

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE AMERICAN SHORT STORY
FROM 1875-1895 WITH THE PERIOD FROM 1920-1940

by

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A. B., York College, York, Nebraska, 1943

A THESIS

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

Department of English

KANSAS STATE COLLEGE
OF AGRICULTURE AND APPLIED SCIENCE

1947

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INTRODUCTION

Purpose

Is the present form of the American short story undergoing a change from the accepted and almost trademarked style of 1875-1895? How do the stories of 1920-1940 differ from those of the earlier period when, some critics say, the short story reached its height?

The two questions above furnished the purpose of this study in comparing these two periods of American short story history. The study does not attempt to answer conclusively either question; neither does it attempt to judge which period produced the better short story. It is believed that not enough time has elapsed in order to judge accurately current stories and authors in comparison with the well-established best of the earlier period. On these more recent writers and stories the measuring stick of time has yet to be used. This study attempts to point out certain tendencies of change in the short story and to draw certain conclusions which may indicate the final answer.

Since the short story is peculiarly American in its development, it is believed that this comparison is fitting in showing the trend of the short story. To compare the historical backgrounds, writers and stories of these periods with the intent of examining the current trends indicated is the aim of this paper.

Method

The comparison of the writers and stories of these two pe-

riode posed several problems, mainly in the handling of the latter period of 1920-1940. Critice are hesitant in committing themselves in regard to authors who are still producing. Time has proved too many wrong, and the critice like to wait for the perspective of time to see whether or not an author's work will "last". As a result intensive research was necessary in order to get representative authors, stories and critical opinion of this time.

No difficulty was encountered in getting material for the earlier period 1875-1895. Authors and stories of those years are pretty well established. The bibliography will show the material referred to in gathering information. There is no dearth of published works by American critics and scholars concerning this vital period in the development of the short story.

It was found that perhaps the best standards for judging outstanding authors and stories of 1920-1940 were furnished by Edward J. O'Brien in his collections called the "best" short stories of each year. It was considered that his selections are more uniform than those of the O. Henry award volumes, also published each year, because he was sole judge. The O. Henry choices were made by a committee whose chairman changes yearly. Reference was made to some of the O. Henry collections to assure fair representation, however. Magazine opinion and comment were also valuable in helping to crystallize the views taken of this period.

When the reading of the stories, historical background and the critical opinion was finished, the study was shaped into an

introduction giving the background of the American short story and of each period; a section dealing with the period 1875-1895, its writers and stories; a section dealing with the period 1920-1940, its writers and stories, with differences and trends indicated; and the conclusion in summary form.

A standard of comparison was set up in order to show the differences between the stories chosen as representatives of each period. This standard contained the following factors considered important in short stories: purpose of story, title, beginning, plot, characters, verisimilitude, setting, and style.

The two periods chosen for comparison in this study had to be somewhat arbitrarily set up. Lines had to be drawn somewhere, and these dates seemed the most logical to use. First of all, the initial period represents a high peak in the development of the American short story. Writers had followed the lead of Edgar Allan Poe in lifting the short story to a respectable place in literature. The Cambridge History of American Literature in commenting on this period of the short story says, "With the nineties came the full perfection of the short story art." Most of the authors then writing started their work in the seventies and had improved yearly. Various critics and scholars of the short story, among them Edward J. O'Brien, Fred Lewis Pattee and Blanche Colton Williams have set off this period as impressive in the American short story history. Consequently, it seemed a good choice to use as a "control" in examining the short stories and writers of more recent date.

The more nearly current period of 1920-1940 was harder to

choose. There were noticeable, however, significant changes in the short story shortly after World War I. Up to that time the form had lost quality since the nineties. This seemed, then, a good starting point, immediately after the war. It was decided to bring the study as nearly up to date as possible, but 1940 was a reasonable stopping place since it ended what was a period between two world wars. It also left room for a little perspective in critical judgment. There is some basis for choosing the two dates also in the fact that Joseph Warren Beach, professor of English at the University of Minnesota, had published a book on current American fiction using those years as his boundaries.

Background of the American Short Story

In order better to appreciate the characteristics of the writers and stories of these periods, a brief view of what has taken place in the history of the short story is necessary. America has made an outstanding contribution to world literature through the short story, and it has come to be considered primarily an American form.

Pattes in his book, The Development of the American Short Story, points out that essentially the form began with Washington Irving in 1819. Irving's Celtic imagination and the rich material surrounding him coupled with a restlessness which made him unable to write in the longer novel form brought about his sketches or tales which are the forerunners of the short story. Irving did not know his works by the term, "short story". The term, then hyphenated, was probably first used by Brander Matthews in 1884 when

he wrote a literary discussion for the London Saturday Review. Since the term is now standardized, it will be used in this study to refer to the works of earlier writers even though they called them sketches or tales. Irving's Sketch Book, then, with its entertaining short stories about American and foreign subjects first popularized the short narrative with the reading public.

There followed a short period after Irving when about the only significant thing happening was the advent of American magazines, although they were then referred to as "annuals" and "ladies'-books". They printed rather short sketches because of limitations of space and were an aid in further advertising the form. No great step was taken, though, until Nathaniel Hawthorne made his contribution beginning about 1840. The brooding yet polished style and the moral emphasis in his stories were to affect the trend of the short story for some time. By 1860 Hawthorne had made the form, still more like a sketch than like the present short story, respectable enough that even New Englanders accepted it. At first that section had looked askance at anything called literature unless it was in the form of a novel.

It remained, however, for Edgar Allan Poe to outline and demonstrate what the short story as it is now thought of should be. Poe was a contemporary of Hawthorne's, but his stories were very different. Poe had no concern with morality; all he tried to do was to leave a strong effect with the reader, usually of mystery or terror. It was he who probably gave the most lasting definition of the short story when he said it was a tale "which could be read at one sitting". Patten in his chapter on Poe comments

that strangely enough circumstance probably made him a short story writer:

He was turned to the short story of the Germanized grotesque and arabesque type by necessity: circumstance demanded it. He had tried to enter the field of literature by way of poetry,¹ issuing three books of verse before he was twenty-two.

It is ironical that the man who did most to define the form the American short story was to take should have been forced to do it by the need for money which he could not make with his poetry. Poe based his short stories on the belief that the effect on the reader had to be aimed at from the start. In his essay regarding Hawthorne's Twice Told Tales he sets forth the things he regards as vital to the short narrative, as he called it: unity of effect, short enough for reading at one sitting and good construction or plan. In any of his stories these qualities he lists may be observed. Poe's influence in the short story continued through the years to subsequent writers because of this resume of the basic things necessary for the effective short story. The Cambridge History of American Literature says, "In the realm of the short story Poe was a prophet, peering into the next age, rather than a leader of his own time."

After Poe, in the 1850's, there was again a lack-luster time for the short story, and not until 1860 when James Russell Lowell took over as editor of The Atlantic Monthly was much advancement recorded. At a time when the only writers seemed to be romantic-minded women spinning tales for the same kind of readers, Lowell's careful selection of stories helped to encourage better writing of

¹Pattes, Fred Lewis, The Development of the American Short Story (N. Y. 1923), p. 130.

a realistic nature. He paved the way for the coming of authors from 1875-1895 whose names are outstanding.

Briefly, this is the background for the short story. Irving and Hawthorne had more or less stumbled into writing it, Poe defined it, and numerous writers were ready to bring about a flourishing time in the growth of the form. First came the War between the States, and then the short story may be said to have come of age.

THE SHORT STORY PERIOD 1875-1895

The Writers

It was a different America that emerged from the war between the North and South. For the first time there was a beginning consciousness of the entire country as one nation. The days when sectional and state pride were the strongest were beginning to pass. It is necessary to mention only briefly here that the increasing spread of railroads and trade, the awareness of other people and customs within the United States and the energy released by the war were social factors in bringing about the bright literary time that followed. America was ripe for "local color" stories in which people could find out about their friends in other sections; and from 1875-1895 such stories came in a flood. This period of the American short story might well be called the "local color" era. To Bret Harte must go the credit for recognizing the mood of the people and capitalizing on it with his story, "The Luck of Roaring Camp". Other authors chosen as representative of the period are Rose Terry Cooke, Harriet Beecher Stowe,

Constance Fenimore Woolson, Thomas Bailey Aldrich, Frank Stockton, Mary Noailles Murfree (Charles Egbert Craddock), George Washington Cable, Joel Chandler Harris, Sarah Orne Jewett, Ambrose Bierce, Hamlin Garland, H. C. Bunner and Mary Wilkins Freeman.

The comments of various critics concerning this time are revealing:

The 1860's reached an astonishing climax in the stories of Bret Harte. Although Harte trod in the footsteps of many predecessors, he focused attention upon the short story as a medium for regional portraiture and enjoyed the distinction of being widely imitated in this country and abroad. "The Luck of Roaring Camp" in The Atlantic Monthly for August 1868, fascinated the East, since this story was set in the comparatively unknown gold-mining area of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Harte's material was absolutely new; it consisted of the coarse, lower phase of life in a region where only the law of human necessity imposed a check upon depravity.²

The Cambridge History of American Literature relates:

What did happen was the sudden appearance of a short story that stamped America and for two decades set the style in short fiction. Bret Harte's "The Luck of Roaring Camp", whatever one may think of its merits, must be admitted to be the most influential short story ever written in America.

And Pattee summed up his views this way:

Unquestionably the influence of Harte upon the American short story has been greater than that exerted by any other American author, always excepting Irving. His influence was far greater than the quality of his work entitled him to exert. He was peculiarly fortunate: everything for a time conspired to give him the center of the stage. The imagination of the whole world had been fired by the California gold era and the field had been untouched by romancers: his material was timely to the moment.³

²Warfel, Harry R. and G. Harrison Orians ed., American Local Color Stories (N. Y. 1941), Intro. p. xx.

³Pattee, op. cit., p. 240.

Thus, Bret Harte is a good starting point in considering the authors of this period. Although the date of this first story is outside the range of this period, Bret Harte continued to write more and more of the same in later years. He first started the swing to local color stories, making the locality the focal point. Closely related is his use of Western humor, especially the tall tale, which he and Mark Twain together popularized. In his stories, such as "The Luck of Roaring Camp", in which he tells about the effect on the lives of tough miners of a baby born to a prostitute in the camp, and "The Outcasts of Poker Flat", in which the gambler, Gakhuret, paradoxically turns out to be a noble hero, can be seen his use of paradox and antithesis in characters. His characters are types rather than individuals. He does make use of impressionistic description of characters. In one of his stories he describes a woman as "a berry-eyed old woman with the complexion of dried salmon". To this man, then, America is indebted for the start of the local color era.

Very shortly after Harte's debut, a woman writer caught the notice of critics. Rose Terry Cooke had been writing for some time about New England, and now with the new interest in localities, her work caught on. The Cambridge History calls her "the most important figure in the switch to actuality in 1870". Her stories differed from Harte's in that hers were factual where his were often imaginative or romantic. She was the most valued contributor to The Atlantic Monthly after Lowell took over. Her handling of character portrayal and dialect gives excellent pictures of New England Yankees.

Another woman writer about the New England scene was Harriet Beecher Stowe. Her stories also appeared about 1870. She writes amusing, easy-moving stories which are not especially dramatic but contain local color and are true to New England life.

Not so well-known but also a contributor to the local color era in the 1870's was Constance Fenimore Woolson. The distinctive thing about her work is that she wrote of various sections she had visited rather than of one in which she had lived for a long time. It is possible that much of her earlier success stemmed from the fact that she was a grandniece of James Fenimore Cooper, and she capitalized on the Fenimore in her name. She wrote about New England, Ohio, the Great Lakes and the North in conscious imitation of Harts. It is not likely that her name will last since her writing has little to recommend it except her imagination and grasp of the picturesque.

However, the most sensational of the short story writers after Harts was Thomas Bailey Aldrich. Largely, his fame was accomplished with one story, one that rocked American literary circles almost as much as Bret Harts's "The Luck of Roaring Camp". The story was "Marjorie Daw" which appeared in the Atlantic in 1873. The artful way in which Aldrich built up to the final climax, which revealed to the thwarted young lover that there actually was no such person as Marjorie Daw with whom he had fallen in love through letters, is unsurpassed. The story is especially noteworthy in that it is told entirely by means of letters. It is probably the first short story to use that method, although novels as early as Samuel Richardson's Clarissa Harlowe in eight-

eenth century England had been told that way. Nearly all of Aldrich's stories have an ironical or humorous twist at the end, and this device has been admired and copied by writers even up to the present time. Often the whole story was constructed just to add the most punch to his surprise endings. Since this was true, his stories are often marvels of plot structure.

Two other works of this period brought instant recognition to their authors when a story, "The Lady or the Tiger," by Frank Stockton and a volume of stories, In the Tennessee Mountains by Mary Noailles Murfree, writing as Charles Egbert Craddock, were published. Both appeared in 1884, and the Cambridge History says:

...1884 was the climactic year in the history of the short story inasmuch as it produced "The Lady or the Tiger" and In the Tennessee Mountains, each of them a literary sensation that advertised the form tremendously.

Curiously, Stockton's story had nothing to do with local color. The now famous narrative sets up a situation in ancient days which causes the reader to wonder whether a prisoner will open the door behind which is a beautiful lady or the door behind which is a savage tiger. Just at the crucial point in the story where the reader expects to find out, Stockton abruptly put in a closing paragraph which left it up to the reader to decide. This was a new twist to the surprise ending. It exemplifies Stockton as primarily an entertainer, giving the reader the opposite of what he expects. He must be respected for his individualism in not following the rush to local color; he contributed manner, not materials, to the American short story when manner was needed.

On the other hand Mary Noailles Murfree was deeply concerned

with locality. Her stories about Tennessee mountain life had been appearing for some time in The Atlantic Monthly under her pen name of Charles Egbert Craddock. When it was determined to issue a number of them in a volume under the title "In the Tennessees Mountains", the author went to Boston to help with arrangements. What was the surprise of the publishers to find that Craddock was actually Miss Murfree! There is no doubt that the accompanying revelation of the true author and the resulting fanfare helped sell the book. Even so, Miss Murfree was a competent regional writer. With much use of dialect interspersed with description of scene, she makes the atmosphere of her stories as strong as Harte's. Her stories emphasize setting more than any other element, and she writes in a chronological style that is almost like that of a journal. Her importance is dwindling, but she should be given credit for impressions made on younger writers who came along in the nineties.

Two men ably depicted the feel of the South of this period, and in different ways. The two were George Washington Cable and Joel Chandler Harris. Cable, a chronicler of Louisiana life, deals mostly with the French people there, capturing the mood and atmosphere of the time. He was the first literary voice of the South after the war. His stories of Creole life are more romantic because of their background than the sternly realistic ones coming from New England, and thus his style is important to notice--slow, brilliant and mysterious.

Harris was intent on bringing another side of the South before his readers. Although he wrote other types, probably his sto-

rice about Uncle Remus, the lovable old Negro who knew all about the troubles of Brer' Rabbit, Brer' Fox and Brer' Bear, will make him best known. These tales first appeared in Harrie's newspaper columns, and it is interesting to note here that aside from Bret Harte and H. C. Bunner, Harrie is the only one of these authors who had newspaper experience. His training shows in his stories, which are short and direct. He was much more factual than Miss Murfree and tried to present things as they actually were. He shows a rare understanding of the Negro slave, and as a result characterization dominates his stories, an unusual fact in this period of settings. The Negro dialect of Harrie's stories is unsurpassed for reality. Still, like most southern literature of the time, there is a romantic tinge about his writings.

One other of the writers of the seventies and eighties who deserves mention is Sarah Orne Jewett. Her stories are essentially about the locality and people of New England. Their style is different from the booming style of Harte. She writes in an intimate, quiet way which would probably have not merited the approval of Poe. She has a place as a sympathetic painter of a vanishing life in New England which she had known intimately. She says of herself, "They (her stories) have neither beginning or end, but shape and flavor may still be left them".⁴ The quaint "flavor" which they have is their distinguishing trait. Miss Jewett will be remembered as a realist of the selective type, wishing to present only the better things of life.

⁴Pattee, op. cit., p. 262.

Moving into the nineties, the short story, as some critics believe, reached the peak of its entire history. It had become a polished, well-established and respected form, and the writers who now took over as leaders added to its reputation. Theirs was a heritage which was ready for culmination. The four writers chosen representative of the time--Ambrose Bierce, Hamlin Garland, H. C. Bunner and Mary Wilkins Freeman--are widely varied in their subject matter and style.

Bierce was an individualist. He did not climb on the local color band wagon. Not many people read him. Yet there is a cold, calculated power in his stories. Later critics have come to appreciate his contribution. Like Aldrich, he was inclined to mislead the reader for an entire story so that he could explode a surprise ending. Bierce does not dally with conversation or characterization; he has a punch line to deliver, and he gets to it by direct narration. His subjects varied widely; it was situations which he sought. Patten says of him that "still more unmistakably does it (his work) point forward to O. Henry. It is impossible that O. Henry had not read it".⁵ It is significant that nearly every collection of outstanding writers of this period read in this research included Bierce.

Hamlin Garland has a place here because of his contribution to realism in the short story. He can also be considered a local colorist because he was spokesman for the farming people of the Mid-Western plains. It is likely that he is the most realistic of all authors of this period. He had a purpose in his stories: to describe exactly the hard life led by the plains farmer, his

⁵Patten, op. cit., p. 306.

wife and children. There had been too much glamorizing of this subject, thought Garland. His collection of short stories, Main Traveled Roads, depicts the various scenes of farm life without any glossing over: fighting off the mortgage holder; planting and praying for a good season; and over and over the hard work, especially of the women. Garland's style is genuine, direct and fresh. His contribution is that of reality.

As editor of Puck Magazine, H. C. Bunner would be expected to contribute humor to the short story, and that is what he did. Here was another author interested in situation. His stories are light, but they are readable and well-constructed. Following the trend of the times he did some local color writing but picked New York City as his scene. Many of his stories are very short, but he had the knack of saying much in little space. There is not much depth to his work. He was too much the journalist for that. Bunner is sometimes looked upon as the American Maupassant. Maupassant he admired and copied.

It is fitting to close the discussion of authors of 1875-1895 with Mary Wilkins Freeman. In thinking of this period as the local color era, one can see that she epitomizes the best of the time. Of all the local writers, she seems most genuine and perceptive. Her knowledge of the New England family was broad and she showed a sympathetic attitude toward it. Her stories are well and economically constructed. A glance through the titles of her stories reveals that she was stingy in using words even there. "Gentian", "Silence", "Louisa", "Luella Miller" and "Sieter Lyddy" are examples. Mrs. Freeman emphasized the characters in her sto-

ries, most of them New England husbands and wives or spinsters, rather than the action. The pathos and humor often revealed as she tells of their lives are her trademarks.

The Stories

In order to give a better idea of the subject matter and technique and to demonstrate the qualities of the authors in the short stories of this period, representative stories of several of these authors are included here. It is believed that by listing these and later stories in the other period, the contrast between the two can be better shown. The differences will be pointed out in the discussion of the twentieth century period.

Note how Bret Harte brings in local color in his story "Tennessee's Partner":

The way led through Grizzly Canon, by this time clothed in funereal drapery and shadows. The redwoods, burying their moccasined feet in the red soil, stood in Indian file along the track, trailing an uncouth benediction from their bending boughs upon the passing bier. A hare, surprised into helpless inactivity, sat upright and pulsating in the ferns by the roadside, as the cortege went by. Squirrels hastened to gain a secure outlook from higher boughs; and the bluejays, spreading their wings, fluttered before them like outriders, until the outskirts of Sandy Bar were reached, and the solitary cabin of Tennessee's Partner.⁶

Again through conversation in the same story Harte gives the feeling of this West so new to Easterners at that time:

"No, no", continued Tennessee's Partner hastily. "I play this yer hand alone. To come down to bed-rock, it's just this: Tennessee, thar, has played it pretty rough and expensive like on a stranger, and on this yer camp. And now what's the fair thing? Some would say more, some would say less. Here's seventeen hundred

⁶ Warfel and Orians, ed., op. cit., p. 145-6.

dollars in coarss gold and a watch--it's about all my pils--and call it square!"⁷

This description of a New England boy by Rose Terry Cooks in "Uncle Josh" shows her sympathy and knowledge both of the people and their dialect:

When Josh woke up, and knew his mother was dead, he did not bshave in the least like good little boys in books, but dressed himself without a tear or sob, and ran for the nearest neighbor.

"Sakse alive!" said "Miss" Rannsy. "I never did ses sech a cretur as that are boy in all my days! He never said nothin' to me when he came to our folks's, only jest, 'Mis Ranney, I guess you'd better come cross lots to ses mother: she don't esem to be alive.'--'Dew tell!' ses I. An' so I slipt on my Shaker bunnet jist as quick's I could; but he was off, spry's a crikst, and when I got there he was a-esttin' the room to rights."⁸

Enough of Aldrich should be observed to see his wit and fondness for the surprise ending. "Miss Hepzibah's Lover" is a good example. Near the end of this tale the reader finds that the lover of a venerable old maid, Miss Hepzibah, is a sleep walker and woos her in his sleep. His father discovers this fact and one night awakens his son, who is aghast and fless. His real fiancée hears about this episode, and says, "I am sure I couldn't think of marrying a man who doesn't know when he's asleep!" The next sentence is pure Aldrich: "But she did." Then Aldrich wryly adds in his last sentence that Miss Hepzibah spent the rest of her life dreaming of her lover. "She thinks he was not so fast asleep as he appeared to be." Surely this is masterful characterization by inference.

George Washington Cable's manner of catching the atmospheres

⁷Ibid., p. 143.

⁸Ibid., p. 85.

of the South, especially its superstitious beliefs, is noticed in his story "Jean-Ai Poquelin":

Among both black and white the house was the object of a thousand superstitions. Every midnight, they affirmed, the feu follet came out of the marsh and ran in and out of the rooms flashing from window to window. The story of some lady, whose word in ordinary statements was worthless, was generally credited, that the night they camped in the woods, rather than pass the place after dark, they saw, about sunset, every window blood-red, and on each of the four chimneys an owl sitting, which turned his head three times round, and moaned and laughed with a human voice. There was a bottomless well, everybody professed to know, beneath the sill of the big front door under the rotten veranda; whoever set his foot upon that threshold disappeared forever in the depth below.

One of the things which attracted attention to Mary Noailles Murfree's stories was the Tennessee dialect. Dialect is used in a high per cent of these local color stories. This quotation is from her story "Over on the T'other Mounting" where dialect is used even in the title. It also reveals the superstitious ideas of the Cumberland mountain people.

"It's the unluckiest place annywhar nigh about," said Nathan White, as he sat one afternoon upon the porch of his log-cabin, on the summit of Old Rocky-Top, and gazed up at the heights of the T'other Mounting across the narrow valley. "I hev hearn tell all my days ez how, ef ye go up thar on the T'-other Mounting, suthin will happen afore ye kin get away. An' I knows myself ez how--'twar ten year ago an' better--I went up thar, one Jan'yry day, a-lookin' fur my cow, ez hed strayed off through not hevein' enny calf ter our house; an' I fund the cow, but jes' tuk an' elipped on a loy rock, an' bruk my ankle-bons. 'Twar sech a job a-gittin' off'n that thar T'other Mounting an' back over hyar, it hev l'arned me ter stay away from thar."¹⁰

Joel Chandler Harris's stories abound with Negro dialect.

⁹Ibid., p. 278.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 312-3.

The following is from "Ananias", a story about a loyal but evil-appearing old slave whose life was disrupted by the war:

"Yasser," he replied, "dat w'at mammy say. Mammy done dead now, but she say dat dey wuz too Ananiasse. Dey wuz ole Ananias en young Ananias. One un um wuz de Liar, en de udder wuz de Poffit. Dat w'at mammy say. I'm name atter de Poffit."¹¹

The tone and purpose of Sarah Orne Jewett's stories are revealed in this beginning of "Miss Debby's Neighbore". Miss Jewett admitted that she was writing to preserve the memory of a vanishing New England life she had known.

There is a class of elderly New England women which is fast dying out:--those good souls who have sprung from a soil full of the true New England instincts; who were used to the old-fashioned ways, and whose minds were stored with quaint country lore and tradition. The fashions of the newer generation do not reach them; they are quite unconscious of the western spirit and enterprise, and belong to the old days, and to a fast-disappearing order of things.¹²

From Hamlin Garland's stories it is easy to find examples of blunt realistic writing. Here is a characterization from his story, "Lucretia Burns".

Lucretia Burns had never been handsome, even in her days of early girlhood, and now she was middle-aged, distorted with work and child-bearing, and looking faded and worn as one of the boulders that lay beside the pasture fence where she sat milking a large white cow.

She had no shawl or hat and no shoes, for it was still muddy in the little yard, where the cattle stood patiently fighting the flies and mosquitoes swarming into their skins--already wet with blood.¹³

Mary Wilkins Freeman's brilliant use of conversation in depicting her New England husbands and wives is outstanding. Mrs.

¹¹Ibid., p. 431.

¹²Ibid., p. 344-5.

¹³Ibid., p. 613.

Freeman's work anticipates a later period when characterization is nearly all done in that manner. In this quotation from "Gentian" the rare knowledge Mrs. Freeman had of these people is evident. There is reality in this talk between Lucy, the wife, and "Alferd", the taciturn old Yankee husband, after he had been told that she had put gentian, which he despised, into his food as a tonic some time before.

"Alferd, you must answer me; I'm in airneest. Don't you want me to do nothin' fur you any more? Don't you never want me to cook anything fur you again?"

"No, I'm afeard of gittin' things that'e bitter."

"I won't never put any gentian in anything again, Alferd. Won't you let me git supper?"

"No, I won't. I don't want to talk no more about it. In futur I'm a-goin' to cook my vittlee myself, an' that'e all thar is about it."

"Alferd, if you don't want me to do nuthin' fur you, mebbe--you'll think I ain't airnin' my own vittlee--you'd rather I go over to Hannah'e--"

"Mebbe 'twould be just as well," said he. Then he went out of the door.¹⁴

However, Mrs. Freeman, as did most authors of this time unless they used surprise endings, manages to steer the plot incidents around so that the ending climax is happy; Alferd at last surrenders:

"I've come to ask you to come home, Lucy. I'm a-feelin' kinder poorly this epring, an--I want you ter stew me up a little gentian. That you give me afore did me a sight of good."

"Oh, Alferd!"¹⁵

¹⁴Ibid., p. 521-2.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 524-5.

Subjecting the most representative of the stories to the test of the standard of comparison indicated in the introduction, the following observations may be made:

Purpose: The authors, besides entertaining, aim at acquainting readers with different sections of the country. There is considerable indication that they were writing what the magazines found was popular, especially after 1880. Not many have any social message to deliver, Garland being the exception.

Title: The titles are usually simple and suggestive of the story or central character. These are representative: "The Luck of Roaring Camp"; "Gentian"; "The Minister's Housekeeper"; "Uncle Josh"; "Peter, the Parson"; "Taking the Blue Ribbon at the County Fair"; "A Lost Lover"; and "An Incident at Owl Creek Bridge".

Beginning: Most of these stories start with description of the setting of the action. A few authors in the nineties, namely Mrs. Freeman and Garland, started the story by introducing the characters.

Plot: Nearly every story has a strong plot structure. On the whole they are realistic, but some have a romantic tinge. The action is sometimes long and drawn out. In most the climax is at the end. Often these stories are like the fifth act of a play; the preceding action is suggested and then the culmination is unfolded in more detail in the story.

Characters: As a rule the number of characters is few. Authors had discovered it was better so in the short story. Most characters are believable people, especially the New Englanders. No particular class is represented. In some stories authors try

hard to bring out the quaintness of a section's characters, and the result is a type instead of an individual. Earlier authors were apt to give detailed descriptions of characters; later ones had started using conversation and actions to reveal them.

Verisimilitude: The best stories have good verisimilitude and make the reader feel that this is real, this is actually happening. Others are weakly drawn and seem artificial.

Setting: Again following Harte's method, many authors devoted time and space to painting minutely the scene of the action. This is a characteristic of the local color stories. In many stories the setting is the dominant factor in the story.

Style: Nearly all of the stories read of this period were written in the third person using the author-omniscient method. Dialect is often used. Sentences are somewhat long and unwieldy in earlier stories but are shorter and clearer later. There is good prose, polished and clear, in some stories. A few authors use the device of one of the characters relating the action, as does Harris in his Uncle Remus tales.

By way of summing up generally what has been said specifically about authors and stories of this period, the following is given. The period 1875-1895 in the American short story is notable. Some critics and scholars have looked upon the period as one in which the short story reached its highest art. The majority of the writers of this time followed Bret Harte's lead in popularizing local color. Speaking generally, the stories are well constructed with a definite plot or action in which the characters are involved. Most of them, following the precepts laid down by

Poe and Brander Matthews, aim to leave one strong impression or effect on the reader. Most have happy endings after conflicts of various kinds involving the protagonists. There is much use of dialect evident in conversation. The dialect is used to carry out the local color motif. A small group of authors, Bierce, Aldrich, Bunner and, perhaps, Stockton, were more interested in clever, stylistic stories than in local color. They are the forerunners of O. Henry's brand of stories.

THE SHORT STORY PERIOD 1920-1940

The Writers

Some similarities in regard to the history of the two periods used for this study are evident at once. The twentieth century period also falls between two great wars. The local color era had ended. Again new writers were challenged, and the time was ripe for new ideas. Seemingly, after-war literature has always undergone changes.

A man who was instrumental in encouraging the new trends that have brought about a different type of short story since World War I is Edward J. O'Brien. Surprisingly, he has never written a short story. Since so much reliance for the readings of 1920-1940 for this study has been placed upon O'Brien, it is well to point out here some comment concerning his place as a critic and judge.

First of all, a brief resume of O'Brien's career shows that it was while he was a reporter on the Boston Transcript that he had the ideas for his annual selections of short stories. Prob-

ably poetry anthologies suggested it to him. At any rate at the age of 25 in 1915 he brought out his first book entitled The Best Short Stories 1915 and the Yearbook of the American Short Story, and each year until 1940 published it again. O'Brien died in 1941 and Martha Foley, an editor of Story magazine, has become editor of the volumes. O'Brien also established a British collection for each year.

Some critics disliked O'Brien's choices, maintaining that he was too partial to little new magazines which sprang up. One biography has this to say of him in that regard:

It was always the 'little' experimental magazines which most interested him, and from which he drew the majority of his chosen stories, though he read annually some 138 magazines, American and English, read 50,000 stories 'carefully' and 10,000 more 'with sufficient care to see that they were rubbish'. Critics frequently disagreed with Mr. O'Brien's selections and especially with his pontifical way of labeling his favorite stories the 'best' of the year, but to appear in his annual collection has long been the goal of every American and British short story writer.¹⁶

It is evident from this quotation just what the writers thought of him as a critic. The Literary Digest in an anonymous article May 29, 1937, called O'Brien the "acknowledged arbiter of the short story". More will be said later in summing up this period in regard to the criticism aimed at O'Brien, but the two references here support his role as short story judge.

The following authors, on the basis of O'Brien's selections, Beach's American Fiction 1920-1940 and the critical material read have been chosen as most representative of the period, at least up to the present time: the years may change this listing, but typi-

¹⁶Kuntz, Stanley J. and Howard Haycraft, ed. (N. Y. 1942), Twentieth Century Authors, p. 1037.

cal of the best and the newest are Sherwood Anderson, Ernest Hemingway, Wilbur Daniel Steele, Theodore Dreiser, Ring Lardner, William Faulkner, Ruth Suckow, William Saroyan, Thomas Wolfe, William March, Erskine Caldwell and John Steinbeck. Many of these will be recognized as outstanding novelists of this century, but it is significant that they began by establishing themselves as short story writers.

Before sketching the individualities of these writers, a short discussion of the short story in the interim 1895-1920 which the study does not cover will be helpful. These years were dominated by O. Henry, who brought together the qualities of Aldrich, Bunner and Bierce into a formula for successful short stories that has never been equaled. There was a danger in these "journalistic" stories, as Patten calls them, which could have led to stereotyped writing because so many authors, impressed by O. Henry's success, imitated him. Critics other than O'Brien were aware of this possibility. Thus Blanche Colton Williams wrote in 1920 of an author's stories that "They have a character of their own instead of following slavishly that O. Henry formula which threatens to stultify American short story writing".¹⁷ O'Brien in his book, The Advance of the American Short Story, points out that every time in the history of the short story that it has become too mechanical, a reaction followed. After Maupassant came Chekhov; after Kipling came Mansfield; after O. Henry came Anderson. Sherwood Anderson, then, seems a good beginning point for the study of this period.

Anderson grew up in a small town in Ohio. The impressions

¹⁷Williams, Blanche Colton, Our Short Story Writers (N. Y. 1920), p. 100.

he gained from observing the lives of people there stayed with him, although he shifted around from one job to the other until he finally found his niche as a newspaper editor. The majority of his writings are based on two themes: (1) his boyhood days spent around horse-racing tracks; (2) his boyhood recollections of the lives of people in small towns. Certainly his material might be classed as reactionary to G. Henry's. His style is loose and rambling and somewhat off-color. There is an air about his stories of a puzzled adolescent who can not figure out what it is all about. But there is a freshness and informality, too, which O'Brien recognized and which caused him to list Anderson's stories in his volumes almost yearly from 1920 to 1930. For a time in his introductory remarks to his volumes O'Brien observes that Anderson is the only writer in America who really meets his standards for good short stories: how "vitaly compelling the writer makes his selected facts or incidents, and the beautiful and satisfying form" in which he arranges them. Anderson presents pictures and impressions rather than using a plot in his stories.

The second great influence on twentieth century American short stories was furnished by Ernest Hemingway. Now better known as a novelist, he first found expression in the short story form. Hemingway as an author was partly the product of World War I when he was in Europe as an ambulance driver. Many of his story settings are European. He, also, had had newspaper experience, serving for a time on the Kansas City Star. O'Brien's evaluation of him is pertinent:

The impulse of his (Anderson's) work, however, soon quickened the senses of another younger writer,

Ernest Hemingway, who began to write short stories with an austerity which Sherwood Anderson lacked. Like Walt Whitman Anderson could never deny himself the luxury of an emotion. Hemingway seems to have denied himself all irrelevant emotions. He learned much from Anderson, but he learned much more from life. He never allowed form to impose its pattern on life. He respected life too much for that and preferred to let life shape the pattern of his work. When life called for resistance, he resisted. When life called for surrender, he surrendered. In his work at its best there is a new poise, a dynamic poise which no earlier American artist had ever achieved. Hemingway's stories are affirmations and acts of faith, realistic in their integrity and profound in their quite unstressed implications. It is from Sherwood Anderson and Ernest Hemingway that the contemporary living American short story derives.¹⁸

What O'Brien meant by placing "living" in front of American short story is probably to indicate his belief that the bulk of magazine short stories were still of the commercialized or journalistic type. O'Brien did not consider them as stories which would "live".

One writer who did not follow the Anderson or Hemingway type of writing and yet who appears almost annually in O'Brien's selections of the twenties and early thirties was Wilbur Daniel Steele. He was a story teller in the sense of one who sits by the fire and entertains his listeners by spinning tales. O'Brien calls him a "romantic realist", and his stories indicate a romantic leaning. He wrote on many subjects but some of his best stories are about the fisher folk of the Urkey Islands. His scene impressions are particularly good as are his plot structure and sense of the fitness of things.

In Theodore Dreiser, although he is primarily a novelist, one

¹⁸O'Brien, Edward J., ed., The Best Short Stories of 1933 (Boston and N. Y. 1933), Intro., p. xvii.

can first see a trend which becomes stronger and stronger in the twentieth century short story. That is the social and economic theme. Dreiser handled it very realistically, and his stories were written only to bring to light and perhaps to correct the economic and social injustices he had observed. His literary qualifications as far as smooth writing goes are limited; but credit must be given to him for discovery of a new wealth of subject matter for the American short story with which writers have since become more and more concerned.

Ring Lardner's stories are individualistic. They contain humor, usually furnished incidentally by the teller of the tale whom we come to know as a character by the way he tells his story. There is plenty of biting satire in Lardner's writings, too, although many, looking for the laughs, miss it. Lardner's style is informal. He uses dialect and often first person narration, as did Anderson. Lardner, like Hemingway, makes the action and the talk tell the story. The author never intrudes in any way into the story. He is purely the observer or recorder.

It was almost inevitable that the South with its problems of racial and economic injustices should furnish writers with a fertile field in the new social consciousness first seen in Dreiser. The writers who have capitalized on it are William Faulkner and Erskine Caldwell. Both have been bluntly realistic in treatment, but Faulkner is more imaginative and perhaps more brutal. Caldwell is best known as the author of the novel, Tobacco Road, but his observations of poor white agricultural workers in the South and others caught in the grasp of depression make powerful short

storiss. Caldwell had newspaper experience of one year on the Atlanta Journal; Faulkner had none, which may explain his more burdensome style. William March also writes of the South, although his reputation is not as high as Caldwell's or Faulkner's. In relating the customs and superstitions of Southern mountain people, he is reminiscent of the earlier local color era.

Ruth Suckow deserves mention for her short stories about the Mid-West, primarily of German immigrants. She has been described as a quiet realist. Her stories are made up of small, incidental experiences in the lives of these people. There is seldom much of a climax or any great amount of action; the story is almost just a record of day-to-day happenings with no special beginning or end.

William Saroyan and Thomas Wolfe may well be discussed together. Both are unorthodox writers, Saroyan extremely so. It is hard to classify his writings. They certainly do not fit the pattern of the ordinary short story. However, they may be valuable as an indication of the future. When he was asked how he classified his writings, his answer was that it made no difference so long as they "breathed". Wolfe is a powerful writer, often taken up with the abnormal and with the psychological. Although a Southerner, his stories are not confined to that section. Much of what he writes is autobiographical.

John Steinbeck is another of these writers who has since turned to the novel. His short stories, usually concerned with the poorer classes of California, are vivid and adequate. He is another of the realistic writers, probably influenced by Hemingway.

In recapitulating, it will be noticed that there is only one woman writer included in this list. There are others, such as Dorothy Parker, Fannie Hurst, or Edna Ferber who could have been included, but they do not quite measure up. Perhaps they have been concerned more with commercializing their art than in leaving a message. With the exception of Steele, these writers have very little to do with plot as it was once used--a conflict between hero and enemy. All are trying to be very realistic, and to interpret only from their own experience. The number of authors with newspaper experience is another remarkable fact. If the study could have been extended to lesser authors, it is believed the percentage of authors who have worked on newspapers or magazines would be even higher. It is obvious that some of this newspaper training will slip into the style of these writers.

The Stories

Just as for the earlier period, excerpts from stories of the period from 1920-1940 are given here. In the latter paragraphs, comparisons of the stories of the two periods are given.

This quotation, showing Sherwood Anderson's commonest method of presentation, is taken from one of his later stories, "Another Wife". The subjective manner is evident--the man's thoughts are given as he considers marrying a second wife after his first had died:

It's like this--here I am practically alone. What am I letting myself in for? If she, if any of the women of that family, were of the marrying sort, she would have made a marriage with a much more likely man long ago. Her younger sisters were so considerate in their attitude toward her. There was something tender, re-

spectful, teasing, too, about the way they acted when he and she were together.

Little thoughts running in his head. He had come down to the country because something inside him had let down. It might have been his forty-seven years.¹⁹

Anderson, it has been said, was always his own chief character. Since he was married four times, it is possible that these were his own thoughts at one time. No subjective passage such as this are found in the earlier period stories, but such treatment is common among present-day writers.

Hemingway's clipped, cryptic style is impressive in contrast to the wordiness of Harte in his earlier period stories. "The Killers", one of his most famous stories, illustrates this style. The two killers have gone into a lunch room looking for their victim, who is, we find later, on the bed in his boarding house too scared even to move. This is how the story begins:

The door of Henry's lunch-room opened and two men came in. They sat down at the counter.

"What're you're?" George asked them.

"I don't know," one of the men said. "What do you want to eat, Al?"

"I don't know," said Al. "I don't know what I want to eat."

Outside it was getting dark. The street-light came on outside the window. The two men at the counter read the menu. From the other end of the counter Nick Adams watched them. He had been talking to George when they came in.

"I'll have a roast pork tenderloin with apple sauce and mashed potato," the first man said.

"It isn't ready yet."

¹⁹O'Brien, Edward J., ed., The Best Short Stories of 1927 (N. Y. 1927), p. 51.

"What the hell do you put it on the card for?"

"That's the dinner," George explained. "You can get that at six o'clock."²⁰

Later in the story, Nick Adams has gone to warn Ole Andreson that the men were looking for him:

Nick opened the door and went into the room. Ole Andreson was lying on the bed with all his clothes on. He had been a heavyweight prizefighter and he was too long for the bed. He lay with his head on two pillows. He did not look at Nick.

"What was it?" he asked.

"I was up at Henry's," Nick said, "and two fellows came in and tied up me and the cook, and they said they were going to kill you."

It sounded silly when he said it. Ole Andreson said nothing.

"They put us out in the kitchen," Nick went on. "They were going to shoot you when you came in to supper."

Ole Andreson looked at the wall and did not say anything.

"George thought I better come and tell you about it."

"There isn't anything I can do about it," Ole Andreson said.

"I'll tell you what they were like."

"I don't want to know what they were like," Ole Andreson said. He looked at the wall. "Thanks for coming to tell me about it."

"That's all right."

Nick looked at the big man lying on the bed.

"Don't you want me to go and see the police?"

"No," Ole Andreson said. "That wouldn't do any good."

²⁰Ibid., p. 40.

"Isn't there something I could do?"

"No, there ain't anything to do."

"Maybe it's just a bluff."

"No. It ain't just a bluff."²¹

One wonders what reaction earlier authors would have had to the ending of the story. Nick has gone back to the eating place.

"I wonder what he did?" Nick said.

"Double-crossed somebody. That's what they kill them for."

"I'm going to get out of this town," Nick said.

"Yee," said George. "That's a good thing to do."

"I can't stand to think about him waiting in the room and knowing he's going to get it. It's too damned awful."

it."²²"Well," said George, "you better not think about

This is pure Hemingway. Nothing concrete has been told the reader. The author does not even slip into the story. The whole thing is implied, and the reader must infer everything from the talk and actions of the characters. Hemingway's sentence structure is the simplest. As few words as possible is the rule. Note that he doesn't even bother to vary sentence beginnings. The subject, the verb, the object or a modifying phrase is the almost constant order of his sentences. The recurring use of "said" in the passages quoted shows Hemingway's belief in simplifying. Yet the entire effect is satisfying and stimulating. The contrast between such writing and that of Aldrich or Mrs. Freeman of the earlier period is plain. "The Killers" has only ten short

²¹Ibid., p. 47-8.

²²Ibid., p. 49.

paragraphs of direct narration. All the rest is conversation, usually in one-line speeches. The entire length of the story would have given most earlier authors room only to start.

Where Hemingway etched, Wilbur Daniel Steele painted a full, glowing picture. His range was wide, but his stories of Urkey Island are probably best. "Out of the Wind", describing the lives of two sisters, Molly, a blonde, and Ray, a brunette, is one of these. The two were very close in their youth, but as a result of marriages to men who were bitter enemies, they grew apart. What happened twenty years later when both men died as a result of a fight shows Steele's artistry; the result seems inevitable.

Ray shifted the bag that grew heavy to her other hand and quickened her steps for the last time along the ridge between the wheel-ruts full of dead grass.

She wasn't tired. They needn't think she wasn't wiry and able. Life had used her all it wanted to, but it hadn't used her up. There was plenty left.

Becoming visible, the tree-trunks ran about her, and their roaring passed over head. In the gale piled up against the windward side of the house she hesitated. "Look at me; I've come without a key." But then the queer part was that she couldn't make it seem important. "If I'd needed a key I'd have thought to remember it." Passing around the southeast corner of the building, she brought up in the lee.

There was a light in the hall. Without any more hesitation, without wonder even, she mounted the steps, lifted the latch, and went in.

Molly, half-way up the stairs with the lamp in her hand, turned and peered over the railing.

"That you, Ray?" she said. "You're awful late."²³

²³O'Brien, Edward J., ed., The Best Short Stories of 1926 (N. Y. 1926), p. 261-2.

And just that simply the two are reunited in the old family house they had kept closed since their marriages. All the enmity and spite is gone, and without words they are once again as close as they were in childhood.

One of Ring Lardner's stories which he sarcastically called "Travelogue" introduces the reader to the bore who has been everywhere and has done everything, in this case named Hazel. The following paragraph shows Lardner's keen powers in observing and relating the empty-headed prattle of such a person. Her traveling acquaintance, a young man, starts to mention something about his watch, and Hazel is off:

"I bought this watch of mine in New York," said Hazel. "It was about two years ago, the last time Bess Aldridge and I went East. Let's see; was that before or after she broke her engagement to Harley Bateman? It was before. But Harley said he knew the manager of the Belmont and he would wire him and get us a good room. Well, of course he forgot to wire, so we finally got into the Pennsylvania, Room 1012. No, Room 1014. It was some people from Pittsburgh, a Mr. and Mrs. Bradbury, in 1012. He was lame. Bess wanted to see Jeanne Eagels in "Rain" and we tried to get tickets at the news-stand, but they said fifteenth row. We finally went to the Palace that night. Ina Claire was on the bill. So the next morning, we came down to breakfast and who should we run into but Dave Homan! We'd met him at French Lick in the spring. Isn't French Lick wonderful?"²⁴

And so she rattles on. The upshot of the story is that the man asks Hazel's quiet friend, also on the train, for a date after the trip is ended and Hazel can't imagine why. Her friend is so quiet. Here again the author leaves the story for the reader to infer. The same indirect method of telling is used in Lardner's story "Haircut" where the barber dispenses a long tale while out-

²⁴Ibid., p. 193-4.

ting hair.

The authors from 1930-1940, writing at the time of the depression, are preoccupied with the social problems presented. In the volume of O'Brien for these years are increasing number of stories dealing with jobless persons. Erskine Caldwell tells a compelling story in "Dorothy" of a girl, out of work and hopeless, who approaches the author (the story is told in first person) ostensibly to ask where an employment agency is. He realizes from her appearance that she has almost given up trying to get a job and is actually asking him to buy her. He is almost broke also and sends her over the viaduct to the "flop-houses" where, he knows, there can be only one fate for her, but where she at least will not starve. His description of her as she goes away is moving:

She turned and walked down the street toward the dirty red brick hotels. The heels of her slippers had worn sideways. She tried to stand erectly on her feet and she had to walk stiffly so her ankles would not turn. If her legs had relaxed for a second she would have sprained her ankles.

She did not look back at me. Her blue flannel skirt was wrinkled far out of shape. It looked as if she had slept in it for several nights, maybe a week. It was covered with specks of dust and lint. Her hat looked as if it had been in a hard rain for several hours and then dried on a sharp peg of some kind. There was a peak in the crown that drew the whole hat out of shape.....

I didn't send her there, she would have gone anyway....That's what I think sometime--but it's a lie! I told her to go down the street and cross the viaduct.²⁵

It is obvious from the foregoing that American writers were no longer content to write of surface happenings or quaint, little-

²⁵O'Brien, Edward J., ed., The Best Short Stories of 1931 (N. Y. 1931), p. 85-7.

known people or lands. They are inquiring into the stuff of which life is made. They are pondering the "why's" of our country, as Caldwell does in this story, asking subtly why this girl should be driven to prostitution to keep from starving. Beach says in his review of 1920-1940 fiction that when Hemingway first started writing short stories his favorite themes were death and danger because the feeling engendered by them is universal. This is true also of hunger and insecurity and joblessness. Words do not need to be wasted in explaining the situation.

The unusual manner of William Saroyan is well-illustrated in his first story, which O'Brien used in his 1934 volume. Saroyan wrote it under the pen name of Sirak Goryan. Most of his stories are first person narratives. The entire so-called story is a collection of incidents remembered from childhood. There is no plot or conflict or suspense. This passage near the end of the story is representative:

Then suddenly something strange happened; it happened inside of me, and at the same time it seemed to be happening all over the world, in the cities, on the surface of the earth everywhere, wherever there were men. I felt at last that I was a part of life, that at last I knew how all things ended. A strange, desolating sadness swept through the earth and for the first time in my life I was feeling it, definitely, personally. It seemed as if I had just been born, that I had at that moment become aware of the earth, of man on it, of life, of the beauty and the pain, the joy and the fear and the ugliness. It was all very clear to me and I knew why I had always sat at the piano pounding the keys, why I had fought with my brother Krikar, and why we had laughed together. And because I had been laughing, and because tears had come from my eyes, I sat on my bed and began to cry.²⁶

Certainly short story readers of 1875-1895 would have blinked

²⁶O'Brien, Edward J., ed., The Best Short Stories of 1934 (Boston and N. Y. 1934), p. 161-2.

twice if they had come across such a story as the one above. Saroyan writes in the currently popular "stream-of-consciousness" style, however, and perhaps it must be set down as a current trend. Authors seem no longer content in telling what their characters say; now they must even tell what they are thinking.

The other authors listed in this 1920-1940 period have not tried the "stream-of-consciousness" method to any extent. To illustrate another common use of it, that of the thoughts of a child, the following quotation is given from a lesser known author of this time, Mendel Lesuer, in "Spring Story".

This year she wouldn't play ball or run in the park at dusk with the gang like a wild Indian. This year she would put on a good dress after supper and walk delicately along the paths, with boys in awe and amazement at the sudden beauty of her ways.

The meaning of the mass (at church) she made up mysteriously herself. It made her sit in the trance of her own destiny, feeling through the ritual some hint of meaning that was never wholly graspable.²⁷

From the whole body of stories read for this period and placed against the standard of comparison, the following comments are made along with contrasts between the two periods.

Purpose: Early in the period the prime purpose of most of the stories seemed to be to make money. They were what the magazines wanted. Later, there seemed to be a real wish to interpret life, especially after the depression. Local color is no longer important. Communications have speeded up so that most people are fairly familiar with their country and even with the world.

Title: Titles are usually short and most of them try to be

²⁷ O'Brien, Edward J., ed., The Best Short Stories of 1932 (N. Y. 1932), p. 143-4.

catchy or interest-arousing. A few are just labels. Here are some examples: "The Undeclared"; "Fame Takes the J Car"; "Sleet Storm"; "Footnote to a Life"; "Lo!"; "Remarks: None"; "The Red Hat"; and "Untitled Story". Comparing these titles with the best of 1875-1895, one can see that there is more stress on originality, although it may be artificial, in the latter period.

Beginning: The commonest method of beginning is that of introduction of characters, usually the central figure of the story. Some achieve this introduction along with conversation. Lengthy description of setting to open a story, as noted in the earlier period, is seldom used.

Characters: The number of characters figuring in the individual stories is small. They are well-drawn and are individuals rather than types, except with Ring Lardner. Characterization is handled almost entirely in an objective manner with just a line or two. Hemingway just names characters and lets the reader get his ideas of the person from the conversation and action. There are not any detailed descriptions such as were often used in the earlier period to introduce a character. Many of the characters in these stories come from the lower classes. This may be because the depression affected their lives more, or it may be that authors feel that these persons are more elemental.

Verisimilitude: One thing the modern author insists on having in his stories is the appearance of reality, whether in characters, setting, conversation or incidents. Much emphasis on this point of reality by critics and the realistic tendency of today probably account for the improvement in this one respect over

the earlier period when considerable liberties were taken.

Setting: In these stories the setting is often brought in only through incidental mention in the narrative. No long paragraphs are devoted purely to description as the local colorists did. In today's stories the entire setting may not be given to the reader until near the end of the story. Sometimes, as with Saroyan, the reader makes up his own setting. If carried to the extreme, this tendency to overlook setting may be a weakness.

Style: This period saw the introduction of "I" into short stories become rather common. First person narration and "stream-of-consciousness" style are both new in contrast to the older period. Sometimes an author may take the reader into the minds of several of his characters in relating a story. Dialect is still used, but perhaps not so obviously or with the idea of showing quaintness as it was in 1875-1895. Now it is another trick to accomplish realness in the story. Some authors, like Hemingway, never use it. Happy endings are no longer in vogue. The post-war and depression stories have a depressing tone. Many of the more recent stories read like journals or diaries, and it is wondered whether earlier writers and critics would think them literature.

In a general way, then, it can be stated that there are two types of stories evident in 1920-1940. The first is the standard plot-structure story as continued by Steele; the second is the personal narrative or "stream-of-consciousness" kind. It should be remembered that the stories of this study were selected ones picked by O'Brien. They are not typical of the vast mass of boy-

girl stories found in magazines of this time. There is no doubt that the magazine stories are the lowest form to which the "journalistic" short story has come. They are the product of over-commercialization of the short story and may have an ill effect on it as literature.

In this respect the comments of William L. Chenery, in 1938 editor of Colliers Magazine, are pertinent. He was writing in regard to O'Brien's selections of that year:

In form Mr. O'Brien's selections tend to be sketches or character studies rather than the compactly organized short stories preferred by the American magazine audiences.²⁸

Chenery goes on to say that magazine editors find these four things as requisites for short stories they use. First, that they have "reader interest" or universal appeal. Second, that the language be intelligible. Third, that they have a "happy ending", which, Chenery says, is indicative of American life in its optimism. And fourth, that they contain no propaganda. It is easy to see that if all authors followed this formula slavishly the short story would soon be in a deep rut. The third requisite for a happy ending would eliminate many of the masterpieces turned out in the two decades 1920-1940. These writers feel that they must be true-to-life.

Stephen Vincent Benet comes to O'Brien's defense in his review of the book Fifty Best American Short Stories, 1914-1939, which O'Brien edited, for the Saturday Review of Literature when

²⁸Chenery, William L., "Picking Popular Fiction", Saturday Review of Literature, June 18, 1938, p. 3-4.

he wrote:

It is true that, for a while, under the spell of O. Henry and the imitators of O. Henry the successful American short story went in for the surprise ending and the well-tailored plot....he (O'Brien) has done as much as any one man to change it, by his constant and unflagging encouragement of experimentation and his critical generosity to young writers of promise. And a lot of the time he has been right.²⁹

The outstanding effect of reading a large number of these selected stories, especially in 1930-1940, is the depressed mood left with the reader. A large body of stories all dealing with renters who have no money, birth, death, the jobless, farmers whose land is dust, hopeless factory workers and other variants of these subjects are bound to give a pessimistic overtone to literature. It is notable that the more recent short story is shorter. O'Brien's early collections had twenty stories; later ones had thirty in almost the same number of pages. In comparison with the earlier period these stories show a much more withdrawn sense on the part of the author. He is merely recording for the reader. He never explains or makes too clear his own beliefs. For this reason some recent short stories leave their readers in a muddle.

Two points regarding subject matter of the 1920-1940 stories should be touched upon. It has already been said that there was much concern with depression and its effect on people, and that there is a depressing tone to much of the literature of the period. One other very noticeable theme in these stories because of the many times it recurs from Anderson on down is the looseness of morale, particularly in sex, which is shown. The novels of this

²⁹Benet, Stephen Vincent, "O'Brien's Choice", Saturday Review of Literature, July 8, 1939, p. 5.

time, many of them written by the same authors noted here, are the same. Beach has attempted to explain this preoccupation:

These writers, like powerful artists in all times, are concerned to render what we may call the very essence of human experience. And for this purpose they have need of characters and incidents that are perhaps more sensational than the average. The peculiarities of human nature are best exhibited in extreme cases. It is about vice and crime that moral problems cluster most thickly. Pedestrian virtue was always notoriously hard to make interesting in literature. Great fiction, great drama was always too strong meat for squeamish readers. They were as much disturbed with the grossness of Ben Jonson, Fielding and Sterne as they are with that of Hemingway and Steinbeck.³⁰

And further in the discussion he adds, "There may be some suggestion that (sexual) promiscuity is a natural accompaniment to economic disorganization, to extreme poverty, slum conditions whether in town or country."³¹

At any rate one great difference between the stories of the two periods is that of subject matter. And the difference in handling material, if the "stream-of-consciousness" method continues to be used, is also much changed. If this type continues to grow in favor, the time may come when Brander Matthews' statement that "as a short story need not be a love story, it is of no consequence at all whether they marry or die; but a short story in which nothing at all happens is an absolute impossibility"³² may be proved wrong. Saroyan's "stories" are close to such a category now; nothing much happens but a series of impressions are given. The future of the short story may lie there, or, as has

³⁰Beach, Joseph Warren, American Fiction, 1920-1940 (N. Y. 1941), p. 10.

³¹Ibid., p. 15.

³²Matthews, Brander, The Philosophy of the Short Story (London and N. Y. 1912), p. 35.

happened so often before, reaction may set in and the undisciplined, informal style of short story give way again to the more artistic plot-supreme type.

CONCLUSIONS

The short story is undergoing changes both in subject matter and style from its peak reached about 1880. If these trends continue, the form will be much different from what it was then. The following are basic differences noticed in the study made of the short story in 1875-1895 and in 1920-1940:

1. The 1920-1940 story is shorter.
2. There is more informality about the 1920-1940 story; it may be told in an off-hand, first person style while the older story was formal in the way the author presented it.
3. Plot and situation were the important things along with local color in 1875-1895; characters are the chief interest in the later period.
4. The earlier period had stories with a definite pattern, a plot, suspense and climax; the latter period is tending toward simplification, formlessness and lack of discipline.
5. In the earlier period much of the subject matter was not of America--foreign lands were often the appeal. In the latter nearly all of the material is American.
6. The earlier period emphasized local color; in the later it is only incidental.
7. The 1920-1940 stories are built around problems of race

and industrial civilization; the earlier stories were mainly of situation and happenings.

8. There is an autobiographical trend in the later short stories. Writers write from experience.

9. Where the earlier writers wrote of what characters said, the later ones write of what characters think.

The American short story seems headed one of two places. It can become a purely "stream-of-consciousness" type recording subjective impressions; or if reaction against this type sets in, the short story might go back to a form resembling that of 1875-1895 with the improvements of reality which later writers have added.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Acknowledgment is made to J. P. Callahan, professor of English, and H. W. Davis, head of the Department of English, for their aid and advice in preparing this study.

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