

HISTORICAL SURVEY:  
THE AMERICAN SHORT STORY

Wallace Stegner

(1909-1993)

A century and a quarter ago, on January 14, 1832, Edgar Allan Poe published in the Philadelphia *Saturday Courier* the story "Metzengerstein," in which he utilized for the first time the techniques of the single effect upon which the modern short story has been built. What began as an American invention has remained an American specialty: of all the practitioners of the short story in English, the greatest ones, with perhaps a half dozen exceptions in 125 years, have been Americans. Of the six exceptions, Kipling was an Indian colonial, Conrad a deracinated Pole, Joyce and O'Connor Irishmen, Katherine Mansfield a New Zealander, and only D. H. Lawrence a bona fide English-man.

In the same years America has produced not only Poe and Hawthorne, who together created the short story as a form; but Henry James, Stephen Crane, Sherwood Anderson, Ring Lardner, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, Katherine Anne Porter, and two dozen less well known but greatly talented writers, who have taken what Poe and Hawthorne bequeathed them and enriched and enlarged and subtilized and intensified it. Partly because of this early start, partly because of the conditions of American diversity and the nature of American journalism, the general level of accomplishment in the short story is probably higher in America than anywhere in the world, and if we have a literary form that most expresses us as a people, it is this nervous, formal, concentrated, brief, and penetrating one of the short story.

Inevitably there are some familiar stories in this anthology. To read through hundreds or thousands of stories from the 19th-century gift books, annuals, magazines, and collections is to acquire respect for the processes by which time and the anthologists have sifted good from bad. It often happens that, as in the case of Washington Irving, the best is also the best known: he never matched, much less bettered, "Rip Van Winkle" and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow." With other writers, too, it has proved impossible to find a little-known story which is also one of its author's best. For this collection we have chosen, in most cases, and especially from writers of the 19th century, the single story which we most admire, without inquiring how many times it may have been anthologized before. The criteria have actually been double: the excellence of a story in itself, and its representativeness in the chronicle of story development within the United States.

These criteria have eliminated certain things that a full chronological and historical survey would have had to include, for some stories and some tendencies much admired in their own time have lost their savor and revealed their lack of importance. Fitz-James O'Brien, nimbly manipulating the pseudo-science and the verisimilitude of Poe, hardly speaks compellingly enough even in his best story, "The Diamond Lens," to demand entrance. Edward Everett Hale, with the patriotic sentiments of "The Man without A Country" or the amusing artifice of "My Double and How He Undid Me," does not seem to look forward to anything or to represent anything essential in himself. Frank R. Stockton, a prolific hack and teller of fables for children, happened to strike the fancy of his generation with "The Lady, or the Tiger?" which got embedded in the tradition, apparently immovably. Yet "The Lady, or the Tiger" is not a modern story at all; if it is anything, it is an Italian novella of the kind that might have been told by Boccaccio, dressed up with a little journalistic editorializing.

Thomas Bailey Aldrich's greatly admired, "Marjorie Daw," which it was said changed the literary practice of a decade, seems now a genteel, pleasant, mildly amusing, inconsequential piece of contrivance, without any of the penetration into character, richness of background, psychological depth, or "effect" of any kind, that one might ask of a story in the great tradition. A well-bred practical joke in story form, it evades what has been a rather compulsive element in the American story, an element that Hawthorne first added. This is moral or intellectual weight, what Henry Seidel Canby has called "specific gravity." Even in its humorous moments, the typical American story asks to be taken seriously as a reflection of life,

manners, morals, national character or aspiration, or as an instrument of psychological insight. All stories which have seemed to us merely skillful without this characteristic weight we have omitted from this collection.

Since these stories are intended as much for students, in or out of classrooms, as for general readers, let us risk detailing the obvious and repeating the well-known by summarizing the tradition which they illustrate. For the orderly tale of linked incidents chronologically treated, the sort of tale of which "Rip Van Winkle" is one of the most graceful, humorous, and urbane examples, Poe substituted something else: the concentrated tale of effect, its single, preconceived impression attained with the greatest economy and directness of means, its action focused upon the climactic moment, its mood controlled from first to last, its improbabilities made plausible by a concreteness as great as Defoe's, and a sensuous impressionism learned from the romantic poets. The technique which he began, developing in "Metzengerstein" and gave critical definition in his review of Hawthorne's *Twice Told Tales* ten years later was pre-eminently designed to make the incredible credible; and though time has not dealt too kindly with Poe's particular kinds of effects, which are related too consistently to the horrors and sensationalism of the German romantics and are heavily draped in Gothic black, it must be said that the short story probably would not have developed as it did without these vivid sensationalisms to demand vivid means of expression.

Poe said that his terror was "not of Germany but of the soul," but for most modern readers the effects he produces seem no deeper than gooseflesh. He was not actually a very profound psychologist; his "madness," that undifferentiated aberration that so many of his characters share, is more literary than observed. His habit of rather cold and unrealistic contrivance, his concentration on effects that are merely physiological, and the restriction of his subject matter to the horrific and the "ratiocinative," mean that he now has more readers among the young than among adults. But what he called the tale of ratiocination, which is the immediate parent of the detective story complete with its Watson, its dumb cop, its super-intelligent amateur detective, and its delightful game of false clues and miraculous deductions, is as lively as when he made it in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue." That it is a lesser literary genre should not lead us to underestimate Poe's importance as an innovator. His horror tales are likewise a lesser literary genre--like the tales of ratiocination, they represent great skill devoted to fairly trivial ends. Before Poe could make his terror truly the terror of the soul he would have had to know more souls than his own--a thing which he never did. His best effects are claustrophobic, as he was himself.

But if his effects are limited, the technique he developed for achieving them is not. The focus upon a single intense impression was a trick that in other hands could be devoted to other and often deeper purposes. In the hands of Fitz-James O'Brien neither intention nor technique changed greatly: "The Diamond Lens" shows the same mad protagonist, the same pseudo-science, the same attempt at persuasive verisimilitude. In the hands of Ambrose Bierce it is made to produce effects even more chilling, though less Gothic, than Poe's own. But leap a long way ahead, to such modern stories as Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery," or Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," and you may detect the same techniques of persuasiveness used to quiet our disbelief, in circumstances and for effects quite different from Poe's.

The influence of Poe is so pervasive that it is impossible to overestimate it; he has influenced everybody, practically, who writes stories. Both the influence and the modification of it are demonstrated in such a story as Conrad Aiken's "Silent Snow Secret Snow"--superficially like Poe in that it is the record of an individual going "mad." But Aiken's effect is human, not artificial; his tone is understanding and compassionate, not chilling. If it were merely a clinical record of a boy slipping over the edge into a schizophrenic withdrawal, the story would not move us as it does. It moves us because its terror is really, as Poe's was not, of the soul.

"The Fall of the House of Usher" seems to us to represent Poe at his best. It has all the Gothic trappings, nearly ad nauseam; and yet this doomed mansion with its diseased and obsessive figures, its bizarre learning, its compulsions and phobias, its flitting terrors, may be taken as the true habitation of Poe's own tormented nature; and in skill--especially in that deadly inverted image of the fateful house reflected in the tarn--it is not easy to match.

Both "The Fall of the House of Usher" and Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" are built on a journey and a return, an arrival and departure; both move from light into darkness and back into light, or light of a sort. But where Poe's darkness is the theatrical dark of the horror tale, Hawthorne manages to communicate his sense of the dark wood as the darkness of the soul, the forest of sin and evil. Young Goodman Brown's initiation into the abiding sinfulness of all mankind, his conviction that virtue is a mask and all men are guilty, is not much more obviously "realistic" than much of Poe. But observe how this witchcraft of Hawthorne's translates into other terms, how naturally Brown comes to represent all the cheerless, life-hating coldness of Puritanism, how his venture into witchcraft can be read as every man's experience with temptation and the nature of evil, every man's descent into his own unconscious "heart of darkness." Young Brown's destruction is of another kind than he feared, but is even more complete. And in "specific gravity" this story, by comparison with the Poe story, is as granite to pine. The New England anatomist of guilt and sin and the sick soul knew more and felt more than the Virginia manipulator of sick minds, and the Puritan darkness in the end is much closer to human reality than the Gothic.

Nevertheless, Hawthorne was not so impeccable a craftsman as Poe; Poe would never have left this story, which up to the time of Brown's return is tight, concentrated, sensuous, sharply visualized, to end lamely with an anticlimactic appendix.

Henry Seidel Canby, whose *The Short Story in English* is one of the few serious and extended studies of the form, long ago pointed out an element of Hawthorne's contribution that is quite as significant for the future as his moral earnestness and his symbolic depth. This is his habit of making stories which are neither the gracefully linked incidents of Irving nor the contrived effects of Poe, but exposed or probed *situations*. In its whole course of development, and not simply in America, the short story as a distinctive form has turned away from plot, and has tended to become less a complication solved than what Henry James was to call a "situation revealed." This kind of story, necessarily more static, has greater possibilities for character development and analysis of motives, for attention to atmosphere, setting, and theme. Often it invites its author to make the process of writing into an act of knowing, of intellectual or moral or emotional exploration. Form becomes less contrivance than discovery; and the end of the story less an "effect" than an illumination.

In this pattern it is easy to recognize what is perhaps the most characteristic habit of the contemporary short story. Hawthorne began what James, Chekhov, Joyce, Mansfield, and a crowd of the moderns would spend a century and more expanding. But from Hawthorne to James the gap is very little populated. There is only the lonely, difficult, and unhappy figure of Melville--not primarily a writer of short stories and certainly not influential upon the short story habits of his own or any other generation. Some of his *Piazza Tales* were published in *Putnam's Magazine* from 1853 to 1855 after the failure of *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre* had driven Melville to try the possibilities of magazine money-making. Perhaps all are short stories by Poe's definition; at least they can be read at a single sitting. But some are novelettes by contemporary standards, and indeed have been collected, with others, under the title of "shorter novels." "Bartleby the Scrivener" demonstrates as well as any of the longer ones the moral and intellectual weight, the intent probing of a situation (what shall one do with the steadfast, desperate and isolated nay-sayer?), and the psychological and symbolic insight, that permit us to use Melville the short story writer as a solid bridge between Hawthorne and James.

Henry James's career began in the late 1860's, when Hawthorne's had just closed and while Melville was mute in his customs house. Its productions cover a full half century until he died in England in 1916; and his contributions to the art of prose fiction--whether novel or short story or his "blessed nouvelle" are too well known to need extensive summary. He was less innovator than polisher: he took the serious story of situation, with its moral and ethical preoccupations, from Hawthorne, and he refined it until he had made himself in very truth the "historian of fine consciences" that Conrad called him. He took Poe's concentration and singleness, discarded the Gothic machinery and sensational subject matter, and applied the method to situations from observed experience. What he could do with a situation he wanted to "reveal" may be seen in such stories as "The Madonna of the Future" or "The Beast in the Jungle," which have all of Poe's virtues plus a psychological insight infinitely more subtle and discriminating.

As a technician, James experimented above all with the limitation of point of view, discarding the omniscient author in favor of narrators, “registers,” “central intelligences,” and propping these up very often with confidantes or “ficelles.” He forced his story through smaller and smaller outlets, until like water shot through a nozzle instead of being allowed to run freely from the hose, it acquired a special concentration and force. Unweariedly he painted himself into technical corners and then contrived ways of getting out again: much of his technical invention was spent on plausible means of communicating expository and background material and the sort of comment which, having abdicated omniscience, he could no longer make in his person as author. Like a man who has disturbed the balance of nature by killing off all the coyotes, he found himself facing problems of jackrabbits; and no sooner did he get control of the rabbit situation than he developed problems of weeds. By constant inventiveness, he managed to stay ahead of the consequences of his own invention.

His technical contributions, in consequence, were enormous, but perhaps quite as important was his way of tincturing aesthetics with ethics, his insatiable curiosity, his view of prose fiction as a high art. Though Somerset Maugham has called him the worst of all possible influences, much modern fiction flows directly from him. The story which deals with a state of mind, with a probing of consciousness, with a psychological situation uncovered, owes as much to him as to anyone. For better or worse, he was one of those who helped move the action of fiction from the street into the mind. Sometimes he split his hairs too thin, and sometimes he wrote tortured prose. “The Real Thing,” one of his best-known stories, is included here because it has his virtues without either of these faults.

Contributing more immediately than James to the theory and practice of the short story was the local-color movement that dominated American fiction from the Civil War to near the turn of the century. It was local color, and especially Bret Harte, that popularized the short story and gave it sanction as a distinct form; it also gave it a vastly extended range of subject matter.

Essentially a many-branched journey of national discovery, local color delighted in the picturesque, and in its more romantic and “colorful” practitioners the story might exist as an excuse for literary landscape painting or quaint ethnography. At times George Washington Cable’s Creole stories, like the Virginia stories of Thomas Nelson Page or the Cajun tales of Kate Chopin or the Georgia mountain stories of Joel Chandler Harris, or even the delicate sketches that Gelia Thaxter wrote of the Isles of Shoals, approximate the leisurely method and the almost legendary intention of a Washington Irving. But in Bret Harte, despite the romantic liberties he took with gold camp society, local color had a story teller for whom the story itself was important, and whose technical skill was generally equal to his materials.

There have been few literary explosions so loud as the one that followed publication of “The Luck of Roaring Camp” in the *Overland Monthly* for August, 1868. Harte had, besides some complaints touching his morals and his taste, the dizzying experience of instant fame, the flattery of frenzied imitation, the encouragement of a fabulous offer from William Dean Howells, then assistant editor the *Atlantic*. He had more of the same to write, and at first they were every bit as good.

Not quite single-handedly, but with the help of his many imitators in other regions, he gave the short story status, related it to life and to American materials. His own status was so great that in 1899 he had to insist, in an essay on the rise of the short story, that he really hadn’t invented the form. All he had done was to apply methods already well known to the colorful, violent, and inimitably American life of the gold camps. To sharpen contrasts already sharp, he borrowed Dickens’ trick of creating characters by putting contradictory qualities within a single individual, making desperadoes with Raphael faces, gamblers and harlots with tender hearts and sensitive consciences, wild-eyed stagedrivers as dependable as granite, hard cases and crude miners (see Tennessee and his partner) full of loyalty and love.

In Harte’s skilled hands the short story was pulled into a shape which could be recognized as something distinct. Nameless up to that point, called “tale” or “sketch” or something else, it was formally christened when Professor Brander Matthews in 1885 wrote a stoutly academic essay entitled “The Philosophy of the Short-Story” reaffirming Poe’s principles of concentration and singleness of effect, acknowledging the great influence of Harte, and insisting on the clear separateness of the form: he emphasized its separateness by hyphenating the name. Practiced by the best American writers, sought by all the magazines, read by tens

of thousands, held worthy by professors at Harvard and Columbia, the short story had finally arrived. By then Henry James had demonstrated possibilities in character and situation far beyond Harte's rather crude contrasts, and Mary Wilkins Freeman and Hamlin Garland had directed local color into deeper and less artificial channels. It would be only a few years until Stephen Crane, with some assistance from Kipling, would have provided the short story with the tool of an Impressionism more vivid than fiction had yet seen, except in the work of the Russian Chekhov, still unknown to English and American readers.

Not that every writer could handle the story as sixty years of creative friction had shaped it. William Dean Howells never wrote a good one; he had learned too much from Addison and Steele and Jane Austen to bend his methods to the new form. Mark Twain likewise never wrote a good one. The only kinds of form he ever fully mastered were those of the humorous frontier sketch whose principles he summarized in "How to Tell a Story," and the fable, which he wrote with the best. The beast story which is perhaps the oldest kind of fiction had never been entirely submerged in the cultures that Americans had brought from Europe. It was extravagantly revitalized in America by animal stories of Negro origin, which emerged as one of the strains of local color. And though Harris's *Uncle Remus* stories, like Mark Twain's "Bluejay Yarn," are not short stories by Matthews' or any other definition, they are superb in their own kind, and they have affected the true short story with their wisdom and their humor.

Look ahead from the 1880's to the 1940's and 1950's, to the cartoons of Walt Disney and the stories of James Thurber, and in particular to Thurber's "The Catbird Seat" in this collection. It deals with human beings, not with animals, but it is surely a left-handed brother to the true fable, a short-story-like variant of those *Fables for Our Time* which unite Thurber with Harris and Twain, as well as with LaFontaine and Aesop. Its action is a chronicle of humorous cunning, its theme the ancient fabulous theme of the overcoming of strength by weakness. If Mr. Martin is one of the shapes of Brer Rabbit, Mrs. Barrows will serve for Brer Fox. Canby, writing his useful study of the short story in 1909, was well aware of the importance of Hawthorne, Poe, James, Harte, and the local colorists. He ignored the importance of the beast fable, and with some reason, since there had not as yet been either a Disney or a Thurber to dramatize its persistent vitality. More surprising is Canby's complete overlooking of Stephen Crane, who in 1909 was nine years dead, and whose work in the 1890's had entitled him to honor not only as one of the few masters of the short story but as the first of the moderns.

Crane is one of those figures who are in danger of having a small body of their best work anthologized to death. He lived so fast and died so young that in spite of his extraordinary productiveness much of what he wrote was certain to be flawed. Of all his stories, only "The Open Boat," "The Blue Hotel," and "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky" are without weakness or soft spot, and from among these an anthologist must choose. Yet it is no disservice to a reader to give him one of these three, for all of them are superb. The real disservice--the real falsification of the tradition--would be to leave Crane out or try to represent him by less than his best.

For he had a picture-making eye (the quality that Bliss Perry said was the prime qualification of a short story writer) of an extraordinary kind. Everything in his stories is intensely, sometimes luridly, visualized: images glare from the page like things seen in a lightning flash. His prose has a nervous pace and a tension that we have come to think of as peculiarly modern-American; despite Crane's addiction to metaphor and Hemingway's avoidance of it, there is no modern closer to Crane in tone than Hemingway. Crane's power of evocation was extraordinary, and how much more concentrated and focused could one get than Crane gets in "The Open Boat," where the place hardly extends beyond the boat's gunwales, the time covers only the duration of the voyage, and the action is unbroken from the opening line that jolts us into the story in one of the most justly celebrated of beginnings: "None of them knew the color of the sky"?

If Crane had had only his vivid Impressionism to contribute to the short story, he would be prominent in its history. But he had as well a mind that was somehow in circuit with that body of image and myth, call it racial memory or cultural inheritance or what you will, that lets his most innocent and external observation suggest, often most powerfully, something deeper. He was a symbolist apparently by accident, perhaps sometimes even unconsciously: he never gives the impression of having worked for his depth, as Hawthorne does. He stumbles upon his meanings; they rise from his soil like stones pushed up by frost. In his way, he was a great simplifier; his figures often have an almost surrealist exposure to space and eternity

and the indifferent universe. But a great amplifier belongs in the short story if he belongs anywhere in literature; and Crane's Bohemianism and stoicism, his persistent irony, his nervous pace and suggestions of depth psychology have made him peculiarly impressive to modern readers. If he did not himself at once influence the course of the short story, he reflected a change in temper and tone and technique that was already in the air in the 1890's, and that after the interruption caused by a resurgence of sentimental Romance in the early 1900's, and by World War I, was to become the characteristic modern tone.

Between Crane's death in 1900 and the outburst which began with Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* in 1919 only three figures need concern us. One, Edith Wharton, continued the tradition of James, and often, until her decline after about 1917, continued it with a seriousness, clarity, and feeling for form that would have done credit to James himself, and with a directness that sometimes outdoes him. "Roman Fever," Jamesian in its handling of the familiar "international" theme as in its restraint and control, is one of her best even though one of her latest stories. Her most characteristic ones are too long for this book—novelettes like *Ethan Frome* or *Bungey Sisters* or *The Old Maid*, cool and heart-breaking stories of people entrapped in life. There have been few American writers, male or female, more intelligent or more skilled.

Of the other two story writers of the pre-war period one, William Sydney Porter (O. Henry) was a popular magazine writer with greater capacities than he ever fully realized. In almost any story his perceptiveness and gifts for words and character are in excess of his artistic seriousness; he has in too many of his stories the air of a talented impostor. "A Municipal Report," which we reprint here, is one of the few in which he avoids his own haste and shoddiness and his addiction to the tricky, and lives up to himself.

The last of the three is Wilbur Daniel Steele, still alive and still writing in 1957. Never easily catalogued, never quite *au courant* with the fads and trends of his time, he is yet a kind of summary of three generations of short story development, for his best stories retain the more leisurely air and the more complicated plots of an earlier time--many of them are split into acts and scenes instead of being compressed into a single intense and continuous action--while at the same time Steele adapts to his own ends the psychological curiosity typical of James, the careful sense of place cultivated by the local-color school, and the bright impressionism which was the hallmark of Crane. Except for Edith Wharton he was our one short story writer of stature just preceding and during World War I. When the long drought ended, and the promises of the 1890's were fulfilled, everything came with a rush and the American short story, together with all the other arts, exploded into what history may very well call its most brilliant period.

Sherwood Anderson in his *Memoirs* testifies to the nearly miraculous sense of ease and liberation with which the stories of *Winesburg, Ohio* were written--poured out in a Chicago room in a concentrated fury of creation, sometimes two or three stories in a week. If his account of their composition is literally true, it is a symbolic parallel to the creative exuberance of the Twenties. The *Winesburg* stories speak with the voice of the Twenties too in their rebellion against lingering Victorianisms, middle-class repressions, Midwestern pieties, Puritan hypocrisies, village narrownesses--all the things which hampered and limited the "life of realization" upon which Anderson and his whole generation were bent.

Individually the stories of *Winesburg, Ohio* do not represent Anderson's best and richest work, and we have acknowledged that fact by selecting a story from another book, *The Triumph of the Egg*. But collectively they are both impressive and of absolutely first importance. They were revolutionary in more than their disregard of conventional morals. The outraged protest that they inspired may even have been obscurely aesthetic in part, for these were no stories by conventional standards: even Anderson's friend Floyd Dell said so; Mencken said so; the reviewers said so. They were little vignettes of buried lives, throbs of muffled desire, sketches of characters foundering among the village tribalisms, glimpses of torment behind drawn (and sometimes undrawn) blinds. They were not only plotless, but they did not even make use of the sensuous impressionism by which Crane and Steele could impress by mere vividness. These stories moved obscurely, like night-things.

To this day the warmest admirers of Anderson cannot quite say how they get their effects. The style is flat, the method more narrative than dramatic, and yet *Winesburg's* people have the terrible shame-faced look of people caught in something unspeakably personal. The suppressed emotions of their lives burst out of them like moans or cries, and they compel attention and exact sympathy as more cunningly made and

steered characters could not. The influence of Chekhov, obviously, is strong here: Chekhov was one of the new and exciting writers of whom Anderson's mind was full, and it was not entirely unjust that a reviewer should later call him the "phallic Chekhov." It may be precisely the strong Chekhovian sympathy that makes *Winesburg, Ohio* a great book--William Faulkner says it is the only great book that Anderson ever wrote. "Unlighted Lamps" is our choice because it contains, along with the themes of frustration and loss and yearning and human waste that were the soul of *Winesburg*, the rich and warmly felt background of the county fairgrounds and race tracks where many of his best *Winesburg* stories are laid. If a single story is to represent Anderson, this will serve as well as any, and better than most.

And after Anderson, the deluge. Two of the major novelists of the Twenties, Dreiser and Sinclair Lewis, were never successful with the short story, but consider those who were: Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Faulkner, Katherine Anne Porter, Steele, Lardner, and in addition, Edith Wharton and Willa Cather and Ellen Glasgow, in the twilight of their powers but still producing. On its short stories alone the Twenties would have been notable. And supporting the great figures, packed around them like excelsior in a tight box, was an astonishingly large and astonishingly good body of lesser writers upon whose work and against whose competition the best ones grew. You do not sharpen an axe against a wheel of cheese; neither do you produce great writers without the pressure of a solid body of competing talent. It is from its secondary figures as well as from its great ones that a period gets its quality.

Yet the great ones make themselves known unmistakably. From his earliest stories--dismissed as mere *contes* by some of the editors to whom he sent them--Hemingway impressed those who knew him as somebody inevitably special. His first books, *Three Stories and Ten Poems* and *in our time*, were hardly more than a sample of what was to come, and yet there was a widespread feeling that a giant was on his way up, as witness Edmund Wilson's early review in *The Dial* for October, 1924.

It may be, as William Faulkner has said, that Hemingway found out early what he could do, and has continued to do it, and that this constitutes a deficiency in him, a lack of daring. On the other hand, most readers will find plentiful signs of progress and growth from "Up in Michigan" and the early vignettes of *in our time* to "The Snows of Kilimanjaro," or "The Old Man and the Sea." Incorporated in this change is evidence that Hemingway, like Chekhov and James, has increasingly chafed against the artificial constrictions of the short story, and has moved more and more toward James's "blessed nouvelle." His first stories were vignettes less than a page long; his last one, just as true a short story, is long enough to make a small book. It is a long way from the things he was producing when as a young correspondent in Paris he was learning to write, "beginning with the simplest things."

No summary of the American short story can omit a discussion of the enormous influence of the characteristic Hemingway concision and objectivity, as well as the early philosophical nihilism and the stoic code that have made a convenient mask for undergraduate imitators for twenty-five years. It is therefore all the more a matter of regret that neither Hemingway nor Ring Lardner, another of the major story writers of the Twenties, is currently being made available for paperback reprinting by his publisher.

If Hemingway gave us a generation of laconic young stoics with tough minds and tough words and a dislike for anything metaphorical or "cheating" he also clarified more than anyone since Stephen Crane the processes of making an impression, and that "sequence of motion and fact which made the emotion." His greatest fictional contemporary and fellow Nobel Prize winner, William Faulkner, has given the short story something else. Whether he has created it himself, or whether the South itself creates it like mist, and its writers only express it, Faulkner is the father of the neo-Gothic school, almost exclusively Southern. Distortion is his medium, grotesques are his personae, and he is not above draping some of his scenes for the most theatrically Gothic effects. Yet he is a long way from Poe. Like Hawthorne's witchcraft, Faulkner's distortion and violence and decaying corpses lie close to the heart of a real society. Like Hawthorne, he is an anatomist of guilt; like Poe, he is a true "nocturnal," a maker of nightmares, for in the Faulknerian world the original sin of black slavery troubles the sleep of all, warps the character and twists the mind. Whether one accepts his total work as mirroring the decline and degeneration of the South after the Civil War--and one must, to a degree--one must without question grant that in Conrad's words he has "made a world."

It is hardly necessary to carry the record further. By now the technical innovations of Poe, James, Anderson, Crane, Hemingway, and Faulkner--along with those of Chekhov, Kipling, Joyce, and Mansfield --are everyone's property. The lingo that was once the vehicle for humor and later for local color has been proved adaptable to serious and even bitter situations by Anderson and Ring Lardner. Katherine Anne Porter's slim, pure productions, drawing delicately and with impeccable taste from James, from Southern Gothicism, and from what has been called the school of female sensibility, but avoiding the excesses of all, has steadily preached the validity and worthiness of the short story as an art. Eudora Welty, gifted with great virtuosity, has learned lessons from Katherine Mansfield, from James, from Faulkner, from Miss Porter; and she has played the grotesque as both a comic and a tragic mask with a skill worthy of Faulkner.

For it is worthy of notice that though the novel seems to have declined from its high point of the Twenties and early Thirties, the short story has shown no such signs of exhaustion or indecision. When one is asked by curious people around the world who are our good young writers, the successors to the Hemingways, Faulkners, Fitzgeralds, Wolfes, and Steinbecks, one may have trouble finding adequate replacements for the novelists, but little in naming younger short story writers worthy of their ancestry. A sampling of them--a mere sampling--is in this book, to indicate what the tradition that came of age in the Twenties has come to since.

It is in our short stories that we most clearly see ourselves, because together they give us a thousand eyes, a thousand points of view, a thousand telling situations and revealing moments. Illumination rather than shock or "effect" is likely to be what a modern story aims at: we have come a good way from Poe. And the range of subject matter, first spread by the local colorists to include all of America's geography and people, and spread by Anderson and his successors to include all the formerly forbidden areas of human behavior, and spread by later writers to include the unconscious, is now as wide as the known boundaries of our life.

Wallace Stegner  
Introduction  
*Great American Short Stories*  
eds. Wallace & Mary Stegner  
(Dell 1957)