

THE EMERGENCE AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE AMERICAN SHORT STORY

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Abstract: American literature, both in the way it was practiced and the way it was perceived, came of age in the period between 1870 and 1920. During these years American writing distinguished itself stylistically and thematically from the European tradition to which it had been dismissively compared for more than a century. American authors also increasingly gained respect as serious artists in the decades following the Civil War as literary critics inside and outside the academy began to appreciate the intrinsic merits of American poetry and prose.

Keywords: American poetry, cultural trauma, short story, myths, legends, folktales, fairy tales, identifying humankind's earliest coherence utterance

Introduction

The short story is one of the oldest forms of literature. Stories have been told as long as man has existed on this planet. We can imagine of early cavemen entertaining each other by telling and listening to stories. The myths, legends, folktales, fairy tales and such like forms are the early manifestations of what later developed into short story. R. C. Fedderson says, "Story it is widely assumed originated somewhere in the misty dawn of language itself." [3, 39] The exact date of the beginning can never be known with any certainty. It would be as useless as "identifying humankind's earliest coherence utterance." But one can certainly assert that the short story is the oldest genre of literature. The fairy tales, fables and legends, which are the basics of all cultures, are so told that their origins cannot be hazarded. But they can certainly be taken as the precursors of the short story as we understand it now.

Such short narratives of stories have existed for as long as we can remember. Such narratives have several purposes in the society. They have, besides entertaining and regaling listeners and readers, also sought to preserve the older traditions and norms of human social attitudes. Their importance can be gauged from the fact that they are prescribed in school and college curriculum, they have been read at public readings. One can certainly agree with Shirley Ann Grau that people are still reading short story "like mad."

Among all the literary genres it is the short story that is typically American in tone and temper. Most critics argue that the short story is an American invention. Alfred Bendixen remarks: "The short story is an American invention, and arguably the most important literary genre to have emerged in the United States. Thus, now the American short story is more than two hundred years old. But it is still going strong. One can agree with Irish Critic Frank O'Connor who said,"[6, 58] It began in 1819 with Washington Irving. Not that there were no short stories written or published in America earlier, but from the point of view of modern short story form none of them are significant. Still two names merit mention. They are Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790), Freneau and Charles Brockden Brown (1771-1810). Among them Brown is better known. Generally regarded as the first American novelist, Brown is a key figure in the tradition of Gothic fiction, for some of his novels--Edgar Huntley, Wieland, Arthur Mervyn—are responsible for "Americanizing" the Gothic, which in its European incarnation featured imagery (ruined castles,) that was simply non-existent, and hence symbolically inert, in America. Brown shifted the settings of his works to American locales--forests, towns, caves, outlying estates -- and relocated the sources of terror, yet retained a Gothic mood of emotional and psychological extremity.

The period between the American Civil War which began in 1861 and the outbreak of World War I in Europe in 1914 may be termed in the era of the short story in general. Those were the days of the gift books. These gift books were annual collections of poems, artwork and literary criticism, aimed primarily at an audience of upper-class women in England and North America. All modern literary magazines can trace their pedigree back to these gift books. In 1837, Nathaniel Hawthorne collected a number of stories that he had written for the gift book market and published them to great critical acclaim as *Twice Told Tales*. And with that, short stories had arrived. It is a short story collection in two volumes by Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864). The first was published in the spring of 1837, and the second in 1842. The stories had all been previously published in magazines and annuals, hence the name.[18, 96]

Washington Irving (1783-1859) remains the earliest notable writer of distinction of short stories among Americans. He made his literary debut in 1802 with a series of observational letters to the *Morning Chronicle*, written under the pseudonym Jonathan Oldstyle. After moving to England for the family business in 1815, he achieved international fame with the publication of *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent* in 1819-20. He continued to publish regularly—and almost always successfully—throughout his life, and completed a five-volume biography of George Washington just eight months before his death. Irving was fascinated by the art of short fiction and there is no doubt that he did much to perfect the art of short story writing. These stories, in the opinion of Charles Neider have a wonderful tone of nostalgia that one must reckon as flowing from the fact settings are personally so meaningful to Irving, and permeates, affects and ultimately lends beauty to the style, warming our imagination as well as the author's... I still find them bewitching, magical, with a great aptness of phrase and metaphor, and with the subtle, delicate, delicious irony that marks Irving's best work.[23, 155]

There is no doubt that Washington Irving perfected the American short story. He was the first American writer to place his stories firmly in the United States, though he ransacked the Dutch and German folklore for his ideas. He is one of the first to write both the vernacular English of America. He never cared for inculcating any moral in his short stories. His aim was pure and simple entertainment of his readers.

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