

## SHORT STORY, BEGINNINGS TO 1900

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In an era when most American literature came from the North, the South distinguished itself most notably in the short story, producing two of its foremost authorities in Edgar Allan Poe and Mark Twain, as well as one of its best-known characters in Uncle Remus. Through the short story, furthermore, southerners led in the development of two important American genres: Southwestern humor and local color. The hundreds of stories in this rich tradition cover a range of characters and landscapes, from madmen ensconced in gothic mansions to saucy backwoodsmen romping over the frontier, and the best early southern stories share a brilliance of form and style.

The history of the short story in the South goes back to two gifted raconteurs of colonial Virginia, Captain John Smith and William Byrd II. Each, though writing lengthy and ostensibly nonfiction narratives, introduced characteristics that would later distinguish southern short fiction. In *The Generall Historie of Virginia, New England, and the Summer Isles* (1624), Smith gave America one of its best-known stories, as well as its first tall tale. Here, in his report of fighting off two hundred Indians while using one as a shield and of being saved by Pocahontas moments before his execution, are the deadpan narration, hyperbole, frontier boast, and climactic conclusion that will appear in Old Southwestern stories in the 1800s. Byrd likewise presaged this genre in *The History of the Dividing Line* (written c. 1728), which exploits the comic effect of a sophisticated narrator drolly recounting the exploits of frontier rustics. By writing in distinctive styles that threaten to take over their narratives, Smith and Byrd set the stage for later southern writers.

Before 1800, American magazines published some four or five hundred short fictional works, few of which bear any obvious southern stamp. The modern short story, however, did not take form until the 1830s, when an explosion of periodicals provided a venue, an audience, and an income for writers of short fiction. Foremost among these writers was Poe, who, through fiction and criticism in publications such as Richmond's *Southern Literary Messenger*, did perhaps more than any other writer to shape the modern short story. Like his fellow Virginians Smith and Byrd, Poe subordinated substance to form, viewing the short story in the same way he saw the poem—as a work of art to be experienced and appreciated. In his most important critical statement on the subject, an 1842 review of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*, Poe places the short story, which he calls the "tale," behind only the short poem as the form suitable for literary genius and argues that the tale writer should use words economically and deliberately to create an "effect." Antithetical as it was to the didactic, digressive fiction of his era, Poe's definition influenced later writers and critics.

Employing these principles, Poe produced several of the world's finest short stories, including the gothic tales "Ligeia" (1838) and "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839). A perfect illustration of his method can be found in the latter, in which Poe constructs his effect through descriptions of a dark tarn, the house's "barely perceptible fissure," and Usher's pallid face and disquieting art. Poe's other major contribution to the short story shows the same attention to method. In "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841) and his other "tales of ratiocination,"

regarded as the first detective stories, the effect is not emotional but intellectual, coming in the form of a solution to a puzzle. Beneath the sparkling veneer of Poe's well-made fiction lies an exploration of the human mind, often conveyed through symbolism and surreal imagery. "William Wilson" (1839) and "The Purloined Letter" (1845), for example, contain *doppelgangers* representing parts of the mind, and "The Tell-Tale Heart" (1843) and "The Black Cat" (1843) dramatize a self-destructive impulse that Poe called "The Imp of the Perverse." Indeed, because Poe's method is to portray symbolic characters acting out abstract desires on a mental landscape, few of his tales bear any outward signs of their southern authorship. An exception is "The Gold-Bug" (1843), which features a South Carolina setting, a quondam aristocrat, and a dialect-speaking former slave named Jupiter. Even this overtly southern story, however, does little to sketch regional characters or customs: Jupiter is a caricature, and the isolated, desolate Sullivan's Island is no more southern-at least in social terms-than the fantastic setting of "The Pit and the Pendulum" (1843).

Although known primarily for his novels, South Carolinian William Gilmore Simms published some eighty stories and sketches in collections and magazines such as the *Southern Literary Messenger*. In his major collection, *The Wigwam and the Cabin* (1845/1846), he sometimes merely transplants drawing-room characters to the southern frontier. In "Grayling; or, 'Murder Will Out,'" however, Simms showed that he could write an original, unified short story. Indeed, Poe called it the best ghost story by an American, perhaps because it embodies his own principles. In this tale of a young man who tracks down a murderer with the help of the victim's ghost, Simms avoids digressions and uses several details—a mysterious stranger, a secluded swamp, an ambiguous vision—to create an eerie effect. In the vein of Poe's tales of ratiocination, a detective like figure solves the mystery with psychology and reason. Later, Simms made his most important contribution to the form with "How Sharp Snaffles Got His Capital and Wife" (1870), a humorous tale highly regarded for its use of dialect.

While Poe and Simms were impressing readers with horror and intellectual satisfaction, writers on the southern frontier were producing stories with a different, but no less meticulously constructed effect—humor—for publications such as New York's *Spirit of the Times*. In "The Horse-Swap," one of the stories in *Georgia Scenes* (1835), Augustus Baldwin Longstreet draws the character Yallow Blossom as a boastful con man until the end, when the reader learns that the con man has been conned. The engaging style of Old Southwestern humor comes largely from the storyteller's dialect and hyperbole, often recorded by a civilized outsider like Byrd's persona in *The History of the Dividing Line*. Thus, as in Smith's and Byrd's narratives, manner is as important as matter—or, as Louisiana writer Thomas Bangs Thorpe explains in "The Big Bear of Arkansas" (1841), the storyteller's style is "so singular, that half of his story consisted in his excellent way of telling it."

Style takes precedence in the work of the next great southern storyteller, Missourian Mark Twain, who explains in "How to Tell a Story" (1897) that the "humorous story depends for its effect upon the *manner* of the telling." In early stories, such as those in *Roughing It* (1872), Twain borrows liberally from his predecessors. His most famous story, "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County" (1865), features an oral storyteller, colorful expressions, and a final, charged effect. A transitional figure, Twain took the short story in new directions without losing his sense of style, using it to draw realistic portraits of life as it was lived in the South and the

West. In "The Private History of a Campaign That Failed" (1885), set in Missouri at the dawn of the Civil War, he presents a parade of colorful characters, a smattering of dialect, even a reference to local food. More than a romp through the antebellum South, the story also explores the war's impact on the region, as when Twain describes a tragic incident that deprives young Confederate soldiers of their romantic delusions. Although "The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg" (1900) is not tied to a specific region, its self-righteous, back-biting residents of a small town resemble characters in his regional novels.

In his habit of spinning exotic fiction out of local eccentricities, Twain resembles other writers of the 1870s and 1880s. When *Scribner's Monthly* and other northern magazines began publishing short stories in this new genre called local color, the leading writers included southerners such as Louisiana's Grace King and Tennessee's Mary Noailles Murfree (whose pen name was Charles Egbert Craddock). Indeed, the exotic locales, dialects, and characters of regions such as New Orleans and Appalachia again allowed some southerners to tell colorful stories while still largely ignoring substance. Lacking their predecessors' mastery of form and style, most merely exploited their regions' idiosyncrasies or transformed the antebellum South into an ideal world. In "Marse Chan" (1884), one of the best-known examples of this nostalgic fiction, Virginia writer Thomas Nelson Page has a former slave reminisce about the "good ole times" when "Marse Chan" and Miss Anne would go riding while their fathers talked and smoked cigars.

Despite this lingering romantic atmosphere, a handful of writers attempted realistic depictions of their region. Louisiana's George Washington Cable and Kentucky's James Lane Allen, for example, looked back at the Old South not to idealize it but to explore its real effects on the present. In "Belles Demoiselles Plantation," one of the stories in *Old Creole Days* (1879), Cable explores class distinctions in New Orleans and the destruction of the southern dream, symbolized in the collapse of a plantation into the Mississippi River. In "Two Gentlemen of Kentucky" (1888), Allen draws a Rip Van Winkle figure who cannot align his Old South mentality with the climate of the South during Reconstruction. Although he tries to stay busy, he is not cut out for "ignoble barter" and loses a thousand dollars trying to run a store. In this strange environment, he clings to a former slave who feels equally isolated in the New South.

In the most significant development of the late nineteenth century, some writers wrote local-color stories that gave realistic voices to previously ignored or stereotyped groups. The most famous of these writers, Joel Chandler Harris, adapted the tales he heard as a white man among the African Americans of Georgia to produce the fabulously popular Uncle Remus stories, noteworthy for their use of dialect and their insights into the people who originally told them. In his introduction to *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings* (1881), Harris notes the possible allegorical significance of the stories, in which the weak but wily Brer Rabbit outwits dangerous animals such as Brer Fox. Like Harris, North Carolina writer Charles Chesnutt, the first major African American writer of fiction, drew on the folk tradition in writing "The Goophered Grapevine" and other stories collected in *The Conjure Woman* (1899). In *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line* (1899), Chesnutt dropped his Uncle Julius narrator but continued to explore race in stories such as "The Passing of Grandison," in which an outwardly passive slave outwits his master and frees his family. Finally, in her collections *Bayou Folk* (1894) and *A Night in Acadie* (1897), Kate Chopin sketches realistic portraits of her region of Louisiana while also exploring race, class, and sex. "Desiree's Baby" is the story of a woman

who faces alienation when she learns she is part African American. In "Athenaise: A Story of Temperament," a young woman defies cultural expectations when she temporarily leaves her husband to taste independence. By emphasizing both place and people, these realists showed southern short fiction moving from local color toward the more sophisticated work of the next century.

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