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The contemporary American short story (a study of The Best American short stories, 1950-1959)

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THE CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN SHORT STORY

(A Study of The Best American Short Stories, 1950-1959)

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of the University of Richmond

In Candidacy

For the Degree of

Master of Arts in English

by

Gertrude Carrick Curtler

August, 1960

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PREFACE

The purpose of this paper is to analyze and review the contemporary short story by means of an intensive study of The Best American Short Stories of the past ten years. The obvious weakness of the project is that all these two hundred and forty-five short stories were selected as the best of each year by one person, Martha Foley. While she is generally respected as a critic, still her opinions are based on her own taste and judgement alone. It is possible that she leans too much toward avant-garde stories, or even that she may prefer stories of one subject over stories of another. Therefore, it must always be remembered that the original selection was hers and may not be as representative as one could wish. On the other hand, however, it seemed advisable to study a group of stories which had already been sorted and selected, rather than just read as many stories as possible by as many writers as possible.

What I have found from this study is that, although today's stories do not differ radically from yesterday's, they do exhibit certain distinctive characteristics. 1) They touch upon a wide number of subjects, some of which are peculiar to the fifties. 2) They are smooth and shining and technically tight--even when empty. 3) Subtlety is deliberately courted, and valued as highly as readability and realism. 4) A search for values, often described as one of the main currents of the fifties, is reflected in what I have termed the Comment story.

The best stories seem to be the ones of this type. Their existence plus the suitability of the medium to our fast-paced age, plus the enormous number of competent writers writing today leads me to the optimistic prognostication that the short story may eventually be considered the dominant literary form of the twentieth century.

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CHAPTER I

THE SHORT STORY AS A MEDIUM

What is a short story? This is not an easy question because the glib answers which come to mind turn out, upon examination, to be inapplicable to many of today's short stories. All that can be said with certainty is that contemporary short stories are complex, subtle, and tightly packed short pieces of prose. They cannot even be called prose fiction because sometimes they are not fiction but accounts of real happenings thinly disguised. In some there is so little discernible plot that the very word story seems a misnomer.

There are two significant differences between a short story and a tale. One is the degree of complexity. A simple narrative, a straightforward from-beginning-to-end relation of an event is a tale. A short story is more sophisticated, more studied, and more artistic. In a tale the author wants simply to tell a story and does so. But the short story writer wants to do something much more serious than just tell a story, and has decided that the story form is the best way in which to accomplish his aims. He has decided that what he wishes to communicate could not be as effectively transmitted in an essay, poem, novel, or play. Before he starts he knows what impression or what message he wishes to convey, and each paragraph, each sentence is composed with that ultimate goal in mind. The second distinction between a tale and a short story must by definition be short. This difference has been

underlined by the terms novella or novelette to describe what used to be called long short stories.

One of the most frequently offered definitions is the one arrived at in 1937 by a group of writers including Sherwood Anderson and Edward J. O'Brien (the originator of The Best American Short Stories annual, now edited by Martha Foley). This definition states only that the short story is a story which is not too long.¹ The advantage of this definition is that there is no short story which cannot be fitted into it. Its obvious disadvantage is that it is so loose that it hardly describes the short story at all.

A definition from one of Martha Foley's fiction workshops at Columbia University is equally unsatisfactory. She and her students came to the conclusion that a short story is saying: "Dear Reader, I want to tell you about some interesting people I have known; how they became what they were; what they did; what happened to them when they did it, and how they felt about what happened to them."² "How they felt about what happened to them" points up the subjectivity of many stories today. But there are also a large number of stories with a strictly objective point of view.

A much older definition, Poe's famous one, is more pertinent than either of these two comparatively recent ones.

¹ Martha Foley, ed., The Best American Short Stories 1952 (Boston, 1952), p. x.

² Ibid.

A skillful literary artist has constructed thoughts to accommodate his incidents; but having conceived, with deliberate care, a certain unique or single effect to be wrought out, he then invents such incidents--he then combines such events as may best aid him in establishing this preconceived effect. If his very initial sentence tend not to the outbringing of this effect, then he has failed in his first step. In the whole composition there should be no word written, of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one pre-established design. And by such means, with such care and skill, a picture is at length painted which leaves in the mind of him who contemplates it with a kindred art, a sense of the fullest satisfaction.³

In this definition Poe makes three points peculiarly pertinent to the contemporary short story. First, he emphasizes planning and craftsmanship. Second, he advocates what is usually summed up in the catch phrase "unity, brevity, and intensity." Third and most important, he makes the point that the reader "who contemplates it with a kindred art" [*Italics mine*] will derive "a sense of the fullest satisfaction." He seems to be implying that stupid or insensitive readers cannot understand or enjoy short stories. This is a perspicacious observation as most short stories, unlike simple, obvious tales or simple, obvious television dramas, do demand intelligence and sensitivity from their audience.

That Poe was a poet as well as a short story writer is significant, for the medium has more in common with poetry than is generally recognized. Symbolism, concrete imagery, and concentration are common to both. And, like most poetry, most short stories require a second reading. The

³"Hawthorne's Tales," The Works of Edgar Allan Poe, (New York, 1914), Vol. VII, 31.

first reading turns up little more than subject, point of view, and narrative movement. The second more careful reading reveals theme, purpose, and meaning.

Character development is not possible within the short space of the short story, but character presentation is. Only a relatively few characters or relatively few events can fit comfortably within its narrow confines. Therefore, solitary characters, single episodes, related incidents, or the events of a single day are suitable to the medium. It is also a wise choice for personal memories and intimate revelations. Wrong for episodic sagas or wide panoramic vistas, the short story is ideal for a close look at usually private, behind-the-scenes occurrences.

Except in three minor instances, today's short stories are not markedly different from yesterday's. One, terse, idiomatic dialogue is an essential ingredient. Two, there are some new subjects, subjects relating to the past decade. And three, the technical skill admired by Poe is possessed by all of today's writers.

Of these three innovations dialogue is the most conspicuous. Indeed, out of the two hundred and forty-five stories of The Best American Short Stories of the past ten years, there were only three which contained no dialogue.⁴ One of these, "Edge of Doom" by Warren Beck,

⁴"Old Century's River" by Oliver La Farge, 1951; "Edge of Doom" by Warren Beck, 1950; "Bright and Morning" by Glidden Parker, 1953.

is written in a very colloquial first person so that the whole story has the flavor of dialogue. The other two are both avant-garde stories in which the omission of dialogue seems to be a deliberate affectation. The very absence of it in these two stories emphasizes its prominence in most others.

Few stories today, however, are almost one-act plays as was Hemingway's "The Killers." That was about ninety-five per cent dialogue. Some years back there was a vogue for dialogue-saturated stories, but now dialogue is used in moderation. Depending on the type of story and on the effect desired, there is as much as seventy-five per cent dialogue or as little as ten per cent.

No, today's stories are not very different from yesterday's, but they are in general more serious. They contain little humor. Few are written for the purpose of entertainment. They are all written entertainingly--that is, in a pleasant and readable manner--but their content is not entertaining. Instead, it is usually grimly disturbing. Its implications are large. Many probe into the search for value which seems to be the principal quest of our age.

The surprise ending stories which O. Henry and De Maupassant both wrought so well have fallen into disrepute. Perhaps this is because they are practically tales. Highly diverting, their emphasis is undeniably upon plot. Sean O'Faolain labels them anecdotal and thoroughly disapproves of them.

Not until a writer has been a long time at his craft does he really harden his heart towards anecdotes. And I suspect the reason why the practised writer avoids them is a wise reason: that the anecdote is a finished thing in itself and that all that is necessary is to get it down on paper at once. This in practice is what is wrong with it. A writer's mind is so much soil; an idea is the seed; the seed grows in his mind, swells and burgeons in his imagination, excites him as it stirs there, awakens other cells that stir and dance and form strange patterns and combinations, touch the cell of memory, the cells of desire, sets us in the uncharted geography of the brain a bubbling fermentation that finally overflows as the liquor of his art. It will have to be purified and matured and go through a whole lot of other painstaking processes after that--but there it is in its primal form. But the anecdote is already finished and complete! It is generally a husk as far as its effects on the mind are concerned.⁵

As a medium the short story is wonderfully suitable to the twentieth century, and has been used to reflect its main currents and undercurrents. Its quick, sharp delivery is a sign of the frantic pace which marks the age. To get and keep the attention of his readers a writer can waste no time on preamble or explanation, cannot digress even momentarily from his subject, and must stop abruptly when its end has been accomplished. Although a second reading is usually essential for comprehension, unless a story is clear, fast, and captivating it will not win a second reading. So in this age of speed, in order to ensnare people during their short moments between appointments, the short story has to be brief and strong. Emotional impact is an essential ingredient of attention-holding.

The medium is frequently used to express the era's respect and sympathy for the individual and desire to understand the forces which made him what he is. Another facet of the age which it reflects is a

⁵ Sean O'Faolain, The Short Story (New York, 1951), p. 173.

craving for truth, an insatiable desire to know what really happened, and an accompanying impatience with the doctored-up, prettified version so often sold to the public. Our national insistence upon ease and comfort is manifested in our short stories by their pleasant smoothness of style and tightness of construction. Skilled craftsmanship has become such an important prerequisite that a rough, uneven story, no matter how deep or sincere, stands little chance today of being published.

What then is a contemporary short story? It is to be hoped that the following definition is both broad and specific enough to fit all stories. --Today's short story is a brief, intimate, and realistic examination of a character or event, which is attractively told and involves some forward movement.

CHAPTER II

SUBJECTS

In the foreword of her 1959 collection Martha Foley complains that readers, spurred on by "critics and would-be students of fiction" do not realize that stories in literary magazines should be read for enjoyment. "They must hunt for terrific profundities, hidden mysteries, symbols, Freudian and Jungian analyses, and goodness knows what not," she says. But the person who actually enjoyed the stories which she considers the best of 1959 could scarcely be considered normal.

The first story, "Jawaharlal and the Three Cadavers" by John Berry, is a study of the effect of beggars in India on a young American teacher at Bharat University. There are three in particular, "ghoulish old crones, cadavers risen from the grave," who plague him:

The first one had shoulder-length, hennaed hair, marvelously touselled, and one white eye. The other eye was so crafty that it alone marked her as the brains of the outfit. Every few minutes she wrestled with nearly fatal spasms through which God alone pulled her each time, that she might bear witness as to who were the misers in this world, and who were the meritorious.

The second Fury had two teeth and both of them were eye-teeth and both were fangs--since the rest of the mouth had retreated--which rested comfortably on each side of her chin, outside, of course. These fangs were extremely effective when she skinned her lips back, opened her mouth wide, and roared a death-rattle cough. She was cross-eyed and pock-marked, with a crew cut that signified widowhood....

The third one kept her head swathed in a gray rag. Stepping forward at dramatic moments, she snatched the rag off to show two wildly rolling eyes and a fine leprosy hole in her face where a nose had been. Her few teeth were red and black from chewing betel nut. She had a boyish bob--that is, she too was a widow, but she needed a haircut.

The young scholar's plan to reform and rehabilitate the group led by this trio boomerangs. Paying them to perform chores that do not need to be done only makes them more corrupt, more domineering, and more than ever ubiquitous.

The second story, "Winter Term" by Sallie Bingham, is about two college students hopelessly entangled in a love affair although they no longer even like one another. No escape from their predicament is suggested, and the story ends depressingly as they sneak together into the back seat of a car outside the girl's dormitory.

Finally she chose a station wagon, and he felt himself growing more excited as she climbed into the back. He followed her and she turned to him and they sank together down onto the seat. For a moment her willing softness seemed to cancel the whole tense evening. He began to unbutton her blouse, feeling her stiffen and gasp as he traced her breast. Across the quadrangle the gymnasium clock chimed. Nine o'clock. Suddenly violent, he tore her blouse open, and as she whimpered, terrified and trying to push him off, he pulled at her slip. "Stop it, Eleanor, God, stop it," he said when she tried to hold his hands, and as he dragged the straps off her shoulders she began to cry.

The third story, "Amid a Place of Stone" by Frank Butler, tells of four boys exploring a cave. The three who are friends are casually cruel to the outsider, although he is the best explorer of the group. When one of the boys loses his footing and becomes a silent and inert form at the bottom of a chasm, it is the outcast boy who volunteers to stay alone in the cave while the other two go for help. It is made very clear that he has made this courageous gesture not out of altruism, but as a desperate and probably futile effort to gain the respect of the other two boys.

The fourth story, "The Bella Lingua" by John Cheever, concerns an American woman who is as contented living in Rome as she was miserable living in her native small town in Iowa. A conspiracy between her unattractive adolescent son and her Babbit-like brother forces her to return to Iowa.

An average man, responding to an inexplicable impulse, becomes a hit-and-run killer in the fifth story, "Getaway" by Robert M. Coates. As he craftily evades and outwits nonexistent pursuers, it becomes obvious that his own terror will bring about his ultimate downfall. It does in the final sentence.

All he saw was a white fence leaping at him, and a slash of trees and branches, then he heard a splintering, and felt as well as heard the long, thumping, thundering roll to oblivion.

A middle-aged couple who retire to a small town in Arizona are forced to sell their house and flee for their lives as disaster after disaster overtakes them in the sixth story, "The Iowan's Curse" by Charles Finney. His neighbor's business becomes an obsession with a man who is definitely neurotic, if not psychotic, in the seventh story, "Mrs. Mean" by William H. Gass.

That a man who wishes to maintain his wife and children in comfortable suburbia must make humiliating compromises is illustrated in the eighth story, "A Day in the Life of the Boss" by Hugh Geeslin, Jr. Divorce is the subject of the ninth, "Love and Like" by Herbert Gold. A well-meaning husband is so depressed by the viciousness of his ex-wife and the effect

of her hatred of him upon the children that he contemplates suicide.

Number nine, "In a Tropical Minor Key" by Frank Holwerda, is a very close look at the disintegration of an alcoholic in a deserted hotel in the tropics. "The Last Mohican" by Bernard Malamud is a somewhat similar examination of a guilt-ridden Jewish scholar in Rome. One of the most respectable citizens in a small town, released from his normal repressions by a drug administered to him by his dentist, attempts to rob his bank in "A Secret Society" by Howard Nemerov. The implication, underlined by the title of this eleventh story, seems to be that there are many apparently respectable people who secretly long to commit some dramatically anti-social act.

"The Guy in Ward 4" by Leo Rosten turns the spotlight upon a psychiatrist who bullies a flier back to normality so that he can be returned to the fray. The thirteenth story, "The Conversion of the Jews" by Philip Roth, tells of a battle of wills between a small Jewish boy and his rabbi. The boy wins by threatening to jump off a roof unless the rabbi proclaims before the assembled multitude his faith in Jesus Christ.

In "A Birthday Present" by Anne Sayre a young woman unhappily in love takes a teaching job in a girls' school as a temporary measure. When she receives no present on her birthday except a handmade offering from one of her students, she decides the future holds nothing for her but the unwelcome adoration of unwanted little girls.

A writer's success and suicide is the subject of Harvey Swados' "The Man in the Toolhouse." An incestuous relationship between an elderly sister and brother is shockingly revealed in Peter Taylor's "Venus, Cupid, Polly and Time." The seventeenth story, "A Gift from the City" by John Updike, is similar to the first in theme, with the nagging beggar being an American Negro and his victim an innocent young wife from the country. "The Buck in Trotevaie's" by Thomas Williams is a childhood memory story. A wild deer is compared to the narrator's friend, a solitary old drifter who disappears immediately after the sheriff kills the deer in the local department store.

The nineteenth and final story of this collection is "The Window" by Ethel Wilson. It is about a lonely and very wealthy old man who, in the midst of his search for faith, is almost killed by a burglar.

No, the stories in the 1959 collection are definitely not entertaining. However, in all fairness to Martha Foley, it must be admitted that her foreword was written so informally that she could not have expected anyone to quarrel with her casually-tossed-off adjective. A critic with as much sensitivity and perception as Martha Foley obviously does not consider the short story mere entertainment. The point she was making was that people tend to dig deep for hidden meanings even when hidden meanings do not exist. One's understanding of people and their problems can be satisfactorily increased by these stories, she is saying; it is not necessary to excavate for messages of universal application.

Whether or not they are entertaining, they are certainly typical. All the major subjects of The Best American Short Stories of the past ten years are represented in this collection.

One writer-critic has said that today's stories, particularly those in The New Yorker, are mostly local color stories. Their subjects are "twentieth century urban and suburban culture or the romance of far places."⁶ But such subject classification is like the definition, a short story is a story which is not too long. It is too broad. And it leaves out all the stories written primarily about individuals. It also gives a false impression of paucity and narrowness, whereas actually the subjects are many and varied.

Although they are sometimes treated so differently as to be almost unrecognizable, some subjects recur quite often. Twelve have been noted. But one of these, Children, appears so frequently that it seems advisable to subdivide it further, bringing the total number of subjects up to fifteen.

- 1) Atmosphere (Ray West's "the romance of far places")
- 2) The Academic World
- 3) Personal Relationships
- 4) Children
- 5) Divorce and Children
- 6) Awakening Adolescents
- 7) Incipient Delinquency
- 8) Marital Conflict

⁶Ray B. West, The Short Story in America (Chicago, 1952), p. 120.

- 9) Character Presentation
- 10) Dramatic Incident (sometimes including what Sean O'Faolain terms anecdotes)
- 11) Grotesqueries
- 12) This Marsh World
- 13) Artists
- 14) Negroes
- 15) Loneliness

If labelling the subjects has been somewhat arbitrary, and it certainly has been, placing the individual stories into categories is even more so. For instance, should the first story of the 1959 group, "Jawaharlal and the Three Cadavers" be called an Atmosphere story? Or should it, since it is about a teacher, be filed under Academic World? Or Dramatic Incident? Or even Personal Relationships? Since the Indian background contributes the color and the plot, it is probably best to place it under atmosphere. This story illustrates the fact that few fit neatly into any one category.

1) Atmosphere

An exotic or bizarre atmosphere, as Ray West has noted, is a popular subject today. In "A Great Reckoning in a Little Room" by Geoffrey Bush in the 1954 collection it is the sixteenth century which is the atmosphere, as the story is a fictional version of Christopher Marlowe's death. The past is the atmosphere also in "The Dark Roots of the Rose" by Walter Clemons in the 1957 collection. The plot, a girl marrying her father's

killer who is later killed by her brother, is so melodramatic as to be reminiscent of many a current television script. But the plot is not of first importance. Family legend and the color and mores of Texas in the middle nineteenth century are what make the story.

Atmosphere is not always geographic, as it was in "Jawaharlal and the Three Cadavers," or one of time remoteness as it was in the two just mentioned. Sometimes it is that of a specialized clique or world-within-a-world. "The World Outside" by Howard Maier, 1950, is a good example of this type as it describes in close detail the underside of circus life. Nancy Hale's "Brahmin Beachhead," 1952, is both Character Presentation and Atmosphere, for a clear picture of Boston high society is essential to her close-up of one of its leading lights. Much the same may be said about Harvey Swados' "Joe, the Vanishing American," 1958. The story is, as the title indicates, principally about Joe; but at least a third of its effectiveness can be attributed to its automobile factory background.

2) The Academic World

A surprisingly large number of stories, like the second in the 1959 anthology, are about college or university people or concerns. "Larchmoor is Not the World" by R. V. Cassil in 1951 focuses on a non-conformist English professor in a small girls' college called Larchmoor. "To the Wilderness I Wander" by Frank Butler, 1957, is an eerie tale about a Columbia graduate student who takes a subway to meet her husband but instead arrives in Tom O'Bedlam's world of madness. "Gertrude and Sidney" by Randall Jarrell in 1954 is a satirical portrait of Gertrude, a

writer-in-residence at some nameless university, and her husband, Sidney, a professor in the English department there. "The Professor and the Poet" by Marvin Mudrick, 1955, is also a satirical portrait of an English professor in a nameless college. In this one the professor contends with a poet named Sean O'Shaughnessy who bears a striking resemblance to Dylan Thomas.

3) Personal Relationships

The second story in the 1959 collection, the one about the college students having the sordid affair, has been placed under The Academic World. It fits just as well, however, under Personal Relationships.

In "Blue Serge Suit" by John Langdon, 1957, the relationship is a touching one between a high school senior and his grandfather. Because of his father's alcoholism the boy has no blue serge suit for graduation, so his grandfather offers him the one in which he was married. It is ridiculously out of style, but because the boy respects his grandfather and does not want to hurt him he bravely wears it to the ceremony. And nobody laughs.

The bond existing between a very little girl and her old grandmother is displayed in "The Picnic" by Constance Pendergast, 1953. When a drowning occurs in the lake beside which they are picnicking, these two are excluded from all the excitement in a virtuous effort to shield them both from the ugly facts of life. Neither is fooled for an instant, and, sympathizing with one another, they feel a mutual scorn for their protectors.

"Man's Courage" by Wyatt Blassingame, 1957, is one of the most dramatic of all the Personal Relationship stories. It tells of the extended conflict between a truculent white soldier and a colored lieutenant. The Negro wins the white soldier's respect when he orders him to act as his bodyguard on the long, dark road back to the post. Knowing full well that the white man has boasted that he will kill him at the first opportunity, the colored lieutenant hands him his loaded gun and walks three paces ahead of him all the way back to camp.

4) Children

Frank Butler's "Amid a Place of Stone," the third story in the 1959 collection, is about Children and Atmosphere, the background of the cave being important to the story. A simpler and completely undiluted childhood story is "The Kingdom of Gordon" by J. Carol Goodman, 1951. It introduces a little boy who is convinced that his minister father is God. His father's turning out not to be omniscient is his first major disillusion in life.

5) Divorce and Children

"The Shorn Lamb" by Jean Stafford, 1954, is told mostly through the mother's telephone conversation which is listened to by the child. According to the mother, the father's having the little girl's hair cut was supposed to be a deliberate act of aggression against the mother.

Kressman Taylor's "Pale Green Fishes," 1954, is another one which is difficult to classify because the parental conflict contained in it

might not necessarily end in divorce. In it the boy slightly and briefly betrays his mother in order to win his father's comradeship and respect.

6) Awakening Adolescents

It takes a little squeezing to fit "A Buck in Trotevale's," the eighteenth story in the 1959 group, into this category. One which fits much more easily is "I'm Really Fine," 1952, by Stuart Schulberg. The title refers to the letter a youngster in prep school writes home to his parents concealing from them the wretchedness which sadistic older boys are causing him.

Another one which fits well is "A Week of Roses" by Donald Wesley, 1953. It concerns the innocent adoration which a young boy feels for an unmarried friend of his mother's. One night, half asleep, he stumbles into the bathroom without remembering to knock--and surprises her standing before the mirror only half clad. She recoils in horror, then darts down the hall to tell his mother. So, because of jaded and suspicious adults, what had started out innocent and sweet is turned into something tarnished and ugly.

"The First Flower" by Augusta Wallace Lyons, 1956, treats the same subject in a less startling and less original way. In the uneasy middle ground between childhood and womanhood, a young girl wonders if she can ever be attractive to men. Then, during a rather casual encounter with an older boy, he playfully pulls a flower from a nearby bush and hands it to her--which makes her realize she has no cause to fear.

7) Incipient Delinquency

The most obvious example of the use of this subject is the powerful "Cyclists' Raid" by Frank Rooney, 1952. Just as much a Dramatic Incident story, it is the account of the visitation upon a small California town of an almost lawless motorcycle club. When they finally roar away down the road, they have left behind them a ravaged town, broken store windows, broken noses and bones, and one dead girl.

The boys in the bus of "A Ride on the Short Dog" by Jane Still, 1952, might be younger brothers of the cyclists. Not wealthy enough or old enough to own vehicles of their own, they amuse themselves by harassing their fellow passengers en route from the open country to a small town. The leader, an expert in delivering rabbit punches, incites one of his two comrades into returning to him a blow which perhaps has killed him. At the end of the story, after a description of his reaction to the blow ("His arms fell, his hands crumpled. He slumped and his gullet rattled."), his two companions are remaining in the bus with his limp body while the other passengers file out.

The delinquency in Flannery O'Connor's 1955 "Circle in the Fire" is similar, an unmalicious but nevertheless very destructive mischief. In all three the act of delinquency is the result of a search for excitement. Also in all three the boys are virtually members of a gang. In Flannery O'Connor's story a boy brings two of his city companions back to the farm on which his father had worked as a hired hand. He and his friends have no plans; they just want as much free food and free lodging (in the barn)

as they can coax from the owner. But when the owner becomes frightened and orders them off, they retaliate by burning down her precious woods.

In the 1959 collection there are traces of Incipient Delinquency in "Amid a Place of Stone" and in "Venus, Cupid, Polly and Time" but no one story has that as its main theme.

8) Marital Conflict

The 1959 story on this subject is the tenth, "Love and Like." In "The Mango Tree," by Rosanne Smith Robinson, 1954, a mother unjustly accuses her daughter of looseness in order to conceal from her ex-husband her own looseness. "The Season of Divorce" by John Cheever, 1951, tells of a New York wife's lowest ebb in a small apartment with two sick children. When, at a cocktail party, she meets a man who wants her to run away with him she is tempted. But she does not run away. Instead she continues her life of quiet desperation, which hasn't changed except that the children are now no longer sick.

"In Grenoble," she said, "I wrote a long paper on Charles Stuart in French. A professor at the University of Chicago wrote me a letter. I couldn't read a French newspaper without a dictionary today, I don't have the time to follow any newspaper, and I am ashamed of my incompetence, ashamed of the way I look. Oh, I guess I love you, I do love the children, but I love myself, I love my life, it has some value and some promise for me and Trencher's roses make me feel that I'm losing this, that I'm losing my self-respect."

9) Character Presentation

Despite its Roman background, John Cheever's "Bella Lingua" is probably a story of Character Presentation more than one of Atmosphere.

Nathaniel Le Mar's "Creole Love Song," 1956, is another blend of both Character and Atmosphere. A medical school graduate returns to New Orleans full of scorn for his doctor father's unorthodox treatment of his Creole patients; soon, though, he is following in his father's footsteps and is himself giving the Creoles drugs instead of medicine and accepting their money and adulation. A graduate student at Heidelberg who is a compulsive eater is the character presented in Jean Stafford's "The Nemesis," 1951. In "Big, Black Goodman" by Richard Wright, 1958, a frighteningly enormous Negro turns out to have in his heart nothing but benevolence.

10) Dramatic Incident

Robert M. Coates' hit-and-run story is plainly one of Dramatic Incident. The ninth, "A Day in the Life of the Boss," is half that and half Character Presentation.

Mary Deasy's "The Morning Sun" from the 1953 anthology is both too, but mostly Dramatic Incident. A mother takes her large brood to a neighboring town so that they may witness a hanging and learn what happens to evil-doers. To the children's surprise, but not the mother's, the man who is hanged turns out to be their oldest brother.

A bus trip is the dramatic incident in "Inland, Western Sea" by Nathan Asch, 1951. An old lady's kindness to a destitute young mother affects the other passengers, and then at the end of the trip she dies.

In "The Waiting" by James Agee, 1958, a woman is told over the telephone that her husband has just been involved in a serious automobile

accident. As directed, she sends a man in the family, her brother, out to the scene of the accident. While waiting for his return she busies herself getting a downstairs bedroom ready for her husband's convalescence; but at the same time she admits to herself little by little that the chances of his ever occupying the bed she has prepared are very slight.

"The Iowan's Curse," the sixth in the 1959 group, can also be thrust, with just a little forcing, into the Dramatic Incident file.

11) Grotesqueries

This is a very elastic category. Into it go stories which are neither Character nor Atmosphere but a blend of both plus a strong dash of the abnormal or macabre. "Mrs. Mean," the seventh story in the 1959 collection, is a good example. "Beasts of the Wild" by Nelson Algren, 1957, is another. It is simply a graphic description of a house of prostitution, its inmates, and its madame. There is little, if any, story line.

Another Grotesquerie, "Bird Man" by David Stuart in 1955, also possesses little plot. It simply introduces to the reader a man who thinks he is a bird, and peers closely at him and at the filthy "nest" in which he lives. Of the 1959 stories Peter Taylor's "Venus, Cupid, Folly and Time" is certainly a Grotesquerie.

"The Sense That in the Scene Delights" by Benjamin Demott, 1954, concentrates on a man who has found a body in the woods, and the policemen he has summoned. The corpse is the result of a suicide, the man having attached the exhaust pipe of his car to a cardboard box into which he then put his head. The hard-boiled policemen seem to despise

the finder, insinuating that because he opened the box he is abnormal and a ghoul. An overt act of homosexuality which took place in these same woods is remembered and discussed by the policemen. On this present occasion a crowd gathers and pushes and shouts in an effort to get a glimpse of the mutilated corpse. A thoroughly unpleasant story, it is difficult to analyze; but it is most probably about the fascination of the hideous. It is also about abnormality, although the abnormality it is treating is the abnormality in all of us, that compulsion which makes us stare at the squashed animal on the highway.

12) This Harsh World

What a harsh world this is! is such an often repeated comment that it can be called a subject. "A Birthday Present," the fourteenth story in the 1959 collection, is a Harsh World story. "I Stand Here Ironing" by Tillie Olsen, 1957, is also one. A mother who is so busy that she has to do her ironing all through the visit of a social worker has found life to be very harsh indeed. She rejects the social worker's offer to help her oldest daughter with the words:

Let her be. So all that is in her will not bloom--but in how many does it? There is still enough left to live by. Only help her to believe--help make it so there is cause for her to believe--that she is more than this dress on the ironing board, helpless before the iron.

Another Harsh World story is "The First Face" by Elizabeth Enright, 1952, which tells of a mother's delight in the first appearance of her newborn baby before he is scarred and marred by life as she knows he

will be. Still another, "The Glass Wall" by Victoria Lincoln, 1950, seems to be implying that in a better world than this Cecelia Amberly and Louis Shapiro might have made an ideal couple. But because she is social register and he is Jewish, they cannot even begin to know one another.

13) Artists

"The Man in the Toolhouse," the 1959 story about the writer who enjoyed the struggle for success more than success itself, should be placed in this category. In "Around the Dear Ruin" by Gina Berriault, 1957, a dead artist's husband gains admission into artistic circles in San Francisco because of his wife. An unhappy hanger-on, he carries her ashes around with him in a tiny enameled box decorated with blue roses.

"Farewell, Sweet Love" by Priscilla Heath, 1954, is also about the death of a young artist. Specifically it is concerned with the reaction of another artist, her best friend.

The artist in "Sonny's Blues" by James Baldwin, 1958, is a colored musician and dope addict. The purpose of the story appears to be to explain the psychological factors which made him both.

14) Negroes

Except for "Big, Black Goodman" the stories about colored people are not ones of Character Presentation. For the Negroes which populate them frequently do not seem to be individuals but types; they are stock figures or representatives of their whole race. The 1959 story, "A Gift from the City," is not a good example; but "Lulu Borrow" by Thomas Mabry in 1957 is.

Lulu is a servant of the narrator's family. Her whole life seemed to be made up of scraps and remnants tossed her by the family so that the narrator is tremendously shocked when, much later, he discovers that she had a life and a son of her own.

"I Got A Friend" by Mark Van Doren, 1955, tells of the strange courtship or love battle between a Negro river boat man and a town girl. In "The Whipping" by Felix Norland, 1953, an incompetent and unreliable servant girl is whipped by newcomers. Instantly all her former employers rally round her, but she declines their offers of work airily remarking that she does not believe she will do that sort of work any more.

15) Loneliness

The most appropriate label for "The Window," the last story in the 1959 collection, is probably Loneliness. "The Need" by Robert Coates, 1953, is also about Loneliness. Almost more an informal essay than a story, "The Need" examines incidents which have lodged in the narrator's memory, and finds that they are always those which are "vaguely mournful or even a bit shameful in their connotation." What he cannot forget are the casual appeals for sympathy to which he did not respond, appeals which indubitably came from lonely people.

Two lonely people meet in Hortense Calisher's "In Greenwich There Are Many Gravelled Walks." The young man has just returned to New York after performing a periodic chore, that of putting his mother in a Connecticut sanitarium for alcoholics. And the girl has come to New York to be temporarily with her father because her mother and step-father are

away. During the meeting of these two in the apartment of the girl's father, the young artist who was living with her father commits suicide by jumping out a window.

An alcoholic mother is also responsible for much of the loneliness in John Shepley's "The Machine," 1956. Since the hero is almost in love with the machine with which he works, finding it reliable as nothing else in his life ever was, this could almost be called a Grotesquerie. It is not, because the fantasy into which the main character has drifted never completely controls him. Finally he quits his job and leaves the machine showing that his obsession was, after all, just a manifestation of his loneliness.

The subject, Social Injustice, so often selected by the writers of the thirties and forties, is no longer prevalent. There were only two, "NRCAP" by George P. Elliott, 1950, and "Take Her Up Tenderly" by Hoke Norris in the same year. But those two were so vivid and haunting, especially "NRCAP," as to give the impression that there were many more. It is significant that in both stories the social injustice alluded to is one committed by society against Negroes.

To summarize, many different subjects have been written about in The Best American Short Stories of the past ten years. These subjects are difficult to isolate and frequently overlap. They include Atmosphere, The Academic World, Personal Relationships, Children, Divorce and Children, Awakening Adolescents, Incipient Delinquency, Marital Conflict, Character Presentation, Dramatic Incident, Grotesqueries, This Harsh World, Artists,

Negroes, and Loneliness. Of these, the most frequently encountered are Children, Character Presentation, and Personal Relationships, perennial short story subjects. Those subjects which are perhaps peculiar to the 1950's are The Academic World, Divorce and Children, Incipient Delinquency, and Negroes.

CHAPTER III

UNWRITTEN LAWS AND THE MAGAZINES WHICH ENFORCE THEM

The statement is frequently made that there are no rules governing today's short stories. This is a fallacy. If it were true then why would there be so many books and how-to-do-it articles on short story writing? Why are so many colleges and universities offering short story workshops?

The truth is that contemporary stories do obey rules. Unwritten though they may be, these rules are nonetheless strict. Any story which gets or deserves publication conforms to them. Certain Do's and Don't's are tacitly understood by all writers and seldom violated.

The Don't's are few, but uncompromising. Beyond the pale are sentimentality, melodrama, the possession of a moral, and obvious or cliché situations or statements. In other words, anything false is condemned.

The Do's are three. First, a story must seem true. Second, it must be highly readable. And third, as was mentioned in Chapter I, it must contain terse, idiomatic dialogue.

Truthfulness or realism is achieved by selective imagery. In order to give the reader a sense of immediacy, the feeling that he is sharing an actual experience along with the characters in the story, concrete details are recorded. The most striking objects or smells or sounds, the ones he would have been aware of if he had been there on the scene, are mentioned. But the others, the irrelevancies and repetitions which dull

or cloud all actual events, are ruthlessly weeded out. Verisimilitude is sought through impressionism, not through a literal, lengthy listing of all that was in a room or all that transpired there.

Readability is attained by an incisive, fast-paced style which also at the same time contributes to realism. For something which is said in a simple, straightforward manner seems more true than the same thing stated in an involved, elaborate way.

Brevity is part of readability. Digressions and all forms of verbosity are never indulged in. Although a story may vary in length from three to thirty-five book pages, its prose must be a starkly naked one in which nothing is included which does not pertain to the story being told. What William Strunk, Jr., has prescribed for all writing is strictly adhered to by contemporary short story writers:

Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the writer make all his sentences short, or that he avoid all detail and treat subjects only in outline, but that every word tell.⁷

All the writing practices advocated by William Strunk, Jr., and E. B. White are emulated. Colloquialisms, metaphors, and informal transitions are freely used. Strong verbs in the active tense and unadorned nouns are used. But adjectives and adverbs are meted out sparingly so as not to weaken the effectiveness of the few which do occur.

⁷William Strunk, Jr., Elements of Style, ed. E. B. White (New York, 1959), p. ix.

Sentences of all types and lengths are employed for gracefulness and variety. But there are few complex sentences with dependent clauses modified by other dependent clauses such as one can find in Henry James. Nor are there any displays of vocabulary such as Hawthorne enjoyed. Lengthy descriptions like Hardy's are also eschewed.

Indeed there is in the style of most contemporary short stories what might be called a non-literary flavor. The statement, today's stories profess to be "the common man's picture of his times," seems a true one.⁸ Therefore, not wishing to appear pedantic or exceptional in any way, the writer is consciously trying to write simply and like the common man.

Clarity is another essential of good style. The lack of it creates a wall between the reader and the writer, and today's writers want no walls. They want to be as close as possible to their readers.

For the spirit of things is what is sought. No blur of inexactness, no cloud of vagueness is allowable in good writing; from the first seeing to the last putting down there must be steady lucidity and uncompromise of purpose.⁹

Exposition must be handled with consummate skill. As the story line moves inexorably forward, a seemingly irrelevant remark here and a bit of gratuitous information there supply the reader with all the necessary background information. Exposition which can be detected as such is the mark of the amateur and not acceptable.

⁸H. H. Bates, The Modern Short Story (Boston, 1941), p. 44.

⁹Eudora Welty, Place in Fiction (New York, 1957), p. 16.

In keeping with realism and simplicity of style, dialogue must be so artistically contrived as to seem completely uncontrived. Although never a transcript of conversation, it must sound natural, but must be pithier, sharper, and, of course, shorter than actual conversation. In a highly concentrated form it must contain the repetitions, rhythms, and slangy raciness of the uninhibited everyday talk it is professing to reproduce. "He said" and "she said" are used only when their absence would cause confusion. And "he bluntly contradicted" and "she shamefacedly and haltingly admitted" are gone with the hair sofa and the antimacassar.

If there are these rules why is it so often said that they do not exist? Probably for two reasons. One, because all that these laws are enforcing is technical smoothness. There are almost no rules about content. As we have noted in Chapter II, subjects are limitless. And two, the treatment of them is unrestricted. Stories may be told from any point of view, at any length, in any manner, so long as they are not sentimental, melodramatic, moralistic, or obvious, and so long as they contain a realistic tone, a clean, readable style, and terse, idiomatic dialogue.

Who has set these standards? The writers of how-to-do-it books and the teachers of short story courses? No, they just point them out and try to explain how they can be lived up to. It must then logically be the magazines who publish short stories who are responsible for the unwritten rules governing them.

There are three types of magazines: quality, slick, and pulp.¹⁰

Two-thirds of The Best American Short Stories were published first in little or quality magazines; the other third appeared first in slick magazines. (Three stories appeared in Eilery Queen's Mystery Magazine and two in Fantasy and Science Fiction, which may be technically pulp magazines, but let us stretch a point and call them slicks for the purpose of this paper.)

Because they pay such large fees, the slick commercial magazines have as potent an effect on stories as do the prestige quality magazines. Of course there are exceptions created by individual editors, but it is probably safe to make the broad statement that in general the slick magazines have emphasized slickness and the quality magazines have emphasized quality. Both insist on professional craftsmanship. In addition, the slick magazines usually demand an entertaining quality, and the small prestige magazines demand an artistic quality.

Twenty or thirty years ago there was a tremendous gulf between these two types of magazines. With very few exceptions the slicks published light, unrealistic happy-ending fairy tales, and the qualities published serious, realistic, artistic endeavors. That this gap is closing is evidenced by the large proportion of Best stories selected from the slick magazines in the past ten years. With the exception of The New Yorker, slicks permit exposés of the ugly facts of life more freely in their

¹⁰The adjectives refer to the paper on which the magazines are printed, but they are also applicable to the contents.

non-fiction than they do in their fiction. But, despite special taboos set up by each magazine, many honest, straightforward stories are now appearing in the slick magazines. Out of The Best American Short Stories' two hundred and forty-five, one hundred seventy-two are from little and quality magazines, and seventy-three from slick magazines.

The most stories from any one single magazine, twenty-nine, have come from the slick New Yorker. The next largest number, twenty, is from the quality Harper's. And the third largest has been drawn from another slick, Mademoiselle, with fifteen. The only other slick furnishing more than two or three is Harper's Bazaar with eight.

The Atlantic Monthly supplied twelve, Hudson Review eleven, and Epoch ten. Nine come from Kenyon Review and eight each from The Virginia Quarterly and Paris Review. Other little magazines supplying four or more are: Accent, New World Writing, Partisan Review, Sewanee Review, Furioso, Quixote, Tomorrow, Western Review, Prairie Schooner, and University of Kansas Review.

The New Yorker may have a larger influence upon the contemporary short story than even its twenty-nine contributions would indicate. For it is possible that stories appearing in many different magazines were written first for The New Yorker then, when rejected, sent to the lesser paying magazines. This may account for the almost excessive amount of sophistication and subtlety which emanates from so many stories. A delicate, thin, solutionless story, no matter what magazine it might have appeared in, is often labeled a New Yorker story.

As with all editorial rigidity, ... it (The New Yorker editorial policy) has tended to produce formula stories--brief, incisive anecdotes, fundamentally a renewal of the local color story.... Its tone is reportorial and cynical. Its appeal is, in many ways, as snobbish as that of the fashion magazines; but whereas that of the fashion magazines is slanted toward the modern woman's desire to keep up with her neighbor in literature as well as in the latest dress modes, the appeal of The New Yorker short story is to those readers whom Peter Viereck has designated "new style Babbits," psuedo-intellectuals, whose pretensions are perhaps an apotheosis of the hardness and cynicism of the 1920's.¹¹

It may well be that the stereotyping of stories is due to The New Yorker, their smoothness to all slicks, and their freshness and originality, when it occurs, to the quality and little magazines. In any case, it is plain that the magazines which publish short stories have helped create today's special brand of story, and the strong emphasis on technical proficiency is certainly due to them.

¹¹West. p. 120.

CHAPTER IV

THREE MAIN STORY TYPES

Four different types of stories have been encountered in the Best American Short Stories of the past ten years. One, of course, is the Typical story. Another is the Avant-Garde story. The third is the Slice-of-Memory story, first cousin to Chekhov's Slice-of-Life story. The fourth, the Comment story, is such an important type that it demands a chapter of its own.

1) The Typical Dramatic Incident Story

There is no such thing as a typical story any more than there is any such thing as a typical person. But "The Undertow" by Wesley Ford Davis in the 1956 collection comes about as close to being typical as any one story could.

First, its characters are children. And the situation against which they are contending has been created by their alcoholic mother. (A few years ago the short story reader met many alcoholic fathers; now he seems to be, more frequently introduced to alcoholic mothers.)

Second, the time lapse of the story is only about four hours. A short period of time and a single scene is a common device.

Third, the happenings in the story are small, but their significance is large. All that really occurs in "The Undertow" is that two little girls on a Sunday morning get up in their house on the beach, find their mother still sleeping and their father gone, make breakfast as quietly as

possible so as not to wake their mother, eat it out on the beach, and then play on the rope for riding the undertow which their father had fixed for them. About noon, when their father has still not returned and their mother has still not appeared, the older girl goes back up to the house, peeks through the window at her mother who is not yet awake, gets the key to the box which her father had told her to open if anything ever happened to him, takes food from the kitchen, and carries it back out to the beach and her little sister. Small inconsequential happenings all, but the implication is that the girls' father has killed their mother.

How is this communicated to the reader when nothing of the sort is ever stated? By innuendo and by symbolism. We get the first clue in the beginning of the story right after the older girl, Barbara Allan, has made the two children's breakfast of mayonnaise and catsup sandwiches.

Then she looked for the sharp knife to cut the sandwiches. She looked in the utensil drawer, and among the dishes and beer cans and bottles on the drainboard, and on the dining table. The sharp knife and the can opener were always getting lost.

So with a table knife she sawed the sandwiches diagonally to make small corners for Fid John to bite from.

In this excerpt we have a beautiful example of portmanteau compression, for these two paragraphs contain foreshadowing and exposition both at once and both so skillfully introduced as to be unrecognizable. As the reader enjoys the forward movement of the story and a mounting suspense, he learns without even being conscious that he is being told, that the children's parents were drinking heavily the night before and that that

is not unusual. Also, his attention is called to the knife, but in such a way as to be misleading. The reader thinks he is being told about it to point up the older girl's solicitous concern for the younger one. She "sawed diagonally to make small corners for Fid John to bite on." The word "sawed" emphasizes that missing sharp knife.

Two pages later and a knife is mentioned again, this time in the guise of description or atmospheric detail.

The pelicans wedged by above them and their big shadows swept along the beach. She thrust out her foot to meet the winging shadows.

"Hey, Fiddee, what if a shadow could slice you like a knife. People would be busy running and dodging. I guess they would have to kill all the birds."

Not only a knife, but killing, too.

This is soon followed by two versions of the story of their father killing a pelican. The first is an expurgated one which Barbara Allan tells her little sister whom she is continually protecting and shielding.

"He was sitting on the front door step up there....He was cleaning the rifle. Can you remember when he used to hunt squirrels nearly every morning at daylight in the oak woods across the river? And Mummy dear hated squirrel and every day she would say, 'I don't see why we have to eat these stinking squirrels just because you think you're Daniel Boone or Buffalo Bill. It's not as though we didn't have money and had to live off the woods.' But he wouldn't say anything. He just cleaned the squirrels and fried them, along with the steak or chops or whatever he had brought from the store."

"Did he shoot the pelican to eat?" Fid John asked.

"No. Of course not. Nobody eats pelicans....It was a kind of accident. The pelicans kept flying by in pairs. It was their mating season. And they always flew one behind the other, about two or three feet apart. He kept tracking them with the rifle, not aiming to shoot them, just tracking them for practise....You know how he is about things. How he likes

to figure things out. He talked about how fast the birds were flying and how far apart they were and his distance from them, and how by aiming at the lead bird the bullet would hit the one tailing. But then he happened to pull the trigger and the pelican fell with its wings turning like an autogyro. So he put the rifle up on the wall so high that even he couldn't reach it without standing on a chair."

Some added strokes to the growing portrait of the picture of the mother are also slipped into that account.

What really happened is that the mother, her jealousy increased by her drunkenness, goaded their father into the shooting of the pelican. She is furious because her husband won't give her the keys to the car so that she can drive into town for more liquor.

...But the screen door squeaked and turning her head quickly she saw her mother's long leg move out and the toe of her house slipper strike beneath his right shoulder. Jumping up he whirled around. His hands gripped the rifle so hard that his knuckles turned white in the sunlight. And she said, "Go ahead, shoot me. That's what tyrants do. They kill anybody that opposes them."

Barbara Allan saw her father's face go pale and then dark. She tried to call out to him but she couldn't make a sound, and she saw his mouth open and his lips move but no words came. Then he turned and walked toward the beach. He raised his eyes and Barbara Allan raised hers and watched the pair of pelicans flying southward one behind the other. And at once, with the sharp explosion of the rifle, the pelican, the one in the rear, spun toward the surf.

This incident illustrates the father's crumbling control, and the mother's devilishness while drinking. Again, a combination of exposition and foreshadowing presented as straight narrative.

Time passing, and the father still not returning, and the mother still not getting up is constantly emphasized throughout the story. And the

undertow, which is used as the title, what is its significance? It also foreshadows. It is an ever-present, potential danger. Whenever Barbara Allan has to leave her little sister, to get her water or food, she always first starts a game which will keep her away from the ocean and its dangerous undertow. Much fun can be had riding the undertow on the rope, but only when one is strong, cautious, and skilled. A comparison between the children's mother and the undertow is probably being hinted at, and the undertow may well be also a symbol.

The cat named Senator is used in much the same way. Barbara Allan calls the cat under her mother's window the last time she goes up to the house, hoping that her calling will wake her mother up. (The reader is never told why the child is so anxious for her mother to awaken gradually, but surmises that her hangovers must produce murderous rages which all the members of her family are anxious to avoid at any cost.) Barbara Allan does not expect the cat to come in answer to her calling because the cat has not been around for a week. Like her father, the cat is gone and no one knows where. Her father is expected back any moment; so was the cat, but so far the cat has not yet returned.

The final description of the sleeping mother reveals nothing exceptional. Her body does not seem unusually rigid, and Barbara Allan does not remark that it is still in the identical position as when she first peeked in. There is no mark on her, and no blood anywhere. It is just that she does not get up. The thought that she is dead is never voiced in so many words by Barbara Allan, but it is plainly what she fears.

She started toward the bedroom but her steps grew shorter and slower. Her thoughts grew solid in her throat and made it hard to breathe. What if she should reach down and shake her shoulder and still she --

She turned away quickly, trying to push her mind backward to undo the thought.

The last paragraph, in which Barbara Allan is getting food from the kitchen to take down to the beach as lunch, contains two sentences about the missing knife. Once again, though, the mention is elaborately off-hand.

...She rummaged through the drawers and among the litter of dishes and cans, looking for the sharp knife. It looked as if it was lost for good this time.

In that same paragraph the sand is described as bleak and her footing on the boardwalk as treacherous.

Edgar Allan Poe would have approved of this story, for undeniably every last word was chosen with the ultimate effect in mind. But it is much more subtle than anything he ever concocted. In fact, subtlety is an integral part of it and creates the impression of a surprise ending. At first the reader is startled to find the story is over without anything having happened when he had been led all along to believe that something was going to happen. But then, with a sudden sense of shock, he remembers that sharp kitchen knife and he knows what must have happened.

The inconclusiveness of the ending is typical, although here it is somewhat exaggerated. For this story stops before Barbara Allan gets to her little sister or even sees her over the dunes. The last sentence,

explaining her hurry to get the food for lunch packed into a paper bag, is "By now Sleeping Beauty would surely be restless." Remembering the title, and the ominous undertones and overtones on every page, the reader worries lest she disobediently ran off to play in the undertow. Whether or not she did is never told.

The neat use of flashbacks is typical. Neither the mother nor the father ever appear in the forward-moving action but we have scenes of theirs in Barbara Allan's thoughts. The off-stage violence is typical, too. Prudery or a false sense of delicacy keep nothing from today's short stories, but the facts of life tend to be suggested rather than poked under the nose of the reader. Horrible things are usually presented by characters' reactions to them rather than by direct, lurid description.

The symbolism in this story is atypical in that there is so much of it. Most writers use it as a part of their shorthand technique, but they don't use more than one or two symbols in one story. Symbolism is irresistible because it has a double usefulness. Because of its connotations it aids in creating a desired impression; because of its pictorial immediacy it substitutes for long periods of exposition or explanation.

Speaking of symbolism in plays, particularly in his own Camino Real, Tennessee Williams says:

...I hate writing that is a parade of images for the sake of images; I hate it so much that I close a book in disgust when it keeps on saying one thing is like another; I even get disgusted with poems that make nothing but comparisons between one thing and another. But I repeat that symbols, when used respectfully, are the purest language.... Sometimes it would take page after tedious page of exposition to put across an idea that can be said with an object or a gesture on the lighted stage.

To take one case in point: the battered portmanteau of Jacques Casanova is hurled from the balcony of a luxury hotel when his remittance check fails to come through. While the portmanteau is still in the air, he shouts, "Careful, I have --" and when it has crashed to the street he continues "fragile--mementoes..." I suppose that is a symbol, at least it is an object used to express as directly and vividly as possible certain things which could be said in pages of dull talk.¹²

Being typical, "The Undertow" naturally conforms to the unwritten laws. Its concrete, selective details--the knife, the mayonnaise, the catsup--supply its realism. From beginning to end it is alive, vivid, true. Readability? Yes, certainly. The style is simple, natural, and unobtrusive; and its description, scattered throughout, is sharp and clear.

On the narrow boardwalk that bridged the sand dunes, through the palmettos and cactus and century plants, they slowed down. The walk was narrow and old and rickety.

Here are two sentences of description containing only three adjectives, "narrow" being used twice. The nouns, "sand dunes," "palmettos," "cactus," and "century plant" stand alone unlimited and uncluttered by any modifying adjective. Clean, visual, vivid writing.

Terse, idiomatic dialogue abounds. It not only reproduces the speech of the children, and thus helps to characterize each, but also adds to the realism, and pleasantly increases the pace at which the story moves.

"If Mama wakes up before Daddy gets back we won't get to play on the rope."

Barbara Allan turned toward the house--just the upper half of the screened front porch was visible above the dunes and

¹²Tennessee Williams, Camino Real (Norfolk, Conn., 1953), p. x.

cactus and palmettos. A mocking bird hopped on the ridge of the roof, but there was no other movement.

"Don't worry. She didn't get to sleep until nearly daylight."

"How do you know? Did you stay awake all night?"

She thought of the beer cans, thirteen of them, and the sherry jug in the waste basket. "I just know. It's Sunday morning, ain't it?"

"Tell me a story," Fid John said, "to help the time pass."

"I'll tell you a true story."

"No. True stories don't have faizies and witches and giants in them."

"I don't care. You're getting old enough to take an interest in true stories. I'll tell you the story of that pelican you're sitting on."

Fid John swung her feet around and shifted her seat on the sand.

"What pelican? How could I be sitting on any pelican? You said this was going to be a true story."

"That's what I said and that's what I meant. That's right where Daddy buried it."

This passage of dialogue is typical too in the way it is interspersed with sentences of description or action which substitute for "she said." Even though just two people are talking, and, therefore, of course, taking turns, such sentences brighten and break large hunks of dialogue and keep a short story from looking and seeming too much like a play. -- Out of ten speeches here, there is only one "Fid John said."

2) The Avant-Garde Story

The Avant-Garde story has all the essentials of the Typical Dramatic Incident story. It too is subtle and shows rather than tells. It too uses symbols and innuendo to imply more than is indicated within the bounds of the story itself. And it too, of course, is concise, realistic, and contains terse, idiomatic dialogue.

The difference is one of degree. The subtleties in the Avant-Garde story are much more extreme. And the symbols or allusions are apt to be much more obscure. It verges upon allegory, or is actually allegory. Its implications are profound and deep and all-important.

It may be that the Avant-Garde story has a snob appeal. The editors who accept these stories (and they are never the editors of slick magazines) may feel pride in that they could appreciate them. For, like some esoteric modern poems, these stories are aimed at the discriminating and cognoscenti few. Only intellectuals or professional scholars can be expected to ferret out their hidden meanings and erudite references.

Avant-Garde writers may be sincere; many editors apparently think that they are. It is equally possible, however, that they are literary exhibitionists. They are not eager to tell a story; they seem to think that anyone can do that. Instead, they wish to display a mystery which the average reader is too stupid to ever solve.

"A Heart of Furious Fancies" by Winona McClintic, 1957, is a typical Avant-Garde story. It too has a small time span, about three hours. And its actual action is unspectacular, even commonplace. A university graduate student leaves her rented room, walks down the street past the neighborhood children to the university, attends a lecture, tries to make an appointment to take her Master's oral examination the following term but is told to come back at one. So she eats lunch, returns, and has a rather unsatisfactory interview with the acting head of the English department, walks back down the street passing a cat this time, and returns to her room.

But the implications? The story's unexplained references and surrealistic touches seem to imply that the graduate student is mad. She feels, possibly as a result of overwork, that the world has been constructed just for her alone and that, as soon as she has gone by, the temporary sets are pulled down and new ones erected. This is indicated in the very first paragraph.

It was time to go to the Old Norse class at the University. I went to the campus very often in those days when I was adjusted to the great conspiracy. I was as contented with life as a reasonable person could expect to be. I had to read books on which the ink was not dry, and suffer similar annoyances, but I was kept going by my knowledge of the secret gesture.

I went downstairs and out of the house, building my singular defences which would not outlive the day. I passed the house where the two little children lived.

"Here comes The Lady," they screamed, dropping the wagon and running out to the street to watch me go. It was amazing that such little children could be taught to act so convincingly. I wished that The Director would teach them new lines. They said the same thing every day.

The great conspiracy? The secret gesture? Singular defences? The Director? What is all this? One is never told. However, on the second page the statement is made that the graduate student does not take notes because "That way madness lies." Is that not the answer then? Surely she must be mad.

The story is told in a laconic, reportorial style but what is related is impossible and macabre.

Beside the gate a man looked at me intently, making sure, before pointing a finger at me. The nail was black and broken at the tip.

"J'accuse," he whispered, showing yellow teeth as he smiled.
"J'accuse you!"

I backed away from him. They laughed behind the buildings. A trained dog was sitting on the curb, playing dumb. Now, he walked over to me and tried to repeat what the man had said, but he could not pronounce the French. This was ghastly beyond belief.

"Ha ha," the Director was saying to his assistants, "that gave Her a turn!"

The subtlety in this story is so heavy that it prohibits understanding. In fact, one suspects that its author is not anxious to communicate anything to the average reader. Instead, it may well be that his only desire is to evoke admiration for the cleverness which has fabricated such insoluble subtlety.

The last two paragraphs of "A Heart of Furious Fancies" are:

Standing before the window which framed the hills, I performed the secret gesture which destroyed the actors, the life behind the scenery, and the ill-made props which had made my days a burden to me.

Now there was no one in the world but The Lady, solitary in the sky, grass, and sea beyond the collapsing town. At last the voices had died away into the silence, whereof I am commander.

The only thing crystal clear about this story is that it is not meant to be taken literally. But how is it meant to be taken? What does it say? Why was it written? The only person who can answer these questions is the author, Winona McClintic, and she has deliberately left them unanswered. Being enigmatic makes a writer seem immensely wise. To some readers it also makes her seem disagreeably supercilious. The autobiographical note about Winona McClintic states that a number of her stories "regrettably remain so far unsold." Some readers might quarrel with that adverb.

3) Slice of Memory

The Slice of Memory story needs little explanation. It is just what its label implies, it is a segment of life somewhat refined, polished and condensed, but not changed. Its having happened some time ago makes it not duller and cloudier but sharper and clearer than if it had occurred yesterday. It is not overly subtle. Indeed, it is the sort of story in which it is ridiculous to search for Freudian or Jungian implications.

"The Unborn Ghosts" by Nancy Cardozo, 1952, is a good example of the species. Like O'Neill's familiar Ah, Wilderness, the action is that of a family celebrating the Fourth of July. The Piersons, Clare and Alan and their children Linda and Davy, summered in 1938 in a rented house two hours from the city. Their holiday guests were Alan's sister, Barbara, and her daughter, Gaby; "Uncle Adrian," who was nobody's uncle but the junior partner in Alan's law firm; the Macys, summer neighbors, and their nine-year-old son Ed; and "of course, Alan's mother, who was deaf and carried her hearing instrument from breakfast table to beach and all around the house."

What gives the story its poignancy is the knowledge that all the actors on that stage, the rented house near the beach, are changed or no longer living. This faintly-sad, lost-forever mood is established in the first paragraph. Its fourth and fifth sentences are:

...Sometimes, years later, when other silences with the uneasy ghosts time had evoked shook her in the dark, Clare would remember those summer nights that had been haunted only by the voices of insects, small, yet interminable as life itself; and

she would listen for the children to call, forgetting that Linda was grown up, living on the West Coast with children of her own, and that Davy, whose plane had gone down off Pusan, could never call her now. And she would reach out and touch Alan's impassive back and lie awake for a long time, trying to recall whether the road in front of a house they had stayed in, all of them, one summer in the thirties had been paved.

The title, "The Unborn Ghosts," is most appropriate, and is emphasized by a bit of dialogue early in the story.

"But I could have sworn I heard a bell," said Barbara. "I guess I'm hearing things."

"Maybe the place is haunted," said Irene Macy.

"It's not old enough....Thirty years is all, I'd say. No real class."

"Poor house," said Clare. "Its ghosts are still being born."

These are the ghosts which are being born, the Piersons and their guests and the children who celebrate a very hot Fourth together in 1938.

Nothing happens. There is no tension, either above the surface or beneath. There are no personality conflicts, no dramatic scenes. It does not even rain. It is just hot and everyone sits out on the porch waiting for it to get dark enough for the fireworks. (The time lapse again is short, about five hours.) The adults are drinking and talking in a desultory way. The children are in the way, but will not go away for fear of missing the fireworks. Clare sends them all off to pick mint for iced tea. Barbara, Alan's sister and the divorced mother of Gaby, finally gets the phone call for which she has been listening all day and leaves before dinner. The others eat a cold supper in the dining

room, and then move out on the lawn to watch Alan set off the fireworks. When no more are left, the Macys leave for their nearby cottage, and Alan and his junior law partner and his son get in the car "to drive down along the shore to see if anything might still be going on."

That is all. Nothing more happens. The story ends with Clare sitting alone on the front lawn waiting for her husband, son, and guest to return.

...Nothing disturbed the night. There were the Pleiades up in the sky, and the Big Dipper, balanced above the points of the pines. Below, on the lawn, around the deserted chairs, a mist had gathered, like a trace of garments, the wraiths of all of them, spellbound still. It was impossible to believe that anything could change, that summers would not always be the same, that anyone would grow old, or go away, or die. (In those days, no one believed the world could possibly end.)

She waited, half asleep, for Alan and Adrian and Davy to come home. Not that she thought anything could happen to them, but it was pleasant to wait, with the sound of insects weaving a web of comfort over the night. Once, from the shadows of the trees, an animal cried out as if in pain. Or it might have been a bird. Then the katydids resumed their shimmering argument: she did, she didn't, she did, she didn't, she did.

There are more of these three types than there are of the Comment stories. The reason may be that the Comment stories sometimes come dangerously close to breaking one of the unwritten laws, something which most writers would never want to do. What the Typical Story, the Avant-Garde story and the Slice of Memory story have in common are the three required ingredients--realism, readability, and accurate-sounding dialogue. Some, particularly those in the Avant-Garde class, raise many questions and answer none. Some are disturbing rather than satisfying.

But all are bright, neatly-constructed, and well-written. And all contain a degree of subtlety; they do not tell so much as they suggest.

CHAPTER V

THE COMMENT STORY

A surprising type of story was noted by Martha Foley in her 1951 collection. As she found then, it is one which is difficult to label. If it were not that didacticism is so abhorrent to current writers and editors it might be called didactic. Martha Foley considered calling its quality "a trend toward Victorianism," but rejected that because of "the semantic overtones of prudishness and censorship" in the word "Victorian."

She says:

I hesitated a long time before being bold enough to mention the trend....Then the fiction editor of one of the better magazines and a book publisher told me they too had been noticing it. The editor said the publisher of her magazine was astounded by three recent short stories she had accepted. "Why, these are--are corny!" the publisher exclaimed. "They're full of the old-fashioned virtues!" "But that's the way writers are writing now," the editor had had to explain. "Most of the really fine ones."

What seemed old-fashioned to that magazine publisher is brand-new to writers in quest of a different pattern for life and literature. The pendulum is swinging in the other direction again.

In his Nobel Award Acceptance Speech in Stockholm in 1950 William Faulkner said that these same verities and "the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself" were the only subjects worth writing about. And he listed the verities as "love and honor and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice." He also expresses his own faith in man.

...He is immortal not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance. The poet's, the writer's duty is to write about these things. It is his privilege to help man endure by lifting his heart, by reminding him of the courage and honor and hope and pride and compassion and pity and sacrifice which have been the glory of his past. The poet's voice need not merely be the record of man, it can be one of the props, the pillars to help him endure and prevail.¹³

Whether or not didacticism has a place in literature is a never-ending debate. Shaw staunchly maintained that it does, and he used his Pygmalion to prove his point.

...I wish to boast that Pygmalion has been an extremely successful play all over Europe and North America as well as at home. It is so intensely and deliberately didactic, and its subject is esteemed so dry, that I delight in throwing it at the heads of the wiseacres who repeat the parrot cry that art should never be didactic. It goes to prove my contention that art should never be anything else.¹⁴

Most critics, however, feel that the popularity of Pygmalion proved only-- if that needed proving--that Shaw's ability to make his characters come alive and shoot off sparks when they clashed could surmount even the handicap of a didactic theme.

Arthur Miller has stated the contemporary feeling against didacticism:

...The whole aim of shaping a dramatic work on strict lines which will elicit a distinct meaning is now suspect. "Life" is now more complicated than such a mechanical contrasting

¹³ William Faulkner, "Nobel Prize Address," The Faulkner Reader (New York, 1954), p. 3.

¹⁴ George Bernard Shaw, Pygmalion (New York, 1912), p. 112.

of forces can hope to reflect. Instead the aim is a "poetic" drama, preferably one whose ultimate thought or meaning is elusive, a drama which appears not to have been composed or constructed, but which somehow comes to life on stage and then flickers away....It is believed that any attempt to prove something in a play is somehow unfair and certainly inartistic, if not gauche, more particularly if what is proved happens to be in any overt way of social moment.¹⁵

Inevitably we come to a discussion of terms. Do we mean by didacticism teaching and preaching? Or do we mean containing a comment, usually an ethical one? Teaching is usually understood by didacticism, so comment is a better term when applied to contemporary stories.

People in general seem to want more than vivid and realistic scenes. But what does it mean? they ask about a story. And they want an answer. They do not wish to be told that they are not sensitive or intellectual enough to ever understand. Nor do they wish to be told that it means whatever they want it to mean. Serious readers, oppressed by the problems of our times, want to have the eternal verities reaffirmed. And that is why they become irked by writers who will not condescend to explain what they are writing about. Are not such writers, as Eudora Welty seems to feel, shirking their responsibilities?

"How can I say what this is all about?" he (the writer) seems to be remarking as he passes through. "I just write here."¹⁶

¹⁵ Arthur Miller, Collected Plays with an Introduction (New York, 1957), p. 32.

¹⁶ Welty, p. 23.

Like our most vital and serious playwrights, the writers of Comment stories are anxious to communicate. They have learned something through their own experiences, and they want passionately to share with others what they have gained. Tennessee Williams, explaining his own aims in his preface to Cat On A Hot Tin Roof, may also be expressing the goals of many short story writers.

...I still don't want to talk to people about the surface aspect of their lives, the sort of thing that acquaintances laugh and chat about on ordinary social occasions. I feel they get plenty of that, and heaven knows so do I, before and after the little intervals of time in which I have their attention and say what I have to say to them....I want to go on talking to you as freely and intimately about what we live and die for as if I knew you better than anyone else that you know.¹⁷

The common man, the favorite subject of contemporary playwrights, is also a first concern of Comment short story writers. This is not to say that the Comment stories believe in progress and in the essential goodness of man. They are too realistic for rosy optimism. But almost all do have a respect for man and a faith in his worth. He may be confused and lost, and may be so through no faults but his own, but they seem to be saying that, even so, he is worthy of understanding and sympathy.

Faith in man is what draws people to all literature, according to David Daiches. He says that all of us who are interested in fiction "are committed to some kind of humanism and some belief in the value of man's experience."

¹⁷Tennessee Williams, Cat On A Hot Tin Roof (New York, 1955), p. x.

...We believe man, as a 'doing or suffering' creature is interesting, is worth contemplating and trying to understand, and that his experience is significant for us because it is his experience and for no other reason....All his experience is potentially our experience, and that makes tragedy possible; it is also potentially your neighbor's experience, and that makes comedy possible.¹⁸

The reason "Victorian" was rejected by Martha Foley and "didactic" has been rejected in this paper is that both are too blatant. And the Comment stories, like all stories today, are subtle. They do not argue and expound; they merely present the situation and allow the reader to draw his own conclusions. But what is included in the story and what has been left out has been carefully selected with the hope that the reader will end up agreeing with the author's unexpressed opinion. Or, if not that, at least the reader will be forced to think for himself.

Also like all other contemporary stories, the Comment story is artistic. Therefore, its comment cannot be conspicuous. As Shaw has demonstrated in Pymalion, a message is possible only when everything else is so well done that the message seems superfluous.

The difference between the Slice of Memory story and the Comment story is that the Slice story is saying, "This is the way it was, exactly like this." And the Comment story is saying, "You must understand that it was this way so that you will feel about it as I feel about it."

¹⁸ David Daiches, A Study of Literature for Readers and Critics (Ithaca, New York, 1948), p. 229.

An example of an effective Comment story is "NRACP" by George P. Elliott in the 1950 collection. In it a comment is never made--except afterwards by the reader. The letters mean National Relocation Authority: Colored Persons, the government agency handling what might be termed our solution of the race problem. The story is told through letters from an intelligent and sensitive young man named Andy who has taken a high-salaried job in the Public Relations department of the government's brand new reservation for colored people. One reason for the high salary is that the reservation, on the edge of which the government employees live, is remote from civilization and the employees have no contact with the outside world except through letters. The first letters reflect his boredom--the government workers have arrived before the inhabitants of the reservation--tell of his low opinion of his co-workers and of the enormous amount of detective stories read by all. Later letters tell of his long walks within limits (the area is heavily guarded) and of his growing interest in a secretary named Ruth. Ruth's philosophy which he terms "the post-Christian golden rule" is: "There are those who get it, and those who dish it out; I intend to be on the side of the dishers."

After the walks and Ruth and the beginning of his paper work, he is less bored and even finds things to like in his new life. Particularly he enjoys the food, the fresh vegetables and the generous supply of steaks, roasts and chops, so much better than the usual run of institution food.

Andy's letters describe the details of his job which is not publicity at all, but censoring the letters the colored people send out. He doctors

or completely rewrites them "to prevent any leaking out of adverse reports on conditions in the CPR."

...Any outsider Negro who writes too many insistent letters will be, at our request, relocated within a month; we do not want any unnecessary unhappiness to result from the necessarily painful program. Friends and relatives are to be reunited as fast as possible. Whole communities are to be relocated together, to avoid whatever wrenches in personal relationships we can avoid.

By "relocated" he means taken by force and thrust into the reservation. The scheme of the NRACP is never fully explained, but the remark is made that the government employees' window washer is considered superior to "the most important Negro in the Reserve, the President of it."

Little by little Andy does learn more about what goes on on the other side of the high walls of the Reserve. He sees things and he hears things and he guesses things. He discovers that his own letters, the censor's letters, are being censored; so his last letters all contain postscripts written in invisible ink. He marries Ruth, and learns that she is pregnant just a few days before he discovers there is no overpopulation problem within the Reserve because it is the Negroes themselves who are the steaks, chops and roasts served to the government workers.

Most of the Comment stories are not as shocking or as tricky as this one. But most do, as this does, force upon the reader some ethical judgment. They all seem to be written from a deep conviction, a belief or a faith in something. Or they are written in protest against an individual or social wrong. Their purpose is not just to tell a story, although they

all do that excellently, but rather they are trying to coax the reader into feeling as they do.

James Agee's "Mother's Tale," 1953, is a fable. It is the legend a mother cow tells her two calves as the three stand on a small hill and watch the round-up in the valley below. In answer to their questions, she says that she does not know where all those jostling, bellowing steers are being taken and what will happen to them after they get there. No cow does know, she explains, because, once the steers are gone, they never come back. However, she has heard a story about what happens, pure legend probably, which was told her by her mother who heard it from her mother. One steer once was supposed to have come back. He was horribly maimed and half crazy from pain so that the others were not even sure he was the one he claimed to be. Dramatically and emotionally he shouted to them that all the steers who allowed themselves to be herded onto the trains were later unloaded and then murdered. But no one would believe such a story; it was too horrible. Both the Jewish extermination camps and Christ's unbelieved preachings come to mind as one reads this story.

In his "Other Foot," 1952, Ray Bradbury is also saying something about the Negro problem. But instead of ending as does George P. Elliott's "NRACP" in crushing depression, his ends on a high, sweet note of optimism. Set in 1985, it is about the contented and well-adjusted colored people who have been living alone on Mars for the past twenty years. The details revealed by the dialogue convince the reader that he is reading a true story, not a science fiction yard.

Once again the action of the story takes only a few hours, and is centered around the arrival from earth of a space ship. Crowds gather around it, the children very excited because never before in their whole lives have they seen a white man. The man who steps out of the rocket is very old and very tired. He tells them that the third war has come and gone and that nothing is now left on earth.

"We've been fools," said the old man, quietly. "We've brought the Earth and civilization down about our heads. None of the cities are worth saving, they'll be radio-active for a century. Earth is over and done with. Its age is through. You have rockets here which you haven't tried to use to return to Earth in twenty years. Now I've come to ask you to use them. To come to Earth, to pick up the survivors and bring them back to Mars. To help us go on at this time. We've been stupid. Before God we admit our stupidity and our evilness. All the Chinese and the Indians and the Russians and the British and the Americans. We're asking to be taken in. Your Martian soil has lain fallow for numberless centuries; there's room for everyone; it's good soil, I've seen your fields from above. We'll come and work the soil with you." He paused. "We'll come and work it for you...."

But before the rocket landed the colored people, led by Willie Johnson, had been dashing around their city roping off the rears of busses and of theatres and putting up signs, FOR WHITES: REAR SECTION and LIMITED CLIENTELE: Right to serve customers revoked at any time. They reminded each other of the lynchings of their parents and of all the abuses they themselves had suffered, and hate and a desire for revenge burned bright.

Willie Johnson's wife, Hattie, does all she can to soften Willie and to turn him from his avowed course. Not until after the white man's speech and after her questions have revealed that nothing is left of their own

former town, does she have any influence on him. At last, though, he as the leader and spokesman of all the others answers the white man's suggestion that the white man will clean the houses of the colored people, shine their shoes, and sit in the back rows of their theatres.

"You won't have to do that," said Willie Johnson...."The Lord's let us come through, a few here and a few there. And what happens next is up to all of us. The time for being fools is over. We got to be something else except fools. I knew that when he talked. I knew then that now the white man's as lonely as we've always been. He's got no home now, just like we didn't have one for so long. Now everything's even. We can start all over again, on the same level."

"Run, Run Away, Brother" by John Campbell Smith in 1957 is a long look at the guilt a man feels because years ago he rejected his fat, clumsy little brother. Instead of defending him, he took the easier and pleasanter way and joined the other children in excluding him from all their games and projects. This long-ago rejection, he has come to feel, was responsible for his brother's maladjustment to life and even too for his early death.

In this one too the comment is buried; each reader must dig it out for himself. But something more than just "Children are cruel" has been said, something thought-provoking and wise. Referring back to Faulkner's statement, the writer here has done more than just record. A case has been made for kindness, and for compassion toward one's fellow man.

Herbert Gold's "Love and Like" in the 1959 selection also does more than merely present the heartbreaking shambles created by divorce. This

is done brilliantly. The confusion of the divorce's victims, one girl six and the other three, is sharply drawn.

"So you really don't love Mommy any more." ...He resolved to go through it patiently once more. "No," he said, "and she doesn't love me. But we like each other, and we love and like you, both together, and we always will. You understand that, Cynthia?"

"Okay," said Cynthia.

Paula was sucking her thumb again. Her mouth was pulled around, working and bothering, as if she were trying to pull the skin off. She might be learning to bite the nail.

...He began to say goodbye to his daughters. He reminded them that he would come to see them at noon tomorrow. Cynthia threw her arms around his neck, laughing, and demanded: "Bring me something, maybe a surprise!"

"If you like," he said. He had a sick lonely weakness in his stomach of something not yet done, not possible.

"Do you like me, Daddy?"

"I like you and love you, Cynthia kid."

Paula was rubbing her face against his hand, the thumb still in her mouth. He lifted her to kiss her, saying, "And Paula too. Now goodbye until tomorrow."

As he started down the stairs, Paula stood with her swollen thumb dripping and shouted after him: "Oh how I'm sick of those words love and like!"

What is Herbert Gold saying in this story? Nothing outright, but he is hinting obliquely at a great deal. (It is possible that the writers themselves could not coherently state the comments they are making; if they could, they might have written them as essays, not stories.) He is saying something about the terrible destructiveness of a broken marriage in which there are children, and a great deal too about man-woman relationships. He may be implying that in an ideal marriage the partners both love and like each other.

Because their implications reach so far beyond the limits of the stories themselves, the Comment stories are fascinating. What Tennessee Williams wants to do in his plays they do--they speak very personally to the reader about "what we live and die for."

CHAPTER VI

EVALUATION

The stress on realism in today's stories has motivated the remark that they are not fiction but just bits of reportage. They exhibit keen observation but not inventiveness, it is said. Short story writers are skilled reporters, nothing more.

There may be a kernel of truth in that criticism. Contemporary writers do worship realism. And in the Best American Short Stories of the past ten years there have been very few fantasies. Whether this means that writers are not writing them or that editors are not accepting them, it is impossible to say. In any case, the only outlets for fantasy seem to be the science fiction magazines which value imagination and inventiveness above all else including writing ability. (No aspersions should be cast on them, however, as they have accepted many Ray Bradbury and Shirley Jackson stories.)

Today's writers are also said to be conformists. It is claimed that they do not experiment:

...another limitation...might be an unwillingness on the part of our younger writers to break through the established forms, to find their own special subject matter and their own special techniques. In the case of Eudora Welty, J. F. Powers, Peter Taylor, and Walter Van Tilburg Clark this limitation may well be said to reside in the fact that their best stories seem rather a continuance of the excellence of their predecessors (an attempt to master existing techniques) than it is a rebellion against them. It is almost as if the present generation were overawed by the examples already before it, stimulated but also frustrated by them.

As we have seen in the instance of William Saroyan, however, it is not enough to find an original mode of expression. Novelty is valueless unless it succeeds in producing new insights into the complexities of experience and developing new processes for objectification--the artistic display of these truths which all important literature provides. By this I do not mean self-conscious avant-gardism but rather the often subtle differences which separate and lend individuality to all important people--the subtle manner in which Melville differs from Hawthorne, for instance, or Henry James from either of them.¹⁸

That it would be almost impossible to identify a passage of writing by one of today's leading short story writers is true. They all do write alike. Of all the story segments in this paper the only one that stands out from the others is Nancy Cardoza's first on pages 47 and 48. Her second, her dialogue, sounds like the dialogue of any top writer. But the first is a little different because her sentences are longer than most.

The unwritten rules have created a bright, smooth story which bears the curse of all mass-produced objects. It is good but it is not unique. What we have now is an astonishing number of competent, sophisticated stories of a certain, flat sameness.

In forms there is no appreciable experimentation. And in content or ideology there is no revolt. The only hint of rebellion is the tiny cap gun explosion of the beatniks. But so far that seems to be little more than a lunatic fringe, with no influence on serious writing.

One reason for a lack of revolt may be, as Ray West has suggested, that there is no cause for one. As is, there is all the leeway and all

¹⁸West, p. 114.

the freedom within the short story form that anyone could ever want.

Also it must not be forgotten that it is difficult to evaluate writing in progress. We see so much that it obscures our vision. The general high level of quality makes judgement all the more difficult. If some stories were very good and some very bad a critic's task would be ridiculously easy. But from so many shining, delicate, and empty vessels it is difficult to select the ones which are shining, delicate and also full. The difference is simply not sharp enough.

Writers who are merely skilled craftsmen by the sheer weight of numbers overshadow the talented and original ones, but that does not mean that there are not many of those. There are. And many who have already established themselves as writers of merit have been included in The Best American Short Stories of the past ten years. Story readers owe a debt of gratitude to Kay Boyle, Ray Bradbury, Nancy Cardozo, Nancy Hale, Jean Stafford, Mark Van Doren, Peter Taylor, John Cheever, Robert M. Coates, Shirley Jackson, Oliver La Farge, Frances Gray Patton, Irwin Shaw, Eudora Welty, and James Agee.

Also included have been a large number of comparative unknowns. Some who may well turn out to be the established writers of tomorrow are: Hortense Calisher, George P. Elliott, Elizabeth Enright, Harvey Swados, Herbert Gold, Wyatt Blassingame, Flannery O'Connor, John Campbell Smith, Tillie Olsen, R. V. Cassil, Priscilla Heath, Howard Nemerove, Wingate Froscher and Frank Rooney.

There are a great many writers writing today. Two hundred and forty-five stories have been chosen as the best of the past ten years. It would be logical to assume that thirty or forty writers had supplied them. Instead, they have been furnished by one hundred and eighty-six different writers! The most stimulating and haunting of these two hundred and forty-nine stories have been contributed by writers who have flouted the unwritten laws and dared to attempt Comment stories. It is possible that in the future still more writers will follow their lead. It is also possible that when the fog of proximity has cleared away the short story will be considered the most dominant and vital literary form of the twentieth century.

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- "Inland, Western Sea" by Nathan Asch. (From The New Yorker.)
- "A Fugitive from the Mind" by Peggy Bennett. (From Mademoiselle.)
- "The End of the Depression" by Mary Bolte. (From Harper's Bazaar.)
- "In Greenwich There Are Many Gravelled Walks" by Hortense Calisher. (From The New Yorker.)
- "Sense of Direction" by Leonard Casper. (From Southwest Review.)
- "Larchmoor Is Not the World" by R. V. Cassill. (From Furioso.)
- "The Season of Divorce" by John Cheever. (From The New Yorker.)
- "The Hunters" by Harris Downey. (From Epoch.)
- "The Temperate Zone" by Elizabeth Enright. (From The Virginia Quarterly Review.)
- "The Kingdom of Gordon" by J. Carol Goodman. (From Mademoiselle.)
- "The Value of the Dollar" by Ethel Edison Gordon. (From Mademoiselle.)
- "Her Breath Upon the Windowpane" by William Goyen. (From Harper's Magazine.)
- "The Summer People" by Shirley Jackson. (From Charm.)
- "The Mother's Story" by Josephine W. Johnson. (From Good House-keeping.)
- "Old Century's River" by Oliver La Farge. (From The Atlantic Monthly.)
- "Portrait" by Ethel G. Lewis. (From Epoch.)
- "Death of a Favorite" by J. F. Powers. (From The New Yorker.)
- "The Tabby Cat" by Paul Radar. (From Quarto.)
- "The Nemesis" by Jean Stafford. (From The New Yorker.)

"The Last of the Grizzly Bears" by Ray B. West, Jr. (From Epoch.)

"The Resemblance Between a Violin Case and a Coffin" by Tennessee Williams. (From Flair.)

THE BEST AMERICAN SHORT STORIES 1952. Edited by Martha Foley, assisted by Joyce F. Hartman. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1952.

"That Lovely Green Boat" by Bill Berge. (From Furioso.)

"The Lost" by Kay Boyle. (From Tomorrow.)

"The Unborn Ghosts" by Nancy Cardozo. (From The New Yorker.)

"Children of Ruth" by George P. Elliott. (From The Hudson Review.)

"The First Face" by Elizabeth Enright. (From The New Yorker.)

"Brahmin Beachhead" by Nancy Hale. (From Town and Country.)

"The Call" by Bethel Laurence. (From Today's Woman.)

"Cyclists' Raid" by Frank Rooney. (From Harper's Magazine.)

"Palo" by William Saroyan. (From Tomorrow.)

"I'm Really Fine" by Stuart Schulberg. (From New-Story.)

"The Healthiest Girl in Town" by Jean Stafford. (From The New Yorker.)

"The Traveler" by Wallace Stegner. (From Harper's Magazine.)

"A Ride on the Short Dog" by James Still. (From The Atlantic Monthly.)

"The Letters" by Harvey Swados. (From The Hudson Review.)

"Nobody Say a Word" by Mark Van Doren. (From Harper's Magazine.)

"Evensong" by Daniel Waldron. (From New-Story.)

"Loud Sing Cuckoo" by Christine Weston. (From Mademoiselle.)

THE BEST AMERICAN SHORT STORIES 1953. Edited by Martha Foley, assisted by Joyce F. Hartman. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1953.

"A Mother's Tale" by James Agee. (From Harper's Bazaar.)

- "The Town Mouse" by Stephen Becker. (From Harper's Magazine.)
- "The Need" by Robert M. Coates. (From The New Yorker.)
- "Morning Sun" by Mary Deasy. (From The Virginia Quarterly Review.)
- "Faq'" by George P. Elliott. (From The Hudson Review.)
- "A Death in the Family" by Wingate Froscher. (From Epoch.)
- "Fly Away Home" by Roberts Jackson. (From Accent.)
- "Beachhead in Bohemia" by Willard Marsh. (From Southwest Review.)
- "The Hill People" by Elizabeth Marshall. (From Mademoiselle.)
- "The Whipping" by Felix Noland. (From McCall's.)
- "The Picnic" by Constance Pendergast. (From Perspective.)
- "Still, Still So" by Mark Van Doren. (From Park East, The Magazine of New York.)
- "A Week of Roses" by Donald Wesely. (From The Hopkins Review.)
- "Three Players of a Summer Game" by Tennessee Williams. (From The New Yorker.)

THE BEST AMERICAN SHORT STORIES 1954. Edited by Martha Foley. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1954.

- "A Great Reckoning in a Little Room" by Geoffrey Bush. (From The Atlantic Monthly.)
- "A Beautiful Night for Orion" by Richard Clay. (From The Hudson Review.)
- "The Sense That in the Scene Delights" by Benjamin DeMott. (From The Partisan Review.)
- "A Stop on the Way to Texas" by Ward Dorrance. (From The Atlantic Monthly.)
- "The Firebird" by LeGarde S. Doughty. (From Prairie Schooner.)
- "Apple Seed and Apple Thorn" by Elizabeth Enright. (From Mademoiselle.)

- "My Brother Down There" by Steve Frazee. (From Bilery Queen's Mystery Magazine.)
- "A Change of Air" by Ivan Gold. (From New World Writing.)
- "Farewell, Sweet Love" by Priscilla Heath. (From The Western Review.)
- "The House on the Esplanade" by Anne Hebert. (From Queen's Quarterly.)
- "Char on Raven's Beach" by Frank Holwerda. (From Accent.)
- "Gertrude and Sidney" by Randall Jarrell. (From The Sewanee Review.)
- "No Way Down" by Almet Jenks. (From The Saturday Evening Post.)
- "The Latter End" by George Loveridge. (From The Yale Review.)
- "The Game" by Frances Gray Patton. (From The New Yorker.)
- "The Red Mountain" by Robert Payne. (From Harper's Magazine.)
- "The Mango Tree" by Rosanne Smith Robinson. (From Harper's Bazaar.)
- "In the French Style" by Irwin Shaw. (From The New Yorker.)
- "The Shorn Lamb" by Jean Stafford. (From The New Yorker.)
- "The Pale Green Fishes" by Kressman Taylor. (From Woman's Day.)
- "The Third Guest" by B. Traven. (From Fantastic.)
- "The Man in Gray" by Christine Weston. (From The Virginia Quarterly Review.)
- "The Indomitable Blue" by Ira Wolfert. (From Esquire.)
- "The Rock" by Vurrell Yentzen. (From Quarto.)

THE BEST AMERICAN SHORT STORIES 1955. Edited by Martha Foley. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1955.

- "A Matter of Price" by Robert O. Bowen. (From Prairie Schooner.)
- "The Excursionists" by Nancy Cardozo. (From Mademoiselle.)
- "Bachelor of Arts" by Nancy G. Chaikin. (From The University of Kansas City Review.)

- "The Country Husband" by John Cheever. (From The New Yorker.)
- "Brother Quintillian and Dick the Chemist" by George P. Elliott.
(From The Western Review.)
- "The Resting Place" by Oliver La Farge. (From The New Yorker.)
- "Portrait of My Son as a Young Man" by Elizabeth H. Middleton.
(From The University of Kansas City Review.)
- "The Professor and the Poet" by Marvin Mudrick. (From Shenandoah.)
- "Yore" by Howard Nemerov. (From Hudson Review.)
- "A Circle in the Fire" by Flannery O'Connor. (From The Kenyon Review.)
- "Tip on a Dead Jockey" by Irwin Shaw. (From The New Yorker.)
- "Maiden in a Tower" by Wallace Stegner. (From Harper's Magazine.)
- "Bird Man" by David Stuart. (From Botteghe Oscure and MacLean's.)
- "Herman's Day" by Harvey Swados. (From New World Writing.)
- "I Got a Friend" by Mark Van Doren. (From The University of Kansas City Review.)
- "Going to Naples" by Eudora Welty. (From Harper's Bazaar.)

THE BEST AMERICAN SHORT STORIES 1956. Edited by Martha Foley. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1956.

- "In an Early Winter" by Roger Angell. (From The New Yorker.)
- "The Snow Owl" by Morris Brown. (From Quixote.)
- "We're All Guests" by George R. Clay. (From New World Writing.)
- "In a Foreign City" by Robert M. Coates. (From The New Yorker.)
- "The Undertow" by Wesley Ford Davis. (From The Pacific Spectator.)
- "Is He Dead?" by George P. Elliott. (From Epoch.)
- "Free the Canaries From Their Cages!" by Arthur Granit. (From Commentary.)

"How Levon Dai Was Surrendered to the Edemuses" by Marjorie Anais Housepian. (From Paris Review.)

"One Ordinary Day, with Peanuts" by Shirley Jackson. (From Fantasy and Science Fiction.)

"The Mexican Girl" by Jack Kerouac. (From The Paris Review.)

"Creole Love Song" by Nathaniel LaMar. (From The Atlantic Monthly.)

"The First Flower" by Augusta Wallace Lyons. (From New Campus Writing.)

"Twenty Below, at the End of a Lane" by Ruth Branning Molloy. (From Mademoiselle.)

"The Artificial Nigger" by Flannery O'Connor. (From The Kenyon Review.)

"The Contest for Aaron Gold" by Philip Roth. (From Epoch.)

"The Machine" by John Shepley. (From Quixote.)

"Four Annas" by Christine Weston. (From The Virginia Quarterly Review.)

"Reginald Pomfret Skelton" by Samuel Yellen. (From The Antioch Review.)

THE BEST AMERICAN SHORT STORIES 1957. Edited by Martha Foley. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957.

"The Beasts of the Wild" by Nelson Algren. (From New World Writing.)

"Around the Dear Ruin" by Gina Berriault. (From The Paris Review.)

"The Proud and Virtuous" by Doris Betts. (From Mademoiselle.)

"Man's Courage" by Wyatt Blassinghame. (From Harper's Magazine.)

"To the Wilderness I Wander" by Frank Butler. (From The Hudson Review.)

"The Dark Roots of the Rose" by Walter Clemons. (From Harper's Bazaar.)

"The Song" by Harris Downey. (From Prairie Schooner.)

- "A Summer's Long Dream" by Nancy Hale. (From The New Yorker.)
- "The Blue Sarge Suit" by John Langdon. (From The Paris Review.)
- "Lulu Borrow" by Thomas Mabry. (From The Sewanee Review.)
- "A Heart of Burious Fancies" by Winona McClintic. (From The Atlantic Monthly.)
- "Greenleaf" by Flannery O'Connor. (From The Kenyon Review.)
- "I Stand Here Ironing" by Tillie Olsen. (From The Pacific Spectator.)
- "The Farlow Express" by Anthony Robinson. (From Prairie Schooner.)
- "The Impossible He" by Rosanne Smith Robinson. (From Quixote.)
- "Run, Run Away, Brother" by John Campbell Smith. (From The Yale Review.)
- "Escape to the City" by Gordon Woodward. (From MacLean's Magazine.)

THE BEST AMERICAN SHORT STORIES 1958. Edited by Martha Foley and David Burnett. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1958.

- "The Waiting" by James Agee. (From The New Yorker.)
- "Sonny's Blues" by James Baldwin. (From The Partisan Review.)
- "The Frozen Fields" by Paul Bowles. (From Harper's Bazaar.)
- "The Day It Rained Forever" by Ray Bradbury. (From Harper's Magazine.)
- "The Picture Wouldn't Fit In the Stove" by George Bradshaw. (From Vogue.)
- "As I was Going Up the Stair" by Alfred Chester. (From The Sewanee Review.)
- "Hunter's Home" by Shirley Ann Grau. (From Mademoiselle.)
- "Ben" by Pati Hill. (From The Partisan Review.)
- "Legend of the Two Swimmers" by Robie Macauley. (From The Kenyon Review.)

- "Somewhere Out of Nowhere" by Jean McCord. (From Quixote.)
- "A Delayed Hearing" by Howard Nemerov. (From The Kenyon Review.)
- "A View of the Woods" by Flannery O'Connor. (From The Partisan Review.)
- "Les Bataille Des Fleurs" by Anthony Ostroff. (From The Kenyon Review.)
- "The Banquet of Crow" by Dorothy Parker. (From The New Yorker.)
- "A Reasonable Facsimile" by Jean Stafford. (From The New Yorker.)
- "Joe, the Vanishing American" by Harvey Swados. (From The Hudson Review.)
- "Not Another Word" by Richard Thurman. (From The New Yorker.)
- "Home From Camp" by Bob Van Scoyk. (From Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine.)
- "House of Many Rooms" by Robin White. (From Harper's Magazine.)
- "Big, Black, Good Man" by Richard Wright. (From Esquire.)
- THE BEST AMERICAN SHORT STORIES 1959. Edited by Martha Foley and David Burnett. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1959.
- "Jawaharla and the Three Cadavers" by John Berry. (From The Western Review.)
- "Winter Term" by Sallie Bingham. (From Mademoiselle.)
- "Amid a Place of Stone" by Frank Butler. (From The Hudson Review.)
- "Getaway" by Robert M. Coates. (From The New Yorker.)
- "The Iowan's Curse" by Charles G. Finney. (From Harper's Magazine.)
- "Mrs. Mean" by William H. Gass. (From Accent.)
- "A Day in the Life of the Boss" by Hugh Geeslin, Jr. (From The Georgia Review.)
- "Love and Like" by Herbert Gold. (From The Hudson Review.)

- "In a Tropical Minor Key" by Frank Holwerda. (From Accent.)
- "The Last Mohican" by Bernard Malamud. (From Partisan Review.)
- "A Secret Society" by Howard Nemerov. (From The Virginia Quarterly.)
- "The Guy in Ward 4" by Leo Rosten. (From Harper's Magazine.)
- "The Conversion of the Jews" by Philip Roth. (From The Partisan Review.)
- "A Birthday Present" by Anne Sayre. (From The Colorado Quarterly.)
- "The Man in the Toolhouse" by Harvey Swados. (From The Western Review.)
- "Venus, Cupid, Folly and Time" by Peter Taylor. (From The Kenyon Review.)
- "A Gift from the City" by John Updike. (From The New Yorker.)
- "The Buck in Trotevale's" by Thomas Williams. (From Esquire.)
- "The Window" by Bethel Wilson. (From The Tamarack Review.)

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Prize Stories, edited by Paul Engle. Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday and Company, 1953.

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- O'Faolain, Sean. The Short Story. New York: The Devin-Adair Company, 1951.
- Parsons, Elizabeth. An Afternoon and Other Stories. New York: Viking Press, 1943.
- Salinger, Jerome. Nine Stories. Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1953.
- Shaw, Irwin. Tip on a Dead Jockey and Other Stories. New York: Random House, 1957.
- Stafford, Jean. Children are Bored on Sunday and Other Stories. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1943.
- Welty, Eudora. Golden Apples. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1949.
- Welty, Eudora. Place in Fiction. New York: House of Books, 1957.
- West, Ray B., Jr. The Short Story in America. Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1952.
- Wing, Mary Jane. Studies in the American Short Story. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Library, 1956.

VITA

Gertrude Carrick Curtler graduated from Vassar College in 1937 determined to become a writer. A small beginning, two novels and several short stories in commercial magazines, was curtailed by marriage and three children. In 1949 she resumed her efforts and until 1954 sold four or five stories a year. At that time, needing a steadier income, she turned to various forms of hack writing including advertising, newspaper, publicity, and even ghost writing. In the spring of 1958 she joined the School of Journalism staff of Richmond Professional Institute on a temporary basis. In the fall of the same year she became a member of the English Department, as she still is. In 1960 and 1961 she will be teaching a course there in short story writing.