

SHORT STORY: FOOTSTEPS IN THE DARKNESS

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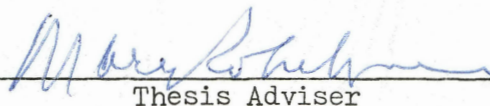
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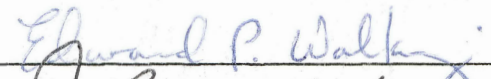


SHORT STORY: FOOTSTEPS IN THE DARKNESS

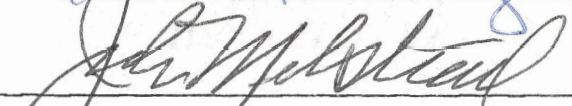
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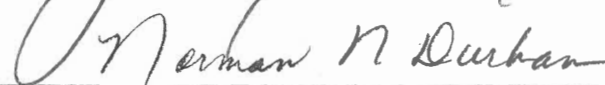
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PREFACE

The graduate faculty of this university has extended me no small amount of criticism and encouragement in my determination to improve my writing, reading, critical judgment, and teaching ability. I will never forget Dr. Luecke's cheerful salutation while she waved my first paper at me: "You can write a good paper, Mary K.; this just needs work!" Then Dr. Milstead would not settle for a flawed paper though he knew that I had traded opportunities for respite during Spring Break and the month of August for a less infirm grip on one small edge of O'Neill. Dr. Berkeley and Dr. Walkiewicz have lent their support while Dr. Rohrberger has furnished the impetus for further study of the literary short story.

I hope this paper reflects the vitality of the short story as I perceive it and the energy of the classroom as I have felt it during my study here. Dr. Rohrberger places the genre into three developmental phases: traditional, modern, and contemporary. Her distinction between the simple narrative and the short story operates within this paper, also. The distinguishing characteristics of the genre which form a basis for Dr. Rohrberger's classes are also the bases for my ideas about the duality of the short story as it revolves around reader-writer collaboration in their search for extra reality. The reader's involvement has become less that of a delighted child and more that of a puzzled adult with childlike inquisitiveness as the genre develops.

A thesis committee, in my case, has been a very helpful entity.
I am grateful.

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SHORT STORY: FOOTSTEPS IN THE DARKNESS

Introduction

Between the time that people sang and told stories and the time that electronics flashed images before glazed eyes, there arose a group of people willing to communicate experience through the written word. One resultant art form, the literary short story, persists today as the connector between bipolar unities; the reader connects to the writer in an everchanging relationship whose focal point is a shared, childlike inquisitiveness; also, the collaborative team seeks an extra reality which combines the understood with the unfathomable. Feeling that life goes beyond the facts of daylight, the short story writer selects, invents, and presents in compressed, lyrical prose an imaginary situation which can energize curious readers, causing them to ponder, many times to rue, a part of life that they may have ignored, missed, or forgotten. Once the short story has connected the outstretched entities of both purveyor and receiver, it can conduct the team from the familiar reaches of the mind (such as normal sensory perception, chronological time, and linearly ordered space) to less charted paths of reality (mazelike juxtapositions of past, present, and future as well as dream content). The short story catches the reader up in a curiously changing search for what is as opposed to what appears to be. This search, successively inviting, sophisticated, and delinquent, revolves around a core of childlike vigor and inquisitiveness within the creative team.

Critics from Poe's time to the present have debated the relationship between reader and writer in the development of the short story. Mary Rohrberger emphasizes the need for reader collaboration in the dense short story, and she cites Poe's call to a responsive readership in his definition of the short story.¹ Nancy Willard, on the other hand, seems to romanticize the purveyor's role:

It requires two people, the teller and the listener. The teller tells the story he has made out of bits he has seen and pieces he has heard, and in the healing synthesis, he gives the wasted hours of our lives an order they don't have and a radiance that only God and the artist can perceive.²

Willard's exaltation of the writer finds a similar expression in Chandra Agrawal's summary:

What is communicated by a good story is not a religious message, a philosophy, a theory of and for life. It is something lighter and profounder--a feeling, a deep understanding, an inarticulated realization, a light which imbues mundane life with new meanings.³

D. H. Lawrence, however, takes the purveyor off the pedestal. He insists, rather, that one has to grapple with what resources one can find for expanding sentience: "The next era is the era of the Holy Ghost. And the Holy Ghost speaks individually inside each individual. Always, forever a ghost."⁴ Lawrence presages Barbara Leonard's call for a mature readership, one that is capable of coauthoring the short story:

. . . Rather it is the reader who, in the ordinary exercise of a mature literary intelligence, acts upon familiar textual clues and extrapolates from them to a fully formed narrative in much the same way as the eye completes a partial circle.⁵

Progressing through three developmental stages (traditional, modern, and contemporary), the short story involves its reader in an escalating

search for extra reality. "Extra reality" refers to an increased awareness which can come from the dual activation of the conscious and the unconscious within the reader-writer team. Intellect and emotion, the understood and the unfathomable, surface and subsurface, exterior and interior are terms that operate interchangeably in this paper to denote the duality of the collaborative search by reader and writer for insight.

The Traditional Short Story

The pioneer writers of the short story extend readers a bonus beyond simple passage along the surface patterns of a story. The reader also has the option of completing Leondar's "partial circle" designed into the subsurface of the story. The detection and decoding of covert patterns increase with the number of times that one reads "Ligeia," "The Fall of the House of Usher," "The Hollow of the Three Hills," "Rappaccini's Daughter," "Bartleby, the Scrivener," "Benito Cereno," and other stories of the Poe-Hawthorne-Melville era.* Crane's "Open Boat" and "The Blue Hotel" allow for similar, open-ended readings.⁷ The slightly overwrought analysis of the Easterner at the conclusion of "The Blue Hotel" diminishes reader extrapolation from "textual clues," but the early short story nevertheless engages the willing reader in activity far surpassing that of surface level entertainment.

In searching for the other half of the story, a reader may discover that he or she not only is the agent of the search but the object.

* These pairs of stories are found in the Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville editions cited hereafter.

Hugh McLean tells us that Gogol was involving his readers in a similar fashion in nineteenth-century Russia:

'Vij,' published in ~~Moscow~~ Mingorod, has about it the mystery and haunting quality of Poe's 'Ligeia.' A neurotic personality has verbalized his dreams; latent in the story, they come to life when exposed to the subconscious of the reader.⁸

Because the reader is one half the flint needed to provide the spark within a highly compressed art form, the literary short story teeters between dynamics and dormancy. More vulnerable, perhaps, than other art forms, the short story initially engages reader interest through its plot; next, the genre elicits reader involvement with its lyricism, compression, and density; and, finally, the spontaneous combustion, if indeed it happens at all, rests almost outside the sphere of rationality--depending much upon the intuition of both reader and writer.

Hawthorne's readers, for instance, seldom are passive observers to the transactions in his stories, unless they prefer. In "Rappaccini's Daughter," readers will need to debate Baglioni's assessment of Rappaccini, as well as the chilling effects of Rappaccini's skills and Baglioni's counterskills.⁹ Beatrice and Giovanni form single entities with dual features (Eve-Mary; Adam-Christ). Man's intrigue with knowledge in the story has turned Eden into Gethsemane. God, devil, priest, and victim merge into a subconscious question rather than a rational answer. This complicity binds reader to writer in an ongoing quest for comprehension.

Poe, the first writer-theorist of the genre, enlists the energies of his readers preeminently through his lyricism, that atavistic call to man's oral, earlier musing. In the following passage from "The Cask

of Amontillado," one can feel alternating currents of attraction and repulsion in the language between the speakers. Poe's is a pre-Freudian demonstration of the counterforces within man.¹⁰ The lyricism of the following passage cuts two ways--one of civilization and one of demonism:

'I have my doubts,' I replied, 'and I was silly enough to pay the full Amontillado price without consulting you in the matter. You were not to be found, and I was fearful of losing a bargain.'

'Amontillado!'

'I have my doubts.'

'Amontillado!'

'And I must satisfy them.'

'Amontillado!'

'As you are engaged, I am on my way to Luchresi. If anyone has a critical turn it is he. He will tell me--'

'Luchresi cannot tell Amontillado from Sherry.'

'And yet some fools will have it that his taste is a match for your own.'

'Come, let us go.'

'Whither?'

'To your vaults.'

'My friend, no; . . .',¹¹

The lyricism and compression of the dialogue bind the reader consciously and subconsciously to intrigue, deception, and jealousy. The literal murder story evokes a sense of the macabre, but the active reading partner constructs the story as a nightmare precipitated by feelings of jealousy, revenge, guilt, and the need for release. These matters speak directly to the subconscious of the unresisting reader.

The willing reader, to use Poe's term, aligns the more easily charted plotlines with the traditional story's covert patterns in order to co-create other levels of meaning. Opposites merge to form double-sided motifs whose patterns shift ever so slightly with each perusal. The nether side of "The Fall of the House of Usher," for instance, reveals tiered themes of the fear of death, incest, homosexuality, and

impotence.¹² The decaying, fissured house and the schizophrenic Roderick oppose the tarn and Madeline, thus connoting a mysterious world of spirit attracted by matter. The dying brother/sister mirror the death struggle in the Ethelred story which couples sex/death. The twin interests of Roderick and the narrator imply an interdependence which enfolds the reader in the dark, silent tarn--reservoir for everyone. The mad and the dying merely arrive there first. Common symbols like the mansion, the tarn, and the tomb complement the motifs and the doubling to endow the story with rich, subsurface linkages between life-death, man-woman, conscious-unconscious, and writer-reader.

Many of the early writers use common symbols so well that they leave an indubitable mark upon the psyche of the co-creative reader. Bartleby's wall and Akakievitch's overcoat immediately come to mind.¹³ Bartleby's seemingly complete resignation to the horrible nothingness of his life and his passive rebellion couched in the famous five words "I would prefer not to" form an essence that seeps into and becomes a part of the walls on Wall Street. The narrator's nervous refusal to believe that Bartleby has to be so doomed or that his own life is just a kinetic coverup of the same void forms the necessary girding upon which the reader constructs Bartleby's wall. The little clerk's long scrutiny of the wall prevents his trying to escape; the narrator, however, has fabricated business, urgency, and amicability as his own psychological ivy for obscuring the terrible wall. The awesome tension energizes readers as they watch one man face the wall and one man flee.

Gogol's story "The Mantle," or "The Overcoat," equals the Melville story in the handling of the common symbol. Akaki Akakievitch, like Bartleby, has been stricken by drabness and futility, but Akaki makes

one supreme effort to retaliate. The reader is never quite certain whether Akaki frantically tries to get beyond nothingness because he is bullied by a drunken tailor or because he succumbs to a wild impulse that grows into a determination to be good to himself in this small way. Nevertheless, the new coat finally materializes. The disproportionate enjoyment of the coat to the terrible brevity of Akaki's ownership of it undercuts the story and bites into the reader's awareness of some of life's futility and absurdity. The dreamlike appearance of the Very Important Person who is haunted by Akaki's ghost is an adroit handling of man's sense of collective guilt over mismanaged human relationships.

The typical Maupassant story, coming from France a generation later, subjugates characterization, symbolism, perspective, and motif in deference to a plot crafted for a single effect, often that of irony.¹⁴ One can read "Ball of Fat" as an example and appreciate the perfectly engineered plot, but the subsurface parallels fail to match the multivalence which the American and the Russian writers had established. "Ball of Fat" focuses upon ten French citizens who are trying to leave a conquered Rouen. The prostitute, whose nickname is the title reference, feeds her haughty, less precautionary, fellow travelers; reluctantly procures their release from a provincial tyrant; and suffers their renewed rejection of her, afterwards. A fine portrayal of civilized barbarity, the story's merits rest squarely upon a plot which maximizes irony.

Maupassant sets up interesting covert patterns in the plot for the alert reader: The fleeing French soldiers reveal the same basic ugliness as the fleeing French civilians when under duress, and the coach rolls smoothly during its exit, after Ball of Fat's victimization,

much as the Prussian invaders roll triumphantly over Rouen. Characterization, however, only hints at covert patterns and tends to keep reader involvement at bay. One sees a stratified society monopolized by greed and indifference. The count and the two wealthy merchants have acquired wives who are successively assertive, seductive, and deceptive. The two nuns seem to account for naught in the story--epithets to ineffectuality. Cornudet, who has risked his family's funds by speculating on the possible success of the Republic relates as poorly to the other men as Miss Elizabeth Rousset (Ball of Fat) does to the other women. According to the eight sojourners, these two oddities are reprehensible. The parallel ends here, however. Cornudet shares the basic greediness of the others, and Ball of Fat stands alone. Entirely unglamorized by Maupassant, she has not been able to replace her vulnerability and concern with the prevailing indifference epitomized by her social superiors.

As an example of a simple narrative with potential for a literary short story, "Ball of Fat" entertains readers more than it involves them.¹⁵ The writer in this case has become the adult of old leading a bedbound child through a ritual. Although somewhat vinegar-coated, the story is a pacifier for the darkness. It is oral storytelling honed to a fine print--the popular, more facile cousin to the complex literary short story.

Poe, Gogol, Hawthorne, and Melville, on the other hand, exemplify the nineteenth-century short story writers who collaborate with readers on a more complex basis. They entertain through the traditional plot, but they also involve the reader and bind him or her to the creative process through detection of covert patterns at work in common symbols,

careful imagery, dream aura, doubling, antithesis, and an overall, orchestrated ambiguity. Through the employment of such skills, these writers have the uncommon ability to clasp a willing reader into a dual authorship of the literary short story.

The Modern Short Story

The optional, subsurface reading and maximal writing of the traditional period merge into a much more sophisticated coauthorship during the era of the modern short story. In spite of the advent of sophistication, however, the reader-writer must maintain an omnipresent childlikeness characterized by nonjudgmental inquisitiveness. Like inquiring entities grasping hands on the threshold of obscurity, the reader and writer of the modern short story seek extra reality in a manner alien to their predecessors.

The reader of the earlier stories picks up especially designed interior patterns for further detection of mood and theme, plus the supplementing of character, setting, and plot. The reader of the modern short story begins where the reader of a traditional story leaves off. Besides finding subterranean images which form meaningful patterns, the reader will find what I call a centripetal plot moving inward toward the subconscious and the instinctive while the external plot operates centrifugally and treats surface appearances or normal reality. James Joyce's story "A Painful Case" has a centrifugal, external plot covering a period of four and more years.¹⁶ A man carefully and pridefully avoids emotional and physical involvement with a woman who gives him pleasure. James Duffy reads about the embarrassing death of his rejected companion four years later and feels momentary

agony within his aseptic vacuum. Calling for reader coauthorship, the centripetal action works inward from a tandem focus on two isolated persons who touch and shatter, twice; once, during normal reality; once, during extra reality. Mr Duffy chooses a nonsocial aloneness to match his intellectual, aesthetic, and cautious nature (before and after his alliance with Emily). Emily inherits emotional abandonment (once through marital atrophy and once through Mr. Duffy's psychical expediency). The reader watches Mr. Duffy veer from further entanglement after enjoying Emily's companionship to an alarming degree. Upon reading of her death, Mr. Duffy gains psychical protection by scorning her moral decline. The memory of her, however, troubles him until the anesthesia of long years of emotional discipline returns. Emily's appreciable intellect, however, has not been developed at the expense of her emotions; therefore, she does not have Mr. Duffy's apparent success in avoiding pain. Her feelings are no match for his disciplined will in achieving the well-ordered life. She scrambles her life and almost unsettles his with her infirm, alcohol-oriented death. She perturbs him with her death. Her irrationality has violated him. His having to read about her precipitates uncharacteristic doubt within him about himself and his life stance. The moment of extra reality in the story (Joyce's epiphany) occurs when Mr. Duffy recoups his habitual isolation. Previously, the suppressed side of him had gained fleeting control and had moved him to reverie and pain. But now he is safely alone again. In the evening darkness and silence, the aura of Emily, like the night train, flees. Emily is a momentary, lighted incision, tearing at darkness and pain.

Operating then from contrapuntal plots which generate intellectual

quandary within the reader and very possibly the writer, the modern short story stimulates the creative team more than it gratifies it. No need, therefore, to look for tidy resolution in a story like Jean Toomer's "Karintha," but in two fertile pages, Toomer gives the reader a world in all its mirrorings.¹⁷ East is coupled with West in the refrain, and dusk is a merging of light and dark. Little boys reflect young men who become old men; all of them play house--either with hobby horses, hard-earned cash, or by counting dusks until the fertile dawning. Karintha, the child, doubles with Karintha's child. The Karinthas, child and woman, are a combination of lively pine needles and smouldering sawdust. Sawmill. Woman. "A growing thing ripened too soon" (p. 2). The story exudes a primeval atmosphere; Karintha, part of the earth and the pines, affects everything. Like Persephone, Karintha--beauty, wisdom, all--will bow to time and go down. The compression of the story is matched only by its lyricism and its call to the reader for sensitive collaboration.

The modern mode of short prose fiction is not unlike the traditional short story in its employment of wish fulfillment dreams and fantasies or nightmares with attendant mazes in order to equate the importance of the subconscious to that of the conscious in the creative team's quest for extra reality. The traditional writer, nevertheless, brings the reader back to secure, acceptable, non-dream bearings while the modern writer leads the reader just close enough to leap back to logic-dominance reality should the reader desire.

Toomer's story "Esther" typifies the commonplace setting and characters of the modern short story, but it also illustrates the fusion of psychic halves in order to fathom a mysterious totality.¹⁸ Esther, the

mulatto child of a black grocer in a nameless Georgia town, fantasizes her way through dreary adolescence and young adulthood. What she dreams and what she hears about King Barlo blur with what she may have seen or may have dreamed. Few absolutes exist in such compressed, lyrical prose. Her conscious being battles her subconscious being over a dream of herself as a madonna with child. The child suggests King Barlo, a saviour figure, while the Esther-Madonna pairs earth-heaven/sin-purity. Neither the reader nor Esther can distinguish the dream reality from the non-dream reality in the shared experience of the story. After rejection by boy and man, Esther brings a climax to her merged, dreamlike, non-dream reality. She seeks King Barlo only to find renunciation and to retire into bafflement, uncertainty, and humiliation--a noplacewhere forever for her non-dream self.

The modern short story often drops its reader in the midst of unromantic settings and characters while employing uncommon, internal symbols that depend upon the context of the story for their meaning. The image of tobacco juice in "Esther" suggests sperm ejaculation and subliminal sex for the thwarted, outcast Esther. Sunrays flaming in McGregor's store window catch Esther's eye often and feed her fantasies. The reflection offers a vitality that is totally lacking in her daily life.

The doubling and pairing common to traditional and modern stories reemerges within story cycles of the modern period. Through compression and accretion, through doubling and pairing, the stories form layers which work toward a single effect. Joyce's Dubliners distills life of the city essentially from one dusk to another and toward a second dawn, without quite diffusing a second daylight in the last story.¹⁹ The

stories, like the Dublin sun, pass from the duskiess of "Sisters" through layers of youth, young adulthood, middle age, and back to night falling on a different pair of aged sisters. The counterbalance of the dissimilar sisters, meals, rituals, and deaths in the first and last stories of Dubliners suggests a density and intricacy that the cooperative reader finds in each story, counterstory, and in the cycle itself.

The modern short story ushers in another era for its readers. The childlike inquisitiveness is still there, of necessity, because readers of the modern mode have to settle for more equivocation and less overt entertainment during their collaborative coupling with the writer. One can intuit the original oral tendencies of adult-to-child storytelling in even the most complex of the early short prose fiction; the modern mode, on the other hand, appears to be deliberately probing further and further into the unknown by balancing plot with counterplot, by characterization which pits physical and mystical yearning against intellectual quandary, by dream patterns with internal symbols, and by commonplace settings with equally commonplace characters.

The Contemporary Mode

The traditional mode gives the reader external reality through linear plots with logical solutions while suggesting subsurface experience; the modern mode speaks directly to that subsurface reality by tailoring psychical plots; the contemporary short story, however, offers no basic assurances about any kind of reality or a way to find it. Quite in revolt against smoothness, guises, and established patterns or formulas, the contemporary mode overtly displays writers' machinations and challenges readers to make what they can of the matter. Robert

Martin Adams identifies some of the rebelliousness of contemporary short prose fiction:

The narrative forms themselves are specious grids. The apparatuses of commentary and critical analysis are used wholly against their ostensible content--not like overlaid or underlying myth, to deepen the significance of the basic stories, but to entangle them with one another, roughen their textures, fracture their sequences, render them more difficult of access.²⁰

The contemporary writer of short prose questions the need to evoke the old world of previously established space, identity, and time. Instead the writer invites the reader to acknowledge uncertainty and absurdity.

Adams lists the ways and means of contemporary writers:

contrasting depths; a fragment from one context used in another; a discourse framed to imply, and to require for its completion, an unstated concept to be supplied by the reader; highly stylized, artificial, or two-dimensional representations; a meticulous surface realism surrounding a single anomaly or absurdity; discontinuity in the texture of the artwork itself--not just holes or gaps, but the reflections upon itself, or self-negations; duplicities, like parody and self-parody; diaphanous representations of one order of experience, through which another order is felt; various forms of violence performed on linguistic conventions, especially diction and syntax; simultaneous, contradictory points of view; anti-narratives. . . collages . . . ; intrusion of the author's authorial concerns, writing about the act of writing, etc.; any constructional technique that involves active, self-conscious complicity on the part of the audience or reader; anti-functional form in general; blanks, silences, and non-performances; arbitrary or gratuitous obstacles; and a thousand other devices awaiting their definitive taxonomist (p. 51).

The contemporary short story writer riddles the old ideas of reality and challenges the flexibility, astuteness, and patience of the reader.

In the Thirties in Europe, Nabokov was employing many of the devices mentioned for passing readers through the reality barrier and depositing them on the lunar sands of uncertainty, perhaps the ultimate

reality. In "The Leonardo," for example, readers have to help conjure the setting for the story instead of watching a magic show perpetrated by the writer. Authorial intrusions create an aura of genesis within the story: "Now this is the way we'll arrange the world: every man shall sweat, every man shall eat . . . Repeat: The world shall be sweaty and well-fed."²¹ The final lamentations of the author carry the reader through retreating props to a state of dismay and dissatisfaction, but certainly not disbelief. As a further portent of contemporaneity, Nabokov formulates in six lines a mini-plot based on a film which reverberates throughout Romantovsky's circumstances. Also, the writer pushes the surrealism to modern, cinematic proportions in order to intensify the horrendous impact of the brothers on the fragile protagonist: "Meanwhile the brothers began to swell, to grow, they filled up the whole room, the whole house, and then grew out of it" (pp. 15-16). A second description emphasizes the ethereal quality of Romantovsky as he temporarily evades obliteration from the hands of Neanderthal: "The brothers stooped, toppled, yawned, still looking through sleepy tears at their guest. He, vibrating and diffusing rays, stretched out, thinned and gradually vanished" (p. 18). This kind of ebbing and flowing captures the evanescence of Romantovsky--an impossible feat if one were adhering to the old illusions of reality.

Surrealism, one aspect of the artists' revolt against standardized reality, has changed in tone through the years. Mansfield and Joyce in the modern mode and Nabokov and Kafka of the early contemporary period employ a surrealism that suggests a wistful uncertainty. The following passage from "That in Aleppo Once" typifies that tone:

She keeps on walking to and fro where the brown nets
are spread to dry on the hot stone slabs and the dappled
light on the water plays on the side of a moored fishing
boat. Somewhere, somehow, I have made some fatal mistake.²²

The latter-day writer employs a surrealism that laughs, brashly and loudly, oftentimes. A Mansfield montage will haunt readers, but Barth's and Barthelme's jolt them. Miss R's platitudes and the misplaced trap-pings of "The Indian Uprising" make the reader smile, but with more apprehension, more weariness, and with much more absurdity.²³

Certainly one property of previous short prose fiction that the contemporary mode cherishes is the dream maze. Mimesis, plot, characterization, and epiphanies may have vanished; but the maze has prospered to the point of engulfing reader, writer, and protagonist. Whether reading Nabokov's "The Visit to the Museum," Barth's "Lost in the Funhouse," or Barthelme's "The Indian Uprising," one finds mazes of clashing sensory detail which build to an inescapable crescendo and leave everyone exhausted and confused.²⁴ Instead of experiencing a story vicariously and comfortably, the reader of contemporary short prose fiction falls prey to the maze. Readers find themselves bubbling like cauldrons in the darkness rather than moving along age-old lines of meaning.²⁵ Jumbled time and dislocated space confuse readers, but also free them. Once they accept their tradition-induced vertigo, readers can right themselves and float the maze advantageously--recognizing uncertainty, dismay, and absurdity. In spite of its having an aura of the Sixties about it, "The Indian Uprising" exemplifies the contemporary mode's ability to mesh time and space with reader consciousness to get an expanded reality. The story regenerates all of America's

confrontations and dabs them in bold colors while holding the reader before a verbal canvas textured with wire, string, yellow ribbon, blue mufflers, ash trays and hollow-cored doors.

In his discussion of a contemporary, fragmented society, Norman Cousins makes more understandable the current flight from old realities:

The acceleration has done more than to impair the faculty of human observation and comprehension. It has created a tendency toward disorientation. It has unhinged the sense of vital balance that enables a man to locate himself in time and space. In the centrifuge of the twentieth century man is whirling away from the center of his own being. The farther out he spins, the more blurred his view of himself, of what he might be, and of his relationship to the nameless faces in the crowd. The separation is not just between body and place; it is between mind and reason.²⁶

The short story, bound as it is to reader by its compression, lyricism, and vitality, more intensely reflects modern man's disorientation than does any other genre, perhaps. Because of their shared uncertainty, the reader and the writer of contemporary short prose fiction remind one of two children setting out for unknown destinations--disrespectful of their elders and determined to learn about life for themselves. The contemporary reader-writer relationship incorporates the childlike inquisitiveness basic to all three phases of the genre, but it converts the modern mode's sophisticated, psychical coauthorship into a present-day tandem which explores our quizzical and undertain circumstances.

Conclusion

In spite of all the variation within the three developmental phases of short prose fiction, similarities prevail: that lyricism which captured the first reader still abides in all good short stories. The compression which strives for maximal effect remains, often in the form

of fragmented accretion. The writer's absorption with the subconscious prevails in the construction of dreams, nightmares, mazes, and fantasies. An extra reality springs from the merging of dream and non-dream attitudes. The author depends upon reader coauthorship. Writers manifest an interest in short fiction as a viable, collaborative search for reader-writer comprehension. The search preempts the ruse of having found ultimate reality. And, finally, contrasts and pairings constitute a vital part of the life experience. All of these qualities suggest a duality which manifests itself repeatedly but diversely during the development of the short story. Through its duality come the short story's unity and essence as a genre. Nowhere is the duality more prevalent than in the changing, exploratory relationships of reader and writer and in the short story's reverberating pursuit of sensory/extra-sensory awareness--or what I call extra reality.

Once upon a time, adults told children stories as a means of reassurance, entertainment, and guidance--a hedge, as it were, against uncertainty. Then electronic television assumed the role of anesthesia, and participants in serious short prose fiction took their heads from under the pillow and opted for exploration. Consequently, the literary short story has evolved into what its forerunner tried to obscure--footsteps in the darkness.

NOTES

¹Mary Rohrberger, "The Short Story as a Literary Form," introd. Story to Anti-Story (Dallas: Houghton Mifflin, 1979), pp. 2-3. Editor Rohrberger discusses a pivotal excerpt from Poe's review of Hawthorne's Twice Told Tales. The original review was published in 1842 in Graham's Lady's and Gentleman's Magazine and the excerpt can be found in Poe by W. H. Auden (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1950), p. 450.

²Nancy Willard, "The Well-Tempered Falsehood: Art of Story-telling," Mass. Review 19 (1978), 378.

³Chandra Agrawal, "Stories of Mansfield and Bhandari: A Comparison," Indian Literature 21, No. 1 (1978), 54.

⁴D. H. Lawrence, "Edgar Allen Poe," Studies in Classic Am. Lit. (1923, rpt. New York: Viking, 1969), p. 79.

⁵Barbara Leondar, "Hatching Plots: Genesis of Story Making," The Arts and Cognition, David Perkins and Barbara Leondar, eds. (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1977), p. 172.

⁶Mary Rohrberger, introd. Story to Anti-Story, pp. 3-9. Also, an excellent supplement is Rohrberger's book Hawthorne and the Modern Short Story (The Hague: Mouton, 1966).

⁷Stephen Crane, "Open Boat," in Tales of Adventure, Vol. V of The University of Virginia Edition of the Works of Stephen Crane, Fredson Bowers and J. C. Levenson, eds. (Charlottesville: Univ. of Virginia Press, 1970), pp. 68-93; "The Blue Hotel," pp. 142-171.

⁸Leonard J. Kent, The Subconscious in Gogol, Dostoevsky, and its Antecedents (The Hague: Mouton, 1969), p. 70. The original reference derives from Hugh McLean's "Gogol's Retreat from Love: Toward an Interpretation of Mirgorod," American Contributions to the 4th International Congress of Slavists (The Hague: n. p., 1958), pp. 224-43.

⁹Nathaniel Hawthorne, Selected Tales and Sketches (1883; rpt., 3rd ed., New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970), pp. 329-60.

¹⁰The two most helpful books that I have read concerning Freud's identification of what writers intuit about the inner/outer struggle of man are Erich Fromm's The Forgotten Language (New York: Rinehart, 1951) and Frederick J. Hoffman's Freudianism and the Literary Mind (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1945).

¹¹Edgar Allen Poe, Selected Prose, Poetry, and Eureka (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, n.d.), p. 117.

¹²Poe, p. 117.

¹³Herman Melville, "Bartleby the Scrivener," Selected Tales and Poems (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, n.d.), pp. 92-131; Nikolai Gogol, "The Mantle," The Mantle and Other Stories, tr. Claud Field (Freeport, New York: 1916), Short Story Index Rpt. Series, 1971, pp. 19-66.

¹⁴Guy de Maupassant, The Complete Short Stories of Guy de Maupassant (Garden City, New York: Hanover House, 1955), pp. 1-24.

¹⁵Rohrberger, Hawthorne and the Modern Short Story, pp. 106-107. Rohrberger's discussion of the simple narrative and her assessment of Maupassant form a basis for much of my own critical thinking.

¹⁶James Joyce, "A Painful Case," Dubliners (USA, 1916, B. W. Huebsch, rpt. New York: Penguin, 1980), pp. 107-118.

¹⁷Jean Toomer, Cane, 2nd ed. (1923: rpt. New York: Liveright, 1975), pp. 1-3.

¹⁸Toomer, Cane, pp. 20-26.

¹⁹Joyce, "The Dead," Dubliners, pp. 175-223. This story doubles beautifully with "The Sisters," pp. 9-19.

²⁰Robert Martin Adams, Afterjoyce Studies in Fiction after Ulysses (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977), p. 50.

²¹Vladimir Nabokov, "The Leonardo," A Russian Beauty and Other Stories (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974), pp. 12-13.

²²_____ "That in Aleppo Once," Nabokov's Dozen (1958), rpt. Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1969), pp. 141-153.

²³Donald Barthelme, Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts (New York: Pocket Books, 1968), pp. 10-19.

²⁴Nabokov, A Russian Beauty, pp. 65-81; John Barth, Lost in the Fun-house (1968: rpt. New York: Bantam, 1978), pp. 69-95.

²⁵Barthelme, "The Balloon," Unspeakable Practices, p. 23. This silken-textured story alludes to the old formula of always looking for meaning in a story.

²⁶Norman Cousins, "Epilog," in Present Tense, An American Editor's Odyssey (New York: McGraw, 1967), p. 651.

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