

## THE SHORT STORY IN ENGLISH: LOST IN TRANSLATION

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Problems may arise in the process of reading, teaching, and writing the English-language short story. Many contemporaneous stories seem wildly experimental, trendy, trivial with low reader-identification—not models of narrative virtuosity like stories in the earlier 1900s. Teaching this literary genre becomes difficult when those and other familiar “chestnuts” fill literature anthologies. And, the creative instructor, wishing to write and publish stories and apply the experience to classroom teaching, is restricted by the tight network of influential writing workshops/schools countrywide, and their powerful editorial contacts. This article will exemplify the above issues, and suggest strategic procedures as possible remedies.

The English-language short story has the potential of beginning in delight and ending in wisdom (to paraphrase Robert Frost) and of being a fixed mark by which we can measure how much our minds have grown. To those who are concerned with reading, teaching, and even writing the English Language short story, any or all of the three actions just named, may sooner or later bring about frustration, disappointment, and/or a feeling of being unable to help the situation . . . as a result of the conditions under which the EL short story is produced, processed, and received at a particular time and place.

The students have their reading assignments imposed on them from above, and readers—whether of the general or private order, or whether they hold the rank of teacher of literature—may sometimes come to feel that the more short fiction there is available (particularly in the annual volumes of so-called “Best Stories”), the less there is to entice the reader. Reasons? Duplication of story titles from the venerated ancients and the trendy moderns; a perceived flattening out of quality and imaginative power, in this plethora of famous prose; and a trivialization of life (as reflected in literature) because of painful shortcomings in some if not all of the essentials: plot, character, diction, thought, spectacle, and song. These six parts of tragic drama, according to Aristotle, have some application to the short story, in my view, if we are not dealing with a mere sketch or some kind of faddish anti-fiction or meta-fiction. Transferring, *i.e.*, fairly translating, the author’s personal creation to the mind of another, *via* the printed page, is difficult enough. It is even harder when that personal creation is to be taught by another person, which calls for a secondary translation. Assume, here, that the author doesn’t quite express what was intended, and the instructor doesn’t quite convey what was printed. The case is hardest of all, though, when the author’s personal creation is attempted to be transferred/translated *to the printed page, to which access is extremely difficult unless traditional editorial barriers can be breached*. It is not a matter of literary quality, or goodness, that should be considered; Mae West’s famous remark to the woman who admired her jewels, gushingly, applies here: “My dear, goodness had nothing to do with it!”

Consider the conventional story patterns in our fashionable magazines and the “Best Short Story” annuals, involving dysfunctional families, middle-aged adolescents, throwaway lives, tunnel-vision losers, *etc.*, moving to the broken rhythms of an ongoing whine: a grand recycling of the similarity in the diversity of American fiction. A seemingly endless supply of cloned tales, modeled on formatted lines, involving humans malfunctioning or breaking down, with optional horrors to suit, has long been provided by the established, often prizewinning, regulars, appointed mysteriously to keep telling us what life is really all about. Stories that rise above the muck and mire of the fictional morass do not often get “translated” fairly by the students. I would like to think Amy Hempel’s masterful story, “In the Cemetery Where Al Jolson Is Buried” [c. 1985], is an exception, but I doubt it. It is not hard for readers of any rank, of any file, to become conditioned or inured to the soggy gray world of wanhope and forfeited

opportunity for self-improvement, where dwell the below-average characters in the "Best American Short Story" annuals.

Another unsatisfactory situation I have encountered concerns the teaching of the short story selections in the American literature surveys. The dull, unimaginative repetition of certain overly familiar stories—of varying quality—by Poe, Hawthorne, Melville, Fitzgerald, Steinbeck, *et al.*, combined with the alibis of some publishers' representatives ("Instructors demand those same titles" or "Copyrights for the other stories aren't available") drive one, in time, to seek some commerce with Mother Necessity and her offspring, Invention. This aspect of the overall picture I am describing, like the first aspect, can be dealt with by the individual's going outside the standard anthologies and short story collections to the ampler resources of the campus library. This will provide access to a wider range of short fictions for class use, and encourage students to find their own supplementary selections for class study, which will give them greater opportunity for self-expression.

Before getting into the third aspect of this paper, following the reading and the teaching of the EL short story, that is, the writing and publishing of same, I want to touch on a matter that greatly concerns all three aspects, and puts the third aspect (soon to be discussed), the utility of any EL short story under consideration, in proper perspective. There are, at the outset, the three basic purposes or functions of art which may be applied to the EL short story. Horace taught us two of them: to be of profit and to please. In the earlier nineteenth century Poe and the French aesthetes gave us the third: "art for art's sake." Emerson, it seems, helped prepare readers for this with his 1839 poem "The Rhodora": "Tell them, dear, that if eyes were made for seeing,/Then Beauty is its own excuse for being . . ." Archibald MacLeish in "Ars Poetica" (1926) put the matter a little more directly: "A poem should be equal to:/Not true/. . . A poem should not mean/But be." To these purposes or functions I would add two more: to be recycled, in part or as a whole (*i.e.*, to be destroyed), and to lead to unintended consequences. But there is yet another, for literature specifically, which quite possibly captures or at least embraces all the others. It is, in fact, a *raison d'être* for literature that I periodically remind students about. The concept comes from the title, only, of an essay published in the 1930s by the late critic and rhetorician Kenneth Burke: "Literature As Equipment For Living."

I stress the utility of fiction read in my literature courses, with the idea that the short story (for example) is not a mere laboratory specimen: a skeletal plot to be anatomized, a cluster of symbols to be analyzed, a cast of characters to be litanized, and a moral lesson to be verbalized. (See for example the schematization by Robert W. Lewis, Jr., "What To Say About Fiction," in the April, 1958 issue of *College English*.) If an EL short story is very good, if it is a fixed mark by which we can measure our mental growth—like Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" (1835), about a corruptible innocent who discovers that everyone else is corruptible too—it will keep resonating in the reader's mind, and things will never seem quite the same afterward. All of this brings us to the third aspect of the "lost in translation" business: translating the story from the author's mind to the printed page *via* professional publication.

Andrew Levy's recent study, *The Culture and Commerce of the American Short Story* (1993), is very important here, for it surveys the development of this genre from an historical viewpoint, placing a heavy emphasis on Poe as lawgiver, literary critic, and commercial practitioner. The book traces what the journalistic "how to" experts and the so-called academicians (with their connections in the centers of power in the publishing industry) have done to this literary form over time, to make it a salable item of manufacture. Levy cites instances in which writing experts, and creative writers too, have criticized the writers'-workshop method of fabricating fiction commodities. Though a product himself of the Johns Hopkins workshop, his experience there led to his abandoning his attempt to write fiction. But in a perceptive review of his book, Glen S. Allen suggests that Levy's giving credit to the workshop system for (to cite one example) institutionalizing "the marginal voice" (*i.e.*, of so

many fiction writers who do not accept “popular values”) is self-contradictory. Allen asks, “Exactly what is marginal about an institutionalized voice?” He later poses another argument regarding Levy’s favorable attitude toward the workshop system: that it “is responsible for the ‘success’ of the minimalist knockoff story so ubiquitous that many incoming writing students believe it to be the only way to write; that all those marginal but institutional voices have in fact fused into a *single* voice.”

A recent critical evaluation of the negative effect on the American short story of the in-group workshop network was made by the well-known literary critic John W. Aldridge in his Afterword to a reissue of the noted writer Alan Cheuse’s novel *The Grandmother’s Club* (1994). Aldridge points out that those younger American writers of fiction “who have achieved some public prominence” during roughly the last two decades are part of our “first literary generation . . . created almost exclusively through formal academic instruction in the art of creative writing.” The work of such writers, Aldridge adds, will likely “be technically conservative, stylistically bland, and often extremely modest in intention,” hardly inclined to provoke, stimulate, or offend anybody.

Not all creative writing instruction in class or workshop directs the students somehow to fuse their articulations into a single voice. Alan Cheuse, who also teaches creative writing at George Mason University, has recently written me about his approach to helping undergraduates develop fiction-writing skills. At the outset, he asks them to read stories from a variety of authors: Malamud, Cather, O’Connor, Babel, Hemingway, Joyce, *et al.* Then he tries to get the individual student “to learn how to make a story from the *inside*, to learn how to become a histrionic reader, that is, imagining the characters from the inside as [the student] might if [he/she] were taking an acting course.” He attempts to induce his students “to feel their way toward some understanding of narrative rhythm in the same fashion—from the inside.” Then, “the externals, the craft part, making like a blacksmith or carpenter”; the students are shown “how to do voice, point of view, images, landscape, dialogue,” *etc.* Thus the reading his students do is accompanied by exercises on a weekly basis “in various aspects of technique.” Cheuse’s short story, “The Tennessee Waltz,” in his story collection under that name (1990), exemplifies those points.

Here additional remarks on the third aspect of our subject (creative idea from writer to printed page) may be helpful, particularly since they have a bearing on the first two aspects. The chronic self-indulgence of certain fiction writers, whose early work *may* have been quite praiseworthy, stands (in my view) as an ever-present warning of what editorial permissiveness can lead to: dross, chaff, forlorn echoes of a once-proud and mighty utterance. John Barth’s stories in his *Lost in the Funhouse* collection (1968) seem to me an example of this. That is, in view of his excellent first three novels and in view of the shattered-story framework of such pieces (in that volume) as (1) the rambling collection of trivia, “Lost in the Funhouse” (the ultimate repudiation of Poe’s single-effect principle in short story composition), and (2) his tape-recorded narcissistic exercise, “Autobiography: A *Self-Recorded Fiction*.” The fact that Samuel Beckett, too, became engrossed in sound equipment and even allowed it to direct his creative processes cannot by itself be a recommendation for sounding such a new kind of voice in fiction or dramatic literature. Another instance of the fruits of self-indulgence, I believe, is the *oeuvre* of the late Donald Barthelme, who in his final years appears to have abandoned the fresh, mind-grabbing, zany inventiveness of his first collection of stories, *Come Back, Dr. Caligari* (1964). His later short pieces, meaningless agglomerations of trivia-fragments, seem to reflect little more than his original wild unconventionality in choosing subject matter.

For all that I have said about the stifling unfairness of the network operations in short story publishing, there are at least two things that somehow offer encouragement to the reader, teacher, and writer, as described above: (1) provocative ideas about fiction writing and literary criticism of fiction, *i.e.*, “angles” that do not easily fit into the formal categories of Lewis’s “What

to Say About Fiction” article. (I am not referring to *de facto* deconstruction or *de jure* deconstruction or *ex post facto* deconstruction.) And (2) Meaningful, memorable, eminently usable stories from whatever source: *even* nepotistic power groups of editors, writers, and academics, or lonely unrecognized, in fact spurned, authors bemoaning their unjust fate.

As for the first, the provocative ideas, I must begin with Lewis, whatever may be the constraints of his formal categories. Lewis has at least two items that offer the writer or critic endless opportunity to defend or attack whatever a writer sets down on paper, so that seemingly *anything* at all could be justified or rejected by a literary critic or a fiction editor. Lewis asks, under his category of STYLE; “Do you note abuse of digression?” And under his category of CLASSIFICATION Lewis asks: “Is what [the author] says worth saying?” One is tempted to call Lewis’s classic format-article of 1958, if these questions are raised, a “self-consuming artifact” with comic potential. That is because those two dynamite questions could blow away any serious discussion.

In any case, despite the format of Lewis’s broad, conventional categories of setting, characters, *etc.*, it is not easy to find a place for various other shaping effects on a story. For example, there are the windows opened up by John Barth himself, in two esoteric articles published in *The Atlantic Monthly*—“The Literature of Exhaustion” in the August, 1967 issue, and “The Literature of Replenishment” in the January, 1980 issue. The articles drew non-literary criticism from a number of angry and resentful *Atlantic* readers who couldn’t figure out what Barth was getting at, with all his palaver about Jorge Luis Borges in article one, and postmodernism in article two. Agree or not with Barth’s fiction trajectory, he has forcefully shown that there are many easily overlooked matters to consider, when anatomizing a short story or other literary form. There is an interesting sidelight on the dimension of exhaustion Barth opened up in his 1967 *Atlantic* article: Max Apple, in his address before the Tenth Alabama Symposium on English and American Literature, in Tuscaloosa in 1983, spoke on “The Style of Middle Age,” providing an interesting and possibly unintended contrast with Barth’s “Exhaustion” article.

Now for the second encouraging element: stories from whatever source, which in my opinion have the potential of enlarging the reader’s, teacher’s, and especially *the* writer’s, horizons (in the case of the latter, despite whatever discouragement from editors and publishers). A major consideration, aside from style, technique, and particular subject matter, is the inclusion of significant ideas which leave a well-marked trail in the reader’s mind, yet keep the story free from polemic and preachment. These are some of the fixed mark stories I have found useful for inspiration and for class assignments: two replacement-therapy stories about dead but extra dimensional children—Rudyard Kipling’s “They” (1904) and Gail Godwin’s “Dream Children” (1976), both included in “*Fiction*” 100, 7th edition, edited by James H. Pickering, and both evoking Charles Lamb’s haunting essay “Dream Children” (1822); Damon Knight’s “Masks” (1958), an unforgettable psychological study of a victim of disease and surgical amputation, now reduced to a vestigial sensorium and an assembly of valves, tubes, and prosthetic devices; David Ely’s “The Academy” (1965), about a father enrolling his son in a nightmarish military academy for what may be a lifetime of incarceration (this evokes Hawthorne’s “Little Daffydowndilly” [1843], about a little boy sent away by his mother to study under a fearsome, inescapable schoolmaster named Mr. Toil); Joseph Whitehill’s “In The House, Another” (1960), about a domestic encounter, between a husband and his gyne-oid wife, baffling the pieties of political correctness yet poking gentle fun at both sexes; Kazuo Ishiguro’s ominously matter-of-fact “A Family Supper” (1982), about a widowed Japanese father dining with his two young-adult offspring, whose lifestyle he disapproves of—set against the background of past suicides and a potential cataclysm; Wilbur Daniel Steele’s “The Man Who Saw Through Heaven” (1925), a gripping reminder of the susceptibility of the religious impulse to atavistic perversion; Sinclair Lewis’s “Young Man Axelbrod” (1917), about an

elderly Swede deciding to go to college, after a lifetime of toil, and trying against odds to “make it” at Yale.

As for concrete suggestions about somehow breaking whatever publishing barriers may exist, there are at least two, neither without flaws and risks. One is to publish fictional pieces under the guise of literary criticism and commentary. This I was able to do, with two articles on what Hawthorne might have written if he had lived in contemporary society; the articles appeared in *The CEA Critic*, in January of 1975 and January of 1976. The other ploy is to publish an anthology of short stories and, simply, include one’s own fiction along with that of all the other writers. One example of this device is the textbook *About These Stories: Fiction for Fiction Writers and Readers*, edited by three of the writers represented therein: David Huddle, Ghita Orth, and Allen Shepherd (McGraw-Hill, 1995). Harking back to one of Lewis’s “What to Say About Fiction” questions: “Is what the author says worth saying?” Each and every writer, applying that question to his or her own work, knows the answer to *that* one: “Such a question isn’t worth asking.”

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