Part I

The Nineteenth Century

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The Emergence and Development of the American Short Story

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The short story is an American invention, and arguably the most important literary genre to have emerged in the United States. Before Washington Irving created the two masterpieces that may be said to have inaugurated this new literary form, "Rip Van Winkle" and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," there certainly were an abundance of prose forms that contained some of the elements that characterize the short story. Storytelling is, after all, one of the oldest human activities, and oral narratives, especially fairy tales and folk tales, have played a significant role in most cultures. Various other kinds of narratives also contributed to the nation's political and domestic life. For instance, the histories written during the early national period often provided strong character sketches as well as imaginative episodes designed to illuminate some moral virtue or quality. Some of these, perhaps most notably Parson Weems's famous story of the young George Washington admitting to chopping down his father's cherry tree, became enshrined in the cultural mythology of the United States. Fictional elements can also be found in the illustrative episodes and anecdotes of eighteenth-century sermons and in some of the moral and satiric essays that were popular during the Enlightenment, particularly the *bagatelles* of Ben Franklin. Indeed, it is tempting to see the best of Franklin's comic pieces, such as "The Speech of Miss Polly Baker," as proto–short stories. All of these works probably deserve some credit for contributing to the development of the short story, but they, like the self-contained episodes one sometimes finds in eighteenth-century novels, lack the development of theme and technique that we now think of as distinguishing this genre as a literary form. In these works, setting is rarely more than the listing of a place or type of scene; characterization consists largely of ascribing a few virtues or vices and perhaps a couple of physical details to the primary figures; plot development is generally either very straightforward or very clumsy, culminating in a conclusion that is usually either overtly moral or sentimental but occasionally comic. Almost no thought is given to the possibilities implicit in narrative point of view, and the style of most of the works that prefigure the true short story can be charitably described as artificial, wordy, and awkward.

Washington Irving changed all of that. The short story as Irving shaped it in the installments of *The Sketch Book* was a work rich in description of scenery and locale, with memorable characters and vivid situations rendered through a highly polished style that shifted easily through a variety of moods but seemed especially successful in its mastery of a new kind of comedy. *The Sketch Book* also gave American culture its first literary best-seller, a critical and commercial success so great that the new democracy finally had an answer to those critics who had emphasized its paucity of cultural achievement. In the January 1820 *Edinburgh Review*, critic Sydney Smith had been able to begin a list of insulting questions about the United States with the phrase, "who reads an American book?" Because of Irving's success, the answer soon became "almost everybody." Nevertheless, current scholarship fails to emphasize how original Washington Irving was in his invention of a new genre. Even in his own time, he was unfairly labeled as a mere imitator of Goldsmith and Addison, two writers whose graceful style certainly influenced him, or criticized for lifting his plots from German folk stories. Such criticism, however, fails to recognize the amount of inventiveness demonstrated in the masterpieces, "Rip Van Winkle" and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow." Although European folk stories may have provided him with some elements of plot, Irving was the first to bring the American landscape to life in works of fiction, giving the short story a specificity and definiteness of locale and ultimately making it the dominant form for expressions of literary regionalism in the United States. Since Irving, the short story has been the primary mode by which American authors define and express the values of a particular culture in a specific time and place. In their fidelity to the qualities of a certain place and their expressions of nostalgia for a simpler and easier past, these two great Knickerbocker tales created the literary mode that came to be called "local color" and dominated American short fiction for most of the nineteenth century.

Irving's achievement in giving a fictional reality to the American landscape is all the more remarkable considering that the bulk of *The Sketch Book* consists of travel writing about England, not the United States. The idea of representing place with meticulous care and sometimes even loving devotion marks both Irving's travel writing and his best short fiction. In his time, travel writers often explicitly expressed their belief in the theory of association, which proclaimed that natural scenes were inherently without meaning, and that only associations with historical or literary connections could provide real significance to the landscape. Irving's emphasis on setting was thus part of a conscious and largely successful effort to endow a portion of his native terrain, the Catskill Mountains, with the kind of value that association with powerful works of literature can provide (Bendixen 108–9). In the process, Irving certainly did a service to the tourist industry, which would use his fiction to market the region, but his placement of these vivid American stories in a book about England served other, less commercial purposes. The vitality of these American scenes provides an important counterpoint to the quieter, duller, more peaceful scenes of rural England that Irving likes to emphasize. Although he is often accused of being an anglophile, his Knickerbocker stories both claim a space for American scenes on the map of serious

literature and also emphasize the exceptional vigor and energy that mark democratic life. Indeed, his best fiction relies on a discovery and exploration of the special qualities that distinguish American life, demonstrating the capacity of the short story to move beyond the narrow moralizing that had characterized earlier attempts at prose fiction into a new kind of national myth making.

Irving freed American prose fiction from the didactic, from the need to preach a pointed moral, and endowed it with a rich playfulness that suggested new ways of achieving the kind of literary nationalism that Americans had been calling for since their revolution. Rip Van Winkle, Ichabod Crane, and Brom Bones are the first memorable characters in American fiction, and their adventures engage them directly, if comically, in a confrontation with fundamental questions about the meaning of identity in this new world. In the act of fleeing his nagging wife, Rip retreats into the countryside, into the bounties of nature where he can avoid the demands of women, work, and civilization, thus establishing the pattern that marks many important male characters in American fiction, and foreshadowing a range of figures that includes Huck Finn's lighting out for the territory and Hemingway's Nick Adams's complex engagement with the Big Two-Hearted River. During his famous nap of twenty years, Rip winds up sleeping through the entire American Revolution, and returns home to a town that has been transformed from a sleepy Dutch village into a busier, more active community engaged in arguments about a local election. Feeling out of place in this new democracy, Rip momentarily loses his sense of identity, but ultimately recovers it, or perhaps more accurately, recreates it by finding a role in this strange new world as a storyteller. Thus, Irving demonstrates how a new kind of highly developed short fiction can probe the complexities, both comic and tragic, entailed in citizenship in a new democratic society.

His engagement with issues of national identity, with the changing demands of a democratic society, with the possibilities entailed in a society marked by multiplicity and fluidity, and with the conflicting demands of agrarian versus commercial values also forms the foundation of "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow." As the sturdy Brom Bones competes with the ambitious schoolteacher, Ichabod Crane, for the love of Katrina Van Tassel, Irving emphasizes two underlying sets of values that are inherently in conflict. Brom Bones and the Van Tassels stand for an easy contentment based on a settled agricultural existence rooted in general prosperity and life in nature. Crane represents a set of values that are more abstract, more commercial, more ambitious, and ultimately more unnatural. Just as the virtues of the Van Tassels' agrarian way of life are summed up in the lengthy and lush description of their farm, the limitations of Crane are defined for us initially by the depiction of his small and shabby schoolhouse, which is shown clearly as a place to imprison young spirits rather than develop the intellect. The contrast between easy Dutch contentment and bustling New England ambition seems to reflect regional differences, but Irving's depiction of Crane's gluttonous lust for Katrina and the family land reveal broader concerns. Crane may be a schoolteacher from New England, but he fantasizes about becoming a land speculator who will convert the Van Tassel estate into cash to buy up the western

wilderness, which he then plans to transform through endless real estate schemes, and he will end up becoming the most dreaded of American creatures, a politician. In tracing the career of Ichabod Crane, Irving shows us a fluid society in which identity may be based more on aspiration and ambition (for good or bad) than on accidents of birth, and in which the development of a meaningful national identity will be based on the ways in which competing values are resolved. What is at stake in "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" and the best of Irving's stories is the future of America.

Irving employed a graceful style that seemed to refuse to take itself or anything too seriously while raising fundamental questions about the meaning of American democracy. His artistry rests on his understanding of the importance of narrative point of view and the value of adopting a specific narrative *persona*, whether that be Geoffrey Crayon, Gentleman, or Dietrich Knickerbocker, the sly chronicler of Dutch New York. He is almost certainly the first writer of short fiction to understand and to articulate the degree to which the manner of telling would always have to be at least as important as the subject matter of the story. In fact, one of his letters indicates that he was clearly a conscious artist who was able to articulate his achievement with rare precision:

> I fancy much of what I value myself upon in writing escapes the observation of the great mass of my readers, who are intent more upon the story than the way it is told. For my part, I consider a story merely as a frame on which to stretch my materials. It is the play of thought, and sentiment, and language; the weaving in character, lightly, yet expressively delineated; the familiar and faithful exhibition of scenes of common life; and the half-concealed vein of humour that is often playing through the whole – these are among what I aim at, and upon which I felicitate myself in proportion as I think I succeed. (*Letters to Brevoort* II. 185–6)

In the same letter, he goes on to argue that the long tale can get away with much dull writing because the author can count on plot and character to keep the reader turning the pages, but short fiction requires a continued commitment to artistry:

> The author must be continually piquant; woe to him if he makes an awkward sentence or writes a stupid page; the critics are sure to pounce upon it. Yet if he succeed, the very variety and piquancy of his writings – nay, their very brevity, make them frequently recurred to, and when the mere interest of the story is exhausted, he begins to get credit for his touches of pathos or humor; his points of wit or turns of language." (*Letters to Brevoort*. II. 187)

The short story as Irving fashioned it was clearly a work of conscious literary artistry with vivid characters, a carefully delineated setting, and a mastery of stylistic nuance, and it was also a form ideally suited for the exploration of the meaning of democratic life in the newly formed United States. Nevertheless, Irving's short stories certainly did not represent the final word in this new genre. In what remains one of the most perceptive studies of his contribution to the development of American writing, Fred

Lewis Pattee chastises Irving for a lack of masculine vigor and notes that the American short story would come to rely less on the detailed descriptive writing that Irving relished and more on dialogue and the dramatic presentation of incident.

The development of the short story was limited by one major fact: there really was almost no market for it that would enable a writer to win both a critical reputation and a significant livelihood, a fact that clearly struck the writers who tried to follow the path that Irving had opened. Irving's short stories were really not designed to stand alone as separate literary artifacts with an audience and market of their own; they were meant to be appreciated aesthetically and marketed financially as components of a larger work. Irving's strategy for *The Sketch Book* involved issuing a series of parts, each of which would offer a blend of fiction and familiar essays, balancing sentiment and comedy. The comedy of the two Knickerbocker tales serves to balance and play off the sentiment of the other selections, sometimes in intriguing ways. Thus, the comic story of a man fleeing his nagging wife, "Rip Van Winkle," is placed directly next to a sentimental piece, "The Wife," which assures the reader that a loyal and loving wife is the most precious thing any man can possess. These stories were meant to exist within a larger context established by other works, not as stand-alone pieces, and to be marketed as contributions to a work that relied on a variety of forms and moods. Irving attempted to bring out a collection of short stories without any of the supporting apparatus provided by familiar essays and travel writing with *Tales of a Traveler* (1824), which contains two of his most important stories, "The Adventure of the German Student" and "The Devil and Tom Walker," but critics responded harshly. After the critical failure of that book, most of Irving's literary energy went to the production of works of creative non-fiction, including travel books, histories, and immensely popular biographies of Christopher Columbus and George Washington. Although almost completely neglected by critics and scholars, *The Alhambra* (1832), which is generally described as a Spanish Sketch Book, contains some of his finest writing.

Irving's success certainly encouraged other Americans to explore the possibilities of short fiction, and some of these works from the 1820s and 1830s probably merit more consideration from scholars. Perhaps the most notable attempt to build on Irving's skillful use of the supernatural for national myth making may be found in the three stories William Austin wrote about "Peter Rugg, the Missing Man" (1824–6). Austin places the old Flying Dutchman story into a new American context which vividly portrays the American landscape as a place in which one can become irretrievably lost. James Kirke Paulding, with whom Irving had collaborated on the *Salmagundi* papers (1807–8), attempted to work in virtually every genre available and managed to produce some significant pieces of short fiction, particularly his attempt to create a specifically American mythology in *The Book of St. Nicholas* (1836) and his remarkable collection of democratic fairy tales for children, *A Gift from Fairy Land* (1837). Many of his most interesting stories remained uncollected during his lifetime and were not brought together into book form until his son, William I. Paulding, edited *A Book of Vagaries* (1867). Some of William Cullen Bryant's short stories also

deserve attention, especially his comic treatment of an encounter with the wilderness and Native Americans in "The Indian Spring" (1828). Several women writers also produced intriguing short stories that deal specifically with the position of women in a democratic society, perhaps most notably Catherine Sedgwick's "Cacoethes Scribendi" (1830), Eliza Leslie's "Mrs. Washington Potts" (1832), and the tales Lydia Maria Child eventually collected in her volume, *Fact and Fiction* (1846). Other important fiction by both men and women may still remain buried in the pages of early American periodicals.

These writers might have had more success with the short story if there had been a market that made such writing profitable. The lack of an international copyright agreement made it more profitable for American printers to pirate best-selling British writers than to take a chance on an unknown American author who expected to be paid for his or her work. The short story as a marketable commodity has always depended on the availability of both periodical and book publication, and it took the United States a long time to develop viable magazines with an interest in literature. The history of American publishing in the early nineteenth century is filled with failed attempts to establish significant literary magazines, and the relatively small number that survived for a time rarely paid very well. Furthermore, book publishers were generally reluctant to produce collections of stories, deeming them inherently unprofitable. Both Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne attempted to launch their literary careers with collections of short stories, but had great difficulty in finding publishers for their first projected books. The stories that were to comprise Poe's *Tales of the Folio Club* and Hawthorne's *Provincial Tales* and *The Story-Teller* were instead scattered in various publications and not collected until later and then in very different arrangements from the authors' original plans. Hawthorne's careful plans for his first volumes were discarded and the individual stories were simply lifted out of context and published in magazines or *The Token*, one of the gift-books that publishers discovered they could sell annually. The gift-books provided one of the few outlets available to writers of short stories, but they paid poorly and usually published anonymously, which meant that they also added little to a young writer's reputation. Moreover, these very pretty volumes appeared designed as decorative gifts that were suitable for gracing a parlor table; there was little in their appearance to suggest they contained literary works meant to be taken seriously. Nevertheless, these annuals published a number of writers whose importance is now firmly established, and *The Token* had the distinction of providing the first home for many of Hawthorne's most powerful stories.

If Irving merits credit as the inventor of the American story, then Hawthorne and Poe surely deserve praise for solidifying its status as a work of art. They grounded the short story more firmly in a clear commitment to narrative structure and plot, replacing Irving's genial rambling and lengthy descriptions with a firm sense of architectural form. Furthermore, they added a startling psychological depth to the development of character, employing a treatment of aberrational psychology in ways that transformed the Gothic mode into an enduring part of the American short story tradition.

They also expanded the range of subject matter available to short story treatment by introducing new forms and genres. As a short story writer, Hawthorne's current reputation rests almost entirely on the great historical tales of the New England Puritans that he produced in the 1830s at the start of his long literary career, but these represent only a relatively small part of his work in short fiction. The achievement of these historical tales is, of course, enormous. At a time when the literary treatment of American history was inclined largely to patriotic fervor, Hawthorne daringly introduced stories of guilt, repression, cruelty, and injustice and detailed the psychological turmoil that ensued. His most famous story, "Young Goodman Brown" (1835), begins with a young man leaving his wife to go into the forest – basically the same starting point as Irving's "Rip Van Winkle." Yet, by the time Brown wakes up from the nightmare he has experienced in the moral wilderness that he has entered, Hawthorne has taken us into a symbolic realm that challenges almost all the conventional boundaries: we have been moved from the world of historical fact into a psychological landscape filled with surrealistic imagery that compels us to question the most fundamental issues of both ontology and epistemology. The most powerful of the great historical tales – "Roger Malvin's Burial" (1832), "The Gentle Boy" (1832), "My Kinsman, Major Molineaux" (1832) – are deeply unsettling, because they insist on raising troubling questions about both the American past and the human psyche. Hawthorne's fascination with how individuals perceive a complex reality – with how perception can create reality – is also the focus of his short story masterpiece, "The Minister's Black Veil" (1836), and an important element in his finest novel, *The Scarlet Letter* (1850).

Yet, in his own time, Hawthorne was best known and most widely praised as the writer of genial sketches and gentle allegories. In fact, he was most often compared to the British essayist, Charles Lamb, and sometimes even called the American Elia. We have lost the taste for works like "Little Annie's Rambles" (1835), "A Rill from the Town-Pump" (1835), and "Sights from a Steeple" (1831), but the contemporary reviews suggest that these works defined Hawthorne for much of his own audience. In fact, he was a writer who experimented with a wide variety of forms and themes throughout his career. He always maintained an interest in the fictional possibilities of allegory and in the 1840s probably even considered creating a series of parables to be called "Allegories of the Heart." This allegorical impulse resulted in numerous works, including his brilliant satire of his own times, "The Celestial Rail-road" (1843). In the 1840s, Hawthorne also helped to create the genre now known as science fiction. He produced stories about the end of the world, such as "The New Adam and Eve" (1843) and "Earth's Holocaust" (1844), and a number of tales focusing on scientists who end up destroying those they love, most notably "The Birth-mark" (1843) and "Rappaccini's Daughter" (1844). These works reflect the author's distrust of disembodied thought and his rejection of the nineteenth century's commitment to technology and belief in unlimited progress. His tales of scientists are often linked to his study of artists, particularly in "The Artist of the Beautiful" (1844), but a focus on the power and limitations of the artist in a materialistic world shapes his entire

career. Hawthorne was also one of the first major American authors to devote himself to the creation of stories expressly designed for children. The skillful refashioning of Greek myths for children in *A Wonder-Book for Girls and Boys* (1851) and *Tanglewood Tales* (1853) are significant achievements in this mode. In fact, Hawthorne's "The Golden Touch" was responsible for the version of the King Midas story in which Midas mistakenly turns his own daughter into gold; in earlier versions, the King's repentance stemmed solely from his inability to eat normal food. He also produced a series of historical stories for children, *The Whole History of Grandfather's Chair* (1820–41), that traced the key events of New England history up to the time of the American Revolution.

The only writer who did as much to make the American romantic tale into a significant literary achievement was Edgar Allan Poe, who began by writing satires and hoaxes and ended up transforming the tale of terror into a serious literary form and inventing the detective story. In his critical writings, Poe emphasized the importance of a single effect to which every element of the short story must contribute. He also continually affirmed the artistic superiority of works that were long enough for full development and short enough to be read in a single sitting, and was one of the very few critical voices in the nineteenth century to argue that the tale was therefore superior to the novel. Poe was the master of a wide range of fictional forms. Although his comic pieces rarely receive the same critical attention as his darker, more pessimistic works, there is no better way to discover the conventions of the nineteenth-century Gothic tale than his brilliant parody, "How to Write a Blackwood's Article" (1838) and its accompanying example, "A Predicament" (1838). He also created some of our earliest stories of science fiction with "The Balloon-Hoax" (1844) and "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar" (1845). The diversity of Poe's achievement is perhaps best represented by his ability to both invent the detective story, which depends upon a faith in analytic reasoning and the capacity of the rational mind to detect the perpetrators of crime and reestablish justice and order, and also become the great acknowledged master of the horror tale, which seems to rely on opposing values, on a fascination with the irrational and the aberrational, with cruelty and pain and suffering, and with bizarre acts of violent revenge. The best of the works that he called his "tales of ratiocination" – "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841), "The Gold Bug" (1843), and "The Purloined Letter" (1845) – established most of the conventions on which detective fiction still rests, including the narrative strategies for presenting an extraordinarily penetrating mind which is able to perceive and finally explain the truth that lies hidden within a great mystery that puzzles everyone else.

If the detective stories seem to affirm the power of human reason and an underlying faith in justice, Poe's horror tales often seem founded on acts of senseless violence which almost always turn out to be self-destructive, and on a very different view of human nature. In "The Black Cat" (1843), the narrator blames his own actions on the "spirit of PERVERSENESS," which he insists is "one of the primitive impulses of the human heart" and describes as "an unfathomable longing of the soul to vex itself – to offer violence to its own nature – to do wrong for wrong's sake" (Poe, *Tales* 599). Of

course, we must remember that axe murderers do not make reliable narrators. Poe's mad narrators never understand their own actions or the underlying causes of their strange compulsions, which usually include a need to verbally reenact their crimes by narrating them. Ultimately, the source of terror in Poe's greatest stories stems from the inability of their narrators to understand the worlds they inhabit and the reasons for their own actions. In these tales, it is the failure to understand the self that leads to acts of mutilation that divide the physical body and shatter the spiritual nature, or to characters being buried alive, which presents an almost perfect metaphor for the psychological idea of repression. In some of these tales, perhaps most notably "Ligeia" and "The Black Cat," the inability of the male narrator to accept the reality of sexuality and the female body seems to be the chief motivating factor. In almost all of Poe's major tales of horror, however, the single great metaphor is the divided self and the over-arching theme points to the inability of an individual to come to terms with a double or some figure that represents an aspect of the narrator's own personality. In "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839), "The Tell-Tale Heart" (1843), and "The Cask of Amontillado" (1846), the chief source of terror is ultimately the inability of the self to understand itself.

Poe brought a level of craftsmanship and psychological insight to the horror tale that exceeded anything that had been done before and most of what has been done since. In addition to his frequent use of unreliable and sometimes mad narrators, he brought a unity of tone, mood, and atmosphere to the development of American fiction. Although his critical writings emphasize the single effect to which everything in a short work must lead, he also recognized that strong writing would have what he (and his times) called "suggestiveness," a broad term implying that great works of art carry with them multiple layers of meanings that invite thought and analysis. In short, his works lend themselves to symbolic interpretation on multiple levels. The romantic tale, particularly as mastered by Hawthorne and Poe, heavily favors the use of symbolic language, but has very little interest in the accurate rendition of normal human speech; there is an artificial and sometimes heavily Latinate quality to both the narrative language and the treatment of dialogue. At this point, it is important to distinguish between the romantic tale and the realistic short story. Although some writers and critics use the terms "tale" and "story" indiscriminately, those who distinguish between the two view the story as chiefly concerned with the presentation of character, usually within a realistic context that is established by a reasonably accurate portrayal of a recognizable place in either the present or the recent past. In contrast, the tale suggests a focus on action, adventure, and plot; a bold development of larger than life characters who move through unusual or exotic landscapes that often seem to be symbolic projections of some psychological state; and a setting that usually shuns the here and now in favor of the distant past, foreign realms, natural scenes of awe-inspiring danger, or some world outside of normal time and space. Suggestions of the supernatural are often deeply interwoven into the basic texture of the romantic tale. These points of shared values should not obscure the very real differences among authors of romantic fiction; for instance, Hawthorne often indulges in

moralizing while Poe clearly rejects didacticism and Melville emphasizes a multiplicity of possible interpretation that seems to completely redefine the genre and expand the idea of moral interpretation.

Melville's experiments with short fiction did not attract much attention in his own time, but twentieth-century scholars established him as one of our finest, most subtle masters of short fiction. Of his short works, the most romantic in tone and texture is certainly the long story "Benito Cereno" (1856), with its portrayal of violent adventure and unending mystery, its heightened contrast of characters appearing to represent American innocence and European corruption, and its insistence on probing the issues of slavery and racism from multiple perspectives. On the other hand, Melville's most studied story, "Bartleby the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street" (1853), appears to be moving towards a kind of realism in its critique of the deadening effects of meaningless labor in a commercial society, but this story demands to be read and reread on multiple levels. "Bartleby" focuses on both its purported subject, a copyist who engages in a passive-aggressive rejection of trivial and debasing work, and its very unreliable narrator, an apparently genial man in flight from any confrontation with the reality he has helped to create. Both narrator and protagonist are isolated individuals who are marked by a failure of vision in a narrative filled with symbolism emphasizing the blank walls, spiritual hunger, and fragmentation of this alienating world. Like the best of Melville's short fiction, the story is complex, subtle, and even devious – at times giving the impression that its author is engaged in constructing an elaborate joke on a reading public incapable of appreciating real artistry. This devious complexity is clearest in the stunning sexual comedy that underlies some of Melville's other short stories, perhaps most notably "Cock a Doodle Doo!" (1853), "I and my Chimney" (1856), and "The Apple-Tree Table" (1856). In his best works, Melville insists on asking us to view the world on multiple levels, suggesting to us that the human experience is simultaneously a rich source of philosophical inquiry and a dirty joke.

The romantic tale continued to attract talented adherents even in the late 1850s, most notably Fitz-James O'Brien and Harriet Prescott Spofford. O'Brien's best tales remain surprisingly neglected by contemporary critics even though Jessica Amanda Salmonson provided important new revelations in her introduction to her 1988 edition of his stories, most notably the fact that he was gay. Read through the lens of queer theory, his finest stories take on new and intriguing dimensions. For example, his famous ghost story, "What Was It?" (1859), is about the threat posed by an invisible man in the bedroom. "The Diamond Lens" (1858), his best work of science fiction, focuses on a man unable to come to terms with sexuality, his own desires, and his own small perception of the world. His finest work of fiction, "The Lost Room" (1858), depicts a man who loses his place in the world, or more precisely, discovers that his room has disappeared after he has been told by a strange being that he lives in a "queer" house (Salmonson, I. 7). In short, O'Brien's best stories are built on anxieties and issues that would have a special resonance for homosexuals in a repressive society.

Harriet Prescott Spofford brought a feminine and sometime feminist dimension to the romantic tale with her best works of short fiction. She first gained attention with the publication of "In the Cellar" (1859), a lavishly detailed story of Parisian intrigue and one of our first important detective stories by an American woman. "Circumstance" (1860), her tale of a pioneer woman who keeps a menacing panther at bay by singing songs throughout a long night, drew immense attention and apparently even gave Emily Dickinson nightmares. Her long and difficult masterpiece, "The Amber Gods" (1860), offers one of the most remarkable and luxuriantly poetic monologues in American fiction and features a heroine whose self-indulgence seems to transcend even death. Her finest work of short fiction is probably "Her Story" (1872), which provides a treatment of madness and marriage that prefigures Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1891). During a long and prolific writing career that lasted almost until her death in 1921, Spofford found herself forced to surrender to the demands of the marketplace and shifted to realistic fiction, where she occasionally produced able work but never matched the distinction of her best romantic tales. Her early work represents the final flourish of New England romanticism and provides the most significant and most daring treatment of the devices of the romantic tale by an American woman writer.

Important new markets for American short stories appeared in the middle of the nineteenth century, most notably the advent in 1857 of the *Atlantic Monthly*, which included three stories in each of its early issues, attracted significant talent, and paid well. *Harper's Magazine*, which had been established in 1850, abandoned its initial practice of publishing mostly reprints of British material and began soliciting American writers. Although *Putnam's* (1853–7) did not last very long, other magazines soon provided a meaningful market for short fiction, including *The Galaxy* (1866–78), *Lippincott's Magazine* (1868–1915), and *Scribner's Monthly* (1870–81) and its successor, *The Century Magazine* (1881–1930). Unfortunately, book publishers continued to believe that collections of short stories were unmarketable, and a writer needed to earn a substantial reputation before publishers would risk bringing out a volume of short fiction. That changed in the 1880s, when Scribner's discovered that it could successfully market collections of short stories if they were focused on life in a specific region of the United States. The result was the wave of regionalist fiction known as the local color movement. Although publishers tended to favor collections of short stories that shared a common setting and sometimes a recurring cast of characters, American writers of short fiction finally had access to both strong periodical and book markets by the end of the nineteenth century.

The major shift in the development of the American short story during the last half of the nineteenth century was the rise of realism, which dominated American fiction for most of the period following the Civil War. Although it is possible to find many antebellum precursors and sources for the emergence of realism, at least two deserve special emphasis in any treatment of the short story: the Southwestern humorists who brought a fresh vitality to the comic story and the group of New England women writers who established the basic traits of the realistic short story. There are

multiple examples of pre-Civil War writers who fashioned short fiction out of regional material and the American frontier, including the western stories of James Hall, Timothy Flint, and William Joseph Snelling, but the Southwestern humorists had the most enduring impact. For most scholars, the classic example of the genre is Thomas Bangs Thorpe's "The Big Bear of Arkansas" (1841), but the works that established this important sub-genre of American fiction include Augustus Baldwin Longstreet's *Georgia Scenes* (1835), Johnson Jones Hooper's *Some Adventures of Captain Simon Suggs* (1845), Joseph Baldwin's *Flush Times of Alabama and Mississippi* (1853), and George Washington Harris's *Sut Lovingood's Yarns Spun by a "Nat'ral Born Durn'd Fool"* (1867). While mainstream authors tended to use a highly artificial and ornate literary language, these writers embraced the American vernacular and pioneered the development of American dialect in short fiction. They offered tall tales of tricksters and conmen, boastful frontiersmen and prodigious hunters, brave figures who define themselves and measure themselves against the vast and magnificent American wilderness. The worst of these tales – the anecdotes about Mike Fink, a brawling bully who appears in some of the stories about Davy Crockett – are marred by crude humor, physical cruelty, bad practical jokes, and blatant racism. The best of them offer brilliant accounts of class conflicts usually derived from the contrast between a highly educated and somewhat pompous narrator from the cities of the east and the more vibrant, more vivid speech of a figure who lives the most natural of lives on what was then the American frontier. Although these stories were largely considered subliterary in their own time, scholars have recognized their influence on writers as important as Mark Twain and William Faulkner. In their insistence on honestly confronting the harsh realities of life and their affirmation of a narrative language that affirms the plain, honest, sometimes earthy speech of simple people, these works also opened paths that would be crucial to the development of realism.

In sharp contrast to the Southwestern humorists, whose works often rely on the portrayal of male violence, are the northeastern women writers who pioneered a different kind of realism in their stories. Although she is best known for her abolitionist novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), Harriet Beecher Stowe also deserves credit for developing the kind of realistic story of New England village life that we now know mostly through the works of Mary E. Wilkins Freeman and Sarah Orne Jewett. The best of Stowe's short works were collected in *The Mayflower* (1843, rev. 1855), *Oldtown Folks* (1869), and *Sam Lawson's Old Town Fireside Tales* (1871), and represent the beginnings of a tradition of realism which recognized the domestic life of ordinary citizens as worthy of literary treatment. Stowe emphasizes domestic spaces, kitchens and firesides, as sites for both storytelling and the dramas of daily life. She focuses primarily on the study of character and the exploration of the normal but sometimes complex relationships between men and women within a social community. Her writing clearly values the ordinary speech of average individuals and attempts to represent it with accuracy and precision as they struggle to express their aspirations and frustrations. As Rose Terry Cooke demonstrated in the more than 200 stories she wrote throughout her long career, this new realistic mode was equally effective in the comic

deflation of pretense and the depiction of the quiet tragedies of repressed lives. In her stories about Polly Mariner, an independent single woman, Cooke helped make the "spinster" into one of the mainstays of the New England feminist tradition. Her bold treatment of bad marriages and her critique of the repression of women within the Calvinistic tradition of New England add force to many of her best works, particularly her grim masterpiece, "Too Late" (1875). Elizabeth Stuart Phelps Ward also helped to introduce a feminist literary tradition in some of her short fiction, the best of which appears in *Men, Women, and Ghosts* (1879) and *Sealed Orders* (1880), but her major contribution is the creation of a social fiction that seeks both compassion and justice for the working poor. The most powerful of the new realistic stories about poverty is almost certainly "Life in the Iron Mills" (1861) by Rebecca Harding Davis, who went on to produce other important pieces of realistic fiction, some of which were eventually collected in *Silhouettes of American Life* (1892).

Women writers played a decisive role in the establishment of realism after the Civil War and in making realism into the dominant literary mode for most (but certainly not all) major American women writers. This is partly because realism tends to be more interested in the dynamics of gender relationships and social relationships within specific kinds of communities than some forms of romantic fiction, which may focus on individuals confronting a symbolic landscape or deal with situations in which women play relatively minor roles, sometimes serving largely as moral touchstones by which one measures the virtues or failings of a central male figure. Women tend to play more substantial roles in realistic works of fiction, including those written by male writers. For instance, whenever Henry James attempted to define the special nature of American life, he almost always found himself writing explicitly about women protagonists and their relationships with men. A number of now neglected male writers also helped to institute realism as the dominant literary mode of the last four decades of the nineteenth century. Thomas Bailey Aldrich, who was one of the most admired writers of his time, made the surprise ending into an important device for short story writers with his epistolary masterpiece, "Marjorie Daw" (1873), and he produced other effective pieces, most of which appear in the collections *Marjorie Daw and Other People* (1873) and *Two Bites at a Cherry* (1894). Frank Stockton won fame with his puzzle story, "The Lady or the Tiger" (1882), a work that raises complex questions about both the reality and the perception of women; the comic fables that appeared in his *The Bee Man of Orn* (1887) also once attracted a great deal of attention. Of the early writers of realism, none attracted more initial acclaim than Bret Harte with his stories of life in the California mining towns. Although his works can now seem surprisingly sentimental and even conventional, his continuous satire of moral pretense and his apparent fascination with disreputable characters were once considered daring.

The major writers of American realism – William Dean Howells, Henry James, and Mark Twain – are best known for their novels, but all produced a significant number of short stories. Although contemporary polls often ranked him as the most important American writer of his time, Howells's great importance now appears to lie primarily in his work as an editor and as an advocate for realism. Of his many

stories, the only one now anthologized is "Editha" (1907), which is both an anti-war story and an attack on the romantic imagination that glorifies warfare. Twain's best-known short works are really comic sketches that were heavily influenced by the Southwestern humorists, particularly the work that first gave him a national reputation, "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County" (1865). Although his imagination was at its very best when it had the space provided by the novel or the novella (which he called the "beautiful and blest nouvelle"), Henry James made several significant contributions to the American short story. He produced many thought provoking stories about artists and the creation of art, thus endowing short fiction with a new kind of critical self-consciousness, a new kind of self-referential capacity for aesthetic examination. James also revived the Gothic, transforming it into what Leon Edel has called the "ghostly tale," a work that relies less on the trappings of supernatural literature and more on a full exploitation of its psychological possibilities. Finally, in his last phase, he produced works like "The Beast in the Jungle" (1903), which transform realism into a densely psychological form of impressionism that ultimately led naturally to the stream of consciousness and stylistic experimentation central to high modernism. James was among the most influential writers of his time, not only on the modernists who followed him, but on a group of women writers who began their literary careers with stories highly imitative of his work, most notably Edith Wharton and Willa Cather.

A commitment to realism transformed the American short story, making its primary subject life in the here and now and casting away romanticism's reliance on a distant past and exotic setting. While a typical romantic story might involve a young man's adventure in the wilderness or immersion in some fundamentally symbolic landscape, realism was more concerned with the complex relationships of individuals with each other in a social setting. In most works of realism, the primary forms of violence described are more likely to be psychological than physical. While the romantic tale prefers to emphasize action and symbolism and shows little concern with the accurate rendition of speech, realism is not only suspicious of highly artificial forms of speech and inflated language, but it generally relies on a style that is relatively simple and clear, emphasizing the accurate portrayal of common speech in moments of dialogue and sometimes even insisting on the importance of capturing a specific dialect with meticulous care. This preference for the plain and simple may reflect a distrust of the abstract rhetoric that glorified the mass slaughter of the Civil War, but it also entails a new fascination with the ways in which human beings communicate or fail to communicate. Realism tends to rely less on the big symbols that often shape romantic fiction and more on the creation of complex characters who make difficult choices in complicated situations. In general, the depiction of setting either defines the choices a character has made or the limited choices available to that individual. The criticism of the time often cites the creation of memorable and vivid characters as the distinguishing quality of great literature; realism's great art form is a kind of portraiture that relies on complex methods of characterization that recognize the importance of both psychological and social realities.

Realism also values specificity and verisimilitude, particularly in its commitment to capturing the special qualities of particular places. Realists believe that who we are is shaped partly by where we come from, and that geography is thus intimately connected to the development of character. In some sense, this emphasis on regionalism is realism's response to the acute sense of fragmentation and dislocation that followed the Civil War.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the United States of America occupied a huge part of an entire continent, and its citizens had a natural curiosity about those who lived in other places, other regions. In showing readers how the inhabitants of the different parts of the country talked, dressed, and acted, realism performed important cultural work. While presenting the distinctive qualities of particular places and different cultures, realist writers usually affirmed the common humanity that united the citizens of the various regions of a vast nation. In this respect, realism was fundamentally optimistic in its belief that an honest confrontation with difference will usually lead towards greater understanding and tolerance.

It is possible to find realistic stories that deal with almost every part of the United States. New England was particularly well served by the women writers mentioned earlier who helped to create realism and later by Mary E. Wilkins Freeman and Sarah Orne Jewett. The West had Bret Harte and Mark Twain, and eventually Owen Wister. The Midwest was represented in literature by Edward Eggleston, E. W. Howe, and Hamlin Garland, all of whom fashioned a specific kind of literary landscape that would be reshaped into the modern fiction of Sherwood Anderson and Sinclair Lewis. The South had Mary Noailles Murfree, Thomas Nelson Page, James Lane Allan, Joel Chandler Harris, and Charles Chesnutt (whose short stories provided the most significant representation of African American experience of his time). Louisiana produced its own bounty of distinguished writing with masterful short stories by George Washington Cable, Grace King, Kate Chopin, and Alice Dunbar-Nelson. There were also writers who traveled to and wrote about a wide variety of regions and places, such as Constance Fenimore Woolson, who produced significant collections of stories about the Great Lakes region, the American South, and Italy.

As noted earlier, gender roles are often foregrounded as a specific subject of inquiry in works of realism. By the final decade of the nineteenth century, it is possible to see the emergence of literary feminism as one of the major achievements of this literary tradition. The aspirations of women received special attention in the stories of Sarah Orne Jewett, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, Kate Chopin, Grace King, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and numerous other writers of the time. Although these writers shared a concern with depicting the way women succeed or fail in a world that is largely controlled by men, it is important to recognize the variety of forms that this literary feminism can take. Jewett frequently focuses on the healing qualities that can be found in a community of women while Freeman's most famous stories usually deal with an unmarried woman who tries to stake out a meaningful independent existence on her own terms. Both Chopin and King write about Louisiana, but they have very different views of the role of female desire and the

possibility for fulfillment that can be found in marriage. Gilman devoted herself to the production of clearly feminist fiction, but her most effective stories are probably her early tales of the supernatural, particularly "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1891). In demonstrating the multiple ways in which the realistic short story could explore the situation of women, these authors opened up a path that would be followed by Edith Wharton, Mary Austin, Anzia Yezierska, Willa Cather, Ellen Glasgow, Katherine Anne Porter, and others.

The final decade of the nineteenth century also saw the development of a new kind of fiction, which we now call naturalism. Some critics seem to portray naturalism as simply realism with a rougher view of the world, but this ignores the very real differences between the two literary movements. Naturalism is best understood as a literary response to the ideas of scientific determinism, to the belief that we are victims of forces, both external and internal, that we cannot control and perhaps cannot even understand. As such, it is fundamentally opposed to realism's focus on complex choices made by complex individuals. In fact, naturalism rarely views human beings as complex at all; instead, it sees and portrays people in fairly generic terms, usually as victims. The naturalist sometimes does not even provide a name for his main character, and often relies largely on animal and/or machine imagery to describe human behavior. Works of naturalistic fiction often devote more time and energy to the description of setting, which often embodies the forces operating on characters, than to characterization. These stories frequently plunge rather crude characters into violent situations, testing moments in which the human pretense to superiority over other creatures is exposed as a sham. For naturalists, the world is a violent and dangerous place and the best that a protagonist can achieve is a greater insight into his own limitations. Although naturalists tend to emphasize the importance of their own "honest" vision of the world over the niceties of literary style, naturalism produced a remarkable number of brilliant short stories, including Stephen Crane's "The Open Boat" (1897), Frank Norris's "A Deal in Wheat" (1902), and Jack London's "To Build a Fire" (1908). The influence of naturalism can also be seen in the harsh depictions of Midwestern life in the stories of Hamlin Garland and in the Civil War stories and horror stories of Ambrose Bierce. As a literary movement, naturalism produced a number of powerful works and raised a number of crucial questions: Are human beings more than animals or machines, and what do we have to do to remain or become complete human beings in a dehumanizing world? While naturalism as a literary movement flourished for a relatively short time, its influence on the writers of the twentieth century was enormous.

By the start of the twentieth century, the American short story was clearly established as a vital and vibrant genre with a wide readership. Strong periodical and book markets offered aspiring writers the prospect of both significant pay and critical recognition. In the early decades of the century, the short story would become an important form for the development of a significant multicultural literature and for a remarkably wide range of literary experiments. Thus, within a hundred years of its invention, the American short story had established itself as a highly flexible, diverse,

and enduring form that could represent and explore the various phases of democratic life in the United States.

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