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Studies in the American Short Story

By

MARY JANE WING

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CHAPEL HILL

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1956



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FOREWORD

Because the short story is a new form and still, despite attempts to impose rules upon it, a relatively free literary form, it offers a great attraction to the writer, be he professional or amateur. Its length and the insatiable public demand for it are additional lures to the writer. The newness, the lack of rules, and the enormous volume of stories produced, all combine to make any study of the short story as difficult and inconclusive as it is interesting.

In order to keep this study within some kind of bounds it has been necessary to ignore certain important factors in the development of the short story in America, to pass over some good writers, to deprive ourselves of the fascinations of historical and social background. What follows is, therefore, the barest of skeletons. At most, it can serve only as a starting-place.

The suggestions for study and the references, too, are intended as suggestions merely. You will find, as you read, that all kinds of questions keep forming in your mind, many of which will be more interesting to follow up than the suggestions given here. You will think of writers whose work you'd rather read. In short, if this outline provides stimulus and framework, it will have served the purpose for which it was designed.



PROGRAM I

THE SHORT STORY IS

Almost always when a new form of literature develops, the form comes first and the rules follow. For example, the Greek dramatists upon whose work Aristotle based his rules for the tragic drama had been dead for twenty years before those rules were expounded. Not so with the short story. Poe formulated his rules for the tale almost as soon as Hawthorne began to write in the form—published those rules, in fact, in his review of Hawthorne's first book of tales, in 1842.

Since that time there has been little respite from definitions and rules for the short story: every reader, writer, and editor has attempted to formulate his own view of the form, of what the short story is, of how it should be written. Robert Penn Warren has defined it as "a story that is not too long," and H. G. Wells has specified half an hour as the maximum reading time for it. Chekhov maintained that it should have neither beginning nor end, while Ellery Sedgwick held that "a story is like a horse race. It is the start and finish that matter most." Henry James said that the short story must be "either a picture or an anecdote," and Frank O'Connor claims that "a good short story must be news."

And so we begin, through these few brief quotations, to catch a glimpse of what the short story may be, of how strict are some definitions of it and of how loose are others. On a few points most of the critics agree: historically, the modern short story is primarily American, and constitutes America's contribution to literature of distinctive literary form. Technically, the short story may contain no detail not immediately relevant to its purpose, its purpose and nature being very different from that of the novel.

We can only conclude, then, with H. E. Bates that "the short story can be anything that the author decides it shall be." Henry James said essentially the same thing, although naturally in more elaborate fashion.

The house of Fiction has in short not one window, but a million—a number of possible windows not to be reckoned rather; every one of which has been pierced or is still pierceable, in its vast front, by the need of individual vision and by the pressure of the individual will.

Suggestions for Discussion:

Why did America invent the short story? Explain from your readings in Bates, O'Brien, and Pattee, and from your own observations of American life.

What is a short story? Summarize briefly the definitions and qualifications discussed in the books above.

Read a recent collection of stories, and describe generally who tells the story for the author, what the prevailing mood of the collection is, and what the writers seem to be trying to say.

References:

Advance of the American Short Story, by Edward J. O'Brien

Development of the American Short Story, by Fred Lewis Pattee

The Modern Short Story, by H. E. Bates

Additional Reading:

Century Reading in the American Short Story, by Fred Lewis Pattee

Philosophy of the Short Story, by Brander Matthews

Short Story in America, 1900-1950, by Ray Benedict West

Shock of Recognition, edited by Edmund Wilson

PROGRAM II

WHERE DID THE SHORT STORY COME FROM?

There have been tales since the world began, and from the tale have developed the many forms of fiction which the world has enjoyed: the beast fable, the legend, the folk tale, the fairy tale, the ballad, the novel, the short story—among others. Some of the early tales and legends came from the reports of huntsmen and returned travellers; and many of them, including most of the Greek myths, were attempts by men to explain natural phenomena beyond their comprehension. Hawthorne, as we shall see, translated some of the classic myths into New England idiom.

The ballads and legends which America's colonists brought from England, Scotland, and the European countries were sometimes history, sometimes entertainment. Many of those we still hear, such as "Barbara Allen," the Robin Hood ballads, and the traditional Christmas carols. America developed variations upon these older songs and originated new ballads as well. "Erie Canal," "Frankie and Johnny," "Sourwood Mountain," and a host of other ballads which we all know, are native to the United States. American poets wrote in the ballad form; and Longfellow, especially, was interested in the origins of songs and legend, as "Hiawatha," "The Wreck of the Hesperus," and "Evangeline" reveal.

With its crossing the sea to America the tale became the yarn, beloved of pioneers and frontier settlers. Irving first adapted the yarn to formal prose, and Mark Twain used it triumphantly in almost everything he wrote. Joel Chandler Harris recorded the art of Negro folklore, and the local colorists found inspiration in the rich lore of their home regions.

Since myth and legend sought first to explain wonders beyond man's understanding they have always told of figures somewhat larger than life, such as Paul Bunyan, and have usually contained a large element of the supernatural, as in the stories of "Ocean-born Mary" and Tennessee's "Bell Witch." They continue today to provide delight, whether through the yarns told by members of the Liar's Club, by Samuel Hopkins Adams in his stories of New York State, or the latest back-fence tale.

Suggestions for Discussion:

Read or play phonograph records of a number of ballads chosen from *A Treasury of American Ballads*. Which of them would make good short stories? Would any of them be more effective in prose than in verse? Why?

Read or tell several folk-tales from *Jonathan Draws the Long Bow* or *The Treasury of American Folklore* that you consider especially interesting. Describe a few of the different kinds of stories that you find in these collections.

Are there any tales or legends of your community that would lend themselves to short story or ballad treatment? You might have several different people write up one of these tales in story or ballad form, each in her own way, and see how they vary in approach and in telling.

References:

- Johnathan Draws the Long Bow*, by Richard M. Dorson
A Treasury of American Ballads, by Charles O'Brien Kennedy
A Treasury of American Folklore, by B. A. Botkin

Additional Reading:

- American Short Stories*, by Charles Sears Baldwin
Doctor to the Dead, by John Bennett
English and Scottish Popular Ballads, ed. from the collection of Francis James Child by Helen Child Sargeant and George Lyman Kittredge
Hurricane's Children, by Carl Carmer
I Hear America Singing, by Ruth A. Barnes
Oxford Book of Ballads, by Arthur Quiller-Couch
The Short Story, by Brander Matthews
Songs Sung in the Southern Appalachians, by M. E. Henry

PROGRAM III

WASHINGTON IRVING

Washington Irving was the first American writer to become famous outside the United States. He was also America's first expatriate writer and the first to use the legend as material for his work. The son of a rather well-to-do New York family, Irving travelled all over Europe, and he recounted the stories of England, the Gothic tales of Germany, and the Moorish legends of Spain, as well as the yarns of his native Hudson Valley.

Two of Irving's stories every school child knows: "Rip Van Winkle" and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow." Both of these are, of course, Hudson River stories, as is the delightful tale of "Dolph Heyliger." But most of us have happy memories, too, of *The Alhambra*, for there is a time in our lives when this collection of Moorish legends is surely the best book ever written. It is because of these and others of Irving's short tales that a few critics name Irving as the inventor of the modern short story. But Irving's style is leisurely; his stories are rich in description and digression, with little action or conversation. They resemble the old tale rather than our modern short story, but they did turn the attention of other writers to the possibilities of the short form of fiction. For this, for his use of the legend, and for his genial and polished style, Irving is regarded as the first important figure in the development of American fiction.

Subjects for Discussion:

1. Tell about Irving's life, the kind of society and the times in which he lived.

2. Read *The Sketch Book* and *The Alhambra*; compare the kinds of stories found in each and the author's manner of telling them. (One way to do this would be to choose one typical story from each book and tell it, pointing out descriptive passages, conversations, how long it takes Irving to get into his story, etc., but you may think of other and better ways of describing the two books.)

Discuss Irving's influence on the short story, and mention something of the tradition of the expatriate American writers such as Irving, Henry James, Edith Wharton, Ernest Hemingway, and others.

References:

Advance of the American Short Story, by Edward J. O'Brien

The Alhambra, by Washington Irving

The Development of the American Short Story, by Fred Lewis Pattee

The Sketch Book, by Washington Irving

The World of Washington Irving, by Van Wyck Brooks

Additional Reading:

Century Readings in the American Short Story, by Fred Lewis Pattee

PROGRAM IV

THE LADIES TAKE CHARGE

The great success of Irving's *Sketch Book* naturally inspired a flood of imitative collections, perpetrated by inexperienced and not particularly gifted authors. Lacking Irving's natural gifts and experience of the world, they nevertheless sought to copy his style. The regrettable result was a nationwide craze for bombast, for long and involuted sentences made up of as many polysyllabic words as possible. This tendency was in no way discouraged by the rise to world-wide fame—just a year later than the *Sketch Book*—of James Fenimore Cooper's *The Spy*, nor by the prevailing rapture over the novels of Sir Walter Scott and the Gothic tales of Mrs. Radcliffe, Horace Walpole, and "Monk" Lewis.

Just at this time, when every young writer in America was trying to produce short prose pieces and finding no market for his products, there came a new fashion from Europe: the annual, or gift book. Until the rise of the magazines, some twenty-five years later, the annual served as both market place and model for the writers of America. *The Token* and *The Atlantic Souvenir* were the most durable of the annuals, but there were dozens more, and in them was published the work of some of the country's best known writers—Hawthorne, Poe, William Gilmore Simms, Longfellow—as well as many whose names are never heard today. These gift books in time became so elaborate that binding and illustrations overshadowed contents. It was, in fact, not an unheard of procedure for a publisher to use the same contents, rearranged and with different illustrations, over and over again!

The annual within a few years developed into the lady's book, its penchant for didactic tales told in high-toned language increasing in the process. Pieces by women writers of fiction began to appear in its pages and soon monopolized them. The stories of the lives of some of these early feminine authors are even more astounding than are their works. Determined and prolific, the ladies here gained an ascendancy in the world of fiction which they have never relinquished.

Subjects for Discussion:

Describe some of the annuals and lady's books discussed in *The Development of the American Short Story*, and read some of the choicer

titles of stories published in these collections. Discuss the kind of tale that generally appeared in these books, and read aloud typical passages.

Tell the story of "Peter Rugg, the Missing Man," by William Austin, pointing out in it the elements of legend and the supernatural that we have already encountered.

Tell William Gilmore Simm's story, "Grayling, or, Murder Will Out." Poe called this "the best story in the world." From what you know of Poe, can you explain this evaluation?

From among the authoresses discussed in *The Feminine Fifties*, choose three or four whose lives or works you find of special interest, and tell about them.

References:

The Advance of the American Short Story, by Edward J. O'Brien

Century Readings in the American Short Story, by Fred Lewis Pattee (Austin and Simms stories)

The Development of the American Short Story, by Fred Lewis Pattee

The Feminine Fifties, by Fred Lewis Pattee

Additional Reading:

American Short Stories, by Charles Sears Baldwin

PROGRAM V

NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE

Hawthorne was a writer born. Indeed, there can have been few moments his life long when he was not in some way writing. As a child he regaled his sisters with tales, some original, some wild variations upon the stories he had read. Even that was not enough: he told stories to himself, and so began in childhood the inner conversations by which he discovered and developed his philosophy as well as his style. As he grew older, Hawthorne began keeping journals and notebooks, copious ones, in which he recorded his travels, his impressions of the people he met, ideas for plots, stray thoughts and observations, and phrases that occurred to him. He corresponded with numbers of people, and his letters are often as readable as stories. As Malcolm Cowley has said, "If Hawthorne in his later years had a better, more flexible style than any other American author of his time, the fact was easy to explain: he had learned to write, first by reading, then by talking to himself, and most of all by writing a great deal."

Like his friend Herman Melville, Hawthorne was a meditative writer born in a period when action and sensation were the qualities most readers demanded in a story. But having worked alone, always, Hawthorne continued to be the most reliable critic of his own work and could never write to conform to any other standard than his own. He learned to be patient with his writing, which often seemed to him to come from a voice deep within himself and one whose speech he was unable to control. When the voice remained silent for a time, Hawthorne learned that he must not try to force himself to write but must wait until the voice was ready. He did develop methods by which he would try to stimulate the voice, a system of working at something else, usually physical labor of some kind, or reading dull books to put himself to sleep.

Hawthorne's life during the years between his graduation from Bowdoin College and his marriage to Sophia Peabody was passed in near solitude, and it is probably to those lonely years that readers owe thanks. From this solitude Hawthorne could observe the patterns in life, an observation which went into his conception of the story as a work of art. In this same solitude he found the central subject for all his writing: the isolation

and frustration of the individual. Upon that subject Hawthorne built in time a philosophy which amounted to a system of theology. Now, one hundred years later, our contemporary writers are still pre-occupied with the inner world that Hawthorne first showed to us, but few of them thus far have written of that world in Hawthorne's bold symbols or with his sense of artistic rightness.

Subjects for Discussion:

Read several stories from Hawthorne's *A Wonder Book* and compare them with the original legends. Comment especially on the author's use of symbols to convey character and atmosphere.

The observation is often made that Hawthorne, himself, is the chief character in many of his stories. From a study of his life, show that this is true of several of his stories, for example: "Wakefield," "The Bosom Serpent," and others.

Read the study of Hawthorne written by Edgar Allen Poe and the one written by Henry James. Which, if either, coincides with your own view of his work? Illustrate your points with Hawthorne's stories.

Discuss Hawthorne's theology as he reveals it in his short stories, for instance: "Ethan Brand," "Young Goodman Brown," "The Birthmark," "Earth's Holocaust," and others.

References:

Hawthorne, by Mark Van Doren

The Portable Hawthorne, edited by Malcolm Cowley

The Shock of Recognition, by Edmund Wilson (has the Poe and James studies on Hawthorne)

A Wonder Book, by Nathaniel Hawthorne

Additional Reading:

American Renaissance, by F. O. Matthiessen

The Complete Novels and Selected Tales of Nathaniel Hawthorne, edited by N.H. Pearson

Hawthorne, by Arvin Newton

The Peabody Sisters of Salem, by Louise Hall Tharp

PROGRAM VI

EDGAR ALLAN POE

Most of us remember vividly our first encounter with the work of Edgar Allan Poe; so vividly, in fact, that we rarely recall any subsequent encounters except as they contributed to that first blood-chilling impression. We are but vaguely aware of his place in American literature and startled when we hear him referred to as an influence upon the literatures of other countries. For most of us he remains the writer whose works we found the most effective of all in those youthful days when we enjoyed frightening ourselves to death. The man himself we remember, rather indistinctly, as a strange being, at once appealing and repulsive.

Rereading in maturity any writer whose books were our companions in youth is usually an upsetting experience; there is so much we have forgotten, so much we did not even see. This is particularly true of Poe, whose stories become in many ways journeys into the world of abnormal psychology. The nature of the stories makes it difficult even now for us to maintain the detachment necessary for a fair estimate of his value. Yet Poe, despite his derangement, usually managed in his critical writings to remain detached and impersonal.

Both as critic and as writer, Poe remains one of the significant forces in American literature. His criticism is interesting and often more readable than his stories, but it is primarily with the stories that we are concerned. An excellent description of the stories is that of Joseph Wood Krutch:

. . . His best fiction falls definitely into two classes, the one consisting of tales so fantastic and so utterly irrational as to be vivid nightmares, and the other consisting of the tales called ratiocination and depending upon pure logic which might seem to be the product of a mind completely devoid of imagination in the ordinary sense.

For the first class of stories Poe owes something to the Gothic tales so popular throughout Europe in the eighteenth century, to which he added his own approach and embellishments. For the second class Poe alone is responsible, and with it he began the detective story. Before that fact we must all stand silent in awed gratitude, for, to quote Mr. Krutch once more, "Poe invented the detective story that he might not go mad," and

Howard Haycraft adds, "Men still read them for the same reason."

Subjects for Discussion:

H. E. Bates says that Poe was born at the right time; Philip Van Doren Stern disagrees. Comment on this, reconciling the two views if possible. Discuss Poe's life, pointing out relationships between the events of his life and the development of his writing.

All our contemporary stories of terror continue to show traces of the Poe influence. Show from the examples of several modern stories in this field how the writer has added to or changed the formula.

Compare the critical estimates of Poe made by James Russell Lowell, Walt Whitman and Joseph Wood Krutch.

Read and comment on Howard Haycraft's appreciation of Poe in *Murder for Pleasure*.

Compare a detective story by Poe with stories by two or three later writers, basing your comparison on Haycraft's remarks.

References:

Edgar Allan Poe, by Joseph Wood Krutch

The Modern Short Story, by H. E. Bates

Murder for Pleasure, by Howard Haycraft

The Portable Poe, edited by Philip Van Doren Stern

The Shock of Recognition, by Edmund Wilson (has Lowell and Whitman articles on Poe)

PROGRAM VII

LOCAL COLOR

As we have seen, local color has been an ingredient of American fiction from the beginning. Irving with his use of New York legend and Cooper with his Indians and scouts had begun the formal literary career of the local color tale. Hawthorne, although a more universal writer than either of them, had his roots deep in New England. The rash of literary magazines in the West which paralleled the reign of the annuals in the East had gloried in publishing localized romance. Unable to encompass the whole United States, with its polyglot and shifting population, its incredible variety of climate and terrain, most writers turned to their immediate surroundings for the materials of their craft.

The Civil War of course intensified this sectional awareness throughout the nation, and following the War the local color story became the staple of American fiction. Attempting perhaps to define his own character, the writer revelled in sectional idiosyncrasy of character and speech. The use of dialect and of local crotchets in fiction became almost mandatory.

Bret Harte was the first of the local colorists to become famous. Prolific and theatrical, Harte was a flamboyant publicist rather than an important writer, and his work is overshadowed by that of numerous successors. George W. Cable and Sarah Orne Jewett romanticized the Creole and the New England character; and among the writers of dialect stories were Joel Chandler Harris, and Thomas Nelson Page.

In time, from the local color tale developed the regional story, essentially realistic—indeed, at times almost documentary. The line marking the boundary between the local colorist and the regionalist is, like most such lines, vague. The two make use of the same materials, and the difference between them is perhaps one of aim. It may be said that the local colorist uses the materials to point out sectional differences, while the regionalist speaks beyond those differences for the universal.

Subjects for discussion:

Read several stories—enough to make you feel comfortably acquainted with the author and his locale—by one of the writers mentioned above. How does the author seem to feel about his characters (sympathetic, detached, superior, etc.)? Does he sacrifice action and

conversation to description? Does his use of dialect make reading difficult? How long does he take to get into a story? Do the characters and the setting seem real to you? In what mood does his work generally leave you? Demonstrate your points by reading passages aloud.

Some contemporary collections of regional short stories are: *Cross Creek*, by Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, *The Grass Harp*, by Truman Capote, *Men of the Mountains*, by Jesse Stuart, *Tortilla Flat*, by John Steinbeck and *Heaven Trees*, by Stark Young. Read one of these collections and discuss the book as a whole. What seems to be the author's attitude toward the characters and their way of life? Does he bring the characters to life for you? Do you find universal attitudes or feelings in the stories? Illustrate your points by reading aloud passages from the stories.

References: (please indicate your choices when sending us your program)

- Advance of the American Short Story*, by Edward J. O'Brien
- The Best Short Stories of Bret Harte*, edited by R. N. Linscott
- Children and Older People*, by Ruth Suckow
- Cross Creek*, by Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings
- The Development of the American Short Story*, by Fred Lewis Pattee
- The Grass Harp*, by Truman Capote
- Heaven Trees*, by Stark Young
- In Ole Virginia*, by Thomas Nelson Page
- Men of the Mountains*, by Jesse Stuart
- Old Creole Days*, by George W. Cable
- Tales of the Home Folks in Peace and War*, by Joel Chandler Harris
- Tortilla Flat*, by John Steinbeck
- A White Heron*, by Sarah Orne Jewett

PROGRAM VIII

MARK TWAIN AND HIS LITERARY DESCENDANTS

If one of us were asked to name the most beloved of American writers, the answer would probably come quickly: "Mark Twain." For a long while now we have loved and honored Mark Twain, and we have felt a deep kinship with him. Max Eastman's comment is worth thinking about:

It is no accident that Mark Twain and Abraham Lincoln, both men in whom humor took the place of ideological hankering—have remained in the world's eyes representative Americans. Their headstrong sensibilities, their steadfast confrontation of fact, and their adjustment through humorous emotion to the predicament in which facts steadfastly confronted place the wishful heart of man, is the keynote of our culture if we have one.

There have been almost as many theories and definitions of humor as of poetry. Fortunately both humor and poetry have survived them all pretty much uninjured. There was, of course, American humor long before Mark Twain, but in Twain the many diverse streams seemed to come together to form the mainstream, broad and deep and constant.

America has been granted many a gifted humorous writer, far too many to consider in a single chapter. We can touch on only those who seem to be in the main current, and only the most important of those. Ring Lardner was the first real artist following Twain. In his own chapter on "How to Write Short Stories" Lardner averred: ". . . you can't find no school in operation that specializes in story writing, which can make a great author out of a born druggist." Great author or not, Lardner certainly knew how to write. His stories are beautiful examples of art, the art disarmingly concealed; but his greatest gift as a writer was the shrewd and unillusioned eye with which he regarded his fellow citizens.

Today many of us find in James Thurber the qualities that were fundamental to Mark Twain and Ring Lardner. For although these three are different in approach and different in expression they share an attitude that is peculiarly American. Desmond MacCarthy, an Englishman, has described that attitude admirably:

"If we cannot get the better of life, at any rate we can be so free as to laugh at it: if we cannot help being insignificant,

we can at any rate acknowledge the fact gracefully with a joke, thereby keeping in touch with a larger sense of things . . . Humor is not a mere distraction, it is a consolation; it is a way of honestly facing facts without being overwhelmed by them."

Suggestions for Discussion:

The story of Mark Twain's early life is so well known that it is hardly necessary to discuss it here. His later years, however, were equally important to his work. Give an account of Twain's later life, including a description of his development as an artist.

Read "The Man Who Corrupted Hadleyburg," and "Captain Stormfield's Visit to Heaven." Compare with Twain's longer works. Be sure to notice the order in which the two were written.

Read Lardner's "Haircut" and Thurber's "The Day the Dam Broke." Compare with one of the two stories above, and discuss similarities and differences in writing, characterization, and point of view.

Compare a collection of Thurber stories and one of Thurber drawings. Would you guess that they were done by the same person if you did not know? Why?

References:

- The Portable Mark Twain*, edited by Bernard De Voto
- The Portable Ring Lardner*, edited by Gilbert Seldes
- The Thurber Carnival*, by James Thurber

Additional Reading:

- Turn West, Turn East*, by Henry Seidel Canby
- The World of Fiction*, by Bernard De Voto

PROGRAM IX

THE SHORT STORY TAKES FORM

Despite Poe's rules for writing the tale and the thousands of short fictions that Americans had written since the success of the *Sketch Book*, few of the pieces were short stories in the modern sense of the term. The short fictions were usually called tales or sketches, and it was not until the 'eighties that writers and readers began to recognize the short story as a distinct literary form, with potentialities and limits peculiar to itself.

Thomas Bailey Aldrich, William Dean Howells, and Brander Matthews were the first critics, after Poe, to see in the short story a literary entity. Their own stories were influential in focusing attention upon the characteristics of the form, their critical writings even more so. Manner, the way of telling the story, became all important to these men; and most of the writers of the time followed so closely the rules laid down by these critics that they wrote their stories almost mechanically.

This mechanistic method of writing was not good enough for the new group of writers which came along a few years later, in the 'nineties. James Lane Allen, Stephen Crane, Mary Wilkins Freeman, and Hamlin Garland revolted against the vogue of local color and the fashionable critical formulae, both of which they felt were too concerned with the surface of the story. These writers of the 'nineties believed with Hawthorne that fiction should concern itself with inner truth. "Beauty of style and substantiality of substance" were the criteria by which they sought to write.

Allen of Kentucky; Mrs. Freeman of Maine; Garland of the Middle West; Margaret Deland of Pennsylvania; and Grace Elizabeth King and Kate Chopin of Louisiana, all endeavored to rectify the romantic impressions of their regions left by earlier writers in the local color genre. They were the first true regionalists, seeking to reveal the universality of the inner life, whatever the setting.

Subjects for Discussion:

Read a story by Thomas Nelson Page and one by James Lane Allen. Compare the two writers from the standpoint of realism of character and scene, and of readability. Tell each story briefly in demonstrating your comparisons.

Read at least one story by George Washington Cable, Elizabeth

Grace King and Kate Chopin. Which story did you find most interesting? Why? Which seems to you most true to the life depicted by the author. What differences do you notice in the moods of the stories, the attitudes of the authors?

Read a collection of Mary E. Wilkins Freeman's stories. Give a brief discussion of the author's life and works. Tell one or two of the stories you enjoyed most.

References:

- The Advance of the American Short Story*, by Edward J. O'Brien
- American Local Color Stories*, edited by H. R. Warfel and A. J. Orians
- The Best Short Stories of Mary E. Wilkins*, edited by H. W. Lanier
- The Development of the American Short Story*, by Fred Lewis Pattee

Additional Reading:

- Flute and Violin*, by James Lane Allen
- In Ole Virginia*, by Thomas Nelson Page

PROGRAM X

O. HENRY—AND FICTION BY FORMULA

O. Henry, according to H. E. Bates, "put the short story on the map." He used no new ingredients in concocting his work, yet he caught the public fancy as has no other short story writer. And he still holds it.

F.L. Pattee has discerned four "conspicuous elements" in O. Henry's work: manner, journalistic sense, mastery of form and technique, and "verbal precision and wide range of vocabulary." Stated thus, it all sounds incredibly dull, completely unlike the work of the conjurer which O. Henry unquestionably was. It is easier for the critics to deplore a writer's popularity than to explain it, and most of their attempts at explaining the phenomenon that was O. Henry resolve themselves into scoldings of the public taste. Bates describes him as "a showman who was also a sentimentalist," and Pattee sums him up as "a harlequin Poe with modern laughter in place of gloom." To Edward O'Brien he is "this cynic with faith, this agnostic with all the theological virtues." High-sounding phrases, all of them—but do they say anything?

O. Henry could take neither art nor himself seriously. Yet his control of his craft was such that he exercised complete dominion over it; his control of himself such as to turn amiably away at the surface all prying scrutiny. A curious and fascinating man who possessed in plenty the gifts of the great artist yet insisted upon remaining the diverting entertainer, O. Henry himself occupies the imagination far longer than can even his stories.

"I picture him now," wrote O'Brien, "as an ironic shade whose last disillusionment came after death, when the audience he amused accepted his caperings as their philosophy and founded memorial hotels and prizes to commemorate the false mask which hid the real O. Henry shrinking from their gaze." For with O. Henry's success came the full awakening of the literary world to the short story form and its art, evidenced by the appearance of multitudinous handbooks on the subject and followed by an era of precision-machined short stories mass-produced according to the rules laid down in the handbooks. And within less than ten years after O. Henry's death there were established the two annual collections of prize short stories. Magazines and newspapers, by now flourishing all over, were

gobbling up short fiction pieces, crying for more and more stories "like O. Henry's." The rules were there in the handbook made up from his stories; the writers followed the rules meticulously and thereby produced thousands of slick and shiny stories. Yet somehow none of them managed to work the magic that O. Henry had. That was strange—it had looked so easy, the way he'd done it.

Subjects for Discussion:

Compare the estimates of O. Henry offered by Bates, O'Brien, and Pattee, considering them especially in the light of his own explanation of his technique as quoted by O'Brien (page 201). Illustrate the points with readings from O. Henry's stories.

Bates (pages 62-64) feels that readers have been so taken up with O. Henry's trick endings that they have overlooked his even better beginnings. Choose a volume of O. Henry stories (*The Four Million* is generally considered his best collection) and read only the opening paragraph or two of each story, noting as you read the beginnings which make you want to go back and read the rest of the story. How many did you mark; how many stories are in the volume? Which opening was the most tantalizing of all to you? Why? Read the story aloud. (You might try reading aloud only the beginnings of three or four selected stories, trying the reaction of the group as you tried your own.

References:

- The Advance of the American Short Story*, by Edward J. O'Brien
- The Development of the American Short Story*, by Fred Lewis Pattee
- The Modern Short Story*, by H. E. Bates
- A collection of O. Henry's short stories

PROGRAM XI

EDITH WHARTON, HENRY JAMES, AND F. SCOTT FITZGERALD

At the same time that the imitators of O. Henry were totally occupied with polishing the surface of the short story, Edith Wharton was continuing the Hawthorne tradition of concern for the inner life. Her work, wrote Pattee in 1923, "shines among the mass of writings . . . like a diamond in a tray of beads."

In speaking of Mrs. Wharton, mention of Henry James is inevitable. They were as master and apprentice in her youth and friends in later years. The respect and affection the two writers felt for one another are rare in the history of the arts. James's first work had appeared almost simultaneously with Hawthorne's last work: one might almost say that he had received from Hawthorne's own hands the theme of what the older writer called "the truths of the human heart." James, in turn, passed the theme on to his apprentice, Edith Wharton, who achieved greater fame as a writer during her lifetime than did her master. Even now, when James has become probably the most respected of all American writers, homage is paid him rather for his attitude towards the art of his calling than for his actual accomplishments as a writer.

Mrs. Wharton shared James's sense of the responsibility of the writer as artist and as moralist. She wrote from an acute intuition of the human heart and with clarity, simplicity, and restraint. In her last years she did produce some pot-boilers, but her best work is perhaps the best America has to offer.

A curious chain of relationships links the lives and work of these two writers with that of F. Scott Fitzgerald. Both James and Mrs. Wharton wrote primarily of Society in the eastern United States and Europe, since that was the world in which they had always lived. Fitzgerald wrote of the same world because it was the one he yearned to belong to. He never did, and that is perhaps one reason why his work, in some ways quite like that of James and Mrs. Wharton, is yet very different.

Subjects for Discussion:

Tell something of the lives and work of Henry James, Edith Wharton and F. Scott Fitzgerald, remarking upon similarities and differences.

Read two or three stories by each of the three writers. With what is each author most concerned? What is his attitude toward the people in his stories? Do the backgrounds of the writers offer any explanation for their differences in attitude? Whose characters do you feel that you know best? How would the characters of each writer fit into the worlds of the other two? Compare the conversation in the stories of the three writers: which is most natural; do the characters of any one of the three "speak the same language" as either of the others? Are you conscious of the author's presence in any of the stories? If so, which ones?

Read a ghost story by Henry James and one by Edith Wharton and compare the effects each seeks to achieve. How well does each succeed in the attempt.

Fitzgerald first won fame as the sensational portrayer of what was then called "flaming youth." Read his "Winter Dreams," and "A Woman With a Past." Has youth, as he depicts it, changed a great deal? What are the characters concerned about in these stories? What are their attitudes toward one another, toward their own lives? Do you feel that the writer is sympathetic? Does he seem to achieve a deep understanding of his characters? Consider the scenes, the atmosphere, the moods of the two stories, as well as the ways by which the author conveys them to you.

References:

- The Advance of the American Short Story*, by Edward J. O'Brien
- An Edith Wharton Treasury*, edited by Arthur Hobson Quinn
- The Modern Short Story*, by H. E. Bates
- The Portable Henry James*, edited by Morton D. Zabel
- The Stories of F. Scott Fitzgerald*, edited by Malcolm Cowley

Additional Reading:

- The Far Side of Paradise; a Biography of F. Scott Fitzgerald*, by Arthur M. Mizener
- The James Family*, by F. O. Matthiessen
- Our Short Story Writers*, by Blanche Colton Williams
- Portrait of Edith Wharton*, by Percy Lubbock
- The Short Story in America*, by Ray B. West

PROGRAM XII

SHERWOOD ANDERSON AND THE REBELS AGAINST TRADITION

In revolt against both the entertainer, as represented by O. Henry, and the tradition of the artist-moralist, as represented by James and Mrs. Wharton, came Sherwood Anderson. His aim was, according to H. E. Bates's definition, "to set down . . . life . . . as a moving, organic pattern, however stupid, colorless, designless, cruel, depraved, and ultimately frustrating it might seem to be."

Preceding Anderson and taking part in the revolt of the 'nineties encountered in Program IX, were Stephen Crane and Jack London. Crane lived for only thirty years, but his importance and influence as a writer have increased steadily in the years since his death. Like Hawthorne, Crane was a born writer, but his life was not conducive to the kind of artistic development which Hawthorne's encouraged. Crane was the first of the naturalistic writers in America.

Crane's contemporary Jack London, journalist and hugely successful writer, was the victim of his own legend. Potentially a fine artist, he dissipated his gifts by writing down to a sensation-hungry public.

Like Crane, Sherwood Anderson tried to reproduce in his writing "the natural, rhythmic flow of life." Like D. H. Lawrence and Thomas Wolfe, he was disinclined to discipline and prune his writing, and the reader frequently finds him "revelling in the luxury of emotion." For Anderson, as for Lawrence and Wolfe, form was "largely a matter of depth of feeling." But this creed too often produces in writing simply the effect of undirected emotion, grotesque, naive, and ultimately less telling than the products of the "genteel" tradition in writing against which Anderson was in revolt.

It was against this tenet of Anderson's credo as a writer that Ernest Hemingway rebelled. At first regarded as a naturalistic writer, Hemingway in time came full around and is now considered by most readers as belonging to the tradition of the artist-moralist. This same pattern of development may be traced in the work of William Faulkner, too, as well as in that of many lesser writers. Whatever his faults as a writer, Anderson's revolt

freed the creative energies and fired the imaginations of America's writers, and the twenty years which followed the publication in 1921 of *Winesburg, Ohio* were the richest in the history of American short-story writing.

Subjects for Discussion:

Read what West has to say about Crane and Anderson, and compare with the judgment of an earlier critic, such as O'Brien. Read a story by each author and tell what you consider the theme of each.

Comment on the evaluation of Hemingway as set forth by Bates and by West, illustrating your points with examples from one or more of his stories.

Read Anderson's "Death in the Woods" and Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants." Tell the stories and comment on each writer's approach to death.

Read Hemingway's "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber" and Faulkner's "The Bear." West calls these "the two finest examples of the modern short story." What is the theme of each? Does the writer succeed in communicating it to you? Contrast the settings, the characters in the two stories.

References:

- The Advance of the American Short Story*, by Edward J. O'Brien
- The Modern Short Story*, by H. E. Bates
- The Portable Faulkner*, edited by Malcolm Cowley
- Reading Modern Fiction*, by Winifred Lynskey
- Short Stories*, by Ernest Hemingway
- Winesburg, Ohio*, by Sherwood Anderson

PROGRAM XIII

THE SOUTH AND THE SHORT STORY TODAY

For many years now the South has played a major role in American fiction, especially in the production of the short story. Any list of leading contemporary short story writers is certain to be headed by the names of Katherine Anne Porter, William Faulkner, and Eudora Welty, and to include Robert Penn Warren and Peter Taylor. The tradition reaches back to Poe, but for many years after Poe it relapsed into its former anemia, showing only occasional indications of life. The vogue for local color which followed the Civil War, and which like Anderson's revolt in the nineteen-twenties released a great burst of literary creativity, brought a momentary vitality to southern literary activity. But thereafter, except for an occasional lonely figure, all was as still as before. The reawakening of the tradition in the years following the First World War seemed therefore all the more abrupt and amazing.

Wilbur Daniel Steele, like O. Henry a displaced Southerner, was one of the most successful practitioners of the formula fiction of the early twenties. But it was with James Branch Cabell, Ellen Glasgow, and William Faulkner that the so-called Southern Renaissance actually began. Although Cabell and Miss Glasgow must be considered primarily as novelists, both did write short stories capably, while Faulkner is regarded as one of the few real masters of the form. The thirties brought Erskine Caldwell, Katherine Anne Porter, Caroline Gordon, and Robert Penn Warren to the front rank of American writers, to be joined in the forties by Eudora Welty, Peter Taylor, Carson McCullers, and Truman Capote. And there have been literally dozens of other capable writers from the South, some serious artists, others successful formula-followers.

But just what is a "Southern Writer?" And what is the reason for his importance in American fiction?

Robert Penn Warren wrote in 1937 that a regional story was one having "a center of gravity in a way of life that no one could mistake." Malcolm Cowley explained that "'the legend of the South' has provided a background for a tragic concept of human life, one to which the best Southern writers have not been blind." Like most of the answers to these two questions, the statements of Warren and Cowley merely rephrase the questions.

Suggestions for Discussion:

Select one or more of the books listed below and discuss briefly the life and works of the author. Comment upon the type of stories in the collection, the skill of the writer, the seriousness of theme and purpose.

Do you feel that these stories have "a center of gravity in a way of life?" Discuss this point in regard to one or more of the stories.

What, in your opinion, are the factors in Southern history and Southern life that impel its writers to express "a tragic concept of human life?"

Define the term, "Southern Writer," and explain the South's current importance in the American literary scene.

References: (choose one or more of these)

Ballad of the Sad Café, by Carson McCullers

Best Stories, by Wilbur Daniel Steele

Circus in the Attic, by Robert Penn Warren

Complete Stories of Erskine Caldwell, by Erskine Caldwell

Flowering Judas, by Katherine Anne Porter

Portable Faulkner, edited by Malcolm Cowley

Tree of Night, by Truman Capote

Selected Stories, by Eudora Welty

Widows of Thornton, by Peter Taylor

The Modern Short Story, by H. E. Bates

PROGRAM XIV

THE PRESENT DAY

H. E. Bates has observed:

A particular artistic form does not flourish in a particular age because of a happy accident, but because certain cultural, inventive, revolutionary, or popular forces combine to stimulate the growth: so that finally, perhaps, it becomes the most necessary and natural expression of the age. This was notably true of the drama in Elizabethan times, the heroic couplet in the eighteenth century, the novel in the nineteenth century, and in a lesser but increasing way it is true of the short story today.

Certainly if quantity and variety in a literary form are indicators, then we are almost forced to accept Mr. Bates' judgment. Stories continue to pour forth in magazines, in books, in newspapers; and experimentation with the form of the short story produces a bewildering variety.

Within the past few years, too, the short story has been the subject of an almost appalling amount of critical writing. Critics compose theories about the way the short story should be written, then write stories to fit the theories. Then sometimes they reverse the process. Critics accuse the magazines of demanding that stories be written according to specifications set by the magazines rather than as the impulse of the writer indicates. We find many writers working in a variety of forms, so that few of our contemporary literary men can be tagged, Poet, Critic, Novelist, but must be considered as all of them. This, in itself, makes things rather dizzying for the reader but vastly interesting. At no time heretofore have readers been offered such a volume of literary production.

Furthermore, writers are calling upon the reader to participate in the literary process. Elizabeth Bowen has spoken for the writer on this:

For the future lies not with the artist only; the reader and the critic have a share in it. If the short story is to keep a living dignity, and is not to be side-tracked into preciousness, popular impatience on the one hand and minority fervour on the other will have to be kept in check.

The contemporary short story in itself offers material worthy of a lifetime of study. Of it Miss Bowen has observed: "The present state of the short story is, on the whole, healthy: its prospects are good."

Subjects for Discussion:

Make a study of the stories in one of our popular magazines. Let your reading cover as many stories as possible from issues spanning a period of from one to three or four years. Do you find that the stories in the magazine that you have chosen follow a "formula"? If so, did the formula change noticeably during the period covered by your study? If you were awarding a prize for the best story that appeared in the magazine during one of the years studied, to which story would you give the award? Why? Suggestions: *Atlantic Monthly*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Good Housekeeping*, *New Yorker*, *Harper's*, *Saturday Evening Post*)

Read a collection of modern short stories and discuss the collection as a whole. Do you notice any particular trend, or pattern in the collection? How do the stories reflect the atmosphere of our times? Contrast these stories, as to form, style and content with the stories in the magazine that you chose for study.

References: (choose one of these)

- The Best American Short Stories* (any recent year)
- O. Henry Memorial Award Prize Stories* (any recent year)
- Reading Modern Fiction*, by Winifred Lynskey
- Stories, British and American*, by J. B. Ludwig and W. R. Poirier
- The Modern Short Story*, by H. E. Bates
- The Short Story in America*, by Ray B. West

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| Hemingway, Ernest | <i>Short Stories.</i> 1954. (12) | Scribner | 4.75 |
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