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The Rise of The Short Story In American Letters

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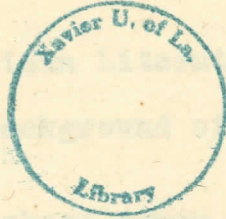
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Mary M. Barra
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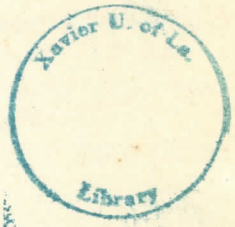
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Outline of

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THE RISE OF THE SHORT STORY IN AMERICAN LETTERS.

Like all other nations America too has had her birth in the literary world. Her beginning has not been less forceful than other nations. We find that English literature, undivided in the past, at the end of the nineteenth century has four divisions: British, American, Canadian, and Australian. The British is still the most important since it has the greatest literary background. But the steadily growing American literature ranks second to it. We glory in this heritage as much as the British because we feel that it belongs to us as well, and prize this tremendous possession.

But since there is so great a difference in manners, customs, and ambitions between the present-day Americans and the British, the American Literature has begun to differ from the British in various ways. In fact, it had to change in order to meet the American demand and satisfy the American taste.

It has been said that there is even a slight difference between the Americans and Englishmen. This is called "Americanism." It is said that Lowell found in President Hayes "that excellent new thing we call "Americanism", which I suppose is that dignity of human nature which consists, perhaps, in not thinking yourself either better or worse than your neighbors by reason of any artificial distinction." It marked the writing of the American authors.

Thus in having our own literature it reproduced American life, feelings, thoughts and deeds; it enabled us to see ourselves as we really are.

Although our early literature, which practically began with the nineteenth century, was crude, we feel it to be our own and of great importance to us. We can readily see that America, being in her infancy, could not have produced anything comparable to that of England.

While Shakespeare was writing his noblest tragedies, Ben Johnson was writing his plays, Francis Bacon was rising swiftly to the height of Chancellor of England and composing his brilliant essays, Captain John Smith's colony began to sail away from the English shores for the new world in the glamor of this literary glory. When the colonists reached the new world they were handicapped by cold, hard work, famine, pestilence, and danger from the natives. They had time only to defend themselves, build houses, plant fields, and set up churches and schools. These strong men labored mightily and laid the broad foundation of the republic under which we live today. Since peace, comfort and leisure are required for the making and enjoying of literature, these colonists had no time to turn their attention seriously to this art. But, nevertheless, these people recorded their laws and important happenings in various ways. Some wrote letters to their relatives and friends in the mother country; some wrote treatises in which they

set forth their own vigorous ideas about religion, and others described the natives, fruits, wild flowers, animals and their own personal experiences. Having neither leisure nor taste for singing songs or telling tales, we find no early novelist or poet among them.

American literature is divided into three general periods: the colonial, dated from 1607 to 1765; the Revolution, from 1765 to 1789, and the national, which may be subdivided into the first part, extending from 1789, the beginning of the government, to 1861, the beginning of the Civil War, the second period from the Civil War to the present time. Authors of these years are arranged into groups according to some common tendency of thought.

Those who are mentioned in the earliest period are Captain John Smith, who published the very first volume of American verse, Cotton Mather, who wrote on religious subjects, and Jonathan Edwards, who wrote the most direct and subtle treatise on a philosophical theme and whose forceful sermons even to this day have power to terrify the readers.

The Revolutionary period was characterized by party literature. The passage of the Stamp Act shook the colonists so that their literary activity turned from history and religious poetry toward oratory, political writings, satire, war songs and patriotic poems to party literature.

Benjamin Franklin was the most versatile man at this time

and his works on political science and literature were honorably accepted. The leading orators were James Otis, Henry Lee and Patrick Henry. Dwight, who was best known by his hymns, Trumbull, whose "M'Fingal" was the best satire of the Revolutionary period, and Barlow, who was best known by his rhymes, ranked among the Hartford Wits. Paiver, Jefferson, Washington and others wrote on politics. Freneau, too, wrote poems that ranked him above all the others of his time. Brown's "Wieland", which was the forerunner of the nineteenth century novel, was also written at this time. Charles Brockden Brown was the first man who followed American literature as a profession. He chose American heroes and placed them against American background and influenced the three great writers that were to follow him.

The National period is characterized by the admission of new states into the Union, the Louisiana Purchase, the Expedition of Lewis and Clark, the successes of the War of 1812, Fulton's invention and the rise of the Knickerbocker School which flourished around New York.

From the name of one of Washington Irving's characters, Diedrich Knickerbocker, has sprung the literary term given to a certain group of writers that lived about New York. Besides Irving, Cooper, Bryant and several lesser writers were at that time more or less connected with New York.

The literary center had, since this Knickerbocker School, moved from Massachusetts to Philadelphia and from there to New York. Irving's "Knickerbocker's History of New York" made him somewhat known on both sides of the ocean, but his "Sketch Book"

was the first American book to win European recognition. Cooper, having attempted an English novel first, wrote the "Spy" which made him famous in both England and America. He wrote many other tales of the forest and the ocean; he was liked for the story but not for the man. Bryant, the third great writer of the Knickerbocker School whose early poems were highly praised, was the Father of American poetry. His masterpiece, "Thanatopsis", was written before he was eighteen. He translated the "Illiad" and the "Odyssey".

Poetry, at that time, was beginning to be recognized, but the short story came much later. It may be dated only as far back as the period between the Civil War and the World War in 1914. Heretofore there had been, not only in America, but in Russia, France and even England, more of the fictional types of literature which were short, effective, with a touch of atmosphere and climatic moment usually found in magazines.

The Gothic novels, which consisted of a sentimental hero, diabolical villain, ghastly mystery and a passage of prolonged agony, prevailed. Then Addison and Steele introduced the Short Story Essay which was very simple. With every generation and race new ideals and forms were set down for the short story.

There were at least four stages in the evolution of the American Short Story. The first was characterized by the Hannah More type, which was colorless, patent, formless, undramatic and written to teach a moral lesson.

Washington Irving, who brought the Addison Essays and moral tales together, came next. He did not create a new type of short story but combined what he found, and the result was his "Salmagunda". He was more of an essayist, a moralist, a sketcher of manners, an antiquarian, a sentimentalist than a short story writer. His moral essays, however, grew into expository stories, imaginative and longing travels which only drew the attention of the untraveled Americans. Nevertheless, he added to the moral tale of his day, humor, characterization, atmosphere, and literary charm, but no constructive influence. Although his work contained sentiment and undramatic humor, he crowded his tales with too much description and essay material and ended them too feebly. He was read for the man behind the story. He helped the progress of the short story more by his influence than his art. "Rip Van Winkle" was characteristic of his work. His "Sketch Book" dominated the twenties and thirties in America.

For the new form there sprang up in the twenties a new model, the annual. For two years the book stands were loaded with "flamboyantly bound gift books", "The Token", "The Talisman", "The Pearl", "The Amaranth", and others; "elaborate sketch books varied soon by the echoes from the new romanticism of Europe", says Fred L. Pattie. And he also tells us that there had never been such a gushing of sentiment and crude terror effects and vague Germanic mysticism before.

Hawthorne alone had genius enough to change the material

of the annual into a form that was to remain and dominate. He was the first to lift the short story out of the essay type into a higher realm of art. Hawthorne did this by putting all his efforts to one situation and giving the whole tale the unity of impression. In most of his work he introduced his characters with a veil of mystery and attempted to combine a strong sense of beauty with Puritan ideals of conscience and law. By constantly trying to portray a moral law against the Puritan background, he missed the great fact of the cheerfulness of life.

When Poe came, he saw the need of a definite scientific art for the short story; the treatment and laws for it if it were to last. There was a demand for more reality, for sharper outlines and greater attention to logical order, and Poe realized this demand and supplied laws to the best of his ability. He wrote, "The whole tendency of the age is magazineward." Poe claimed that condensed, painted, curt, and readily diffused fiction was needed. That fiction to be scientific, must be brief, must yield a totality of impression capable of being grasped at one sitting. Since he had been a magazinist all his life, and had to view the tale from an editor's point of view, he saw fit to condense, plan and study words and phrases, not only of his magazine material, but also for his fiction.

Poe's prose and reviews were first^{to} establish him as a literary man. He had a keen sense of literary excellence and recognized it at once. He was bold, utterly fearless in his criticisms; fearlessness was, at that time, one of the most needed qual-

ities in American criticism. But on the other hand he had not read very much and for this reason he had not the foundation that was to last. Moreover, if he disliked a man or was jealous of him, he was not great enough to forget his personal taste and be fair in his criticism toward such a person. He was considered a master of prose since he had the ability to construct a good plot as well as to develop one; every word, every sentence is counted toward the climax. He had a splendid ability to make his tales real and gave his readers a clue to his story in the first sentence. For example, in his "Cask of Amontillado" - "The thousand injuries of Fortunato I had born as best I could, but when he ventured upon insult I vowed revenge." Here is the keynote of the whole tale, and we are prepared for some terrible revenge. No one knew better than Poe how to work up to a climax of horror by dropping in some contrasting detail. For instance, the false friend in his motley dress with cap and bells was chained, we are told, and then walled up in the masonry that was to become his living tomb. There remained only a single opening through which the avenger thrust his torch and let it fall. Poe ended thus, "There came forth in return only a jingling of bells. The terrible death of the false friend is doubly horrible at the suggestion of the carnival merriment. Thus in such a story he startled his reader in the beginning and left a bitter taste in his mouth in the end.

Then came the demand for local stories. The Putnam Magazine editor announced that the public wanted American themes to predominate and local reality to be one important point in the

short story. Emerson came forward and asked how far off from life, manners and motives the novel still was. But Rebecca Harding Davis, a writer of 1861, seemed to have had a ready answer in her grim short story, "Life in the Iron Mills". She wanted to break away from that stereotyped theme of which everyone wrote and get down to real life. She introduced her work with this: "I want you to hide your disgust, take no heed to your clean clothes and come right down with me, - here into the thickest of the fog and mud and effluvia. I want you to hear this story, there is a secret down here, in this nightmare fog, that has lain dumb for centuries: I want to make it a real thing for you."

The works of the writers of the fifties and sixties were dominated by definiteness of material, locality, actuality and real human life. With the dawn of the transition period came Rose Terry Cooke, who was noted for having been the first who contributed seven short stories to the first eight numbers of the "Atlantic Monthly". In her early work there was a tendency toward the "Young Ladies' Repository" type of fiction, sentimental, leisurely, moralizing, but the sense of realism which had been introduced by Miss Davis was found even in the poorest. These were not romances but only fragments of English district life. She introduced her heroine in one of her stories like this: "Mrs. Griswald was paring apples and Lizzie straining squash." This introduction was quite unromantic, but the dialect and the locality sounded true to American life. Her work has been traced from one "Atlantic" to another, and a gradual increase in power has been found.

In her declaration of independence , 1861, at the opening of "Miss Lucinda", she wrote, "I offer you no tragedy in high life, no sentimental history of fashion and wealth, but only a little story about a woman who could not be a heroine." It was felt that, in the declaration, she had found herself secure and had taken an honorable place in the center of a small group of masters of the short story. She was able to grant the demand of the new period. This power made her the pioneer and leader, not only a depicter of New England life, but of the later new school of realistic localized short story.

Fitz James O'Brien, unlike Miss Cooke who had come gradually and without great sensation, after his "The Diamond Lens", was widely announced as a new Poe. He did not write incessantly but temporarily when the mood came upon him. His writings were published here and there in the Harper's, Putman's and Atlantic Magazines. Having enlisted in one of the first regiments of volunteers, he fell in one of the earliest skirmishes of the Civil War. Although his short Story, "What Was It?" shows undoubted power, it cannot be compared with the best works of Poe and Hawthorne. It is believed that if O'Brien had lived into the next period, he might have accomplished a great deal. However, in the short time that he wrote he added the sense of actuality to the unlocalized romances of Poe.

Edward Everett Hale, whose "The Man Without a Country" was accepted as an American classic, was another figure in the transition. This classic may have lost on account of timeliness, its

genuine atmosphere of patriotism and its historical value. Moreover, it is called a work of art. Though it has many episodes, it has but a single situation which seemed to haunt its reader with its presence. In this story he added specific detail to detail with the skill of a Defoe, it is said, until, in spite of its manifest impossibility, the tale became alive, a piece of actual history, a human document. Hale possessed the art of "verisimilitude" which so few writers can surpass. On the whole, Hale added not only a single situation and a sense of reality, but plausibility as well.

The transition period came to an end with Henry James. He contributed fourteen stories to the Atlantic alone and brought to his theme not only the scientific art America had evolved, but that of England and France as well. It is said that he was a great tabulator, scientist, and observer. Henry James threw out, as it were, all of Poe's solution except his art, and created his own. He, being a naturalist rather than a supernaturalist, could not endure anything harsh and horrible. He had a deep aversion for stories of a painful nature. He said that literature of horrors needed no extension and that tradition that "a serious story of manners shall close with the fictitious happiness of a fairytale" should be condemned. He, like George Elliot, believed that truth told directly, simply, and concretely was the first requisite of fiction. He demanded shades in fiction. James described the short story as the analysis of a situation, the psychological phenomena of a group of men and women at an interesting moment. He tried to solve the story on a scientific basis and, unlike Poe, said that it should contain

slow motion, such as that of actual life, and that characters should reveal themselves by their own dialogue, actions, manners and personal peculiarities in dress. His short stories are said to be long enough to appear as volumes, and yet they contain only a single situation and a unity of impression. Pattie said that James was seldom spontaneous, always intellectual, always a realist working in the actual field of life. Critics claimed that he did not advance the short story, though he gave distinctness to it, because he viewed life from the standpoint of a laboratory and test tube, and because he was not a good interpreter of human life.

Francis Bret Harte, a man of the city, a professional literary worker, a poet and dreamer, came to the short story by way of Washington Irving. When he became an editor of the *New Overland Monthly*, he thought that he would evolve for its second number a short story, "The Luck of the Roaring Camp." He considered it time and a propos for such a production. It was woven of four strands: the Dickens' sentiment, melodrama, theatric presentation of lowly adapted material came first; the French art, form and finesse, adopted from Poe was second; the unusualness of background, new skies, strange types, which seemed to be presented by one who had taken part in what he told was third; then came Irving's reminiscent power of atmosphere. He evidently added the third, "local color," to the short single element, which gave "The Luck of Roaring Camp" its popularity and made its author, if but only in America, the most influential short story writer in a generation.

When the story reached the East, the Boston Publishing Com-

pany hailed it as a new classic; no other story had been so widely advertised before. He, like Poe, believed that stories should be deliberate, models of consideration. Characters of his stories were distinct and striking, his climaxes dramatic, and the closing effect always impressively theatric. Besides local color, he added the dramatic element. Though his stories could easily be turned into little plays, they lacked sincerity and a moral background.

One would naturally expect a sudden change in the American short story after the new vogue of local color which was widely praised in Europe and America. But James and others kept on writing as before. It was only those who were just starting out that fell into the spirit of local color and were later known as the "local color school".

The eighties and nineties progressed with the new tide of Harte. The work of Constance Fenimore Woolson (1838-1894), a grandniece of Cooper, appeared to be the most interesting in which the transition could be traced. She, at first, wrote un-localized poetic stories for Harper's Magazine, such as, "A Merry Christmas", "An October Idyl". Then came a change, a sense of the value of background and strong individualized characters. She later chose western material. After reading Harte she was stirred by the desolation and poverty wrought by the war. Then putting her heart in her work she wrote the first after-war southern short stories based on the contrast of what was and what had been. Each volume of stories showed an increase in definiteness, in picturesque characterization and in dramatic

effect. Unlike Harte, she was a realist who used no dialect, cast soft evening light over her stories and worked with sympathy and insight.

Then another type of transition is found in the works of Sarah Orne Jewett (1849-1909) who was betwixt a realist and romanticist. Concrete geographical locality made definite and minutely real was the new note that characterized "Deephaven". She had that Irving-like atmosphere of reminiscence, that suggestion of a departed glory softly glowing in her work. She was familiar with the material with which she worked and delighted in the single and idyllic characters rather than in the dramatic. Sarah, being of the old school of Irving, Hawthorne and Poe, was almost the only one of the few short story creators who put distinction in her work after the seventies, Pattie said that she was a romanticist with a camera and a pen and that she touched lightly, humorously and pathetically with a perfect naturalness as no one else could.

Edward King, while on a Southern trip for Scribner's Monthly, 1872, found Cable, a clerk of New Orleans, dreaming over great authors. He gave to the short story what is called personality. His "Sieur George" was published first, then came "Old Creole Days", his recognized, unique, undisputed masterpiece of short story in America or abroad.

Pattie claimed that he had an epigrammatic style which was Gallic in its swift shifting and witty insinuations, daintily

light, exquisitely pathetic at times in its flavour of the old creole city, which was so strange to Northern readers, was always exotic. Thus he was called a painter of feminine daintiness, master of suggestion and atmosphere. Although he had gradually dawned on the American consciousness, his influence was lasting.

The school of unlocalized art, placeless and timeless, like that of Hawthorne and Poe, and the "local color" school of Harte reigned in the seventies. T. B. Aldrich, like James, kept on with his work without a single thought for the new demand. His style was characterized by a certain patrician elegance and yet an art hidden by a naturalness and simplicity. The art being the soul of the story, every word, every sentence was a studied contribution towards the final effect. He cannot be compared with any American writer, for there is no concealed meaning, chastening teagedy and no exotic background, but there is a light air and a little of an American comedy in his stories.

Although Stockton (1834-1902) had neither the technique of Aldrich nor his naturalness and ease, he had his whimsicality and unexpectedness, and he had a startling art that made the impossible seem plausible and commonplace. He surpassed not only Aldrich but even Everett Hale and others after he had given "The Lady or the Tiger" to the public. Critics and the public realized then that Stockton had found a subtle art by which he was able to keep his reader at his own mercy.

Henry Cuyler Bunner, like Aldrich, had originality and personality in his work. He, too, viewed the short story from

the fastidious standpoint of the lyric poet and believed that art was a matter of exquisite touches, of infinite compression and of light shading. He was American in everything he wrote, and his works had a singular depth of soul that gripped their readers and remained there.

Ambrose Bierce belonged to that group just mentioned. He was somewhat like Poe when at his best. Very few have surpassed him in his diction, reserve and in the use of the subtle insinuation and haunting climax. He was said to be lacking in sincerity towards the true facts of human life. He was an artist for the sake of his art.

The short story came to America in its full extent in the eighties. Before this it had been somewhat of the magazine form. It was the later novelists who sought to standardize the form of fiction. Old writers had not troubled themselves with the task. Authors like James collected their stories for the Atlantic in the year 1891; others revised theirs for the same purpose.

The short story triumphed in 1891 with the following collections: "Elesket", Nelson Page; "Balaam and His Master", Joel Harris; "Flute and Violin", James Allen; "Otto the Knight", Octave Thanet; "Main Travelled Roads", Hamlin Garland; "Gallegher", Richard Davis; "Fourteen to One", Elizabeth Sturart Phelps; "Huckleberries Gathered from New England Hills", Rose Terry Cooke; "Iduna", George Hubbard; "Three Takes", William O'Connor; "Uncle of an Angel", Thomas Janvier; "Zadoc Pine", Bunner; "With my Friends", Brander Mathews; "Rudder Grangers Abroad", Stockton; "The Adventures of Three Worthies", Clinton Ross. The "Philosophy of the

Short Story", by Brander Mathews, helped to make that year famous.

Realism and naturalism ruled that period so that stories coming from every part of the country were characterized by faithfulness to local condition. Some wrote stories in the Negro dialect. "Uncle Remus" and others were written by Joel Harris. He, being a native of the Georgian hills, wrote with sympathy and knowledge of the natives, and a woman by the name of Charles Egbert Craddock too wrote of life in Tennessee mountains. Johnston, like Harris, dealt with rural life but was more of a sketcher like Longstreet than a short story writer.

Since local color had been in such demand in the eighties, a novelist had to work very carefully lest he be criticized severely if he tread beyond its limits. There were three phases connected with this movement: first, we are told, was the Irvingesque school that romanticized its material and then threw over it a softened light, by Harte, Miss Jewett, Cable and others; second, the exhibitors of strange material objectively presented, by Charles Craddock, Octave Thanet, and the dialect reformers of the eighties, and the third, the veritists of the nineties who told what they considered to be the unidealized truth concerning the life they knew - Garland, Miss Wilkins, Frank Norris, and the rest. The third group of writers worked on a scientific basis. Having stated their doctrines clearly, they worked with a deliberate art. They set about to tell the direct truth without regard as to what it might be, so that it convinced one not as a story but as a living document.

Miss Wilkins's "A New England Nun" exemplified the above mentioned qualities. She went to the opposite extreme in so far as she portrayed pitiless studies of repressed lives and searched into their souls. She wrote with truth and conviction of the life from which she had come and still controlled herself in such a position that her pictures were direct and cold. However clear, direct, and convincing she has been, yet she was faulty in that she repeated a few formulas too frequently.

The nineties brought full perfection to the short story, and critics claimed that within their limited field "A New England Nun" and "Main Traveled Roads" cannot be surpassed. The works of James Allen, Margarett Wade Deland, Grace King and Alice Brown stand by themselves. Kate Chopin's "Bayou Folks" was the last to be found in the whole range of the "local color" school. She, being of Celtic blood, had the power to really tell a story with restraint and yet with abandon. Pattie claimed that her "Desiree's Baby", with its gripping end, and "Madame Celestin's Divorce", with its tasteful humor and its glimpse into the feminine heart, are among the few unquestioned masterpieces of the American short story art.

Harte's "local color" had really done a great deal toward the advancement of the American short story. He and Craddock and others attempted the novel but failed. The short story then was the only way by which American life could be recorded.

The early works of O. Henry and Jack London, in about 1898, ended what is called the last period of the history of the short story and began the work of the present day. Short, snappy, out-of-the-ordinary stories are demanded by the present-day Americans; something that can be read en route to work; something that can give them a cold chill in summer and a warm glow in winter; something that can give a hint that it is part of the author's own experiences. Hopkinson Smith's works contained these qualities. Pattie wrote: "He has been everywhere; he has seen everything; he has learned all the world's rituals and all its secrets. His works are life-like pictures seen in the flashes, vivid bits clipped from the moving film of human life."

Jack London's works are characteristic of the present demand. Strangeness is the tone of his works. He knew what was wanted and he gave it at the cost of finished elegance of style, melody, and elevation of tone. He did not write for the refined few; he wrote for the mass, and he was well paid for it. Everything and anything with which he came in contact he wrote about; he even wrote about the sensation which the daring underworld had given him. He told vivid stories of sensational movement and physical thrill; he wrote of wild happenings in which he had taken part; he wrote of the strange, rude, horrifying and unheard-of things. His style is said to be barbaric, with its lurid wealth of adjectives, melodramatic, intense headlong rush of happenings that could sweep its reader like a hurricane. Although he had force and new

variety of material, he was lacking in the main refined qualities, poise, moral background and beauty of style.

Richard Davis (1864-1916), son of Rebecca Davis, was chosen as a figure out of the later short story writers. From his "Gallagher" he became noticed by critics. He was well fitted to give the reading mass exactly what it demanded, and he did not forget, as it were, prose literary traditions, a certain patrician touch and an innate love of the romantic. Had he lived in an earlier era, critics knew not what he might have accomplished. Although his works were brilliant and had a touch of distinction, they do not satisfy the final test. However, critics claimed that he was a versatile entertainer, a craftsman rather than a critic of human life, an artist enamoured with his art rather than a creator who worked with the deeper materials of the human tragedy and comedy.

William Sidney Porter (1862-1910), who wrote under the name of O. Henry, closed the period with his work which was written at his leisure while detained in the Ohio State prison. "Whistling Dick's Christmas Stocking" was his first short story. He was unique and at his best when he wrote of tales of the great metropolis. He was a sensation. Unexpectedness was the soul of his art. There was humor, sentiment, philosophy and surprise at every turn of his story. He kept his reader guessing from beginning to end. O. Henry was an artist, a master of plot and diction, a true humorist and a philosopher, but his weakness is seen in the nature of his

of his art. Over all his work there is a brilliancy, but often cheapness is connected with it. Like Harte he is said to have lowered the standard of American literature, since both worked with the theatric intent and without the moral background. His characters were extreme types, and his works were a brilliant, highly amusing literary vaudeville.

In so far as we are concerned with the rise of the short story, we find that there have been many innovations, additions, and new solutions, but when we find that after all these changes the short story has lost its romantic beauty and moral background and taken on to the hard, brutal facts of life, we wonder whether it has achieved anything at all. H. G. Wells said, "Short story writing is a young man's game." And since it is a tendency of the young generation to view human life in true perspective, to know the truth in its entirety, it is demanded that we put our efforts "not on fragments of life, on snatches of experiences, on glimpses and swift impressions, but on wholes." It is demanded of the modern short story writers that they bridge the gap between present day demand and the literary tradition. Will they take heed to what has been done? Will they ever realize that there is enough evil in the world without writing a short story of it? These and many more questions are yet to be answered.

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