



DISCOVERING GENRE:

Short Story

Edited by

MARY C. BEARDSLEY



Prestwick House

P.O. BOX 658 CLAYTON, DELAWARE 19938



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In this book, you will study *Short Story* by looking at the author's style. After all, it is the author's masterful use of figurative language, characterization, tone, mood, and plot development in a compressed format that makes a short story successful.



I N T R O D U C T I O N

THE ART OF STORYTELLING, contriving and writing a short story, requires a great many skills beyond simply developing a plot. Choosing the appropriate details; creating a tone that contributes to the conflict, plot, and theme; developing believable characters within a restricted time period; and establishing a realistic setting all rely on the writer's craft.

Short stories are different from novels in more ways than length. Writing an effective and interesting short story is an art that involves careful consideration of characters, plot, setting, theme, and conflict. Of course, these are all elements of fiction, regardless of genre, but the short story writer intertwines them gracefully to spin a compact, yet complete, tale.

Take characters, for instance. In a novel, the author has space and time to develop a character thoroughly. The author usually employs physical description as well as other means of character development. In a short story, since space is limited, you may see significantly less description and much more character action, reaction, and dialogue per page than you would in a novel. It takes skill, to define a character with inference—to set each character in a situation that both advances the plot and reveals personality without digressing on a tangent or adding misfit information.

The plot of a short story needs to be especially economical without omitting the details the reader needs to understand the conflict. The novel writer has hundreds of pages to unfurl the story, but the short story writer has merely a fraction of that time and space with which to mold the elements of fiction into a worthwhile, complete, and appealing tale. ☺



An Occurrence *at* Owl Creek Bridge

A M B R O S E B I E R C E

I

A MAN STOOD UPON A RAILROAD BRIDGE in northern Alabama, looking down into the swift water twenty feet below. The man's hands were behind his back, the wrists bound with a cord. A rope closely encircled his neck. It was attached to a stout cross-timber above his head and the slack fell to the level of his knees. Some loose boards laid upon the ties supporting the rails of the railway supplied a footing for him and his executioners—two private soldiers of the Federal army, directed by a sergeant who in civil life may have been a deputy sheriff. At a short remove upon the same temporary platform was an officer in the uniform of his rank, armed. He was a captain. A sentinel at each end of the bridge stood with his rifle in the position known as "support," that is to say, vertical in front of the left shoulder, the hammer resting on the forearm thrown straight across the chest—a formal and unnatural position, enforcing an erect carriage of the body. It did not appear to be the duty of these two men to know what was occurring at the center of the bridge; they merely blockaded the two ends of the foot planking that traversed it.

Beyond one of the sentinels nobody was in sight; the railroad ran straight away into a forest for a hundred yards, then, curving, was lost to view. Doubtless there was an outpost farther along. The other bank of the stream was open ground—a gentle slope topped with a stockade of vertical tree trunks, loopholed for rifles, with a single embrasure through which protruded the muzzle of a brass cannon commanding the bridge. Midway up the slope between the bridge and fort were the spectators—a single company of infantry in line, at "parade rest," the butts of their rifles on the ground, the barrels inclining slightly backward against the right shoulder, the hands

Passage 2

As these thoughts, which have here to be set down in words, were flashed into the doomed man's brain rather than evolved from it the captain nodded to the sergeant. (Pg. 7)

**Passage 3**

His neck ached horribly; his brain was on fire, his heart, which had been fluttering faintly, gave a great leap, trying to force itself out at his mouth. (Pg. 9)

- 6a. **Describe the tone, or emotional quality, of *Passage 1*.**
- 6b. **For *Passage 2*, comment on Bierce's description of the man's thoughts. How does the wording of this sentence change the reader's understanding of the man's thought process?**
- 6c. **For *Passage 2*, support the assertion that Bierce chose his words with painstaking accuracy. Why is the word choice in this sentence particularly effective? Which literary device (e.g., metaphor, assonance, repetition) does Bierce use?**
- 6d. **Discuss Bierce's wording and literary devices in *Passage 3*. What effect do these devices produce? For example, do they establish mood or tone? Do they further develop a character or the setting? Do they influence the reader's feelings about the character?**
- 7** **Describe how the point of view and tone change throughout the story.**



Questions

Rappaccini's Daughter

- 1** What aspects of this story justify its inclusion as a story of suspense?
- 2** The story takes on believability because of Beatrice's character. Why does the reader accept Beatrice despite her fantastic quality?
- 3** Hawthorne's works often contain symbolism and vivid imagery. Analyze the following symbols and images, and explain their significance in "Rappaccini's Daughter."
 - 3a. **Light and dark imagery:** where is light, where is darkness, and what does each represent? What is accomplished by contrasting the two?
 - 3b. **Gems:**
 - 3c. **The garden:**
 - 3d. **Colors — gold, silver, purple, and black (the presence of all colors):**
- 4** In "Rappaccini's Daughter," Hawthorne employs paradoxes to build suspense and develop conflict—both internal and external. Name two paradoxical relationships in the story, and explain the suspense they create and/or the conflicts they foster.
- 5** Hawthorne includes many allusions to communicate ideas, images, and impressions without using extensive description. Explain the following allusions, making sure that you identify their meaning in this story:

"The young stranger, who was not unstudied in the great poem of his country, recollected that one of the ancestors of this family, and perhaps an occupant of this very mansion, had been pictured by Dante as a partaker of the immortal agonies of his Inferno." (Pg. 23)