained manifest in their tales. The "Matter of Britain" (stories of King Arthur and his knights), the "Matter of France" (the Charlemagne cycle) and the "Matter of Rome" (stories out of antiquity) were the three romantic matters addressed.

The exemplum (a short didactic tale usually illustrating a moral) was another popular form. Of all the exempla, the lives of the saints in the 11th and 12th centuries were very famous. *The Gesta Romanorum* (Deeds of the Romans) was the example.

Among the common people of the late Middle Ages, the practical minded animals in beast fables, the coarse and "merry" jestbooks and the ribald fabliaux were widely accepted. They displayed a preference for common sense, secular humor and sensuality.

The Decameron of Boccaccio and *The Canterbury Tales* of Chaucer (in the 14th century) were the heritage of the short story. It was from Chaucer and Boccaccio that the short narrative

received its most refined treatment in the Middle Ages. The frameworks of these two collections are in themselves evidence of the universal popularity of the short story as a prime and respected means of entertainment. Boccaccio and Chaucer took great care to assure their readers that their stories would give both pleasure and moral instruction.

The Decameron is a series of one hundred tales told by seven ladies and three gentlemen who fled the plague that devastated Florence in 1348. *The Canterbury Tales* is a collection of religious and secular tales, Chaucer's pilgrims told their stories to shorten their journey from London to Canterbury, where they would pay homage at the shrine of Saint Thomas à Becket.

Boccaccio's genius, geared more toward narrative than toward drama, is of a different sort, compared with Chaucer. It was his zest for life, rather than an intellectual regard for technique, that forged his stories. The whole of *The Decameron* pulsates with emotion. While Chaucer was a virtuoso of the form. The variety of form in his *Canterbury Tales* makes it a great roundup of the medieval short story.

After the popularity of *The Decameron*, the imitations were produced nearly everywhere. In Italy alone, at least 50 writers of novella were after Boccaccio. 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. But by the time of the 17th and 18th centuries the temporary decline of short fiction arrived. Certainly, the causes of this phenomenon are many: the rising of the novel; the increasing awareness of other lands and the growing interest in social conditions produced a plethora of descriptive and biographical sketches...

In the 19th century, the short story emerged once again as a major literary form. The modern period of the short story began

almost simultaneously in Germany, the United States, France and Russia. German writers were the first to experiment and develop this new form into original, imaginative narratives that resemble what we call short stories. In 1795, Goethe wrote a set of stories to Schiller's Journal, *Die Horen*. His contemporary Ludwig Tieck experimented with stories he himself called "novelle", which blend fantasy and reality in ways that influenced his contemporaries. A new type of short fiction was near at hand — a type that accepted some of the realistic properties of popular journalism.

In the U. S, the short story, as in Germany, evolved in two strains — the realistic story and the impressionist story. The former one sought objectively to deal with seemingly real places, events or persons. The regionalist stories of the second half of the 19th century by G. W. Cable, Bret Harte, Sarah Orne Jewell belong to this kind. The impressionist story is a sort of tale shaped and given meaning by the consciousness and psychological attitudes of the narrator. These stories seem less objective and are less realistic in the outward sense. Poe's tales are of this sort. The hallucinations of a central character or narrator provide the details and facts of the story, e. g, the narrators of "The Fall of the House of Usher" and "The Tell-Tale Heart". In fact, Edgar Allan Poe largely inspired the short story rebirth. Poe thought that a satisfying artistic unity could best be achieved in short works because of the limited span of human attention. In addition to this, Poe invented the most popular of all types of story, the murder mystery or detective story.

Washington Irving like some writers contributed to the development of both types of story. Irving wrote several realistic sketches — *The Sketch Book* and *The Alhambra*. Also he wrote stories in which the details weren't taken from the reality but from within a character's mind. His "Rip Van Winkle" draws up-

on the symbolic surreality of Rip's dreams. While the interest of Nathaniel Hawthorne was in psychological aberration only as an effect of moral values. Other famous short story writers include Herman Melville, Mark Twain and Henry James, etc. They offered valuable insights, though sometimes shedding more light on their own work than on the art as a whole.

The new respect for the short story was also evident in France. Nineteenth-century France produced various short stories though the impressionist tale was less common in France. Alphonse Daudet is one of the most interesting writers of nineteenth-century France. Guy de Maupassant, the greatest French storywriter, by far, is a master of the objective short story. His characters are known through their appearance and action. Their motives are not analyzed, and the inner recesses of their minds are not probed. And Maupassant's stories are basically anecdotes of middle class citizens. In his stories, he achieved the brevity and concrete portrayal essential to the form, while the Victorian English writers groped in handling the short story because they could neither reduce the luxuriant verbiage nor sharpen the leisurely style fostered by their huge novels. Maupassant's "The Necklace" is a very good example.

In Russia, many writers contributed to the short story, for example, Ivan Krylov, Nikolay Gogol, Ivan Turgenev and Fyodor Dostoyevsky, etc. Among them, Anton Chekhov was the master of the impressionistic short story. In many of his stories nothing seems to happen because he is primarily concerned with evoking a mood, as in "Gooseberries", or indicating character, as in "The Schoolmistress".

Impressionism has continued to be an important influence in the works of both older writers and of recent writers in the 20th century. But innovations in style, structure and content that went beyond simple impressionism began to appear in the early

decades of the 20th century. The fundamental means of structuring a story underwent a significant change. One of these new techniques was the "stream of consciousness" method introduced by Virginia Woolf and James Joyce. Another was the heavy emphasis on symbolism by Katherine Anne Porter, Thomas Mann and D. H. Lawrence, etc. The influence of Freudian psychology can be seen in the role played by the subconscious in stories by Joyce, Lawrence, Mann, and in the stories of Franz Kafka.

After World War I, in the U. S., a generation of brilliant new writers appeared. They were Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, F. Scott Fitzgerald and Sherwood Anderson, etc. In 1919, Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* was published, revealing the lack of formal plot. With Anderson the new technique entered the American story almost in disguise. Anderson's aim was to achieve form, not plot. And the record of the short story in the 20th century is dominated by this increased sensitivity to form. Also, writers were interested in experimenting with form.

In Europe, during the interval between the two world wars, the short story was greatly influenced by existentialism — a philosophic theory that emphasizes the absurdity of human existence. Franz Kafka was the most original writer of this group. In his stories, Kafka created a nightmarish world full of anxiety in which the hero's search for justice, love, and God is frustrated by the mechanisms of bureaucracy.

In the U. S. after World War II, the most important writers were J. D. Salinger, John Cheever, John Updike, Mary McCarthy, Flannery O'Connor, Carson McCullers, Truman Capote and Ralph Ellison. Recently there has been an exciting trend in both the United States and Europe toward abstract expressionism in the short story. Instead of seeking to represent reality, some writers are inventing hallucinatory surrealistic situations to express their feelings of alienation and their sense of the deca-

dence of modern society, for example, Jakob Lind's *Journey Through the Night*, Isaac Bashevis Singer's *Gimpel the Fool* and Donald Barthelme's *A Shower of Gold*.

We can say that the history of the short story in the 20th century has been an interesting and exciting one. The influence of French and Russian authors has, on the whole, been relatively slight, and the credit for the excellence the short story has achieved belongs once again to America and to a lesser but still important extent to Great Britain and Ireland. Still, in numbers and in quality, the advantage in the present century clearly lies with American, British and Irish authors.

The history of the short story is open-ended, as befits a mature and vigorous literary form. The ideal reader is also open to new writing, ready to be enchanted by the magic of each writer's imagination, revealed in his or her engagement with the short story.

Part Two Approaches to the Short Story

I The Elements of Fiction

The literary form *short story* is a brief fictional prose narrative, often involving one connected episode. It may range in length from 500 words up to 12,000 or 15,000 words. Of all literary forms, the short story is the least restricted in subject matter, for its length permits treatment of subjects that could not alone sustain interest in a longer form.

A short story has certain format development of 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. When we speak of the elements of fiction, we are speaking of plot, character, setting, point of view, theme, symbol, allegory, style and tone.

Plot

Plot is the sequence of events in a story and their relation to one another. Usually they are related by causation, and their meaning lies in this relation.

Most plots originate in some kind of significant conflict. The conflict may be either external, when the protagonist is pitted against some object or force outside himself, or internal, in which case the issue to be resolved is one within the protagonist's own self. External conflict may take the form of a basic opposition between man and nature (as it does in Jack London's "To Build a Fire") or between man and society (as it does in Richard

Wright's "The Man Who Was Almost a Man"). It may also take the form of an opposition between man and man (between the protagonist and a human adversary, the antagonist), as, for example, in most detective stories. Internal conflict focuses on two or more elements contesting within the protagonist's own character, as in Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness", where Kurtz struggles (and fails) to subdue the savage instincts concealed beneath his civilized veneer.

It should be noted that some short story plots contain more than one conflict. And the conflicts of a story may exist prior to the formal initiation of the plot itself, rather than be explicitly dramatized or referred to. Some conflicts are never made explicit and must be inferred by the reader from what the characters do or say as the plot unfolds (as is the case in "Hills Like White Elephants" by Hemingway). Conflict, then, is the basic opposition, or tension, that sets the plot of a short story in motion, it engages the reader, builds the suspense or the mystery of the work, and arouses expectation for the events that are to follow.

The plot of the traditional short story is often conceived of as moving through five distinct sections or stages. There is a rough diagram follows on page 9:

1. *Exposition*, in which the characters, the scene, the time and the situations are introduced.
2. *Complication*, which is sometimes referred to as the rising action, develops and intensifies the conflict.
3. *Crisis*, this is the moment of the highest tension, the point after which the circumstances must change. It is also referred to as the climax or the turning point.
4. *Falling action*, once the crisis, or turning point, has been reached, the tension subsides and the plot moves toward its conclusion.
5. *Resolution* (dénouement), the final section of the plot is its

resolution, it records the outcome of the conflict and establishes some new equilibrium.

Although the above five stages are helpful in understanding the relationship among the parts of many kinds of narrative, all plots, unfortunately, do not lend themselves to such neat and exact formulations, for example, in many modern and contemporary stories the plot consists of a “slice of life” into which we enter on the eve of crisis, and the reader is left to infer beginnings and antecedents — including the precise nature of the conflict — from what he or she is subsequently able to learn.

Plot can work in several ways. It can be an outgrowth of a character’s personality or will, as in Young Goodman Brown’s insistence on his meeting with the devil or in Monteresor’s insane scheme of revenge against Fortunato in Poe’s “The Cask of Amontillado”. It can be propelled by an apparent accident of fate. It can be controlled by the setting, as in Stephen Crane’s “The Open Boat”. Most often the plots can be understood as the interaction of character with circumstances: for example, “Babylon Revisited” by Fitzgerald.

Plot does not emerge just through the description of events in the story. It can also be carried forward in dialogue, as when Hawthorne introduced the characters, the time, and the situation through the conversation between Goodman Brown and his wife in the beginning of the story.

All in all, authors of short stories have different ways of telling the story, the goal is the same; they must show the reader what is important through the dramatic action of the plot and the other elements of the story, and not just explicitly tell the reader what to think.

Character

The action of the plot is performed by the characters in the story, the people who make something happen or produce an effect. And not always just people (Aesop's Fables). But when we say character, we usually mean a person. And character is an essential element of short fiction, it is destiny, it determines the development of plot.

The major, or central character of the plot is the protagonist; his opponent, the character against whom the protagonist struggles or contends, is the antagonist. The terms protagonist and antagonist do not imply a judgment about moral worth. Many protagonists embody a complex mixture of both positive qualities and negative qualities, very much in the way their real life counterparts do. Usually the protagonist is easy to identify; he or she is the essential character without whom there would be no plot. Often the title of the work identifies the protagonist: "Young Goodman Brown" and "Rip Van Winkle". While it is some what more difficult to identify the antagonist, especially if he is not a human being, as is the case with the marlin that challenges the courage and endurance of the old fisherman Santiago in *The Old Man and the Sea* by Hemingway.

Characters in fiction are also divided into several types. Flat characters are those who embody or represent a single characteristic, trait, or idea, or at most a very limited number of such qualities. Flat characters are also referred to as type characters,