

## **OVERVIEW: AMERICAN SHORT STORY, A BRIEF OVERVIEW**

The short story, an indigenous American form, like the movie, has been called an act of "artful audacity" because of its marvelous compression, and its ability to heighten feelings and evoke human responses. Its characters are fully drawn in relatively few pages, often resembling the uncertain but appealing nature of our own neighbors: those people we see in hurried glimpses and might someday want to know more deeply.

That compression, that appeal to the private sense in our nature, gave the short story its popularity -and the fact that Americans have always loved a good yarn(historia). But its is a craft that has suffered from growing neglect. The demise of newspaper serialization, the collapse of hundreds of literary magazines and periodicals in the last century, and the insatiable hunger for banal television "shows" have diminished serious motivation for newer short story writers.

The short story has thrived(florecido) in America from the moment that Americans began to develop their own secular literature, free from slavish imitation of Anglo-European forms and from subordination to religious function. But American writers were the first to define the short story as a specific literary form, different from the novel or the long narrative poem not only in length but also in kind. American writers were the first to be conscious of working in a particular literary genre, with its own rules and values, in a way their predecessors had not been.

It was Edgar Allan Poe, who in 1842, provided the critical definitions for this new literary form. But it was in reviews of the tales of his contemporary, Hawthorne, that Poe formalized the nature and the demands of the short story, thereby defining this new literary form. He praised the story as the prose form

most suitable for the exercise of "ambitious genius" in a writer. Then, he defined its central characteristic as a singleness or unity of effect attained by subordinating all characters, incidents, and even sentences, to a single purpose. Finally, he declared the well-constructed story capable of leaving "in the mind of him who contemplates it with a kindred(semblante) art, a sense of the fullest satisfaction".

The short story became a staple(ingrediente básico) of the American magazine. Almost every general magazine included short stories in its table of contents. Only from World War II on have the more popular showcases for short stories disappeared, such as *Collier's Liberty* and *The Saturday Evening Post*.

A conception of a literary form demanding the highest craft still attracts the most talented writers in America. A central irony springs from a cluster of themes frequently developed in American short fiction: the loss of illusions as to the nature of one's own experience or identity, and the forging(forja) of a different identity from the insight(intuición) gained through disillusionment. The central initiatory process touches on different problems, ideas, and values in American cultural history. Many of the initiation stories exemplify another important characteristic of American short fiction: its detailed observation of manners and social texture, and its careful examination of their relation to moral values. The obverse (anverso) of this emphasis on social history is the careful psychological exploration dominating several of these stories.

In many American short stories, the abstract impersonal forces of history, of myth, of religion or of social convention intersect with the intricate personal details of individual lives. For the essence of the short story is detail -detail so carefully selected, artfully ordered, and evocatively expressed that a moment in

a character's life can suggest the whole life, a day or a year suggest a whole segment of American history.

Short stories exist to be read, to be experienced; and reading a short story is an act of interpretation. The glory of the American short story is that it lends itself to ever-recurring(repetitive) acts of interpretation, for like all art it relates simultaneously to the past, present, and future. The short stories exist as a compendium of knowledge about our collective past as a people. And they exist to be reinterpreted when we need them to understand our future.