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Great American Short Stories

A Guide for Writers and Readers

Course Guidebook

Professor Jennifer Cognard-Black
St. Mary's College of Maryland

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Corporate Headquarters

4840 Westfields Boulevard | Suite 500 | Chantilly, Virginia | 20151-2299
[PHONE] 1.800.832.2412 | [FAX] 703.378.3819 | [WEB] www.thegreatcourses.com

Jennifer Cognard-Black, PhD

Professor of English
St. Mary's College of Maryland

Jennifer Cognard-Black is a Professor of English at St. Mary's College of Maryland, a public liberal arts college, where she has taught since 2000. She graduated summa cum laude from Nebraska Wesleyan University with a dual degree in Music and English. She then studied under Pulitzer Prize winner Jane Smiley for her MA in Fiction and Essay Writing at Iowa State University. Professor Cognard-Black received her PhD in 19th-Century British and American Literature from The Ohio State University, where she continued to take and teach writing workshops, including working with short story writer Lee K. Abbott.

In 2012, Professor Cognard-Black was named a Fulbright Scholar to Slovenia, where she taught the American novel and creative writing, and for the spring of 2020, she has been selected as a Senior Fulbright Scholar in American Culture to the Netherlands, where she will offer a course in American food narratives and social justice at the University of Amsterdam. Professor Cognard-Black is also the recipient of a Maryland State Arts Council individual artist award, and she was named a 2019 finalist for the prestigious Robert Foster Cherry Award for Great Teaching at Baylor University.

Twice, Professor Cognard-Black has received the most prestigious teaching award at her institution—the Faculty Student Life Award, selected by the students themselves—and she has been given Andrew W. Mellon Foundation grants on three different occasions to support her course development and experiential learning initiatives. Nebraska Wesleyan University has also named her a distinguished alumnus and an outstanding graduate. Professor Cognard-Black has also been an artist-in-residence at the Kimmel Harding Nelson Center for the Arts, the Sandy Spring Museum, the Iowa Writers' House, and the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, for which she won a creative fellowship from the Mid Atlantic Arts Foundation.

Professor Cognard-Black's publications are extensive and eclectic, reflecting her intellectual background as both a writer and a literary critic. Her critical work spans Victorian visuality and technologies of communication, theories of the letter and of monsters, images of women in the media, the literatures of food, the rise of the novel by women, feminist rhetorics, and writing theory and practice. In turn, her short stories and essays often grapple with issues of betrayal and the body. She has collaborated with a number of visual artists, including photographers and painters, and has had this work exhibited at galleries in New York and Philadelphia. Professor Cognard-Black is also writing her first novel, under the working title *Making Up*. The novel is inspired by the secret life of the first woman ever to win the Pulitzer Prize, Edith Wharton.

Professor Cognard-Black is the author of *Narrative in the Professional Age: Transatlantic Readings of Harriet Beecher Stowe, George Eliot, and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps* and a coeditor of three collections. The first is a volume of previously unpublished letters on female authorship, *Kindred Hands: Letters on Writing by British and American Women Authors, 1865–1935*; another is an anthology of poetry, fiction, and essays that all include recipes, *Books That Cook: The Making of a Literary Meal*. The final one is a collection of creative nonfiction essays by women writers, *From Curlers to Chainsaws: Women and Their Machines*, which

won a gold medal in the national 2016 Independent Publisher Book Awards contest.

Professor Cognard-Black is also a prolific creative writer, often using the pen name J. Annie MacLeod. She has published her essays and short fiction in a number of journals, ranging from *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* to *Another Chicago Magazine*. She is also a contributor to *Ms.* magazine and a member of its Committee of Scholars, a past reviews editor for the journal *Literary Mama*, and part of the advisory board to the University of Nevada's Cultural Ecologies of Food book series. Professor Cognard-Black has written about recipes as a powerful means of storytelling for *HuffPost* and the University of Maryland's *Faculty Voice*, and she appeared on *The Kojo Nnamdi Show* on NPR in Washington DC to talk about recipes as containers of individual and national memory. ◆

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DISCLAIMER

This course contains discussions that involve violence and adult language. It may not be suitable for all audiences.

This course is dedicated to virtuoso storyteller Lee K. Abbott (1947–2019).

GREAT AMERICAN SHORT STORIES

A Guide for Writers and Readers

The short story is a classic American form. This national literature emerged out of the melting pot of immigrant and indigenous tales. Such stories start from a place of trouble and showcase an American hero struggling with a vital question of nation or self. Gripping plots shape a rising action to a climax and land at a final, satisfying scene. American short stories try to fix what is broken, or at least give the hero a lasting insight.

The first eight lectures of this course trace the American short story from classic early examples of supernatural and whimsical work to more realistic stories by modernist masters. This part of the course discusses how North American stories began as collaboratively authored oral tales that served communal purposes. From here, the course explains how encounters between Europeans and Americans across the 15th, 16th, and 17th centuries led to new stories of discovery, wonder, and horror that forever changed American storytelling.

By the end of the 18th century, Washington Irving published the first decidedly American short stories, then known as sketches. Irving drew from the nation's complex legacy to write tales with a transatlantic worldview that would become the foundation for a national American literature.

Between the antebellum period and the onset of World War I, America was transformed from a rural, agrarian state into an urban, industrialized nation. Women and African American authors turned away from mythic and Gothic tales toward more lifelike and contemporary ones, often taking up the theme of social reform.

Nineteenth-century American authors showed interest in exciting their reader's feelings through Gothic or sympathetic means. This inclination eventually gave way to realism, a style more interested in accurate depictions. However, the rise of modernism in the first half of the 20th century constituted a deliberate break with the conventions of earlier traditional literary genres. Writers of the Lost Generation and the Harlem Renaissance retained the precepts of realism but altered the subjects and themes of their tales to include modern topics.

This tour of the American short story up to the 20th century concludes with a lecture arguing that the storytelling techniques developed by Ernest Hemingway have served to open up possibilities for more transparent representations of everyday citizens, particularly those from marginalized groups.

The second part of this course, comprised of Lecture 9 through Lecture 17, uses American short stories to illustrate effective fiction-writing techniques in a way that is useful to both writers and readers. These lectures teach you how to read and interpret tales with an expert's eye, and how to transform your personal anecdotes, memories, and lived experiences into original short stories.

First, the course argues that it's better for both readers and writers of short fiction to think beyond mere setting, which implies that the place of a story can be separated from its characters and purpose. Rather, the course introduces the idea of a story's donnée, which comprises its premise and its story world.

Then, drawing on an essay by American fiction writer and literary critic Toni Morrison, the course explains that the facts or details a writer selects have everything to do with a story's success. Building on this idea, the course provides insight into how certain writers create characters who seem real. The very core of any good character is what they truly think and feel underneath their daily masks.

Next, the course turns to dialogue, the most powerful method a writer has to reveal the chaotic mess of an American character. The course offers examples of both credible and implausible dialogue, and it discusses how farfetched dialogue can be politically dicey. After that, the course turns to point of view for two lectures, delineating the advantages and the potential dangers of using the first-, second-, and third-person points of view.

Other lectures in the middle section of the course focus on plot as well as Flannery O'Connor's advice that the senses are vital to fiction. The final lecture in this section discusses a short story: "Lou" by Andrew Wildermuth, one of this course's instructor's writing students. The lecture synthesizes concepts from previous lectures to discuss the story's style and its effects.

The third part of the course, comprised of Lecture 19 through Lecture 24, invites you to explore dozens of contemporary American short stories and analyze them with a writer's eye toward technique. The writers discussed in this section include Junot Díaz, ZZ Packer, and Sherman Alexie, all of whom invoke traditional storytelling themes and methods while simultaneously venturing beyond the box through experiments in voice, plot, and point of view.

Along the way, the course distinguishes literary genre fictions from their pulp counterparts. The course also explores contemporary interest in writers who tell their tales across words and pictures. Additionally, the course provides examples of highly experimental postmodern fiction.

As this final section of the course draws to a close, the penultimate lecture considers the endings of American short stories. The final lecture highlights the challenges and opportunities aspiring short story writers should be aware of, and it provides resources for both readers and writers of short stories. ◆

"Come In Here": How Stories Draw Us In

This lecture looks at how a writer might make an appealing invitation to his or her readers. One of America's best-known authors, Stephen King, offers this advice: "An opening line should ... say: Listen. Come in here. You want to know about this." With a good opening, a writer offers the reader an invitation to step across the threshold and into another realm.

The Opening Line

One tried-and-true approach to the opening line of a story is to have a reader stride into the middle of the action. In his *Ars Poetica*, the Roman poet Horace termed this *in medias res*, meaning "in the middle of things." In a good writer's hands, this effect creates a sense of wonder in the reader, or even productive confusion.

An example of this comes from the opening of "The Cask of Amontillado," a Gothic tale by Edgar Allan Poe. It begins: "The thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as I best could, but when he ventured upon insult, I vowed revenge." With this sentence, Poe drops a reader inside this narrator's burning desire for retaliation against a series of unexplained wrongs.

Another approach to writing an alluring opening is to entice a reader with comedy or wit, as the humorist Woody Allen does at the beginning of his story "The Kugelmass Episode." This is the beginning of Allen's story: "Kugelmass, a professor of humanities at City College, was unhappily married for the second time."

The punch line of this sentence is the phrase "for the second time." To be unhappy in marriage is one thing, but to bring such grief down upon oneself twice is another altogether.

Stories are gateways to strange lands. As Stephen King once said, stories are a "uniquely portable magic."

The Four Ps

A good goal for a story starter is to have it contain certain vital information, which this course refers to as the four Ps: people, place, perspective, and problem. For an example of the four Ps in practice, take this remarkable first sentence from "The Lesson" by the American writer Toni Cade Bambara:

> Back in the days when everyone was old and stupid or young and foolish and me and Sugar were the only ones just right, this lady moved on our block with nappy hair and proper speech and no makeup.

Notice the punch of this narrator's voice. Part of that punch is rhythm, coming from phrases such as "old and stupid," "young and foolish," and "me and Sugar," as well as "nappy hair and proper speech and no makeup." The narrator's voice is driving and energetic because it uses so many phrases and words that start with a downbeat, as if she's hitting the gas every time she starts a new idea.

Additionally, because of the slang and judgmental tone—"me and Sugar were the only ones just right"—a reader feels connected to this narrator, even if that connection is one of irritation or distrust. The narrator is already a character who has revealed at least one of the central problems of the story: the unusual lady who has moved into the neighborhood.

Bambara's first sentence suggests a concrete place: the block the narrator and Sugar live on. It provides a sense of the people tied to this place (with the use of the word *nappy*). The sentence also makes it obvious to readers that they will be living inside this narrator's head for the duration of the ride, which offers a clear perspective.

First Line Examples

This lecture now turns to two opening lines written by the course's instructor. This first one is from a story entitled "Fairytale." The story begins: "There is a story about my cousin Julia's coma."

The second is from another story, titled "A Clean Shot." It starts: "First day of open season, and the stars were still guttering like candles when Teddy Edwards dressed, loaded the guns and the dogs in his truck, and hustled his still-nodding son into a jacket, ready to drive."

The second opening line gives lots of information on place and a little about Teddy and his sleepy son. However, there is absolutely nothing here about a problem—that is, about what's going to happen between Teddy and this boy. The problem is at the heart of any story: It is the stake characters have in the tale.

Even though the opening is longer, it isn't necessarily better. There's no need to pack a story starter full of verbiage in the hopes that more words will equal more interest or intrigue.

By contrast, the first example—"There is a story about my cousin Julia's coma"—makes a reader curious about the coma and the story that surrounds it. Who is Julia? Why is she in a coma? And what's her cousin's stake in all of that? Even though this opener doesn't give a reader any details about the story's place, from the outset, readers likely will be asking the right questions and will be interested in what matters most.

Exercise: First Sentences

This lecture concludes with a first-sentence exercise. You can try it whether you're more of a reader or a writer of short fiction. The exercise involves five elements: an indoor thing, an outdoor thing, a famous person, a place, and an emotion. Here are examples of the five elements:

- An indoor thing: a mirror.
- An outdoor thing: a puddle.
- A famous person: Charlie Chaplin.
- A place: Denmark.
- An emotion: insecurity.

Your task is to write a first sentence that includes at least one of these elements. Do your best to incorporate the four Ps in such a way that a reader will want to enter your story.

Here is an example using the five ingredients listed above: "By 3:00 in the afternoon of the 13th day of almost constant rehearsing, even I believed that I was Charlie Chaplin reborn."

That example only uses the famous person from the list, but it gives the first-person narrator a particular voice: She's very fussy, knowing that it's 3:00 in the afternoon and the 13th day of rehearsal. Such fussiness tells a reader a good deal about her perspective on life.

The people are also clear in the form of the narrator herself as well as the character she's trying to become, the famous comic film actor Charlie Chaplin. The example leaves out giving a reader a sense of place, and it doesn't make the problem obvious, although both of these become apparent later in the story.

Once you have written a first sentence from the five elements, trying hard to follow the four Ps, write a 500-word story from your opening sentence. Attempt to include all five ingredients from the list. In sum, you will extend your invitation into a full-blown tale. See what happens once a reader steps across the threshold and into the world of your story. ◆

Discovering the American Short Story

This lecture uses the following working definition for a short story: A short story is a piece of fictional prose running 10,000 words or fewer, built around conflict, ending in a definite manner, and privileging art over amusement. With that working definition as a backdrop, this lecture seeks to answer the question: What makes for an American short story?

The short story genre keeps finding new, unusual shapes. In modern-day America, the short story is rarely a tight, simple square, predictable and tidy.

Trouble in the Mind

One notion espoused by the writer Lorrie Moore is that American stories are "about trouble in [the] mind. A bit of the blues. Songs and cries that reveal the range and ways of human character." The mood the blues suggest for America's national fictions is fitting: a mood indigo. For instance, characters such as Ichabod Crane, Tessie Hutchinson, and Yunior de Las Casas are suffering characters whose songs and cries, deeds and desires, reveal essential American sorrows.

Their individual conflicts represent the nation's conflicts over issues that have been labeled the culture wars. This includes issues such as civil rights, prejudice, sexuality, drug addiction, undeserved violence, the role of religion in civic life, the quiet desperation of undervalued workers, failing prison and foster-care systems, and the fantasies some citizens have for escaping the ills of modernity through any means possible.

The American short story sings a blues song. That the blues developed out of the tensions and aspirations heard in African American spirituals, field songs, and folk music seems appropriate to yet another analogy for what brings short story writers and readers to the page. As Lorrie Moore says, American stories give their readers a "shock of mercy and democracy" and ask readers to "spend time in the company of people whose troubles we might ordinarily avoid."

Empathy

If an American short story is about what it means to be an American, then more often than not, the fictional characters will be people the reader feels she cannot fully understand or even like because the characters won't match up with her own sense of what it is to be American. Thus, she will be required to engage her empathy if she hopes to learn something from the story.

American lives are chaotic and painful. They're hard and full of mean people—just as they're diverse, expansive, and full of quirky, loving, and amazing people. The only way to tell the truth of a character is to seek the evasions of that character's soul and then bring back the knowledge of this soul's indecisions and revisions to the readers.

One guiding principle is an idea that Lee K. Abbott used to attribute to Henry James. He claimed that this most serious of American writers believed in planting a stout emotional stake for any story to swirl against.

A helpful analogy is that of a pylon sticking out of a river. If the pylon has been driven deep enough into the riverbed—if it's sturdy and stout—then as the current swirls around it, the pylon will stay put. Like this pylon, it's the stake a character has in a story's action that gives a reader a similar emotional investment in what happens to that character. Without a stake, empathy will be lacking.

A character's stout stake may be small or large, but it must be real and complex. For instance, if the character's a new mother, her stake might be the sense that her child is a burden and a parasite rather than a pleasure, which sets her against everything in American baby culture that portrays motherhood as endless bliss.

An American character's stake can be almost anything that's devastating to that character. But without a clear stake for a story's central character, a reader won't know who or what to care about and will quickly cease to care.

STORY EXAMPLES

You can find many examples of characters with stout stakes. For examples of maternal characters who have a dark sense of their babies' nature set against their own desire to be good parents, see Karen Russell's "Orange World," Alexandra Kleeman's "Choking Victim," or Jennifer Cognard-Black's "Meiosis."

For the character of a daughter whose lifelong stake is her admiration for, and also embarrassment over, her mother, see Edward P. Jones's "The First Day." In this story, a girl learns to be ashamed of her parent when she discovers, quite by accident, that her mother can't read.

To see an example of a lover whose stout emotional stake is the conviction that no one could possibly ever love him or her, read Susan Minot's "Lust," Junot Díaz's "The Cheater's Guide to Love," or Cognard-Black's "A New Love Poem."

The American Short Story

This lecture now returns to its opening question: What is an American short story? Perhaps the only way to answer that is to read many American short stories. The following are suggestions of American storywriters across the centuries that every serious student of the genre, whether a writer or a reader, needs to know.

Washington Irving pioneered the short story form in the early decades of America's history. His "Rip Van Winkle" and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" are masterful and iconic. Then, it's best to move on to the 19th-

century writers who purveyed mystery and mythos, including Nathaniel Hawthorne, Catharine Maria Sedgwick, Edgar Allan Poe, Herman Melville, and Louisa May Alcott.

As more and more women took up the pen, this century also gave us authors who traded in sentiment, the domestic, and regional writing, such as Harriet Beecher Stowe, Mary Eleanor Wilkins Freeman, Frances E. W. Harper, and Alcott.

Post–Civil War reading provides examples of a group called the realists, especially Bret Harte, Kate Chopin, Henry James, Stephen Crane, and Charles Chesnutt. A closely affiliated group was the naturalists, of which Mark Twain, Edith Wharton, and Willa Cather are essential.

Crossing into the 20th century, American writers of note include the modernists: Sherwood Anderson, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Katherine Anne Porter, William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, and Ernest Hemingway. Also notable were the Harlem Renaissance authors, especially Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright, and Langston Hughes.

A multitude of storytellers emerged in the postwar period, particularly James Baldwin, Flannery O'Connor, James Thurber, Carson McCullers, Philip Roth, John Updike, and Tillie Olsen. Next came the experimental postmodernists of the 1960s and 1970s, such as Kurt Vonnegut, Tobias Wolff, Ursula K. Le Guin, and Donald Barthelme.

Another group came out of the civil rights era with a keen interest in highlighting the experiences of blacks, women, and the working class. Of this group, notable authors include Toni Cade Bambara, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Raymond Carver, Joyce Carol Oates, and Ann Beattie.

Next on the scene were the American storytellers of the contemporary period, meaning those writing after 1980. This course recommends Jamaica Kincaid, Ha Jin, Tim O'Brien, Stephen King, Charles Baxter,

Jhumpa Lahiri, ZZ Packer, Lorrie Moore, Sandra Cisneros, Annie Proulx, Leslie Marmon Silko, Edward P. Jones, and Sherman Alexie. Also notable are Lee K. Abbott, Jane Smiley, and Kent Haruf, who influenced the writing of this course's instructor in various ways.

The Connecting Element

The above survey of authors contains a huge number of names. However, they possess a shared quality: These authors have the collective ability to disappear in their fiction. On that point, Francine Prose, an excellent practitioner of the short story, has this to say:

> A story creates its own world, often—although not always—with clear or mysterious correspondences to our own. … While reading the story, we enter that world. We feel that everything in it belongs there and has not been forced on it by its reckless or capricious creator. In fact, we tend to forget the creator, who has wound the watch of the story and vanished from creation.

The trick, then, is to write what you know, but to make it seem as though your fingerprints are not on the page. One of the many contradictions of American short fiction is this: An individual psyche must create a universal, yet not stereotypical, character. This is a character for readers to love, hate, become frustrated with, and empathize with.

If you wish to write an American story of your own, start with the American life that you know best, and then do your best to disappear. Allow the story to become your readers' rather than yours. Give them a reason to empathize—to care about your tale—by giving your character a stout stake of emotion for the rest of your story to swirl against. ◆

The Storytelling Instinct in America

Psychologists, anthropologists, neuroscientists, and those who study the history of literature all agree that humans are storytelling organisms who lead storied lives. This lecture looks at how people's natural storytelling instincts emerged in America.

Written Pieces and Oral Tales

Over many centuries as well as up to the present moment, there has been a constant back-and-forth between oral tales and written pieces of fiction. In the United States, this back-and-forth was initiated when oral and print cultures first came into contact with each other.

Beginning in the 15th century, Europeans started crossing the Atlantic in hopes of discovering new sea passages to India and China. After finding that the Americas were in the way, they altered their desires, becoming intent on exploring and conquering this new continent.

Although every American knows the legend of Christopher Columbus, fewer have heard of Diego Colón. He was a member of the Taino people. Columbus seized him from the West Indies and brought him back to Spain, eventually adopting him.

Colón was adept at languages, learning Castilian well enough to speak it, and so he became a guide and an interpreter for the Spanish. Upon returning to the Bahamas on Columbus's second voyage, Colón also became a teller of tales among his fellow Taino people.

Thus, the stories written down by Columbus for a European audience as well as those told by Colón for an audience of fellow Indians became a microcosm of the new tales that came into being as the print cultures of Europe encountered the oral cultures of the Americas. As Colón's tales make plain, from the 15th century onward, new narratives on both sides of the Atlantic were often ones of discovery and wonder.

However, these stories were also ones of destruction and sorrow, especially as colonists started building an imitation of Europe by displacing, enslaving, and killing off indigenous populations. This dynamic of wonder and horror also typifies the culture clashes that occurred when Pilgrims, Puritans, and Catholics colonized the Eastern Seaboard as well as how slaves from Africa viewed their enslavers.

A Transformation

Across four centuries, these transatlantic tales of discovery, wonder, and horror forever changed American storytelling. As a professor of American literature, Wayne Franklin, explains, the European invasion of the Americas "entailed a many-sided process of influence and exchange that ultimately produced the hybrid cultural universe of the Atlantic world."

The cross-fertilization of Native American and European ideas, beliefs, and cultural practices ultimately led to the development of the American short story as we know it today. Creation stories played a role in this cross-fertilization.

Among the European colonizers to the New World, a well-known creation story was the Christian one of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. An extant version of an Iroquois creation story shares intriguing commonalities with the Christian origin story.

Scholars have discovered upward of 25 versions of the Iroquois's creation story. A French missionary recorded the first in 1623. Two centuries later, a man named David Cusick was the first Iroquois to write down an account of his own culture's origin, structure, and mythologies.

His book was called *David Cusick's Sketches of Ancient History of the Six Nations*. It came out in 1828. Many historians believe it may be the first account of indigenous history written and published in English by a Native American.

For Cusick, this tale isn't strictly fiction. In his version, Cusick begins by describing an upper world of the gods and a lower world of darkness and monstrous creatures. In this upper world, a sky woman becomes pregnant with twins. When she goes into labor, she lays her body down on a prepared mattress, but as she sleeps, this mattress descends into the dark world.

Much of Cusick's tale is specific to Iroquois social structures and religious traditions, not European ones. However, a character named the Good Mind forms humans out of the dust "in his own likeness," and he breathes directly into their nostrils to give them souls. Such details are borrowed from the biblical book of Genesis. That Cusick was raised by a father who had converted to Christianity says a good deal about how and why he brought such elements into his story—elements that are absent from some other versions of this myth.

Defining a Genre

Cusick's myth of origins has roots in an oral tradition and yet settles into a written form—one that eventually helps to define the genre of an American short story. Cusick's creation myth uses scene setting specific to North American geography, as also seen in short stories involving Puritan interactions with Native Americans penned around the same time by Nathaniel Hawthorne and Catharine Maria Sedgwick.

In addition, Cusick's tale also foregrounds complex main characters wrangling with psychological and spiritual troubles, which is in keeping with contemporaries such as Edgar Allan Poe, Lydia Maria Child, and Nathaniel Hawthorne. These writers were also keen to imagine complicated protagonists with idiosyncratic moral compasses—or even antiheroes who would come to embrace evil over virtue.

Cusick's creation story offers a plot that follows the traditional model, one borrowed from Aristotle that cuts across almost all of Western storytelling in the centuries prior to the modern era. This is the plot that starts with a problem, builds a rising action, arrives at a climax, and then offers a denouement.

Finally, like listening to a tale told by a campfire, Cusick's narrative can be enjoyed in a single sitting—thereby creating the unity of effect championed by Edgar Allan Poe. Considered in this way, the Iroquois creation story becomes an early example of the American short story as we currently define it.

NATURE AS AN EXPERIENCE

The fundamental reason humans have such a strong storytelling instinct is that nature is a storied experience. Both our biological lives and the natural world follow a chronology or linear plot. We are born, grow up, grow old, and die. So do plants and animals.

Just as day and night evoke a beginning, middle, and end, and our lived experience is predicated on cause and effect, stories mirror these intrinsic aspects of human existence as well. In essence, a short story is life, just as life is a short story. The storytelling instinct in America isn't specific to time, place, people, or culture.

Story Circles

A story circle is a simple but elegant idea. They've been used in numerous contexts, but modern versions can be traced to a group called the Roadside Theater, whose motto is "Art in a Democracy."

In the 1970s, the founding Roadside ensemble started sitting in a circle to share tales and sing songs as a means of gathering ideas for their original plays, which were centered on the culture of central Appalachia.

The stories they spun came out of those handed down from Scotland and Ireland, where many from the Appalachian community originated.

The Roadside Theater group chose a general theme for each of their story circles, and all participants were asked to tell a tale they'd learned growing up. As the actors went around the circle, a call-and-response format developed, with everyone elaborating upon the theme. This, in turn, helped them enrich whatever play they were working on.

After the Roadside Theater troupe popularized the story circle concept, over the next few decades, it was adopted by American activist groups, therapists, religious leaders, and educators.

Exercise: A Story Circle in Practice

The following is a two-part storytelling exercise based on the story circle. You can use it if you have a group of people who might like to participate and then write stories out of this experience.

Start with a simple theme; for example, you and your group might focus on the significance literature has in your day-to-day lives or tell stories about bread from your pasts. The stories may be serious or silly, and they can be from long ago or recent times.

Start the circle by offering up a story of yours. Others in your group should do the same. These are the only rules for the stories:

- Do not worry about whether the story is good.
- Take risks.
- Shape the stories with a beginning, middle, and end.
- Do not speak for more than three minutes or during another person's story.

At the conclusion of the stories, have a longer discussion. This is a time for your group to process the stories and ask follow-up questions of each other.

After that, everyone should write a very short piece of fiction—no more than 500 words—in which people steal elements from one another's stories.

The participants should fold in parts of at least two of the tales they've heard, and they should also spin their own narrative around those parts. These are some helpful tips for contouring the stories.

- Rather than simply scene setting, start in a place of action.
- Come up with a first sentence that grabs the reader's attention.
- Invent a problem or struggle that will propel the plot.
- Make sure the main character has a stake in what's going on.

The next time your group meets, have everyone share his or her 500-word story, reading it out loud. Your group members will likely be delighted to hear bits and pieces of their stories reworked into someone else's tale.

This exercise gets at the heart of how oral storytelling gets recorded and reworked into a written text, and how no story is completely original. Any good storyteller is also a good thief. ◆

Storytelling and American Mythos

In the decades following the Revolutionary War, patriotic writers sought to establish a literature worthy of the new nation. The main assumption of these writers was simple: A large part of England's greatness came from its authors, and so the United States wouldn't stand fully on its own until its writers had transformed the country's people and geography into vibrant works of literature.

The American Voice

Crucially, this new American literature couldn't mimic the poetry or prose of Great Britain. Solyman Brown said it best in his 1818 book *An Essay on American Poetry*: "The proudest freedom to which a nation can aspire, not excepting even political independence, is found in complete emancipation from literary thralldom."

Brown was particularly anxious about British reviewers, and he was right to be worried. At the turn of the 19th century, abusing Americans was fashionable, and English critics were brutal. Some detractors went so far as to claim that American authors were nothing more than shallow imitations of English writers.

Many Americans came to believe in their cultural inferiority. In response, American authors sought to forge their own national literature, a project that felt all the more urgent at the turn of a new century.

Though early Puritans, colonists, and enslaved Africans had already penned elegies and sermons as well as essays and autobiographies, these were not deemed literary texts. At the time, literature was defined exclusively as imaginative or fictional writing, and so the clarion call among early American authors became, in the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson, to stop listening to "the courtly muses of Europe."

Emerson insisted that it was incumbent upon the young, innovative minds of the fledgling country to speak their minds—especially through original and imaginative writing. Some Americans tried to fill the gap by writing romances. Examples include novels in the vein of Sir Walter Scott but set in the New World and featuring Native American characters, such as Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter,* James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*, and Catharine Maria Sedgwick's "response" to what she saw as racial and gendered stereotypes in Cooper's book, a novel entitled *Hope Leslie*.

Others reimagined the epic poetry of Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queen* or John Milton's *Paradise Lost* by having Christopher Columbus keep company with an angel or by making Native Americans the main characters of epic sagas. Examples of this approach include Joel Barlow's *The Columbiad* and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *The Song of Hiawatha*.

Still others used African slavery as the backdrop for a new kind of coming-of-age story that mixed autobiography with fictional storytelling—texts now referred to as slave narratives. Among these, notable examples include the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs.

A New American Genre

WASHINGTON IRVING

The only literary genre to emerge from this period of literary nationalism that was patently and exclusively American was the short story. Initially called sketches, the first American short stories offered brief narratives covering just the main facts of any incident.

The first master of this form was Washington Irving, who became famous on both sides of the Atlantic for his satirical book called *A History of New York*. Irving offered his next treat in 1820 with the publication of the two-volume

Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent., a collection of 34 essays and sketches combining satire and sentimentality.

Irving drew from oral traditions of myths, legends, and folktales in crafting his own written tales. This was partly because he had the chance to meet Sir Walter Scott, who directed Irving to the wealth of largely unused source material in German folktales.

There, Irving discovered the story of "Peter Klaus," which became the source text for "Rip Van Winkle"—a story that's also about a rural man who falls asleep for 20 years. Irving's genius is how he amalgamated this folktale with elements of contemporary US politics and set the whole story in the state of New York, thereby creating a work of American mythos.

Mythos

The word *myth* comes from the Greek word *mythos*, and it originally signified a story of any kind, whether true or invented. This etymology underscores how central the idea of myth is to any culture—for a culture's stories are as vital and important as its language.

Now, the term *mythos* has evolved into a synonym for *myth*, meaning a single tale within a larger mythology. In essence, a mythos is a foundational tale: a narrative that plays a fundamental role in structuring society, conveying that society's customs, values, taboos, and norms.

> *Mythos is what allows a people to claim a culture. Without such stories, human beings wouldn't have collective memories, beliefs, or a shared sense of community.*

In the case of Washington Irving's "Rip Van Winkle," the story is a mythos because it combines the workings of a realistic world with archetypal characters and situations specific to the American experience.

If we humans think, remember, learn, and dream through storytelling in our individual lives, it's also true that we do the same for overarching or mythic stories that we hand down from generation to generation. These overarching narratives come to define our sense of self, both individually and collectively.

According to the scholar Joseph Campbell and others who study mythic storytelling, there are actually only a few plotlines, which repeat across time and place. The most obvious is the journey of the hero, which Campbell wrote about in his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. These well-worn plots, populated by archetypal characters, help us to think about and to shape our own individual identities within the ancient frameworks of human struggle and achievement.

"Rip Van Winkle" as a Hero's Journey

The basic plot of "Rip Van Winkle" mirrors the epic journey of a hero. One bright autumn day, the character Rip decides to take his firelock and his dog Wolf to hunt squirrels up in the mountains—a strategy for avoiding both work and wife.

While there, he comes across a strange figure with a gray beard. Because this figure is carrying a keg that Rip hopes to sample, he follows the figure. Eventually, Rip steals a drink from the keg, and as he is "naturally a thirsty soul," he is "soon temped to repeat the draught" and falls into a deep sleep.

Upon waking, Rip finds that everything about him is strange. His gun is rusted through, his dog is gone, and he has grown a long, grizzled beard. When he makes it back down to the

village, his wife is absent, and his house looks abandoned. Arriving at the old inn—now renamed the Union Hotel—he sees that the "ruby face of King George" has become a portrait of someone named General Washington.

When someone asks him whether he is a Federal or a Democrat and he claims to be a loyal subject of the king, Rip is attacked as a Tory and a spy. He falls into hysterics, crying out, "Does nobody here know Rip Van Winkle?"

Upon hearing this question, someone points to a young lad who is the spitting image of Rip himself, "apparently as lazy, and certainly as ragged." At seeing this doppelgänger, Rip exclaims, "I was myself last night, but I fell asleep on the mountain, and they've changed my gun, and every thing's changed, and I'm changed, and I can't tell what's my name, or who I am!"

Eventually, it comes out that Rip has been away from home for 20 years—even though, to him, it all felt like a single night. He learns that his wife has died ("a drop of comfort" for him), and that the doppelgänger is his son. He also learns that the Catskills are said to be haunted by Hendrick Hudson—the Dutch name of the famous English explorer for whom the Hudson River is named.

Although few in the village believe that this grizzled old man actually experienced a supernatural sleep, Rip soon takes his place "once more on the bench, at the [hotel] door" and is "reverenced as one of the patriarchs of the village, and a chronicle of the old times 'before the war.'"

Rip tells the story of his enchantment over and over to anyone who will listen, and the mythos ends on the note that "it is a common wish of all hen-pecked husbands in the neighborhood, when life hangs heavy on their hands, that they might have a quieting draught out of Rip Van Winkle's flagon."

The Purpose of "Rip Van Winkle"

At first, it seems as if this story is nothing but a fairytale for children. However, the story has a sophisticated cultural purpose. For instance, Rip is an example of an archetypal hero. As Campbell has detailed, a mythic hero follows the same quest plot again and again, regardless of the society that tells the story. Rip was absent from his home for many years, just like Odysseus from the ancient work of Homer.

Rip travels from a known world to an unknown one, and he faces challenges along the way. Campbell says this process includes a helper figure (for Rip, that's the trickster with the keg), a mentor figure (in this case, Hendrick Hudson), and a temptation (which is the gin).

During his long sleep, Rip exists in what Campbell refers to as "the abyss," where the hero must face death before being reborn, as Odysseus does when he descends to Hades. The hero's time in the abyss leads to a transformation of the self, and typically he or she then atones for any sins or transgressions before returning to the known world, able to convey new knowledge to his or her community.

However, Rip is actually an antihero who follows a satirical quest plot. He's not terribly heroic, because he doesn't have many admirable qualities. Additionally, when he returns from the unknown world back to the known one, Rip hasn't learned anything. Although he seems to have an identity crisis, he doesn't transform himself as a result.

Instead, after he gets over the shock of sleeping for 20 years, Rip "resume[s] his old walks and habits" and soon finds "many of his former cronies, though all rather the worse for the wear and tear of time." He reinstalls himself as someone who can chronicle the "old times" before the Revolutionary War. In other words, Rip is one of those old men who sits around and talks about the past.

Seen in this light, Irving's "Rip Van Winkle" tells a complicated tale of American national identity, especially for a country not far into its sovereignty. It's purposeful on Irving's part that Rip sleeps through the American Revolutionary War, and after waking up, he refuses to change himself in any real way.

Indeed, Rip's role as an obsolete, lazy man who doesn't work but lives off of the toil of others—as well as a man who doesn't recognize his own privilege—ironically aligns him with the British model of a gentleman, one who hails from an aristocratic, leisured class and lives off the poor who work the land on his behalf.

Irving's story is an indictment of Englishness. It is also a cautionary tale for Americans to recognize their British heritage and then to keep that heritage where it belongs: in the past. ◆

Sentimental Fiction and Social Reform

By 1850, many Americans were engaged in a national project of stirring up what was then called sentiment. They were trying to affect the bodies and souls of readers through fiction, transforming their thinking about a philosophical topic or a vexed social issue through feeling.

In the mid-19th century, the most pressing social issues Americans faced were slavery, female suffrage, temperance, and workers' rights. These were the topics that sentimental authors took up in the hopes of reforming these aspects of society.

Harriet Beecher Stowe

Harriet Beecher Stowe was the most popular sentimental writer of the century. Her wildly successful novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* published as a single volume in 1852, has been credited as a landmark antislavery work.

As a woman keen to reform the thinking of all Americans who supported slavery, Stowe didn't focus on promoting new laws or organizing political action groups, even though she wrote in favor of abolition. Stowe understood that abolishing slavery through the law wouldn't necessarily alter the moral corruption that enabled slavery in the first place—namely a lack of "Christian feeling."

Stowe's fictions, including her short stories, are repeatedly bound up in the ancient drama of spiritual redemption. She believed that reading the right kind of sentimental literature, which would foster the right kind of feeling, could utterly transform society.

Because the majority of fiction readers at that time were women, this also meant that such a national transformation would start in the home: at individual hearths where wives and mothers would take the lessons of sentimental literature and instill them in their husbands as well as within future citizens. Not surprisingly, then, Stowe believed that women writers were the ones to initiate this transformation.

HARRIET BEECHER STOWE

Women Writers

In many ways, Stowe was correct about the power of women writing to other women. From the 1830s until the 1870s, women dominated the American marketplace for fiction, circulating their stories in the pages of newspapers and magazines that reached an unprecedented number of Americans.

Before 1820, there had only been about 100 magazines and 400 newspapers in the United States, but by 1860, those numbers had grown to 600 magazines and thousands of papers. In these periodicals, women published serialized novels and short stories. The express purpose of these stories was to improve human nature through social reform.

Prolific writers such as Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, Mary Wilkins Freeman, Louisa May Alcott, Frances E. W. Harper, and Stowe herself harnessed the short story form and linked their ideological and political marginality to this relatively new genre. For instance, Phelps and Freeman published tales portraying women in unconventional ways, such as female characters with the talent and drive to pursue artistic lives or rural wives and mothers who could run the family's finances better than their husbands.

CHANGING AMERICA

Nathaniel Hawthorne, in an 1855 letter to his publisher, derided the cultural and financial success of popular women writers. He wrote, "America is now wholly given over to a damned mob of scribbling women, and I should have no chance of success while the public taste is occupied with their trash." This so-called trash, however, was actually changing America.

"The Seamstress"

In 1843, Stowe produced her first collection of short stories, entitled *The Mayflower and Miscellaneous Writings.* One sentimental tale from this book is called "The Seamstress." It's about a widow named Mrs. Ames and her daughters Ellen and Mary, who are all "dependent entirely on the labors of the needle."

At one point, the narrator reconstructs the entire domestic space in which the family lives. The narrator says that the room contains all of the three women's "small earthly store, and there is scarce an article of its little stock of furniture that has not been thought of, and toiled for, and its price calculated over and over again, before every thing could be made right for its purchase."

By highlighting the threadbare carpet, the narrator makes it clear to her middle-class reader that poor people inhabit the space. The reader understands that this carpet is symbolic. Mrs. Ames and her daughters were once respectably middle class but have fallen on hard times, so the danger is palpable to the reader, who wonders about the state of her own metaphorical carpet and thinks about how vulnerable she is as the dependent wife of a mortal man.

Like many other poor or working-class Americans in the 1840s, Mrs. Ames and her children are immigrants. As women, and especially once they've fallen on hard times, they have limited choices in supporting themselves.

If the daughters can't find someone to marry them, then they might be employed as servants or governesses. They become seamstresses or, if they had had any learning, schoolteachers. They might obtain factory jobs, or they might become prostitutes, which is the unspoken threat that permeates this story. These characters represent of a class of women that most of Stowe's readers would have had regular contact with—but would have known very little about.

Another important character is a rich woman named Mrs. Elmore. Ellen delivers needlework to Mrs. Elmore, but Mrs. Elmore is offended by the bill and signals that she believes the price is too high. Still, the story makes it clear that Mrs. Elmore was "not a hard-hearted woman" and that "if Ellen had come as a beggar to solicit help for her sick mother, Mrs. Elmore would have fitted out a basket of provisions."

Stowe transfers the reader's empathy from Mrs. Ames to Mrs. Elmore. Where before this reader felt pity and some fear over Mrs. Ames's socioeconomic woes, she then recognizes herself in Mrs. Elmore: an ordinary Christian wife who feels it is her civic and moral duty to give baskets of food and old clothing to beggars but also to economize, even when she has more than she really needs.

Materiality and Feeling

The materiality embedded in "The Seamstress" is key to eliciting authentic emotion from a reader. It's also key to teaching that reader how to channel this emotion into productive social change. Mrs. Elmore's physical health and wealth are juxtaposed against Mrs. Ames's ailments and poverty, with the strong suggestion that the clothes could be swapped easily in a kind of prince-and-pauper reversal.

Thus, Stowe utilizes the sensations of the body—the clothes characters and readers wear, the everyday objects they own and use—as a means of attempting to alter something deep within the reader: her empathy for the plight of others. In this way, sensation becomes sentiment, and sentiment becomes belief—which potentially can be turned into direct political action on behalf of those who need the activism most.

In another short piece from Stowe's *Mayflower* collection, she muses on the philosophical question of feeling. She highlights an approach of studying human nature that

"regards them as human beings, having hearts that can suffer and enjoy, that can be improved or be ruined.

This approach defines Stowe's work as a sentimental storyteller, particularly one who was interested in generating feeling across class, gender, and racial divides. Stowe also articulates perhaps the most crucial reason why human beings tell each other tales: We do so on behalf of our spirits or souls, defined not in terms of a specific theology but rather universal ethical principles.

Stories teach us something of the mysteries of feeling. Even more, they teach us something about the mystery of empathy: that elusive yet formidable force for good. ◆

The Rise of Realism in American Fiction

By 1911, realism had been the predominant aesthetic for four decades. The realist style rejected the flourishes and emotive qualities of sentimentality in favor of trying to show people, places, and things as they really are, meaning as they exist in the current moment. In essence, the realists were rejecting the modes and methods of the culture of sentiment that had dominated the literature of the antebellum and Civil War periods.

The Champions of Realism

From the end of the Civil War to the beginning of World War I, realism typified American short fiction. Its qualities of immediacy and banality became the means by which a host of writers attempted to depict how ordinary Americans lived in the here and now. Those writers included Mark Twain, Stephen Crane, Rebecca Harding Davis, Jack London, Theodore Dreiser, Kate Chopin, Edith Wharton, and Henry James.

One of the greatest champions of realism was William Dean Howells, an influential novelist and critic who used his position as the editor of *The Atlantic Monthly* and then of *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* to circulate his literary theories. In 1889, he described realism as "nothing more and nothing less than the truthful treatment of material."

In many ways, the rise of realism was a response to four decades of social upheaval. After the Civil War ended in 1865 with the death of more than 620,000 soldiers, the period known as Reconstruction began, in which the North and the South attempted to reconcile their political, cultural, and economic divisions, and former slaves tried to make new lives for themselves.

Yet there were numerous factors that destabilized and fractured the nation as well, including a renewed interest in colonialism, which led to the annexation of Hawaii in 1898 and attempts to gain Cuba, Puerto Rico, and parts of the Philippines as American colonies.

Additionally, by the end of the 19th century, most Native Americans were confined to reservations, and African Americans continued to experience segregation and racial violence. Because of the emergence of the periodical press, the exploitation of factory workers also became much more visible.

A Literary Boy's Club

Into this breach came a new generation of American storytellers, many of whom started their careers as writers for newspapers and magazines. Such periodicals had first gained momentum in the 1820s, but by 1865, they were in full swing.

Some periodicals were themed, such as *The National Era*, an abolitionist newspaper from the antebellum period that first carried Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1851. Others courted women readers by designing lavish fashion plates and offering articles on hearth and home, the best known being *Godey's Lady's Book* from Philadelphia. *Godey's* editor, Sarah Hale, published short stories by literary notables such as Edgar Allan Poe and also advocated for various causes, including the education of women and the establishment of Thanksgiving as a national holiday.

Still other publications had newly freed and newly literate blacks in mind. For instance, *The Colored American Magazine* published stories and articles by African American writers such as Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins and adopted a middle-class ideology.

The most-literary periodicals of the day, however, were the ones focusing on arts and culture, particularly *The Atlantic* and *Harper's*. These magazines published biographies, book reviews, and public intellectual essays. They also published serious pieces of literature, such as parts of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* and short stories by almost every well-known Anglo-American writer of the time.

However, *The Atlantic* and *Harper's* were also less likely to publish stories by women or African Americans. The realist writing of the 1870s, 1880s, and 1890s turned to subjects and styles tailored to a male readership. William Dean Howells was particularly keen to distinguish literary realism as a masculine pursuit.

A Flexible Category

Realism eventually came to be a flexible category—one that developed over time to become more than one thing. As a result, Howells wasn't the only writer to define it, write it, or to utilize its potential. For example, the realism of Mark Twain was much more colloquial and comedic than that of stuffy and staid New Englanders such as Howells, though Howells was a lifelong promoter of Twain's work.

Twain used his iconoclastic realism to tear down political, social, and literary conventions. A short but fitting example comes from one of his first published stories, "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County," which appeared in the *New York Saturday Press* in November 1865.

Built on a tall tale about a jumping frog that could whirl in the air doing somersaults, Twain's story is conveyed almost entirely in the voice of the fictional Simon Wheeler, a "good-natured" but "garrulous" old man from the wilds of Calaveras County, California. Wheeler explains all about this miraculous frog—and also a marvelous dog and a wondrous horse—owned by a betting man named Jim Smiley.

The story is practically forced upon the reluctant narrator, who claims that he is "bored to death" by Wheeler's anecdotes. The realism of the tale comes from Wheeler's manner of speaking. For instance, in talking about Smiley's famous frog, Wheeler has this to say:

> Well, this-yer Smiley had rat-terriers, and chicken cocks, and tom-cats, and all them kind of things, till you couldn't rest, and you couldn't fetch nothing for him to bet on but he'd match you.

This story is also an example of how Mark Twain uses realism as a kind of argument. In this case, he's trying to debunk the romantic mythologies of the West that most Americans at the time believed were true.

Jack London

A different approach to literary realism came from Jack London. Early in his life, in the late 1890s, London traveled to the Yukon territory in Canada, hoping to find gold. His brutal experiences there became the material for some of his earliest tales, including his most famous short story, "To Build a Fire."

A distinct kind of literary realism from Twain's, "To Build a Fire" was published in 1908. It follows an unnamed protagonist and his dog as they attempt to walk many miles through the Yukon territory. The man and the dog are bound for a faraway camp, and yet the temperature is 75 degrees below 0.

A turning point occurs for the protagonist when the young man accidentally steps into a frozen spring, soaking his legs up to the knees. His feet are now numb. He builds a fire, but mistakenly built it under a spruce tree. Snow from the tree falls onto the fire, extinguishing it.

Although the young man then tries to build a second fire, his fingers are too frozen to do it, and by the story's end, he freezes to death. His dog leaves him in the snow, trying to make its own way to the camp. Ultimately, the reader never knows if the dog survives, although it heads in the direction where there are other "fire-providers."

For two decades, Jack London was one of the most popular American writers in the world, publishing more than 20 novels and almost 200 short stories. He lived off the proceeds of his writing.

While London's story offers a commentary about our inevitable mortality and the hubris of those people who believe they can best nature, also interesting is the matter-of-fact narration at the moment of greatest crisis within this story. London's narrator is impersonal, observing this man and his plight with indifference. This matter-of-factness is particular to London's brand of realism, which literary critics now call naturalism.

Take, for instance, the way in which the narrator moves step-by-step, explaining the man's thoughts and actions. The progressive nature of the sentences mimics how humans actually experience time: as one moment, and then another, and then another.

The narrator underscores this sense of progression in comparing the size of twigs and branches to the man's own body: twigs the size of fingers and branches the size of wrists. Not only do these comparisons move from small to big, but they offer a kind of promise: that the fire will warm the man's body and save his life, beginning with his extremities before warming the whole of his feet, legs, and trunk. This cause-effect sequence is both rational and scientific—and, thus, naturalistic in its realism.

Yet London's narrator then reverses the logic of the man's progress by having the snow on the topmost branches of the tree fall to the boughs beneath. Once again, the sentences are structured as cause-effect: a sequence that literally grows larger as it progresses.

This time, though, the step-by-step sequence is the means of the man's demise. The fire is "blotted out" by the "avalanche" of snow, which symbolizes that the man's life will be blotted out as well, although the narrator does not explain or highlight this symbolism. Because the style of the story is matter-of-fact and its action true to life, it's up to the audience to find its larger meaning.

Exercise: The Realistic Style

This lecture closes with an exercise that can help writers and readers alike to start to see what it's like to adopt aspects of a realistic style. The exercise uses an example that demonstrates the opposite approach: the more romantic and mawkish style of the mid-Victorian period.

The example is made up of the last few paragraphs of a short story by one of the late sentimental writers, Mary Wilkins Freeman. The story is called "A New England Nun" and was first published in 1891.

Freeman's story tells the tale of Louisa Ellis, a woman who has been engaged to a good man named Joe Dagget for 14 years. Dagget has been away finding his fortune. When Joe returns after being away for so long, Louisa realizes that she would rather live alone than get married, which opens the door for Joe to pursue another respectable woman who's in love with him, Lily Dyer.

The final paragraphs of Freeman's story start at the penultimate scene, in which Louisa tells Joe she can't go through with it. To hear it in full, refer to the audio or video lecture. Here is a brief excerpt:

> [Louisa] never mentioned Lily Dyer. She simply said that while she had no cause of complaint against [Joe], she had lived so long in one way that she shrank from making a change.
>
> "Well, I never shrank, Louisa," said Dagget. "I'm going to be honest enough to say that I think maybe it's better this way; but if you'd wanted to keep on, I'd have stuck to you till my dying day. I hope you know that."
>
> "Yes, I do," said she.

> That night she and Joe parted more tenderly than they had done for a long time. Standing in the door, holding each other's hands, a last great wave of regretful memory swept over them.

The writing exercise is this: Put the character of Louisa in the 21st century along with Joe and Lily. Then, adopt a voice that is more along the lines of a Jack London story, with a narrator that is distanced, objective, and observant. Drop the clichés, get rid of the over-the-top symbolism, and excise the sentimental details.

In essence, try to remake the ending of Freeman's story through this new narrative lens and within this new setting. If you'd like, you can try to write it from Joe's point of view or Lily's perspective. The important part is that you allow your versions of Louisa, Joe, and Lily to be as raw and as real as they can be. ◆

American Modernists

Many American writers, now called modernists, wanted to make short fiction seem all the more literary by detaching it from the everyday speech and behaviors that form the backdrop of our lives. In other words, the modernists were reacting against the forms and styles of the realists who preceded them, just as the realists had pushed against the sentimental writers who had been in vogue before them.

"Barn Burning"

In taking on a style that was clearly a construct, the curated technique of the modernists made short stories seem more rarified and self-conscious. As an example, this lecture looks at a short story by William Faulkner. It's the opening paragraph of his story called "Barn Burning" from 1939. Faulkner's narrative is about a young boy named Sarty who is put in the difficult position of knowing that his father has burned down someone else's barn illegally. Sarty has been threatened by his dad to tell no one about it.

The store in which the Justice of the Peace's court was sitting smelled of cheese.

The boy, crouched on his nail keg at the back of the crowded room, knew he smelled cheese, and more: from where he sat he could see the ranked shelves close-packed with the solid, squat, dynamic shapes of tin cans whose labels his stomach read, not from the lettering which meant nothing to his mind but from the scarlet devils and the silver curve of fish—this, the cheese which he knew he smelled and the hermetic meat which his intestines believed he smelled coming in intermittent gusts momentary and brief between the other constant one, the smell and sense just a little of fear because mostly of despair and grief, the old fierce pull of blood.

He could not see the table where the Justice sat and before which his father and his father's enemy … stood, but he could hear them, the two of them that is, because his father had said no word yet.

Faulkner's story has certain elements in common with the storytelling modes of the previous century. For instance, he articulates a clear problem for his main character right away, and the story is in the third-person point of view. However, there are many notable differences.

Faulkner versus Hawthorne

A significant difference between Faulkner's style and that of, for instance, Nathaniel Hawthorne—who was writing 100 years earlier—is that an author such as Hawthorne echoes characteristics of oral storytelling in a way that Faulkner does not. For instance, Hawthorne's stories often start with characters speaking out loud to each other.

Note that plenty of modernist writers, Faulkner included, also use direct dialogue. The important point is that the structure of Hawthorne's stories is much closer to the tradition of storytelling that comes out of oral tales. In addition, as in a fairytale, Hawthorne's characters are more types than lifelike human beings.

Hawthorne's story "The Birthmark" is a version of an old story about the hubris of people who wish to wield the power of God and thus wind up destroying those they love best. It is heavy on symbolic plot points, and these elements are more important to Hawthorne than characters' thoughts or conversations.

At the sentence level, Hawthorne also draws on techniques of oral storytellers. He employs common phrases—or clichés—that readers would recognize instantly, and he repeats certain words and turns of phrase again and again. These traits mimic the incremental repetitions that balladeers and other storytellers often used as memory aids. In all of these ways—through character types, symbolism, clichés, and repetition—Hawthorne's printed story pays homage to oral structures.

Yet Faulkner does away with most of that. As an American modernist, Faulkner is fascinated by the stream of a character's consciousness or thoughts, which is less about a plot or symbolism and more about trying to depict the mental complexity of a character. This technique was used earlier, but it became prevalent among the modernists.

STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS

The stream-of-consciousness approach is a technique Faulkner used fully and extensively in his novels *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying*.

The Modernist Voice

When employing stream of consciousness, a storyteller attempts to portray the continuous and unedited current of a character's mental experience through the chaos of their thoughts, moment to moment. And while a character's external surroundings might bear on those thoughts, the point is to portray a psychic truth rather than a physical one.

There are no real rules within modernist writing other than Ezra Pound's maxim to "make it new." The test, then, is whether the story has a mesmerizing voice. In other words, a compelling modernist story has a voice that expresses both what happens and why it happens. The voice allows for the story's cadences and silences, its full meaning and full immersion, to be revealed.

Part of what allowed for the rich and strange diversity of modernist voices during this period—from roughly 1900 to 1945—is that it was a period of

instability and change. Socially speaking, by the onset of WWI, the traditional American values of hard work, Christian morality, respectability, and duty were all in flux, as were conventional roles for men and women, blacks and whites, and people of a specific class status.

In addition, technological innovations abounded, with the telephone, airplane, Ford's Model T car, and the birth of Hollywood all emerging near the start of the century. The American political and economic scenes were also in various states of upheaval, and this period saw both World War I and World War II. With such head-spinning changes, short story authors looked to find new ways of representing human experience that rejected the illusion of coherence embedded within traditional narrative forms.

Seeing culture, history, memory, and human experience as nothing but a series of fragments is obvious in most modernist work. Such fragmentation was meant to show readers that reality was only a construct—a deep desire on the part of humanity to find coherence.

Gertrude Stein

An exaggerated example of modernist fragmentation comes from the American expat Gertrude Stein. Stein didn't write short stories per se. Her work might be called prose poems, microfictions, word puzzles, or linguistic collages. Yet her writings are also a good example of how modernist authors tried to represent the brokenness of the world through the fragmentation of broken prose.

A short example comes from Gertrude Stein's 1914 book *Tender Buttons*. The example is titled "A Carafe, that is a Blind Glass." Here is the story: "A kind in glass and a cousin, a spectacle and nothing strange a single hurt color and an arrangement in a system to pointing. All this and

not ordinary, not unordered in not resembling. The difference is spreading."

Even though each word is clearly English, the sequence is baffling. By refusing her audience the comfort and ease of reading normally, Stein shows that reading—and language itself—is a human construct. As such, she forces her readers to stop taking for granted that a world built out of words is either real or coherent.

Other Modernist Voices

In the first half of the 20th century, there were many other modernist voices that circulated through American culture. No two were alike. Each modernist writer hoped to shatter some taken-for-granted aspect of Americana—whether that was the English language itself or accepted ideas about who and what is truly American.

An excerpt from a story by Harlem Renaissance writer Jean Toomer serves as a juxtaposition against Stein's "Carafe." The Toomer story is titled "Fern," and you can find it in Toomer's 1923 book *Cane* or online.

Unlike Gertrude Stein's story about the glass carafe, Toomer's "Fern" is sequential and understandable. The narrator is a northerner passing through Georgia, and he tells a story about a woman named Fern. However, the story isn't one with an actual plot. Instead, the narrator circles around his subject like an essayist might, working through certain ideas, and he also evokes the metaphors and sense-based imagery of a poet.

Even his first sentence is metaphoric: "Face flowed into her eyes." It's possible that the narrator means he sees his own face flowing into Fern's eyes. But it's also possible that the term *face* refers to something held within her eyes as well.

Toward the end of the passage, Fern's eyes seem to cast a kind

of spell over the narrator, holding him, the divine, and the countryside all together. He calls her look "weird and open," as if her eyes are open enough to let all things in and yet able to contain it all, too.

Fern's dance of memory covers quite a lot. With the whole of her community, the land, and even the divine held within her eyes, Fern's body is the "tortured" one of a slave under a whip or one being "burned" by "boiling sap." It's the body of a slave woman being raped by her master and then fainting. It's the body of a child and of an old man.

As Fern takes on the memories and the sensations of all of these people, the narrator says she's "pounding her head in anguish upon the ground" and calling out to "Christ Jesus." In this way, Fern literally takes on the voices and pain of all enslaved blacks.

Yet the narrator doesn't seem to want to remember. Not only does he "feel strange" walking in the field with Fern, but after she faints and they return to her home, he leaves and goes back north. He looks out at her from the train window and does not fully understand her even then.

Ultimately, "Fern" ends with further fragmentation rather than unity, and this piece becomes a hybrid essay, poem, and story. It is plotless, and it doesn't offer a clear ending. Toomer's story stays true to modernism, with all of its ambiguity, cynicism, and refusal to adhere to specific forms or even clear ideas about what literature is and what it can do. ◆

Exercise: Make It New

This lecture's exercise asks you to take elements of fragmentation from your own life and map them onto what is now an old form: Gertrude Stein's un-stories of everyday objects.

First, choose an object that means something to you. It doesn't have to be rare or distinctive. All that matters is that you feel something about the object, though the feelings don't have to be positive.

Then, choose a larger subject matter having to do with modern-day American politics, religion, education, or culture (popular or otherwise) that you can link back to this object. If it helps, think about some of the issues that were roiling through American society during the modernist period from 1900 to 1945 and then find a current parallel for this topic.

Finally, imitate both the form and the style of Gertrude Stein's "A Carafe, that is a Blind Glass" to write about your object and to connect that object to your larger topic. You might want to look online for the whole of *Tender Buttons* to become more familiar with her un-stories.

In terms of style, play around with negations (such as *not*), use repetitions of parallel structures (such as "What is this / what is this"), and use repetitions of words. Zero in on colors, textures, and surprising contrasts.

Note that Stein's story about the carafe is only 45 words. You'll be surprised how effective you can be in so few words at representing our modern American world—and its continued fragmentation—through Stein's splintered and splintering form. To again echo the modernist American poet Ezra Pound, remember that your one criterion is to "make it new."

Contemporary American Storytelling

There is much to admire and much to dislike in the life and writing of Ernest Hemingway. Hemingway was a serious drinker, a legendary womanizer, and a paranoid depressive. The mythology surrounding Hemingway sometimes makes it difficult to celebrate his literary achievements. Yet he remains the single most influential short story writer of the last century. This lecture considers how Hemingway revolutionized the American short story and wound up influencing scores of other authors, from Jack Kerouac to Chuck Palahniuk.

HEMINGWAY'S STYLE

The admired literary critic Henry Louis Gates Jr. suggests that Hemingway's fast-paced, matter-of-fact method was an artistic reaction to the ravages of World War I, during which he and other American writers lost faith in progressive or sentimental views of humanity.

The Iceberg Principle

The writing techniques required to build a short story in Hemingway's style mostly come from the realm of journalism, in which an author employs a seemingly objective narrator, adopts a telegraphic style, adheres closely to accurate detail and descriptions, and forms the plot around spoken dialogue, much like an interview.

This decision to rely on gaps and silences to convey a character's interiority is encapsulated in what has become known as Hemingway's iceberg principle. In essence, a writer is supposed to know everything about a character's experiences, memories, beliefs, and insecurities, all of which roils below the story's surface. However, the writer reveals only one-eighth of that knowledge to the reader.

The iceberg principle of writing requires that a reader make meaning alongside a story's narrator, actively interpreting what is not there as much as what is. This method of storytelling mimics lived experience more closely, because people rarely say what they actually think or do what they most wish to do.

"The Snows of Kilimanjaro"

The opening line of one of Hemingway's best-known short stories, "The Snows of Kilimanjaro," is this: "'The marvelous thing is that it's painless,' he said. 'That's how you know when it starts.'"

In this story, the main character is Harry, a writer. He is dying of gangrene from a scratch he got two weeks earlier that he didn't take the time to disinfect. Harry's on safari in Africa with a wealthy woman named Helen.

As the story unfolds, we readers learn about Harry's regrets, including spending too much time with wealthy women and never reaching his potential as a writer. In the end, the suggestion is that Harry dies of the gangrene, although we never know for sure.

However, almost none of that information is made obvious. Readers can't see most of the iceberg that's lurking—either Helen's fear that Harry will die or Harry's regrets about his life. Instead, we're given just the one-eighth of the story that's above the waterline. That's mostly conveyed through realistic dialogue—meaning dialogue that's short, full of incomplete sentences, and filled with commonplace words and phrases.

To read a Hemingway story is like watching actual Americans on safari, or interacting at a bar, or walking along the street. Readers must try to decipher the hidden emotions of Hemingway's characters by paying attention to their speech, silences, gestures, and actions.

Hemingway's Influence: "A Worn Path"

Hemingway's method remains an amazingly flexible approach to representing all kinds of ordinary American citizens. Two specific examples serve as evidence that Hemingway's methods continue to have relevance. The first example is Eudora Welty's "A Worn Path," which was published in *The Atlantic* in 1941.

In the middle of Welty's story, her focal character—an old black woman named Phoenix Jackson—is halfway to her destination, which is a doctor's office in the small town of Natchez, Mississippi. The story maps Phoenix's difficult journey from her rural home to this town in order to get medicine for her small grandson.

An interesting moment occurs when a big black dog surprises Phoenix, and she falls into a ditch. At first, it seems she may not be able to get up, but a hunter who is a white man arrives.

Welty is able to convey Phoenix's beliefs about the hunter's racism and violent nature without actually telling us those thoughts. Rather, we have to interpret her words and actions carefully to understand that she is well aware of how dangerous her situation might be—and how she is able to turn the tables on the hunter's assumed power and privilege.

On the story's surface, the threats to Phoenix are merely physical: She accidentally falls in a ditch, there's a big stray dog roaming around, and the hunter who rescues her jokingly points his gun in her direction. Yet the real threat here is below the story's surface—part of the larger iceberg. This man is white, old Phoenix is alone with him out in the country, and the story is set in Mississippi in the years after the Great Depression, during the time of Jim Crow and rampant lynchings.

The hunter asserts his whiteness and privilege over Phoenix in saying, "I know you old colored people! Wouldn't miss going

to town to see Santa Claus!" Additionally, by calling Phoenix "Granny," the hunter erases her individuality as a human being and also turns her into the butt of his racist joke.

The hunter further asserts his dominance when he turns his gun on her without warning, asking if she's scared. Yet Phoenix pushes back against the hunter's menace, arrogance, and racism, albeit in subtle ways.

The most important action she takes is when she sees a nickel fall out of the man's pocket. (During this time, a nickel was worth the equivalent of roughly seven dollars.) Phoenix deliberately plays him, turning her attention to a stray dog. By calling the dog "big" and saying that "he ain't scared of nobody," she inherently challenges the hunter's own power; she even laughs at the dog's fearlessness, as if in admiration, to goad the hunter.

The gambit works. The hunter says, "Watch me get rid of that cur," and takes off, which allows Phoenix to bend down and scoop up that nickel. This central scene is indebted to Hemingway's fictional methods.

Welty doesn't overtly tell the reader that the hunter is racist or that Phoenix resists his potential violence against her. Instead, Welty's narrator shows these things through her characters' speech and actions as well as by what they do not say or do.

Hemingway's Influence: "Lou"

This lecture's second example of Hemingway's influence is the story "Lou" by a young man named Andrew Wildermuth. He wrote this story in an upper-level writing workshop run by this course's instructor, and the story focuses on two old men, Raymond and Ed. To hear the story in full, refer to the video or audio lecture.

Hemingway's fingerprints are all over this story. "Lou" is definitely dialogue-driven. It shows more than it tells. Its style is direct and

trim, using colloquial diction and short, simple sentences.

There may be more than one potential symbol in "Lou"—cigarettes, cards, or cans of beer are all contenders—but the one that works best is how the narrator describes Raymond's fields. Early in the story, the fields represent the futility and impotence Raymond seems to feel at the end of his life.

He sees browning stalks of corn that are close to death, and Raymond cannot control how the corn will "die" (or be harvested). Instead, the younger generation, his kids and grandkids, wind up replacing him. They are the fresh, new fields that will be planted after this harvest.

As the story progresses, additional details emphasize this bleakness. When Raymond and Ed finally talk openly about their mutual fear of death, the sound of the cicadas starts to roll over the fields.

This sound—which Ed calls "beautiful" and which the narrator claims the two men know well—signals a transition in Raymond from being fearful about death to feeling comforted by beauty, laughter, and friendship. In the end, both Ray and Ed are willing to look steadily into the full dark, "over the fields and over the woods behind them, and down towards the Bay and then out even further, to places the two men couldn't name."

Thus, the symbolism of Raymond's fields makes a significant change. It has become an undiscovered country from which no traveler returns, and yet in not knowing these nameless places, both men claim they "see" something anyway. In essence, the old men come to see that what matters most, even in death, is human connection and the memories of those connections.

Hemingway's storytelling method is so flexible and adaptable that it still has viability for current American writers who wish to grapple with the great themes of literature—death, birth, love, loss, power, powerlessness, despair, and joy—in fresh, vivid, poignant, and realistic ways. ◆

Setting or Donnée in American Short Fiction

The writer Lee K. Abbott referred to the world of a story as its *donnée*, which is a French term for "given," or what Abbott meant as "that which is given." Unlike the notion of a setting, which can be limiting, the donnée is the entire world of a story. The donnée is not just the story's backdrop or scenery but its very fabric, something that cannot be separated from plot, point of view, characters, or intent.

Establishing Donnée

In American fiction, there are certain données that recur: the frontier, the road, the desert, the farm, the field, the factory, the prison, the suburb, and so on. These are tied to the geography and infrastructure of the United States, such as those stories set in the Wild West or in a teeming, modern city.

A writer of short stories must quickly and credibly establish the donnée. Unlike a novelist who has the time to invent a wide-ranging and elaborate donnée, a short story writer must know the whole of his donnée and then, through very careful choices, show but one or two moments from this world.

Indoor and Outdoor Examples of Données

This lecture now turns to some examples of how master American storytellers evoke wildly distinct, credible données. The first two examples are linked insofar as they both have female narrator-characters, and both are interested in how the psyche itself can be liberated or constricted. In addition, one creates an outdoor donnée and the other an indoor one, which will allow us to see how both exterior and interior landscapes can be metaphors for the human mind.

The outdoor example is from a story by Leslie Marmon Silko, a Laguna Pueblo writer. The donnée starts to be built right at the opening of her best-known short story, called "Yellow Woman," which begins:

> My thigh clung to his with dampness, and I watched the sun rising up through the tamaracks and willows. The small brown water birds came to the river and hopped across the mud, leaving brown scratches in the alkali-white crust.

The central tension in this story is the line between reality and mythology. However, despite the mythic nature of this tale, the donnée is relentlessly realistic. Note how careful the narrator is with her nouns, using specific terms for the trees, birds, and even the mud crust.

The second example is from a piece by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, a 19th- and early 20th-century writer. In her best-known story, "The Yellow Wallpaper," Gilman evokes the donnée from the start:

> It is a big, airy room, the whole floor nearly, with windows that look all ways, and air and sunshine galore. It was a nursery first and then playroom and gymnasium, I should judge; for the windows are barred for little children, and there are rings and things in the walls.

At first, this room seems welcoming, with the narrator describing the space as a "big, airy room" with "sunshine galore." Quickly, though, the tone shifts, especially once the narrator reveals that the "windows that look all ways" are "barred." All of a sudden, this large, inviting room is a prison.

After the excerpted section, the narrator goes on to focus on the room's repellent wallpaper, which becomes the representation of her imprisonment. She says it's "sprawling," "unclean," "dull," "lurid," and "sickly." It commits "every artistic sin."

In the end, the narrator admits to hating her surroundings, which reveals that she hates her circumstance and her confinement to a bed in the room, where she can only reach as far as the bald patches that ring her headboard.

This room becomes a symbol of the story's critique against the so-called rest cure therapy of Victorian physicians. This practice, in supposedly encouraging mental health, often led to mental illness among the women who had to endure it. In this way, then, Gilman's donnée is crucial to her story's political purpose.

Along with being an accomplished writer, Charlotte Perkins Gilman was also a sociologist, magazine editor, novelist, and social reformer, especially on behalf of middle-class women.

Donnée and the World

This lecture's third example comes from "The Martian Agent, a Planetary Romance," written by Michael Chabon. The story features steampunk elements, and it begins:

> The brothers first encountered a land sloop on the night, late in the summer of 1876, that one hunted their father down. It picked up their trail in Natchitoches country, two miles from Fort Wellington, at the ragged southwestern border of the Louisiana Territories and of the British Empire itself.

Chabon works hard to make the marriage of historical and science fiction seem plausible. He introduces a "land sloop" with a "steel throat," which is pure fantasy. It is an enormous steam-driven coach, and Chabon reveals that it is "sleek and canine, a steel greyhound powered by a hundred-horsepower Bucephalus engine." However, Chabon has done his homework in researching the topography, the material culture, and the politics of the United States in 1876.

Within this complex donnée, Chabon's narrator is able to heighten a sense of fear as a family attempts to flee. They are plunging headlong into a dark wilderness at the edge of an ambiguous borderland. A fearful land sloop pursues them, and insects and amphibians surround them. In sum, the world itself knows that death and destruction await.

The Donnée's Influence

The donnée of a short story strongly influences the kind of tale that may be told. The donnée is bound up with every other fictional element. It's a whole world that's usually created in the first few paragraphs and then must be sustained—and kept consistent—throughout the rest of the tale. Thus, when choosing a donnée, the top rule for a writer is to make sure that it serves the story.

A writer's choice of donnée influences the range of actions any character can engage in. It also limits and defines a character's use of language, educational level, cultural history, and overall personality traits. For instance, a character in a metropolis will have different employment options from one living in a tiny town.

A story's donnée also restricts the advancement of a plot or what characters do next. The story's world condition limits the way the entire plot unfolds. For instance, in American road stories, what the characters do next has everything to do with the road, although the most interesting part of the story is who or what they find along the way.

Exercise: Writing from a Photograph

This lecture's exercise asks you to write the opening of a story out of a photograph. In the writing of that opening, you will inevitably create a donnée. You have two photographs to choose from.

The first comes from Michael Forsberg, an American conservationist photographer. The photograph is titled "Whitman Road."

You can view "Whitman Road" in the video or online.

In this image, Forsberg uses the vanishing point of the horizon to create a visual invitation. You can almost hear the road beckoning to a viewer to step through the frame and onto this dark, rich road that cuts so perfectly through the golden wheat fields. This is a photograph for a traveler—just as Chabon's family were a group of desperate travelers, moving swiftly through the night on their own dark road, fleeing the land sloop that was chasing them.

The other image is by Gabriela Bulisova, and it is part of her series "The Option of Last Resort," an exhibition of portraits of Iraqis living in Washington DC. In almost every case, Bulisova photographs people who had to flee their home countries due to violence, and yet, in the United States, they live in hidden exile. In this particular black-and-white photograph (SEE PAGE 67), the figure is partially hidden, wrapped up in the gauze of a pair of sheer curtains while she looks out a window.

The single lamp behind her is the only artificial light in a sea of black that is this room. Otherwise, a viewer can only glimpse certain features. This photograph brings to mind Gilman's "Yellow Wallpaper," in which the outside world is brought inside at least a little, but the person inside cannot actually go outside.

Your task is to examine closely the people, places, and things in one of these two photographs. You can also use a photograph of your own choosing, but with a similar theme. Write all elements of the photograph down in a single paragraph, with as much detail as you can muster.

Make a list of all of the nouns in the picture, but be precise. Consider the colors, the grays, and the places of light and dark. Consider the objects you can see, whether human-made or of nature. Consider their texture and shape.

Next, consider the perspective you've been given—the angle through which you're being asked to look. What difference do these angles make? What do you notice more or less? What do you notice the more you look?

Give your notes on the people, places, and things some attitude. Come up with adjectives that describe the mood or tone of these photographs. Is the world of the image hopeful or threatening, light or dark, or vibrant or muted? Is it melancholy or joyful? Does it push you away or pull you in?

Now, using your precise nouns and adjectives, write a paragraph in which you describe the perspective of the photograph, using a narrator of your own devising. Is it a first-person speaker? Is it a third-person narrator? The choice is yours. Once you have written your paragraph that delineates this photograph's perspective, you will have created a donnée.

Finally, take a step back from your paragraph and look at it again. Read it out loud. You can also have someone else read it to you. Then ask yourself: What is the world of this story? What has now been established in this opening? That is your donnée—the subject of your beginning. ◆

FROM "THE OPTION OF LAST RESORT"
—GABRIELA BULISOVA

The Use of Detail in American Short Fiction

Telling stories is all about conveying human truths. As a result, a story's success—that is, its ability to excite empathy within a reader—has everything to do with the facts or details a writer selects. If the writer has orchestrated the details well enough to give the illusion of inner life, then the characters will become something more than words on a page: They will become both real and compelling.

Factual details must be considered carefully in terms of whether they contribute to the overall intent of a story. The use of any details must be purposeful, not random.

A Deluge of Details

An author can take specific facts from the real world and transform them into literary truth, but how does a writer know which facts or details are significant? How can an author tell when such details become too dense, overpowering, abstract, or trivial—and thus insignificant?

To begin to answer those questions, this lecture turns to part of a story that takes on a particular moment from American history. The story is "One of *Star Wars*, One of *Doom*" by Lee K. Abbott, and it fictionalizes the Columbine High School massacre. This mass shooting happened in 1999. Two seniors from Littleton, Colorado—Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold—killed 12 students and one teacher before killing themselves.

The section of Abbott's story relevant to this lecture comes about midway through. It's the moment right before Harris and Klebold—whom Abbott calls by the aliases Tango and Whiskey—are about to walk down to the high school and start their slaughter. For the full passage, refer to the audio or video lecture.

It features a deluge of details. For instance, the passage specifies the boys' weaponry, mentioning the "Stevens pump-action, sawed-off shotgun" and the "Hi-Point 9-mm semiautomatic carbine with the sixteen-inch barrel." The hyper-detailed descriptions of these firearms show the careful planning that has gone into this moment. The boys are scarier for being more interested in their firepower than they are in the people they're about to kill.

Abbott's narrator also suggests that Whiskey, the leader, is smart in surprising ways. Whiskey makes allusions to the Bible's book of Revelation, Dante's *Inferno*, two exceptional military figures (Attila the Hun and the

Black Prince), and T. S. Eliot's modernist poem *The Waste Land*.

These allusions, however, are interspersed with pop culture references. Whiskey eats Cap'n Crunch cereal. He knows Klingons, so he must have grown up watching *Star Trek* reruns. His reference to the Wicked Witch of the West signals that he has probably seen the famous movie adaptation of *The Wizard of Oz* from 1939, and he quotes a well-known R.E.M. song.

The Purpose of the Detail Deluge

In having all of these highbrow and lowbrow details inside Whiskey's consciousness, Abbott accomplishes two goals at once. First, it strangely humanizes Whiskey, who is initially dehumanized by using a military code name and by being so excited about his firearms.

The detail deluge also speaks to a wider theme beyond Whiskey, one that would be lost without all these allusions and historical facts. The title is "One of *Star Wars*, One of *Doom*," suggesting that Abbott is pointing outside of the story, to other teenage boys beyond Harris and Klebold. In other words, the actual characters from the real world—Harris and Klebold—should be seen as interpretations of these boys, even as archetypes of them.

The Columbine shooting sparked serious national debates about gun control laws and the level of violence allowed in gaming.

Abbott is trying to move from the demonized, two-dimensional accounts of school shooters in the mass media to a more humanizing view of them. In this case, Abbott's story uses all of these details to try to demonstrate that young men who become school shooters are products of their culture—of *Star Wars* and *Doom* and everything else. That implicates every American—including the reader—in the making of such murderers.

The facts and the detail deluge of Abbott's story become significant—even if the narrator's style is off-putting to some readers. The form of the tale is symbolic of the larger cultural story Abbott is trying to convey.

For readers and writers of American short fiction, the question should simply be this: Do the facts and details within a story reveal something crucial and credible about characters and/or about US culture? If the answer is yes, then those details are significant. They lead to a larger understanding of human truth. If not, then the details and facts are insignificant filler.

Details in "Recitatif"

This lecture now looks at a small section of Toni Morrison's only published short story, which is called "Recitatif." Morrison's story is a series of moments between two characters, Twyla and Roberta, who wind up meeting five times over the course of their lives, from childhood to adulthood. One is white and the other is black, though Morrison never reveals which is which.

This lecture's example comes from the second time these two women come into contact. They run into each other at a Howard Johnson's where Twyla is working as a server, and Roberta shows up as a customer. For the full excerpt, refer to the audio or video lecture.

Unlike in the Lee K. Abbott story, Morrison's details are less about American popular culture or history. It's true that she does reference Howard Johnson's—a motel-and-restaurant chain that started solely as restaurants in the late 1920s before adding motels as well in the 1950s. By the start of World War II, there were 200 Howard Johnson's restaurants nationwide.

This detail becomes significant in a cultural way because, in the 1950s and 1960s, Howard Johnson's restaurants continued to practice segregation even after *Brown vs. the Board of Education* struck down segregation in public schools in 1954. Thus, this detail creates a donnée in which these two characters—one white, one black—are interacting in an environment with a racially charged past.

Later, details of Roberta's hair and outfit signal that we're in the late 1960s. Readers discover that Roberta and two men—who are "smothered in head and facial hair"—are making their way to California to meet Jimi Hendrix, which further establishes the decade.

The details about Roberta's clothing and makeup, though, are significant to establishing her as distinct from Twyla. Twyla has on an apron. She's in the uniform of a waitress, and she's working the all-night shift at a chain restaurant. In fact, when Hendrix is mentioned, it's clear that Twyla has no idea who he is.

Thus, the clothing becomes a way to heighten the distance between these two characters, who were once good friends. This distance is significant because the rest of the story will turn on how Twyla and Roberta come to distrust each other, especially amid the historical backdrop of civil rights and practices of bussing to integrate schools—a political decision that these two women will find themselves on opposite sides of the next time they meet up, when both are mothers.

Exercise: Using Significant Details

This lecture closes with a simple exercise that can be helpful if you want to work on distinguishing between what facts or details might be significant for creating a story's donnée or a character's interiority. First, decide upon a specific moment from American history that you want to work with, just as Abbott chose to write about the Columbine massacre and Morrison selected the period of civil rights.

Then, write down everything you know about that period of American history. List details that range from bits of historical information to details of how people dressed, spoke, and acted, as well as details of popular culture and national politics.

Next, conjure a character who will be living and doing things in this historical moment, being as precise as you can be about this character's age, gender, race, ethnicity, body type, occupation, clothing, manner of speaking, and where the character hails from.

Finally, go back to your list and look at it through the eyes of this newly created character. If you inhabit this character's psyche in an authentic way, you'll quickly understand which facts on your list will become significant to this person and which ones will be insignificant. This exercise will produce the material you need to write a short piece of fiction that puts this character in action within this historical donnée.

As you write, think about how the facts you bring in about this moment in American history speak to the truth of how this character thinks, feels, and acts. If you insist to yourself that any decision you make to bring in a fact must be directly tied to this character's inner life, all of your story's facts will be significant. ◆

Character: Who You Are in the Dark

Whether you are an aspiring writer or someone who wants to know why certain characters live with you long after you finish a story, it's important to understand how writers create complex characters. In order for fictional characters to be both vital and true, they must at times remove their daylight masks, showing readers their nighttime desires and fears. And fiction writers must follow their characters into this dark if they hope to make readers care about and identify with the people they create.

Character Complexity

Many famous literary figures are failures as complex characters. For instance, Odysseus and Daisy Buchanan serve as powerful archetypes, but as people who leap off the page with their humanity, they fail. Stock characters have their place in certain kinds of stories, such as allegories, romances, legends, fairytales, and myths. But in literary short fiction, such figures are ultimately boring.

There are countless examples of knights in shining armor, evil villains who chuckle and say, "I've got you now," and helpless, beautiful women tied to train tracks. This is the stuff of melodrama, not drama. In melodrama, characters are exaggerated, the plot is sensational, and everyone's actions are predictable. The focus is outward, not inward. We're meant to enjoy the spectacle.

In drama, though, the audience is meant to come to understand the psyche of a perplexing yet compelling human being, such as Prince Hamlet, Jane Eyre, Clarissa Dalloway, or the Invisible Man. The focus is inward, not outward.

"A Temporary Matter"

This lecture now turns to "A Temporary Matter," which is an excellent piece of American fiction by Jhumpa Lahiri. In the story, Lahiri resists melodrama and offers up the dark of her main character to make him fully complex, modern, and American.

In this story, Shukumar and Shoba, a married couple, have recently lost their first baby. It was stillborn, and as a result, the two have become "experts at avoiding each other." The main part of the story occurs over the course of five days during which the couple's electricity is

Many well-known literary heroes, villains, and secondary characters are actually little more than a collection of clichés. Examples include bad boys, evil twins, and unceasingly heroic knights.

"cut off for one hour, beginning at eight P.M." in order to repair a line that went down in the last snowstorm. The notice that informs them of this inconvenience explains that this loss of electricity will be a "temporary matter."

Beginning the first evening, Shukumar cooks dinner. Shoba compliments her husband's cooking, and then she suggests that they should tell each other something they've never shared before, akin to a game her grandmother's family used to play in India when the power would go out. Shukumar agrees, and on this initial night as well as the subsequent ones, the two share small secrets in the dark.

This intimacy connects them, and Shukumar remembers the way his spouse was before the baby was born. He feels close to her again and looks forward to exchanging confessions each evening. However, as the days progress, Shukumar also starts to worry, realizing that his wife might reveal something difficult, even destructive.

On the final night of scheduled blackouts, Shoba reveals that she has been hunting for an apartment, has found one, and is going to move out. Shukumar's fears are realized. Lahiri writes: "He was relieved and yet he was sickened. This was what she'd been trying to tell him for the past four evenings. This was the point of her game."

Once he discovers that his wife is leaving him, Shukumar must decide how to react. Shoba had wanted the baby's sex to be a secret, and she assumed that information was unknown to both of them, as she'd asked the doctor not to reveal it.

Shukumar, however, had arrived early enough to see the baby, and he held the baby for a time before the child was cremated. He reveals to Shuba that the baby had been a boy. At the end of the story, the two are at their table. The story concludes: "They wept together, for the things they now knew."

This moment is simultaneously the climax and denouement of "A Temporary Matter." In it, readers are just as surprised as Shoba to learn that Shukumar held his dead son. However, it is Shukumar's horrible yet human desire to hurt Shoba that matters most—his powerful desire for emotional revenge.

Feelings, Actions, and Thoughts

It would be easy for readers to be appalled at Shukumar's decision to wound his wife, yet Lahiri is careful to portray him through precise feelings, actions, and thoughts that allow readers to understand, and perhaps even empathize with, Shukumar's broken psychological state. To reveal Shukumar's complex feelings, Lahiri shows these through a concise flashback, a careful line of dialogue, and commonplace but meaningful actions.

In the flashback, Shukumar remembers what happened at the hospital. Lahiri resists clichés that would turn this moment into melodrama. Shukumar doesn't clench his teeth; his cheeks aren't wet with streaming tears. Instead, his actions are simple and straightforward.

Once again, Shukumar's words are simple and straightforward rather than exaggerated or theatrical; he describes the baby's features in close detail. Additionally, Lahiri allows her

readers to see into Shukumar's most private thoughts. When he admits that six months ago he still loved his wife but that now he has lost his love for her, we are given full access to his dark.

He doesn't speak this insight out loud. He thinks it, which means that the readers, and not Shoba, share this terrible knowledge with him. Shukumar's thoughts as well as the feelings that come with them are completely wretched and yet completely real. They are truthful to the human rather than expected or formulaic.

Three Fiction-Writing Errors

This lecture now pivots to discuss three classic errors that burgeoning writers often make. The first error is trying to save a character—that is, protecting the character from bad events.

If writers are going to discover the dark of their characters, it's imperative that bad things happen to the characters. Bad things put pressure on characters, allowing them to reveal their true selves. And if writers don't allow bad things to happen to good characters—or don't allow hateful characters to be empathetic—characters' feelings will ring false, their dark will be hidden, and the story will fail.

The second classic error is focusing too much on plot. In the best stories, plot is what characters do next. It is never an end unto itself. A plot is what happens, but in literary fiction, the writer's job is to consider both the why and how, meaning both why and how characters move through that plot.

Writers must scrutinize each and every action of their characters, from the seemingly small actions, like putting on socks, to charged ones, like pointing a gun in someone's face. Writers must also ask a single question: Is this action in keeping with the character's dark?

Locating emotion in a character's actions—in the turn of a wrist, the arch of an eyebrow, or a deliberately mistimed punch—is one of the best ways a writer has to reveal a character's true feelings. In addition to actions, a writer has access to a character's thoughts either through direct dialogue or interior monologue.

However, there is a significant danger for writers when imparting a character's inner thoughts. The story may become one in which characters tell everything and show nothing—the third classic error. American author A. B. Guthrie Jr. advises this approach:

> Show, don't tell. … [This is] all-important, more important than anything else. … If you show, rather than tell, you will excite the reader's imagination.

An example may help explain exactly what Guthrie means. In Suzanne Collins's best-selling novel *The Hunger Games*, the heroine Katniss Everdeen has a dream the night before she is sent to the training center to learn survival skills. Katniss explains:

> My slumbers are filled with disturbing dreams. The face of the redheaded girl intertwines with gory images from earlier Hunger Games, with my mother withdrawn and unreachable, with Prim emaciated and terrified. I bolt up screaming for my father to run as the mine explodes into a million deadly bits of light.

Here, Collins leaves nothing to the imagination. Katniss simply tells the reader everything that's going on in her head. The approach keeps the reader at arm's length, skimming clichéd images and envisioning little. This is summarizing, rather than dramatizing, the dark.

Exercise: Finding the Dark

This lecture closes with an exercise that is meant to help you find the dark of your characters. The exercise is a series of questions that a fictional character is supposed to ask himself or herself when the lights are out and the character is in bed. In this moment, the character can potentially shed the masks that he or she wears all day long.

While these questions are in the second person, they are directed toward the character, not the writer. The point is to do your best to inhabit this character's psyche. Here are the questions:

- Who are you when the lights are off, when no one else is around to see you or hear you or know what you're thinking? Do you worry? Do you pray?
- What do you fear? What do you hate? What do you love?
- What are you vain about? What do you desire?
- What do you covet from a friend? From a family member? From a coworker? From a movie star?
- What would you give everything you have to own or to be? ◆

American Dialogue and Interior Monologue

The importance of good dialogue in fiction cannot be overstated. Dialogue brings a story to life and makes it hum with vitality. If a short story writer cannot rivet readers in the back-and-forth between his characters, then those characters, and the story itself, will remain formal, even forced. These are the two rules for learning how to craft good dialogue:

1. Authors must listen carefully to how actual people talk.

2. Authors must also understand that story dialogue isn't the same as the real thing.

AVOIDING PITFALLS

In trying to re-create an authentic American voice, it's possible to go too far by using clichés or slang that can turn a character into a caricature. To avoid this, do research. For instance, even if your character lives far in the past, you might find letters, journals, and sound recordings of interviews or speeches from the character's region and time period helpful.

It can also be tricky for a writer to take on the dialect of a group that speaks in a way that is distinct from how the writer speaks, especially when trying to represent Americans from a variety of racial, economic, and ethnic backgrounds. When attempting to make a character's dialogue sound real, it's vital that a writer distinguish between lived reality and the version of reality provided by mass media. The dialects of reality TV and social media are curated dialects, meant to evoke stereotypes that may be unconscious, even to the writer.

Listening Well

Learning how to bring real-world speech into the fabricated world of fiction—and being able to recognize terrific dialogue when you read it—is fundamental yet difficult. It requires listening to real-life dialogue. Anne Lamott, an American novelist and memoirist, has put it this way: "[Good dialogue] is a matter of ear, just as finding the right physical detail is a matter of eye."

To listen well, writers need to spend time eavesdropping as people talk in an airport, on a bus, standing in line, eating in a restaurant, sitting in a meeting, or gossiping at a baseball game. Lurking and listening is the only way to catch the pace and pulse of spoken language. It is also key to understanding how and why people don't sound the same and picking up on their silences as much as their speech.

Making It Real

To write dialogue well, and to recognize good dialogue when you come across it, you must listen to real talk—but you must also make sure that this talk is, indeed, real. For instance, as Anne Lamott points out, dialogue that relies too heavily on dialect can be exhausting to read.

An example that speaks to such exhaustion comes from Harriet Beecher Stowe's 19th-century novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. This is part of a scene right after a runaway slave named Eliza has dared to jump across the Ohio River from Kentucky into Ohio by leaping on a series of ice floes, her newborn baby clutched to her breast.

A slave trader and two of Eliza's fellow slaves have followed her to try and catch her. The three are talking after having witnessed her acrobatic feat. Eliza's friends are happy that she's managed to slip free. Here is the passage:

> "Wal, now," said Sam, scratching his head, "I hope Mas'r'll 'scuse us tryin' dat ar road. Don't think I feel spry enough for dat ar, no way!" and Sam gave a hoarse chuckle.
>
> "*You* laugh!" said the trader, with a growl.
>
> "Lord bless you, Mas'r, I couldn't help it, now," said Sam, giving way to the long pent-up delight of his soul. "She looked so curi's a leapin' and springin'—ice a crackin'—and only to hear her,—plump! ker chunk! ker splash! Spring! Lord! how she goes it!" and Sam and Andy laughed till the tears rolled down their cheeks.

This dialect is hard to read, and it also rings false. Stowe was a white, middle-class writer who lived in the North, and yet she was trying to capture the tempo and intonations of Southern black slaves. To do so, she copied the ways in which Southern dialects were represented in the literature and newspapers of the time—and, thus, she traded in obvious racial stereotypes.

A contrasting example comes from Toni Morrison's novel *Jazz,* a book that also tries to follow the rhythms of black speech. In this case, the scene is in Harlem in the late 1920s. This bit comes from a scene in which a teenage girl asks another woman to watch after her baby brother in a carriage while the girl runs into her house to get a phonograph record.

When the girl comes back outside, she doesn't immediately see that this woman has picked up the baby and walked down the street. The girl panics, and trying to get help, she starts talking to a group of neighbors who are there:

"She who?" somebody asked. "Who took him?"

"A woman! I was gone one minute. Not even one! I asked her … I said … and she said okay … !"

"You left a whole live baby with a stranger to go get a record?" The disgust in the man's voice brought tears to the girl's eyes. "I hope your mama tears you up and down."

Morrison uses the rhythms of certain phrases, a few instances of colloquial diction, and sentence fragments to achieve a sense of dialect without fatiguing the reader. Morrison also avoids drawing the reader's attention entirely to how the dialogue is written rather than what the dialogue is saying.

Interior Monologue

Direct dialogue is one of the two main tools a writer has to put a character's speech patterns to the page. The other is interior monologue—that is, speech that is in the head rather than in the mouth of a character. American authors use interior monologue in their stories so that readers can climb inside a character's thoughts, which is nothing short of thrilling.

However, all of the difficulties of direct dialogue apply to interior monologue. A writer has to try to make constructed thoughts on the page sound and feel like the contemplations and reflections of real people.

An example of a distinct kind of dialect comes from a story titled "Girl," by Jamaica Kincaid. This dialect occurs in the head of a single character, the girl referenced by the title, who is from Antigua in the Caribbean. Thus, Kincaid's dialect becomes a form of interior monologue—even though this character has more than one voice rambling around inside her head.

Kincaid's entire short story is presented in interior monologue. The following is an example that provides a taste for how the whole story works:

> Wash the white clothes on Monday and put them on the stone heap; wash the color clothes on Tuesday and put them on the clothesline to dry; don't walk bare-head in the hot sun.

While the reader is inside the girl's consciousness the entire time, the voice that's most prominent isn't her own but her mother's. Her mother's voice demands attention. It's bossy, with imperative statements starting with verbs such as *wash*, *cook*, and *soak*.

Her mother's voice is also accusatory and negational, especially after the passage quoted above.

This mother's relationship to the main character is negative. She's controlling and assumes the worst about her daughter.

However, as the story unfolds, the content of the mother's statements changes. Among other advice, the daughter is told how to sweep a floor, how to sew a button, how to avoid speaking to wharf-rat boys, and how to have sex with a man (and that it's OK to give up if it's not working).

As such, it becomes clear that the girl is remembering commands and advice she has received from her mother over many years, from the time she was a young girl until she has become a young woman. In this way, Kincaid is able to use interior monologue as a means of collapsing the whole of the girl's coming of age into a two-page story.

Twice, however, the reader hears the girl's voice. Kincaid uses italics to make these instances clear.

For instance, at one point the girl asks, *"But what if the baker won't let me feel the bread?"*

In this way, a reader can sense the girl's reactions to her mother's overbearingness—the way she speaks back, at least in her own head. The sentences signaling these reactions begin with the conjunction *but*, which suggests a small but important resistance—that is, a way in which the girl questions the mother and her assumptions.

The reader comes to understand that this girl has internalized much of her mother's teachings, and yet she is also trying to establish her own sense of self.

The story offers up a particular and realistic portrayal of an old American story: the ways in which parents have a deep psychological hold on their children and the ways in which these children break away from their parents to become adults.

Exercise: Lurk and Listen

This lecture's exercise involves lurking and listening to at least two people having a conversation. You can try this at places such as a coffee shop, dining area, an athletic event, or a store. Ideally, you will lurk around people you don't know, or at least people you don't know well.

Sit somewhere close to the speakers and jot down or type everything you hear. The end goal is to produce a transcript of the dialogue. Try to capture everything, including elements like "ah" and "um," repeated words and phrases, interruptions, and non sequiturs. Label each speaker with random letters or numbers rather than with names.

Then, analyze which parts are story worthy and which wouldn't work well in a story. The story-worthy dialogue gets at a problem of some kind rather than acting as boring filler dialogue.

Finally, build a scene around your lurking dialogue. Do not add to your transcript in any way. However, feel free to cut lines. You can put what the actual people said into the mouth of any character.

This exercise shows that there is nothing like putting actual speech into the mouths of your characters. However, writers also make careful choices about what their characters say, which is linked to what the characters do. ◆

Standing Apart: The Third Person

When choosing a point of view for a story, it is crucial to think about both who is telling the story and why the story may be best told from that perspective. In American short fiction, the third person is the most common point of view. Adopting a third-person narrator allows a writer to create an illusion of objectivity. It presents a speaker who is both inside of and standing apart from the tale.

The Advantages of the Third Person

If a character makes bizarre decisions or is untrustworthy, a third-person narrator can convey such behavior in a way that seems credible. In addition, if writers use a third-person perspective, they also get a bonus: the narrator-character.

Occasionally, this narrator-character is actually named and given a personality as a separate character. In most instances, though, this narrator-character is nameless and almost invisible, which means the writer can rely on the story's speaker to come across as honest.

Additionally, a third-person narrator can have knowledge that eludes the characters themselves. Even if a narrator isn't omniscient, the narrator might still have insight into the behaviors, motives, and consequences of what characters say or do.

The third-person point of view has three distinct variations. These are the limited, objective, and omniscient points of view.

The Limited Third Person

In his story "The Things They Carried," Tim O'Brien chooses to tell his tale about an American platoon during the Vietnam War in a third-person limited point of view.

Here's the beginning of the piece:

> First Lieutenant Jimmy Cross carried letters from a girl named Martha, a junior at Mount Sebastian College in New Jersey. They were not love letters, but Lieutenant Cross was hoping, so he kept them folded in plastic at the bottom of his rucksack. In the late afternoon, after a day's march, he would dig his foxhole, wash his hands under a canteen, unwrap the letters, hold them with the tips of his fingers, and spend the last hour of light pretending.

This perspective allows readers to watch Lieutenant Cross's actions. We see him dig a foxhole, wash his hands with a canteen, and then hold Martha's letters with his fingertips—a gesture that demonstrates their preciousness.

On the other hand, though, almost everything else we learn about Jimmy Cross comes from inside the character's own head—especially his fantasies about Martha, in which the narrator imagines, wonders, and pretends right alongside this character.

As this opening suggests, O'Brien's story is one that will move from a place of innocence to one of experience. As a soldier on foreign soil who could die at any moment, Jimmy Cross will come to learn that the optimistic and naïve America contained in Martha's chatty letters is poisonous to him.

In this way, then, O'Brien's choice of a limited, third-person perspective also mirrors the complicated view that Americans continue to have of the Vietnam War. As citizens, many of us wish to honor Vietnam veterans, and yet at the same time, our historians call the war a failure.

The limited third-person point of view is the perspective used most often in American short fiction. Writers and readers alike are drawn to its elasticity: It weaves in and out of a single character's mind and the wider landscape of the whole story.

The Objective Third Person

The second variation of the third person is called the objective point of view. Although second in popularity among American writers, it is a close second, largely because it follows another genre that readers have enjoyed for centuries: the stage play.

This lecture's example of the objective third person comes from a classic story by Ernest Hemingway titled "Hills Like White Elephants."

Like O'Brien's piece, this one is also about Americans abroad, although this time it's a young couple traveling in Spain. The story begins with a man and a girl sitting at a table on a hot day.

They are waiting for a connecting train to Madrid, and they eventually have this conversation:

"What should we drink?" the girl asked. She had taken off her hat and put it on the table.

"It's pretty hot," the man said.

"Let's drink beer."

"Dos cervezas," the man said into the curtain.

"Big ones?" a woman asked from the doorway.

"Yes. Two big ones."

The woman brought two glasses of beer and two felt pads. She put the felt pads and the beer glasses on the table and looked at the man and the girl. The girl was looking off at the line of hills. They were white in the sun and the country was brown and dry.

"They look like white elephants," she said.

"I've never seen one," the man [said and] drank his beer.

As opposed to using a limited third-person point of view, in this story, Hemingway's perspective doesn't allow readers to get inside anyone's head.

The effect is theatrical: It's as if readers are watching a play, and the characters' motivations, fears, hopes, and desires must be revealed through what they say and do.

In this case, readers know that these two characters are a man and a girl and that they're on their way to Madrid, waiting for a connecting train. It's hot, and so they order two big beers and sit in the shade to cool off.

However, there is much more to see. For instance, the first thing the girl says is in the form of a question, whereas the man speaks in declarative sentences. The man is also the one who places their order. With these clues, the reader can come to the conclusion that the man is the dominant one in this relationship. He's older, and he speaks with authority. The woman is less sure of herself. She's younger and asks questions. However, she is also more imaginative than he is, comparing the hills to white elephants.

These differences become crucial when Hemingway's narrator reveals the central problem of this story. The woman, whose nickname is Jig, is pregnant. Jig wants to have the baby, and she shows that wish by imagining a life of lush fields and playful hills in the shape of elephants.

The man, though, sees this pregnancy as an unwanted gift, much like the regifted presents people bring to white elephant parties, hoping to offload them. The story focuses on the couple's conversation about what to do and their very different desires for the future.

Hemingway's decision to use the objective third-person perspective matches his story's tone of distance and displacement. In Spain, these two Americans are displaced from their home country, and they also spend the whole of this story at a way station between cities, a literal space of displacement. There is also great distance between the man and the woman emotionally.

The Omniscient Third Person

The omniscient third-person point of view is arguably the most challenging variety. The narrator functions like a god, able to access everyone's thoughts and feelings at all times. A writer must figure out how to manage the chaos of an all-knowing, all-seeing narrator, who is constantly deciding which character's mind to follow and which to ignore.

This lecture's example comes from a well-known short story by O. Henry—the pen name of William Sydney Porter, a writer known for his surprise endings. Again, it is a story about a relationship between an American couple, in this case a married one. The piece is called "The Gift of the Magi," and it begins:

> One dollar and eighty-seven cents. That was all. She had put it aside, one cent and then another and then another, in her careful buying of meat and other food. Della counted it three times. One dollar and eighty-seven cents. And the next day would be Christmas.
>
> There was nothing to do but fall on the bed and cry. So Della did it.
>
> While the lady of the home is slowly growing quieter, we can look at the home. Furnished rooms at a cost of $8 a week. There is little more to say about it.

Here, the omniscient narrator wants to gain the reader's confidence, and does so by revealing something that Della herself may not want to tell: that she and her husband Jim are living in a rented apartment that isn't very nice. The narrator uses the first-person plural term *we* to invite this behind-the-curtain look.

Additionally, when the narrator confides, "There is little more to say about it," it's as if this narrator is gossiping.

An omniscient narrator is never invisible. This narrator is a stand-in for the author himself, and it's as if the reader gets to see all of the buttons and levers of the story's machinery.

The third-person point of view is always an active perspective. It lends itself to showing over telling, which simply means that the narrator is dramatizing rather than summarizing the events of the story.

"SADIE PFEIFER, A COTTON MILL SPINNER, LANCASTER, SOUTH CAROLINA, 1908"
—LEWIS HINE

Exercise: Third-Person Perils

This lecture concludes with an exercise on the perils of the third-person point of view. To begin, look at the photograph titled "Sadie Pfeifer, a Cotton Mill Spinner, Lancaster, South Carolina, 1908" (SEE PAGE 97). The image was taken by Lewis Hine, who was instrumental in changing child labor laws with his photographs of American children at work.

Hine's photograph of Sadie standing in front of the cotton loom is taken in a way that makes her look small against a giant machine. The industrial bobbins in the forefront take up most of the frame, whereas Sadie is put right in the middle of the viewer's eyesight, which makes her look diminished and vulnerable.

The exercise asks you to give your full attention to Sadie and turn her into a character. Specifically, write three paragraphs about Sadie, adhering to the following directions:

- First, write only about what you can see Sadie doing and perhaps what you can hear her saying to herself out loud as she works. Keep this writing to a single paragraph.
- Then, rewrite this paragraph and jump into Sadie's head, explaining her thoughts as she's standing in front of this mammoth machine—but do not use the word *I*. Write "Sadie thinks" or "Sadie imagines."
- Finally, rewrite your paragraph one more time, and now have your narrator speak directly to the readers, talking about how readers should feel about Sadie and her situation.

Next, reread your three paragraphs and note what the third-person perspective cannot achieve. Because the first paragraph is in the objective third-person point of view, a reader is barred from understanding this character from within, which severely restricts understanding Sadie's emotions, ideas, desires, and fears.

In the second paragraph, although the third-person limited narrator jumps into Sadie's head now and then, a cool distance remains. The narrator-character stands between the reader and Sadie at all times.

Finally, in the third paragraph, the omniscient narrator becomes prescriptive, drawing attention to itself. Because this narrator knows so much more than Sadie can or does, an omniscient narrator can potentially suck all of the air out of a story.

With these perils of the third person in mind, it's now up to you—if you so choose—to take your paragraphs about Sadie, select one of the third-person points-of-view, and write a short story about her and her living conditions. In doing so, you'll be participating in yet another tradition of American short fiction: stories that try to capture and convey the struggles of vulnerable populations, such as children. ◆

Standing Close: The First and Second Person

The first-person perspective is well suited for American stories. This is because Americans hunger for the voice of witness—the soldier recently returned from war, the neighbor who thinks she saw something fishy going on next door, or the man who recorded a police officer kicking a protester on his cell phone. This lecture looks at that perspective as well as the second-person perspective.

The Autobiography

Ever since the first American short stories were published in the late 18th century, the first-person approach has been a hallmark of many tales, from Edgar Allan Poe's unhinged murderer in "The Tell-Tale Heart" to Toni Morrison's complicated "I" narrator, named Twyla, in her short story "Recitatif."

This national predilection for feeling close to a storyteller comes out of a classic American genre: the autobiography. Though the term *autobiography* wasn't used until 1809, notable Americans wrote and published their life stories soon after the country was formed, including Ben Franklin and Olaudah Equiano.

In many ways, American autobiography helped to define and to sustain the nation's interest in first-person stories. This is particularly true for stories about self-creation out of adversity and those produced by authors with an eye to social reform, such as Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life,* Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior*, or Anthony Kiedis's *Scar Tissue*.

Today, thousands of online blogs now serve as everyday autobiographies. The deeply confessional and subjective nature of the first-person point of view seems to be of endless fascination to American readers.

Inside a Character's Head

Such revelatory content is given special intensity in American short stories because of the genre's brevity. In this compact form, a reader's full immersion in the mind and heart of a first-person narrator can become intoxicating, claustrophobic, and often profoundly moving.

For instance, in Melanie Rae Thon's award-winning piece of short fiction, "Xmas, Jamaica Plain," the writer takes the reader inside the mind of a thief. Because of lines such as, "I'm the broken window in your little boy's bedroom," readers feel the violence—and the violation—of the thief's acts.

On the other hand, Thon manages to foster the beginnings of what could become strong feelings of empathy for this character. While the speaker's nonchalance about her theft and destruction is certainly off-putting, the reader also learns that she hears a voice in her head, one she believes might be her sister Clare.

This confession starts to humanize the narrator, especially because she reveals that she is not sure whether she ever had a sibling. Clare could be a figment of the narrator's imagination, a desire for a family of her own.

Pitfalls of the First Person

Though the first-person perspective is quite powerful, it is not a perfect point of view. Some writers become so enamored with their first-person speakers that they lose virtually all sense of place, other characters, dialogue, or actions.

When it comes to the first person, it can be too easy to tell rather than to show—and telling is often tedious.

Yet another peril of this perspective is that an author writing in the first person must

be careful about the limits of the narrator's knowledge. A first-person speaker cannot know the thoughts and feelings and motivations of other characters unless they tell the narrator that information. The first-person point of view severely limits what a narrator can know about the world of the story.

A first-person speaker can't know everything about himself or herself, either, especially when it comes to unflattering qualities. However, it can be fascinating when a reader becomes aware of certain truths about a speaker's pettiness, vanity, and cruelty beyond what the narrator can possibly understand.

Exercise: Swapping Points of View

One potent way to see just how close a first-person narrator can feel is to try this exercise: Take a third-person paragraph from a short story (either yours or someone else's) and rewrite it in the first person. You might start by only altering the pronouns and seeing what difference that small change makes.

For instance, take an example from a draft of a story titled "The Fairy and the Water Son." It was written by one of this course's instructor's former students, Zach Pajak.

Here is a piece of the story:

> The Fairy was tired with twinkling, tired with having sex with drunken people. Just because the barflies made her promises, and because they would try so hard to take her to their creaky beds, she could not help but be a little eager from time to time. But they were all the same: they smoked their cigarettes, they knocked back their drinks, and they said, "But this time, I'm not gonna leave!"

Here is the same passage, with the only change being the switching of pronouns:

> I was tired with twinkling, tired with having sex with drunken people. Just because the barflies made me promises, and because they would try so hard to take me to their creaky beds, I could not help but be a little eager from time to time. But they were all the same: they smoked their cigarettes, they knocked back their drinks, and they said, "But this time, I'm not gonna leave!"

Here, simply swapping instances of *she* for *I* utterly changes the sum and substance of a reader's relationship to this character. Now the reader is standing close rather than apart.

The Second Person

Another point of view can potentially be as intimate as the first person. It occurs when a story's narrator talks from the perspective of *you* rather than *I*, which is called the second person. This perspective has its perils—for example, a reader might chafe at a bossy narrator—but the perspective also has merit.

In the 1980s, the second person came into vogue among serious American writers. For instance, Jay McInerney's *Bright Lights, Big City* is told in the second person. Ever since the second person became prevalent in late 20th-century literature, some American story writers, such as Lorrie Moore and Junot Díaz, have employed it with charm and wit.

The second-person perspective is commonly used in children's books as a way of getting kids to feel as though they've jumped directly into the story.

This lecture's example of the second person comes from E. J. Levy's "Theory of Dramatic Action." The narrator is a homeless young woman. The speaker has just gone through a breakup and has decided to move across the country to start a graduate program in film writing. Here is how Levy's story begins:

> In the last three months, your cat has died, your car has died, your marriage ended. In the last three months, you have lost ten pounds, a job, a city, a state. Now as you drive a UHaul across the vast stretch-marked belly of the continent, on your way from Colorado to start film school in Ohio, you try to locate a feeling to go with these events.

Levy alters the typically universal term *you* into a highly specific protagonist. Additionally, the journey this second-person narrator goes on—which is the journey to find love and connection that the reader goes on, too—is painful and plausible, and it ends (as life so often does) in contradiction.

At the conclusion of "Theory of Dramatic Action," nothing is fully resolved. Over the course of the story, the narrator engages in romantic intrigue with a married professor and an unexpected one-night stand with an old friend, Erin, who lives in another state. Yet the protagonist winds up hurting Erin's feelings and cuts it off with the professor before anything actually happens.

The story's ambiguous ending is a critique of the idea that there are tried-and-true theories about how plots in stories and films are

supposed to start, develop, and end. That makes this story about the difficulties of the protagonist but also about readers' expectations when picking up any American story. In this way, Levy manages to keep a reader both on and off the page: participating in the narrator's messy love life but also always conscious of the fact that this is merely a story—and stories are not the same as lived experience.

Conclusion

A writer must truly have a reason to use the second person, just as Levy did. Too often, writers adopt the second person simply because it's distinctive or flashy. In such cases, though, the second person becomes an irritating affectation. A badly done second-person perspective can cause readers to refuse to be a part of any emotional involvement with the story or its characters.

Whether you're choosing a narrative lens that is in the third person, the first person, or the second person, remember this: Each choice has its possibilities, but each has its perils as well. As writers and readers, though, it's the possibilities that matter most.

In sum, writers and readers should care about point of view. It isn't window dressing. Indeed, it gets at the very heart of a story—that is, why a story moves people and why people wish to be moved. ◆

Plot: What Characters Do Next

A writer who spends too much time scaffolding her story ahead of time—that is, plotting—is not going to be able to see her skyscraper for the beams. However, it is important for an author to have a sense of how the cause-effect chain of a plot will be linked together or broken apart, especially in genre fiction such as mysteries and horror stories. Put differently, once a writer excavates her tale—once she has followed her main character and discovered what that character is up to—then the task is to shape the story so that it does, indeed, have a design.

Mimesis and Epiphanies

Short stories are carefully constructed pieces that reflect difficult, bizarre, or beautiful parts of the human experience back to readers so that those same readers may better understand their own difficult, bizarre, and beautiful lives. Another term for this reflective process is *mimesis*—an idea that governed how works of literature and art were created in ancient Greece.

First articulated by Plato in his *Republic* and then extended by Aristotle in his *Poetics*, mimesis is when writers or artists hold up a mirror to reality and then try to reflect this lived experience back to their audiences in provocative and resonant ways. Traditionally speaking, fictional mimesis in the Western world has focused on representing a process of change or discovery on the part of at least one character—a character who struggles physically, psychologically, or spiritually and then learns something from that struggle.

Although the plots these characters live through do not need to unfold chronologically, they do need to create momentum toward the focal character's epiphany. The epiphany is a concept borrowed from Christianity. It refers to a revelation a character has about some vital truth of human nature, either depraved or transcendent or somewhere in between.

The epiphany plot is the most prevalent model across all of Western literature. However, there are other approaches to designing a story's structure, including episodic, circular, and fragmented models.

The Parts of the Epiphanic Plot Structure

The epiphanic plot structure includes four elements: an initiating circumstance, a rising action, a climax (which is where the epiphany comes in), and a denouement (which involves the tying up of loose ends of the main complication within the story). As an example, this lecture breaks down the plot structure of a story called "The Voice," which is below:

> I yelled at my little girl. My reasons were many and important. Like a lawyer's. Then I found that I'd lost my voice. I whispered, "Honey, you need to understand you can't act like that. It's inappropriate." I looked at her with the wise eyes of a mother. My little girl said she was really sorry. Then she asked me what the word was for someone who says not to do something, but then does it anyway. In a tiny voice, I said, "Well, that's a hypocrite." Then she looked at me with the wise eyes of a daughter. She repeated, "Hypocrite," her own voice sure and strong. Like a teacher's.

Importantly, the initiating circumstance of any story must establish the central problem: the trouble that the main character will wrangle with. In "The Voice," the initiating circumstance establishes who the main character is as well as her central problem: that she has yelled at her little girl and feels justified in doing so.

The middle of this story—or its rising action—goes on to describe how the narrator starts to realize that she has been unfair, although she tries to justify her behavior. This rising action moves toward the climax—and, thus, the epiphany—when the daughter wants to know the term for a double-dealer.

The mom may or may not be fully aware of why the girl asks her this question, but it becomes clear that there has been a reversal of power. "She looked at me with the wise eyes of a daughter," explains the narrator. The little girl repeats the new word, "Hypocrite," in a voice both strong and sure.

The narrator has had an epiphany. Her girl has called her a hypocrite—and rightfully so. The mother has behaved badly, doing the very thing she's yelled at her daughter not to do.

The story's final denouement is quick: "Like a teacher's." This sentence fragment creates a neat parallelism to an earlier comparison, "Like a lawyer's." As a conclusion, it becomes the story's takeaway. While the narrator is actually nothing like a lawyer, the daughter has become the mom's teacher.

It is the actions, thoughts, and lines of dialogue of the mother herself that determine the causal relationships among the events of this plot. In this particular piece of fiction, plot is what the two characters did next. They chose their plot based entirely on who they are and the parameters of their distinctive problem.

Exercise: The Six-Word Story

It is possible to practice epiphanic plot without having to read or to write a full story. To do so, spend some time reading or writing six-word stories—that is, exceptionally short stories that happen in only six words. You can find many examples online, and below are some written by students of this course's instructor.

- By Jordan Parker: The asteroid missed Earth. "So … coffee?"
- By Julia Andreas: Monday: Layla sneezed. Friday: class empty.
- By Red Danaceau: Made him dinner. He was delicious!
- By Joey Johnson: A tool, broken, and Father's belt.

An entire plot can exist in six words. For instance, take the final example: "A tool, broken, and Father's belt." Here, the initiating circumstance and rising action are inside the first three words: "A tool,

broken." Readers don't know who broke the tool, or why they did so, but the fact that it's an unusable tool is clearly a problem.

Then, the climax and denouement come in the final three words: "and Father's belt." Although readers have to connect certain dots, readers assume that a son or daughter has broken the tool and that the father is punishing the child with the belt.

"A Good Man Is Hard to Find"

This lecture now turns to a long story by Flannery O'Connor. Her well-known story "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" follows the traditional Aristotelian plot—which, in her deft hands, is both inexorable and credible.

O'Connor's work shows an interest in how fiction can work on a theological level, demonstrating humanity's fallen state and its need for Christian redemption. Her fiction has also been called modern Gothic because it is often full of violence and distress.

"A Good Man Is Hard to Find" tells the story of a family of six that drives to Florida for a vacation. Through a series of unfortunate events, the family is killed by an escaped convict who goes by the name The Misfit.

> *Flannery O'Connor was among the most celebrated writers of southern literature in the first half of the 20th century, along with William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, and Katherine Anne Porter.*

The main characters are the grandmother, her grown son Bailey and his wife, a baby, their two older children John Wesley and June Star, and a cat named Pitty Sing. For the purposes of the climax, the grandmother and The Misfit are the most important characters.

The story builds up the grandmother as nagging and manipulative. At the climactic point in the story, the grandmother still lives. The other members of the family, save their cat, have been taken off into the woods and shot. The grandmother, who's standing in front of The Misfit, knows she's next. For this exchange in full, refer to the audio or video lecture.

The pivotal moment for the grandmother is the one in which she feels God's grace right before she is sacrificed—in essence, she becomes a good woman because there was somebody there to shoot her. Before being faced with her death, she is hypocritical, sentimental, and selfish; she even lies to get her own way.

But even after The Misfit has ordered the death of her son Bailey and even put on Bailey's shirt, there is an instant when the grandmother sees that The Misfit is about to cry. Her head clears, and she murmurs, "Why you're one of my babies. You're one of my own children," before reaching out and touching him on the shoulder. The Misfit reacts badly, jumping back "as if a snake had bitten him" and shooting the grandmother three times in the chest.

The grandmother's consuming fear of dying, her anguish at losing her son and his family, had disappeared. In its place, she takes on a maternal love, seeing The Misfit as her son. In this way, she forgives The Misfit for his sins—and, perhaps, she redeems something of his violence or her own selfishness.

The grandmother's position as a modern American mother defines her role in the story. She's actually quite believable in this role—and not idealized in any way, given the flaws O'Connor presents earlier in the story. Yet when there's a gun pointed in

her face, she is a different kind of mother. She becomes the ideal.

In this way, the story's climax isn't about a hardened criminal shooting an old woman, because that would be about plot and nothing else. Instead, the climax is fully about character: the grandmother's moment of clarity and Christian redemption, and The Misfit's inability to accept that—even though he realizes that the grandmother's gesture was real and thus profound.

When he says, "She would of been a good woman … if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life," he means that her self-sacrifice and forgiveness have everything to do with the fact that she was in the greatest crisis any character can ever be in: the moment before their own death. This story has a perfect plot. The plot is completely about what the characters were doing and why. ◆

Imagery in American Short Fiction

To fully engage a reader, a good short story will employ concrete, fresh, and apt imagery. This includes more than visual pictures in the mind. A fiction writer must teach her reader how to see, hear, touch, taste, and smell a story.

Imagery in "Gasoline"

For an example of imagery in use, this lecture turns to a fantasy short story by the course's instructor. It is titled "Gasoline" and was published in *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*. Although the story is centrally about a teenage girl who turns into a wolf, most of it is realistic. It is essentially a road tale about a young girl named Jo and an old woman named Viola.

These two characters spend most of their time driving out from the small town of Hay Springs, Nebraska, to the other side of the state, looking to find a magic ring of pine trees. Occasionally, the reader gets a glimpse of Jo's thoughts and memories. Once the two arrive at the fabled ring of pines, though, Viola teaches Jo how to cast a circle and transform herself into a wolf.

To make the reader believe that such transformation might be possible, the story uses sense-based imagery and fully embodies the moment.

Here is part of the story's transformation scene:

> "Now what do you smell?" asked Viola.
>
> At first, nothing. [Jo] crouched closer to the ground, needles pricking her palms. Her nose, she thought, her useless nose. Only pine and dirt, faint. She imagined her nose like a radiator grill, close to the land and moving fast, and she caught a sweet smell with a metal bite, sticky and sharp—a smell that widened and grew heavy.
>
> Her own body. She tilted back her head, wind like water over her face. A smell of rot, sweet like her own skin but with a foulness she could not name. That last smell was night.

The story uses Jo's hay fever to demonstrate that the magic was starting to work and that she was moving closer to becoming a wolf. Jo's allergies fall away as she gains her new, keen nose—one that could detect a scent as subtle and complex as night. As the scene progresses, Jo notices scents, sounds, and other physical things that the girl she used to be would never pick up on.

This example shows that any fiction writer's use of imagery is first about evoking the senses—that is, making words carry the weight and heft of the physical world. Yet imagery also moves beyond the body's senses into the realm of the figurative.

Figurative Language

The phrase "figurative language" means that there is a figure of some kind—an image—that is representing something other than itself. Among the multitude of figures of speech identified by classical rhetoricians, modern short story writers use these five the most: personification, allusion, symbolism, simile, and metaphor.

With personification, writers give human qualities to inanimate objects or aspects of nature: a hot Iowa wind in August becomes a soul of song through a cornfield, or a squat teapot is said to have a round, smooth belly.

With symbolism, fiction writers allow something to stand for something else—especially a material object that represents an abstract idea, quality, or condition.

With allusion, a fiction writer jumps outside the narrative to reference subjects such as the Bible, mythology, a historical moment, or a song, painting, or bit of pop culture. Allusion widens the world of the story.

Simile and metaphor are the two most popular figures of speech in modern American stories. These occur when a writer compares one well-known thing or idea to

a less-known one to make that familiar thing or idea both new and strange.

With similes, one thing is said to be like another, whereas with metaphors, one thing is said to be another. A metaphor is an implicit comparison—not an explicit one. For instance, a writer might indicate that small-boned, quick-gesturing woman is "like a robin," which would be a simile, or the writer could write that she "is a robin," which would be a metaphor.

Exercise: Fresh, Apt, and Concrete

In order for a simile or metaphor to be powerful—to give birth to something new in the world—it has to be concrete, fresh, and apt. If such a comparison is clichéd, diffuse, or poorly chosen, then the reader is likely to laugh, feel confused, or abandon the story.

To help write concrete, fresh, and apt metaphors and similes, the following exercise can be helpful: Take a passage from a story that is rife with figurative imagery, and then ruin the metaphoric comparisons. For an example, this lecture turns to a story by ZZ Packer, a writer who is both nimble and smart at blending her figurative language with her characters and plots.

The example comes from her story "Brownies," which is about the Girl Scouts:

> By our second day at Camp Crescendo, the girls in my Brownie troop had decided to kick the asses of each and every girl in Brownie Troop 909. Troop 909 was doomed from the first day of camp; they were white girls, their complexions a blend of ice cream: strawberry, vanilla.
>
> They turtled out from their bus in pairs, their rolled-up sleeping bags chromatized with Disney characters: Sleeping Beauty, Snow White, Mickey Mouse; or the generic ones cheap parents bought: washed-out rainbows, unicorns, curly-eyelashed frogs. Some clutched Igloo coolers and still others held on to stuffed toys like pacifiers, looking all around them like tourists determined to be dazzled.
>
> Our troop was wending its way past their bus, past the ranger station, past the colorful trail guide drawn like a treasure map, locked behind glass.
>
> "Man, did you smell them?" Arnetta said, giving the girls a slow once-over. "They smell like Chihuahuas. *Wet* Chihuahuas." Their troop was still at the entrance, and though we had passed them by yards, Arnetta raised her nose in the air and grimaced.

This is an example of a writer creating concrete, fresh, and apt metaphors and similes. For instance, while both a complexion and ice cream are highly concrete images, to call a fair complexion a blend of "strawberry" and "vanilla" ice cream is also fresh: It is not an image that is used very often. Additionally, it is apt because it is exactly the kind of metaphor that would come out of the mind of young American girls.

Below is the same excerpt, but with the deliberate destruction of Packer's careful imagery:

> By our second day at Camp Crescendo, the girls in my Brownie troop had decided to kick the asses of each and every girl in Brownie Troop 909. Troop 909 was doomed from the first day of camp; they were white girls, their complexions a hunk of tofu with red streaks through it: blood and snow. They parakeeted out from their bus in pairs, their rolled-up sleeping bags splattered with Disney characters: Sleeping Beauty, Snow White, Mickey Mouse; or the generic ones cheap parents bought: scoured rainbows, unicorns, Barbie-eyed frogs. Some clutched Igloo coolers and still others held on to stuffed toys like nervous nellies, looking all around them like strangers in a strange land.
>
> Our troop was cartwheeling its way past their bus, past the ranger station, past the colorful trail guide drawn like a graphic novel, locked behind glass.
>
> "Man, did you smell them?" Arnetta said, giving the girls a slow once-over. "They smell like something. *Wet* somethings." Their troop was still at the entrance, and though we had passed them by yards, Arnetta raised her nose in the air and grimaced."

The damage is obvious. For instance, changing "*Wet* Chihuahuas" to "*Wet* somethings" removes the specificity of the image. It's no longer concrete. Additionally, changing the description of the complexions to "a hunk of tofu with red streaks in it" turns a fitting comparison into a clunky, ridiculous, and inappropriate one.

Note, however, that should you wish to write humorous images, this exercise can actually serve you quite well. The funniest metaphors and similes are created when they are vague, clichéd, and/or simply wrong in their comparisons.

Clichéd Imagery

This chapter concludes with a warning about clichéd imagery. Examples include the phrases "he writhed in pain" and "her jaw hit the ground." Ironically, such images don't get a reader to feel anything at all. Readers have heard these phrases countless times, and so using them distances any reader from the text. Because the reader has heard these chestnuts so many times over the course of her life, she's actually distanced from what's happening to the character. Any electricity has been zapped. The reader tunes out, and the story loses its physicality—its strict attention to the real.

AN AMUSING CONTEST

If you'd like to have a good chuckle—or to find fodder for your own comic story—then check out the Style Invitational Bad Simile and Metaphor Contest, run by *The Washington Post*. This contest includes the following gems:

The hailstones leaped from the pavement, just like maggots when you fry them in hot grease.

The little boat gently drifted across the pond exactly the way a bowling ball wouldn't.

Her vocabulary was as bad as, like, whatever. ◆

Style in Traditional American Short Stories

Aspects of craft such as the effective use of donnée, details, character, dialogue, interior monologue, dialogue, point of view, plots, and imagery come together to define a storyteller's style. Style is the sum of all elements of the writing and of the writers themselves.

A fiction writer's style should be truly unique as well as complex. Within a good short story, style should not be distilled to a slogan or a single image. It must encompass the whole of the writing, even down to its punctuation. True style—the distinctive manner of an author's expression, imagination, and state of being—is all-encompassing.

STYLE AS SYNTHESIS

Style is never singular. Instead, it is the synthesis of a multitude of elements. As these elements coalesce, they carve windows into the hearts and minds of American characters—as well as their authors and even their audiences.

Hemingway versus Faulkner

This lecture begins by contrasting the styles of two well-known American storytellers: Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner. They were 20th-century contemporaries who maintained a stylistic feud that shows how differently the two wrote. As their literary biographer Joseph Fruscione has indicated, Faulkner tended toward "verbosity, stream of consciousness, and scope," while Hemingway made use of "verbal minimalism, Imagistic reality, and sharp focus."

As an example of Faulkner's style, a story called "The Bear" serves well. This 1942 story is centrally about a teenager, an expert hunter who, along with a group of other hunters, becomes obsessed with killing Old Ben—a local bear that has taken on mythical dimensions.

Here is a short passage from this very long story:

> "[The teenager] had heard the best of all talking. … [It was] of the wilderness, the big woods, bigger and older than any recorded document. … It was of the men, not white nor black nor red but men, hunters, with the will and hardihood to endure and the humility and skill to survive, and the dogs and the bear and deer juxtaposed and reliefed against it, ordered and compelled by and within the wilderness in the ancient and unremitting contest according to the ancient and immitigable rules which voided all regrets and brooked no quarter[.]"

In just a few sentences, Faulkner's style is unmistakable. His diction is always elevated—in this case, he uses words such as *hardihood*, *unremitting*, and *reliefed*. This style is an educated one. This narrator seems to be a historian who is not very interested in action or dialogue. Instead, this excerpt is pure description, in which the unnamed third-person narrator seems to sit by a literary campfire to spin his legend of Old Ben. In this way, the bear becomes a symbol of the story's larger, thematic vision.

Additionally, in this story as a whole, Faulkner circles around his own ideas, reforming and restating them into thicker layers of idea and meaning. He repeats certain phrases and comes back to them over and over, like a spiral.

The point of this story isn't about Isaac killing Old Ben, the bear—which Isaac doesn't ultimately do. It's about something much larger: the hubris of men from all walks of life and across all ages who have believed they have dominion over the North American continent. Faulkner's style speaks to this greater meaning: American national history is centrally about the hubris of many Americans who desired and continue to desire to possess and exploit the natural world.

Hemingway on Hunting

This lecture's next excerpt comes from another short story about hunting, although this one is by Hemingway.

The story, published in 1936, is called "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber." It follows two rich, white Americans on safari in Africa. These characters are married, and the story is about a moment in which the husband, Francis Macomber, tries to shoot a lion, fails to kill it, and runs away as the wounded animal charges him, thus exposing Macomber's cowardice to the whole hunting party.

The safari leader, another white man named Robert Wilson, shoots the lion on Macomber's behalf. This passage begins just after the disastrous encounter:

It was now lunch time and they were all sitting under the double green fly of the dining tent pretending that nothing had happened.

"Will you have lime juice or lemon squash?" Macomber asked.

"I'll have a gimlet," Robert Wilson told him.

"I'll have a gimlet, too. I need something," Macomber's wife said.

"I suppose it's the thing to do," Macomber agreed. "Tell him to make three gimlets."

The mess boy had started them already, lifting the bottles out of the canvas cooling bags that sweated wet in the wind that blew through the trees that shaded the tents. …

Francis Macomber had, half an hour before, been carried to his tent from the edge of the camp in triumph on the arms and shoulders of the cook, the personal boys, the skinner and the porters. The gun-bearers had taken no part in the demonstration. When the native boys put him down at the door of his tent, he had shaken all their hands, received their congratulations, and then gone into the tent and sat on the bed until his wife came in.

She did not speak to him when she came in and he left the tent at once to wash his face and hands in the portable wash basin outside and go over to the dining tent to sit in a comfortable canvas chair in the breeze and the shade.

Compared to Faulkner, Hemingway is much more exact in the subjects and verbs that begin his sentences. In large part, Hemingway's specificity of subject and verb has to do with how his stories are driven by plots. In this story, it is clear how Macomber tries to cover over his humiliation and how his wife reacts to such posturing. This reveals Macomber's craven, vain, and pitiful nature.

Because Hemingway's intent is to build suspense—from the title alone, the reader knows that Francis Macomber is going to die, but doesn't know how—his style makes good sense. Hemingway adds important information bit by bit and yet he also moves the story forward through quick-paced dialogue and action.

Unlike Faulkner, though, Hemingway isn't trying to make a philosophical comment on epic struggles between humanity and nature as represented by hunters in an American wilderness. Instead, he's hoping to expose a certain kind of American whose privilege and elitism allows him to seek, and attain, unearned trophies.

Conclusion

While Hemingway and Faulkner's styles were experimental and revolutionary in their own day, after many decades, their fictions have taken on the patina of the past, and their work has become canonical. However, that doesn't mean that these stories are either outmoded or old-fashioned. It simply means that their literary styles have become so ingrained in the national psyche that they have become timeless.

Hemingway and Faulkner coined distinctive American voices, and even now, those voices still resonate. Their styles can serve modern writers well, because they are approaches that typify American storytelling.

Perhaps the clearest testament to the continuing viability of these traditional styles comes in the form of handbooks produced for aficionados of short fiction, given that these texts promote approaches to writing and reading that come out of these established methods and literary tastes.

RECOMMENDED HANDBOOKS

This lecture concludes with a brief list of recommended handbooks to keep close as you read, interpret, and/or write stories. This is not an exhaustive list, and it has gaps. For instance, there is not a handbook available specifically geared for writing African American fiction. However, the books in this list do have something to offer:

Charles Baxter,
Burning Down the House.

Robert Boswell,
The Half-Known World.

Ray Bradbury,
Zen in the Art of Writing.

Ron Carlson,
Ron Carlson Writes a Story.

Annie Dillard,
The Writing Life.

John Gardner,
The Art of Fiction.

A. B. Guthrie,
A Field Guide to Writing Fiction.

Stephen King,
On Writing.

Anne Lamott,
Bird by Bird.

Alice LaPlante,
The Making of a Story.

David Lodge,
The Art of Fiction.

Peter Rubie,
The Elements of Storytelling.

Dani Shapiro,
Still Writing.

Jerome Stern,
Making Shapely Fiction.

Edith Wharton,
The Writing of Fiction. ◆

Experimental American Short Stories

This lecture, though not exhaustive, covers examples of innovative short fiction that have been produced since the 1960s. The 1960s and 1970s saw the rise of a group of writers who were deeply skeptical that any single story could represent what it meant to be an American. As a result, many of these authors developed a skepticism about whether it was possible to represent any kind of reality through a piece of literature, especially because people's everyday experiences were so varied, volatile, and even contentious.

Deconstruction

In the mid-1960s, when the ideas of philosopher Jacques Derrida arrived from France on American shores, some writers such as Donald Barthelme, William Gass, Philip Roth, and John Barth adopted Derrida's central belief in deconstructionism.

Deconstructionists contend that language creates a simulacrum, or false representation, of reality. This simulacrum should be deconstructed to expose the hidden ideologies and power dynamics behind the words.

An example of a deconstructionist approach to short fiction is metafiction. In metafiction, a writer exposes the artificiality of his stories by either turning them into a parody or by self-consciously pointing out how stories work.

Some of Barthelme's work shows metafiction in action. Many of Barthelme's stories are made up of fragments—phrases, quotations, details, lines of dialogue, and non sequiturs—that he pastes together.

For instance, his 1974 story "The School" is a parody of a dramatic monologue—a form that the British poet Robert Browning perfected during the Victorian era as a means of conveying the psychological complexity of a narrator-character within an implied scene. "The School" is about a grade school in which every living thing the students touch or study dies.

Breakdown of "The School"

The narrator of "The School" is a teacher named Edgar. In the midst of the story's deaths, the students finally ask Edgar where the dead "go" when they die. Edgar says he doesn't know before admitting that nobody knows. The children then ask Edgar whether death is what provides a sense of meaning to the living, to which Edgar rejoins that, no, life is what has meaning—not death.

From here, the story continues:

> [The children asked], but isn't death, considered as a fundamental datum, the means by which the taken-for-granted mundanity of the everyday may be transcended in the direction of—
>
> I said yes, maybe.
>
> They said, we don't like it.
>
> I said, that's sound. …
>
> They said, will you make love now with Helen (our teaching assistant) so that we can see how it is done? We know you like Helen.

To this bizarre request, Edgar says that while he likes Helen, he will not make love to her in front of the class. Within a traditional dramatic monologue, the narrator-character is usually unreliable, and the point is for a reader to come to recognize his unreliability by amassing clues the speaker gives about his underlying desires and decisions.

In some sense, Barthelme's story follows this tradition. Edgar's own bewilderment and incompetence become clear. However, just as the story seems to be getting at something deep and honest within Edgar's own psyche, Barthelme employs a series of quick, surreal juxtapositions to undermine a reader's ability to understand the supposed truth of Edgar's character.

For instance, the children would never say, "but isn't death, considered as a fundamental datum, the means by which the taken-for-granted mundanity of the everyday may be transcended." They wouldn't have the capacity to articulate such a concept. Nor would the kids ask Edgar to make love to Helen in front of the class.

Barthelme's very point is to write a satire: to engage in absurd language and outlandish plot points to deconstruct the ways in which American readers have been trained to assume that the psychological realism of fictional characters is authentic.

The story also deconstructs the supposed empathy that is meant to come from reading this kind of fiction. It is hard to identify with Edgar, given that both his world and his reactions to that world are strange.

Breakdown of "The Cheater's Guide to Love"

This lecture now jumps to the other side of this epoch of experimentation to consider a piece that was published almost four decades after Barthelme's. It's called "The Cheater's Guide to Love."

Junot Díaz wrote the story, and it was published in 2012, first in *The New Yorker* and then as the final story in Díaz's collection of linked narratives *This Is How You Lose Her*.

VOICE

"The Cheater's Guide to Love" is distinctive because of the way Díaz manipulates voice. The development of distinct voices within stories, in all of their idiomatic rhythms, is indicative of how many writers of color have come to claim American storytelling as a place of their own.

"The Cheater's Guide to Love" works by counting up, not down, starting with Year 0, in which the second-person narrator—named Yunior—is dumped by his fiancée after cheating on her. The piece ends with Year 5, in which Yunior decides to write a book about all that he has gone through.

Here is a sample from the Year 0 section, which serves as the story's first bookend:

> Your girl catches you cheating. (Well, actually she's your fiancée, but hey, in a bit it so won't matter.) … Maybe if you'd been engaged to a super-open-minded blanquita you could have survived it—but you're not engaged to a super-open-minded blanquita.

It is also revealed that the fiancée promises to "put a machete in [Yunior]" should she discover that he has cheated. In essence, she does this by leaving him cold after she discovers his infidelities, cleaving them apart.

In the time between Year 0 and Year 5, Yunior makes many bad choices when it comes to women. Additionally, it is also revealed that his body has slowly fallen apart: He ruptures a disk doing yoga, he gives himself plantar fasciitis by running too much, and his arms and hands start to go numb for no reason. Here is a sample from the story's other bookend, Year 5:

> Finally, when you feel like you can do so without exploding into burning atoms, you open a folder that you've kept hidden under your bed. The Doomsday Book. Copies of all the e-mails and photos from the cheating days, the ones the ex found and compiled and mailed to you a month after she ended it. *Dear Yunior, for your next book*. Probably the last time she wrote your name.

That Yunior is a fast talker is clear from the start. His voice is electric. In addition to the speed and the slang, there's also a consistently visceral quality to this narrator's voice.

For five years, Yunior feels as though he's "exploding into burning atoms," and his body falls apart. He violated his fiancée's trust by turning to other women's bodies (many of them), and so it's fitting that his own body and voice are corrupted.

The most distinct feature of Yunior's voice, though, is that he never wavers from using the second-person *you* across the whole of his long, sordid tale. This decision on Díaz's part makes the story experimental.

This story's use of *you* is not meant to encourage a reader to imagine himself as the main character, as with other such stories. This *you* is a way for Yunior to try to hide his weaknesses, even when he's just with himself.

This approach allows Díaz to make an unlikable character compelling, even though Yunior is immature, emotionally unavailable, not terribly self-aware, and a thoroughgoing sexist. Díaz wanted to write a sexist character, even though he didn't want to write a sexist book. He hoped to confront the less-than-stellar side of masculinity. In other words, Yunior's hyper-masculinity distances Yunior from himself.

Literature in Flux

Not everyone in the 1960s, 1970s, or even in the present moment finds the kinds of experimental short fictions produced by writers such as Barthelme and Díaz compelling.

Some have seen these stories as thinly disguised soapboxing, or as a group of American authors trying to copy deconstructionist methods from Europe, or as intellectual exercises.

For example, in 1972, Joyce Carol Oates wrote in *The New York Times* that Barthelme was "a writer of arguable genius, whose works reflect the anxiety he himself must feel, in book after book, that his brain is all fragments."

Her main concern with the postmodern writers such as Barthelme was that they were creating a literary elitism around nothingness. She feared that in this environment, any writer—such as Oates herself—who was still writing in a traditional mode and trying to change the world through story would be treated with scorn.

However, in moving beyond the box of traditional short fiction, these postmodernist writers did create a new literary era. Deconstruction—as conceived in the days of Derrida—is old hat at this point, but new voices (particularly those of people of color, women, and LGBTQ writers) continue to use the possibilities of language to critique mainstream social constructs. Thus, the deconstructionists have left a potent legacy: an ingenious array of forms and styles and subjects that capture, represent, and invent America. ◆

Genre Short Fiction in America

The best science fiction, horror, and fantasy stories have always been about something more than fancies, frights, or an alternate universe. They've allowed American storytellers to wrestle with a wide range of modern concerns, such as alarm over technologies of war, social inequality, and instances of violence or depravity.

To demonstrate how short genre fiction—and specifically literary genre fiction—has grappled with national problems, this lecture moves chronologically through three specific examples: a Victorian horror story by Edgar Allan Poe, a Cold War science fiction piece by Ray Bradbury, and a fantasy tale by Ursula K. Le Guin, published in the wake of the women's movement of the 1970s. Each of these examples demonstrates the conventions of its genre, and these three authors crafted their stories in poetic and eloquent ways.

"The Tell-Tale Heart"

This lecture begins with an early American horror story: Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" from 1843. By the time Poe published "The Tell-Tale Heart," he had developed his distinct Gothic style and become a master of the short story form. The plot of this tale is simple: an unnamed narrator tries to convince a reader of his sanity while detailing the murder of an old man—a murder that he himself has committed.

The narrator is painstaking in describing the events leading up to the killing.

Here are the opening paragraphs:

> True!—nervous—very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why will you say that I am mad? The disease had sharpened my senses—not destroyed—not dulled them. Above all was the sense of hearing acute. I heard all things in the heaven and in the earth. I heard many things in hell. How, then, am I mad? Hearken! and observe how healthily—how calmly I can tell you the whole story.
>
> It is impossible to say how first the idea entered my brain; but once conceived, it haunted me day and night. Object there was none. Passion there was none. I loved the old man. He had never wronged me. He had never given me insult. For his gold I had no desire. I think it was his eye! yes, it was this! He had the eye of a vulture—a pale blue eye, with a film over it. Whenever it fell upon me, my blood ran cold; and so by degrees—very gradually—I made up my mind to take the life of the old man, and thus rid myself of the eye for ever.

Right away, Poe immerses his reader fully into the dark mood of his story, created in large part by the narrator's heightened diction—a language meant to engage the senses, especially those of sound and sight. The reader is also asked to see in the way the narrator sees, with such paranoid specificity that the old man's "pale blue eye, with a film over it" becomes as vivid and eerie to the reader as it does to the hysterical speaker.

Through this approach, Poe's aim is to plumb the depths of human depravity—and he does so for three reasons. For one, he wants to thrill his reader. For another, Poe is unlike many horror writers in that he draws on literary techniques to make his story resonate. This narrator and the tale he spins exist in an unspecified time and place, rather than in the present moment of Poe's own era. Thus, the characters and the events become representational.

Finally, Poe may have had a political purpose as well. One of his best-known biographers, Kenneth Silverman, argues that Poe, "in his many accounts of persons bricked up in walls, hidden under floorboards, or jammed in chimneys" provided a commentary on "enclosure,

KING ON POE

In a 1987 interview, Stephen King credited Poe with establishing how literary Gothic can best be achieved. King argued that there are three levels of Gothic storytelling in America: the gross-out level, the horror level, and the terror tale. The terror tale represents the highest level, possessing a literary sophistication that gross-out and horror works can't match.

constriction, and victimization" that speaks to the violence and national destruction inherent in an economy built upon African slavery. Thus, Poe's horror stories may have an antebellum purpose: to get readers to think twice about perpetuating distrust and violence against innocent people, just because they have physical attributes that seem strange or alien.

"August 2026: There Will Come Soft Rains"

This lecture now turns to a piece of literary science fiction by Ray Bradbury, a story entitled "August 2026: There Will Come Soft Rains." It was published in 1950.

Among science fiction works, pulps had been popular at the turn of the 20th century. These catered to male teenagers and high school graduates, offering up abundant scenes of action and adventure as well as hackneyed plots.

By the 1950s and 1960s, however, a new kind of science fiction came into being that was distinct from the pulps in both content and style.

In terms of content, writers such as Bradbury, Harlan Ellison, and Kurt Vonnegut told dark tales of suffering and annihilation to reflect the fears and tensions of the Cold War.

"August 2026" begins with the premise that the United States has been destroyed by a nuclear holocaust. The main character isn't a human being at all. Rather, it is a house—a smart house.

Bradbury gives the house a body: a singing voice from within the clock, electric eyes inside its walls, and a metal throat. He also gives the house feelings.

In the first sentence of the story, a reader learns that the house is "afraid" that nobody is there to wake up when it narrates an alarm at 7:00 am. The clock-voice repeats its phrases into what the narrator calls the "emptiness," and the house "waits" a long time for the family to leave in their car—signaling a feeling of false hope.

As the story progresses, Bradbury describes the house with more and more personified imagery. It quivers at strange sounds and snaps its shades at a surviving bird. The narrator explains that, as the silence grows louder with each day, the house takes on a "preoccupation with self-protection which bordered on mechanical paranoia."

Eventually, the reader learns that the house is the last one that is still standing in all of Allendale, California, and by the end of the story, it starts to die. A wind blows a weakened tree through the kitchen window, and cleaning solvent topples onto the stove, starting a fire.

As the fire spread, the house

> shuddered, oak bone on bone, its bared skeleton cringing from the heat, its wire, its nerves revealed as if a surgeon had torn the skin off to let the red veins and capillaries quiver in the scalded air.

Here, the house is more human than not—a palpable representation of how an actual body might experience the fire from a nuclear blast.

Bradbury's ability to meld the technological with the literary makes a powerful comment about Americans' unexamined trust in such technologies. He believed that literary science fiction could challenge and perhaps change the very science it imagined.

Le Guin wanted to use her fantasy fiction to consider privilege and power and domination, especially in terms of gender.

"She Unnames Them"

This lecture's final tale is a fantasy story, "She Unnames Them," by Ursula K. Le Guin. The story's narrator is Eve, and she sets out to unname all of the animals that Adam has already labeled, according to God's instructions. Her story starts in medias res. This is an excerpt:

> Most of them accepted namelessness with the perfect indifference with which they had so long accepted and ignored their names. …
>
> Among the domestic animals, few horses had cared what anybody called them. … Cattle, sheep, swine, asses, mules, and goats, along with chickens, geese, and turkeys, all agreed enthusiastically to give their names back to the people to whom—as they put it—they belonged.

With this piece, Le Guin redefines the boundaries of American fantasy, using an ancient story to make a current political point. This Eve doesn't sound like a character from the Bible. Her parable is told in crisp, modern language.

A later conversation with Adam domesticates their epic relationship. She is trying to be friendly in returning the so-called gift of her name, but as often happens in a marriage, Adam is absorbed in something else, and he absentmindedly tells her to "Put it down over there, OK?"

Perhaps of greatest importance, Le Guin doesn't employ a third-person narrator to tell this tale. Eve speaks in her own voice, explaining her own choices and motives. In this way, Le Guin gives voice to a largely voiceless figure.

Exercise: New Weirdness

This lecture concludes with a genre-crossing exercise. To start it, obtain and read the full text of each of this lecture's three stories. Then, write three paragraphs, following these directions:

1. Take the narrator from Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" and put him in Bradbury's "August 2026: There Will Come Soft Rains."
2. Take the house-character from Bradbury's story and put it in Le Guin's "She Unnames Them."
3. Take Eve from the Le Guin tale and put her in the Poe story.

As you create your mash-ups, the character you're importing into a new story must keep their integrity as that character. The world of the second story must remain stable as well.

This exercise helps push writers toward the exciting cross-genre writing that has typified such storytelling since the turn of the 21st century. As American horror writer Peter Straub explains, "the genres of science fiction, fantasy, and horror have been, unnoticed by the wider literary culture, transforming themselves … into something all but unrecognizable, hence barely classifiable at all except as literature."

Straub used the label of new wave fabulism for these genre mash-ups, while others have come up with labels such as slipstream, transrealism, interstitial fiction, Afrofuturism, and the new weird. Even though it is unconventional, this mixing of the realistic fictive and the unrealistic fanciful has the capacity to produce effective fusions of science fiction, horror, fantasy, and traditional short fiction. ◆

LECTURE 20

Graphic Short Fiction in America

In the past half-century, graphic fiction in the United States has taken on a literary complexity to rival the best novels and short stories of previous ages. The form of graphic fiction is related to comic books in both its conventions and overall appearance. Many gifted American authors and illustrators have adapted these standards to produce graphic stories that seek to do much more than entertain.

The Black Panther Series

One example of graphic fiction that moves beyond entertainment is Ta-Nehisi Coates's reboot of the Black Panther series, which he did in collaboration with the illustrator Brian Stelfreeze. The Marvel Comics superhero Black Panther is a character who was first introduced in 1966.

Apart from his own love of Marvel since he was a boy, Coates's decision to accept this challenge had much to do with modern politics about race. Beyond sheer entertainment value, the new Black Panther stories offer inroads into our nation's problematic history of racism and racial violence.

By creating a fictional world in which intelligent and technologically advanced black people are at its center, Coates makes an implicit argument that African Americans and their accomplishments are worthy of emulation and praise. One can argue, then, that graphic short stories such as those in the Black Panther series have the capacity to express ideas of universal interest and to spark social awareness through empathy—an empathy created by both seeing and imagining.

ILLUSTRATED BOOKS AND GRAPHIC SHORT STORIES

The development of graphic fiction in America did not happen solely through the rise of comic books. This mode of storytelling also comes out of the long tradition of illustrated books, which were popular and ubiquitous from the Victorian period onward. There are fascinating possibilities inherent within the graphic short story.

This lecture illustrates these possibilities by discussing two pieces of graphic short fiction. One is titled "Body Language" and was created by Diane Schoemperlen. The other, created by this course's instructor in collaboration with photographer Colby Caldwell, is titled "Blink."

"Body Language"

Diane Schoemperlen's "Body Language" begins in this manner:

> On a good day (a good day being one on which they have not argued at breakfast, she has kissed him goodbye on the mouth at the door before they make their separate ways to work, they have plans for the evening that involve good friends, fancy clothes, white wine, and red meat) his throat goes loose with happiness. His tongue is nimble and lithe. The words flow out of him, clever, witty, and remarkably intelligent. … He could talk all day long to anyone about anything.
>
> On a bad day (a bad day being one on which she has cursed him because the coffee is cold, the toast is burnt, the sun is not shining; and … she says she won't be home till late, she's not sure how late) his throat freezes into formality. He is articulate but icy. His language is laden with precision and good grammar. … His spine is stiff with offense."

Alongside these two paragraphs, Schoemperlen embeds the diagram of a human throat. The effect is that the diagram feels similar to an illustration in a textbook—a common graphic form that most Americans know from their school years.

In this story, though, Schoemperlen creates a tension between her diagram and the words it supposedly illustrates. It's a medical image: a dissection of human anatomy. Visually speaking, then, this image creates a clinical tone and assumes a logical ethos.

However, once the reader moves from the diagram to the words, both the tone and ethos shift.

While the narrator speaks in a straightforward manner, the narrator also turns to sense-based imagery, especially through adjectives. For instance, the man's words are described as "clever, witty, and remarkably intelligent" or "articulate but icy."

The narrator also uses figurative language: "His spine is stiff with offense." Thus, the narrator's tone is poetic, which appeals to a reader's emotions rather than reason. Thus, the ethos of the words is more about feelings than logic, and so it's in direct conflict with the ethos of the diagram.

The story also features parentheticals, and it is in these that the problem of the story actually happens. The man believes his wife is having an affair. Arguably, the overall effect of embedding medical textbook diagrams into a story of suspected adultery is to suggest that the pain the man carries over his wife's affair is not just psychic but an embodied pain. His wife's physical indiscretions make the man physically ill.

But because the diagram is generic—meant to represent anyone's esophagus—and because the man and his wife are never named, Schoemperlen is arguably making a larger comment on adultery in modern American society. As reported in January 2018 in *The New York Times*, national surveys conducted by the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy indicate 15 percent of married women and 25 percent of married men have had extramarital affairs at some point. When these surveys include emotional and sexual relationships without intercourse, those percentages rise by another 20 percent.

Schoemperlen's medical diagrams serve to dissect the rampant cheating among American couples. The textbook illustrations are almost ironic: Statistics and diagrams may be able to show the extent of the country's infidelities, but they cannot hope to capture its devastating emotional effects on people.

"Blink," Part 1

This lecture now turns to "Blink," which toggles between moments from the late 20th century in America and others from 1860s England. The two main characters are a girl named Virginia (or Ginny) and an actual historical figure, Julia Margaret Cameron.

Both are photographers. They are ultimately connected by a twist of fate when Ginny buys one of Cameron's old Victorian cameras. (Ginny is interested in what is now called alternative process photography.)

Here is an excerpt from the end of the story:

> Today was a Sunday, and Ginny was walking the curve of a crescent-shaped beach, hot as hell. She bent to pick up a shell, running her thumb up inside. Too perfect to photograph, concentric circles neat as a farmer's field. And then the sunset coming on. A postcard.
>
> She set her heavy camera on the dunes and turned back to the water. Ginny looked—she looked hard and long and without a lens. Blink. The sea as blue-black as a mussel shell. Blink. A far-flung sky, carnation pale. Blink. Sand like powdered buttercups.

After this passage, at the bottom of the page, are two of Caldwell's photographs side-by-side. The one on the left is a blurry image of a beach. It's clear that the sun is setting, although the sky is soft, not fierce.

The second photograph on the right is crisp and clear, and depicts only the sky. Again, the sun's lighting suggests evening. The white clouds look like ribbons and scattered pebbles against the deep and lighter blues of the sky itself.

Next, these two sentences float on a single, white page:

> Blink. The sun, rimmed in red.

After that comes another of Caldwell's photographs. It takes up an entire page, although it's impossible to know what it depicts. The top is black as night, the middle could be a sunset, and the bottom is a rectangle of white in the shape of a car's rearview mirror. Then, the words continue:

> Ginny turned to pick up her camera and thought the old thing looked a little like a washed-up accordion, lonely for hands. The broken lens might have been an eye. A Dallmeyer Rapid Rectilinear lens—her professor's words. What had it seen, Ginny wondered. All this? Any of this?
>
> Maybe just this, thought Ginny. This sand, this sea, this sun.

Caldwell's final photograph once again takes up an entire page, and it is the conclusion of this piece. It is as if the photographer has walked out on the water itself, and the viewer is looking at the remnants of a sunset. The photograph is extremely blurry—more color and shape than water or sky.

"Blink," Part 2

In the final pages of "Blink," the photographs are not embedded in the words, as Schoemperlen did in her piece with the medical illustrations. Instead, the prose is sequenced with the pictures. The writer and photographer wanted the images and the text to have equal weight in the storytelling, to unfold together as a progression of seeing and imagining.

On this particular day, Ginny puts down her camera and takes in the natural world around her. It is only here, at the end of the story, that the word *blink* appears. The photographer and writer wanted the reader to experience a similar blinking while reading, and the sequencing tries to do just that.

Once Ginny sets her camera down and looks at this beach with her own eyes, there are very few words on the page. Instead, a reader is asked to look as Ginny looks—to see as she sees and to think as she thinks. The intent here was that Ginny's momentary rejection of the camera—the item that separates her from experiencing the world directly—would speak to the value of collecting memories in the mind, not just on phones and computers.

The physiological blinking that both Ginny and a reader must engage to follow this sequence is meant as a clearing of the mind, even though the blurriness of the images also represents how the mind itself is often like an Impressionist painting in how it sees and remembers together. In other words, the writer and photographer tried to fit form to function.

SUGGESTED READING

If you wish to continue your reading in the genre of graphic short stories, this course recommends the following anthologies:

Best American Comics (series).

Brunetti, *Anthology of Graphic Fiction, Cartoons, and True Stories* (two volumes).

Kick, *The Graphic Canon* (three volumes).

Ware, ed., *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern* (volume 13).

Exercise: Your Graphic Short Story

This lecture's exercise is useful if you want to write a graphic story. The directions are simple: keep your piece to no more than two pages, and don't use images that are copyrighted. You don't have to draw your pictures; they can be photographs or collages.

Make sure that you're not just illustrating the language. One way to resist this temptation is to develop your images first: to tell a visual story without words. Then, once you've fashioned a tale through pictures, start to weave in another, related tale through prose. As you move between your text and its images, you will inevitably engage the synthesis of seeing and imagining that distinguishes the best examples of modern graphic storytelling. ◆

LECTURE 21

Postmodern Short Fiction in America

The terms *postmodern* and *postmodernism* are complex and even contentious in their definitions. However, there are central qualities of experimental American fiction that can be discussed as postmodern. This is especially true when using the postmodern designation to refer to when short story writers have actively sought to turn the invisible into the visible or absence into presence.

Qualities of Postmodern Pieces

There can be a self-conscious playfulness to postmodern pieces, as if the author says, "Hey, I'm telling you lies. Trust me," and the reader responds in a trusting manner. However, postmodern American fiction isn't only playful or ironic. It also embeds social commentary about the disorientation many citizens experience living at a moment that feels chaotic, especially with the omnipresence of commercialism, spectacle, and social media.

Postmodern fiction often has a political edge. It can give voice to the marginalized experiences of certain groups of Americans, such as people of Asian, Hispanic, African, and Native American descent, or those with disabilities, or people who ascribe to unconventional religious beliefs. It can also lay bare the invisible workings of power, such as instances of sexism, racism, classism, and homophobia.

Postmodernism can shake up definitions of what is even considered a piece of short fiction. For instance, this can be accomplished with pastiches of popular music, advertising, and film.

"Bullet in the Brain"

This lecture's first story example comes from the celebrated writer Tobias Wolff. It is his postmodern piece titled "Bullet in the Brain." The story opens with an arrogant man named Anders, who takes out his frustrations on the strangers in line with him at a bank.

While Anders fumes about being surrounded by stupid and incompetent people, two men in ski masks and business suits rob the bank. As these thieves threaten everyone, Anders seems unperturbed, offering disdainful comments about everything the bank robbers do and say.

This behavior enrages one of the robbers. In the second half of Wolff's short story, the irritated robber shoots Anders in the head. The moment the gun goes off and the bullet enters Anders's brain, the story changes completely.

Wolff shifts from a traditional storytelling mode using an invisible third-person limited narrator, who relates all of the characters' emotions through a series of scenes, into a highly self-conscious storytelling mode, in which some other narrator jumps in and starts talking about the neuroscience behind what happens when a bullet passes through a brain. For instance, the narrator relates that "the first appearance of the bullet in the cerebrum set off a crackling chain of … neuro-transmissions." For Wolff to make this drastic shift right at the instant when Anders is shot links form to function in a postmodern way. Wolff wants a different form of storytelling here because Anders is now a different form of character.

Anders is essentially dead; the bullet kills him instantly. However, the rest of this story is entirely about the nanosecond in which the brain's "synaptic lightning" gives Anders a leisurely glimpse of a long-gone memory from when he was a boy. Additionally, this story offers the reader a look at what actually happens—biologically and psychologically—when a human experiences the cliché that his life "passes before his eyes."

"Captivity"

In the story "Captivity" by Sherman Alexie, a present-day Native American narrator addresses Mary Rowlandson, a white woman who was held captive by a Narragansett tribe in the 1670s and who published a popular memoir about this experience in 1682. Her *Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson* became one of

the most widely read works of literature in 18-century America, and its portrayal of the indigenous population had a negative effect on subsequent Anglo-Indian relations.

In Alexie's postmodern response to and revision of this narrative, a contemporary narrator directly addresses Rowlandson as *you*. This use of the second-person point of view cuts across time and space, allowing Alexie's fictional character to question the authority of this long-dead writer. In addition, because this *you* is intimate, it's as if the narrator knows Rowlandson.

The narrator's critique of her one-sided and dehumanizing portrayal of Native Americans has the edge of a personal attack.

Wolff employs a postmodern presentation of character, and Alexie utilizes a postmodern point of view. Both of these writers make their readers conscious or hyperaware that they're reading, and they do so in the hopes of creating a meta experience—meaning a way to read both the surface and the substance of a story at the same time to gain philosophical or artistic or political insight.

"The Hit Man"

This lecture's final postmodern American story is "The Hit Man" by T. C. Boyle. It features a main character who is a thug for hire.

It begins:

Early Years

The Hit Man's early years are complicated by the black bag that he wears over his head. Teachers correct his pronunciation, the coach criticizes his attitude, the principal dresses him down for branding preschoolers with

a lit cigarette. … When he is thirteen, he is approached by the captain of the football team, who pins him down and attempts to remove the hood. The Hit Man wastes him. Five years, says the judge.

Back on the Street

The Hit Man is back on the street in two months.

From here, additional subtitles ensue, signaling events such as a first date and first job. These labels make fun of traditional plot structures in American fiction, especially those that follow a hero's journey from a place of innocence to experience.

This story imagines what the American dream might look like for a hood-wearing hit man. However, the author may also be making a sardonic commentary about how violence and greed are perhaps at the heart of the seemingly good life, especially for some upwardly mobile families that gain their privilege and wealth from preying on other people's fears.

This class-based critique is plausible because Boyle creates a paragraph that says the Hit Man character is "stalking the streets of the city, collar up, brim down. … He could hit any of us." The tone here becomes semiserious.

This is the only time in Boyle's story that he employs a first-person plural point of view, addressing the reader directly with that single use of *us*. In this way, Boyle points a finger at the readers, implicating them in anxieties over class warfare.

Exercise: A Postmodern Sentence

This lecture's exercise asks you to write a 500-word sentence. This sentence must be correct in terms of its punctuation, which means that it's not possible to use a question mark, period, or an exclamation point until the very end of those 500 words.

With the sentence, you will have to be strategic with commas, dashes, parentheticals, colons, and semicolons. Additionally, the word count must be exactly 500 words.

One more factor makes this assignment both challenging and postmodern. This exercise riffs on Donald Barthelme's famous short story called "Sentence," in which a narrator rambles for three-and-a-half packed pages but within a single sentence.

The exercise's final factor is this: Just as Barthelme's narrator is self-conscious in writing his sentence, the exercise asks you to do the same. For an example of this self-consciousness, take the beginning of Barthelme's piece: "Or a long sentence moving at a certain pace down the page aiming for the bottom—if not the bottom of this page then some other page—where it can rest, or stop for a moment to think out the questions raised by its own (temporary) existence."

Improvising off this example, write your 500-word sentence in a way that discusses what a sentence is and how it works. Do this as you are writing the sentence. This will make your piece self-conscious. Also try making comparisons along the way between what your sentence is doing and something from everyday life.

This exercise may be used to discuss any manner of sentence-like qualities or habits, such as why sentences evolved in the first place, whether sentences are the best way to structure writing, and how sentences might evolve into new structures. ◆

American Microfictions

This lecture focuses on a specific type of storytelling called microfictions or micros. A microfiction is a character-driven story of extreme brevity, often featuring a central problem.

As a point of focus, this lecture examines experimental short stories written by students of this course's instructor. All are fewer than 300 words. These stories explore lost love, and each writer makes the self-consciousness of their micros obvious by adding additional layers of postmodern techniques to convey the brokenhearted natures of their central characters.

Example 1: "Brushes"

The first story is by Joseph Johnson, and it's titled "Brushes." Here is an excerpt:

> The brushes were worn, their handles chipped. She'd been like them, worn out by the end, when her eyes had gone blank and her hands cold in yours. Worn out and chipped from giving everything to your boy, and yet she'd always found time to paint. She'd painted the moon for his first birthday, the stars for your anniversary, the sunset to apologize for giving herself to other men—men we owed.

The narrator obtains much from these objects: a set of painter's brushes. In essence, these brushes become the lost mother and romantic partner. They don't just represent her feel, look, and actions; the brushes are these things.

The brushes also encompass all of the moments constituting the narrator's long relationship with this woman.

When the narrator holds these brushes with their chipped handles, then, these memories are revived.

The memory that the painter had to sell her body to support their son is particularly important. Later, when the narrator places the brushes on the counter in the pawn shop, they become the relationship itself: one of compromise, loss, and complicated love.

There is cleverness in how the writer resists expectations by personifying the brushes as the lost woman. However, the most postmodern or experimental aspect of his micro is the author's refusal to gender the narrator. As a result, readers can step into this narrator's grief, regardless of their own gender or romantic circumstance.

Exercise: Objects as Characters

One potential writing exercise that comes out of "Brushes" is to select a common, everyday object and make that the central character of a microfiction. The object should be closely associated with a human being—ideally one who's lost or absent.

The narrator within your microfiction can conjure this missing person by interacting with the object in various ways. Whether that interaction is comic, tragic, loving, or livid, the point is to take seriously that the object is the lost person.

"The Mirror" and "Lonely Twentysomething Tries Tinder"

This lecture's other examples of student-written micros adopt a second-person point of view as a means of heightening the self-consciousness of this form. The first is called "The Mirror" by Sam Warby, and here is an excerpt:

> You stand in front of the mirror—your reflection seems almost foreign. Some days you feel trapped—trapped in your body—trapped in your own skin. The skin that drips from every square inch of your frame. You run your hands over your wrinkled midriff—pocked with the stretch marks from your past life. What remains of your bulging belly now drapes low.

The second is "Lonely Twentysomething Tries Tinder" by Joey Haavik. This story features no punctuation. Here is an excerpt:

> you're in a car with an older man that you met online he is so handsome whiskey-brown hair shiny green eyes like a cool summer afternoon you think he has a couple of kids two daughters and they love their daddy but he doesn't ask for your name and your bike is in the trunk of his car because you didn't have a bike lock

In adopting the stream-of-consciousness approach of the modernists and the postmodernists, these two writers have upended expectations about whether a micro has enough room to capture the rich complexity of a character's interiority. Typically, authors using a stream-of-consciousness technique eschew short fiction on the assumption that the workings of a human mind cannot be represented within anything less than a lengthy section or chapter of a novel.

However, the narrators within both of these pieces are fully realized. In "The Mirror," it is the carefully presented body within the mirror that reflects not the outside but the inside of this speaker. The inside conveys the lie that is the mirror of American popular culture: one that constantly repeats a perfect female form that can supposedly be achieved by diet, exercise, and surgery.

Here, the narrator has lost the extra weight, but the speaker hasn't gained any confidence in losing her pounds. If anything, in losing this weight, she has seemingly lost herself. Additionally, the decision to use the second-person *you* creates a double self-consciousness: the surprise of a human body turned into an unknown landscape and then of readers themselves turned into the thinker.

"Lonely Twentysomething Tries Tinder" takes the central contradiction of Tinder—its

impersonal intimacy—and turns it into the fissures and breaks of a human psyche, especially when someone is looking for love in all the wrong places. In fact, the writer literally breaks his sentences, dropping capitalization and punctuation.

He also employs a point-of-view shift from the second person to the first person that parallels the slipperiness of Tinder, in which a person's profile becomes who they are. The result of this grammatical rupture is a powerful re-creation of the tension most everyone feels on a first date, especially with a stranger: the push and pull of desire and fear.

The micro doesn't actually end; without a final period, this narrator is suspended perpetually within the purgatory of his or her own making. Even when this specific date is over, the cavernous insecurity and longing within this narrator will go on and on and on.

SUGGESTED READING

If you'd like to read more examples of microfiction, this course recommends the following sources:

100 Word Story, www.100wordstory.org.

Stern, ed., *Micro Fiction*.

Thomas and Scotellaro, eds., *New Micro*.

Exercise: An Experimental Micro

It's possible to experiment within the experimental form of microfiction itself. As a writing exercise, you might try drafting a micro using the first-person point of view and the techniques of stream-of-consciousness. Then, change your initial draft into the second-person point of view to see what it means when you make your reader, and not your narrator, into the focal character.

You can also allow your punctuation to fall away, thereby turning your micro into a type of prose-poem in which white-space jumps function like enjambments at the end of poetic lines. To think in jumps rather than commas or periods might help to oil the wheels of your narrator's mind.

Feel free to combine the techniques from this lecture. For instance, "Lonely Twentysomething Tries Tinder" is largely in the second person, it adopts a stream-of-consciousness narration, and it has no punctuation. ◆

Short Story Endings

This lecture examines four endings from American short stories. They are four distinct conclusions covering a wide expanse of time: The first is from 1839, and the last is from 1961.

The American fiction writer Richard Ford has said that "short stories … feel as though they arise out of some fierce schism which they by their very existence mean to reconcile." This lecture uses Ford's elements as tools of analysis, asking: What "fierce schism" seems embedded in these endings, and what—if anything—has been reconciled?

The Ending of "The House of Usher"

This lecture's first two examples turn to objects as the final image. In the first, that object is a house; in the second, it is a statue. In addition, both stories have a first-person narrator who witnesses a kind of transformation of these objects and interprets that transformation through their own peculiar perspective.

The first ending, focusing on a house, is from Edgar Allan Poe's eerie Gothic tale "The Fall of the House of Usher." By the end of Poe's story, the house is destroyed. A crack running along the whole of the house widens into an enormous fissure. Out of this crevice, the narrator sees the moon and hears a voice of "a thousand waters" shouting, and then the whole is consumed into the "deep and dark" pond or "tarn" next to the property, leaving nothing but silence.

EDGAR ALLAN POE

GOTHIC TRAITS

From the 18th century onward, Gothic stories were often set in lonely castles or crumbling monasteries, and the structures themselves held unsavory characters, such as a lewd monk, a mad scientist, or some other social pariah preying upon the innocent.

Poe is obviously trading on Gothic stereotypes. Given that Poe's House of Usher is ripped in half and consumed by dark waters to the tune of a screaming voice, it's safe to assume that this house represents something bad that needs to be destroyed. Poe's intent is supernatural, not natural.

The fact that it's a house, too, is important: It's a symbol of domesticity, and domesticity itself was a symbol of family, piety, and safety in the 19th century. Roderick and Madeline Usher, a pair of twins and the last surviving ancestors of the Usher line, own the house. In essence, the story is about the insanity of the two and their highly dysfunctional relationship.

The ending is a symbolic culmination of the madness: the house is split and dies just as the twins are split in death, and all of them fall into ruin. In this case, then, a fierce schism is literally reconciled.

The Ending of "Life in the Iron Mills"

The second ending, focusing on a statue, comes from the end of Rebecca Harding Davis's harsh and symbolic story "Life in the Iron Mills" from 1861. Davis's ending offers light instead of darkness. The narrator is gazing at a statue of a mill woman made out of korl, a waste product from smelting iron.

The statue is described as having a "dumb, woeful face," and the narrator wonders if the "desperate need" written on that face has "commanded the darkness away." In the final moment, as day starts to break through a window, a "cool, gray light" touches the statue's head "like a blessing hand," which the narrator believes is God promising "the Dawn."

Davis was a devout Christian, and with this story, she attempts to offer hope over despair—even though most of her story compares American iron factories to Dante's *Inferno*. The story relates the tragic tale of a worker named Wolfe, who sculpts the

korl woman and ends up killing himself in prison for a crime he didn't commit.

The statue, then, symbolizes all of the ignorant and oppressed ironworkers who are exploited by the rich and ignored by the middle class, a group that constitutes Davis's readers. The fierce schism between the haves and have-nots is reconciled through God's grace.

The Ending of "Bernice Bobs Her Hair"

This lecture's final two examples are narrated in the third person, not the first, and they focus on characters, not objects. Take, for example, the finale of F. Scott Fitzgerald's darkly comic "Bernice Bobs Her Hair" from 1920, excerpted here:

> [Bernice] was passing Warren's house now, and on the impulse she set down her baggage, and swinging [Marjorie's] braids like pieces of rope flung them at the wooden porch, where they landed with a slight thud. She laughed again, no longer restraining herself. "Huh!" she giggled wildly. "Scalp the selfish thing!" Then picking up her suitcase she set off at a half-run down the moonlit street.

It seems that Bernice's wild actions and dialogue reveal a character who is now free of some limitation or constraint. She may even be acting out of character, because she's behaving in an impulsive, wild way.

In addition, Bernice seems to be sending a message to Warren—one that has something to do with Marjorie. The braids were once on Marjorie's head. This message is also linked, somehow, to Bernice's newfound freedom: The braids she's swinging are said to be like ropes that no longer bind her.

Fitzgerald's story is one of sweet revenge—in this case, of one cousin against another. It's also hard not to see some gender politics at play in "Bernice Bobs Her Hair." Fitzgerald published

it in 1920, the year American women won the right to vote and a time when many worried about young women who wore flapper dresses or bobbed their hair.

Bernice's flight and her wild laughter indicate that she has found freedom in rejecting the societal norms of an older generation that would surely frown on a young, respectable woman going off by herself into a moonlit night with nothing but a suitcase. Here, the fierce schism occurs between Bernice and Marjorie as well as between the old ways and the new.

The Ending of "The Man Who Was Almost a Man"

The final example comes from Richard Wright. It's part of the conclusion of a piece of realistic fiction called "The Man Who Was Almost a Man," published in 1961:

> He was hot all over. He hesitated just a moment; then he grabbed, pulled atop of a [train] car, and lay flat. He felt his pocket; the gun was still there. Ahead the long rails were glinting in the moonlight, stretching away, away to somewhere, somewhere where he could be a man …

Given that he's hot and hesitant, the character seems agitated and unsure. He also seems to feel the need to protect himself, and he may be a fugitive of some kind, hopping a train in the middle of the night. Maybe he's killed someone with that gun, and so he's running away to avoid capture.

However, the rails glint with promise as they stretch away to "somewhere" the character believes he can "be a man." If he has hurt or killed someone with his gun, it also seems that he is someone who has not been allowed to grow up.

Here, the character who runs away is a boy named Dave Saunders, a young African American farm worker in the rural South who talks his mother into letting him buy a gun. Dave believes the gun will prove to those around him that he's an adult, not just a boy. Yet he winds up accidentally shooting a mule owned by the man he works for, Mr. Hawkins, and as a consequence will have to work for two years to pay off this debt.

The fact that Mr. Hawkins is white and a landholder, and that Dave is black and poor and works Hawkins's land, has everything to do with why Dave runs away, especially in the segregated South where the story takes place. Unlike Bernice, who is momentarily free of societal constraints at the end of her story, Dave trades one form of bondage for another.

He doesn't understand that mature manhood isn't having physical power or threatening others with violence. Rather, it is owning up to one's mistakes and making things right. Thus, Wright's final sentence is tinged with irony: "Ahead the long rails were glinting in the moonlight, stretching away, away to somewhere, somewhere where he could be a man …"

That Wright ends his story with ellipses rather than a period suggests Dave will not find this "somewhere" at the end of the line. Instead, Dave has to turn inward to find a psychic place of power and wisdom—a reconciliation he has yet to learn, for the fierce schism remains within himself.

Exercise: An Ending

This lecture concludes with a straightforward exercise. This exercise makes clear that, unless a piece is deliberately comic or absurd, once a writer has made certain choices about the donnée and the central problem that will put pressure on her characters, there are only so many conclusions that will allow for a sense of completion.

This exercise may be done with any piece of flash fiction, meaning a story that is no more than one to five pages long. Read roughly nine-tenths of the story, and then stop and write your own ending to the story. When you're done, read the whole piece again and include your ending. Then, ask yourself the following questions:

- Why did you choose this ending?
- How does the rest of the story anticipate your ending?
- How did you answer the questions and problems posed in this story?
- Did you play into assumptions that you had about what would happen?
- Did you try to upend assumptions?
- Does your ending arise naturally and authentically out of what came before?

The more you practice thinking about how and why endings are earned from their beginnings and middles, the better your own conclusions will be. ◆

A Hundred False Starts

All American fiction writers have false starts. For example, F. Scott Fitzgerald once called himself "one of the champion false starters of the writing profession." Perhaps most famously, he produced 18,000 words of a story that would eventually become *The Great Gatsby*, and then he discarded almost all of it and started over. Other famous American writers have had similar experiences.

Dan Kois, a book reviewer for *Slate* and *The New York Times*, has explored why fiction writers abandon certain stories, and it turns out the reasons are many. They give up because of psychological despair, because their stories aren't working, or because the work is simply bad.

However, failure is crucial for an author to discover what to write about. This lecture looks at the world of publishing short stories and some strategies for dealing with inevitable, crucial failure. The end of the lecture provides resources for writers and readers alike.

Handling the Struggle

Keep in mind that for American storytellers, false starts and failures abound. Short story writer Janis Hubschman explains one method of dealing with the struggle of writing in this way:

> I'll take a story through dozens of drafts. Sometimes, I'll put a story away for months and then look at it again with fresh eyes and new ideas for deepening the characters and/or complicating the plot.

One of Hubschman's stories, "Wilderness of Ghosts," took years to produce and suffered multiple rejections. However, "Wilderness of Ghosts" eventually won the Fiction Open contest for *Glimmer Train*—an American journal that publishes nothing but excellent short fiction. In other words, Hubschman's false starts and failures eventually resulted in success.

The Short Story Publishing World

The publication of a novel—even a literary one—can propel an author into great fame. As a result, New York publishing houses are much more interested in buying novels than any other kind of fiction.

By contrast, a short story writer really must be in the business of storytelling for its own sake—for the human truths the form distills. A short story is rarely published as a single volume unless it is lengthy and penned by a well-known writer.

Short stories usually appear in literary journals, magazines, or as part of a story collection. Over time, the short story became less commercial and more literary, which is why people now talk of sophisticated short fiction as "*New Yorker* stories."

At the same time, the explosion of creative writing classes and

programs since the 1970s has also made the short story popular in writing workshops. Reflecting this, over the past 50 years, a wave of small literary journals has come into being. It is here that most American short story writers publish their work.

RESOURCES FOR WRITERS AND READERS

For writers looking for publication, it is vital to stay current. Here are resources that can help with that:

- The Poets & Writers website, which has a database of over 1,200 literary magazines. This can be invaluable for creating a review of the market.
- The current *Writer's Market*, available via hard copy or digital subscription.

For people who are primarily readers of American short fiction, a variety of small-circulation periodicals are producing the widest variety of new voices in the field. Among many others, these journals include:

- *Virginia Quarterly Review*.
- *One Story*.
- *Juked*.
- *Zoetrope: All-Story*.

Readers can also use the aforementioned database on the Poets & Writers website. Here, you will find the freshest and most current short fiction out there, including both online and print journals that cover an astonishing variety of genres, subjects, and styles.

Exercise: Handling Rejection

Even after the false starts of writing a story are overcome, it's quite possible to fail at finding a publisher who will publish it. However, persistence can pay off: This course's instructor once had a story spend six years on the rejection circuit before she finally saw it in print.

Writers who are planning to send something out for publication need to grow a thick skin. They also need to send their work to the right places.

To that end, the following exercise can help. Start by writing up a review of the market. Go through at least 20 websites of literary journals. As you do so, look for places that will at least read your work, if not take it.

Completing a review of the market takes time. It requires reading the online samples of the stories each journal is publishing. The taste of one editor is wildly different from another, and when editors change jobs, they take their aesthetic preferences with them.

If you send out your work but receive a rejection, put that story back in the mail the very same day. That way, the sting is momentary.

In addition, look for journals that accept simultaneous submissions, which means you don't have to be monogamous with your work. As long as you let other editors know when your story is taken by a journal, there's no reason not to up your odds. ◆

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