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What Is a Short Story?

By H. E. BATES

A T fairly frequent intervals during the last few years the art of the short story has raised considerable, and for the most part rather illogical, controversy. Short-story fans can be divided roughly into two schools. On the one side stands the school of what might be called the graph-paper story, in which lines of action are carefully calculated and plotted and from which certain sensible and properly worked-out conclusions are drawn. This school has a million pupils, the sympathy of Mr. Somerset Maugham and Mr. Desmond MacCarthy, and the rather surprising championship of Mr. George Orwell, to whose views Colophon referred a week or so ago. The other school is lazily called the Tchegov school—the school of the story in which nothing (apparently) ever happens, and which has for its champions such writers as Mr. V. S. Pritchett, who has been duelling with Mr. Orwell; Mr. Leslie Halward, Mrs. Whitaker, Mr. Saroyan, and a fair number of other distinguished people on both sides of the Atlantic.

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To this last list I should naturally be expected to add my own name. Indeed, the number of press-cuttings for the last fifteen years which have referred to me as "the English Tchegov" would, I think, make a notable contribution to the war-time salvage scheme. Unfortunately for this Tchegov label, I began writing stories before I had read a word of Tchegov, and I do not think I have read a Tchegov story for nearly ten years. Many of my early stories were, in fact, modelled on Maupassant. I am therefore in sympathy with both schools—believing both to be legitimate. Unfortunately there is a controversial tendency on the part of people like Mr. Orwell to champion one kind of story to the entire detriment of the other. This is, as I hope to show, very narrow thinking.

Perhaps it may be simpler for the sake of argument to call one school the active school and the other the passive school. All literature is inanimate before it makes contact with the mind of the reader. It is only the attitude of the reader, the magnitude of his mental or emotional receptivity, which re-infuses the dead words with life; without a reader the words might just as well be fly-marks on the paper. This very simple truth applies, of course, to all literature, from *The Prodigal Son* to the stories in *The Gem* and *The Magnet*, from the plays of Shakespeare to the leading articles of *The Times*. No reader, no literature.

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Every writer therefore relies entirely on the attitude of the reader for the successful re-animation of certain words printed in a certain order on the paper. If the reader

fails ("I can't see the point, I can't get into it, there's nothing in the thing, etc."), the writer also fails. The writer must therefore decide how much or how little chance of failure the reader shall be allowed. Shall he rate the intelligence of the reader at a low level, describe everything simply and straightforwardly, allow no possibility of a wrong interpretation or response, and finally supply the correct answer to all questions himself? Or shall he estimate the reader's intelligence highly, assume his ability to fill in minor details, give him credit for making the correct interpretations, and leave him working out his own answer? The one is a safety-first method, water-tight, carefully planned, so that there shall be no mistake. The other is a risky method, involving illimitable possibilities of total failure.

Apply all this to the short story and you get the active and the passive school. Both may produce great or worthless stories. And both, odd as it may seem, borrow something from the method of each other. No story supplies everything, leaving nothing to the reader's imagination, and no story is utterly passive, leaving the reader to do all the work. Both, to a lesser or greater degree, are processes of selection, in which certain superfluous and obvious material is left out. Both, in a lesser or greater degree, ask the reader for emotional co-operation. The one method produces a story of which there are scores published each week in commercial magazines, and of which perhaps the most distinguished examples are those of Maugham; the other produces such pieces as those of Katherine Mansfield, which I agree with Mr. Orwell, do not wear very well, and such masterpieces as Joyce's *The Dead*, which Mr. Orwell, like me, professes greatly to admire.

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What, then, is the fuss about? The answer lies, I think, not in the rights and wrongs of the taste of Mr. Orwell on the one hand or of Mr. Pritchett and myself on the other, but in the great flexibility of the short story itself.

For the basis of almost every argument or conclusion I can make is the axiom that the short story can be anything the author decides it shall be; it can be anything from the death of a horse to a young girl's first love affair, from the static sketch without plot to the swiftly moving machine of bold action and climax, from the prose poem painted rather than written to the piece of straight reportage, in which style, colour, and elaboration have no place, from the piece which catches like a cobweb the light, subtle iridescence of emotions that can never be really captured or measured to the solid tale in which all emotion, all action, all reaction is measured, fixed, puttied, glazed and finished, like a well-built house, with three



Mr. V. S. Pritchett.

(A photograph reproduced from *New Writing in Europe*, Penguin Books.)

coats of shining commercial paint. If that infinite flexibility, indeed, lies the reason why the short story has never been adequately defined.

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Many definitions have been, and always are being, attempted. Wells defined the short story as any piece of short fiction that could be read in half an hour. Poe, sometimes acclaimed its modern originator, declared that "in the whole composition there should be no word written, of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to one pre-established design." Tchegov held that a story should have neither beginning nor end, but reminded authors that, if they described a gun hanging on the wall on page one, sooner or later that gun must go off. Mr. John Hadfield describes the short story as "a story that is not long." Sir Hugh Walpole asserts that "a story should be a story; a record of things happening, full of incident and accident, swift movement, unexpected development, leading through suspense to a climax and a satisfying dénouement." Jack London declared that it should be "concrete, to the point, with snap and go and life, crisp and crackling and interesting."

Miss Elizabeth Bowen, rightly wary of the concrete definition, says "the first necessity of the short story, at the set-out, is *necessariness*. The story, that is to say, must spring from an impression or perception pressing enough, acute enough, to have made the writer write." The late E. J. O'Brien, to whom the short story in England and America owes a considerable debt, held that "the first test of a short story, in any qualitative analysis, is the measure of how vitally compelling the writer makes his selected facts or incidents." Mr. Ellery Sedgewick, who pounced on the genius of Hemingway's

Fifty Grand when that story had been rejected by half the editors in America, holds that "a story is like a horse race. It is the start and finish that count most." Finally, Mr. A. E. Coppard bases the whole theory of his work on the essential difference between a story, as something which is written, and a tale, as something which is told.

All of these definitions have one thing in common. None of them has a satisfactory finality; none defines the short story with an indisputable definitive accuracy which will fit all short stories. For Tchehov, the craftsman, beginning and end do not matter; for Mr. Sedgewick, the editor, beginning and end are everything. Yet both are right. Mr. Hadfield's definition will fit a thousand stories yet fall to account satisfactorily for Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*, Tolstoy's *Family Happiness*, or Bunin's *The Gentleman from San Francisco*. Sir Hugh Walpole's definition will do admirably for a work by O. Henry, but fails miserably on application to Tchehov's *The Darling*. Mrs. Malachi Whitaker's *Front in April*, or the unpredictable sketches of Mr. Saroyan. One does not measure the beauty of landscapes by a tape measure. Jack London's demand for a concoction with "snap and go and life" is a perfect answer for those who like whisky, but it will be lost on those whose taste has been educated to the bouquet of Turgenev or James Joyce's *The Dead*.

It is only when Mr. Ellery Sedgewick, in an extremely perceptive essay written for American schools, asserts "So it is that the short story has become all sorts of things, situation, episode, characterization, or narrative—in effect, a vehicle for every man's talent" that we come back again to the sensible conclusion that the short story, whether short or long, poetical or reported, plotted or sketched, concrete or cobweb, has an insistent and eternal fluidity which slips through the hands.

There is one other thing which these many and varied definitions all have in common. All omit to point out the advantages of elasticity, both in choice of character and use of time, which the short story holds over the novel. The novel is predominantly an exploration or chronicle of life: reflecting and describing in some form the impact, entanglement, fruition, destruction or fulfillment of human motions and desires. "Characters begin young; they grow old; they move from scene to scene, from place to place," says Mrs. Virginia Woolf. Not always, of course; but the development of character, the forward movement of time, have always been and perhaps always will be the pulse and nerve of the novel. But in the short story time need not move, except by an infinitesimal fraction, like the shadow of sunlight on a wall; the characters themselves need not move; they need not grow old; indeed there may be no characters at all.

A novel without characters would be a tiresome affair; but a novel with characters who never spoke a word, would surely be more tiresome still. Yet many a good short story has characters who never open their lips. A novel whose characters were never named, whose location and time were never stated, might well impose on its readers a strain that they might justifiably refuse to bear. Yet many a short story has characters which bear no more marks of identification than the anonymous and universal label of "boy" or "girl," "man" or "woman," "the traveller" or "the commercial traveller," "the barmaid" or "the soldier," and no more topographical exactitude than "the street," "the field," "the room," or any sea-shore between Brighton and Botany Bay.

"The novel," it was once said, "can be anything according to the hands which use it"—a truth far more widely applicable to the short story. For the short story remains plastic, and continues to increase its plasticity, as long as human nature remains the infinitely plastic and variable thing it is. In the 'nineties Kipling was writing of India with a viewpoint so popular and so widely endorsed that it might well have seemed, to the

Empire-drunken Britisher of the day, the only right and proper view; in 1940 young native Indian writers have something to say of their own country from a viewpoint so unsuspected, so unheeded, and so real that Kipling seems guilty of nothing but plain falsification.

Again in the 'nineties, when O. Henry was performing elaborate conjuring tricks with an amazing collection of comic human paraphernalia, and the result was accepted with the same universal applause as that of Kipling, who could have guessed that fifty years later a young American-Armenian named Saroyan would demonstrate how a conjuring trick would be performed without any human paraphernalia at all, but with only a pair of eyes, a typewriter, and a handkerchief to dry his tears?

In its various stages of development the short story has invariably been compared with some other literary form, or with some artistic form outside literature. It is thus declared to have affinities with the drama; with the narrative ballad; with the lyric and the sonnet. In the last thirty years it has shown itself, as in fact much other writing has, to be pictorial rather than dramatic, to be more closely allied to painting and the cinema than to the stage. Mr. A. E. Coppard has long cherished the theory that short story and film are expressions of the same art, the art of telling a story by a series of subtly implied gestures, swift shots, moments of suggestion, an art in which elaboration and above all explanation are superfluous and tedious. Miss Elizabeth Bowen advances the same idea.

"The short story . . . in its use of action is nearer to the drama than to the novel. The cinema, itself busy with a technique, is of the same generation; in the last thirty years the two arts have been accelerating together. They have affinities—neither is sponsored by a tradition; both are, accordingly, free; and both, still, are self-conscious, show a self-imposed discipline and regard for form; both have, to work on, immense matter—the disorientated romanticism of the age."

This is strikingly true. Indeed, the two arts have not only accelerated together but have, consciously or not, taught each other much. The scrap of dirty paper blown by wind along the empty morning street, a girl sewing the tear in her lover's jacket at a railway station and he hiding it by holding up a suitcase, a mother staring dumbly at her returned gangster son—these tiny moments, seen as it were telescopically, brightly focused, unelaborated and unexplained, stamp swiftly on the mind the impressions of desolation, embarrassed love or maternal despair. Each moment implies something it does not state; each sends out a swift brief signal on a certain emotional wave-length, relying on the attuned mental apparatus of the audience to pick it up.

That audience, it seems to me, becomes of increasingly greater importance; but more important still, I feel, becomes the attitude of writer or director towards that audience. Are its powers of reception and perception to be consistently under-estimated? In a process of under-estimation what happens? At the extreme a writer takes a character and describes not only his physique, his weight, his moustache and glasses, but also his clothes, his manner and his mannerisms and taste in food and drink all in minute detail—in order to eliminate any possibility, it seems, of his being confused with the clothes-prop.

This is all very well, and in many cases delightful fun, in a novel of 200,000 words; but to apply the same method to the short story is rather like dressing a six-months-old baby in a top-hat and fur-coat, with an inevitable result: suffocation. Hence, I think, the languishing of the short story in England throughout the first three-quarters of the nineteenth century, when no single writer applied to it a technique different from that of the novel, and its gradual emergence, accelerated during the last thirty years, as a separate form addressed to a reader who was pre-

sumed to be able to take many previously elaborated things such as physical descriptions for granted.

The evolution of the short story may therefore, I think, have something to do with the evolution of the general reader. We must be wary of condemning Dickens, when it would be more just, perhaps, to condemn an age more confined to compartments of class, place and prejudice than our own. Dickens often found it necessary to devote some hundreds of words, and if necessary repeat these words; to a single character. In 1920 Mr. Sherwood Anderson remarks simply that "she was a tall silent woman with a long nose and troubled grey eyes"; in 1930 Mr. Ernest Hemingway in a moment, for him, of unusual expansion, says "He wore a derby hat and a black overcoat buttoned across his chest. His face was small and white and he had tight lips. He wore a silk muffler and gloves." In 1940 Mr. V. S. Pritchett writes "He had a cape on, soaked with rain, and the rain was in beads in his hair. It was fair hair. It stood up on end."

Mr. Anderson uses fourteen words, Mr. Hemingway thirty-one, Mr. Pritchett twenty-six. Between Dickens and Mr. Pritchett, then, something has happened. Is it only the evolution of the short story? May it not also be, perhaps, the parallel evolution of the reader? Education, travel, wider social contact, the increased uniformity of life, dress and manners have made us all familiar with things that were once remote enough to need to be described.

To-day we have all seen Mr. Sherwood Anderson's woman, the tragic, anonymous representative of a whole inarticulate class; we have seen Mr. Hemingway's tough with the light overcoat and bowler hat; we know Mr. Pritchett's type with its fair hair that stands up on end. The widening of social contact, among other things, has relieved these three writers, and their generation, of an oppressive obligation. It is no longer necessary to describe: it is enough to suggest. The full-length portrait, in full dress, with scenic background, is now superfluous; now it is enough that we should know a woman by the shape of her hands.

In this way the short story can be seen not as a product evolved by generations of writers united in a revolutionary intention to get the short story more simply, more economically and more truthfully written, but as something shaped by readers, by social expansion and on what Miss Bowen calls "peaks of common experience." For there has not been, and rarely is, any such united revolution among writers. Writers work, die and leave legacies. Other writers draw on those inheritances, as Katherine Mansfield did on Tchehov, and in turn leave others. But in their turn, too, readers live and perhaps succeed in raising, by an infinitely small fraction, the level of common experience and artistic receptivity.

I believe therefore that we have reached an important stage in the development of the short story. In fact, I would go further and say that the balance-sheet of the first half of twentieth-century English literature may show the short story, together with that style of writing known as reportage, as a more important part of the sum total than the novel. Unlike Mr. Orwell I am unimpressed by the nineteenth-century contribution to the short story; from the great fusty, prosy and largely overrated period of Victorian literature we derive a heritage of stories that is, compared with the richness of France and Russia, both small and tedious. "The short story is a young art," says Miss Elizabeth Bowen, "as we know it, it is a child of this century." I agree; and I gain immense satisfaction and hope about its future from the fact that it has suddenly begun to excite controversy.

If from great nature's or our own abyss Of thought we could but snatch a certainty, Perhaps mankind might find the path they miss— But then 'twould spoil much good philosophy. Byron: *Don Juan, Canto XIV, l.*