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# Flynn: A Study of A.E. Coppard and His Short Fiction

Frank Edmund Smith

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FLYNN: A STUDY OF A. E. COPPARD  
AND HIS SHORT FICTION

By  
FRANK EDMUND SMITH

A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of the  
Graduate School of Loyola University  
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For April

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For much of the information and interpretation of this study I must thank Flynn's wife Winifred De Kok Coppard, who favored me with two lengthy interviews and access to her late husband's press books. In addition, she graciously permitted me to photo-copy Coppard's Diary and to quote from it. She also introduced me to May Crittall of Dunmow, Essex, who with her late husband, Pink, was a close friend of Coppard. Mrs. Crittall talked to me about Coppard and gave me access to her



library, which contained much Coppard memorabilia. I also spent an afternoon with Percy Muir, another of Coppard's friends, who has since helped me to build up my own library of Coppard's work.

Finally, I owe personal thanks to John Rouch, friend and teacher. And, I thank my wife April for her critical reading and her personal support.

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## INTRODUCTION

For those who know the name at all, the reputation of A. E. Coppard holds a place somewhere among the second rank of modern English writers. Even at the height of his popularity in the 1920s and 1930s, his following, though very enthusiastic, was always small. He attracted the favorable attention of literary periodicals, yet the sales of his short story volumes were limited, often to collectors who later realized huge profits in the sale of rare first editions of the early work of this author whose work seems rarely to have been evaluated for its real worth as literature. One reason that Coppard has never been adequately evaluated is because, except for some volumes of poetry, he wrote exclusively in the short story form, a genre that has been accepted neither popularly nor critically as a significant literary mode. In general, a short story writer is not taken seriously until he writes in a more "significant" genre, ordinarily the novel. Even given the fact that a Mansfield can be valued for writing exclusively in the "lesser" form, Coppard's writing seems to have been displaced regularly by his person, which is the subject of almost as much discussion as is his writing in the literary periodicals of the time. Coppard himself was the object of much interest. He was raised a poor, fatherless,

uneducated boy who worked himself into a position of trust and responsibility as a confidential-clerk and accountant and who, at the age of forty-one, left his job and his wife to live in a hut in the woods and write stories. Post World War I England still had enough Romanticism left to find that fascinating. In addition to the intriguing facts of his life, Coppard wrote stories, often in a quasi-Irish idiom, about a time that had passed for England, a time in which man could best be understood in relation to the land--the moors, the forests, the fields, the downs.

Due to this combination of his life and literary subjects, Coppard acquired a reputation as a literary bucolic (a kind of noble savage wielding a pen) that, while partly true, has persistently obscured his real achievement as an artist in the short story. That the romanticism associated with Coppard's life seriously influenced the judgment of his contemporaries is evident in the remarkable inaccuracies found in the many biographical sketches of which he was the subject. He spends some time in his autobiography and in the Schwartz Bibliography disavowing apocryphal stories about his life. And, though reviewers and critics took notice of Coppard's technical skills from the beginning, this recognition of his artistry was regularly buried beneath descriptions of his rusticity.

Other than the frequent references in literary periodicals, Coppard has received little significant critical attention. In 1922 Ford Madox Ford came to consider him "the

"White Hope" for the post-war revival of English literature, and he figured prominently in Ford's plans for the Transatlantic Review. Later, he was the subject of an annotated bibliography, and in 1932 George Brandon Saul wrote a dissertation analyzing his poetry, which today seems to be insignificant. Saul pointed out the very literate quality of Coppard's poetry and touched on his short fiction, but the romantic myth persisted. In the early 1940s H. E. Bates developed an artistic understanding of Coppard's short stories, and in 1961 a dissertation by Russell MacDonald dispelled very convincingly the notion that Coppard was some sort of "natural" writer. Using Coppard's 1957 autobiography and Coppard's fiction, MacDonald traced the literary orientation of Coppard's self-education and subsequent writing. Yet, in striving to show Coppard's literacy, especially his debt to James, Maupassant, and Chekhov, MacDonald ignored the evident and significant relationship between Coppard's life and his work. Consequently, the study, which traces Coppard's work and reputation volume by volume, creates an unfortunate fragmentation between Coppard's life and fiction, a distinction that Coppard himself would not have allowed.

A. E. Coppard was an intentional party to his own romanticization. More, even, than his most enthusiastic public, Coppard supported an exaggerated version of his life. He had been a fastidious, sensitive child who, acutely aware of his own poverty and ignorance (which he perceived as "vulgarity"), began to see his life through the gathering filter

of his extensive reading in English literature. When the circumstances eventually developed that at middle age he could become an author, he approached this new personality no less romantically than his audience did. No longer "Alf" Coppard, he became first A. E. Coppard, the author, then to his friends he became "Flynn," the protagonist of a series of self-proclaimed autobiographical fictions. Throughout his life he seems to have encouraged friends to think of him in terms of his re-creations of the hardships that he had overcome. And, certainly, the early attitudes engendered by those hardships and tempered by his almost compulsive reading are reflected in the materials of his fiction.

Neither the traditional view of Coppard as a literary primitive, nor the more recent picture of him as a simple, somewhat shallow, but nevertheless very "literary" writer is completely accurate. Coppard espoused both versions. He saw himself as a man of the people telling the kind of tales that are told in taverns, yet he was extremely self-conscious of his formal artistry, enormously pleased to be a literary figure.

In 1965 Frank O'Connor devoted a chapter of his study on the short story to a partial analysis of the relationship between Coppard's life and his work. My dissertation is, in a sense, a continuation of O'Connor's analysis. It is a further, more elaborate attempt to reconcile the life of the author with his work without forcing the intrusion of either one into the other. This study is made possible by the availability of several sources, primarily biographical, that

have not been used before in a treatment of Coppard. These include interviews with Coppard's second wife, Winifred De Kok Coppard, and with his friends, Percy Muir and May Crittall. In addition to the interview, Mrs. Coppard gave me permission to use Coppard's personal Diary covering the period January 10, 1902, to March 12, 1906, and she also helped me to locate a novel written about Coppard, No Goodness in the Worm. Finally, I have used materials concerning Coppard's relationship with Ford Madox Ford, some previously undiscovered critical essays by Coppard, the work of O'Connor and T. O. Beachcroft, and sources describing the selection of Coppard's Collected Tales as the Book of the Month.

With the above sources, and with the material more commonly available, this study will describe Coppard's life and personality in more detail than has previously been attempted, and it will suggest some legitimate relationships between his life and his fiction. More important to an understanding of Coppard as an artist in the short story form, this dissertation will also demonstrate Coppard's artistic control, his ability to separate the form of his fiction from the substance of his life. I will do that according to a method not previously used in an analysis of Coppard's fiction, first, a summary view of his materials and forms, then a formal analysis of a few selected short stories.

In brief outline this is how the dissertation will proceed. Chapter I begins with a description of Coppard's sudden emergence as an author and the contribution of that

event to his intense self-consciousness. Next I will outline the problem of the confusion of Coppard's life with his fiction, and, after a biographical sketch, I will analyze two fictive expressions of Coppard's life, his own "Hundredth Tale" and Gay Taylor's No Goodness in the Worm. From these and other sources we can trace Coppard's disgust with vulgarity, a phenomenon that became a controlling influence in his life and in his fiction, expressing itself in two forms: poverty and ignorance. Coppard's ongoing concern with poverty and ignorance and the way he attempted to overcome both will order the remainder of the chapter. Principally, we will follow his self-education, the influences of his clerkship in Oxford, and his beginnings and development as a writer. Proceeding chronologically from the 1921 publication of Adam and Eve and Pinch Me, after which event Coppard's autobiography and other studies stop, I will fill in major events of Coppard's biography, trace the growth and decline of his artistic powers, and describe briefly the changes in his reputation.

Chapter II describes Coppard's artistic self-consciousness as found in the book reviews and literary criticism that he wrote. We find initially that Coppard's reviews tell us more about his personality than about literature. But, in more serious criticism he gets past his concern about money and ego to reveal some important, if not altogether original, understandings about the operation of the artist, the manner in which the events of life become the materials of fiction. And, he has even more valuable things to say about short story



artistry. If Coppard's literary theory is neither organized nor sophisticated, it is insightful enough to provide a means of assessing the development of the short story form and, more important here, to demonstrate Coppard's awareness of his own use of that form.

The artistry of Coppard's short fiction, as suggested in Chapters I and II, is revealed more fully in Chapter III. Here I have artificially separated Coppard's fictive materials from his forms to give an overview of his work. Rarely a "thematic" writer (he kept his personal, often simplistic, ideologies in check when he wrote so that, when they appear, they appear as suggestion rather than statement), Coppard divorced himself from the still popular "idea" story to write stories that depend on dramatization, implication, suggestiveness to communicate meaning. Yet, Coppard's work meets the tests of significant substance and vivid form that E. J. O'Brien championed during the twenties. Because Coppard does have something significant to say about religion, male-female relationships, and the human condition, I have organized an exposition of his fictive materials--setting, character, narrative techniques, dialogue, humor--according to these major thematic orientations. The second half of the chapter examines Coppard's formal techniques, first, his minor, or supportive forms--language, imagery, and interludes--then, his developmental forms, and, finally, his two gross structural forms, plot and the lyric, or poetic, mode of the short story. In this chapter I will continue to point out examples of Coppard's

life providing materials for his fiction, but I will also demonstrate the artistic remove that he was able to enforce on his own experiences and beliefs so that his fiction comes to life on its own terms.

Although Coppard resisted attempts to interpret his short stories, the close formal analysis of a selection of his best fiction in Chapter IV proves it complex enough to render additional meaning under scrutiny. Although the temptation to confuse Coppard's life with his fiction may cause some interpretive problems, more difficult is the problem of apparent simplicity in so much of Coppard's finest work. He relies on static rather than dynamic actions to reveal the inner lives of his characters. The reader of Coppard has to understand that the primary movement in a given fiction may well be the movement of the reader, rather than the character, to a moment of understanding about the character. This is particularly true of Coppard's more poetic fiction. But, the examination of Coppard's formal devices, particularly metaphor clusters that often operate as motif, causes his fiction to yield the rich interior meaning that is disguised beneath the seeming simplicity.

## CHAPTER I

### FLYNN: THE ARTIST AS COMMON MAN

I came from nothing, and it may be I was never anything more than a contrivance for recording emotions I would fain have taken for my own, but could not-- life passed me by.

These lines are from A. E. Coppard's autobiographical "My Hundredth Tale," which he composed about 1930 as he reached the height of his influence in British literature. Most of his major writing was behind him, but he was still considered a "new" writer, and his opinions were eagerly sought by literary periodicals. His impact on the English short story was so sudden that he was constantly referred to as a "young" writer, yet by 1930 he was already in his early fifties and had been publishing for about a dozen years. His emergence as a major writer of the period, seeming to come from nowhere, has often been commented on. Ford Madox Ford, who had been friends with Coppard since 1922, wrote in 1927:

It is impossible to say whence Mr. Coppard can derive. His career--as is the case with most writers of great human experience and insights into the hearts of women--had been romantically unliterary until he took it into his head to write stories. He had rolled his hump un peu partout. Then, suddenly he wrote stories--and much as was the case with Conrad, suddenly found himself famous in England.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ford Madox Ford, "Half Pixie and Half Bird," New York Herald Tribune Books, Feb. 27, 1927, p.4.

Although Ford seems to have been romantically infatuated with Coppard's untutored artistry (and with Coppard's lack of economic recognition), his impressionistic assay of Coppard's sudden literary prominence is echoed by more judicious writers. H. E. Bates, who credited Coppard for influencing his own beginnings as a short story writer,<sup>2</sup> and who later became the closest thing Coppard had to a literary enemy,<sup>3</sup> wrote in 1941 that, because he had waited so long in life to write, Coppard's first work shows a maturity of finish uncommon to the beginning writer:

Coppard's first window display, in fact, was like a show of well-made, bright-coloured handicraft: strong in texture, bold and fanciful in design, carefully finished, fashioned from excellent native materials which, like oak and wool, had their own sweet earthy and enduring flavour.<sup>4</sup>

T. O. Beachcroft, in his recent study of the English short story, also comments on the importance of Coppard's mature emergence, to which he gives credit for

an unusual depth in his apparent simplicity. This is due partly to the fact that he did not begin writing till he was forty, and his early stories combine a mature mind and deep reflection with the freshness of a new writer.<sup>5</sup>

If Coppard's beginnings were sudden, they were also timely. By accident, or by temperament, he seized upon a literary form that grew to prominence during the 1920's, and

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<sup>2</sup>H. E. Bates, The Modern Short Story, A Critical Survey (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, Ltd., 1941), 140.

<sup>3</sup>Interview with Mrs. Coppard; July, 1968.

<sup>4</sup>Bates, 134.

<sup>5</sup>T. O. Beachcroft, The English Short Story (II), (Published for the British Council and National Book League, London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1967), 25.

he became one of its earliest and chiefest advocates. Although he had no contact with any literary circles when he began to write (and little contact thereafter), his first publication dovetailed with that of other writers who were to become better known. Beachcroft remarks on the chronology of this occurrence:

His first book, Adam and Eve and Pinch Me, was published in 1921 just after Bliss but before the re-issue of Dubliners, and he had published in magazines before then. These dates are interesting, because Coppard was so early in the field.<sup>6</sup>

Through much of his youth Coppard was a professional sprinter, and he loved to draw analogies between sprinting and short story composition. We might suggest a similar analogy between sprinting and his own career as an author--although he was fast off the mark, he could not go for distance. Thus, although Coppard continued to publish short stories until 1954, after 1935 he faded from literary recognition, almost as quickly as he had begun. In fact, his creative powers had begun to fade long before 1935 (he was 57 then), and he is remembered chiefly today for his earliest stories. H. E. Bates says that all of Coppard's outstanding writing is to be found in his first five volumes through Silver Circus.<sup>7</sup> So, according to Bates, by 1928 Coppard's creative abilities had already worn thin. With exceptions for individual stories, this is true.

But, our concern is not with Coppard's decline as an artist, except incidentally, so much as with his art and his

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 26.

<sup>7</sup>Bates, 134.

person during his development and at the period of his greatest powers and recognition, principally 1916 to 1935.

Coppard had little time to get used to the idea of being a published author (as opposed to a mere writer) because it happened over half way through his life when he was middle-aged. Yet, he made his accommodations quickly enough. At some point he decided very consciously that the author of his stories was not to be Alf Coppard, as his friends called him, or even Alfred Edgar Coppard, his given name, but A. E. Coppard, a decidedly literary name--or, at least, what might appear to be a literary name to a self-educated, proud-poor, enormously self-conscious middle-aged man who later described himself as "a bawdy uneducated larrikin" who "lift[ed] himself as it were by his own bootstraps to a place wherein he could recognize and worship fine expression in art, literature and music."<sup>8</sup>

When, on April 1, 1919, Coppard walked away from a successful life as a cost-accountant and confidential clerk to make his living and to reshape his life as a writer, he did not leave his forty-one years behind him but took them along as the substance and shaping of his fiction and of his new life.

Coppard's life keeps getting tangled, intentionally and unintentionally, in his fiction. Five of his stories are clearly intended to be autobiographical, and they conform so closely to the facts of his real biography that he began to

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<sup>8</sup>A. E. Coppard, It's Me, O Lord! (London: Methuen and Co., 1957), 131.

live them out in his real life, even taking the name of his fictional alter-ego, Johnny Flynn. Other stories, he tells us, are based on specific experiences of his life (He identifies himself as a character in "Marching to Zion."<sup>9</sup>). And, of much of the rest of his fiction, there is a legitimate temptation for the reader to make connections between the motifs of the fiction and recurring patterns in Coppard's life. The extension of this intermix between Coppard's life and his fiction has led to, at various times, a picture of Coppard as a simple rustic, a literary bucolic who wrote with a primitive instinct. Little wonder that the reader is often tempted to read some of Coppard's fiction as his biography--George Brandon Saul, who corresponded with Coppard, does it literally<sup>10</sup>--Coppard himself confused the two. Or, at least, he tells us so at the very beginning of his autobiography:

A difficulty for the fiction-monger intending to write his autobiography--and it is a pardonable one--arises from the fact that his talent is commonly directed to the presentation of a show, a fiction, presented moreover in terms most pleasing to himself. Therefore in such a biography he may helplessly, perhaps even thoughtlessly, but more probably designedly, select, omit, minimize, exaggerate, in fact lie as wholeheartedly as in his normal creations. The mirror he holds up in autobiography is not to nature but to his fictive self. . . . It may--but I know it will!--turn out to be just another work of fiction under the guise of autobiography instead of the deeper autobiography which is after all the principal source of fiction.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 180.

<sup>10</sup>George Brandon Saul, A. E. Coppard: His Life and Poetry to the Publication of the "Bibliography" (Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1932), pp. 16ff.

<sup>11</sup>Coppard, It's Me, 9.

Coppard even goes on to encourage biography hunting in his tales: "This book of probable fiction will, in conjunction with the probable autobiography in the tales, dot many of the 'i's' and cross many of the 't's' of one or the other and present my image from crown to footsole and back again."<sup>12</sup>

A few pages later, as Coppard settles down to the recreation of his life, he self-consciously steps back, looks at what he has written so far and finds himself "uneasy" yet "deeply interested" in what he has written.

Is it going to turn out only just another bunch of fiction? Is the whole basket of real sweet-smelling fiction which I have previously sold in the market my true and sufficient autobiography? I never intended it so, or ever felt that anybody would understand it that way, yet I begin to fear that between the basket and the bunch there may come (O reconcile them, good Lord!) a pretty kettle of fish.<sup>13</sup>

After a few more pages Coppard again pauses to comment on what he is about. He disavows It's Me, O Lord! as his "authentic history" and warns the reader that he is "not to be trusted all the way" because, although truth "is more reliable than fiction, . . . fiction is the better known, is much more palatable, and therefore much more used and regarded."<sup>14</sup>

Although in the first pages of his autobiography Coppard had denied any autobiographical intention in his fiction, half way through he informs the reader:

Thus far this autobiography has informed me of a thing I was forgetting; although its content is not as informative as a conscientious diary I can see now that I have put a good deal of 'me' into my fiction. . . . Apparently it is impossible for a fiction writer not to use some of his personal experience and thought, whether precious,

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 18.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 23.



lascivious, or flighty, in the fiction he produces. . . . All the same there is no stupider fallacy than the assumption that anything his characters say inevitably embodies the author's own private beliefs.<sup>15</sup>

By the final page Coppard has come to a kind of ir-  
resolute resolution concerning the interrelatedness of his  
life and his fiction, and he throws the problem right back at  
the reader: "Now I am able to declare that thus far my auto-  
biography has no more pure fiction in it than my fiction has  
pure autobiography."<sup>16</sup>

Although we must avoid the Biographical Fallacy (using  
Coppard's life to evaluate his work) and the Romantic Fallacy  
(using Coppard's work literally to understand his life) and  
although we must recognize in the above collection of state-  
ments Coppard's frequently self-directed, self-deprecating  
comic sensibility, we must admit the unavoidable correlation  
between his life and works--both in specific events and in  
motifs. That he draws the parallel himself only provides a  
directive for the evidence that we cannot overlook.

Beginning with a surface biographical sketch of Cop-  
pard's life to 1921 and the publication of Adam and Eve and  
Pinch Me, the rest of this chapter will operate on two levels.  
On the one hand it will develop details of Coppard's life,  
some of them not previously available or previously used, to  
flesh out his biography. From this it will attempt to depict  
Coppard's psychic life, particularly as reflected in his fic-  
tion. Frank O'Connor's chapter on Coppard in The Lonely Voice

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 131.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 247.

is a precedent for the second task. In fact he sets a course for part of our analysis with his discussion of the effect Coppard's "unearned income complex" had on his fiction. He tempts us in another direction when he speculates that Coppard's oft repeated theme of woman's secretiveness implies "the grip of some inner compulsion. . . . Clearly, some personal experience was responsible for the way Coppard came back to the subject again and again."<sup>17</sup> Unfortunately, there is no available biographical material to support this notion very far in any specific way.

The basic facts of Coppard's life, up to and including his decision to break away from his established way of life to become a full time writer, have been repeated often enough and in enough detail, especially in Coppard's autobiography, to need little more than a cursory summary here.<sup>18</sup> He was born on January 4, 1878, at Folkstone, Kent, eldest son of George and Emily Southwell Coppard, a tailor and a housemaid. In 1884 his father deserted the family for a time and his mother moved the four children to Brighton. George Coppard returned to the family shortly, but, suffering from tuberculosis, died at twenty-nine when "Alfie" was nine. Emily went to work as a presser, and her meager income was supplemented by parish relief. Coppard was taken out of school, supposedly because of

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<sup>17</sup> Frank O'Connor, The Lonely Voice: A Study of the Short Story (New York: The World Publishing Co., 1965), 176.

<sup>18</sup> The following biographical sketch from Coppard's birth to 1921 is an abstract of Coppard's autobiography with additional information drawn from the Saul dissertation.

poor health, and was apprenticed to a parafin oil vendor. He never received other formal education. The next year he was sent to live with relatives in London where he worked first as an errand boy for Mr. Alabaster, a tailor, then as a messenger boy for Reuter's Telegraph Agency.

In 1892, returning to Brighton for a holiday, he begged his mother to let him remain at home. She consented, and he became an office boy at Jenner & Dell's auctioneers in Brighton. During the next few years, he worked as a clerk for a butter, bacon, cheese merchant then for the Sunlight Soap Company. Fired from that job, he went to work for Jordan & Co., carriers. At fifteen he took up professional sprinting, in which he competed successfully over the next dozen years. At twenty-one he left Jordan's to clerk for eight years at Reason Manufacturing, an engineering firm. Here he met Lilly Anne Richards, whom he married July 29, 1905, and moved to Burgess Hill, Sussex. Early in 1907, at twenty-nine, he went to Oxford where he remained for twelve years as a confidential clerk-cost accountant at the Eagle Ironworks. After writing perhaps a dozen short stories (and publishing six of them in the latter half of 1918), Coppard decided at forty-one to attempt to make his living as a writer. With his wife's cooperation and with fifty pounds, he went on All Fool's Day, 1919, to live by himself in a cottage near Oxford at Shepherd's Pit where he remained for three years, sustained mostly on raw carrots, apples, and other inexpensive foods. During this time he wrote much poetry and some additional short stories. His first collection of tales, Adam and Eve and Pinch

Me, was published by the Golden Cockerel Press on All Fool's Day, 1921.

The foregoing sketch of A. E. Coppard's surface life during the years of his growth and development describes essentially the course of a man moving from poverty to solid, middle class respectability then chucking it all for a romantic fling at writing that proved successful. It does not describe the real man struggling to find self-identity through the reading and writing of literature.

One partial testament to this struggle ("adventure" might be a better word) is the Diary that Coppard kept, unevenly, from 1902 to 1906.<sup>19</sup> It is the journal of an amazingly active young man recording, mostly in the period 1902-1904, a great variety of activities: professional running and billiards tournaments (both with handicaps, scores, wagers, prizes, participants, strategies), marathon walks around Brighton, sketching, photography, reading, writing competitions, art exhibits, and concerts, plays, and operas attended. There are many descriptions of the land and of the people of the land. The young Coppard describes the seasons' changes in their

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<sup>19</sup>When I met Mrs. Coppard in July, 1968, among the materials which she kindly allowed me to inspect was a holograph journal that Coppard had kept from January 10, 1902, to March 12, 1906. Very graciously, Mrs. Coppard gave me permission to photocopy the journal and to quote briefly from it in this study. The journal covers closely the years 1902-1903 with a few entries from 1904 and one entry for 1906. Coppard refers to it on page 128 of his autobiography: "For three years 1902-1904 I kept a scrappy register of the books I read, the prices of those I bought, the athletics I went in for, and the way I spent my luncheon hours." Within the document he refers to it as a "diary" so that is what I will call it.

effects on the land, mostly the plowed fields around Brighton. He also describes flowers, clouds, and birds seen on his frequent hikes.

The Diary contains almost no introspection and no direct entry into the mind of Coppard. He rarely talks about his self. Although one can see in the Diary a strong romantic inclination toward life and literature, there are only the lightest suggestions of his own developing love of Lilly Anne. His wife-to-be appears in many entries as "Dick," but there is little to suggest that they are about to be married. The young Coppard got along well with others--his many friends and acquaintances appear throughout the pages, and some of the incidents that he describes show that he could make friends rapidly. Yet, his greatest enjoyment is long walks alone.

A great portion of the Diary is a record of Coppard's reading as his literary consciousness grew. He meticulously records book purchases, always with prices, describes his response to the books he reads, and quotes long passages from favored prose and poetry. He is attempting to write, too. His descriptions of the land around Brighton are, especially at the beginning, sentimental, forced, mawkish, overdone, although they do improve from 1902 to 1906. Not all of his descriptions, though, are set scenes. He already has a fascination for listening to and telling tales, and, when he records persons in action--dialogue, features, movement--he is excellent. He lets the scene carry itself while his sharp eye picks out the comic, the unusual, the bizarre.

In the Diary he has already begun to devise the writing process that he was later to perfect--the continual recording of details that would finally emerge as a complete dramatic portrait. All during his life he carried with him notebooks in which he kept descriptions of scenes and events and records of odd names.

The Diary alone is ample evidence that the quotation that opens this chapter is not wholly true of Coppard. His origins were common enough, he was a recorder of human emotions, but life did not pass him by. Few persons have lived such physically and intellectually energetic lives. Coming from poverty and ignorance, A. E. Coppard read widely and deeply in English poetry and prose and practiced the craft of the short story until he finally gained recognition and a modest income as an author. He was never to escape his background though. In some ways he continued to nourish it,<sup>20</sup> and much of the best and the worst in his fiction can be traced to the continual intrusion of his past.

Just how much Coppard purposely combined his real and fictive lives has only been mentioned by his friend, fellow short story writer and critic, Frank O'Connor. He maps out some of the relationships (one might call them "psychological

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<sup>20</sup>When I spoke to Mrs. Coppard and to Coppard's friends Percy Muir and May Crittall, I was struck by how often each of them told me about the rigors of Coppard's childhood. I gathered that they told me these stories, which can be found in the autobiography and in the Johnny Flynn stories, because he enjoyed telling them the stories over and over, as though he were saying to those who knew him "Look how far I've come, old man!"

relationships") between Coppard's real life and his fiction. O'Connor briefly notes that Coppard was known later in life to his family and friends by the name of the character in the group of stories that describe his early life--Johnny Flynn.<sup>21</sup> In his autobiography Coppard vouches for the authenticity of many of the details in these stories. Twice he tells us that "The Presser" is a "truthful" account of his experiences working for Mr. Alabaster in Whitechapel as a child of ten.<sup>22</sup> Although the short story "The Presser" formalizes a single dramatic situation that may or may not have been based on fact, the flavour and many of the details of the occurrences of that time are similar in the autobiography and in the story. In fact, Coppard directs the reader of the autobiography to the tale for additional factual information about his life in London.<sup>23</sup> "The Cherry Tree" is at least an emotionally accurate account of the Coppard family's poverty as seen through the eyes of the sensitive Johnny Flynn. "Pedestrian Fancy" recounts Coppard's youthful experiences as a runner.<sup>24</sup> Coppard says that "Pomona's Babe"

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<sup>21</sup>O'Connor, 171.

<sup>22</sup>Coppard, It's Me, 22 and 46.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 46.

<sup>24</sup>Although the narrator of the 1939 tale "Pedestrian Fancy" identifies himself as Johnny Flynn and although the tale deals with some of Coppard's experiences as a runner, it is not at all like the other Flynn stories. The narrator, unlike the Johnny Flynn of the other tales, is an uncouth, insensitive almost illiterate country bumpkin who cannot fathom the cause of his best friend's suicide. The suicide, which pretends to give the story a serious purpose, is not adequately prepared for in the development of the story and seems tacked on at the end.

captures something of his adolescence in Brighton.<sup>25</sup> This story about the shame of a younger sister's unwed pregnancy cannot be confirmed as an event of Coppard's life, but Johnny's sister Pomona appears elsewhere in these tales. Finally, the lengthy short story "My Hundredth Tale" concerns Johnny Flynn's boyhood and later career as a novelist. Specific incidents of that tale are factual autobiography,<sup>26</sup> and most of it might well be factual psychological autobiography. Certainly these tales must be judged as fiction according to sound formal principles, and all of them are striking short stories that give strong evidence of Coppard's ability to create, if not actually recall, convincing human emotion and dramatic actions. The stories can and do stand without any dependence on their author. But, it is equally clear that the author came to depend on them. He adopted Flynn as an alter ego.

Coppard wrote the following personal dedication on the copy of Clorinda Walks in Heaven that he gave to his mother:

To Mrs. George Coppard,  
Mother

You will not know until you have read this book (and perhaps not even then) that it is dedicated to you. But if these remeberences of Johnny Flynn do brush you like a faint kiss out of the past, he will be the happiest of souls for they were written out of his love for you, the best heroine he has known or could ever hope to know.

"Johnny Flynn"  
1. June 1922 27

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<sup>25</sup>Coppard, It's Me, 131.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 29.

<sup>27</sup>This dedication was copied from the original by Mrs. Coppard for Mrs. Crittall at her request. Mrs. Crittall kindly allowed me to make a copy of it.



"The Cherry Tree" and "Pomona's Babe" were collected in Clorinda, which bears the formal dedication "To Mrs. Flynn."

Coppard's second wife, Winifred De Kok Coppard, always called him "Flynn," as did others of his family and friends, such as Pink and May Crittall.<sup>28</sup> In most of the personal dedications written in the copies of his books given to the Crittalls, Coppard signed himself "Flynn." Dunky Fitlow he formally dedicated to them, and the following appears in his hand on the dedication page:

It has only just dawned upon my besotted brain that I never had the grace to ask your permission to dedicate this book to you. And now it's too late! But believe, please, that it was out of affection that I took this liberty with your names.

Flynn  
Oct. 10, 1933 29

Coppard signs himself "Flynn" in handwritten presentation messages to Pink and May Crittall of copies of his Collected Poems in 1934, Polly Oliver in 1935, and You Never Know, Do You? in 1939. For the presentation copy of Ninepenny Flute in 1937, he signs himself "The Warden of Walberswick," another fictional title he apparently encouraged. He dropped it, however, the following year when he moved from Walberswick to Duton Hill, Dunmow, Essex, about a quarter mile from the Crittalls.

The intermix of fact and fiction in Coppard's life

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<sup>28</sup>When I spoke to Mrs. Coppard, she repeatedly called her late husband "Flynn." Mrs. Crittall told me that Mrs. Coppard had asked her and her late husband to address Coppard as "Flynn" because it would make him happy."

<sup>29</sup>Mrs. Crittall graciously allowed me to use this and the following materials.

spilled over into the lives of others. He writes in the "Epilogue" to the Schwartz Bibliography:

Here at the close of a work devoted to my own books is perhaps the best place to mention that there are a few novels and stories published by other writers in which I myself figure in more or less veiled forms. My pride in thus furnishing my friends with interesting material is mitigated by the fact that the resulting "portraits" are always, unfailingly, derogatory ones!<sup>30</sup>

One of these biographical-fictions, No Goodness in the Worm, was written by Gay Taylor, wife of Coppard's publisher Harold Taylor. Coppard had an affair with her during the early twenties, about the time her husband was dying of tuberculosis.<sup>31</sup> He dedicated The Black Dog to her in 1923, and in 1925 he dedicated to her Fishmonger's Fiddle.

The theme of Mrs. Taylor's novel is convincingly set forth in the title (and the novel is as ghastly as the title would lead one to believe). She thoroughly castigates Coppard, but the novel is still valuable as both a physical and psychological portrait of Coppard. Giving due recognition to the fact that the writer was a woman scorned with a debt to settle, much of the novel can be confirmed in at least a

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<sup>30</sup>Jacob Schwartz, The Writings of Alfred Edgar Coppard. A Bibliography. With forward and notes by A. E. Coppard. (London: The Ulysses Bookshop, 1931), 73.

<sup>31</sup>Since Coppard provides no clues as to titles or authors of the biographical-fictions to which he alludes, I queried Mrs. Coppard on this point. She could provide me with no details on stories or novels but told me that Coppard had had an affair with Gay Taylor before he met Winifred. When Coppard broke off with her, Gay was embittered and wrote two novels attacking him. The only novel by Gay Taylor that I have been able to find is No Goodness in the Worm. After reading the novel, I asked Mrs. Coppard and Mrs. Crittall to confirm certain details of Coppard's physical appearance and speech in the novel, which they did. When I described the plot to Mrs. Coppard, she found it amusing.

general way by other sources, including Coppard himself.

No Goodness in the Worm is the story of Valentine Spens [Gay] and Francis Merryweather [Coppard], who delivers her from "the half-infantile, half-sexed life to which Humphrey [Harold Taylor] had condemned her."<sup>32</sup> Merryweather is living alone in a cottage on Heron Hill [Little Poynants] designing furniture. He affects open-necked fine linen shirts. He has a nose like a beak, and he habitually twists a lock of his very black hair into his forehead. Except for the mannerism, the description exactly duplicates the photograph of Coppard taken at Shepherd's Pit in 1921. In addition, the narrator describes Merryweather as subtle, unschooled, unfamilied, rustic, hedonistic, and superficial.

He seemed to [Valentine] to have an animal's grace and an animal's aloofness; an animal's self-absorption he had too, quiet and deep, and quite unlike the restless tearing introspection of her own generation.<sup>33</sup>

As the exposition of this transparent "novel" develops into complication, the two become romantically involved after an ankle is romantically cut on briars. He ministers to it: "I say, old man, you're positively wounded. Wait a minute, I'll bathe it for you."<sup>34</sup> In a later moment of introspection with a friend, Valentine describes the psychology of her sexual relationship with Merryweather:

"To feel happy about our relationship, you see, I have to think that it is in some ultimate way right. But he can't

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<sup>32</sup>Gay Taylor, No Goodness in the Worm (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1930), 22.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 37.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 75. Mrs. Crittall told me that Coppard called everyone "old man."

enjoy it unless he thinks it's wrong. To do what he feels he ought not to be doing gives him the real authentic thrill."<sup>35</sup>

Eventually Valentine begins to see Merryweather as "less a supreme artist than a clever little craftsman, and fearful for his future." He becomes trivial and "endlessly enthusiastic over surface cleverness and smart sayings." He becomes "auto-intoxicated" with his success at furniture making.<sup>36</sup> In the meantime she learns from him that he once was a clerk, was married and divorced and has had a long line of women. True to form, Merryweather impregnates Valentine's best friend Sikey while he is living with Valentine. Valentine, despondent, enraged, burns his drawings, moves to London, attempts suicide. She comes to think of him as a "liar and philanderer."<sup>37</sup>

Valentine goes back to him at last but finds him married. At their meeting she contemplates his features:

Her attention was not on her words but on his face. It was really impudent, coarse and impudent. No, perhaps it was less impudence than impudeur, and there was something strangely shocking about it: this impudence, this impudeur, was the reflection of the fevered attempts of a man no longer young to stimulate his own sensuality.<sup>38</sup>

Although throughout the novel Gay has described Copard in animal images--"animal grace," "eyes like a squirrel,"-- she concludes that he has lost the true freedom of the animal wild but that he has not been really civilized either.

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<sup>35</sup>Ibid., 105.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., 123.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 208.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 213

Consequently, he is just vicious. He confuses fact and fiction constantly, and, when facts make him uncomfortable, he changes them and believes the fabrication. This last is not too far from what Coppard has told us about himself in his autobiography.

Gay Taylor's picture of Coppard is only more extreme than that a more objective observer might draw. Frank O'Connor writes about Coppard's life as a tension between freedom and necessity and notes Coppard's "obsession with personal freedom--freedom from responsibilities, freedom from conventions--particularly sexual conventions."<sup>39</sup> Coppard's whole life exhibits his attempt to escape from his own feared vulgarity and to avoid those who remind him of his impoverished, ignorant past by being themselves vulgar. "My Hundredth Tale" is a first person account of Johnny Flynn living alone in a cottage in the forest writing novels and having affairs with a series of women. The first two women are too vulgar for his self-educated, fastidious sensibilities, and the last, a real lady with a private income, finds him too vulgar for her. Although none of the women in "My Hundredth Tale" corresponds to Gay Taylor, the psychology of Flynn and Merryweather is strikingly similar. Taylor's description of Merryweather-Coppard, as a studied bucolic who has lost his original unschooled innocence but has not gained true sophistication, is that of a cripple, which Coppard was not. Yet, rendered with more subtlety and less venom, it would begin to describe the conflict at the core of Coppard's personality.

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<sup>39</sup>O'Connor, 172.

Russell MacDonald has concluded that "Coppard was a sensitive but not a complicated person, a rather ordinary man who happened to have an extraordinary desire to be a writer."<sup>40</sup> Sensitive Coppard was, but he was neither simple nor unambiguous. The tension between his romantic, fictive imagination--that created for him a world he would have liked to believe in--and his careful, observing eye--that saw the world for what it is--expressed itself in an ironic, comic, tragic vision that he was never able to completely detach from his own life. Gay Taylor came in time to see Coppard's vulgarity (in her embittered way), but she did not know that Coppard saw it, too, and shrank before it.

Coppard despised vulgarity in others and feared it in himself. Yet, he was strongly attracted to vulgarity both in himself and in others. The more he learned, the more well read he became, the more that he longed to attach himself to his own vital roots. He was a self-styled teller of tales for the common man. All of his life he loved to inhabit taverns where he listened to the tales told by the common man, and, more often, told his own tales. Percy Muir describes Coppard walking into a pub and immediately making himself at home, telling stories that held the attention of the working class men for hours. Wherever he went on his frequent walking tours through England and Ireland, he stopped in working class pubs, introduced himself as "Flynn," and began telling tales. His ability to

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<sup>40</sup>Russell MacDonald, A. E. Coppard: A Critical Study of His Short Stories (Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1961), 36.

capture the imagination of an audience, and his joy in doing so, can be found in his Diary. In the entry for June 22, 1902, he records a long day's walk with a friend: "On the way home over the lonely hills I told Symonds some of Poe's tales.[sic] 'The Maelstrom' 'The Pendulum' & 'The Mesmerized Corpse' made him quite uncomfortable." On July 6 he repeated the experience: "Coming home I beguiled Symonds with some more terrible tales, & rather unnerved him again to my great joy."

Much of Coppard's fiction is "vulgar" in the best and original sense of the word--concerning the common man. Brewster and Burrell comment on this element in Coppard when defending Joyce's Ulysses against charges of vulgarity.

The book has been accused of great vulgarity. This need not necessarily be an adverse comment. Healthy, lustful, fructifying vulgarity can be a very acceptable quality in life and in literature. It can serve as a fertilizer of much beauty that blossoms from it. One feels this in Rabelais, in Fielding, in Smollett perhaps, and in A. E. Coppard. It is refreshing to meet or to read about people who have a direct, unambiguous contact with life--who in their own activities are life itself. Such writers have gusto and vitality, ingenuity and humor.<sup>41</sup>

Coppard may have been able to create this "unambiguous contact with life" in his tales, but he could not find it in his own life. As Flynn says in "My Hundredth Tale":

A tailor might devour his cabbage with a soup-spoon and fart in front of his wife and still serve God with humility, but your poet would rather shoot himself than imitate the tailor. And so, I thought, would I.

In his autobiography Coppard describes his growing disdain for vulgarity as an adolescent. A favorite newspaper columnist, Mr Sporting Notions, wrote a book that Alf would

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<sup>41</sup>Dorothy Brewster and Angus Burrell, Modern Fiction (New York: Columbia University Press, 1934), 211.

not read

because he had given it the horrible title of Bottled Holidays for Home Consumption. I was very dainty then about a thing like that--I thought it vulgar! Although steeped in vulgarity myself I could quibble at such a literary peccadillo, and I recall how I squirmed at an awful newspaper poster sensationally recording the assassination of the French President:

CE CHER CARNOT  
LUNGED IN THE LIVER AT LYONS<sup>42</sup>

His sense of his own and other's vulgarity developed from his reading, especially his reading of poetry, particularly his reading of "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," which effected his life immediately, profoundly, permanently. In both "My Hundredth Tale" and his autobiography Coppard details the discovery of this poem which changed his life. When he was about seventeen, he was on his way home one wintry night when he sought shelter under a second-hand bookseller's awning. While passing the time, he happened upon Keats' poem and was struck by the "magic" of its "poesy."<sup>43</sup> The romance of poetry became, for the young "Alfie," a filter for life. Especially did "La Belle . . ." effect his understanding of women.

Long inspired by a notion foolishly derived from poems and romances of the virtues and delicacy of the beautiful, I naturally wanted to know only that kind of girl: . . . I was befooled, I was indeed a noodle. There were some whom I could only furtively admire, while those I did get to know lied to me with an amiable simplicity that confirmed me in my purity of adoration. How was I to know that there were no La Belle Dame sans merci, no late Victorian Unas or Mirandas? How was I to know then that I, too, was pretending!<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup>Coppard, It's Me, 100.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., 61.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 87.



The sense of chivalry with which he surrounded women even directed him to passively accept a punch in the jaw from Lilly Anne's father.

I had enough ability at that time to have torn him apart and strewn the remains upon his own hearth. As, of course, I ought to have done! But I must have had a real touch of literary chivalry. Could I lift my hand against the father of the girl whose love I cherished? Instantly I knew that I could not. And I did not. And I regret it still although it happened as long ago as Queen Victoria's time.<sup>45</sup>

At the Brighton Works Coppard expanded his friendships with members of the working class and added to his experiences in the process. The men and women there were earthy, worldly, fascinating, yet more than a little distressing to young Alf. They had lived much, but he had read. He joined their revels but hid behind shame and smugness. They possessed common knowledge of which he was ignorant--what to wear, what to drink, what to eat. They knew about gambling and women.

They were embarrassingly free in their talk about sex, drawing upon a common litter of humorous eroticism that I shrank from, not because of native virtue of my own but in conformity with notions of high-mindedness culled from my poetic reading.<sup>46</sup>

More than once Alf went with his fellow workers on midnight whoring escapades down by the seafront, but, unlike them, he always declined the offers of the "bawds":

Though inwardly abashed I could always present a brazen front. I was distressed, not morally but because the quarry was always so tawdry and profitless; had they been young and attractive I might have been their customer, these were poor, coarse, flabby, nocturnal wretches, eeking out the wages not of sin but of poverty. . . . I am utterly sickened of the romantic view of prostitutes as portrayed in fiction from de Quincy onwards.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup>Ibid., 97.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., 113.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., 114.

"My Hundredth Tale" is filled with Johnny Flynn's growing sense of superiority over the young men and women of his home town. He has gained a level of experience in literature that they cannot even comprehend. He leaves his home town, clearly Brighton, and takes to a cottage in the woods where he lives one fictitious life after another through his novels. Cut off from his roots, he returns home seeking some kind of salvation, searching for his real self that has become for him just another poetic phantom. He finds himself an outcast by his own hand--or pen. Old friends are briefly, superficially interested in him, but no one really understands him or accepts him. Nor can he accept them. He has become a stranger in his own land. "If I had told them I wrote books they would have laughed, compassionately. Yet I wanted them to read and like them, for they were my people, my own sort."

Johnny Flynn returns to his isolated cottage in the woods for another five years, living out more fictitious lives, before once more attempting to live his own. He goes to London and returns with Livia, a born lady. At first he is hopeful that such a personage might stoop to love him, but eventually he discovers, through the vulgar subterfuge of reading Livia's correspondence, that she thinks him vulgar. He has had his chance to be human, after a fashion, but, when he had asked her for her love, Livia had told him that a "gentleman" would not need it. To that Johnny had pompously replied: "I'm no gent. . . . I'm an artist." Art must now be sufficient meaning for life. But, art by itself is not enough.

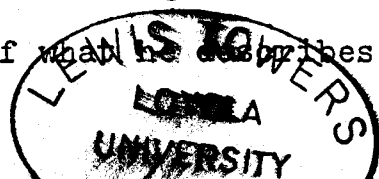
She left me face to face with an inadequacy I had never before been able to look squarely in the eye. I look at it now, I have much time; for five years I have stared myself almost blind by not doing anything else. She had found me vulgar, not merely because I had abjured life by imitating joys and sorrows that were never really mine--a parvenu in a suit of words--but because I had been born vulgar. And now I have lost my place, there is no place for me either here or there. With the women of my own class love had been nipped by their deficiencies, with Livia it was ruined by my own.

Appearance is a poor substitute for reality, and the "fiction-monger" has become his own fiction. Johnny Flynn becomes frozen at the recognition. He is condemned to live somewhere between the real world with the vulgarity he both abhors and shares and the fictional world with its false promise of romance and escape. At the end of the tale Johnny Flynn tells us that for five years he has sat in his isolated hut doing nothing but contemplating the wreckage of his shattered life. Vulgarity is shameful, but the alternative, false sophistication, is bland, empty, superficial. Much like Merryweather-Coppard, Flynn-Coppard has become a cripple.

But, there is something romantic even about the crippling deficiency of Johnny Flynn at the end of "My Hundredth Tale." Certainly Coppard recognized in himself the dilemma that confronts Johnny Flynn, but the ending takes on a sort of cosmic helplessness that one might get from an impressionistic reading of some romantic poetry.

I am getting poor again, and I suppose I shall die in some idiotic way. But it does not matter, nothing really matters: the gnat has a piercing tooth, but great calamities calm us. . . . I can do nothing for myself. I am a lost ship waiting for a wind that will never blow again.

Although Coppard had in him much of what he describes



in Johnny Flynn, we must remember that Coppard did not become frozen with despair. He wrote the story. In fact, the romance at the end is so overdone as to suggest to one who knows Coppard another example of his comic recognition of himself: "Still, there is my private comedy to be enjoyed, the recognition that my swans were indubitably geese after all."<sup>48</sup> Also, Coppard approached the story "My Hundredth Tale" with the careful deliberation of the artist in full control.

This tale, as the title indicates, is the one with which I reached my century. I suppose I could have found a more suitable title, but I had a sporting desire to signalise the event in this way. The two main themes of the tale, the nemesis of vulgarity and the protean disintegration of a writer, were in my mind for some years and as I got closer to No. 100 I deliberately reserved them for that occasion.<sup>49</sup>

Coppard certainly saw his own life through an artistic filter, but he did not lose the capacity to raise and lower it at will. Yet, our recognition of Coppard's concern with his own vulgarity is substantive. As he moved from ignorance to increasing literacy, he became more convinced of the vulgarity of others and more suspect of his own. The comic detachment he maintained was often, like much comedy, a defense. In his autobiography he describes himself in his youth as a figure of fun to others. When he worked for Jordan & Co., carriers,

the carmen, all big stout fellows, called me Little Dick and seemed to regard me as a figure of fun, which I presumably must have been. I recall my astonishment (and discomfort) at a friendly question put to me at that time: 'Why do you go on wearing those pea-green trousers?'<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup>Ibid., 16.

<sup>49</sup>Schwartz, 61.

<sup>50</sup>Coppard, It's Me, 77-78.

Coppard tells us that from the age of sixteen to twenty-six he ran, read, fell in love, and tried to write verse. He changed jobs several times, but more often he changed girls, or, more exactly, they changed him:

Often, no doubt, my lamentable appearance was the cause, for my ready-made trousers seldom cost more than five shillings and the rest of me was to match; by their standards (alas) I was not a presentable object; by temperament I was no swashbuckler, there was no more to be said. There came a time when I was able to put some gloss on myself, but that was not to be for some years.<sup>51</sup>

"Pomona's Babe" describes Johnny Flynn as he appeared to a loving but not uncritical mother:

He was thin and not tall, his dark hair was scattered; his white face was a nice face, thought Mrs. Flynn, very nice, only there was always something strange about his clothes. She couldn't help that now, but he had such queer fancies; there was no other boy on the street whose trousers were so baggy or of such a colour. His starched collars were all right, of course, beautifully white and shiny--she got them up herself--and they set his neck off nicely.

Coppard, like Johnny Flynn, was afraid of being mocked by his fellows for his literary bent, so he kept it a secret: "I shrank from conferring with anybody about my private hobby, for I could not bear to be laughed at."<sup>52</sup> That he eventually learned to laugh at himself so well is conclusive evidence that he was not the psychological cripple that Merryweather and Johnny Flynn became.

Yet, his concern for vulgarity became a controlling factor in his life and in his fiction. For Coppard, vulgarity expressed itself in two forms: poverty and ignorance. He believed that he had escaped the latter, but he could not quite escape the first, and he never shook off the distaste, the

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<sup>51</sup>Ibid., 68.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., 85.

fear, of either.

Johnny Flynn says in "My Hundredth Tale" that he began to write, not for fame or for beauty, but to escape simple priggishness and to earn money: "La Belle Dame had made me a prig, but it is a pity to be a prig forever. Or for nothing. And so I began to write." Although Coppard was all of his life a man of purposefully simple wants, the fear of poverty dogged his life. In the Georgian Confession Book of 1930 Coppard answered seven of the twenty-four personal questions with references to money.<sup>53</sup> To the questions "Your worst fault, real or fancied?", "Your life's greatest sorrow experienced?", "Your life's greatest sorrow feared?", and "The fault you dislike most in others?" he answered four times "Impecuniosity." His idea of both the best invention and the worst invention? "A money box." He responds to the question "Your life's greatest pleasure experienced?" with "Writing a poem." But, for the next question, "Your life's greatest pleasure anticipated?", he replies, "Getting paid for it." While we might enjoy Coppard's "having on" the reader with humorous comments about money, after a point the joke begins to strain, especially when we note that his fascination with money was not isolated to this "confession."

Coppard's autobiography records the shame he experienced due to his youthful poverty. The Coppard family "plunged into

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<sup>53</sup> Gilbert H. Fabes, compiler, The Georgian Confession Book (London: W. & G. Foyle Ltd., September 1930), all the following material is on the same unnumbered page.

acute poverty" with the death of George Coppard, and Emily worked long hours as a laundress.

Thus for some years, eked out with Parish Relief, we subsisted and survived. Parish Relief was a humiliating thing, everyone tried to conceal it; niggardly charity is bitter to receive, though hunger loves a soup kitchen.<sup>54</sup>

Many years later, when Coppard was about twenty-one, he was able to relieve his family of this burden and himself of the stigma. At the Works he received a sudden promotion and a large salary increase. Immediately, he ran home and ordered his mother to quit her job, which, after some hesitation, she did.

How proud I was! All the same I knew my pride was mixed with relief at the removal of a stigma. Association with an office full of professional ladies had shown me that my social status was not on a par with theirs; that a mother who went out to work in a laundry for two and sixpence a day was no social asset, to say nothing of two sisters incarcerated in domestic service.<sup>55</sup>

Although Coppard's hard work, beginning at the age of nine, eventually freed him of his childhood poverty, he did not escape the painful memory of it.

I was a good clerk, I had seen to that, and my success had enabled me to climb out of the poverty of my childhood. Not until I had so escaped did I realize the fiendish thing such poverty is. My beginning was nurtured on the Parish Relief of seventy years ago; I am hopeful that my second childhood will be spared a comparable indignity. If I am careful, and do not live too long, I shall just about manage it.<sup>56</sup>

A. E. Coppard was a life long socialist like his father,<sup>57</sup> even a secretary of the I.L.P. at Oxford.<sup>58</sup> He always

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<sup>54</sup>Coppard, It's Me, 40.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., 92

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., 158.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., 14.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., 146, 148ff.

lived simply. For part of his life he was a principled vegetarian.<sup>59</sup> He had no desire to own things or to travel in style. In short, both as a matter of philosophical choice and personal disposition, Coppard had almost no need for money. Yet, he wanted it badly.

Percy Muir describes Coppard as a Socialist-Communist sympathizer, perhaps because he was not earning much money from his own labors. But, no matter how much he complained about money--and he complained often and loudly--he would have had nothing to do with it. According to Muir, Flynn was always an extremely happy man. He was easy going and never really felt any pressing need for money.

Certainly, the scars of childhood poverty were a major ingredient in Coppard's life long fear of destitution. But, his ambivalence about money developed further out of his perception of his society. His father had been a socialist. He himself had worked since childhood. In the best capitalist tradition, he had pulled himself out of poverty through hard work to a position of middle class respectability. With the publication of his short story collections and his subsequent fame, he might reasonably have expected to become even more well off. But, this did not happen. His best salary at the Eagle Ironworks was \$212.<sup>60</sup> And, according to his second wife, he eventually earned about \$500-600 a year for his

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<sup>59</sup>Ibid., 158.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., 211.



writing. Although this latter is more than twice what he was making as a clerk, it is by no means consistent with what one might expect as a reward for literary regard, nor does it take into account inflation. In effect, Coppard saw the value system of his society in a very simple yet very understandable way. The society sends out all sorts of messages that money is the token of its highest esteem. It also promises to confer money in accordance with the value and degree of one's labor. Furthermore, the society says that it values art. Working his way out of ignorance, according high valuation to the work of his favorites, spending all of his extra money for books,<sup>61</sup> A. E. Coppard came to see a direct link between literary worth and economic recognition. When he himself achieved a measure of literary fame, he was confused and embittered that money did not come with it. In fact, during the time he was best known and his work was most in demand--1930-1935, he was further confused and angered that those holding autographed copies of his first editions were making huge sums for single copies of volumes that had earned him little.

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<sup>61</sup>Coppard ran principally for the prize money so that he could purchase books. In his Diary entry for May 24, 1902, he says: "Sports at the Reason Ground (annual) [.] I won 4 third prizes viz. 120 yds, ¼ mile, 1 mile, & throwing cricket ball. I was really third in long jump, but a mistake by the judges "outed" me. My prizes were a fearful walking stick, a set of carvers of which the knife refuses to perform the only duty one asks of a carver--to carve & 2 of the most medally silver medals God ever permitted a man to make. The value of the lot is about a £1. I swear when I think of the books I could have bought with the money." May 27 of the following year Coppard took fourth place in a 29¼ mile walk that he completed in 5 hours 8 minutes. "My prize money was value of 15/- [.] I chose with this JW Mackail's translation of "The Odyssey 5/- & 7 vols of Chiswick Shakespear."

Frank O'Connor, enraged by a poor book of Coppard's, once "called his preoccupation with money 'an unearned income complex.'"<sup>62</sup> O'Connor traces Coppard's fascination with money through his tales and suggests that Coppard's decline as a writer can be followed in the working out of his fiscal fantasies in his fiction. Ironically, he entitles the chapter about Coppard, "The Price of Freedom." According to O'Connor, Coppard was one of a group of Georgians obsessed with freedom, but for Coppard freedom meant a sufficient, dependable income. O'Connor describes the "terrible note of anguish and self-pity" in the Johnny Flynn stories. He quotes Johnny's childish prayer for relief from hunger in "The Presser":

"O God, make him give me a penny tonight, only a penny; make him give me a penny, please God. Amen." The prayer was not answered, and I suspect that Flynn never forgave God or the English upper class for it.<sup>63</sup>

O'Connor links this childish prayer with the frustration of the artist in "Luxury" [in this strongly autobiographical story the narrator-protagonist is not identified as Johnny Flynn]:

"The garden is all right, and literature is all right, only I live too much on porridge. It isn't the privation itself, it's the things privation makes a man do, it makes him mean, it makes him feel mean, I tell you, and if he feels mean and thinks mean he writes meanly, that's how it is."

It isn't how it is, and I don't think it ever made Coppard write meanly. . . . All the same, I don't think one can understand his work without keeping it in mind.<sup>64</sup>

O'Connor contends that in Coppard's earlier fiction, such as, "The Higglers" and "The Watercress Girl," money "is

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<sup>62</sup>O'Connor, 171.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid.

kept in its proper place as a necessary condition of life."<sup>65</sup> But, in another story of the same period, "The Little Mistress," money begins to intrude.<sup>66</sup> By the time Coppard published The Field of Mustard in 1926, the money problem had got out of hand.<sup>67</sup> No longer does everyone in a Coppard story work for a living. Now they have "modest incomes" or even "fortunes" conveniently left them by deceased relatives.<sup>68</sup> Now they have the freedom to do as they will. The necessity of earning a living, and with it the need to be perfectly respectable, has been lifted from them.

O'Connor believes that as time went on Coppard began more and more to replace his characters with himself. He had taken the necessity so much from their lives that they were left with nothing to do. They became too free to be real.<sup>69</sup> Because Coppard was a man of the people, he could describe well the working class and its need for a little money to free it from stark necessity. His own achievement "gave him a new perception of the possibilities of their lives, but when he turned to people of the leisured classes" he tended to romanticize "wealth and position."<sup>70</sup>

As Coppard is drawn more and more in his fiction to an equation in which freedom is to necessity as wealth is to poverty,

one begins to do sums, equating conduct with cash, and arrives at such conclusions as that for five hundred pounds

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<sup>65</sup>Ibid., 179.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid., 180.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid., 181.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid. 183.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid., 185.

one can afford an illegitimate child, for one thousand pounds a lover on the Riviera, for fifteen hundred pounds bigamy, and for a clear two thousand bigamy and a love affair with an American Indian.<sup>71</sup>

O'Connor ends the chapter by implying that Coppard was attracted to life in the communist states because he came to see freedom simplistically as relief from the direst economic necessity, which these societies guarantee.<sup>72</sup> He gradually forgot that freedom has components other than money and that he, in fact, had achieved extraordinary personal freedom. Coppard never made much money, but, in that his income was, through most of his adult life, significantly greater than his simple needs, he had freed himself from poverty. Still, in so far as his obsession with money came to play a greater and greater part in his life and in his fiction, he did not really escape it.

A. E. Coppard was more certain, however, of his escape from ignorance. This certitude, in fact took on such immense proportions that through most of his life he could be counted on to lay down the final word, and likely the first, on any topic under God's heaven, including God. In the beautifully comic scene in his Diary, Coppard exhibits early his condescending superiority (here to his mother):

My mother's gossip grows voluminous, she's quite a character. "You know Alf when I was up there, I used to tell them gals so, whatever it was[.] They used to say 'Why Coppard's a jolly old witch, that she is'. And s'elp me bob, its just the same with politics[.]" Her[e]her garrulity develops[.] "I says to Mis Hillman, well, I says, so & so, and so & so & there it is. Yes, I see, she says[.] Ive never 'ad it put before me in that way

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<sup>71</sup>Ibid., 184.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid., 186.

before. She's a Roman Catholic but I says there's nothing to beat a good ole Liberal" (at this point I shut my book & exhibit a sort of rebellious interest)[.] "I was just the same when I first got married, but your poor ole dad, he used to get me up in such a corner & fair beat it into me 'e did; he used to drive me clean off me rocker & make me understand all about it" (I make a comprehending inclination of my superior head, & suffer mutely)[.] "The things never used to be so dear: when ole Gladdy was in he made everything cheap & paid up all the Natural debts & saved any amount of money, any amount that there ole Gladdy saved. And then the Queen must go and send for that beautiful Beaconsfield, & what with the wars & the things, he spent every blooming farthing he did that poor old Gladdy 'ad saved, Alf. And the country kicked up bobs-a-dying, & was in such a uproar that the Queen had to send for old Gladdy to come back. But e wouldn't go; e said he wouldn't go, & move e never did" (a pause, chockful of unearthly things)[.] "There was, Sir "Something" Bright, too, e rebuked the corn bills, & give us a cheap loaf". (the latter achievement constitutes a transcendental feature of all her favorite statemen) Sir Somethings "rebuke" assaulted my reserve & I subsided.<sup>73</sup>

When Coppard got older, he also got louder. His quiet condescension became argumentative authoritarianism. He confirms this in his autobiography. Speaking of the art, literature, and music that he came to know, enjoy, and be nourished by, he tells the reader:

Such as I came to love was never to be anything lower than the best, the best naturally and inevitably being just my own apprehension of it! This seems and sounds sheer impudence on the part of one who never suffered any categorical instruction in any of the arts and even now professes an aversion to Bach and Mozart, a dislike of El Greco, a contempt for Van Gogh, and is comfortably allergic to the productions of Dryden, Swift, Bacon, and Thackeray. . . . These are but a few of my hundreds of unauthorized opinions--authorized opinion is no opinion at all.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup>Coppard, Diary, January 18, 1903. I have attempted to reproduce the Diary as exactly as possible with a minimum of editing. Coppard has a habit of omitting periods at the end of sentences; I have supplied them, and a few other minor corrections, in brackets.

<sup>74</sup>Coppard, It's Me, 132.

In case anyone has missed the message, he tempers it for a moment and then charges on. He professes to have the "proper share of the biological urge of adaptation to environment" to keep him "amicable" much of the time, yet

I was imbued with a stubbornness or contrariness that had little care for compromise when argument arose. Although uneducated and ill-informed, I developed immensities of opinion and was not easily convinced of my ignorance or unreason. Invariably I deferred to my own opinions--I still prefer it that way! Wrong they may be, exposing my absurdities and inducing mockery, but such ideas and prejudices, commonly dignified by politicians as their principles, are one's life and pride. . . . Mine served, and were good and proper for me, until they were confuted, and by that time I had generally grown so attached to them that I continued to cherish them privately, as pensioners.<sup>75</sup>

Coppard's stubborn, argumentative, opinionated temperament was probably a compensation for his youthful ignorance which he became immensely proud of, once he had left it behind. He loved to talk about his impoverished, ignorant childhood, and he reminded his friends time and again that he had left school permanently at nine. Mrs. Coppard, Percy Muir, and Mrs. Crittall all remember Flynn's penchant for argument. He would argue long and loudly on any topic, especially art, religion, and politics, whether or not he knew anything about it. He could be embarrassing at dinner parties because, although his friends knew his love of argument and could usually avoid one if they chose, strangers were invariably trapped in fearsome, righteous tirades. Since he often did not know what he was talking about, he simply invented arguments and attempted to browbeat opponents. Yet, for all his bluster, he knew that he was merely staging a scene, and usually his own comic sense

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<sup>75</sup>Ibid.

would take over. At this point, Percy Muir remembers, although Coppard might have been arguing noisily and with complete conviction, he would end the argument by laughing at himself in a loud hearty laugh that made his face crease into a mass of smiling wrinkles.

Reading what Coppard has said about his self-education is a lesson in the enjoyment of life and literature. He read widely and deeply in the greats of English literature. Beachcroft points out that Coppard read and pondered great masses of literature that many "well-educated" people know only from a distance.<sup>76</sup> Yet, for all of this enthusiasm, much of his study was just that. He became compulsive about reading great works, especially the long ones, clear through. He spoke proudly, later, of the untutored "instinct" that led him to read the things that were right for him. But, he exhibited all of his life the marks of the self-educated man. One, of course, was his satisfaction with his own opinions. Because he had met only a few persons with whom he could discuss literature and ideas during his formative years, he became convinced of the truth of his own opinions. The other habit he remarks on frequently. He consistently mispronounced words, especially the kinds of words he would most likely come across in his reading.

Having no education or scholastic attainments, I hopelessly mispronounced many words with which I was now familiar through reading; I perfectly understood them

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<sup>76</sup>T. O. Beachcroft, The Modest Art: A Survey of the Short Story in English (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 189.

but had never heard them spoken; awry was one simple example--I always said aw-ree. Another was elegiac, which I pronounced elee-giac. Greek names, naturally, were always slaughtered in my ignorant innocence. . . . My most bizarre effort was with Shelley's 'Epipsychidion', which even to this day I have never heard anyone pronounce.<sup>77</sup>

Coppard read with a joy that might be beyond anyone who has "studied" literature:

No amount of repetition could lessen or bring repletion of the instant joy poems like 'L'Allegro' gave me, and it became a happy hobby to print out in plain exercise books the lyrics I specially loved. I made blunders, of course, but they were few . . . once I had struck the match the light seemed to blaze unerringly in that Aladdin's cave.<sup>78</sup>

But, he read with a compulsive thoroughness that in itself defines his fear of ignorance.

Once it was my self-imposed duty to tackle the reading of very long poems, that seemed significant and truly necessary to me! Keats decided that he would not be entitled to the name of poet until he had written a lengthy work; the least I could do was read the longest of the long! . . . I tackled Paradise Lost, Troilus and Criseyde, The Excursion, and some of Browning's monoliths. Tackled is the not juste: I did not browse on them, I grappled, and although they often perplexed me, prostrated and stifled me, I laid them low--I must be the only person alive who has ever read Hudibras clean through! I am able to hold, pronounce, and insist to the death, that The Ring and the Book is the most beautiful long poem ever written--in English at any rate.<sup>79</sup>

Coppard's search for the literature that was to be his own was done without the guide of a tutor or mentor, without the communion of a "fellow-seeker." He had no classes to attend, no papers to prepare. Perhaps because of this, he

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<sup>77</sup>Coppard, It's Me, 70; see also, pp. 17, 60, 126.

<sup>78</sup>Ibid., 69.

<sup>79</sup>Ibid., 34-35. Coppard did literally "insist to the death." He took The Ring and the Book with him to the hospital where he died.



implies, he was never in his life bored. In fact, he desired no assistance, no instruction, wanting to be alone to follow his own instinct.<sup>80</sup> In this single-minded pursuit of literature during his late adolescence, he became high-handed and demanded that his family conform to his conditions of study:

I was tyrannical and ruthless too, for I demanded complete silence for the brief time of an evening when we were all together at home, and the loud-ticking clock whose noise exacerbated my dainty nerves had to be removed from the mantelpiece and put out on the stairs.<sup>81</sup>

He contends that his resolute, interior directed study of literature had both bad and good effects on his person:

Such preparation of course left me undisciplined, self-willed, opinionated, and intolerant, but I suppose it nourished whatever spark of original talent I had. I was utterly susceptible to poetry and read it seekingly-- that is the only fitting word; although there was no positive goal in my seeking beyond the exalting happiness of entering into the enchanting mood.<sup>82</sup>

Also, during this period Coppard had begun reading "tough speculative prose," such as, The Origin of the Species, the Hibbert lectures of Max Muller on Comparative Religion, the Rig Veda, and The Upanishads.<sup>83</sup> Some of his attempts at self-education seem comic in their exaggeration. In the Diary we find Alf on January 19, 1902, and February 4, 1902, purchasing for two pence and reading a book called Agricultural Chemistry. He read Darwin about the same time.

A. E. Coppard has described the three major events of his literary experience as the discovery of "La Belle Dame

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<sup>80</sup>Ibid., 84-85.

<sup>81</sup>Ibid., 85.

<sup>82</sup>Ibid.

<sup>83</sup>Ibid.

"Sans Merci," of Thomas Hardy's short fiction collection Life's Little Ironies, and of Whitman's Leaves of Grass and The Shorter Poems of Robert Bridges. The first we noted above. Hardy's book was loaned him by his boyhood friend Tom Oliver, with whom he played at athletics and occasionally discussed literature. It held for him "at once the same startling enchantment as Keats poem 'La Belle Dame' had earlier, and determined . . . a new and lasting ambition."<sup>84</sup>

When I had finished the book it was clear to me that my real mission in life was to write not poetry any more but short stories. It was an ambition that I nourished in secret for over twelve years. No, it is wrong to say 'nourished', for I made not the slightest effort to realize it. I might have been a flower-pot in which was buried a bulb that had neither power nor inclination to put forth a single shoot. But the bulb, whether worthless or not, was not dead. I was always declaring to myself: "I am going to write short stories, some day I am going to write short stories. I am going to."<sup>85</sup>

Coppard records together his reading of Leaves of Grass and the poems of Robert Bridges as being the books "that altered my stance towards pretty well everything, not merely to the art I was groping for but to life and its thought surrounding me."<sup>86</sup>

During the time that Coppard was acquiring his literary consciousness, he had no personal literary ambitions.<sup>87</sup> But, in his early twenties he had begun to take a more serious interest in writing poetry and descriptive essays. He entered some literary competitions sponsored by The Academy, and from

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<sup>84</sup>Ibid., 63

<sup>85</sup>A. E. Coppard, "On First Getting into Print," in The Colophon, Part Six (May, 1931), unnumbered pages.

<sup>86</sup>Coppard, It's Me, 98-99.

<sup>87</sup>Ibid., 69.

time to time he won. His Diary mentions seven different competitions that he entered. For some he wrote poetry (with some topics set by Lilly Anne), for some he wrote criticism (one went by the pretentious title "A Note on Literary Criticism"), for others he wrote descriptive essays based on material recorded in his Diary.<sup>88</sup> This latter is the beginning of the writing process he was later to perfect.

Although Coppard maintains that he had no clear writing ambition until he was in his thirties, his Diary, covering his twenty-fourth and twenty-fifth years and touching briefly on his twenty-sixth and twenty-eighth years, shows a young man in love with literature trying very hard to write. Usually he tries too hard. Most of the descriptive writing is forced, awkward, and mawkish, yet we can see in it some touches of the sharp eye for detail Coppard was to acquire. Viewing the Diary as a whole, we can even find significant improvement over the four years.

An early entry in the Diary, April 28, 1902, became the basis for an Academy competition the following April for which he won honorable mention:

Each field & road & hedge were charged with clamour & thunder of the great wind which bored into you with a fierce splendid power. But on this bright day the constant motion of the shining grass was wonderful to see, & slipping up over the hill the land seemed living. At one point I stood back to the wind, face to the sun, & the tall greenmeat went scurrying away like myriads of tiny beasts galloping in panic until they reached a little hillock; over there they lost form & it all looked

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<sup>88</sup>For instance, for a competition he entered March 17, 1903, he borrowed material from July 17 and October 9, 1902.

like a lot of water boiling furiously. So on to Bevendean, past the roaring wood, & behind the barn where all was quiet & warm. I saw 2 red & black butterflies. Further on, sitting on a sheltered bank, I watched the rooks trying to beat into the wind, but each had to drop down & travel close to the earth.

We see here the straining for effect as he tries to combine his "literary" experience with the natural experience--"myriads of tiny beasts," "it all looked like a lot of water boiling furiously." Still, the combination of many details recorded was to flower in the mature writer.

Coppard seems much more at ease recording an incident at the Works:

When the late mr Reason was killed in Australia a big subscription was made by the men in order to buy something which could be placed in the new factory as a memorial of him[.] About £25 was collected & it was foolishly resolved to buy a drinking fountain to be placed in the courtyard. When at length the fountain appeared there was great disappointment it was so small, ludicrously small. At noon when the men came out for dinner they found some sacrilegious wag had tied a notice to the paltry thing, "No bathing allowed here"!<sup>89</sup>

The anecdote is simple, and he has allowed it to remain that way. He makes no attempt to go beyond the basic narrative. In Chapter III we will take notice of a longer incident that he relates; for now let us return to Coppard's descriptive writing. For an Academy competition that he entered about March 17, 1903, Coppard borrowed from the following description of July 17, 1902:

The first day for many days to Bevendean. Summer has come to its own again, the sun burns strongly, & the larks have a gamut of God. Gusts of Solid cloud move up from southward and mesh your sweating body in timely shade. The last

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<sup>89</sup>Ibid., May 15, 1902.

new flowers look very trim in the faint grass--the hillside is as many-coloured as a Paisley shawl. There are still shoes & stockings; the earliest cornflowers & bex & crowds unknown, & a pretty plain orange-hued flower with five petals very sweet.

There are women in the fields,

"The oldest & the youngest

Are at work with the strongest"

either weeding kilk or binding radishes, & very hard toil it seems in this great weather. A month ago at Hodshrove the cornlands were all yellow with kilk; now it is completely green, the wheat having grown above the yellow muck. When I got down to the dusty road the breeze was frisking up long columns of white powder.

Through most of 1903 Coppard wrote few purely descriptive passages. Descriptions of nature become a part of his reading outdoors, or running, or watching people. The few descriptive passages that he does write toward the end of the year are sometimes more forced than the writing of 1902. This passage dated September 9, for instance:

In spite of recent rains the landscape seems to be gathering dust and negative hues that do not obtrude themselves yet are as indecent to the loving eyes as tawdry furniture. Tho the birds dart round in flocks there is no singing, or but rarely, and the trees tho thick with shade have tattered rusty hangings.

Or, this one dated November 18, 1903:

Immediately above me the sky was clean & blue & without a cloud, but all around, in spite of a sharp keen breeze from N.W. the land was steeped in damp mist & compassed by bleak horizons. Dew was still among the grass which lay flat where the frost had walked & the rutted roadway held handfuls of the last evening's rain. At Bevendean there were thousands of starlings, young & tame, & dozens of chaffinches; A bearded angular man cut & trussed bundles of sweet hay. It seemed a pleasant labour to be there under the trees full of the chattering starlings & nothing else befall the whole day thro'.

The clumsy metaphor "where the forst had walked" and the final "poetic" line makes the above read sophomoric, but the following, November 26, 1903, is simpler and better:

A day of iron sky & frozen field with a mist which tho not near to you seems, as you recede, to envelope everything. The hue of the ploughlands is one, tho in varying degrees, with discoloured grass on steep ascents, with the tops of vacant trees[.] Frost was in the fields & glistened on the backs of the sheep[.]

After this entry the Diary breaks off for a full year before resuming:

November 22.1904 To Bevendean This was a day of days. A storm all over England last night. The morning came with a little fall of snow--no great matter--but in favourable places on the hills & over ploughed land it lies light on the dry dead grass & cowers on the loose furrows [.] It assumes the aspect of things around a miller's habitation. The atmosphere is crystalline & thrilling although under grey skies, for a big shattering wind clears all unlovely mist away from here & \*the sharp lace of the bare trees [.] It is now indeed the season of the whirling leaf. The cold snow brings an increased loneliness to the old sweet lonely places [.] the farm laborers wear great coats old fashioned & tattered [.] A week ago the stubble was crowded with half-budded pimpernel with here & there a poppy. They must be dead as the year is, today.

\*gives an exquisite clarity to the roll of the downs & [sic]

In this passage there is not great improvement, but Coppard seems not to be trying so hard for a "poetic" effect, and, so, it reads easier. He seems to have entered into the scene instead of attempting to shape it to his feelings.

There is no 1905 entry in the Diary. The next and final entry is dated over a year later, March 12, 1906:

at Burdock Farm:

Following a bright morn the Northwest wind, for an afternoon, filled the weald, &, leafing towards the Downs kept a blue unhampered sky, & upon sodden field bare hedge thicket path & brook renewed an ancient beauty. But as early as 4 o'clock shadow was filling up the scars on the north side of the Downs; the clarity of the day & the glowing distance to the hills were bent almost as soon as seen to their vicarious decline[.] Day closed later under a wall brilliant with piercing stars; tall trees swinging viciously in the blast [.]

Here we at last begin to see something of the mature Coppard. The writing moves easily and rhythmically. The images are not so strained as before. The diction is better controlled so that he is not so obviously forcing images, or showing off his vocabulary (except for "vicarious decline"). In Coppard's best writing he leaves off trying to impress the reader with his self-educated lexicon and uses a more simple language that flows from the scene. He continues to use fancy words, but mostly to achieve comic effect, as though he were making fun of his own escape from ignorance.

Coppard's reading experiences only began to coalesce into a conscious need to write after he had moved to Oxford at the age of twenty-nine. Here he became strongly aware of how truly ignorant he was, but he also came to recognize his strengths. The undergraduates and dons of Oxford who befriended him gave his mind its first real test, and, although he sometimes cringed at his own ignorance, he was also smug about some of his superiorities. For twelve years he was challenged and nourished in the climate of Oxford. During very little of his life did he ever seem unhappy. He was always cheerful and enthusiastic, but this time at Oxford was a joyous homecoming. He had found his own people. Frank O'Connor tells us: "He loved Oxford as Newman and Arnold loved it, but he went there as a clerk, not as a student."<sup>90</sup> Coppard speaks of the "happy Oxonian time which I do believe steeped me in

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<sup>90</sup>O'Connor, 171.

some of its dye (always a deep dark blue!)."<sup>91</sup>

At Oxford Coppard began to associate with undergraduates who ignored the (at least) twelve year age difference and his marital status. He drank with them, formed a play-reading society with them, and attended lectures. But, first he was stunned: "It was . . . in Oxford, that I first met the thing I recognized as intellect, and it was being so casually exercised by old and young, startlingly in the young, austere in the mature."<sup>92</sup>

Coppard loved to dwell on his lack of literary companionship before Oxford. Depending on his mood, he complained about it or, more often, bragged about it. Sometimes he contradicts himself. At one point in his autobiography he tells the reader:

Tom [Olliver] was the only man with whom I could exchange a word on any kind of literary subject during my youth. . . . I was past my thirtieth year and married and gone to work in Oxford before I ever met a soul save Tom Olliver who could talk to me about any kind of literature at all.<sup>93</sup>

A few pages later he contradicts himself:

Not until I went to work as a clerk in Oxford . . . when I was thirty years old and married, did I meet a single creature save my wife who could discuss poetry or prose or any aesthetique at all.<sup>94</sup>

From Coppard's Diary it would appear that he did discuss literature with one or two others during his early twenties. He exchanged books with a friend, Frank Lewis,<sup>95</sup> and discussed

<sup>91</sup>Coppard, It's Me, 191.

<sup>92</sup>Ibid., 160.

<sup>93</sup>Ibid., 62.

<sup>94</sup>Ibid., 71.

<sup>95</sup>Coppard, Diary, March 19 and April 30, 1902.



Henry James with a local chemist named Hatfield.<sup>96</sup> If anything, he had developed a sense of intellectual superiority that purposely excluded others. After informing his boss, Mr. Hughes, that he wanted to be an isolated farmer, Hughes told him that he would grow tired of the loneliness:

I demured & he said that intercourse is the very essence of life and intellect. I said I did not know six people whom I ever cared to talk to. He said he always learnt something from a friend. He seemed to regard them as a kind of condiment for intellectual appetites. I suggested that the most intimate friends could not always be regarded as intellectual companions. Which closed the confab.<sup>97</sup>

The point to be made here is not that Coppard did not grow toward maturity in an intellectual isolation. He did. Yet, he was not so alone in his love of literature as he would have one believe in his romantic re-creation of his life.

Coppard's response to Oxford, like his response to other new experiences, was a mixture of awe and smugness. He thought that the prevalent undergraduate passion for Ernest Dowson "was rather inadequate and boyish."<sup>98</sup> But, Coppard admits,

at Oxford I became aware of my astounding ignorance--how it shamed me!--of the many subjects so casually broached and so entertainingly discussed there; philosophy, logic, mathematics, and languages dead and foreign.<sup>99</sup>

During the Oxford years Coppard indulged heavily in most of the pastimes he had collected through his youth, and he

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<sup>96</sup>Ibid., July 8 and 13, 1903.

<sup>97</sup>Ibid., February 4, 1902.

<sup>98</sup>Coppard, It's Me, 71.

<sup>99</sup>Ibid., 190.

picked up a few more. Although he no longer raced, he says:

In my own spare time I had an omnivorous appetite for football, boating, reading in the Radcliffe Camera, swimming, taking my dogs to dog shows, following the Torpids and Eights; there was the I.L.P., the Glee Club, amateur theatricals . . . Balliol concerts on Sunday nights, the W.S.P.U., the Ashmolean, boxing (but only to watch it now) at Sergeant Morley's School of Arms in Merton Street, St John's Garden, lectures, and some travel.<sup>100</sup>

His own literary creativity began now to develop in earnest. His mind had been nourished by all of his reading, but it had been lulled, too, into a kind of passivity. Oxford shook him out of the "lullaby." It became a catalyst for his previous experience and helped set him a direction.

It was not emulation alone that had shaped me; the ordinary phases and challenges of life had long been curdling within me, and seemed during my sojourn in and around Oxford to have mingled and emerged in some sort of significance, in recognitions, intuitions, exchanges, and delights, of which I had had only faint intimations during my growth at Brighton.<sup>101</sup>

As Coppard describes his passage from passive reading to active artistry at Oxford, he does not romanticise his motives for writing poetry and short fiction. His initial reason for writing was a natural outgrowth of the personality we have already described. He envied his Oxford companions and simple "rivalry" moved him to write. At first he felt a kind of smug superiority that he was better versed in English poetry than were his Oxford companions. He "championed the pure stream of Chaucer, Milton, Wordsworth, Whitman, and Browning" against some poets then in vogue. But, he could not read or discuss the work of the French poets, and, more significantly, his

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<sup>100</sup>Ibid., 190-91.

<sup>101</sup>Ibid., 190.

companions could write poetry.

I had probably read more English poetry in bulk than any of them, much more, but they could write it, they were always at it, they had published poems and things. They showed me their writings, or I would happen upon them in some journal, and there I was with my head stuffed and my heart burning but hardly a line indited. I had always been going to write something, yes, but here were all these boys, boys! with their poems and tales already in being, some in periodicals, some even in real books. Straightway I was fired, though not by any more worthy muse than the spirit of rivalry.<sup>102</sup>

A. E. Coppard's keen sense of competition thrust him into writing as it had into running and other athletics. From the way Coppard talks about his sprinting and about his writing, it is clear that he did not mind being beaten by someone better, but he could not brook being bested by anyone he took to be an inferior. Even more, he could not stand being out of the race. If he was not the best, yet he would always be up with the winner. And, so, the kind of single-minded dedication he had once invested in his running he now applied to writing.

About 1911 Lilly Anne moved the Coppards to a cottage at Combe so that Alf could escape all of the clubs and activities that he had engaged in at Islip where they had lived the previous three years.<sup>103</sup> Here in 1912 at the age of thirty-four Coppard began to write and produced first a 12,000 word story called "Fleet," which he submitted to The English Review. It was rejected as being too long.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>102</sup>Ibid., 162

<sup>103</sup>Ibid., 147-48

<sup>104</sup>Coppard, "Getting into Print," Colophon.

During this same period he wrote "Piffingcap" and "Clorinda Walks in Heaven."<sup>105</sup> The Coppards moved into Oxford proper during the war, but they rented a cottage at West Hagbourne in the Berkshire Downs one summer to spend the weekends. Here he wrote "Weep Not, My Wanton,"<sup>106</sup> which he submitted without success to The New Statesman. Among other tales that he wrote during the war years were "Dusky Ruth," "Arabesque: The Mouse," and "Adam and Eve and Pinch Me."<sup>108</sup> Towards the end of this period he wrote "Marching to Zion," based on a walking trip he had taken.<sup>109</sup>

On May 31, 1916, The Varsity printed "Communion."<sup>110</sup> T. S. Eliot's The Egoist published two of Coppard's poems, "The Lock" and "The Oracle," in July, 1917.<sup>111</sup> The Nation printed two others. But, Coppard dates his real beginnings as an author from his July, 1918, publication of "Piffingcap" in Pearson's Magazine. It was the first thing for which he received payment.<sup>112</sup> He had had about a dozen tales finished at that time, so he sent them all out singly to different magazines. Soon after "Piffingcap" two other stories, "Weep Not, My Wanton" and "Dusky Ruth" were accepted, by the Saturday

<sup>105</sup>Coppard, It's Me, 148.

<sup>106</sup>Ibid., 173.

<sup>107</sup>Coppard, "Getting into Print," Colophon.

<sup>108</sup>Coppard, It's Me, 176.

<sup>109</sup>Ibid., 180.

<sup>110</sup>Coppard, "Getting into Print," Colophon.

<sup>111</sup>Coppard, It's Me, 176.

<sup>112</sup>Coppard, "Getting into Print," Colophon.

Westminster Gazette and the English Review respectively.<sup>113</sup>

He also published "Mr. Lightfoot in the Green Isle" serially in the Manchester Guardian late in 1918 with the final segment appearing in the Saturday Westminster June, 1919.<sup>114</sup>

By the time "A Night in Dublin" was published in the Saturday Westminster Coppard had already made his move to leave his job at the Ironworks and had taken up residence just outside of Oxford in a cottage at Shepherd's Pit, Bayswater, Headington.<sup>115</sup> Lilly Anne stayed behind, and, although he dedicated Adam and Eve and Pinch Me to her, she gradually faded out of his life.

Coppard now lived the idyllic life of the writer. His cottage in the woods provided him with solitude, nature, and inexpensive lodgings. Cost of living was as important as the romantic setting because for the nine months of 1919 Coppard earned only £31 and for all of 1920 netted £66.<sup>116</sup>

Shortly before he had moved to Shepherd's Pit, Coppard met E. J. O'Brien in Oxford, and, although Coppard gathered from him that he already had a formidable American reputation in publicizing the short story, Coppard could not allow himself to solicit O'Brien's aid in making a name. Because he had come so far without tutors or formal education, he felt that he had to succeed entirely on his own merits, without a patron: "It was excruciatingly important to me that my writing

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<sup>113</sup>Coppard, It's Me, 212.

<sup>114</sup>Schwartz, 27.

<sup>115</sup>Coppard, It's Me, 228.

<sup>116</sup>Schwartz, 2.

should be judged, not boosted."<sup>117</sup> O'Brien did not give a lift to Coppard's career, but he did recognize his writing ability and his importance to the short story genre. From 1922 to 1928 O'Brien included Coppard's tales in his annual anthology The Best British Short Stories. He even dedicated the 1924 edition to Coppard.

During 1919 and 1920 Coppard tried to find a publisher for a collection of tales. This collection, that eventually became Adam and Eve and Pinch Me, is significant in that, collecting tales written from 1912 to 1920, it contains three of Coppard's best known tales, "Adam and Eve and Pinch Me," "Arabesque: The Mouse," and "Dusky Ruth." These three are certainly among Coppard's superior production, as is the often overlooked "Weep Not, My Wanton." Only somewhat inferior to these is the intriguing "Marching to Zion." Thus, much of what Coppard is best remembered for was written before he committed himself exclusively to writing. Furthermore, these stories, which are often called "Chekhovian" or are compared to Katherine Mansfield, Coppard wrote before he had read either writer. He only began reading Chekhov and Mansfield shortly before he left for Shepherd's Pit<sup>118</sup> and after he had written the bulk of Adam and Eve.

Adam and Eve had been turned down by Methuen, Macmillan, Constable, Chatto and Windus, Heinemann, Grant Richards, and Ward Lock but was being seriously considered by Messrs. Nisbet's, when Harold Taylor, having read "Arabesque" in the

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<sup>117</sup>Coppard, It's Me, 228.

<sup>118</sup>Ibid., 213.

July, 1920, Voices, cycled forty miles to inquire if Coppard had a number of tales that might be collected to inaugurate his newly formed Golden Cockerel Press.<sup>119</sup>

Coppard's first volume publication was well received, although, like most of his books, it made little money for the author. Still, we can readily imagine that Coppard was ecstatic with his new identity. Like those Oxford undergraduates, he was now in a book, and a book all his own!

The reviews of Adam and Eve were pleasant, if not enthusiastic, but they were also mistaken. The Times Literary Supplement credits Chekhov, Maupassant, and Irish writers with influencing Coppard:

If . . . Mr. Coppard acknowledges his debt to Tchekhov and Maupassant, we are constrained to add the comment that he has still a great deal to learn from these two masters. As a matter of fact, in reading most of these short stories, the names of neither would have occurred to us, for the most obvious influence on Mr. Coppard is that of the Irish school, with its rather voluble style of narrative, its elaborate similes, and the elusiveness of its meaning.<sup>120</sup>

Although Coppard was very familiar with Maupassant (and with James) when he wrote the Adam and Eve stories<sup>121</sup> (O'Connor tells us that Coppard "knew Chekhov and Maupassant backwards.")<sup>122</sup> he did not know Chekhov until most of them were

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<sup>119</sup>Coppard, "Getting into Print," Colophon.

<sup>120</sup>Review of Adam and Eve and Pinch Me, The Times Literary Supplement, April 14, 1921, p.243.

<sup>121</sup>Coppard, Diary. He writes about reading and discussing James and Maupassant April 3, 7, and 21, 1903.

<sup>122</sup>O'Connor, 173.

completed. The Irish influence that the TLS claims to find did not derive from Coppard's reading of Irish writers, although Mrs. Coppard describes Joyce as one of Flynn's favorite writers; it did derive from Coppard's incredible gift for observation. He took his first walking tour of Ireland in 1915 and another one soon after that.<sup>123</sup> "Marching to Zion" was based on incidents occurring on one such tour.<sup>124</sup>

Coppard's reputation for being an "Irish writer" persisted, however, as did other accusations made by the Times. The review describes him as a writer of fantasy and reality, who, in combining the two, was "deliberately straining for effect." Furthermore, he was found to be too artificial.<sup>125</sup> As both O'Connor<sup>126</sup> and Beachcroft<sup>127</sup> have pointed out, Coppard was an enormously self-conscious writer. He was aware of himself as writer writing, and he was aware of the process he was manipulating in the story itself. But, at this point in his creative life, Coppard was no more guilty of artifice than that which comes naturally to the "fiction-monger." It was to be later, when he had begun to follow his own successful formula, that his writing could be called "artificial" in a negative sense.

Three months after the TLS review of Adam and Eve,

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<sup>123</sup>Coppard, It's Me, 179-80.

<sup>124</sup>Ibid., 180.

<sup>125</sup>Review, Adam and Eve, TLS.

<sup>126</sup>O'Connor, 143.

<sup>127</sup>Beachcroft, Modest Art, 188.



The London Mercury discovered the same "imitation of Irish models" and further accused him of extravagance, eccentricity, and excessive deliberation. "But he has a poetic imagination and can describe vividly what he sees."<sup>128</sup> This early recognition of Coppard's poetic imagination is significant. As time went on, "poetic" came to be the one word used most often in descriptions of Coppard's short stories, and it is still the most valid word one can use to describe the form and effect of many of his best short stories.

By 1922 Coppard, justly proud of himself, was now reading his tales and giving papers on Chekhov and Maupassant at Oxford.<sup>129</sup> The landlord of the Shepherd's Pit cottage wanted it for another purpose and asked him to vacate. Lilly Anne found them a cottage at Chinoor in the Chilterns,<sup>130</sup> and he moved there with her for a year before leaving her, apparently for good, and isolating himself in his hut at Little Poynants where he lived until 1927.<sup>131</sup>

Coppard's second volume, Clorinda Walks in Heaven, dedicated "To Mrs. Flynn," came out in 1922 to rave reviews. Golden Cockerel Press also published in the same year a collection of Coppard's poetry, Hips and Haws. Coppard mentions one review of Clorinda entitled "The Critic Walks in Heaven."<sup>132</sup> The TLS

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<sup>128</sup>Review of Adam and Eve and Pinch Me, The London Mercury (July, 1921), 321.

<sup>129</sup>Coppard, It's Me, 245.

<sup>130</sup>Ibid., 245.

<sup>131</sup>Saul, 20. Also, Mrs. Coppard

<sup>132</sup>Schwartz, 16.

had better things to say about Clorinda than it did about Adam and Eve. The Times reviewer suggests that Coppard's fiction goes beyond mere narrative to evoke deep response. His tales are

nothing which as a mere sequence of actions would seem remarkable; and yet he produces a tale that demands the attention and awakens the emotions. At his best he takes a narrative of some substance and clothes it with much imaginative sympathy.<sup>133</sup>

The Outlook, reviewing both Clorinda and Hips and Haws, speaks of Coppard's "genius," calls the poetry "a noble instrument of beauty," and parallels the tales to those of the "great masters of the abused form."<sup>134</sup>

1923 saw the publication by Jonathan Cape of Coppard's next volume, The Black Dog, dedicated "To Gay." By this time the reviewers had begun to type Coppard as a literary bucolic. He writes that, although the reviewers were kind to his book, he was criticized for too much "variety" in his tales, and he "was urged to concentrate on country tales," advice he refused to follow because he did "not believe in specialisation [sic] or formulae in art."<sup>135</sup> The TLS praised the book highly with a sound exposition of the materials and structures with which Coppard was creating his fiction. The reviewer explains that Coppard chooses ordinary people of the villages, not idiots or

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<sup>133</sup>Review of Clorinda Walks in Heaven, The Times Literary Supplement, June 8, 1922, p. 379.

<sup>134</sup>Review of Clorinda Walks in Heaven and Hips and Haws, The Outlook, L (August 12, 1922), 138.

<sup>135</sup>Schwartz, 23.

introverts, for his characters, then imbues them with a vitality beyond the reader's previous experience. The reader comes to see "with people one has been merely looking at." Coppard's treatment of the country is not sentimental or idealized, nor does he hold illusions as to the wisdom of its inhabitants, "but sensuously it has deeply affected him, so that the emotions he describes stand out like motives from a rich texture, from a profound inheritance of memoried images." The two stories "The Black Dog" and "The Poor Man" have a "unity closer than that of plot or style. . . . the unity we look for in a poem and may call inadequately atmosphere, though it comes from within and is personal rather than objective."<sup>136</sup>

The year following the publication of The Black Dog Coppard made his first trip to the continent, visiting France and Italy. Italy, especially, he came to love and to describe beautifully in some of his tales. More significantly, in Paris he was the guest of Ford Madox Ford, whom he had met in 1922 at Ford's request. Ford came to see Coppard as one of the best hopes for the resurgence of British literature after World War I.

One index of Coppard's emergence as a major figure in British literature during the 1920's was his prominence in Ford Madox Ford's plans for the Transatlantic Review, for which Coppard eventually supplied copy for three numbers. The importance which Ford accorded Coppard can be seen in his prospectus for the Review published in December, 1923, in Paris:

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<sup>136</sup>Review of The Black Dog, The Times Literary Supplement, June 28, 1923, p. 438.

It is such writers as Mr. James Joyce, M. Pierre Hamp, Mr. E. E. Cummings, M. Descharmes and Mr. A. E. Coppard that with the assistance of Mr. Ezra Pound, Mr. T. S. Eliot, Miss Mina Loy, Mr. Robert McAlmon and Miss Mary Butts--to mix our liquors as singularly as possible--the Review will energetically back, whilst it will hope to print the first words of many, many young giants as yet unprinted.<sup>137</sup>

Of course, the literary evaluation of many of these writers has changed since 1923, but certainly Pound and Eliot had already become major figures and Joyce, too, had a considerable reputation, so it was with much respect for Coppard's talent that Ford included him in this list. Four years later in a New York Herald Tribune review of The Field of Mustard Ford tells the reader: "I remember that the first English writer to whom I wrote for a contribution to the 'Transatlantic Review' was Mr. Coppard."<sup>138</sup>

Part of Ford's esteem for Coppard the artist was prompted by his emotional sympathy and admiration for Coppard the man. He was immediately struck by the character of Coppard's short fiction, but this estimation must have been heightened by later confrontation with Coppard, of whom Ford gives a detailed, if romantic, description. In addition, Ford was strongly affected by Coppard's description of his limited income and his raw vegetable diet. This combination of Coppard's writing, personality, and penury seems to have influenced Ford in his consideration of Coppard for inclusion in the

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<sup>137</sup>Bernard J. Poli, Ford Madox Ford and the "Transatlantic Review," (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1967), 39-40.

<sup>138</sup>Ford, "Half Pixie," 4.

Review. Apparently, he believed that Coppard was well enough known to influence the Review's sales, while, at the same time, increasing Coppard's own income.

Although Ford did not meet (indeed, had not even heard of) Coppard until the summer of 1922, by which time Coppard had published two volumes, Bernard Poli says: "Ford somehow felt that he had 'discovered' Coppard."<sup>139</sup> Ford "discovered" Coppard in the pages of The Saturday Review:

I don't know what made Mr. Coppard come and stay with me. . . . Or perhaps I do. My old friend The Saturday Review under a new editorship was pursuing the very admirable policy of preserving in what it published a reasonable balance between creative and what is called "serious" writing. I bought it one day at a book stall and came upon a piece of work that made me at once see that a new force existed in England. It was a story by Mr. Coppard relating how when he was nearly starving he had bought some bananas. I had never till then heard of Mr. Coppard. . . . Then I saw other stories by that writer and I became convinced that England possessed a short-story writer as great as any there ever had been. Of that opinion I remain.<sup>140</sup>

The story Ford describes is "Luxury," by Coppard's account his thirty-ninth published story, in the July 22nd Saturday Review. Immediately Ford began to track down Coppard. He wrote to a friend, Anthony Bertram, August 14, 1922: "Do you happen to know--or know of--Coppard? He seems to me to be pretty good; I'd like to get to know him."<sup>141</sup> He also included with a very poor story that he wrote for The Saturday Review

<sup>139</sup>Poli, 30.

<sup>140</sup>Ford Madox Ford, It Was the Nightingale (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1933), 173.

<sup>141</sup>Ford Madox Ford, Letters of . . ., edited by Richard M. Ludwig (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), 142.

a request to the editor for Coppard's address. With the rejection slip he received a note that addresses of contributors were never given to outsiders.<sup>142</sup> The Saturday, however, communicated this request to Coppard, a correspondence was quickly arranged and within a few more days Ford had invited Coppard to visit him at The Coopers.<sup>143</sup> Ford recalls his first impression of Coppard:

Then Mr. Coppard came. I have said that he produced on me the impression of a gipsy [sic]. I had taken him, from his writings, to be Irish or Welsh but he was neither and, with his exquisite perception of form he could not be English. So I found in my mind the conviction that he must be a gipsy and that conviction gained immensely when I met him, dark, lean, hard in physique as in intellect and with piercing dark eyes under a deep hat brim, sitting on beech-log and giving out all the wisdom of an ancient and cruel world.<sup>144</sup>

Ford romantically describes "the dark gipsy earnestness" of Coppard, "who so admirably lived the only life worth living."<sup>145</sup>

From what he chose to relate of his biography . . . I gathered that this real prophet had met with very little honour in the country he had honoured by his birth. It was not merely that for an extended space of time he had had practically nothing but raw grated carrots to eat in a lost cottage in a damp corner. . . . such vicissitudes do the writer himself little but good. . . . If in short he cannot imagine for himself what happens in yachts, palaces and drawing rooms he may as well not start out on the career of writer. . . . But it is bitter bad for a country that it should have a writer of the genius of Mr. Coppard and let him live in lost cottages on a diet of grated carrots. It proves itself to be a country that no writer will love and that all will leave as soon as they can.<sup>146</sup>

In another source Ford relates his first meeting with Coppard, and his remembered impression transforms Coppard from

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<sup>142</sup>Ford, Nightingale, 173-74.

<sup>143</sup>Ibid., 174.

<sup>145</sup>Ibid., 140.

<sup>144</sup>Ibid., 174-75.

<sup>146</sup>Ibid., 175-76.

Briton to gypsy to pixie:

I did not catch all that he said. But I was thinking to myself: What a queer creature this is, this brown assured gypsy of the beech woods. But then--not gypsy; autochthonous; product of the soil; gnome, pixie . . . and I remember there came into my mind, I don't know why, the line that has always seemed to me to be rather inscrutable if not rather silly:

"Oh lyric love, half angel and half bird,"

Immediately, in the way the idle mind works, there came the phrase "Half pixie and half bird" . . . as descriptive of the being beside me on that tree trunk.<sup>147</sup>

Like many other Coppard readers, and to a degree Coppard himself, Ford was never really able to separate Coppard's personality from his art. He describes Coppard's stories as "pixie gardens--little mazes in which the happy mind wanders until, with a little pop, it comes right out somewhere where it is least expected to be in the world."<sup>148</sup>

For Mr. Coppard is extraordinarily Celto-British with a touch of something altogether mysterious to him. (I am, of course, now talking of his art--but the description would suit his personality well enough.) For there are in England everywhere survivors of the little, dark, persistent races that were there before the Saxons and the Danes; even before the Druids. And these are the pixies!<sup>149</sup>

Within a year after their first meeting, Ford was writing to Coppard for contributions to his projected literary journal.

65, Boulevard Arago  
Paris XIII  
28/9/23

My dear Coppard;

Have you a short story--or two, or three--that you could let me have for a Review that I myself am going to edit from this city & to publish in New York and London; so

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<sup>147</sup>Ford, "Half Pixie," 4.

<sup>148</sup>Ibid.

<sup>149</sup>Ibid.

there won't be any doubt as to publication or payment, the latter fairly miserable to begin with, though getting better if the Review paid? So that the real advantage to you--as to others of a struggling world--is simply that here is going to be a periodical in which you can print work that the more popular periodicals won't print & mop up a very little money that you otherwise wouldn't get.

It isn't an exaggeration to say that I've started this review with you in mind as I started the English Review to publish stuff of Hardy's that other periodicals wouldn't publish. I've a great admiration for your work & though I hope you can serialize all you write I imagine, this sad world being what it is, that you may have some that you can't.

I may say that I prefer not to have sexually esoteric, psychoanalytic, mystic or officially ethical matter but don't bar any of them obstinately--& if you hadn't short stories available I'd be just as glad of "essays" or any other form.

Later in haste: the flat rate of pay proposed by my proprietors, the Societe Anonyme de Publications Etrangeres is 30 frs per page = 100 frs per 1000 (rather over 25/- at present rates but the franc may rise). If you wrote and advised me I cd. probably squeeze a little more. The trouble is that you can get almost any French contribution at above rates & I am going to publish both French and English.<sup>150</sup>

Through the two other letters that Ford wrote to Coppard at this time run the same coaxing tone and the same heavy concern with money. On October 15 Ford asked Coppard to write him "a much more violent letter for exhibition to my proprietors on the question of . . . pay in general."<sup>151</sup> He continues:

I can in special cases, of which yours is one, squeeze about fifteen pounds, more or less, according to the state of the franc out of them for a short story, however short, or however long, or in violently special cases--of which yours again would be one--it might run to 1500 francs, which at the moment is twenty guineas, but in that case it would have to be a very violent letter you wrote me.<sup>152</sup>

Ford finishes the letter by inviting Coppard to visit

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<sup>150</sup>Ford, Letters, 152-53.

<sup>151</sup>Ibid., 155.

<sup>152</sup>Ibid.



him in Paris. By December the final arrangements had been made for Coppard's visit to Paris and to Italy. And, in a letter to Coppard that month Ford tells him that he will hold the check he was about to send so that Coppard will not lose any money on the exchange. In addition he describes the most economical way to buy train tickets from England to Paris to Italy.<sup>153</sup> All of this correspondence reflects Coppard's desperate need of money with which Ford was in sympathy, or which, perhaps, he even prodded along in order to foster his own romantic notion of Coppard as the injured artist.

The first number of The Transatlantic Review was published the following month. Included in it were four poems by E. E. Cummings, Two Cantos by Ezra Pound, and Coppard's "Pelegea." According to the Review's "Communications":

Of our poets Messrs Cummings, Pound and Coppard are too well known in the United States to need our introduction there. . . . if American magazines did not print with eagerness all that Mr. Coppard vouchsafed them we should have started the Transatlantic Review to print him.<sup>154</sup>

The "Chroniques" section of the April issue informs the reader: "The poems of Mr. Coppard and Mr. J. J. Adams in former numbers were received with such warm liking by readers whose taste we esteem that we print further specimens of their work in this number."<sup>155</sup> The "specimens" of Coppard's poetry were "April Fool" and "The Little Tempest."<sup>156</sup> According to Poli, Coppard

<sup>153</sup>Ibid., 160-161.

<sup>154</sup>The Transatlantic Review, edited in Paris by F. M. Ford. Vol. I, no 1 (January, 1924), 96-97.

<sup>155</sup>Transatlantic I, 4 (April, 1924), 201.

<sup>156</sup>Ibid., 113-16.

had already submitted to the Review his story "The Higgler," but Ford's lead time was so long that he was already to press with the April issue in February and could not make room for the very lengthy story. Wanting Coppard's name on the front page of the April Review, he made a return mail request to Coppard for some poems to fill "chinks and crannies." Coppard quickly obliged with the above two poems.<sup>157</sup> Ford made room, proudly, apologetically, for "The Higgler" in thirty pages of the May issue. In the "Chroniques" of that issue he printed the following explanation that tells us some things about Ford, Coppard, and the state of the British short story of that time:

We are glad to print a long-short story by Mr. Coppard, extremely English in texture as a balance to Miss Stein's more essentially transatlantic methods. The peculiar length of the story by Mr. Coppard calls attention to a side of the art of short story writing, particularly in England. It had been frequently pointed out--and it is indeed true enough--that the short story is usually very badly done in our Islands and that the long-short story as a form is practically non-existent. This is partly due no doubt to national temperament but very largely to purely commercial circumstances. The ordinary magazine of English commerce prints stories of from fifteen hundred to four thousand words in length; rarely, it will run to seven thousand words. The ordinary commercial publisher in England will not print any novel under say seventy thousand words in length. Now English writers have rarely either the technical skill or the desire for selection that are needed for the real perfection of the quite short story. The English temperament is perhaps meditative, perhaps poetic, perhaps sentimental and all these attributes take a great deal of "getting in", so that the length called for by the English productive mind is one of almost always more than seven thousand words. And indeed, for the writer of almost any nation one of the most satisfactory and delightful lengths is that of 40,000 words. For this particular length there is practically no channel of publication, for a story

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<sup>157</sup>Poli, 70.

of that length is seldom suitable owing to its continuity of thought, for serial publication. So the form as such hardly exists in England, for the writers who can go on producing work that will never be published are few indeed. In the Transatlantic Review we try to find work of every length as of every character, but this necessitates either a certain monthly change in the aspect of the Review itself or a certain continuity from month to month. Miss Stein's work will better bear division than the story of Mr. Coppard and, fortunately, Miss Stein kindly allows us to divide her up, which is more than many writers will.<sup>158</sup>

Coppard published nothing more for Ford's journal, and the Review folded, in any case, with its December, 1924 issue. Poli records what seems to have been the last contact between Ford and Coppard in 1927, a dispute over payment for republication of "The Higglers."

In 1926 Ford published an anthology of stories which had appeared in the Transatlantic Review, under the title Transatlantic Stories, with an interesting preface and biographical notes on contributors. In connection with this book and with an unpaid contribution to the Transatlantic there was a correspondence between Ford and Coppard in February, 1927. . . . From Ford's letters it appears that Coppard, whose permission had not been asked for reprinting his story, had stopped the publication of Transatlantic Stories in England.<sup>159</sup>

So, from beginning to end the relationship between Ford and Coppard involved a tension between art and payment for it-- a motif that seemed to dominate so much of Coppard's artistic

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<sup>158</sup>Transatlantic, I, 5 (May, 1924), 349-50. The next month the Review in "Communications," I, 6, p. 480 published the following response to "The Higglers from Ezra Pound:

"To: the Editor, the Transatlantic Review  
Assisi, May 17th 1924

Cher F.

. . . .

Dash (1) Oh Gawd. This village Idyll stuff. (British Contributor).

. . . .

Yours

Old Glory

life. Yet, in the same month as occurred this final dispute between Coppard and Ford, Ford published in the New York Herald Tribune the review of The Field of Mustard that has come to be the best known, most often quoted critique of Coppard. Ford begins:

Mr. Coppard has been so long for me the White Hope of British literature that I can't get out of the habit of so regarding him, though there may well be others in Great Britain to day. . . . for me Mr. Coppard remains what I will call the one illuminated author of Great Britain.<sup>160</sup>

Nearing the end of the piece, Ford focuses on what he considers Coppard's singular quality as a writer, a quality that today is recognized as an essential nature of the artistic short story--lyricism:

Mr. Coppard is almost the first English writer to get into English prose the peculiar quality of English lyric verse. I do not mean that he is metrical; I mean that hitherto no English prose writer has had the fancy, the turn of imagination, the wisdom, the as it were piety and the beauty of the great seventeenth century lyricists like Donne or Herbert--or even Herrick. And that poetic quality is the best thing England has to show.<sup>161</sup>

By 1925 Coppard's reputation had already become significant enough to rate inclusion in The Borzoi, a record of ten years of publishing by Alfred A. Knopf, both as a contributor and as subject. Roland Pertwee writes of Coppard's "atmosphere," his "knowledge of deep and secret places in the minds of men and in the broads of Nature," and his "vision" of "the men and places that surround us all, yet pass unnoticed."<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>160</sup>Ford, "Half Pixie," 4.

<sup>161</sup>Ibid.

<sup>162</sup>Roland Pertwee, "A. E. Coppard," The Borzoi, 1925 (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1925), 153-54.

Fishmonger's Fiddle, dedicated "To Gay," appeared the same year. The TLS praised this volume even more than The Black Dog. It no longer found Coppard's "artifice" to be a weakness.

In definition and colour and solid strength his work suggests that of the old Dutch painters; every object in the world, seen through his childlike eyes and presented by his mature art, possesses intrinsic value and a significance not derived from any ulterior philosophy or "criticism of life." A gate, a tree, an apple, a farmer's cart--these have value not because they perform useful functions but because they are so enchantingly themselves, having each a distinctive and solid shape.<sup>163</sup>

The reviewer goes on to find Coppard's "passion for the concrete reflected both in the substance and the style of his writing." Certainly, Coppard's writing had matured in the time since the TLS review of his first book, but it was not all that different. His subjects were the same; he had gained more control over his prose. Very likely Coppard's growing prestige had some influence on the review, at least enough influence for the reviewer to read him seriously. Also, the prestige of the short story in general was rising. In addition, the acceptance of Coppard's first volumes was probably hampered by the reviewer's formal expectations. If they were used to the carefully plotted short story--the short story as an abbreviated novel--Coppard's poetic, patterned forms would make little sense. Coppard's growing acceptance was at least partially a function of the formal education acquired by reading his short stories and the short stories of others who had broken away from the traditional

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<sup>163</sup>Review of Fishmonger's Fiddle, The Times Literary Supplement, June 11, 1925, p. 397.

narrative to create new modes of formal expression. The above review is one of the best descriptions of Coppard's ability to capture vivid physical detail and project it into a reader experience. It also recognizes the essential relationship between substance and form in the Coppard short story, and it ends by identifying him as a "storyteller."

1926 was a most important year in Coppard's personal and professional life. He met a young South African medical student Winifred De Kok, who began to visit him at his isolated hut and who, eventually, became his second wife. She intended to study psychoanalysis, and, so, after she completed her medical exams, she and Coppard left for Vienna where she underwent analysis with Wilhelm Steckel. Coppard got to know Steckel, who told him the story that came to be "Silver Circus."<sup>164</sup> Mrs. Coppard describes the relationship between Coppard and Steckel as one of professional interest on the part of the latter and protective interest in the former. Steckel tried to analyze Coppard, but Coppard refused to cooperate. He would not talk. He insisted that he had no dreams, and he would not reveal his childhood. Mrs. Coppard believes that Flynn refused to participate in Steckel's attempted analysis because he feared that if he talked he would lose whatever it was that made him write. This response is ironic coming from a man who seemed at times compelled to reveal his inner life and his childhood. Yet, Coppard's refusal to submit to analysis may have been a legitimate protective reaction. If the mind

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<sup>164</sup>Schwartz, 36-37.

of the artist is a place to store images and experiences (and Coppard's mind certainly was at least this), a place where ideas persevere and grow until they force their way out, then the premature release of the contents of that mind might well cleanse it of the need to create. Perhaps he reacted instinctively to protect his creative power. Perhaps he was merely afraid to get out of his intellectual depth by engaging in a process that was outside the boundaries of his deep but narrow self-education. Steckel's superior learning must certainly have been a threat to anyone in retreat from his own ignorance.

During this year, Coppard published two collections of poems, Pelagea and Poems, dedicated "to Winifred de Kok," and Yokohama Garland and Poems. More importantly, he dedicated "To Wynne" the volume bearing the title of his most superb short story, the lyrical "The Field of Mustard." Again the TLS views Coppard pictorially: "One might compare his stories to woodcuts as opposed to line engravings and etchings."<sup>165</sup>

J. B. Chapman's review in The Bookman enthusiastically describes Coppard's poetic sensibility:

To one surveying this work as a whole the thought is insistent that the writer is essentially a poet. In tale after tale the viewpoint is that of the poet, and in them all the prose is never far from the verge of poetry. Whether in verse or in prose, Coppard's absorption is in the recreation of experience. In this he differs from the host of so-called poets of to-day who merely wait for the occasion on which emotion is moved and then descant gracefully about it. In the true sense of the name, Coppard is a poet, a "makar," [sic] a creative artist.<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>165</sup>Review of The Field of Mustard, The Times Literary Supplement, November 18, 1926, 816.

<sup>166</sup>J. B. Chapman, "The Bookman Gallery. A. E. Coppard," Bookman, LXXI (January, 1927), 267.

Another review of The Field of Mustard in the same periodical is even more important for its implications about the short story form in general and Coppard's status in particular. It labels him one of the "recognized masters of the modern short story. . . . who is exploiting to the full the best possibilities" of that form.<sup>167</sup> Speaking of the form of the modern "selective" short story, C. Henry Warren maintains that the genre has become one in which the reader must participate. The old notion of plot has been dispensed with, and the new poetic writer, sharing the work of interpretation with the reader, "has to evoke the imagination rather than supply it."<sup>168</sup> Coppard does abandon plot and employ poetic imagination:

In [Coppard's tales] is no intruding moral; their plot (if such it may be called) is quite as natural as the plots of everyday life itself; they mingle the rough and the smooth, the crude and the poetic, as life will capriciously do; they are told with all the sensitiveness of a poet's power over word and image and they evoke one's imagination to a larger scope than their immediate theme, by unobtrusively widening out from the particular to the universal.<sup>169</sup>

With The Field of Mustard Coppard reached the height of his creative powers. Although he was to write many more individual stories that achieved excellence, they gradually got lost in the piling up of cranked out imitations of his early successes, or his obsession with particular themes began to overpower the delicate formal structures of the stories, or his fascination with language became an end in itself instead of a means for delivering the fictions. Also, as he moved up

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<sup>167</sup>C. Henry Warren, "The Modern Short Story, Bookman, LXXXI (January, 1927), 236.

<sup>168</sup>Ibid.

<sup>169</sup>Ibid.



in society, he began attempting more and more stories about the lives of middle class and upper class people. Although one certainly would not insist that the writer limit himself only to the people and places of his personal experience or youthful identity, still the writer must "know" that which he is writing about. Coppard never really understood the upper classes as persons, and his attempts at portraying their lives are generally weak and occasionally ludicrous. Having had to scrounge at one time or another for his daily bread, he could not imagine in any realistic way the lives of people to whom the bread was daily delivered. If he had written comic attacks on the upper class, he might have got away with it. He might have written some fine satire. But, perhaps he could not satirize a class to which he secretly wished to belong. After all, he married a doctor. But, his attempts to portray the upper class as people can best be described as "cute." According to Mrs. Coppard, Flynn got on well in upper class society, but he was ill at ease underneath. Finally, he felt that he belonged to neither class.

In 1927 Coppard and Winifred took a flat in London but continued to rent the hut for summer visits. In 1928 the following works were published by Coppard: Collected Poems, Silver Circus, and Count Stephan, the first of Coppard's short stories published individually for collectors, in a limited edition of 600. With the reviews of Silver Circus, Coppard tells us, "I found I had not yet scotched the legend of my inability to write anything except 'country' stories."<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>170</sup>Schwartz, 37.

The Evening News reviewer, who Coppard quotes, demonstrates that Coppard's rural personality had become such a fixture with many of his readers that they misread his stories to accommodate their own expectations. The review assigns to Coppard total command of the story set in the Thames Valley of rural England, calls up images of wind blowing across orchards, and concludes that the further he gets away from the country the weaker he gets. "The best tale here is 'The Presser.' If Mr. Coppard had given us a whole fat novel like 'The Presser' we should have whooped for joy. Why didn't he?" Coppard's reply: "I can only point out I do not write fat novels, and that this particular tale is not about the Thames Valley or the wind blowing across the orchards; it is about a little boy working in the slums of Whitechapel."<sup>171</sup> The TLS review notes Coppard's catholicity of styles--if not always successful at least always interesting. And, it describes Coppard's particular characteristic as the effortless mix of comic and tragic. "Mr. Coppard's vision of life--sensitive and fine--yields him the melancholy amusement of a fatalistic detachment which sees the comic and the tragic as but two aspects of the same situation."<sup>172</sup> We have already noted that H. E. Bates marks Coppard's decline as a writer from this volume. We should also note that Coppard was in his fifty-first year at the publication of Silver Circus, and he was still to write some fine short stories.

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<sup>171</sup> Ibid., 37-38.

<sup>172</sup> Review of Silver Circus, The Times Literary Supplement, November 11, 1928.

Lilly Anne Coppard touched on Flynn's life briefly the following year. She published an Italian novel The Orange Court dedicated "To my Beloved Husband A. E. Coppard." Coppard moved with Winifred from London to a house at Longwhiteningham, Berkshire. In the same year his short story "The Gollan" was privately printed in a limited edition of 75 by Earl and Florence Fisk of Green Bay, Wisconsin as a Christmas gift for their friends. Fisk was later to figure in Coppard's greatest literary and financial recognition.

The next six years, 1930-1935, were to see the biggest volume of Coppard publications and recognitions. It was as if his work as a whole had finally been appraised and found to be valuable, even though much of what he was turning out was no longer as good as his early work. Moreover, his literary recognition, which had always been limited but intense, grew even stronger among a few people who smelled profit in the limited first editions of a writer in demand. Although some of Coppard's editions were purposely limited in number in the late twenties and early thirties to bring increased profits, most of his first editions were rare because limited demand had always controlled production. Coppard suddenly became both more and less than an artist; he became instead an art object.

Coppard had always been chased by autograph hunters, whom he hated. He has said, in fact, that a truly rare first edition of Adam and Eve would be one without his signature.<sup>173</sup> But, if autograph seekers once had been an annoyance, now they

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<sup>173</sup>Schwartz, 5.

were a source of frustration and anger. They held signed copies of first editions that were going for enormous sums. Coppard, who had written the books, received no direct financial benefit from his sudden popularity. People were not buying his books to read. If that were the case, he could have made a fortune on his reprint rights and his new publications. It was the rarity of copies that made his work valuable, not its intrinsic worth, and he had none of those rare copies in hand. Little wonder that he was bitter. Coppard has said about the autograph hunters and book values that they inspired: "It is embarrassing, to say the least, to be asked to inscribe a book which has obviously not been read; it is lacerating to see it in the sale room fetch twenty times its published price, though it has obviously not been read."<sup>174</sup> The Daily Herald for January 28, 1930, quotes Coppard two years before calling book collectors: "'Gilt-edged ghouls who batten on certain books as wine-dealers seize a good wine, never to savour it, but keep it tightly corked until its price rises.'"<sup>175</sup> The Manchester Guardian of the same date records that at a book auction at Sotheby's one dozen Coppard books went for £54. A first edition of Adam and Eve sold for £16 alone.

Even more painful for Coppard than these first edition speculations, a "pirated" limited edition of "The Higgler"--thirty-nine copies, each copy containing a page of the original manuscript in holograph--was published in New York for \$65 a

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<sup>174</sup>Ibid., 6.

<sup>175</sup>This is taken from Coppard's press clippings which Mrs. Coppard allowed me to use, as is the following from the Manchester Guardian.

copy.<sup>176</sup> If special editions of Coppard were going to earn money for others, they might as well earn money for the author, too. So, Coppard began publishing limited editions. In 1930 he published The Man from Kilsheelan, A Tale with woodcuts by Robert Gibbings in 550 numbered copies with 500 for sale. He dedicated it "To Tom E. Olliver friend of my boyhood, first and best critic." The next year he published singly the poem "Easter Day" printed in a facsimile of his hand writing with the last page in holograph. Also, in 1931, Coppard published at the Golden Cockerel Press a subscribed edition of "My Hundredth Tale," entitled The Hundredth Story of A. E. Coppard, with engravings by Robert Gibbings. Originally intended for 750 copies, it was immediately over-subscribed because of the popularity of Coppard first editions and was enlarged to 1,000 copies.<sup>177</sup>

The following year Albert Parsons Sachs had printed a private edition of 105 copies of "Cheefoo" with drawings by Victor Candell for presentation to his friends at Christmas. In addition Coppard published in 1932 two special editions with engravings by Robert Gibbings: 500 copies of "Crotty Shinkwin" and "The Beauty Spot" and a limited edition Rummy, That Noble Game Expounded in Prose, Poetry, Diagram and Engraving with an Account of Certain Diversions into the Mountain Fastness of Cork and Kerry. "Ring the Bells of Heaven" became an edition of 150 copies in 1933, and in 1934 Sachs once again privately printed Coppard works, a poem, "These Hopes of Heaven," in January in

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<sup>176</sup>Schwartz, 7.

<sup>177</sup>Ibid., 60-61

an edition of 150, and as Christmas gifts 110 copies of the story "Good Samaritans." In the same year Random House published a special edition of the story "Emergency Exit." Two other special editions, Tapster's Tapestry and A Carol, were printed after this period 1930-1935. The former appeared in 75 copies with engravings by Gwenda Morgan in 1938, and the latter was printed nine years after that as a Christmas present for the friends of the Fisks.

So popular had Coppard become during the period that we are discussing that by 1931 he rated a bibliography, by Jacob Schwartz, in 1932 he inspired a dissertation, by George Brandon Saul, and in 1933 he required a detailed description of his first editions, by Gilbert Fabes.

An additional sign of Coppard's popularity at this time can be seen in all of the specialty volumes with which he was involved. Gilbert H. Fabes compiled in 1930 The Georgian Confession Book, including Coppard's responses to a series of set questions, "confessions." For The Fothergill Omnibus in 1931, Coppard and sixteen other writers wrote variations on a plot provided them by John Fothergill. The Golden Cockerel Press published in 1932 Consequences. A Complete Story in the Manner of the Old Parlour Game in Nine Chapters Each by a Different Author. Coppard wrote "Where They Met." He next wrote "Jack the Giant Killer" for The Fairies Return; or, New Tales for Old, a rewrite of standard fairy tales by 1934 authors in the 1934 mode.

It is significant that very little of all this literary

paraphernalia involved Coppard's best fiction. For the most part these special collections or editions printed Coppard's poorest work, often fantasy tales. One suspects that during this period Coppard was purchased by those with the most simplistic literary tastes. Coppard's continuing reputation as a writer of fantasy might be traced to this time. He included at least one fantasy story in almost all of his volumes, yet fantasy did not make up the bulk of his writing, nor is it usually his best work.

One wonders if Coppard might have become cynical that his most successful writing was his poorest writing. Perhaps he did not see these special editions as comprising mostly dull stuff. Certainly, we are tempted to imagine that Coppard's decline as an artist could only have been hastened by the complete misunderstanding by the buying public of his real powers. Coppard's desire for money was strong enough that it might have seduced him to produce what the market place would support.

During these six years Coppard also rated more than half a dozen interviews and "Portraits," some of the latter very inaccurate as to biographical details. Some of these came about, Coppard tells us, in an underhanded fashion:

There are those foul miscreants who write you some interesting questions about your work, and extract a reply which a few weeks later is hawked in the A.L. market.

It is evident that my signature, inscription, information, or opinion, has been a profit to anyone except myself, but my cupidity is now dangerously aroused and in future I propose to suck the blood of all persons requiring this unearned increment of me.<sup>178</sup>

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<sup>178</sup>Ibid., 6.

In addition, Coppard wrote a number of descriptions of his literary origins, and he figured prominently in any writing about the short story. He also continued to publish short fiction volumes.

In 1930 Coppard published the closest thing to a novel that he ever wrote, Pink Furniture. A Tale for Lovely Children with Noble Natures. Although this tale has the physical proportions of a novel, Coppard insists that he never writes any such thing.<sup>179</sup> Although reviewers of the time seemed to be taken by this fantasy about Toby Tottle, in retrospect it seems merely awful. One would be hard pressed to imagine the sort of child that it might be written for because it comes off as overly cute and, finally, patronizing.

The following year Flynn married Winifred,<sup>180</sup> and they traveled in Italy. Fares, Please!, an omnibus collection of the three volumes The Black Dog, The Field of Mustard, and Silver Circus, came out in 1931, as did Nixey's Harlequin. The TLS gave its approval to what it saw as Coppard's control in his fiction: "His stories end neither by contrivance nor through exhaustion, but simply by the teller's choice." And, the reviewer found in Coppard's characters something of what we might see in Coppard himself: "Sometimes Mr. Coppard's characters suggest that the successful rogues of this world

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<sup>179</sup>Ibid.

<sup>180</sup>I have not been able to learn the exact circumstances of Coppard's separation from Lilly Anne that permitted him to marry Winifred. I assume that they were divorced because L. A. was still alive in 1931; she published a short story that year.



are the born story-tellers, who cozen the simple for their own ends."<sup>181</sup> Coppard was not quite a rogue, nor did he accomplish from his tales everything he wanted, but we can surely recognize the sense of power that fictional manipulation gave him.

In 1933 Flynn and Winifred moved to Walberswick, Suffolk, where he made himself known as "The Warden of Walberswick." He also traveled in France with Pink and May Critall. The tale "Gone Away" is a fantasy based on these experiences. The TLS review of Dunky Fitlow, published that year, sounds more familiar than enthusiastic, but it notes that Coppard's tales "begin boldly" without any "useless tuning up."<sup>182</sup>

In the remainder of that decade Coppard published three more volumes, Polly Oliver in 1935, Ninepenny Flute in 1937, and You Never Know, Do You? in 1939. The reviews of these volumes get to sounding very much the same. They list Coppard's standard collection of characters and call him a "born storyteller." The review of Ninepenny Flute in the TLS is telling in its recognition of Coppard's decline: "Mr. Coppard's impulse towards caricature, which is undoubtedly increasing, comes often between him and the life which he observes." His caricaturing increases temporary enjoyment, but it is superficial.<sup>183</sup> That is to say, Coppard's style has become largely stylization.

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<sup>181</sup>Review of Nixey's Harlequin, The Times Literary Supplement, October 29, 1931, p. 838.

<sup>182</sup>Review of Dunky Fitlow, The Times Literary Supplement, October 26, 1933, p. 728.

<sup>183</sup>Review of Ninepenny Flute, The Times Literary Supplement, March 13, 1937, p. 187.

Superficial form has become everything; content is negligible. A later review remarks Coppard's failure to maintain "narrative logic," of being "noticeably inconsequential, of flitting from one side street to another and finishing up in a cul-de-sac." The stories lack unity:

They are sportive and spirited in the telling, they are strewn with sharply comic little character sketches, they have a shrewd intellectual vigor beneath an air of frivolity or of bucolic fancy; but as stories they lack wholeness and coherence.<sup>184</sup>

Of course, Coppard and some of his contemporaries had always used forms that differed from the traditional plot and had relied on other methods of unifying their work, but Coppard was beginning to lose control of the forms he had helped create. But, perhaps, the British short story as a whole had become too self-directed, too inbred and was suffering a decline. The Times reviewer thought so:

Here [in Ninepenny Flute] despite an occasional lapse from grace, is to be found that individual excellence which we associate with Mr. Coppard; but here, too, are some tendencies which throw a light on the state of contemporary English short stories. Primarily these restrictive tendencies are, no doubt, a question of personal impulse and its particular quality. At the same time the tyranny which the form seems to exercise occasionally over so accomplished a writer as Mr. Coppard may be regarded as symptomatic. After an exciting flourish the English short story appears to be in danger of settling into a narrow pattern of its own.<sup>185</sup>

The short story flourish that began with Coppard's ascendancy seems to have diminished, temporarily, with the waning of his powers. But, then, although Coppard was older than most of his

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<sup>184</sup>Review of You Never Know, Do You?, The Times Literary Supplement, May 13, 1939, p. 279.

<sup>185</sup>Review, Ninepenny, TLS, 187.

contemporaries, they shared a similar milieu. That time had passed. Even more had Coppard's time passed. During the twenties and even the early thirties, he could convincingly write about the grotesques and simple tragedies of life in rural England, but that time and that place was also passing away as World War II came closer. Coppard's best subject matter was no longer vitally real so much as "quaint." In the twenties it was still possible to believe in a dusky Ruth or a higgler. In the late thirties probably even Coppard could no longer believe in them. As we have pointed out, he was unable to make the transition to more "sophisticated" topics.

In 1938 Coppard had moved to Duton Hill, Dunmow, Essex where he remained for the rest of his life. He was still an active man. Mrs. Crittall remembers that late in his life he promised that he would give up playing football when his football shoes wore out. But, when they wore out, he bought another pair. Even the year before his death, he and Winifred took a walking tour of the Hebrides, and through the forties and fifties he took many walking tours of Ireland and England. He loved to climb the hills of the Lake District. According to Mrs. Coppard, Flynn lived off his royalties during the war (and, of course, she was employed as a doctor), but he continued to write, producing three more volumes: Ugly Anna in 1944, Dark-Eyed Lady in 1947, and Lucy in Her Pink Jacket in 1954. This final volume was not even reviewed by the Times.

In 1948 Alfred A. Knopf published Coppard's Collected Tales. "Selected Tales" would have been a better title because

that is what they are. William Peden's review for the Saturday Review of Literature strikes at the essence of Coppard's fiction. He calls the Collected Tales

an important contribution to the literature of short fiction . . . . If he is first of all a teller of tales, Coppard is next a poet and an artist. Passages of real lyric beauty appear and reappear in his stories, the final effect of much of his work is closer to that evoked by poetry than by prose. Many of these stories deserve to be read and remembered long after many of Coppard's more publicized contemporaries are forgotten.<sup>186</sup>

The most significant literary and financial tribute accorded Coppard arose from the selection of his Collected Tales as a dividend book of the Book of the Month club in 1951.<sup>187</sup> Earl E. Fisk of Green Bay, Wisconsin, who collected first editions and had corresponded with many writers since the twenties, became a great fan of Coppard after reading the Golden Cockerel Press edition of Adam and Eve and Pinch Me.<sup>188</sup> He persuaded Alfred A. Knopf to publish many of Coppard's works, including the Collected Tales.<sup>189</sup> About the same time, Knopf also published the collected tales of E. M. Forster and Walter de la Mare. Fisk decided that Coppard needed help in getting greater

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<sup>186</sup>William Peden, Review of The Collected Tales of A. E. Coppard, Saturday Review of Literature, XXI (March 27, 1948), 18.

<sup>187</sup>Mrs. Coppard described the following to me in detail, and I have been able to add information from Fanny Butcher, who wrote "The Literary Spotlight" for The Chicago Tribune, and from Alfred A. Knopf, who published the Collected Tales. Not all of the accounts agree perfectly, but I believe that from the three sources I have reconstructed the event accurately.

<sup>188</sup>Fanny Butcher, "The Literary Spotlight," The Chicago Tribune, July 15, 1951.

<sup>189</sup>Ibid.

recognition, so, as he wrote Fanny Butcher:

"In April, 1950, Bernardine Kielty, [wife of Harry Scherman, president of the Book of the Month Club], knowing of my interest in Coppard, Forster, and de la Mare, sent me a clipping of a piece she wrote about these three 'Collected Tales' for the Book of the Month Club News. I replied, saying among other things that I knew Forster and de la Mare were doing all right for themselves but that Coppard could stand a helping hand and I wondered if she would be willing to help. She answered at once saying she would love to do so and would see what could be done.

"Some months later I received a letter from Harry Scherman," continues the letter, "asking me to get some testimonials on Coppard's work from leading British writers and I got busy at once. I wrote first to some old friends--Walter de la Mare, Frank Swinnerton, Storm Jameson, and Rebecca West. They all took hold of the idea with great enthusiasm, wrote splendid letters themselves and suggested others who would like to get in on it--in many cases they approached other writers and letters began to pour in on me. . . . Then Harry Scherman asked me to get a few letters from American writers, and I wrote to Eudora Welty, Robert Frost, Edmund Wilson, Carl Sandburg, and a few others. When all the letters were in, the Book of the Month Club took action and decided to make 'The Collected Tales of A. E. Coppard' a dividend book."<sup>190</sup>

According to Mrs. Coppard, additional letters were sent by Gerald Bullett, J. B. Priestly, Elizabeth Bowen, and Martin Armstrong (H. E. Bates refused to contribute.). The letters were collected without Coppard's knowledge and were presented to him after they had fulfilled their initial purpose--to convince the Schermans to select the Collected Tales as Book of the Month. Unfortunately, the letters have been lost, and, apparently, no complete copies are available, but portions of the letters, testifying to Coppard's importance in the estimation of his peers, have been reprinted by Fanny Butcher and on

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<sup>190</sup>Ibid.

some book jackets of later printings of Coppard's work:<sup>191</sup>

He is unquestionably one of the masters, and cannot be given anything less than homage and praise from any writer of the short story--we all owe much to him.

Eudora Welty

There is nobody like him. He has had many imitators, and some of them have been better business men than he is, and have come to higher public favour. But his stories are subtle, not skimpy; delicate, not wishy-washy; evocative, not vague. Thus you can tell him from his imitators and recognise him as the great master of the short story of our times.

Rebecca West

The finest English short story writer of all time, he has all the qualities the short story needs.

L. A. G. Strong

How high he will rank in English literature it is hard to say--perhaps as high as Chekhov does in Russia. . . . I would back A. E. Coppard, purely as a tale-teller, against most of our better publicized reputations. I believe this publication of his best tales to be a literary event of genuine importance.

Clifton Fadiman

Not only is he a penetrating understander of the human heart--he is a poet, and every one of his tales creates a portion of his own passionate, humorous poetic vision of life.

Rosamond Lehmann

His great short stories--and they are great stories--particularly the ones about women's secretiveness (Coppard's

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<sup>191</sup> Mrs. Coppard told me that the original letters have been lost, and she is not aware of any complete copies in existence. She did identify for me, however, parts of the letters printed on the dust jacket of Coppard's 1954 publication Lucy in Her Pink Jacket. More lengthy and additional quotations from the letters appear on the jacket of the 1966 printing of The Collected Tales. Neither Peter Nevill nor Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., nor Mr. Knopf himself have copies of the original letters. No doubt, copies exist somewhere, and it seems highly unlikely, Coppard memorabilia having always been collected with such enthusiasm, that the originals have been entirely lost.

principal obsession), stories like "The Field of Mustard," "Dusky Ruth," "Olive and Camilla" and "The Sullen Sisters"--- are unequalled outside of Chekov.

Frank O'Connor

I think he has written some of the very best short stories in the English language, and it is an inestimable advantage in these days to have his pure, clean-cut and wasteless English to come by.

Walter de la Mare

Even taking into account the likely excess of enthusiasm of writers supporting one of their own in such a circumstance, the testament of the above statements and others is clear. Among his peers Coppard had much regard, respect, and esteem. Because of his testimony, Coppard received, at last, more than literary recognition. For the Collected Tales Alfred A. Knopf recollects that Coppard was paid "five cents a copy, but as the number of copies used was quite large, the deal brought him more money, I'm sure, than he had ever seen at one time, before or afterward, in his life."<sup>192</sup> Knopf continues: "My recollection is that he gave it away almost immediately to some cause, organization, party or individual that was very, very far to the left."<sup>193</sup> If Knopf's memory is correct, Coppard's response to this sudden large sum fits the pattern of his life--money reflects society's true recognition of art and frees one from "meanness," but it is useless and probably no good in itself. Percy Muir remembers that, when Flynn got a lot of money from the United States' sales of his Collected

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<sup>192</sup>Letter from Alfred A. Knopf, July 27, 1970.

<sup>193</sup>Ibid.

Tales, he and Frank O'Connor went out and rented a car and drove around the countryside, pulling up to Muir's in a cloud of dust. Since Coppard frequently repeated his hatred of cars (When he toured France in 1933 with the Crittalls, he complained the whole time they were driving that he was missing the scenery, that he was uncomfortable--he often got out and walked.), his driving madly around with O'Connor seems to have been an ostentatious attempt to burn up money--very like his purchase of a watch when, after living skimpily for two years at Shepherd's Pit, he suddenly sold a story for fifty pounds.<sup>194</sup> Coppard had little need of or use for money, as we have already seen, and he was a socialist besides--though not in any energetic or sophisticated way, but he knew what society valued and how it demonstrated its recognition. He wanted that acceptance of himself, of his art. He also needed freedom from want, but, since his own wants were so small, he needed very little. So, when he got money, having nothing to do with it, he spent it superficially.

Although publishers were never able to convince Coppard to write a novel (the sort of art that might have earned him popular recognition and much money), in 1955 Methuen finally pressured him into writing his autobiography, on which he spent the last two years of his life. He called it It's Me, O Lord! from the spiritual he loved to hear sung by Paul Robeson. He sent the corrected proofs to Methuen the day before he entered the hospital for the last time, taking with him his well-worn copy of Browning's The Ring and the Book. Regardless of the

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<sup>194</sup>Schwartz, 22.



title of his autobiography and the continual references--and appeals--to God that appear in it and in his other works, he insisted to the last that he was an atheist:

As a lifelong dweller in the comfort of atheism (I was never anything so frozenly credulous as an agnostic), I am not in the least afraid of death or the dying into it.<sup>195</sup>

He died in a Catholic hospital in January 1957, but he refused to admit to even Church of England membership on the hospital admission form.

Despite good reviews, the sales of It's Me, O Lord! were poor. Mrs. Coppard received only about <sup>£</sup>300 from it. The Times review was approving but somewhat inaccurate. It described his major influences as Synge and Chekhov, leading one to believe that the reviewer had not read the book at all. And, it said that "he was funniest when he wrote about the upper classes, whom he saw through a loving prism,"<sup>196</sup> leading one to believe further that the reviewer had read nothing of Coppard. Perhaps Coppard would have enjoyed this final comedy.

Flynn wanted no huge stone memorial:

I beg, I must not have any headstone or tomby memorial, such things have never occurred in the short and simple annals of my family. Besides, it would embarrass me to make a choice beforehand--I would surely insist on choosing it!--of a quotation for it from the many handsome ones that readily spring to my mind. . . . A headstone without some nonsense is much like an advertisement that has lost its function.<sup>197</sup>

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<sup>195</sup>Coppard, It's Me, 39.

<sup>196</sup>Review of It's Me, O Lord!, The Times Literary Supplement, April 12, 1957, 226.

<sup>197</sup>Coppard, It's Me, 10.

Consequently, a silver sacristy lamp bearing his name and dates was hung in the chapel of Blessed John Ball, priest and martyr, in the lovely fifteenth century Church of St. John the Baptist in Thaxted, Essex, a few miles from Coppard's last home in Dunmow. John Ball, one of the leaders of Wat Tyler's revolt in 1381, was a socialist who is remembered for the rallying cry, found in the chapel, "Good people, things will never go well in England so long as goods be not in common." (Subsequently, the lamp has been moved to the chapel of "Our Lady.")

Coppard's reputation has moved fitfully since his death. For Christmas of 1967 three of his short stories, "Dusky Ruth," "The Field of Mustard," and "Adam and Eve and Pinch Me," were adopted for BBC-TV by his son Kit Coppard. According to Mrs. Coppard, "Judith" is being made into a film. Being one of his most "plotted" stories, "Judith" is one of the few Coppard tales that could become a feature length film. In 1966 Knopf reprinted the Collected Tales. In 1970 the Books for Libraries Press began reprinting Coppard's individual volumes of tales in its Short Story Reprint Series.

Coppard's critical reputation has been as spotty as his public regard. He inspired a dissertation by Russell MacDonald in 1961. In 1965 Frank O'Connor enthusiastically included Coppard in The Lonely Voice, giving him a chapter. T. O. Beachcroft, in his two recent authoritative works on the English short story, places Coppard at the center of the modern tradition of the short story. Coppard's critical recognition, thus, is limited, if enthusiastic. Usually it is expressed something

like this: "He was very good. At his best he compares only to Chekhov. Unfortunately, he wrote too much." I agree. Coppard's reputation might well be higher if he had stopped writing about 1930. More likely, his repute would be greater if he had not been so much of a literary loner. If he had moved in a larger society during the twenties, he might have gathered a bigger public. That alone could have propelled him to a longer-lasting recognition. More likely, though, Coppard's memory suffers from the general fate of the short story genre. It is still the least regarded major literary form. Contemporary publishers usually will only publish a collection of short stories as a favor to a novelist, who will make them money in the more salable genre. The short story is ordinarily taught in college literature courses as a prelude to reading the novel rather than as a real form in its own right. Yet, the short story is receiving increasing critical attention. It has its own scholarly journal, Studies in Short Fiction. The sales of collections of short stories by John Barthelme, Philip Roth, Robert Coover and other contemporary writers in short fiction almost rival their novels. Perhaps the short story is becoming significant. If it does, A. E. Coppard's popularity, at least in short fiction anthologies, will certainly increase. His corpus cannot compare in total value to that of his contemporary Katherine Mansfield, but his best work (as many of his admirers have already said) stands among the best of any writer of short stories.

Perhaps Coppard "came from nothing," as he has told us by way of Johnny Flynn, but life did not 'pass him by.' Had he

been nothing but a clerk, the life he led would have been interesting material for a short story. That he himself converted that life and its observations into fiction shows that he was much "more than a contrivance for recording emotions" of others. He was, finally, the person he made himself to be, his own creation, Johnny Flynn, hero and narrator of his own life.

## CHAPTER II

### COPPARD'S THEORY OF SHORT FICTION

For the fifteen year period between 1921 and 1935 Flynn was the complete literary figure. During this time he published most of his best fiction in nine of his eventual fourteen volumes. Perhaps almost as important to his own sense of himself as an artist were the three dozen book reviews that he wrote, primarily for the Manchester Guardian and The Spectator, from 1919 to 1928, and the articles, interviews, introductions, novelty books and other literary paraphernalia in which he figured through the mid-thirties. A. E. Coppard had arrived. The self-styled Johnny Flynn, who grew up in poverty and ignorance, taught himself to appreciate literature, and, at forty, went off to the woods to write stories, found himself, at middle age, if not popularly famous, at least well known and sought after by a certain enthusiastic and believing literary public. Particularly in the thirties, when his ability as a creative artist had slipped badly, he found himself considered by a small but intense public to be the major figure in the contemporary short story. His name appeared regularly in the literary periodicals. His opinions were sought. He gave interviews on the short story technique and, occasionally, the state

of the world.

From this collection of sources it is possible for us today to abstract a picture of Coppard's understanding of literature, particularly the short story. In no way complex or sophisticated, Coppard's ideas about art, literature, and the short story yet give us some insight into his writing and his personality. Further, they provide a valuable commentary on the work of his contemporaries and a means of getting at short fiction theory as it developed during one of the major periods of the modern short story.

Most of Coppard's book reviews do not tell us as much about literature as they tell us about Coppard. Consequently they are often entertaining, if not artistically informative. Even more, they give us a picture of Flynn, the confident literary figure, dispensing solicitous praise and criticism at the expense of his new found peers. In a review of E. Temple Thurston's The World of Reality, for instance, Coppard's criticism expresses itself as parody of the novel's overblown diction and involved sentence structure:

Jill, however, soon has to discard him [John Grey] because, although he is a poet and therefore wonderful, he is also unsuccessful and therefore indigent, while she is a girl of good family and therefore a determinist of the patriarchate school.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps Coppard's review of this novel would not have been so facetious if it had been written later in his career when he

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<sup>1</sup>A. E. Coppard, Review of E. Temple Thurston's The World of Wonderful Reality, Manchester Guardian, November, 27, 1919.

had become acutely conscious of the distance between his own literary recognition and the limited remuneration that he received for it.

Sarcasm is Coppard's major device in writing reviews of other books, such as, Ernest Oldmeadow's The Hare in 1920,<sup>2</sup> Kathleen Norris' Poor Butterfly in 1923,<sup>3</sup> and Warrington Dawson's Adventure in the Night in 1924.<sup>4</sup> And, he is, predictably, especially critical of Michael Joseph's Short Story Writing for Profit in 1924.<sup>5</sup> Maybe by this time he had already come to see that profit could not be his legitimate expectation from writing short stories.

In his autobiography Coppard has remarked upon his own joyful surprise at the discovery that some magazines pay for short stories by the word:

The Dial delighted me by making payment at so much a word, two pence I think. It was so diverting to know that you were getting as much for such pipsqueaks as the first personal pronoun and the indefinite article as you were for extravagant mouthfuls like perpendicularity and problematical.<sup>6</sup>

Knowing Coppard, it is little surprise that during this same period he should use an economic formula as a basis for

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<sup>2</sup>A. E. Coppard, Review of Ernest Oldmeadow's The Hare, Manchester Guardian, December 24, 1920.

<sup>3</sup>A. E. Coppard, Review of Kathleen Norris' Poor Butterfly, Manchester Guardian, December 21, 1923.

<sup>4</sup>A. E. Coppard, Review of Warrington Dawson's Adventure in the Night, Manchester Guardian, July 25, 1924.

<sup>5</sup>A. E. Coppard, Review of Michael Joseph's Short Story Writing for Profit, Spectator, CXXXII (January 12, 1924), 56.

<sup>6</sup>Coppard, It's Me, 244-45.

reviewing Salt by Charles G. Norris:

The subject is rather thin for the length of the book, the price of which works out to four pages a penny. Art is long, maybe, but life, besides being fleeting, is expensive.<sup>7</sup>

Coppard continues this concern with the economics of language and of life in other reviews. He writes, for instance, about Norman Davey's The Pilgrim of a Smile that the author

is as real as a municipal tramway. And he is almost as ruthless, for he opens an episode as if he were beginning a ten-volume disquisition upon some congenial theme; he cannot make one word do the work of two, but he can make 500 do the work of half a dozen, and he does it glibly.<sup>8</sup>

He does praise Norris' work, though, for having "an artistic economy a little unusual in American fiction."<sup>9</sup> In his review of Sinclair Lewis' Main Street he continues with this common theme of the 1920's English literary world (the absence of significant "style" in American literature) in remarking that "real literary style is an art that at present simply will not grow in America."<sup>10</sup> But, he has better things to say about F. Scott Fitzgerald a year later:

His [Fitzgerald's] publishers state that "he is now one of the highest paid short-story writers in America, and it is said that no one has so appealed to the American

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<sup>7</sup>A. E. Coppard, Review of Charles G. Norris' Salt, Manchester Guardian, May 28, 1920.

<sup>8</sup>A. E. Coppard, Review of Norman Davey's The Pilgrim of a Smile, Manchester Guardian, January 28, 1921.

<sup>9</sup>Coppard, Review, Salt.

<sup>10</sup>A. E. Coppard, Review of Sinclair Lewis' Main Street, Manchester Guardian, April 1, 1921.



public since O. Henry." These are two very serious indictments, and Mr. Fitzgerald deserves to be acquitted.<sup>11</sup>

Passing beyond our amusement with Coppard's fiscal self-consciousness, we note here a striking example of his concern for short story form, especially for the strong dislike of the trick or surprise ending with which O. Henry is associated. He had mentioned previously, writing about Guy de Maupassant in the Daily Herald's "Great Name" series, that he did not like surprise endings in the short story because this device makes it impossible to re-read the story with the original delight.<sup>12</sup>

Clearly, Coppard, during these years when he was doing his earliest and best writing, had a strong, conscious sense of the difference between suspense of form and suspense of ending--the latter common to the detective story or story of ideas and the former descriptive of the organic nature of the artistic short story. Clear exposition of this sense in Coppard will be developed later in this chapter.

The expression of literary consciousness in these reviews is certainly superficial, although some of them suggest important artistic recognitions. But, probably, most of the books Coppard reviewed were not worth more than the kind of consideration that he gave them. And, of course, he did it for money, which he badly needed in those first years at

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<sup>11</sup>A. E. Coppard, Review of F. Scott Fitzgerald's Flappers and Philosophers, Manchester Guardian, April 28, 1922.

<sup>12</sup>A. E. Coppard, "Guy de Maupassant," Daily Herald, July 6, 1921.

Shepherds Pit. He tells us that by the end of his first year there he "had earned a total of thirty-one pounds, chiefly for reviews and one or two sketches in the Manchester Guardian, who were indeed my standby in the tribulations of that time."<sup>13</sup>

We have already remarked on Coppard's argumentative, opinionated personality in other contexts, and it is no less significant in our understanding of his literary self-consciousness. But, just as we did in Coppard's attitudes toward religion, politics, and life in general, we see in his gross exaggerations of his aesthetic competence a kind of ironic self-effacement. He tells us, for instance, that when he took employment at the Iron Works in Brighton, he delighted in his new associations although he was aware of a secret distance between them and himself:

I was a little on my guard and secretive, aware of our dissimilarities, of the deficiencies in myself as well as in them. My mispronunciations and the haphazardly of the infernal aspirate continued to flush me with shame. None of them knew anything at all about art and poetry, evinced no awareness of either, simply nothing, while I, of course, beyond all question, knew everything about both!<sup>14</sup>

This is Flynn talking--the voice of a man who, continually afraid to reveal any incompetence, compensates by being "perfect," especially in his understanding of literature. Coppard mentions, for instance, a man at Oxford who had no connection with the university but who "impressed [him] deeply with his superior knowledge" about many things in which Coppard was interested, "of almost all things, in fact, except poetry, for

<sup>13</sup>Coppard, It's Me, 227.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 113.

I had a firm belief that no living person knew more about it than I did."<sup>15</sup> Concluding an anecdote about an argument with Hugh Walpole over a painting which Coppard had declared with "magisterial aplomb" to be "one of the greatest paintings since Botticelli," Coppard concludes: "It will be inferred (and rightly!) that I had a big opinion of my opinions. All the same I was not sure about them, I was only positive!"<sup>16</sup>

As might be inferred from Coppard's certitude about his literary judgment, the basis of this judgment was essentially impressionistic. He describes it as "instinct": "I knew with certainty that I was going to like Rossetti's poems although I had not read a line of him. How did I know? Instinct."<sup>17</sup>

Coppard describes his "study" of poetry as a young man in this intuitive fashion:

My mode of study . . . was illuminated by instinctive awareness of the poets I wanted to read and those I was bound to dislike--as I did Dryden and Thomson and Young. For me this instinct was always right and I learned to trust it. I would find myself mystically drawn towards certain poets who were then but mere names to me but from whom, when time ripened, a great wonder grew.<sup>18</sup>

Once Coppard had seized upon a poet in this impressionistic manner, he clung to him and to all of his works without exception. Indeed, so strong was his sense of loyalty to a poet whom he had already accepted that he could give up all critical judgment in the acceptance of his individual poems. A poet who had failed to "please" him, on the other hand, could not excite him with any of his works, nor could any work that

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 197.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 73.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 200.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 73-74.

failed to "please" have any value:

In the poetic field I had my idols--who has not-- although most of them wrote more than I wanted of them, much that nothing could induce me to read again. It is stupid, but tempting, to hold that the poet we adore never stepped awry in his art; it is stupider to assume that there is no virtue in the mind that is excited by work that totally fails to please us, and stupid beyond all to think that art which does not please us has no virtue at all. The mind has facets that shine only by reflected light. I am triple-dyed in this stupidity, am ineradicably guilty on all three counts.<sup>19</sup>

Although Coppard, in his whimsical, self-deprecating manner, assigns this absolute impression to his youth, in a later elaboration on his aesthetic ignorance, he praises the stubborn subjectivism that led him to appreciate the art of others while buttressing his own creative process:

I was . . . as disputatious about music as I was about art and poetry, and indeed about anything--as I still am [1956]! Never having vexed myself with the burden of analysis, I knew nothing of the technicalities of music, I was appreciative only of some of the noises that came from some of it. In the same way, although knowing little of etymology, I could appreciate the meanings and implications that derive from certain ways of using words. . . . I did not want to know why, I accepted it, as I am still content to do, being as void of principles of aesthetics (if there are any such principles) as Adam in his marvellous garden was of botany.<sup>20</sup>

Later in his autobiography Coppard extends slightly his notion of an aesthetic principle, but he deals mainly in the effect of art on the individual. He begins with a typically outrageous metaphor to discuss the meaning of the truth-beauty paradox in "Ode to a Grecian Urn," which ends "as though [Keats] had slapped half-a-crown on the counter and defied you to give him change for it."<sup>21</sup> And, Coppard continues, the truth-beauty

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 34.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 157.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 209.

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is mystically acceptable, but what he meant by his truth and his beauty will remain delightfully unknown. To define truth and beauty for yourself is simple, but such appraisals are not knowledge, they are hats you can put on your own head but will not fit anybody else. . . . For me beauty is just freedom from evil, but I have to concede that one man's evil may be another man's elixir.<sup>22</sup>

In his studied primitivism Coppard happily reaffirms the ambiguity of Keats' paradox, but he suggests his openness to aesthetic judgments that differ from his own. If he is open to such differences, he is merely affirming the right of each man who disagrees with him to be a blockhead. Shaw, he contends, is wrong in his assertion: "'Beauty is not a matter of taste at all, but a matter of fact as to which no difference is possible among cultivated people.'"<sup>23</sup> He must be wrong, Coppard continues with sly irony, because there are thousands of "cultivated people" for whom bad taste is a matter of personal preference. "How else explain the prevalence in current sculptures of women without faces and with craters in the belly? . . . Some artistic perversions are as repulsive as sexual ones."<sup>24</sup> Clearly, if taste is a matter of personal choices (as Coppard asserts), there are (so Coppard believes) a great many persons and choices that are entirely wrong!

Coppard's literary certitude and primitivism provided him, however, with perceptiveness that guided his own growth as a writer. We watched this growth in chapter one. Here we can see some examples of the way in which these facilities expressed themselves in Coppard the critic. Although he was

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 109-10.

often linked, as a writer about nature, with D. H. Lawrence (Frank O'Connor develops this parallel at length), he tells us in the Schwartz Bibliography: "I have to disclaim any liking for the work of [Lawrence]. Possibly it is a matter of temperament rather than criticism that I find it unpalatable and boring."<sup>25</sup>

If his reason for disliking Lawrence is somewhat hazy and personal, Coppard's criticism of Sir Walter Scott is more specific and deals with a continuing concern of his reading and writing--language.

Whenever I tried to read Scott it seemed to me that eternity might have been contrived as an appropriate medium for Sir Walter to compose in. Left to himself the world's supply of scribbling paper might suffer exhaustion and the stems of the longest quills, porcupine, peacock or ostrich, be worn down to their useless stumps, but the Wizard of the North would not cease to commune, . . . To a student of literature no doubt these remarks upon Scott will appear thoughtless, heretical, stupid, but I must urge that Scott did not write only for students of literature, he wrote for the general reader, people like me.<sup>26</sup>

Although Coppard could attack well known writers with the same enthusiasm that he scored more common writers in his book reviews, when he talks about major figures in poetry and fiction, and especially the short story, we begin to see more clearly his own creative sensibility. We get a strong sense of Coppard's personal and literary character in his following comments on The Faerie Queene:

The Faerie Queene is a lovely long poem, as lovely as it is long . . . for this lumbering waggon [sic] of

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<sup>25</sup>Schwartz, 23-24.

<sup>26</sup>Coppard, It's Me, 214.

knight-errantry is wholly adorned with Spenser's genius for poetizing, genius of such high order that no matter whom you test it by you cannot put him down. No more perfect vehicle could be conceived for such narration than the marvellous nine-line stanza with its alexandrine so admirably disposed to jog the mind and stave off satiety in a manner void to the organ roll of blank verse. Each stanza . . . is a perfect piece of poetic work, although Spenser is absolutely unscrupulous about rhyme and ruthless about inversion. Most of the poem is now, to me at any rate, intensely, though unconsciously, funny with its sweeping extravagances. . . . Time has dealt affably and gently with this great creation and greatly comic though it has become it is still fine poetry.<sup>27</sup>

We see in the above lines another example of Coppard's continuing valuation of the proper use of language in literature. He recognizes the formal function of style in support of meaning, or even as inseparable from meaning. We will return to Coppard's sense of form. Further, we get again his enormous love of the comic, here used for approval rather than opprobrium. In Coppard's analysis of the success of Tom Jones we come to understand something more of his notion of the fictive process, here described as a kind of brilliant manipulation:

The 'plot' of Tom Jones was dragged out of the fleabitten stockroom of Restoration theatre. With lacerating deliberation he claps a couple of dots upon every 'i' and half a dozen crosses upon every 't'. Ladies weep and swoon, gentlemen rant of honour, weep too, and tear their hair. . . . Although Fielding was a tried dramatist there is no such thing as dialogue or conversation in his novel; his images orate or declaim or tell you the story of their lives with all the elegance of polite literature. Only by seeing them as puppets, controlled by a masterly hand with the strings, can we savour them. Seeing thus we are disarmed by their life-likeness, by their angular animation and their mechanical gesturing; the rhodomontades they utter are divinely appropriate then. Fielding, the manipulating genius, with his slyly 'innocent' irony, explanations that are 'miles off centre', his wit, wisdom, and compassion, compels you to accept his presentation as a picture of life in his day-- which it assuredly is not!<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 221.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 220-21.

In this interpretation of the artist at work in Tom Jones we begin to find more of the awareness of Coppard as an artist, especially his understanding of the process by which life becomes fiction (Coppard distinguishes strongly between fiction and real life in other sources), his belief in the need for dramatization, "objective" story telling, as opposed to reporting in fiction, and his distinction between the manner in which characters operate in the novel and in the short story.

Finally, we will watch Coppard assess a short story writer, Katherine Mansfield. Although he first encountered Mansfield about the same time he began reading Chekhov, about 1919, he was strongly and immediately impressed by her writing. Coppard and Mansfield were often compared in short story reviews and articles of the twenties and thirties, and Coppard seems generally to have been considered the better writer. Coppard, too, was mistaken in his estimation of Mansfield's total artistic skill.

You revel in the apprehension of her delightful mind: that is the activity she keeps you interested in, for in general there is little enough action in the stories themselves; they are pictures rather than events; had they been as fine in substance as they are in texture and sympathy she would have equalled the greatest masters of the short story.<sup>29</sup>

Today, of course, Katherine Mansfield is considered one of the masters of the short story. Coppard's faulty evaluation of her work stems from his insistence that the short story have "substance," that it be about something, that it have an idea to be

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<sup>29</sup>A. E. Coppard, Review of Katherine Mansfield's Something Childish, Manchester Guardian, September 12, 1924, p. 7.



worked out. Although he delighted in the form of her work, he felt that it failed to reach its potential because she did not have enough to say. It seems to have been common in the literary periodicals of the time to regret that Katherine Mansfield had nothing significant to say while praising the manner in which she constructed her stories, i.e., their form. Of course, Mansfield's work is often dense with meaning, and Coppard's own failure to see past the surface of her work is a further example of the distance between some of his very literal literary judgments and the subtle suggestiveness of his own fiction. If Mansfield's short fiction did not seem, to Coppard, to originate in a significant idea (a topic we will take up later), he did value the dramatic form that made it come alive with vivid "actualities" of "people's minds in flashing movement--the actuality of drama, not a narration of it."<sup>30</sup>

Having portrayed Coppard's personality in his perception of literature, and teased at something more, the remainder of this chapter will be devoted to his particular contribution to (or, more accurately, understanding of) the theory of fiction in general and the short story in particular with some reflection on his writing in that form.

In chapter one we began to develop the relationship between Coppard's life and his art. In writing about his life, Flynn warns us often that what he is presenting as fact may, indeed, be fiction:

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<sup>30</sup>Ibid.

This book is not to be taken as my authentic history; memory is coy and clarity fails me, charity too . . . so I am not to be trusted all the way. What is truth after all? To put it unprofoundly it is more reliable than fiction, but fiction is the better known, is much more palatable, and therefore much more used and regarded.<sup>31</sup>

Because his life has been lived in continuing tension between reality and his fictive imagination, because he has used this capacity for "fiction mongering" to select and shape his life into his art, he "cannot take oath" that what he has written as autobiography has not itself been colored by the need to tell a tale, "a fictionmonger being by nature a glozing decorator, a plausible perverter, which gifts of nature have come to be used in no pinch-penny fashion."<sup>32</sup>

In 1949 Coppard read a paper entitled "Some Aspects of the Short Story" at the Writer Circles Summer School. A condensed version of that paper was printed in The Writer that fall. Most of the paper concerns this capacity of the writer to shape fiction from his observations of life. Coppard begins by comparing the qualities of life and art:

As a general rule the living experiences we undergo are inevitably of a much lower grade than those we read or dream about. Ordinary life, it seems, is no more interesting than ordinary business. In fiction, your ordinary life is transmitted and presented in a way that reveals and magnifies some unperceived significances.<sup>33</sup>

So, on the one hand, the writer's perception of the world around him is heightened beyond that of most persons. But, in addition, "the fictional process . . . selects and

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<sup>31</sup>Coppard, It's Me, 23.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid.

<sup>33</sup>A. E. Coppard, "The Short Story," The Writer (October, 1949), 8.

enhances, or suppresses and ignores."<sup>34</sup> Once "having access" to the "stuff of fiction . . . the common or uncommon matters of the world that lies around us: the acts and beliefs of the people, their ambitions, desires, misfortunes, triumphs and, in particular, their conflicts," the writer must shape these experiences through his "fictional mind,"

a mind that goes about noting events and conversations for the sinister purpose it has in view. A mind that, when it meets with a stimulating occasion, begins to effervesce and bubble over in extra-truthful amplifications; a mind that is constantly conspiring with itself and conceiving plots, or bits of plots, and modifying, or extending them as it thinks fit. In short, the mind of a liar, who desires to supplement truth in the interests of romance.<sup>35</sup>

Of course, this is the kind of mind that Coppard had. He went about jotting bits of life in his notebooks, and from this collection of names, places, and scenes he provided much of the vivid detail of his fiction. And, he tells us, there is much to be found in the world of reality for the person who looks because the world is a strange and exciting place. Coppard implies that it is the writer's role to interpret the world to those with lesser perceptions, but it is an interesting, even wicked, world that the writer is privileged to observe and remake:

The whole world loves a story and from fiction's seat of observation the world is most interesting when it is sinning. . . . Truth is by no means stranger than fiction, it is fiction, and familiarity with it breeds content. Maybe, but solely in the interests of such fiction, these things [murders, lusts, stupidities of real life] should be encouraged to continue to occur.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup>Coppard, It's Me, 18.

<sup>35</sup>Coppard, "The Short Story," 8.

<sup>36</sup>Coppard, It's Me, 232.

Coppard praises Chekhov for exhibiting to an extraordinary degree the ability to observe the world around him and recreate it as fiction:

Chekhov was supremely an artist, informed with an extraordinary emotional sympathy. . . . He extends our range, but not of knowledge or speculation. "The artist observes, selects, guesses, combines;" that is Chekhov's simple formula.<sup>37</sup>

If the making of a fiction is the process of creating a believable falsehood out of a truth, the reader's experience of fiction is an engagement in the resulting illusion. As Coppard says,

the fiction-monger must always be more or less untruthful. He has to persuade you that his fanciful view of a certain process or event is a precise and real one. What is important in the art of fiction is not truth itself but the sensation of truth.<sup>38</sup>

In these passages we see something of Coppard's debt to Henry James who fictionally depicts the distinction between the real world and the artistic illusion in "The Real Thing" and describes the artist's transformation of experience to fiction in "The Art of Fiction."<sup>39</sup> James even insists upon the keeping

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<sup>37</sup>A. E. Coppard, Review of William Gerhardt's Anton Checkov, Spectator, CXXXI (December 8, 1923), 902

<sup>38</sup>Coppard, "The Short Story," 8. Coppard repeats this word for word in It's Me, 216.

<sup>39</sup>"The Real Thing" is a fictive expression of the relationship between appearance and reality in art. The truly aristocratic Monarchs cannot convey, as artist's models, the same appearance of elegance as the more common Miss Churm can. In "The Art of Fiction" James compares the writer to the painter, who must employ all of his life experiences, seizing every detail of his subject, to compete with nature in creating his artistic illusion. Upon the total awareness of surrounding life the artist imposes form so that the world that he has made seems real. Henry James, "The Art of Fiction" in Selected Fiction, edited with an introduction and notes by Leon Edel (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1953), 585-609.

of a notebook to record impressions of life.<sup>40</sup>

Coppard's conscious recognition of the distinction between truth of real events and the appearance of truth inherent in successful fiction demonstrates a high level of awareness of his own art. In fact, Coppard tells us in some of his writing about his artistic principles in general and about some of his stories in particular. In an essay about David Garnett for the Borzoi he recounts a discussion of the craft of fiction with Garnett and Liam O'Flaherty:

We came to a conclusion upon a point of literary construction--at least I did. As thus: If your story is to deal with extraordinary characters, it will be a waste of treasure to invent extraordinary circumstances for them, and, per contra, if you are dealing with ordinary characters, then you must put them into extraordinary circumstances in order to secure a decent balance of effect. Extraordinary people, we said (at least, I did) were always worth watching even if they were only putting on their boots, whereas any ordinary person only became interesting when he was doing something unexpected or provocative, like changing his pants in the middle of the street--that sort of thing.<sup>41</sup>

This is reminiscent of James' discussion of the relationship between character and incident in "The Art of Fiction."<sup>42</sup>

Prompted by reviews of "Fishmonger's Fiddle," Coppard discusses its artistic design in the Schwartz Bibliography:

["Fishmonger's Fiddle"] was more than once criticised because "nothing really happened in it." But that was precisely the point of my tale. I made it clear that something was trying very hard to happen, and I know

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<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 593.

<sup>41</sup>A. E. Coppard, "David Garnett," in The Borzoi, 1925 (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1925), 50-51.

<sup>42</sup>James, 597-98. For James the distinction between character and incident is an artificial one. "What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character?" The artist selects character and incident as complements.

that often as much tragedy is involved in the things that do not happen as in more catastrophic climaxes.<sup>43</sup>

We see another example of Coppard's conscious artistry when he quotes at length from a review of "Fishmonger's Fiddle" that "apart from its praise, pleased me very much by its critical recognition of my technique."

"There is no affectation and the machinery of his method, for he is a most methodical worker, never disturbs the delicate charm of the finished work. The 'Fishmonger's Fiddle' story is an interesting example of the purely abstract provoked by a minimum of definite physical fact. It is well chosen as the representative of the collection, the limits of which are strictly separated by a diversity of subject specially treated and fundamentally united by a single personal emotion."<sup>44</sup>

The 1920's was a time of the conscious creation of the short story and a developing recognition of that form. During this period we find some of the earliest strong statements about the positive shortness of the short story. The comparison of the short story to the novel is a natural one, but, significantly, the notion that the short story is merely a truncated novel--even something for the novelist to practice on, a lesser prose form that would give him the practice for something more significant--came under attack. Yet, an understanding of the novel provided, at least, a point of departure for much of the discussion of the short story form.

An essay on "The Modern Short Story" by C. Henry Warren in the April, 1933, Bookman tells us that the time of the short story has come in England (in a 1927 article of the same title Warren noted "the predjudice of the reading public against

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<sup>43</sup>Schwartz, 27.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 28-29.

the short story is rapidly passing"): <sup>45</sup>

The short story is the one literary art-form in which the present century may be said to excel. . . . the modern short story shares neither the unhappy indecision of modern poetry nor the general inferiority of the modern novel. It is sure of itself. It is peculiarly expressive of the mood and sensitiveness of the present day. It is in fact the one new creative contribution which so far this century has made to literature. <sup>46</sup>

Coppard lived in and helped to create a short story milieu. Warren implies this when he traces the short story form from Chekhov and Maupassant to his contemporary "genuine" short story writers, Coppard and Katherine Mansfield. Warren credits Chekhov and Maupassant for "the whole basis" of the modern English short story in all of its forms, and he notes especially that neither author is remembered by his novels.

Indeed the short story, considered as a definite art-form, has nothing to do with the novel. . . . Rarely do we find an author really successful in both forms. . . . Usually the genuine short-story writer excels in that form only--as A. E. Coppard for instance, and Katherine Mansfield. The reason, I believe, is to be found in the fact that the short-story writer has an innate desire for form which the novel does not easily satisfy. <sup>47</sup>

Coppard discusses frequently and at some length the significant artistic differences between the novel and the short story (he was painfully aware of the economic difference). In describing how he developed his own art, Coppard tells us that he learned much from his favorites--novelists and short story writers alike--but was determined not to imitate them, to be instead "absolutely original" in "matter and manner."

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<sup>45</sup>Warren, Bookman, (1927), 236.

<sup>46</sup>C. Henry Warren, "The Modern Short Story," Bookman, LXXVII (April, 1933), 8.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., 8-9.

In writing his tales, he asserts, he had to break with his favorite novelists because "study of the novelist's art was no training for the art of writing a short story, it was murder, their true principles of construction being so opposed."<sup>48</sup>

Coppard detailed the significant differences between the two prose fiction forms in his paper to the Writer Circles Summer School. His sense of positive short form asserts itself when he tells the aspiring writers: "All the best stories are short stories, and I have come to the conclusion that they are the best because they are short!"<sup>49</sup> He goes on to defend the short story against charges that it is "less literary, less worthy, less important, than a novel."<sup>50</sup>

It seems to be thought that the short story and the novel are manifestations of the one principle of fiction, differentiated merely by size, and that the writing of short stories is a sort of skittish prelude to the real business of writing a novel.

There is a likeness between them, . . . but they are different art forms demanding a different sort of skill, different approach, different treatment, a different basis of judgment.<sup>51</sup>

This critical distinction between the short story and the novel on the basis of positive form can be seen in the critical writing of Coppard's friends, such as, Gerald Bullett and Ford Madox Ford, and others of his contemporaries in the short story, such as, Elizabeth Bowen. Bullett debunks the notion of the short story as a kind of little novel:

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<sup>48</sup>Coppard, It's Me, 215.

<sup>49</sup>Coppard, "The Short Story," 7.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., 7-8.



The connexion between the novel and the modern short story is extremely dubious. Historical connexion there is none. The newer form is not a development or off-shoot of the older, any more than the lyric is an off-shoot of the narrative poem. It would be roughly true to say that the short story is to the novel what the lyric is to the narrative poem.<sup>52</sup>

In fact, continues Bullett, a better comparison may be made between the tragedy and the epic, in that the tragedy and the short story depend on a single action, while the epic and novel are episodic, which, Bullett reminds us, Aristotle thought to be inferior.<sup>53</sup>

In his autobiography It Was the Nightingale Ford Madox Ford relates his first attempt to meet Coppard by soliciting his address from the Saturday Review in a letter accompanying an attempted short story. The writing of the short story and the Review's response taught him something about that form.

I happened to have tried my own hand at a short story. I was never any good at that form. I need length--and as often as not quite preposterous length--to get an effect. But as I was convinced that I could not then write anything competent I thought I might as well try that form as any other. I did not feel proud of that story.

That story came back with astonishing promptitude. By the postmark on the stamp I could see that it could not have been in the office of that journal for more than ten minutes. . . . It had been time enough for someone to write on the printed slip of rejection a message to the effect that that journal demanded at least a glimmering of technical ability in the short stories that it printed.<sup>54</sup>

We see from this lesson in humility that by 1922, at least, the short story was recognized in English literary

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<sup>52</sup>Gerald Bullett, Modern English Fiction, A Personal View (London: H. Jenkins Ltd., 1926), 107.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid.

<sup>54</sup>Ford, Nightingale, 173-74.

circles as a particular form with its own techniques, something considerably more than Ford's hack attempt at a shortened novel.

Elizabeth Bowen, whose short fiction theory closely resembles Coppard's in many respects, describes the burden under which the English short story had labored as a result of too close connection to the novel and novelists, especially James and Hardy, whose short stories are only abbreviated novels that show

no urgent aesthetic necessity; their matter does not dictate their form. Their shortness is not positive; it is non-extension. They are great architects' fancies, little buildings on an august plan. They have no emotion that is abrupt and special; they do not give mood or incident a significance.<sup>55</sup>

Mere length, then, is not the principal criterion of the short story form. The organic use of that length determines the art. Although the name of Coleridge does not appear in the short fiction theory and criticism of the 1920s and thirties, the idea that each work of literature is a kind of organism, that it has its own life, occurs commonly. The principle of the organic short story was championed by E. J. O'Brien in his regular introduction to The Best British Short Stories. Somewhat enigmatically, he describes the "organic" nature of the short story as its "embodiment" of "living truth." The organic story eschews formula for "the fresh living current" of "psychological and imaginative reality."<sup>56</sup> If O'Brien does not

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<sup>55</sup>Elizabeth Bowen, "Preface" to The Faber Book of Modern Short Stories in Collected Impressions (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1950), 42-43.

<sup>56</sup>Edward J. O'Brien and John Courson, The Best British Short Stories of 1922 (Boston: Small, Maynard & Co., 1922), xix.

precisely define "organic," he implies strongly that substance and form are interdependent in the artistic short story and that its very shortness is positively determined by the brief form that arises naturally out of the materials.<sup>57</sup>

Brander Matthews, writing in the United States at the beginning of the century, prefigures the recognitions of short story form arrived at with various degrees of sophistication by Coppard, Bullett, Ford and Bowen. Sounding very much like Coppard and Bowen describing the injuries done to the short story by novelists shrinking their imaginations to produce fewer words, Matthews contends that the "British machine" manufactures British novels because the serial publication in British magazines encourages and pays for three volume novels, whereas the American magazines emphasize the short story. Thus, the American short story is superior to the British type of short fiction which is only a little British novel or an incident or episode from one.<sup>58</sup> To be precise

the difference between a Novel and a Short-story is a difference of kind. A true Short-story is something other and something more than a mere story which is short. A true Short-story differs from the Novel chiefly in its essential unity of impression. In a far more exact and precise use of the word, a Short-story has unity as a Novel cannot have it.<sup>59</sup>

Antedating Gerald Bullett, Matthews notes, too, the episodic quality of the novel, which lacks the intensely unified quality of the short story.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>57</sup>Ibid.

<sup>58</sup>Brander Matthews, The Philosophy of the Short-Story (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1901), 58-59.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., 15.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., 16-17.

To provide more perspective for this issue of the essential difference between the novel and the short story, as recognized by Coppard and his contemporaries, we can turn to a defense of the short story written by Thomas Gullason as recently as 1964. He, too, contrasts the novel with the short story in order to illuminate the artistry of the short story. Like Coppard and his contemporaries, he suggests that the artistic short story may, in fact, be more difficult to write than the novel. In any case, the short story is no little brother of the novel to be lightly dismissed as practice for the work of something more significant.

Because it is read in parts, a novel's possible lack of logic and proportion and loss of momentum are not noticed for the piecemeal reading of the novel. Now because the short story is read in one sitting it is always on trial. Every second counts. Like poetry, if a word, a sentence is misplaced, if there is a loss of proportion, or if the momentum is not right, if there are platitudes, anything superfluous, any faking--the jig is up.<sup>61</sup>

With a characteristic metaphor Coppard describes what is for him, personally as much as artistically, the essential difference between the novel and the short story. Employing an analogy that he repeats on several occasions, Coppard, in an interview for John O'London, tells Ashley Sampson that his use of the short story medium is bound up with his whole life:

For I have always found that concentrated moments contain the essence of living rather than prolonged passages of time. When I was an athlete, before I became a writer, I cultivated the habit of sprinting for the same reason. One cannot diffuse one's energy over a whole race; but I discovered that by developing the knack of sprinting one

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<sup>61</sup>Thomas H. Gullason, "The Short Story: An Under-rated Art," Studies in Short Fiction, I (Fall, 1964), 31.

could win a race by concentrating upon moments; and now I am finding the same in fiction. In the short story I can do my sprinting, and leave others to carry on the race in the novel.<sup>62</sup>

Gullason echoes Coppard's analogy (with an apparent reference to Frank O'Connor's work on the short story, The Lonely Voice): "The novelist has been called the 'long-distance runner,' and he is not lonely. The short story writer has been called a 'sprinter,' and he is lonely."<sup>63</sup>

We have already discussed Coppard's understanding of the translation of life experiences into art through the mind of the "fiction monger." In addition we have developed his distinction between the novel and the short story. It is, for Coppard, precisely the difference between the manners in which the two fictive forms translate life to create their "appearance of truth" that distinguishes the two forms and leads us to an understanding of Coppard's theory of short story form. In a variety of sources Coppard discusses the difference between what he calls "subjective" and "objective" story telling. The former describes the creative action of the novelist; the latter is a necessary quality of short story artistry. Coppard introduces these terms in one of his more important book reviews, a review of Gerald Bullett's short story collection The Street of the Eye:

One main difference between the novel and short story is the question of treatment, and not mere length. Most

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<sup>62</sup>Ashely Sampson, "Mr. A. E. Coppard on Current Literature," John O'London's Weekly, XXXII (December 1, 1934), 357.

<sup>63</sup>Gullason, 31.

English writers use the short story much as they use a novel, that is, the treatment is preponderatingly subjective, whereas the greater artists, Tchekov, Maupassant, and Katherine Mansfield, swing the balance over to the objective side.<sup>64</sup>

Coppard goes on to score Bullett for just this misuse of the short story. His stories fail because he has made full use of the subjective method.

Mr. Bullett is unusually subjective, with the result that in each narrow space we scarcely get a real picture of his story; the outlines are hazy, the backgrounds vague, the personalities a little tenuous.<sup>65</sup>

In this review Coppard's definition of the terms "subjective" and "objective" is not clear, so on February 9, 1924, prompted by a questioning correspondent, he attempted to clarify them in a letter to The Spectator. The letter is so dense with information that I have reprinted it here in whole:

The objective method of writing is that by which the characters themselves direct the whole progress of the story. Their psychology, with the least possible intrusion by the author, is revealed directly by their own words and actions, and the things they are permitted to observe. The subjective is naturally the contrary method; you learn not so much by seeing the tale enacted before you, as by the narration of the author--partially dramatized, it is true--but also in the way of aside, parenthesis, recollection, and the scores of devices by which a tale is rather insinuated or hypotheticated [sic], than explicitly presented. In other words, the antithesis, if it is one, is that of drama versus history, or, if you like, Mr. Hardy versus Mr. Conrad; or, to take a simpler illustration, the method of the cinema (continuous movement) versus the magic lantern (a series of pictures with observations by the operator). Because I believe the former methods to be especially appropriate to the short story, I ventured to suggest its closer adoption by the author of The Street of the Eye.

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<sup>64</sup>A. E. Coppard, Review of Gerald Bullett's The Street of the Eye, Spectator, CXXXI (December 29, 1923), 1036.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid.

A.E.C.  
 Little Poyrats, Kimble Wood  
 Skirnet, Henley-on-Thames<sup>66</sup>

A month later it became necessary for Coppard to answer another inquiry regarding his apparent bias in story telling methodology. In a letter of March 20, 1924, Coppard insists that he is not arguing for the relative superiority of methods--objective or subjective--except as they apply to the short story: "That the great short story writers are in the main ob-  
jective has for me an obvious significance."<sup>67</sup> He argues that for every literary genre there are appropriate methods of presentation that best use the potential of that form. For his example he points out the effectiveness of Hamlet's soliloquies as a method of presentation in the dramatic medium.<sup>68</sup> The intrusion of the author into the action of his fiction is a technique of the novel that will not work in the more limited, more intense, more dramatic form of the short story. It is not

necessarily bad for an author in his own person to discuss his people at length, but I do suggest that in the more restricted medium it is unwise to indulge the habit and sacrifice unity of impression and clarity of action without compensation.<sup>69</sup>

The short story writer uses the objective method because he must dramatize to bring his story to life in its brief but intense contact with the reader. He told the Writer Circles Summer School students:

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<sup>66</sup>A. E. Coppard, Letter to the Editor, Spectator, CXXXII (February 9, 1924), 202.

<sup>67</sup>A. E. Coppard, Letter to the Editor, Spectator, CXXXII (March 20, 1924), 504.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid.

Having got your plot and your characters you have to breathe the breath of life into your short story. . . . you have to dramatize and make your figures act their parts within our critical view. It is not enough to tell us that they acted in such and such a way: we want to see them doing the interesting things.

No character really begins to live until he speaks.<sup>70</sup>

Although this entire discussion of objective dramatic form began with Coppard's finding it wanting in Gerald Bullett's short stories, Bullett's own description of this short story technique is very much like Coppard's and, in fact, adds to Coppard's in its recognition of the dramatic form's organic nature:

The creation of people, which is of first importance in the novel, remains important in the short story, but it takes a second place. . . . We demand more than "character sketches": we demand drama, whether external or of the mind; we demand movement to and from a crisis of illumination that shall be the significant pivot of the whole. In fine, we ask of the short story that it shall have a point, not a moral lesson, not an opinion on this or that--nothing, indeed, that can be stated in a paraphrase, but a something to communicate that can be communicated only in this way.<sup>71</sup>

Coppard exhibits strikingly more literary sophistication in the delineation of the objective-subjective methods than he does in most of his theoretical writing. Even more striking is the similarity between Coppard's description of these terms and Chekhov's description of the same terms as found in his letters. In a letter written in 1883 Chekhov tells his brother Alexandr:

You underscore trifles in your writings, and yet you are not a subjective writer by nature; it is an acquired trait in you. To give up this acquired subjectivity is as easy as to take a drink. One needs only to be more honest, to throw oneself overboard everywhere, not to obtrude oneself into the hero of one's own novel, to renounce oneself

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<sup>70</sup>Coppard, "The Short Story," 9.

<sup>71</sup>Bullett, 109.



for at least a half hour. You have a story in which a young wedded couple kiss all through dinner, grieve without cause, weep oceans of tears. Not a single sensible word; nothing but sentimentality. . . . But suppose you were to describe the dinner, how they ate, what the cook was like, how insipid your hero is, how content with his lazy happiness, how insipid your heroine is, how funny is her love for this napkin-bound, sated, overfed goose, . . . to free yourself from the personal expression that a placid honey-happiness produces upon everybody. . . . Subjectivity is a terrible thing. It is bad in this alone, that it reveals the author's hands and feet.<sup>72</sup>

In a great many other letters Chekhov expounds the objective technique. He believes that the writer should be only the observer of his characters, not the judge. Thus, he defends himself against A. S. Souvorin's charge that his objectivity is actually "indifference to good and evil, lack of ideals and ideas." He replies that the reader will know right and wrong and can judge the character's personal honesty if he chooses, but the writer has another task:

Of course it would be very pleasant to combine art with a sermon, but for me personally it is extremely difficult and almost impossible, owing to the conditions of the technique. You see, to depict horse-thieves in seven hundred lines I must all the time speak and think in their tone and feel in their spirit, otherwise, if I introduce subjectivity, the image becomes blurred and the story will not be as compact as all short stories ought to be. When I write, I reckon entirely upon the reader to add for himself the subjective elements that are lacking in the story.<sup>73</sup>

Chekhov does seem to have an absolute bias against subjectivity, which he equates with sentimentality, that Coppard does not express. Whereas Coppard consigns subjectivity to the novel, Chekhov dismisses it altogether.

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<sup>72</sup>Anton Chekhov, Letters on the Short Story, the Drama and Other Literary Topics, selected and edited by Louis S. Freidland (New York: Benjamin Blom, Inc., 1964), 69.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid., 64.

It becomes clear in Coppard's description of the subjective-objective methods of fiction that, although he has sometimes been thought of as a nineteenth century author caught up in the wrong century, his sense of dramatic form, if not all his fictional materials, places him clearly in the modern literary tradition. The self-conscious narrator, the intrusive narrator, is a fictive device of former centuries. Although Coppard never writes with what could be called a modern dramatic technique, a camera's eye persona, it is almost a definition of his best fiction to say that it captures moments of persons in action, in psychological confrontations with others and, especially, with themselves, or it moves a character through an incident of revelation, in addition to what is often best remembered about Coppard, striking visuals.

Yet, there is a sense in which Coppard's ideas of literary form place him in an earlier tradition. In fact, he insists that he is reviving a tradition of story telling form--the tale:

"Modern short-story writers are on the wrong track. They psychologize and describe too much, instead of letting actions speak for themselves. The short-story writer has no time or space for being subjective. He must be entirely objective. He mustn't explain the psychology of his characters. Let their actions show their psychology. That's why I say that the writer should study the folk tale."<sup>74</sup>

Coppard spends a great deal of his time defending, describing, and tracing his short fiction in its connection to the folk tale. Although his insistence on the use of the word "tale" for his short stories tells us a lot about his intentions for these stories, that is, they are to have a "voice" that

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<sup>74</sup>Louise Morgan, "A. E. Coppard on How to Write Short Stories," Everyman, IV (January 22, 1931), 793.

addresses the reader, it is also misleading. Especially, it seems to have misled Coppard to admire most some of what have to be described as his weakest stories.

According to Mrs. Coppard, Flynn, an atheist to his death, read the Bible continually and "knew it better than anyone." In the Bible he found what he considered the two best short stories ever written, "The Prodigal Son" and "The Good Samaritan," both great "tales." Of his own stories, he thought best "The Green Drake" and "The Fair Young Willowy Tree," because they were, in his mind, the closest things to a folk tale that he had written. Both stories are simplistic little fables that could easily have "morals." Here we encounter again the basic contradiction in Coppard's literary personality. For the most part his literary understanding recognized and demanded artistic nuance and complexity. His creative skill enabled him to write such subtly ambiguous and formal works as "Arabesque: The Mouse" and "The Field of Mustard." His own literary taste ranged as widely as Hawthorne, Chaucer, Browning, James and Keats. Yet, when he came to making absolute literary value judgments, he opted for the simplistic and the moralizing.

And, Coppard apparently recognized this contradiction. According to Mrs. Coppard, Flynn always saw himself as writing for the working class, his tales an outgrowth of the stories told in taverns. Yet, he knew that his work was too literary for its intended readers.

With all that, his defense of his fictions as "tales"

tells us some important things that he did with short story form. One of these concerns what modern fiction theory would call "voice"--the style, the verbal signature of the author. In the Schwartz Bibliography Coppard notes that he prefers to call his fictions "tales"

because of a slight distinction in my mind which is nevertheless important to me, that is; a tale is told, a story is written. I have always aimed at creating for the reader an impression that he is being spoken to, rather than being written at.<sup>75</sup>

Coppard's intended "voice" has an intended "address."

We have already recorded his disagreement, as a "general reader," with those "students of literature" who approve of Sir Walter Scott's lengthy novels. As Common Man, Coppard will not allow his reading experience to be oppressed by, what is to him, weighty, aimless verbiage. The writer must always be aware of his audience, and the teller of tales must speak in the voice of the common man. He must say what the common man is prepared to hear, and the preparation of this "general reader" is, according to Coppard, limited indeed. Tracing his primitive, affective response to literature back to Adam's response to the beauty of his Garden, Coppard

put[s] up a good average plea against authority and expertise for the good average man who feels a response to art or any other forms of Kultur, but having no time to spare for study and instruction is content with what he likes and rejoices when he finds it for himself.<sup>76</sup>

Continuing his defense for the common reader, Coppard avows that the "artist, the poet, the musician, are creating

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<sup>75</sup>Schwartz, 13.

<sup>76</sup>Coppard, It's Me, 158.

precisely for him and not to please other artists, poets, and musicians."<sup>77</sup> Nevertheless, Coppard's own assertion that he met only two other persons able to discuss literature before he was thirty is strong evidence that the audience Coppard presumed to be writing for does not exist. That is, if one reads at all, one is going to have a personal history of literary experience--one has learned to respond to literary form, or one would not continue reading. If one has not read, he is not likely to read even the fiction intended for him by the well read, studied primitive. The virgin reader is a contradiction in terms. Coppard's public was, in fact, a highly literate group that collected first editions and sponsored private editions, as he did himself.

Coppard delighted, as we have already seen, in the verbal give and take of the country inn. For hours he entertained the tavern crowd with his tales, and he loved to hear tales from them, some of which became the sources for his short stories. He liked to speculate about, or even trace, if he could,

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<sup>77</sup>Ibid. In his Critical Writings, edited by Frank MacShane (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1964 ), pp. 49-54, Ford Madox Ford argues more clearly, if no more convincingly, that the writer should address himself to the commoner, "the cabmen round the corner," to "l'homme moyen sensual," not to the intellectual or one who has past experience with art because the common man will read a story or see a painting with no preconceptions. He will not try to categorize, interpret, or understand it so much as just experience it. He will be open to the artist's guidance and suggestion, not trying to force or limit the meaning as would an educated reader. The common man will take the art experience as part of his total experience with no attempt to classify, generalize, or moralize. An artist can and should divert his Impressionism to the "peasant intelligence," to a "particular virgin openness of mind."

the origins of folk tales. Occasionally, he describes the sources of his own short stories, and one, that he details at length, illuminates the seeming contradiction between his fascination for the folk tale and his own literary awareness (the man of the people complemented by the man of letters):

There is an interesting circumstance connected with the tale called "The Devil in the Churchyard." The outline of it was told me in The Starr Inn, Stanton St. John, by a thatcher named Jim Massey, a rare and interesting figure and a fine tale teller who died a year ago. He assured me the story was true, that it had all happened about thirty years before in the old churchyard at Stanton, and concerned people who had lived thereabout. I wrote my version, published it, I even broadcast it, and then some years after I came across what was undoubtedly the origin of this tale in one of "The Hundred Merry Tales," the one called, "Of the mylner that stole the nuttys and of the tayler that stole a sheep." "The Hundred Merry Tales" are mentioned in Shakespeare, but only two copies of the original book are known. It is a collection of folk tales current at that time, printed by John Rastell in 1526. It was reprinted for the first time during the nineteenth century, in very limited and specialist editions, and the odds against Massey having seen or even heard of the book are very great. I conclude that he acquired the story natively from the tradition, and that I have had the unique experience of hearing an English folk tale told by a man to whom it had descended orally. There was nothing of the recitation about Massey's narrative; it was just a lengthy anecdote, and though the differences from Rastell's version are very great, they undoubtedly had the same origin.<sup>78</sup>

In an article for T.P.'s Weekly in 1928, significantly entitled "The Craft of the Short Story, Lessons from the Folk Tale," Coppard claims that the origin and basis of the modern short story is the folk tale. In studying the folk tale, he tells us, the apprentice short story writer will learn much about his craft:

The special qualities of the folk tale are its swiftness, its colour, its plot, its entire elimination of inessentials,

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<sup>78</sup>Schwartz, 13.

its charming and significant repetitions, and its poetry. For the short story is to the general body of prose what the lyric is to poetry. And above all these features there is, too, the sense of being spoken to, rather than read at. All folk tales were originally spoken.<sup>79</sup>

Although Coppard believes that the short stories of Katherine Mansfield lack substance, he finds in them a compelling voice that speaks to the reader in moods and atmospheres:

Katherine Mansfield's art is an art that delights rather than stirs. It expresses itself more freely in moods and atmospheres than in characters and circumstances, and makes every simple occasion such an adventure that the tenacity necessary for high construction sometimes escapes in those flexible surfaces. She could afford to run that risk, for she could compel you to listen.<sup>80</sup>

So, in a sense, Mansfield's art passes Coppard's test of voice as found in the tale.

Coppard is not alone in seeing in the folk tale the roots of what is best in the modern short story. His one time friend H. E. Bates writes in The Modern Short Story that his contemporary short story writers work in a tradition begun by Gogol who, according to Bates, made the short story realistic by removing from it the romantic trappings and weighty social moralizing which had broken down its delicate structure:

Gogol . . . did a very simple thing, for which countless writers of stories are indebted to him and the results of which may be directly seen in the work of such writers as Coppard, O'Flaherty, Joyce, Sherwood Anderson, Saroyan, and many others today. He took the short story some way back to the folk-tale, and in doing so bound it to earth.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>79</sup>A. E. Coppard, "The Craft of the Short Story, Lessons from the Folk Tale," T. P.'s and Cassell's Weekly, IX (January 28, 1928), 481

<sup>80</sup>Coppard, Review, Childish.

<sup>81</sup>Bates, 27.

By implication we can withdraw from Coppard's description of his fiction as "tales" a suggested sense of controlling form. Coppard attempted to 'bind his short stories to the earth' in two ways: in content, Coppard's most successful fiction is that which deals with the people of the earth, common men and women; in form, Coppard's best work is written in a style that blends a literary sense of shape with a diction that is fresh, colorful, earthy. He attempts to say something about people in a (literate) "voice" that people use.<sup>82</sup>

In the final part of this chapter we will attempt to derive Coppard's sense of total short story form--the union of fictional materials and structural shape in the completed short story. Here, again, Coppard's expression is limited but highly suggestive of the inherent formal awareness of his own fiction. If Coppard's judgment of fiction can be readily summarized (as Russell MacDonald does) as "I-know-what-I-like,"<sup>83</sup> his understanding of his own writing process might be simply stated: "I know what I'm doing." He tells us that, when he had moved to Shepherds Pit, he

had already envisaged the Short Story as a work of literary perfection, supreme though small, a phoenix, a paragon. I cannot pretend that I in any way dedicated myself to its production; I felt it was my métier and that I could give it a significant setting, gold maybe, and adorn it with gems, a creation to be treasured.<sup>84</sup>

This brief, absolute, romantic, and thoroughly

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<sup>82</sup>Or, the voice that the common man would use if he were self-educated as Coppard was.

<sup>83</sup>MacDonald, 33.

<sup>84</sup>Coppard, It's Me, 233.



ambiguous description of the short story is exactly what we might expect from Coppard. But, he does throw more light on the construction of the form. In "The Craft of the Short Story" the artistic explanation of his work is, initially at least, somewhat disappointing, if amusing. He contends that the craft of fiction cannot be taught although those who have the gift can develop it. It is presumption, he asserts, that anyone with "sufficient time and energy" can write a novel and a further presumption that the shortness of the short story makes its craft teachable.<sup>85</sup> But, if it cannot be taught, yet Coppard will supply the novice short story writer with three golden rules for the construction of stories (that to be good must be more than the imitation of other stories):

The first golden rule is that you must please yourself. The next golden rule is that it is very unlikely that anyone can teach you how to please yourself. The third golden rule is that if you can only please yourself by annoying the public you ought to be in goal.<sup>86</sup>

Immediately, Coppard follows these exorbitant instructions with a metaphorical explanation of the "third golden rule" that suggests again his concern with careful use of language and his awareness of short story form: "One way of annoying the public is by taking an anecdote and blowing it up with a pump of verbosity into a bladder of three or four thousand words."<sup>87</sup>

Much of what Coppard has to say about the construction of the short story revolves about the traditional standards of character and plot. According to Coppard, the dominant use of

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<sup>85</sup>Coppard, "Craft," 481.

<sup>86</sup>Ibid.

<sup>87</sup>Ibid.

character is more common to the novel, but plot is more important to the short story.

The novelist comes into possession of, or contact with, a character or set of characters, involved in some suggestive relationship, and he has to provide them with a plot and episodes to bring out their significant reactions. That is the method actually stated by Turgenev and favoured by Henry James and Thomas Hardy.

The ideal mode for the short-story writer is the exact opposite. He has first to find his plot--that is HIS proper jumping-off place--and then devise the characters most suitable for bringing out the point or significance of his plot.<sup>88</sup>

That Coppard, who created so many memorable characters, should emphasize plot in the making of the short story seems contradictory to the form of his own fiction. But, this contradiction is more apparent than real. By "character" Coppard does not mean an element of the story separate and isolated from the plot, except, perhaps, in the novel. Characterization, rather, is a particular part of the total operation and effect of the short story, a part that follows from and serves the basic story idea. In fact, Coppard's characters exist only as a part of the brief action in which we watch them. Rarely do we remember their faces or even their names. Nor, can we imagine them as persons who live lives outside of the story. The two characters in "Dusky Ruth" are identified only as Ruth and the "traveler." Although the traveler may not be unlike those of other fictions, there is no other Ruth. She exists wholly and only in that fiction. And, what we remember of that story is not so much those two persons as it is the brief contact between them in which

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<sup>88</sup>Coppard, "The Short Story," 8. He restates the same idea in almost the same words in his autobiography, pp. 215-16.

we, with the traveler, experience the girl's strange grief and the traveler's helpless response to it. "Dusky Ruth" is a fleeting, enigmatic moment in which characters come to life in incident.

"Dusky Ruth" is a poetic, Chekhovian type of fiction. Coppard praises Chekhov for his characterizations, but he sees Chekhov's characters not as memorable individuals (the way a character in a novel might be memorable) so much as personages whom the writer captures in a moment of action--life--that makes them strikingly real--"people who have accepted civilization rather than life."<sup>89</sup> In this way the characters of Chekhov's fiction, in Coppard's view, are not really different from the total creation of the fiction. They are a part of the total form of the individual story:

Chekhov's ordinary people--and they are all ordinary--are presented to you at just the one significant moment of their lives when they do for a brief space become universally interesting. In this capacity to transform the meanest episodes he has no peer in literature.<sup>90</sup>

It is really this total form that Coppard implies when he uses the term "plot." He provides the following dictum for the young writer:

Get your plot. Fiction without point is like a lead pencil in the same condition. Every folk tale in the world has a plot, but nobody can tell you how to make one. If you have not a ready supply of these teeming in your brain you will not be able to write many short stories--you had better become a novelist.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>89</sup>Coppard, "Review of Chekhov," 902.

<sup>90</sup>Ibid.

<sup>91</sup>Coppard, "Craft," 481.

This suggests that for Coppard "plot" means something other than the traditional Aristotelian causal chronology. More exactly, Coppard seems to mean by plot all of the components of the story--material and formal. In his interview with Louise Morgan Coppard describes plot as "a situation that has to be worked out."<sup>92</sup> (In effect, Coppard's characters are elements of the fiction that contribute to the working out of the situation.) And, he insists that the writer, especially the poet and short story writer, know the entire situation and its working out in advance, "before one begins putting it into words."<sup>93</sup> Even though Coppard's diction shows extensive revision in manuscript, he insists that his gross construction and most of its details be completed as pre-writing. And, he must have some thing to write about. He admired Hardy for just that kind of purposefulness.

"I reverence Hardy. No matter what he wrote, even in his smallest poem, he had to have an idea. He never described just for the sake of description; there always must be an idea behind it."<sup>94</sup>

Even more, Coppard admired Henry James for his sense of form, and his description of James' method of story construction is very much like his description of his own writing process:

Henry James' idea of form was his particular contribution to the story. He would never begin until the end was quite as clearly in his mind as the start. He would fill in all the details as he went along; but the shape of it all had to be there before he would begin.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>92</sup>Morgan, 793.

<sup>93</sup>Sampson, 356.

<sup>94</sup>Morgan, 793.

<sup>95</sup>Sampson, 357.

Coppard describes his determination to control the entire process of his own writing and, in doing so, illustrates what he believes to be the proper function of characters in short fiction:

I could [n]ever begin a tale experimentally like a novelist, picking up enlightenment and developing the theme as I went along, to land up at last at a fortuitous goal. I had to know all, everything, before I could begin to write. Whatever the plot--if it had one--I had to know the solution--if it had that!--before beginning to write. In that way the characters would always be consistent and behave consistently in accord with my plan for them. They were not to impose their personalities on my tale and run away with it. . . .<sup>96</sup>

In this context Coppard seems to mean by "plot" something much closer to the Aristotelian than he has suggested before, but here, too, he makes it clear that his stories do not always operate with that kind of "plot." What Coppard implies in all of this is what we, in fact, find in his short fiction--a sense of organic form. The total form of each story creates itself from an amalgam of contextual materials and structural shapes. And, each story individually occurs in the form most appropriate to itself.

This is not to suggest that Coppard believed each fictive idea existed preformed. Quite the contrary, he understood short story form as an extension of the mind of the artist, thus there might be as many forms of a particular plot as there were writers at work: "If six authors were given the same plot to deal with they would produce six entirely different stories."<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>96</sup>Coppard, It's Me, 214-15.

<sup>97</sup>Coppard, "Craft," 481.

In 1931 Coppard participated in an experiment to demonstrate just that point. He wrote a story, unoriginally titled "Variation" (later anthologized as "Poste Restante"), based on a plot provided him and sixteen other authors, including Elizabeth Bowen, Gerald Bullett, G. K. Chesterton, L. A. G. Strong, and Rebecca West, by John Fothergill.<sup>98</sup> In fact, as one would expect, the stories are all different, and the volume is an excellent example of a poetic principle--although the individual stories are not particularly good.

As further evidence of Coppard's organic understanding of plot, we note his specific comments about Aristotelian elements of plot in the construction of the short story, especially the importance of the beginning and the function of the end.

One of the most interesting and indeed valuable features to study in a short story is its beginning. It determines (or it should) not only the tone; it sets the pace and suggests the intentions of the author. In the openings of Tchekov in particular you perceive you have exchanged the alluring flourishes of prose style for a series of clear picturesque statements. You know right from the beginning something of what you are about to receive.<sup>99</sup>

The entire effect of the short story depends, initially at least, on the opening because this is the reader's first contact with its brief and intense action. We "read ourselves into"

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<sup>98</sup>John Rowland Fothergill, The Fothergill Omnibus (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1931), v. "THE PLOT As Given to Each of the Authors: A man gets into a correspondence with a woman whom he doesn't know and he finds romance in it. Then he sees a girl, falls in love with her in the ordinary way, marries her and drops the academic correspondence. Happiness, then friction. He writes again to the unknown woman and finds consolation till by an accident it is discovered that the married couple are writing to one another."

<sup>99</sup>Coppard, "The Short Story," 9.

the novel, a form of "deliberate progression, minute description, and underlining of psychology," but the short story gives us no time for such leisurely insinuation: the writer of the short story has "to take the reader by the scruff of the neck, and throw him into the bath we intend him to have."<sup>100</sup> Thus, the beginning operates as a part of the whole.

We have already mentioned Coppard's strong distastes for O. Henry, the master of the surprise ending, and we have described, too, an article on Guy de Maupassant for the Daily Herald in which Coppard remarks that he does not like surprise endings because a story that depends on such a gimmick cannot be re-read with its original delight. He is here arguing for suspense of form as opposed to suspense of ending. Formal suspense engages the reader again and again in a well written fiction because what he marvels at in the working out of the action is not "what happens?" or "whodunit?" but is, instead, his experience of the living creative process--the organic whole. "How does it happen?" is the formal question, and the ending that supplies such an answer does not surprise the reader because it follows naturally from the formal expectations created in the reader by the action of the whole.

A Bookman review of The Field of Mustard recognizes the essential formal difference between the story that withholds its secret to the end and the story that reveals its secret progressively in the reader's experience of the whole:

The result upon the reader [of the poetic selectivity of Coppard and some other short story writers] is that,

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<sup>100</sup>Coppard, "Craft," 481.

whereas the story with the slick plot may just as well be thrown away once you have robbed it of its only surprise, the modern selective story, wherein method and poetry have taken the place of plot, can be read over and over again and with a new enrichment every time.<sup>101</sup>

Unquestionably, both Coppard's fiction and short story theory parallel the literary consciousness of his times. The problem for the reader of Coppard's literary "criticism" is often one of language. Although his short story theory is on the whole sound and consistent, it is neither systematized nor sophisticated, largely because his critical vocabulary is limited in its scope and depth of meaning. Coppard's use of the word "plot," for instance, denotes, misleadingly, a classical formal device that neither Coppard nor his contemporaries associated with what they thought to be best in the short story.

Coppard lived in a time that was working out a definition of the short story. That he did not share, except in a limited way, with the theoretical articulateness of his contemporaries merely reflects his self-education (and his temperament). To the point: what literary theory he did express shows his engagement in the critical mind of the time and confirms his self-awareness of the artistry of his own fiction--his real contribution to short story definition.

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<sup>101</sup>Warren, Bookman (1927), 236.



## CHAPTER III

### THE TELLING IS THE TALE

The landlord, addressing them, resumed an interrupted yarn:

"Well, it was in the time of the Fenians--"

"Just fill that mug again," one of the stout strangers commanded.

"Yes, sir!" cried Alan. . . . he repeated: "In the Fenian days it was--". . . .

"It's a good tale, this Fenian tale," the one man remarked to his companion.

"It was." The other puffed at his pipe stolidly.

"But it wants telling, you must realize that. It wants telling, in a certain way, delicate."

"Yes, yes; and I heard it twenty years ago," said the other with an air of contempt.

"So've I. Five thousand times. But a good tale is worth hearing over and over again, Harry, so long as it's well told. It's the art of it."

"That's right enough, Sam, and I had a queer experience once, I did."

"It is funny how experience keeps on cropping up!"

In the above excerpt from A. E. Coppard's tale "Able Staple Disapproves" Sam describes the tale-telling function in a manner similar to Coppard's own description of it (as seen in Chapter II). (It is not only what the tale is about that makes it worthwhile. The telling of it is just as important. The tale and the teller are inseparable because it is the voice of the teller that makes the tale come alive, that formalizes its materials, that distinguishes it from all other tales with the same events. Coppard himself was such a teller of tales. Ford Madox Ford describes one such tale:

There was Hokusai--the Old Man Mad about painting. The following version of his life was given me by Mr. A. E. Coppard, sitting on the trunk of a felled beech above the great common where my Large Blacks roamed. . . . There are of course many versions of the sayings of Hokusai but this one pleased me the most because of the dark gipsy earnestness of the narrator who was such a great artist in words--and who so admirably lived the only life worth living.

Hokusai, then, when he was seventy, said: "Now at last I begin to divine faintly what painting may be." At eighty he said: "Now I really think that after ten more years of research I shall know how to paint." At the age of ninety he said: "Now it is coming. A little more research and thought! . . ." On attaining the age of a hundred years, he said: "Tomorrow I am going to begin my Work of Works. . . ." And so died.<sup>1</sup>

As we have already seen, the love and the ability of tale telling were present in the young Coppard of the Diary. He relished the discomfort he could impart to his hearer in the retelling of Poe's tales. We watched him struggle to attain grace and simplicity in his nature descriptions. But, he had little growing to do when it came to describing people--their words and their actions. He evinces in his early twenties the gift of capturing and translating a scene to a reader-listener who is not present. If his language usage was not yet mature, his powers of observation were. On July 6, 1902, he described in his Diary the following scene at the "Half Moon":

There was an old fisherman in the tap, & two strangers came in after us, both tall, one with a clean shaven, knibbly face under a straw, & the other with close eyes, a tufty mustache, bowlered. The Straw had with him a most beautiful bitch--he didn't see her invented, but he believed her to be a cross between a Russian Borzois & Irish terrier. She was young & seemed speedy, but he vowed that she was'nt [sic], & so far from being able to catch a rabbit or a partridge she could'nt catch an earwig if it hurried! The

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<sup>1</sup>Förd, Nightingale, 140-141.

Old Fish soon found out that they had been to sea & to many places where he had been, so they were soon talking all over each other[.] Tufty, who had a curious habit of repeating almost every other sentence, told a tale of bad treatment during one of his voyages, at which the Old Fish declared that he "would'nt ha' put up weit. Id a left 'er at first port O' call, quicker un lightnin tru a gusberry bush." He himself had been at Cleethorpes "catchin wilks to make pincushuns av, big enough to old av' a pint of war-ter [.]" Our incredulous mouths gaped boisterously, beholding which he appealed to the others for corroboration, which was gravely vouchsafed. While Tufty was in the bar Old Fish asked the Straw if he had ever been up the Bristol Channel. "Well, no," he replied, "I haven't. I'm not a man like that. It don't pay," & he winked surreptitiously[.] The same question was put to Tufty on his return. "No" he said, "cant say as ever I was up the Bristol Channel, never up the Bristol Channel; I an't goin to say I av; I don't tell no lies where I bin; I ant goin to say I av."

The above scene may not have much range, but Coppard convinces the reader in the truth of the persons he recreates. He was to write a great many scenes of this kind--tavern setting, digressive dialogue, broad humour--in his short fiction. As we shall see, they usually provide not only comic relief but also contribute to the total experience of the fictions in which they occur as an integral part of the composition.

(Coppard's method of composition led to what is best and worst in his fiction. He was a deliberate, self-conscious artist who, so he tells us, trusted nothing to poetic inspiration as he wrote. Every detail of each tale had to be worked out before hand, then, because his sense of language was so acute, he went back over his manuscripts, painstakingly revising brief passages and even words until he was satisfied that every word and sentence construction was right. We have already mentioned that Coppard carried with him everywhere a notebook into which he jotted descriptions of scenes, impressions, person and place

names, all of which provided the raw material for his fictions. He literally transposed passages from his notebooks to the pages of his manuscripts. G. B. Saul, from his correspondence with Coppard (and from other sources), sums up his method of composition like this:

He is man who works slowly and deliberately. "For him, as he once told us, the writing of a short story is a sort of wrestling match to get it out." He dislikes talking about work in progress, writes only when he feels like writing, considers (for himself) physical fitness the best stimulation to creative activity, writes much out of doors, keeps (and carries) notebooks in which he classifies data under appropriate headings and notes plots and ideas, insists on doing things in his own way (though unbothered by interruptions of his work), is extremely careful in his nature-references, and plans his tales "To the last word," often writing "the last few sentences first." Incidentally, he tells me, "I believe in order and effort. I do not know what inspiration is. Of course it is necessary to be born with a natural talent of some sort."<sup>2</sup>

Frank O'Connor discusses the premeditated care with which Coppard wrote, and he credits this deliberation for the effect of the great Coppard stories:

Technically . . . to write a story resembling the best of Coppard we should have to carry a notebook and jot down the details of every moment of interest and pleasure--the appearance of a house of landscape [sic], the effects of lighting, the impression of characters glimpsed in passing, with their actual words. Then we should have to work these notes into the texture of whatever story we happened to be writing until every paragraph tended to be a complete work of art. . . . that, I suspect, is how the great early Coppard stories were written. In these the surface of the story is always exquisitely rendered--the glimpses of landscape, the snatches of conversation overheard, the odd names of villages and people, the illiterate shop signs--even the comments in the visitor's book in country inns. . . .

The landscape, too, seen in sudden vivid flashes like jottings from a painter's notebook is surely the moment caught and held in a brilliant sentence or two.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Saul, 33.

<sup>3</sup>O'Connor, 175-76.

H. E. Bates remarks that this studied creativity eventually led to the rigid artificiality of Coppard's later work:

Coppard wrote with great care, piecing his stories together rather than writing them, noting down metaphors as they flashed on him, storing up oddities of description, odd names, odd situations, until a suitable niche was found for them in the final framework of the tale. All this gives his work the effect, at times, of being the product of an arts-and-crafts shop. Its apparent boisterous spontaneity is in reality studied.<sup>4</sup>

In Chapter I we assigned a number of reasons to Coppard's artistic decline, not the least of them being advancing age, but certainly one of the strongest marks of his decline, if not a direct reason for it, was the giving way of his style to stylization. The tale may be in the telling, but, as Coppard maintained in his own criticism of Katherine Mansfield, the tale must have some substance, too. C. Henry Warren remarks on the difference between Coppard and Mansfield as judged by the substance and form of their work. He calls Mansfield's stories "sketches" because, although the form is perfect--sensitive, exuberant--"the substance is too often slight. The good short story however is never slight in substance; it is in fact as meaty in substance as it is immaculate in form."<sup>5</sup> Coppard, he contends, does display significant substance and living form, thus "he is nearer. . . to what a true short story writer should be."<sup>6</sup> He is, in fact, nearly a poet. Like most of the best short story writers of the time, there is in his "work a lyrical quality,

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<sup>4</sup>Bates, 138.

<sup>5</sup>Warren, Bookman, 1933, p. 9.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

a natural fecundity of imagery which, if the scales had been tipped a little the other way, might have made for poetry rather than for prose."<sup>7</sup> This study of substance and form in the work of the short story writer had been raised in the early twenties by E. J. O'Brien to the level of a test--a dual test of the qualitative value of any given short story. E. J. O'Brien explains this test in his regular introduction to the annual Best British Short Stories:

Substance is something achieved by the artist in every creation, rather than something already present, and accordingly a fact or a group of facts in a story only attain substantial embodiment when the artist's power of compelling imaginative persuasion transforms them into a living truth. The first test of a short story, therefore, in any qualitative analysis is to report upon how vitally compelling the writer makes his selected facts or incidents. This test may be conveniently called the test of substance.

But a second test is necessary if the story is to take rank above other stories. The true artist will seek to shape this living substance into the most beautiful and satisfying form, by skillful selection and arrangement of his materials, and by the most direct and appealing presentation of it in portrayal and characterization.<sup>8</sup>

This test of significant substance and appropriate form was important during the time Coppard was writing, and it still provides a convenient and illuminating, if somewhat artificial, method of presenting an overview of Coppard's fiction, which is the purpose of this chapter. What is the tale about, and how is it told? Before closely analyzing a few of Coppard's finest works, as we will do in the final chapter, we can come to know Coppard better and realize sounder principles for reading his

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 10.

<sup>8</sup>Edward J. O'Brien and John Cournos, eds., The Best British Short Stories of 1924 (Boston: Small, Maynard & Company, Inc., 1924), pp. xxi-xxii.

fiction if we recognize first the range of subjects and methods of treatment that occur in his two hundred-plus short stories.

Here is the plan of this chapter. There will be no attempt to rigidly categorize Coppard's fiction as to either substance or form, rather we will attempt to expose his great variety of fictive materials and structures. The chapter will not be exhaustive but exploratory.

Coppard's materials will be discussed in the following three categories that reflect the topics that seem to dominate his fictive consciousness (these are by no means all of the subjects that Coppard uses in his fiction, nor is this the only way that these materials can be arranged, although they are the most important materials and the arrangement is effective): We will begin with a topic of minor weight but continued interest in the Coppard canon--God, religion, and the clergy. Although few of Coppard's great stories directly involve these topics, his argumentative atheism had a lasting effect on his fiction, and he returns again and again to these stories, especially is he fascinated with entry into heaven. Next, we will consider the type of Coppard tale that has received the most attention, those dealing with the secretiveness of women. This particular topic, however, will be only a part of this section because it is, in fact, contained in a larger subject--abortive sexual encounters. Because Coppard was such a deft artist with a particular aspect of female psychology, his larger frame has been overlooked. Although his attention is most often on women, his stories of unfulfilled male-female relationships go far beyond

the limited degree to which they have been understood. Finally, we will discuss Coppard's fiction concerning the human condition (much of which can be found in the above categories). Here we will focus on a theme that runs through Coppard's best fiction. Alienation, time, fate, survival, freedom, necessity--these are the central ingredients in all of the great Coppard. Although the substance of Coppard's fiction will be arranged in "thematic" categories, we will make extensive use of the text to investigate all of his materials--setting, characterization, dialogue, humor, narrative techniques.

After this study of Coppard's materials, we will turn to an analysis of his formalization of them. First we will look at Coppard's very evident minor, or supportive, forms--language usage, imagery, and interludes. Then, we will summarize the manner in which Coppard develops minor form into gross structure and, finally, describe his major forms, that is, the gross structures of his fiction both in the conventional plot and in the poetic, or lyric, short story.

As we begin with the materials of Coppard's fiction (organized according to "thematic" topics), it is important to point out that Coppard does not pursue "themes" in any ideological sense. It is a rare, and poor, Coppard story that can be said to have a moral, a thesis, a message, a simplistic meaning reducible to a lesson for life. He did not, as a rule, write the "idea" story (still popular in his time), that is, the story that preaches or intellectualizes a social or political problem that the author wants solved. This kind of story is, of course,



far away from the penetrating observation of human nature that is available to art because it subordinates everything in the story to the exposition of a problem. It tells, scolds, attacks, directs, cajoles; it is not an artistic experience. It is remarkable, and a striking demonstration of Coppard's artistic control, that, for one with such opinionated beliefs, he did not often write ideological fiction. Bates comments on this:

Unlike Wells or Kipling, Coppard had no sociological axes to grind. He was interested only in the tale for the tale's sake; in his stories there is no social, religious, scientific, or imperialistic background or bias. Coppard was interested in what happened to people once they got on to the merry-go-round of emotion.<sup>9</sup>

One of Coppard's rare attempts at the thesis story is "Tribute," a heavy-handed, sweepingly sarcastic tale of a mill-owning family that gets rich off the war while the sons of workers die. Everyone, of course, is doing his fair share. The workers send their sons to war and the mill owners lend their money to the war effort. The workers get back bodies and the owners receive tribute from the government. The little town enjoys the boom of economic progress. The story begins well as a contrast between two young men who marry--one for love, the other for money, but it degenerates into a simplistic attack on capitalism as the history of the two families unfolds. A Frank Dawtry wrote a letter to The New Statesman and Nation shortly after Coppard's death describing "Tribute" as a "bitter story

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<sup>9</sup>Bates, 139.

. . . which summed up all the feelings of a Socialist and pacifist of those days."<sup>10</sup> The correspondent goes on to relate his meeting with Coppard at a literary circle and their discussion of that story: "I said, 'As a Socialist it appealed to me' and he said 'I was secretary of our local I. L. P. when I wrote that.'"<sup>11</sup> "Tribute" was a rare slip from artistry into ideology. Perhaps Coppard was able to keep his artistic distance on social problems because he did not believe that the artist can change the world in any case. In a symposium for The Bookman in 1934, entitled "The Artist and the World To-Day," Coppard gave Geoffrey West the following answer to a question about the relationship between his art and existing world conditions: "Art, not being a necessity of life, has very little relevance to any conditions existing at any time or place."<sup>12</sup>

The closest Coppard comes with any regularity to expressing his "opinions" in his fiction is in the stories that deal directly or indirectly with God, religion, and the clergy. Although few of the stories that take one of these topics, or all of them, as the central theme rank among Coppard's best, traces of these topics can be found in many of his stories. Having a freethinker for a father and a religious browbeater for a mother, Coppard grew up an atheist fascinated with God. The

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<sup>10</sup> Frank Dawtry, correspondent, The New Statesman and Nation, LII (January 26, 1957), p. 102.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Geoffrey West, ed., "The Artist and the World To-day," The Bookman, (May, 1934), 92.

strongest portion of this disbelief seems to have been meted out to organized religion. But, beyond his feelings of cynicism for the clergy, Coppard could not stomach religion because he believed that it concerns itself with death whereas he thrived on life. His athletics, his reading, his writing, his walking tours, even his arguing were all expressions of life, but the death orientation that he saw in religion alternately appalled and intrigued him; sometimes it even amused him.

One of Coppard's first tales, "Communion," scores the empty formality of religion. A little country boy, Tom Prowse, son of a confirmed atheist, begins making secret visits to the village church where he sits quietly in the silence watching its hushed events, happy in its peace and simple beauty. On the first page Coppard sets the mood for the empty, death fixation of the church with a fine image. Grainger, the sexton, who orders Tom out of the church is a stern, "tall tall man, whose height enabled him to look around out of a grave when it was completely dug." But Tom continues to return to the church, and one night he is locked in. Unafraid, he puts on a chorister's robe, explores the church, and kneels down to imitate the prayers he has heard, murmuring: "'Thirty days hath September, April, June and November. . . ." In the vestry he finds a small loaf of bread and some wine in a goblet, both of which he consumes. Then, he returns to the altar, and, piling up prayer mats for a bed, he falls asleep. He is awakened by the vicar who roughly expels him from the church. Coppard's description of the vicar as he leans over the awakening boy depicts an

unhealthy belief at odds with the vitality of the world.

The morning sunlight was coming through the altar window, and the vicar's appearance was many-coloured as a wheelwright's door; he had a green face, and his surplice was scaled with pink and purple gouts like a rash from some dreadful rainbow.

Sick belief reflects the world's light as a disease. The story ends as the boy goes out into the "new clean sunlight." "Communion" is not fully realized because the conflict is much too simplified. The country lad is much too ingenious. The story is so brief, in fact, that it goes only slightly beyond a sketch.

"The Poor Man" is not about God, or religion, directly, but the moralistic meddling of the wealthy, materialistic parson forces the conflict in the action. The Reverend Scroope, new to the village, brazenly preaches to his impoverished parish, "The poor we have always with us." Coppard further characterizes him in a dialogue with an old parishioner early in the story:

"I never knowed what was to be out of work for one single day in all that sixty year. Never. I can't thank my blessed master enough for it."

"Isn't that splendidly feudal," murmured the priest, "who is your good master?"

"The old man solemnly touched his hat and said: "God."  
"Oh, I see, yes, yes," cried the Rev. Mr. Scroope.

Coppard might have got the comic irony of that character exposition from Fielding.

We soon learn of another character trait of the good reverend. He likes to keep his parishioners busy so that they will be as productive as possible and to that end tries to reform the parish and its activities in his own image, his favorite

method being to tell about the good people and the bad people of his previous parish. The good ones were those who took his advice; the bad ones did not and ended up much the worse for it. God rewards and God punishes, and for the latter, if God should happen to miss an appropriate punishment, Rev. Scroope will oblige Him by taking it out of His hands.

Dan Pavey and Rev. Scroope are separated by a profound "congenital difference." Pavey is poor so he makes book and he poaches; he enjoys good company so he drinks. He is also the best singer in the parish, and, when he drinks, he sings bawdy songs. All of these things the Rev. Scroope despises. Finally, when during a single week Dan brings home an illegitimate five year old son and is fined for bookmaking, the Reverend expells him from the church choir--Dan's chief joy--for "mockery" of God. In their lengthy confrontation Rev. Scroope's intolerance and hypocrisy become even more evident as he prophesies doom for Pavey while insisting again and again that he 'offers no judgment.' Pavey voices the belief of the basically decent man who has strayed from the path:

"You may be right, sir, as far as your judgment goes. . . but we can only measure people by our own scales, and as we can never understand one another entirely, so we can't ever judge them rightly. . . . But as for being a mocker of God, why, it looks to me as if you was trying to teach the Almighty how to judge me."

The contrast between the two men is the contrast between life and death. Dan Pavey is a poor, decent man with great weaknesses and great joys. Rev. Scroope is a legalistic, rigid, empty representative not of God but of the upper class. In an unexplained character shift, the Rev. Scroope testifies to Dan's

good character three years later when Dan is apprehended for poaching. But, if Scroope has somehow come to understand human frailty, yet religion's eternal focus on death as a beautiful escape from a world of dark sin eternally estranges God from man's simple joys. While in prison, Dan learns that his son Martin, who has become his entire joy, has been drowned in a boating accident, and in a fit of delirium he imagines himself at the funeral: "'We give thee hearty thanks,' the priest was saying, 'for that it hath pleased thee to deliver this our brother out of the miseries of this sinful world.'" In his dreaming Pavey turns away from the funeral back to the reality of prison through the living world:

Things were growing, corn was thriving greenly, the bean-fields smelled sweet. A frill of yellow kirk and wild carrot spray lined every hedge. Cattle dreamed in the grass, the colt stretched itself unregarded in front of its mother. Larks, wrens, yellow-hammers.

Coppard wrote many stories about going to heaven, and, in rejecting (both in his own life and in his fiction) religion's view of man as a sinner spending a sad time before retiring to a mansion in the sky, heaven becomes in Coppard's fiction an extension of the best that the earth has--fields, plants, animals. Heaven is a bucolic paradise in such stories as "Clorinda Walks in Heaven," "Father Raven," and "Simple Simon."

Simon is a simple man who "lived lonely in a hut in the depths of the forest . . . he had given up all the sweet of the world and had received none of the sweet of heaven. Old now, and his house falling to ruin," he decides to walk to heaven, which he finally enters (after being refused aid by a clergyman)

by way of a lift. When he arrives, he finds that heaven is like the best country on earth, and we find, too, that heaven is an individual thing.

And he had not gone far when he saw a place just like the old forest he had come from, but all was delightful and sunny, and there was the house he had once built, as beautiful and new, with the shining varnish on the door, a pool beyond, faggots and logs in the yard, and inside the shelves were loaded with good food, the fire burning with a sweet smell, and a bed of rest in the ingle.

But, heaven is not always simple goodness for Christian religion teaches not only that God rewards but that He judges severely. No sinner may enter. Father Raven, in the story of that name, does not take that rule seriously. Unlike the vicar of "Communion" or Rev. Scroope, Father Raven, to his everlasting grief, eschews legalisms for simple love.

The old priest, Father Raven, was a dear and a darling, a little prancing man somewhat big in the belly, though you wouldn't call it a paunch, it was a plumpness that betokened a good appetite and caused the crucifix and holy medallion on his watch-chain to tinkle as he trotted along with smiles coming out of his nice old face. And he had a way with him that betokened a kind heart toward the unsaintly as well as the dutiful and any other whatever. . . . His mind was at rest with God, and when he slept he was visited by proper and beautiful dreams--angels and so on.

Did you hear what happened to him then on the Day of Judgment?

He happens to be with his flock at the seashore on the day of judgment. Suddenly, he finds himself leading his parishioners down a country lane to a shining city. As the marchers walk along to their final reward, we learn something of their frailties, which Father Raven, we also learn, considers inconsequential in his love for them. When they finally get to Paradise, the day is closing and judgment has to be rushed, so all the parish priests are called to answer for their flocks.

Father Raven runs to the bridge and swears to the sinlessness of all his parishioners, upon which he stakes his soul. He is fearfully shaken to do it, but lovingly decides: "They were good enough for him, kind loving creatures when you got to know them." But, to the "great handsome being" who knows them well, they are not good enough. Father Raven urges his flock into heaven, but, as he follows them, he is barred entrance:

"The black-bearded one snapped his finger and thumb with a thick click and waved him off. 'You have done evil! Stand away!'"

His pledge forfeit,

the priest was thrust out, there was no help for him, his fond heart had betrayed him, had stolen the truth from his tongue. He heard the tinkle of little Nym's triangle fading across the bridge, growing fainter and fainter, and when he could hear it no more he felt his soul shrivel out of him.

The stark ugliness of the last line speaks in brutal contrast to the opening passage (quoted above) with its light, frolicsome air. But, it does tell us what happened to him on the day of judgment, and the rhetorical question that provides the immediate introduction to the action of the tale becomes a cynical commentary on a religion that teaches a sweet man the proper way to be at rest with God, a God who demands love for Himself, yet can exact a terrible vengeance from one who loves unwisely.

Not all of Coppard's clergy, however, are ugly or foolish. Some are merely entertaining, such as Father Corkery in "Purl and Plain." Asked by a fellow Irishman to attend his home to baptize the child due any moment, Father Corkery is only mildly surprised, and not at all discomfited, to find also in attendance the Reverend Mr. Caspin, on the off chance that



the baby is a girl. The expectant parents have agreed that all boys will be baptized Catholics, like their father, and, like their mother, the girls will be baptized Protestants. To the mild discomfort of the stuffy Rev. Caspin, Father Corkery drinks wine, smokes cigars, offers to play dominoes, suggests a wager on the sex of the baby (he is willing to bet that it will be a girl), and converses on the nature of sex and the mystery of women. He has a rich appreciation for the vagaries and contradictions and oddities of human nature. He describes, for instance, a moving moment in a cathedral in Venice. He had stood rapt and teary eyed at the beautiful voices of women singing saintly music as they cleaned the church plate, but, when a door opened, he had heard clearly the words of a song he had heard before, "'a song of the last conceivable bawdiness!'" And, he still remembers the "'sweet emotion'" of that experience.

Rev. Caspin asks Fr. Corkery if he approves of the Moriarty's arrangements about their children. Fr. Corkery responds:

"I am rather old now to approve things. At my time of life it is much easier to condemn anything, only condemnation so often upsets the kidneys, ye know."

"Indeed, sir," said the other, "I thought age brought a--a--a more mellow wisdom."

"It may bring wisdom . . . but wisdom isn't mellow; what is mellow is one's indifference. Wisdom must be critical, or what is the use of having it at all? On the other hand, we often fall into the error of believing that criticism itself is wisdom when it may only be bad temper. It is impossible to exercise wisdom in regard to women, for instance, and to criticize them is merely bad taste. Woman is most prone to superstition--so she worships man. She is a great gambler--so she bears his children.

Father Corkery's catholic humanism is comfortable and enjoyable; the Reverend Phalarope Doe is even more a comforting

human being, Coppard's most complimentary portrayal of the clergy. The story "Doe" takes place in a poor village cut off from the trade of the larger world. In this village the Rev. Doe has for forty years practiced the art of forgiveness:

For he was kind and wise, and he was so forgiving—he could forgive anything. A pat on the shoulder, and something, somehow—you know.

"Now tell me," he would ask some erring maiden, "why were you so careless?"

"Oh, sir, he decaptivated me!"

"There, there; you shouldn't have done. I shouldn't do it again, you know, not that kind of thing, if I were you. It's wrong; at least, it's not quite right, you know. I shouldn't do it again, not if I were you."

Doe's ministry is not theological but personal; he does not save—he salves. He may or may not get the people of his village into heaven, but he will help them to live more comfortably, with less guilt.

Doe is visited by his old college companion Ellis Rowfant, a confirmed atheist. The two old men begin to settle together, and Rowfant proposes that he move in permanently with Doe. Doe's rectory and Rowfant's income will provide them both with a comfortable, companionable old age. Before Rowfant can move in, he feels it necessary to confess to Doe a sorry incident from his past; his pride had led to the downfall of a young woman. Doe listens sympathetically, then, by way of forgiveness, suggests a game of dominoes. Rowfant moves in with Doe and is gradually insinuated into the shielding embrace of his life. To please his old friend, Rowfant agrees to say grace at table; when the sexton gets drunk, Rowfant rings the bell; having once attempted play writing, Rowfant agrees to write a parish nativity play. Then, he is cajoled into reading the lesson at services. "He found that it pleased him immensely to please Sammy [Doe];

he had no belief in God, but he believed in his friend." The two old men constantly debate their belief and disbelief, but they have no real differences between them.

Sometimes while listening to Sammy's exhortations Rowfant would fall asleep, and when he awoke Sammy would be gone away somewhere, to the garden, to the study, or into the church. "Ah," Rowfant would despondently sigh, "he disapproves of me!" But it was not so, never so.

The narrator tells us that Rowfant could never hope to share his friend's belief, "but he lived gratefully in its reflected beam. The beam might be a mirage and lead no further than the grave--but what then?" Life is good, and it is enough in itself. Indeed, Coppard often seems to be saying, life is too sweet for one to ignore it by looking beyond to something else that might not be.

A more significant subject than the one we have been pursuing is the relationship between men and women in Coppard's fiction. One aspect of this subject has been commented on more than any other material that Coppard uses--the secretiveness of women. We have already seen what Ford and O'Connor have to say on this topic. O'Connor, in fact, devotes much of a chapter to it, describing it as an "obsession" with Coppard because he returns to it so often with such penetrating insights. Yet, this is only a portion of Coppard's study of feminine psychology and its relationship to masculine psychology. We can most appropriately describe this larger subject as the abortive sexual encounters between men and women. Rarely in the world of Coppard's fiction are the sexual contacts between men and women wholly satisfactory. Sometimes they occur as weak, ineffectual

gropings, other times as misperceptions, confusions, and illusions, often they are clouded with fear, with reserve, with suspicion. Rarely does an intense male-female relationship last, and, when it does last, we usually discover in retrospect that all was not as it seemed. Coppard gains an uncommon insight by presenting almost all of these stories from the point of view of the woman--the woman wronged, the woman spurned, the woman misunderstood, the woman loving, the woman loved for the wrong reasons, or rejected for the wrong reasons. And, the women in these stories are usually dominant and dominating characters.

One might ask after reading "Dusky Ruth," or "The Watercress Girl," or "The Fishmonger's Fiddle" does Coppard really understand the secret hearts of women, or does he merely recreate his own confusion? The second possibility would be tempting were it not for the fact that he so often creates such strong women. The dark secrecy of Ruth or the trembling fright of Maxie Morrisarde in "Fishmonger's Fiddle" may leave one feeling that Coppard is very sensitive in depicting the confusions and fears that men so often experience in women, but this is only one facet of feminine psychology, and it is only a portion of Coppard's understanding. He explores, too, the deep, intense, even violent, sexual passions of women, passions that sometimes entice but more often terrify the men with whom they come into contact--weak, priggish, proper men who have kept their own sexuality at a safe distance.

Coppard sometimes describes women frivolously and comically as he does in "Purl and Plain," a lovingly humorous

treatment of the Irish, the clergy, and women. The story is set in the dining-room of the Moriarty home where a Catholic priest and a Protestant clergyman await the outcome of the imminent birth of the Moriarty's first child--"by the grace of God (and the contrivance of Mr. Moriarty)." The Catholic Moriarty and his Protestant wife have agreed that any child will be baptized in the faith of the parent of its own sex. While they wait to discover which of them will perform the rite, Father Corkery and Reverend Caspin discuss the unusual arrangements:

"Tell me, sir: do you approve of these family arrangements? Do you think it right for a child's religion to be decided by the mere accident of sex?"

"...sex is no accident at all; it comes, I suppose, by the grace of God. All the important things of life are decided by sex, and maybe it's as good a guide as any other."

"Oh come, I say," Mr. Caspin almost gasped, "really now!"

"Well," laughed his reverence, "I admit I have sometimes thought it would not be a bad thing if all men were Christians, and all women heathens. Indeed, I fancy Nature intended something of the kind and that we have blundered."

The clergymen take up the discussion of a commentary on the view of women expressed in Paul and Augustine.

"And, of course, sir, one is forced to recognize that the female sex is definitely inferior in moral stability--not to be trusted."

"Oh, I like women to be reasonably unreliable," said Father Corkery.

Later, the Reverend Caspin relates a story in which a colleague of his was scandalized that the daughter of a pensioned sailor had to take his meals to him at his place of employment, a public men's lavatory where the woman was subject to the ribald remarks of all the passing men. To put a stop

to it, the vicar arranged for a choir boy to deliver the man's meals, the upshot being that the angered woman refused to enter the vicar's church and that some "indelicate" "unmentionable traffic" went on between the sailor and the choir boy.

At last the vigil comes to an end. Milly Moriarty is delivered of a daughter, but she decides to break her previous agreement in favor of her husband and have the girl baptized a Catholic. Mr. Moriarty relays this news to the two clergymen and tells the Reverend Caspin: "'A hundred thousand pardons for disturbing you, sir, and troubling you for nothing at all. It's the women, sir, are the queer creatures.'" After the minister leaves, Father Corkery and Mr. Moriarty talk about Mrs. Moriarty:

"God has blessed you," repeated his reverence, "with the finest wife in the world."

"True it is, Father; but you can't tell what they'd be wanting from one hour to another. The devil himself, saving your presence, don't know where he is with the creatures."

One might simply summarize "Purl and Plain"--women are confusing, and that is what makes them attractive, but, of course, this story is a comedy and comic characters are often simple. Coppard's portrayal of women can be much more complex. If women confuse men, it may be that men just do not expect to find much real depth in women, and, upon finding it, they refuse to recognize it for what it is. They back off and assign simplistic motives to what they might find uncomfortable to understand. Such is the case in "Emergency Exit." Mrs. MacNair has returned from Canada with her ten year old son to take up residence near her mother and send her son to school. She

explains to her mother that she and her husband have grown tired of each other and have separated permanently. Mrs. Essex is concerned about what the neighbors might think, but Mrs. MacNair disavows any concern for the opinions of others. However, as the story develops, we learn that "Polly Olliver" (the nickname her father had given Elizabeth as a child) is a very blithe spirit who does indeed care what others might think. She has fabricated a network of lies about her life, lies from which she cannot now easily escape.

She secretly takes up with a young "artist," Vicary Vines, whom she tells that her husband is dead. When he proposes marriage, she must introduce him to her family, who believes her to be separated. So, she tells Vicary part of the truth. Her husband is not dead, and she is not separated; she is not and has never been married. She had lived in Canada with MacNair for the past eleven years, but they had never got around to marrying. Since she is not married, she cannot get divorced, but she does not want to reveal this long standing deception to her mother for whom she devised it in the first place. Vines is somewhat taken aback by this revelation. His simple little Polly Olliver is not so simple after all. But, he agrees to go along with her plan to fictitiously kill off her non-husband. Polly announces to her mother that she has received notification of MacNair's death. Now the way is clear for her marriage to Vines, but MacNair, who had promised never to see her again, shows up in England seeking reconciliation. Vicary meets MacNair and learns by accident that Polly's child is not MacNair's

son. This sets the stage for the final scene which deftly depicts a woman struggling to free herself of convention, a woman so completely formed as a human being that Vicary Vines shrinks before her.

They meet in Mrs. MacNair's London hotel, and she invites Vines to her room, which he enters with many hesitations, apologies, and uncomfortable glances. Although he has been the aggressor in their relationship, he has never been in her bedroom before, even to kiss her goodnight. His "dithering" and "unreasonable scruples" make her "testy":

"Don't be silly! Are you so shocked to be in a lady's bedroom? . . . It has all the usual appurtenances," she laughed waving an airy hand: "telephone, radiator, hot and cold water always on, mirror, chair, and a bed! Do sit down."

Vines confronts her with the problem of Peter's parentage, and after some avoidance of the issue Polly admits that MacNair is not the father of her child. She is "shaken," she blushes, she is "discomfited" by the revelation, but she is "by no means shattered." She glances "casually" around the room as she assures Vines that she has intended to tell him all "at the proper time."

"The proper time!" he exclaimed. "What do you mean by that? You've lied so much, you've got into the habit and don't know it!"

"Ha!" She was sardonic now. "You try being a woman and see if you don't lie occasionally."

So, Polly Olliver does tell all. Peter is the result of a brief affair she had in Italy before she went to Canada. She met a "fascinating Italian" "gentleman" whom she had no intention of marrying,



but she took him for a lover and after a month--passed on.

"Just a mere seduction?" commented Vines.

"Good heavens!" she cried. "There is nothing 'mere' about it, let me tell you." She got up from the bedside in a rage and paced up and down the room. "You men make me sick. You pretend to yourselves that women are this and that and the other, holy virgins, nuns and angels, all the nonsense stuffed into your heads by poets and books, and you go on unloading that sort of lumber upon us."

"O, well," Vines snapped out, "you were one of his mistresses then!"

Elizabeth sat down in the armchair away from him. "Let's get this over," she said sourly.

Vines will not be made to understand. Women are supposed to be simple; there are supposed to be good women and bad women. Elizabeth describes the arrangement that she had made with MacNair in Canada, including a vague intention to marry that was never fulfilled.

Vines sighed. "Poor old Polly, you must have had an agonizing time; it sounds awful."

"Nothing of the kind," declared she; "it was Paradise itself."

Somehow that affronted him. "Why on earth did you give it up, then?"

"Because, sooner or later, Paradise gets tired of you."

"And then," he asked, with a suave sneer, "I suppose you seek fresh woods and pastures new?"

"Why not?" Her voice was harsh and antagonistic. . . .

Vicary, who has been playing at the daring, iconoclastic artist role, is shown to be a very tradition-bound young man.

If men insist on applying simplistic traditional expectations to women, Coppard seems to be saying, they will see only the surface of female persons, and turbulent surfaces can be confusing indeed. Much of the secretiveness of women may be a protective response to men who refuse to deal with the threat of what a relationship with a whole person will expose about themselves. Women like Polly Olliver must make dissimulation a way of life or they will have no freedom at all. Perhaps life with

MacNair was a "Paradise" because he did not demand that she be anything other than herself. But, away from MacNair, to save herself the irritation of social expectation, i.e., the traditional passive female role, she makes a secret of her real life, her real personhood. We are not surprised when, in the final lines of the story, she is placing a call to MacNair.

Coppard's best known short stories concerning women are those, like "Dusky Ruth," "The Higgler," and "Fishmonger's Fiddle," in which the women are quietly secretive, shy, hidden. Ruth, Mary Sadgrove, and Maxie Morrisarde are vulnerable women whose very secretiveness and gentleness make them, for a man, confusing and desirable, at once objects of mystery and of protection. They never threaten, but they can frustrate. The enigma of Ruth is a source of intrigue to the traveler that draws him irresistibly toward her. Her fascination to the traveler and to the reader is the mystery of her strange, deep sorrow.

Harvey Witlow, the higgler, tries too hard in the wrong way to see to the bottom of Mary Sadgrove's timidity, her mystery. Because he thinks of himself as a sharp business man, and, because Mary is too good to be believed--beautiful, educated, wealthy, he begins to think that there must be something wrong with her. Rather than accepting or attempting to understand her shyness, he tries to investigate it and assign it motives. His native cunning sees a snare set for him in Mrs. Sadgrove's offer of marriage to her daughter. Fearing that he is being made a fool of, he marries the coarse, blunt Sophy. Mary, of course, loves the higgler, and, though he loves her

too, he cannot see either love for all his craftiness.

Of the women in these three stories the most completely developed is Maxie Morrisarde. She is not a mystery to others so much as to herself. But, the mystery she is too frightened to question. The joy of love for which she longs threatens her uneasy security. She cannot risk something to gain much. She will risk nothing and stay as she is. She will not question, so she only dimly sees the secret: freedom can only be won. Maxie has been married and abandoned and taken in by her aunt and uncle. Coppard describes her as "a slight fair pretty creature, helpless, charming, delicate, and an orphan," who "married, quite suddenly, the first man who had made love to her." When she meets Arnold Blackburne, his manly attentions begin to make her feel like a woman again. But, she is married; her aunt will not even talk of divorce, so she softly refuses Blackburne's offer to come live with him--the threat of hell-fire terrifies her. In her shy timidity she crushes her own emerging freedom and falls back on conformity, security, and fantasy.

Coppard's women are not all weaklings waiting for men to save them from dull, insipid lives. Marie the Cossack of "The Tiger" is a woman strong in body and mind. Yak Pederson, the lion tamer of the circus where they both work, lusts after her, but she is passionately faithful to her little husband, Jimmy Fascota. Yak is equally unsuccessful at attempting to compromise her virtue and at trying to tame the new tiger--both of them hate him with a personal ferocity. At last Yak humiliates himself before Marie; he tells her that he fears the

tiger. Her hatred turned to disgust, she threatens to tame the tiger herself. Then, she pushes him out of her way and goes off to town to drink. Marie returns late that night, drunk; Yak carries her into the arena and bolts the door. The next morning she wakes up next to Yak. When he attempts to caress her, she punches him in the face with both fists, and a violent brawl erupts. As both of them lay bleeding from the fight, Yak swears that nothing happened the night before, but, suddenly, Pederson sees the tiger looking at him: "The beast stood with hatred concentrated in every bristling hair upon its hide, and in its eyes a malignity that was almost incandescent." Meanwhile, Marie is creeping stealthily to the door of the cage. She throws open the door and leaps in with the tiger. "As she did so, the cage emptied." Pompoon, the old black who cares for the animals, at last breaks into the arena: "As he stepped forward into the gloom he saw the tiger, dragging something in its mouth, leap back into its cage."

Other women in Coppard stories exact horrible vengeance when wronged. We do not directly see the action of "A Broad-sheet Ballad"; it is told to us by one of two men sitting in a taproom eating their dinner. Bob, the mason, and Sam, the tiler, are discussing a murder case in which the accused is expected to hang--unjustly. Bob offers to tell a tale about such a hanging ten years before in the Cotswolds. There were two sisters, Edith and Agnes, daughters of Harry Mallerton. The elder sister, Edith, got pregnant by a young man named William. Edith at last informed her mother, and Harry made William

promise to marry the girl, but, then, Agnes claimed that she too was pregnant by William. Harry went out and found William, beat him senseless, carried him home and threw him on the kitchen floor between the two girls demanding that he marry Edith. William insisted on Agnes, a coin was tossed, and Agnes it was. But, as it turned out, Agnes was not pregnant at all. She had lied to get William. Sometime after Edith's baby was born Agnes was found dead--poisoned. People knew who had done it, even knew where Edith had bought the poison, but everyone kept quiet and William was hanged for the crime.

"And Edith, she sat in court through it all, very white and trembling and sorrowful, and when the judge put his black cap on, they do say she blushed and looked across at William and gave a bit of a smile. Well, she had to suffer for his doings, so why shouldn't he suffer for hers? That's how I look at it."

Mary McDowall, "The Watercress Girl," is more passionate than Edith, and her revenge is more brutal and more public, yet the irony of the story is such that in the end she has regained the love she lost. Mary's passion is so strong that it lifts her above society and its conventions:

For all that passion concerns with is love--or its absence--love that gives its only gift by giving all. If you could read her mind . . .: I will give to love all it is in me to give; I shall desire of love all I can ever dream of or receive.

When she falls in love with Frank Oppidan, we are told: "Her fire and freedom would awe him almost as much as it enchanted." Because of her passion and freedom, she is proud, too proud to marry Frank because she cannot bring herself to tell him of her own seemingly illegitimate birth. He cannot convince her to marry him, so he comes to see her less and less

often. Finally, he stops visiting her, but he has left her pregnant, and she is too proud to tell him. Mary and her father, we are told, are deep, "uncommunicative" people who find it difficult to express affection in words. She has no words for Frank. The baby is born dead, and Frank has taken up with Elizabeth Plantney, inheritor of five hundred pounds:

To Mary's mind that presented itself as a treachery to their child, the tiny body buried under a beehive in the garden. That Frank was unaware made no difference to the girl's fierce mood; it was treachery. Maternal anger stormed in her breast, it could only be allayed by an injury, a deep admonishing injury to that treacherous man.

Mary purchases some vitriol, planning to throw it in Frank's eyes, but she changes her mind at the last instant and hurls it at Elizabeth, ruining her face. Mary is tried and sentenced to six months in prison.

Her words when she is sentenced are the perfection of "quality" in Coppard's work--the few broken phrases that serve to distinguish Mary from every other passionate woman in the world. . . . Even the punctuation seems deliberate, as though Coppard had invented it to describe the heavy breathing of a hunted woman in a country courthouse. "Twas he made me a parent, but he was never a man himself. He took advantage; it was mean, I love Christianity." If that did not come straight out of Coppard's collection of press cuttings it should have; it has an air of absolute authenticity.<sup>13</sup>

In the course of time Frank, too, plots revenge. Even with five hundred pounds Elizabeth is too ugly to marry now. So, he plans to splash acid in Mary's face. He finds her home alone one night, as he expects to, but, as he waits at the window to carry out his plan, he sees her for the first time since the trial. She is not the dull ugly Mary of his vengeful recollection; she is "the old Mary of their passionate days,

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<sup>13</sup>O'Connor, 178.

transfigured and marvellous." Coppard brilliantly describes Frank's transformation from hatred to awe:

He was rigid with surprise. It was Mary all right (the bitch!), washing her hair, drying it in front of the kitchen fire, the thick locks pouring over her face as she knelt with her hands resting on her thighs. So long was their black flow that the ends lay in a small heap inside the fender. . . . Dazzling fair were her arms and the one breast he astonishingly saw.

The effect of Oppidan's surprise at his rediscovery of Mary's beauty is enhanced by the liquid imagery of her hair (water figures appear elsewhere in the story) and the periodic construction of the final sentence.

The girl is not surprised when Frank enters the kitchen. To her horror he describes vividly what she has done to Elizabeth, and he reveals his intentions for her, intentions that he can no longer carry out. This shock breaks through her barrier of secrecy, and the story of the baby comes out. Frank is stunned. He protests that he would have married, would have wanted to marry, had she only told him. She insists stubbornly that he should have come around again to see her; then he would have found out for himself. When the problem of her birth is revealed next, Frank is only slightly interested, never would have cared. He wants to marry her now. She puts him off this topic, but they do begin to talk about their dead son. The ending is beautifully subtle. She urges him out the door because her father might come home, because her cakes are burning.

"Give us one," he begged, "and then I'll be off."

"You shall have two," she said, kneeling down by the oven. "One for you--mind, it's hot!" He seized it from the cloth and quickly dropped it into his pocket. "And another, from me," continued Mary. Taking the second cake

he knelt down and embraced the huddled girl.

"I wants another one," he whispered.

A sudden intelligence swam in her eyes: "For?"

"Ah, for what's between us, dear Mary."

Frank O'Connor remarks on the authenticity of the ending of "The Watercress Girl": When Frank learns about the baby, "her secret is no longer her own and hatred for Frank drops away."<sup>14</sup>

Coppard's "Watercress Girl" is a rare instance in his fiction when the passion of a sexual relationship survives the contradictory psychologies engaged in it. Sometimes a relationship is destroyed when one of the partners learns that the other is not worthy of it; this occurs in "Fifty Pounds." Eulalia Burnes is living with Phillip Repton, a professionally proud impoverished writer. She does not see the selfishness in his personality--she worships him--until she receives a small inheritance and anonymously sends him fifty pounds. She expects that with this money he will gain more freedom to write and their relationship will, subsequently, be strengthened. Now she will be able to stay with him instead of taking the job in Scotland that poverty had made necessary. On the contrary, he does not even tell her that he has received the money. He plays poor but proud until he finally sends her off with glowing words of love. As his perfidy gradually dawns on her during their last days together, she first experiences anger and bitterness, but she also learns something of her own strength, and, at the last, filled with "sardonic revelation," she relishes the comedy of his hopeless, empty, self-puffery.

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid.



No woman waits to be sacrificed, least of all those who sacrifice themselves with courage and a quiet mind. . . .

Lally tripped down the stairs alone. At the end of the street she turned for a last glance. There he was, high up in the window, waving good-byes. And she waved back.

In other Coppard stories the sexual encounter is aborted because the woman, not necessarily more insightful than the man, is more elemental. Her earthy passion distresses him. He has expected her to act like a lady. Instead, she acts like a woman. She is alive, vital, passionate; he is proper, priggish, frightened. Such men and women can be found in "The Black Dog" and "Christine's Letter." The Honourable Gerald Loughlin falls in love with Orianda Crabbe, daughter of the keeper of The Black Dog tavern. She is lovely and soft and delicate, but she is a country girl, not easily embarrassed about the facts of life. The Honourable Gerald, as Coppard mockingly calls him, would prefer that the facts of life go away. They will not, so he does.

Christine, attractive waitress at the Cafe Tee To Tum, receives a letter from the husband she has left. The brief action of the narrative covers her reading and reacting to the letter during a lavatory break. We learn from the letter, a kind of dramatic monologue, that the husband is a sniveling, priggish poet who pleads Christine's forgiveness. Then, he accuses; next, pleads misunderstanding; finally, just pleads. The letter opens:

"Come, it was not nice to run away and leave me so, but I will not reproach you. No, nor for anything. But still, why did you? Why did you? It is hard for me to account for your absence, you know, I am in a false position, a

stupid position. . . . Of course we had ceased to love each other, though we had only been married a year, a little long year; our life together was stifling, unbearable, though I never told you so--you would not have understood. We annoyed and stung each other--but, what of that?"

The writer of the letter is certainly an ass. He is afraid of what the neighbors might think. And, he stupidly underestimates her capacity for recognizing the misery of their marriage. She left him after all! Christine's correspondent next manfully blames their marriage on his mother: "'I wish I had never married you, it was my mother's fault, she urged me to it.'" He continues to patronize, pontificate, and wax poetic for three more pages, but the best picture of their contradictory personalities and of their relationship occurs in the middle of the letter. We see here his priggish retreat from life and her passionate embrace of it (it is not by accident in this A. E. Coppard fiction that he believes in religion, God, and death and she celebrates life like a simple pagan):

Do you remember one day last April when it snowed and you stripped yourself naked and went out on the lawn and danced in the white flakes? So reckless of you, anybody passing might have seen you, but I did not say anything. I did not even watch you. I got out some towels and warmed them for you, but somehow you did not like that. Why not? It always pleased you greatly to be displeased. I wish you believed in God. How can you not--there is Christ? You believed only in the things that concerned you, you said: death was death and you knew nothing about it and could not know. Oh, false, dreadful, trivial spirit of the age, so flippant and so fleeting; every year a new Abraham prepares to sacrifice a new Isaac. The everlasting wanders in the void, for half the truths we know can never be told, they are too divine for speech. But God is freedom from evil--is it not so?

Obviously, he is more enamoured of his own religio-poetic sensibility than he is of his wife. Freedom from evil is too limited for Christine. She wants freedom, without any modification.

She responds to the letter, "The hound! The hound!" and, crushing the pages, throws it into the toilet.

A very few of Coppard's tales about the furtive, confused gropings between men and women are told from the man's point of view. Among the best of these are "Alas, Poor Bollington," "The Wife of Ted Wickham," "Abel Staple Disapproves," and "Huxley Rustem." These tales do not have the power of the stories that drive directly into the female personality. Their mood is essentially ironic, whimsical, slightly confused, even comic, rather than intense and passionate. The first two of these stories are tales told in bars by the principal male figure in the tale being told.

"Alas, Poor Bollington" uses a double narrator technique. A first person narrator relates Bollington's tale of his marital troubles as Bollington has told it to Turner in the bar of their club. The first person narrator provides no more than an initial scene setting before allowing the tale to carry itself by means of the dialogue between Bollington and Turner. The unidentified, self-effacing narrator describes Bollington as a "mild," "unassertive," "little old man" who drinks milk while Turner drinks whisky. Bollington's own narrative reveals a comic-pathetic attempt by the little old man to assert himself in his marriage. When he was forty, he had married a lovely girl of twenty-five, who continued to be very popular with men but who, Bollington asserts, began to grow suspicious that he was unfaithful with a Mrs. Macarthy. Nothing could be further from the truth, Bollington insists; in fact, he had often

admonished Phoebe not to stay tied down to an "old fogey" like himself. This had made Phoebe furious, her tongue became sharper, and finally they had a violent argument.

"She accused me of dreadful things with Mrs. Macarthy and she screamed out: 'I hope you will treat her better than you have treated me.' Now, what did she mean by that, Turner?"

Bollington tells Turner that after this exchange he had walked out of the hotel and never returned. He took a steamer to America where he stayed almost four years, the whole time feeling lonely and remorseful for his intemperate act. Finally, when he returned to London, he did find Phoebe--lovelier than ever and full of affection for him. Over dinner she begged his forgiveness. For what? Why, for running out on him! Bollington had protested; he had run out on her. No, she had left their hotel after the argument and had not returned. When Phoebe realized that she had been abandoned by Bollington, she lost the satisfaction of having made him suffer. She was disgusted. Her contempt for him returned. Once again she began her verbal abuse: "'Now I never want to see your face again, never, this is the end!'" Bollington finishes his story of woe; he has not seen Phoebe in three years and has no desire to see her again.

"The Wife of Ted Wickham" uses a similar narrative technique. A third person narrator describes a "cattle-dealer, a healthy looking man, massive, morose, and bordering on fifty" who tells the other men in a tavern how his good friend Ted Wickham was cursed in marriage by being wed to a thoroughly compliant woman. The woman was different than Ted in every way

before their marriage; his politics and religion directly contradicted her own, but, when they wed, she gave up all her own beliefs to accept Ted's. According to the cattle-dealer, this was a treachery to Ted, who was "a great sporting cock of a man," "a perfect demon with women," "crusty," "a terror." But Molly, Ted's wife, was accommodating in all things. She never reproached him, never disagreed or argued. According to the cattle-dealer, this aggravated Ted until he finally despised her. "A man wants something or other to whet the edge of his life on; and he did despise her, I know." Even on his death-bed Ted could not get her to stand up to him.

And she says to him again: "Isn't there anything you would like me to do?"

Ted says to her: "Ah! I'd like to hear you give one downright good damn curse. Swear, my dear!"

"At what?" she says.

"Me, if you like."

"What for?" she says. I can see her now, staring at him.

"For my sins."

"What sins?" she says.

Now did you ever hear anything like that? What sins!

Over Ted's dying protestations, Molly promised him never to marry again. After Ted's death Molly continued faithful to Ted in every thought and belief. Because Ted had not believed in insurance, she refused to insure her public-house, which burned down two years later. But, even more to the cattle-dealer's chagrin, she keeps even now, ten years later, her fool death-bed vow to Ted not to remarry. The suspicion that has been growing on the reader through the telling of the tale is confirmed. The cattle-dealer's perception of the Wickham marriage has been coloured by his own love of Molly Wickham, whom he was never

able to get at during Ted's time and who will not marry him now.

She liked to see Ted make a fool of himself, liked him better so. Perhaps that's what she don't see in me. And what I see in her--I can't imagine. But it's something, something in her that sways me now just as it swayed me then, and I doubt but it will sway me for ever.

In "Abel Staple Disapproves" we learn of yet another marriage that was not all it seemed. Abel Staple, the bereaved husband, meets his brother-in-law Ted Billings in a public house to discuss the insertion of a notice in the newspaper on the anniversary of Fanny's death. It quickly becomes clear that the memorial is Ted's idea. Abel goes along grudgingly. He disapproves of a number of texts suggested by Ted, especially anything that suggests a hymn. Fanny, it seems, was a good hard-working wife who, because she had no children, took to religion--hymns, tears, and "psalming"--until she drove Abel nearly mad. Abel finally suggests an appropriate text: "Peace, perfect peace," and the reader wonders if the text is so much a memory of Fanny as it is Abel's prayer of thanksgiving.

"Huxley Rustem" tells of the delicate relationship between a slightly foolish man and an aggressive lady barber. Slight foolishness is all that is necessary to destroy a delicate relationship. The lady barber, one among many male barbers, very subtly arranges for Huxley to be seated in her chair in his first time at her shop. Few words are spoken, nothing personal, but the mutual attraction grows. Huxley now becomes a regular visitor at the shop, but none of the lady barber's machinations can get him seated in her chair again. He imagines her cutting his hair as he entrances her with amusing tales.

Huxley, it develops, is an egoist. "An egoist is a mystic without a god, but seldom ever without a goddess. It was bliss to adore her, but very heaven for her to be adoring him."

Huxley passes the lady barber on the street three or four times, but each time he is with his wife, whom he tries to ignore "as if she were just an acquaintance instead of being an important alliance." Once he is alone as she passes "ogling him in a very frank way." But, Coppard tells us, she does not understand egoists:

He was impervious to any such direct challenge; he thought it a little silly, coarse even. Had she been shy and diffident, allowing him to be masterful instead of confusing him, he would have fluttered easily into her flame.

At last the hoped for day arrives; Huxley is seated in her chair. No words are spoken. The girl is nervous and clips his ear. As she hands him the check their fingers touch, and he stupidly gives her a tip.

It was as if he had struck her a blow. He was shocked at the surprised resentment in the fierce glance she flung him. She tossed the coin into a tray for catching tobacco ash and cigarette ends. He realized at once the enormity of the affront; his vulgar act had smashed the delicate little coil between them.

Huxley slinks away, having learned, perhaps, a lesson about the values that other human beings place on themselves. But, he is fool enough to be allowed to salvage his ego in the end.

He only recovered his balance when, a fortnight later, he encountered her in the street wearing the weeds of a widow! Then he felt almost as indignant as if she had indeed deceived him!

The comedy of Huxley Rustem serves as a counterpoint to the passionate intensity of Coppard's finest stories about women.

The vain, proper, priggish man can not bring himself to engage in the vitality of the intense, elemental woman. To protect his ego he must play games of propriety, he must be protective, he must patronize. Some women, such as, Ruth, Mary Sadgrove, and Maxie Morrisarde, appeal to this kind of man, but, as we have seen, even they can not be assured a deeply personal relationship with a man. The promise of sexual encounters in Coppard's fiction is not at all hopeful. Men and women can not communicate. They seem to be two entirely different species that can not find a common language--though they share a common need, the need to find a complementary person of the opposite sex. Coppard's women need men who will engage with them in life; Coppard's men are not such persons. Coppard's men need superficial women, but, Coppard shows us, women are not like that at all.

Coppard's stories about women are not so much a condemnation of men as they are a rich appreciation of the interior life of women, and for some reason Coppard was more consistently able to plumb the psychic lives of women than of men. Perhaps the female sex seemed to Coppard more isolated by social convention than is man. He knew that some kinds of isolation encourage the development of (and give the artist more opportunity to examine) intense personhood. Since men are more the controllers of social convention, they stay on the surface (this is not so true of the poor man who is the object of social and class conventions, and the subject of many of Coppard's finest stories). Women are the objects of social convention and, so, must journey



to hidden places to realize their selfhood. Coppard journeys with them. In some of the above stories, and in other stories about women, such as, "The Field of Mustard," "The Little Mistress," and "The Hurly Burly," Coppard explores the nature of that isolation. These stories about the human condition are, as a group, Coppard's finest short stories. The human condition is Coppard's most important subject matter. As he envisions it, the condition of man from birth to death is the unfulfilled bittersweet longing of men and women made captive by time and change that they can neither control nor escape. These stories involve alienation, despair, fate, survival, time, freedom and necessity. Although those men and women who are most brutally subject to the ruin of time and mutability are invariably poor, these fictions are not polemics aimed at the upper class. The upper class, who ordinarily is not seen (it is represented by game keepers, some clergy, and the abstract of "law"), is not represented as the enemy of the poor man. Rather, the upper class, like death, taxes, and other inevitabilities, is merely part of the condition in which the poor struggle for survival, sometimes foolishly hoping that they can conquer necessity and gain freedom.

In the most important Coppard fiction man is trapped between the two walls--birth and death. Sometimes Coppard treats this material with comic irony. In "Purl and Plain," as the Reverend Mr. Caspin enters the dining-room to take up his vigil with Father Corkery, Coppard tells us:

Like his reverend brother he, too, had brought a little black bag with him, and in this they both resembled the

doctor, except that he was supervising the child's entry into the world while they were already concerning themselves about his entry into the next.

We can chuckle at this comic truism, but, who, having read "The Field of Mustard," can forget Dinah Lock's bone-deep despair? "Oh, God, cradle and grave is all there is for we."

Coppard outlines the sad condition of man with comic pathos in stories like "Alas, Poor Bollington," "Fine Feathers," "Nixey's Harlequin," and "The Fancy Dress Ball." The severe alienation of Bollington, Homer Dodd, Tom Wilson, and Bugloss is tempered yet made more poignant by the pathetic comedy of timid men, escaping and hiding behind little passions, seeking in a circumscribed existence the fulfillment of a grand design. Bollington, in his one glorious moment of self-expression, abandons his wife, only to lose this tiny triumph when he discovers later that she has left him. Homer Dodd attempts to exchange his commonplaceness for epic grandeur. Determined not to be a fool, he refuses to become a gardener like his father. Filled with ambition beyond his abilities or the constraints of his little town, he becomes a clerk for an insignificant brewery. The brewery job promises more money than gardening, but even more "'a clurk is more genteel.'" "Gentility [is] one of Homer's secret ambitions," and to that end he nourishes the desire to own a complete evening dress suit, tailor-made of the most expensive materials. Years go by, and gradually he saves up the money, refusing himself every other convenience and ease that he might purchase instead. Occasionally, his special savings account must be temporarily depleted, but eventually he acquires

the money and purchases the suit. He is determined, though, not to accumulate any unnecessary learning or knowledge.

"But what's the use of it?" he asked. "It's like picking up stones in one corner of a field and marching 'em over to another corner. You begin picking up stones as soon as you're born and be [sic] the time you come into your grave there's a tidy bagful to tip into it.

Homer is past thirty-five by the time he acquires the suit. But, now that he has it, he has nothing to do with it. The possession of the suit has been so long an ambition that its use is beyond contemplation. So, he keeps it in his dresser, occasionally trying it on in his room on Sundays. Yet, even having the suit sets him apart, in his mind, from the bumbling rustics around him: "The unworn suit was as significant to him as the inner revelation may be to every divergent mystic." But, Homer does get one opportunity to wear the suit. "Save for one pollution his robe of sanctity was to remain what it had become-- the pure heaven of his desire."

Laura, lovely daughter of the Squire, treats Homer pleasantly, and he begins to entertain meek hopes in her direction. One day she visits his home. She is giving a dance and has heard that Homer has an evening suit. Yes, he does have such a suit. Then, will he come and help the butler? Homer holds on to his shattered pride and ambitions; he accepts the job. For the first and only time he wears his "fine feathers" in public. Coming home from the dance, he pulls off his evening dress and tosses it on the floor. The next day Homer's mother puts it in his dresser where it stays until he is forced to sell it for a fraction of its cost to pay off his brother-in-law's debts. He

is already far into middle age. With confused bitterness he sees his life drawing to a close with no hopes, no prospects, no meanings. His time is nearly gone, and the one thing he has tried to do with his time has become a grim joke. He is doomed; he thinks (with Coppard's anticipated irony): "'Why, I might just as well have been born a fool.'" Although the tone of the story is consistent with comedy, the heavy mood of time's inevitability runs through the action as surely as the "laggard heavy stream" runs past the town.

Homer Dodd, at least, achieves a partial recognition of his misuse of his life. Not so, Bugloss and Tom Wilson. "The Fancy Dress Ball" is another story about a pathetic investiture of expectations in clothes. The hopelessly named protagonist of this tale, Bugloss, suffers "from a remarkable diffidence, one of nature's inconsistencies having been to endow him with a mute desire for romantic adventure and an entire incapacity to inaugurate any such thing." At last he makes "a mighty resolve to discard his pusillanimous self with one grand gesture," and he buys a ticket to a fancy dress ball where he expects to remain anonymous because everyone will be making a fool of himself; "he only hoped, at the very least, to look some fair girl deep in the eyes." Bugloss is an architect, used to sweeping designs, so he designs an oriental costume, buys purple and crimson fabric, and sends fabric and design to a dress maker to be made up.

Bugloss arrives at the ball late wearing a bowler hat, a long mackintosh, and "goloshes" to disguise himself on the way. Nothing pains him so much as to be noticed, so he takes to the

dark shrubs and trees around the well-lit lawn, hoping to get to the cloak room without being noticed. But, Bugloss never does bring himself to cross that lawn, nor does he ever get out of his mackintosh. Like a Hawthornesque "Paul Pry," he spends almost the entire evening lurking in the bushes watching the party on the lawn and stumbling in the dark onto several romantic scenes. This grotesque self-enforced isolation at the party is, of course, merely a figure of Bugloss' alienation in the larger world.

The hypersensitive creature sees in the common mass of his fellows only something that seeks to deny him, and either in his fear of that antagonism or in the knowledge of his own imperfections he isolates and envelopes the real issue of his being--much as an oyster does with the irritant grain in its beard; only the outcome is seldom a pearl and not always as useful as a fish.

As he hides in the bushes, his romantic fantasy involves him with a lovely young green haired lady dancing with a pirate, whom he immediately loathes. He wishes that he were dancing with that lady, and he reflects, accurately, that he is the only man there with a decent costume. As the evening comes to an end and the lights are turned down, Bugloss finally sinks into a chair in an obscure corner. Two girls sit near him, and they are soon joined by the green haired object of his romantic imagination. All evening he has been a passive observer, and so, consistent to the last, he listens in on them. We, and Bugloss, learn that the young lady, Claire, is a dress maker who has made seven of the costumes for this ball, including one she has not yet seen, one for a man.

"This order just dropped in upon us very mysteriously, and we did it, from top to toe, a most gorgeous arrangement, all

crimson and purple and silver and citron, but I haven't seen anybody wearing it yet. . . . I'm so disappointed. . . . I was so anxious to see it worn. I had made up my mind to dance at least half the dances with the wearer, it was so lovely."

She describes the pirate's costume as "a fright" and declares her disinterest in him. When the ladies leave, Bugloss briefly reflects on the events of the evening and decides that he is glad that he and the young lady did not meet. "The tragedy had floated satisfactorily out of his hands, thank the fates." He blames the pirate for the failure of the evening, and "with unwonted audacity he stalk[s] off firmly, even a little fiercely, across the lawn in his mackintosh and bowler hat." At home in bed that night he thinks to himself:

"So that's a fancy dress ball! Sweet God, but I'm glad I went! And I could have shown them something, I could have. Say what you like, but mine was the finest costume at the show; there's no doubt about it, it was, it was! And I'm very glad I went."

Bugloss rationalizes his experience and rejects his potential self-recognition. In the absurdity of his alienation, Bugloss' fancy about what little he has done protects him from recognition of what he could be. His personhood--his costume--is splendid, but he hides it and remains alone.

If the name "Bugloss" suggests the absurdity of the protagonist of "The Fancy Dress Ball," the name "Tom Wilson" implies the desperate need for anonymity of the protagonist of "Nixey's Harlequin." The first person narrator of this comedy of mistaken identity tells us more often than we want to hear it that, although he is, indeed, a Tom Wilson, he is certainly not the Tom Wilson. As the tale opens, the narrator nervously

skitters between two narrative lines: the tragedy that he says is the subject of his tale, and his mistaken involvement in it that becomes for the reader the real point of the tale. "Nixey's Harlequin" is a tragi-comedy of noninvolvement, Wilson's failure to engage himself in life.

I ought to tell you about the terrible thing first, I ought to begin with that because it is what the story is about, and desperately tragic, I can tell you. But as it happens there are two men named Wilson concerned, one of them very wickedly concerned, and my name is Wilson. It is a common enough name, you couldn't have anything commoner than Wilson, and I have told everybody that I am not the guilty Wilson; I am indeed as innocent as a new-born lamb, but nobody believes me, they just grin.

Wilson can not understand why everyone grins at his frequent protestations that he is not the Tom Wilson. He told the police so, but they replied that that was just what the other Wilson said. The entire affair involves a girl named Sally. Our Tom Wilson had entertained some notions about Sally. In fact, his fantasy life seems to have been filled with Sally. He had observed the other Tom Wilson flirt with her: "What would you like Mr. Wilson?" . . . "A kiss and the afternoon off with you!" The narrator was shocked, he tells us, but shortly we see him engage in a fantasy with the same dialogue. He believes himself superior to other men, and he remembers the many times that he would have liked to make Sally aware of their commonness. In moments like the following Coppard makes Wilson's narrative voice distinctive and singular. In his very drabness Coppard gives him the individual coloration that makes his narrative real.

I had--indeed, I don't mind confessing it--an idea that the poor girl was really rather fond of me in a tobacconist

shop sort of way, but I never made up to her at all, never stroked her fingers as she gave me my change--it is--you will pardon me--I honestly do not think myself capable of such a thing.

The salacious prudery of Wilson becomes evident in the shifty hesitations, the uncalled-for denial that he had ever stroked her fingers. His denials are many steps ahead of the reader's questions; in fact, they provoke questions.

After three pages Wilson at last gets down to his own tragedy, and incidentally, the real tragedy.

To be brief--for I detest those people who beat about the bush, trying to beguile you into sympathizing with them before they reveal to you the crime they have committed--I myself was visited by the police.

The girl had died after an abortion in London, the consequence of an affair with one of twenty-two men of the town she has named intimately in her very revealing diary. One of the names is "Tom Wilson."

One morning twenty-four men, including the second Tom Wilson and a police inspector, set out for London in "a cockily painted motor-coach christened Nixey's Harlequin." In this ludicrous setting they journey to the inquest where the judge rules them all out of the case. They have no bearing on the deceased. But, Tom Wilson, our Tom Wilson, is not so easily put off. He demands an opportunity to clear his name of disrepute, but, when this is denied, he succeeds only in bringing further attention to himself. On the return trip, the party stops at a public-house for drinks, and everyone is soon merry, everyone, of course, except the narrator, who tries to get the other Tom Wilson to admit his involvement in the nasty business.



"Listen here," I said. "I want you to explain to everybody here that I am not the T. Wilson mixed up in this."

But he soothered me with a lot of odious verbiage, neither quite denial nor quite admission; what we know we know, and what we don't know is done with, and all that. Ah, the cockroach! You'd have thought he was the mistaken, the misunderstood, and I the bad one! It was impossible to counter the vile and tricky affability of that man, and the others applauded him.

Nixey's Harlequin returns them to their town late that night.

The twenty-two parted as though there was something they had all conspired to suppress, to deny, to ignore, to cast out and bury deeply. But whatever they thought or said or did, shame is shame and you can't hide it in your pocket. Like Cain's mark it is on the brow, and I--my God!--I've got my unlucky share of it.

The narrator has protested far too much, and we are inclined to believe, as his acquaintances surely do, that he is the Tom Wilson named in the diary, but a careful reading of the story shows this conclusion to be neither likely nor the point. The narrator is far too priggish to have been intimate with Sally. Far better for him if he had been. Behind his proper exterior he hides a prurient mind, and in his imagination he has been intimate with Sally; he is a true member of the harlequinade, the buffoon. And, like the others, he has tried to disassociate himself from the dead Sally. In denying his involvement with her, he has denied her--and himself. As the twenty-four men board Nixey's Harlequin, Wilson tells the reader:

But I felt my soul sicken at going where I was going with such men, sharing their wretched plight, and, remembering that they had all embraced her, breathing in their shame. For the shame, somehow, was not in her at all, it was in them, and they were going to deny her.

The court does not give the men a chance to deny Sally, but the intention is there, and the narrator demands his opportunity.

Then, at every succeeding opportunity, including the story itself, Tom Wilson denies Sally and embraces that shame.

The lonely, alienated, impotent characters of these last four fictions remind us of Melville's *Bartleby*, Gogol's *Akaky Akakyevitch*, and Hawthorne's *Wakefield*. We can sympathize with these characters, but we are protected from complete involvement by comic distance, not so in the bulk of Coppard's fiction concerning the human condition. In stories like "The Hurly Burly," "The Poor Man," "The Old Venerable," "The Field of Mustard," and "The Higgler," Coppard portrays the world as a corrupted Eden subject to continued mutability. Persons plan too much, expect too much. They lose control of the time and get swept away. Usually, plans are too big, greed sets in, but sometimes a person gets tripped up when his plans are too small. The fault is to look to the future at all in a world in which every moment is tenuous and time itself is the enemy.

Cradle to grave is the scope of Coppard's fiction, and we have noted his portrayals of death and afterlife. But, Coppard must have been obsessed with the birth of man and his loss of the Garden. For Coppard, man lives in post-Eden times. Over a dozen times he mentions Eden in his fiction. Two of his short stories, "Adam and Eve and Pinch Me" and "The Field of Mustard," even employ the image of the lost Garden as the controlling metaphor.

In a story appropriately titled "Time's Sweet Use," we read the following summary of a character's infidelity: "But man is male, there is no doubt of that; the children of Adam are

ipso facto heirs of sin, pursued from Paradise onwards and collaborators in falsity." Coppard joins time and Eden in "Fine Feathers," also. He repeatedly contrasts the life of Homer Dodd with that of the nuns on the other side of the river that runs by the town:

On the opposite bank of the river a hill of ground, curved like a young moon and green as Eden, rose up to a vast collar of trees, and amid this stood an abbey of nuns with its belfry and its holy air.

The story focuses on the plodding time that is consumed as Homer saves for his dress suit, and the two images come together:

But as time went on, things settled down again and were easy again. His salary at the brewery now amounted to thirty-two shillings a week. . . . Nothing could impugn the integrity of time, so richly crusted was the old abbey wall, not even those mysterious nuns walking in holiness across the living green of the fields in their dead dark gowns and white fluttering hats.

The nuns, cut off from the world, forsake its fine feathers, but they do not suffer the dread change of its clocks. Homer does.

He has squandered his time:

Age came upon you; it had come upon him. . . . If only he could look forward now, as he had wont to do, to some fine promise of the future--but no, no, there was nothing that age did not wither.

Perhaps time could be partially endured were it not for poverty. Coppard only deals with people of means in his later, weaker fiction. For the poor men of Coppard's early fiction, unrelenting poverty sharpens the effects of time. The hope for escape from dire necessity is merely a phantom, a temporary illusion, that one can, through one's efforts, overcome corrupting time.

In "Crippled Bloom" no amount of time can overcome the

illusion that things can be worked out. Ruby, a cripple, brings home a man, Potter Jones, who soon contrives to marry her sister Nan and move in with the two women. Jones is a pensioned soldier who decides that living with the girls, who earn a modest living as dressmakers, will extend his own meager income, but he has hopes of becoming wealthy as a bookmaker. Time goes by, and time, Coppard assures us at the beginning, is not the adversary man believes it to be; the real enemy is life itself.

As the years revolve it is the humour of men and women to impugn time for the many changes rung upon fading body and declining spirit, although time itself has nothing to do with these things. We accomplish our own changes by the act of living, by those desires that thrive or languish within us in response to allurements that shine without. Time but records these changes.

Gradually, Jones's initial domestic happiness gives way to a recognition that this ideal is yet not enough for happiness:

Upon its realization there had fallen the shadow of its limitations. No man is free. Free to do what? Why, whatever he may desire to do. And what else could he desire? Do you not know? If you care to listen I will tell you, but I admonish you that it is by no means agreeable.

("Crippled Bloom" is one of Coppard's later stories, and this passage is a rare example of his use of the self-conscious narrator.) Simple freedom from want is never enough. Man must have always more material goods to feel in control of his own spirit, his own time. Jones begins chasing women, particularly Ruby, and in his desire to get rich he gets hopelessly in debt. The attempt for ever more possessions, more freedom, loses him the simple ease he has gained:

There was no shilly-shallying about Potter Jones--he had been a soldier--time was his enemy now. . . . He was found

on the beach next day with the gun still in his hands. His body was cold and hard as a rock.

After Potter's death the sisters go on living as before. They had hoped for little and, so, had been little disturbed by time and change.

To dare to hope in the world of Coppard's fiction is to risk being ground down. Three of Coppard's most powerful stories about the inevitability of suffering, the tragic illusion of hope, are "The Hurly Burly," "The Poor Man," and "The Old Venerable." "The Hurly Burly" submerges the reader in its wearying mood of unceasing, unending, undiminishing work. Phemy Madigan is a charity girl taken to work on the Weetman farm--"that farm ate up the body and blood of people." The family members drive themselves and the servant girl in continual gloomy work. Phemy's only break in a lifetime of pointless toil comes when, with the son Glas in prison, Mrs. Weetman dies. Then Phemy drives herself for the first time in her life. She works even harder but gains the satisfaction of responsibility. She has been released, for a time, from the "torment" of hopeless slaving. When Glas returns, "the old harsh rushing life [is] resumed." The gloom returns. "Time alone could never still him, there was a force in his frame, a buzzing in his blood." Phemy goes on working: "She worked in the house like a woman and in the fields like a man." Soon, she is pregnant by Glas, who insists that it is his duty to marry her. But, marriage does not change her status; she is still a servant. "In marrying Weetman she but married all his ardour, she was swept into his current." There is no romance in her life; Glas still directs his loving

attentions to Rosa, his former fiance. As for Phemy:

His way with her was his way with his beasts; he knew what he wanted, it was easy to get. If for a brief space a little romantic flower began to bud in her breast it was frozen as a bud, and the vague longing disappeared at length in her eyes.

In time Phemy's son is born dead. "Glas was angry at that, as angry as if he had lost a horse." By now Phemy does not mind Glas's rage or his infidelity: "The farm had got its grip upon her, it was consuming her body and blood." The following summer she dies of blood-poisoning contracted while milking a cow with a cut finger. To accentuate the meaninglessness of the work ritual that was her life, Coppard contrasts Phemy's last hours with the soft June night outside:

A nightingale threw its impetuous garland into the air. She lay listening to it and thinking with sad pleasure of the time when Glastonbury was in prison, how grand she was in her solitude, ordering everything for the best and working superbly. She wanted to go on and on for evermore, though she knew she had never known peace in maidenhood or marriage. The troubled waters of the world never ceased to flow; in the night there was no rest--only darkness.

Phemy's life had become a prison of work, yet she can not bear to think of the world going on and her not in it. Never having known peace in life, death can promise her no rest. The meaning of life itself has escaped her because she has never had the freedom to discover it: "'Nurse,' moaned the dying girl, 'what was I born into the world at all for?'"

Without hope life can have no meaning, but, in Coppard's world of the poor man ensnared in his own poverty and the inevitability of time, hope itself becomes a vicious irony that turns in malicious glee on the hopeful. "The Old Venerable" is, for the reader, one of Coppard's most emotionally laden stories.

We become deeply empathetic with the old man who for one moment in his life sees his way clear to ease, to escape from the numbing burden of poverty, only to have his expectations dashed.

Seventy years old he was, an old venerable ragged crippled man using two sticks, with a cheery voice and a truculent spirit. . . . he lived, as you might say, on air and affability and primed his starved heart with hope. A man like that could hope for anything--twopence--would bring him bliss, but his undeviating aspiration, an ambition as passionate as it was supine, was to possess a donkey.

With a donkey the old man, who peddles firewood for his living, could increase his loads of kindling and become "a rich man." At last the old man begins to see the possibility of realizing his dreams and more. The head keeper of an estate gives him a sick puppy from a pedigree litter. The old man heals the puppy, and it grows into a brilliant retriever. The keeper assures the old man that the dog, Sossy, is worth twenty pounds and could be traded for a donkey, but the old man has got his head filled with even more. With his little dream all but realized, he conspires to breed Sossy with one of the finest retrievers on the estate, then he waits for his investment to grow. "He scarcely dared to compute their value, but it would surely be enough to relegate the idea of a donkey to the limbo of outworn and mean conceits." He begins to contemplate a complete change of life. When the puppies grow old enough to sell, he plans to buy a horse and cart and to trade in "cokernuts." "And perhaps he might even find an old 'gal' to go with him."

This roseate dream so tinted every moment of his thoughts that he lived, as you might say, like a poet, cherishing the dog, the source and promise of these ideas, with fondness and joy.

In the meantime a new head keeper comes on to the estate

and orders the old man out of his tent in the woods. The venerable stays on for a few more weeks: "All he wanted was time for Sossy to rear her pups, . . . then he would go gaily, driving his horse and cart like a man of property." But, for him, too, time runs out. In another week Sossy is delivered of a beautiful litter, and a week later, while the old man is out, the keeper shoots the dog. The old man returns to find the pups dying; there is no way that he can feed them. One by one he drowns his dreams in a bucket:

Picking up one of the pups he plopped it into the bucket. "There's your donkey," he gurgled, "huh, huh, huh! And there"--as he plopped the others in one by one--"goes your cob and your cart and your cokernuts. And there"--as he dashed the last one violently in--"goes the old gal. Huh!"

Dave Pavey's dream is also drowned. Dave is "The Poor Man," who earns a small living peddling papers and supplements it with poaching and bookmaking. We have already catalogued his run-ins with the Reverend Mr. Scroope, who preaches, "'The poor we have always with us.'" Dan is happy, even in his poverty, because his wants are small. His greatest joy is singing. But, his intemperance, his bookmaking, and his illegitimate son conspire, in the eyes of Rev. Scroope, to expel him from the church choir. Dan alters his life, fixing all of his hopes on his son. Father and son become inseparable. If Dan's life has been simple, and lazy, and unproductive, yet his son might achieve something. Dan believes that he lacks courage, and he constantly exhorts his little Martin not to be like his father. He instructs his son to practice ambition and, especially, courage.



Martin is the pure promise of life realizing its highest aspirations of love and fruition. Even the fruit trees in Dan's garden bear for the first time; the garden has become, in Coppard's words, "a tiny paradise." But, of all the promise Martin holds for Dan, nothing is so thrilling to the father as the child's voice: "Nothing in the world gave (or could give) Dan such flattering joy as his son's sweet treble voice. Martin could sing!" Wanting nothing beyond this simple joy, Dan passes three years with his son until, on the anniversary of the boy's homecoming, Dan is taken poaching. At first he lies to the keeper about his name, but, as it seems that he is going to go free, he summons the courage (apparently as an example for his son) to tell the keeper his real name and to attack him physically. Dan is tried and convicted. While he is in prison, Martin is drowned in a boating accident. Dan is literally struck dumb. Through his mind runs a nonsense song:

In a park there was a lake,  
On the lake there was a boat,  
In the boat there was a boy.

All of his hopes that with a new generation the future might be better than the present have evaporated.

"Courage is vain," he thinks, "we are like the grass underfoot, a blade that excels is quickly shorn. In this sort of a world the poor have no call to be proud, they had only need be penitent."

In post-Eden times one day is like the next. Because the past has been lost, the future can not be redeemed. Suffering is all.

The great Coppard story is suggested, never stated. At his best he never obviously ties things together or wraps up the plot or strikes poses, or morals, or themes, or meanings. He

plunges to the experiences of souls. In examining the human condition, particularly as it occurs for the poor man, or for the lonely alienated soul, Coppard made use of his knowledge of the people of the small towns and villages of England and Ireland, people who were often helpless, in his eyes, before the brutality engendered by poverty and the class system and the subsequent condition of near-servitude. Certainly Coppard understood something of the nature of life for the common man because of his own origins (although, ironically, he was able to escape his origins to a degree that his characters cannot). Coppard's treatment of the ugly side of the human situation is not insightful merely because his subject is "earthy," or "natural." Man close to the earth is not necessarily more elemental than any other man; there are just fewer things between his exterior and his interior life (fewer material goods) so that he can be more easily got at. But, he must be got at by someone who knows him. Coppard's knowledge of this kind of man--his sympathy--is what makes these fictions valid. He vibrates with his subject and makes the reader experience that sympathetic vibration.

The foregoing survey of Coppard's fictive materials, describing Coppard's use of dialogue and narrative point of view, delineation of character, employment of setting, and manipulation of comic and ironic tones in a great variety of his short stories, has been arranged topically so that we might attempt to discover something of the range and the specific focus of Coppard's artistic vision. We can withdraw some general descriptions of Coppard's artistic subjects when we

find them repeated, with great variation, from story to story. But, it would be a disservice to Coppard's craft to imply that his fiction is "thematic" in the worst sense, i.e., preachy, ideological, or summary in form. It is precisely in his formal power that he brings his materials to life. Although all of Coppard's materials are unified in the single comprehension of life as a trap between the cradle and grave, this understanding of the human condition is neither unique nor profound in itself. It is in the formal expression of his understanding of the human condition that we, as readers, come to experience the lives of some trapped humans. To put it another way, it is purely material and intellectually informative to say, for example, that women are deep and confusing. It is also trite and simplistic. When Coppard draws us into the lives of women, we participate in a complex understanding of the artist's vision.

Having surveyed Coppard's fictive materials, we turn now to a summary of his artistic formulation. Chapter IV is a formal analysis of a selection of Coppard's best work; here we will attempt to explore Coppard's formal range and demonstrate something of its operation. First, we will consider Coppard's use of minor formal devices--language, imagery, and a device unique in Coppard's short fiction, interludes. Then we will note his methods of formal development and his use of two gross structuring principles: traditional plot and the lyric mode of the short story. By "form" we mean the method by which materials on any level of a piece of literature are structured and, finally, are used up. And, we continue to recognize a kind of artificiality

inherent in any attempt to separate the experience of literature into its materials and its forms.

By "language" we mean Coppard's selection of words and his construction of them into grammatical patterns. (I have refrained from using the more traditional word "style" because that word is growing to be used in literary criticism as a description of the monistic quality of the work, that is, the entire piece of literature is said to have a "style" that distinguishes it from every other piece of literature and identifies it.) As we saw in Chapter I, Coppard's use of language attracted the attention of reviewers from the very beginning. It has probably attracted more critical attention than any other aspect of Coppard's work.

The only work published to date that is exclusively about Coppard is a fifteen page monograph written in Buenos Aires in 1944. A. Jehin makes some Remarks on the Style of A. E. Coppard. He summarizes Coppard's techniques of language as "contrast, inversion, and transposition."<sup>15</sup> As brief as this study is (only eleven pages of text), it is, in its perception of Coppard's language usage, a valuable source. Jehin not only identifies Coppard's language structures according to classical figures, but he explains how the particular figure operates within the larger whole. Jehin contends that Coppard's figures of speech are most often "based on contrast. . . . The effect he achieves in this way is sometimes humorous and ironical, sometimes

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<sup>15</sup>A. Jehin, Remarks on the Style of A. E. Coppard (Buenos Aires: Argentine Association of English Culture, English Pamphlet Series, No. 8, 1944), 5.

poetical, according to circumstances," but the result is compression and more expression.<sup>16</sup>

Here, for example, is what Jehin says about Coppard's use of syllepsis:

The sweeping quality of Coppard's prose is largely due to his frequent use of the syllipsis, which he uses perhaps more than any other writer. We shall constantly find in his stories sentences such as these: "He flung into his desperate courage and his car." or "The barber was in great grief at these calamities: he had tremors of guilt in his mind, no money in his coffers, and the chins of the Bargwood [sic] men were still as smooth as children's." He often brings under the same verb or the same preposition, the physical and the moral description of a person together with his or her profession, tendencies, and social rank. . . . It is obvious that his aim is chiefly to amuse but it also is a fact that in many cases, by these unexpected associations of incongruous details, he economizes words for he not only shortens the description but he manages to imply much more than he actually says. . . .

Sometimes he achieves irony and humour by repeating the same verb twice, but each time in a different sense, or at least, with widely opposed objects. In such cases, besides the humorous effect, there is the technical advantage of a well-balanced sentence--which has its importance in the general rhythm of the prose.<sup>17</sup>

Coppard likes to play with words,<sup>18</sup> and, because he wants "to quicken the telling of the story," he will sometimes alter the ordinary grammatical function of a word:

He will give an object to an intransitive verb: "His white face gleamed his perturbation up at her", [sic] or he suddenly gives a direct object to a verb generally used only with a preposition: "The girl looked her silent thanks at him." In the same way, he uses a transitive verb as if it were intransitive: "and you knew of the water only by the white foam squandering round the rocks". He also often makes a verb out of a noun: "the daylight moon which had ghosted in the sky for hours was triumphantly hovering."<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 6-7.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 10.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 11-12.

In his dissertation on Coppard's poetry, George Brandon Saul parallels Coppard's use of language (and themes) in his prose and verse. He speaks, for instance, of Coppard's "tendency toward employing inversions, sometimes with doubtful effectiveness," and gives the following examples:

"Manlike was Oddfellow, beautiful was the lady . . . ,"  
 "Delicately charming were her face and figure, entrancing  
 were her movements . . . , " "Wild it was . . . , " " . . .  
 let those hovering tears down fall," and "Intoxicated it  
 was!"<sup>20</sup>

Russell MacDonald develops the figure of inversions further, and links it to the Irishness of Coppard's prose:

Gaining the effect of poetic inversions, Coppard uses typical Gaelic construction: the fondness for expletives (It's not anything I'm taking you to be . . . ), for ellipsis (It's lonely to be in the world with you, Mary, and no hope in my heart, but doubt filling it.), for the indefinite superlative (The sky was that blue . . . ).<sup>21</sup>

Coppard's use of a kind of Irish idiom initially caused him to be wrongly identified as a disciple of the Irish school. Actually, Coppard had a practiced ear, especially for dialogue, that he used with great effect in his early fiction. For some reason during the forties, Coppard turned away from this early success (of course, his writing on every level had become weak by then) and began writing first person narratives in a kind of Eastern-European dialect of English that is almost unmentionably bad. For instance, the opening lines of "Hail Columbia":

I have a beautiful daughter. And is good. I am proud. Very very good. Is this a comfortable house for the money? It is best satisfaction, I think. And have

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<sup>20</sup>Saul, 64.

<sup>21</sup>MacDonald, 64.

I a beautiful business? I should say so! And for money? Well, enough goes a long way if it is not too far; farther than far is not good.

In his earlier writing Coppard was able to capture something of the taste of a dialect without forcing it so that it lost its flavour. "Marching to Zion," the first story in Adam and Eve and Pinch Me, is a first person narrative by one Michael Fionnguisa, who speaks in a kind of Biblical Irish that, while it may never have existed, sets a believable tone for the illusion that the reader is about to enter:

In the great days that are gone I was walking the Journey upon its easy smiling roads and came one morning of windy spring to the side of a wood. I had but just rested to eat my crusts and suck a drink from the pool when a fat woman appeared and sat down before me. I gave her the grace of the morning.

The lilting language that Coppard controlled so gracefully in some of these "Irish" pieces also got out of hand at times, especially when he wrote fantasy. Here he let go not only all rules of probability in the story line, but the gentle movement of language became forced and stilted, as in "The Green Drake":

In the village of so-and-so lived an old woman, Rebecca Cracknell, who had a dog with an odd eye and the name of Jack, a kitten with an odd tail and the name of Jack, and a green drake with odd ambitions that was called Jack.

The incremental repetition of the parallel structure is amusing, but a whole story written in this "cute" manner becomes irksome.

Like other self-educated people, Coppard was fascinated with language--words enthralled him and their combinations gave him joy. According to Mrs. Coppard, he repeatedly revised his stories before he submitted them for publication. He had to find for every fiction the exact words and combinations of words to express exactly the experience that he was attempting to

communicate. We noted this same excitement about language in Coppard's Diary. This joy in language for its own sake led to much of what is best and worst in Coppard. In Coppard's word play he sometimes altered words to add an onomatopoeic effect to their original meaning, such as, "strig of grass" ("Mordecai and Cocking"), or "constringing" (describing a winding, constricting snake in "Keeper Cuffley"), or "soothered" (apparently a combination of covered and soothed in "Nixey's Harlequin"). Sometimes he made the mistake of letting his book learning invade his artistry, and he attempted to show off his vocabulary, sending the reader to his dictionary, or, at least, stopping the flow of the action while one notices a word which, if not used wrongly, is used badly. H. E. Bates gives us the following example from "Communion": "'He was of years calendared in unreflecting minds as tender years.'"<sup>22</sup>

Coppard enjoyed the permanency, "truth," and cleverness that a careful use of words and syntax can achieve as aphorism. He coins this one in "Huxley Rustem": "An egotist is a mystic without a god, but seldom ever without a goddess." Maxie Morrisarde of "Fishmonger's Fiddle" "did not know that freedom is never to be given, but only to be taken; she was like a child for ever beckoning to the things that did not come." Even more he seems to have liked comic aphorisms. In the same story Aunt Vole says: "'A man should settle down, he should settle down and bear his burdens, bear his burdens properly. That's what a burden's for." And, he sometimes reverses standard aphorisms

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<sup>22</sup>Bates, 137.



for comic effect: "They always wait who only stand and serve." ("Judith") And, he mixes this same aphorism in a later story, "A Devil of a Cook": "There were other retainers of course, those who stand and wait and for ever serve. . . ."

Coppard's love of word play led to alliteration, such as, the repetition of the "m" and "p" sounds in the following: "He could see the glare of the naptha lamps and hear the interminable melancholy drone of the organ pleading to an audience too meagre for mirth and too poor for patronage." Expanding an earlier example of word alterations, we discover an even more effective use of alliteration: "When at last he slept it was to dream of the coils of a vast serpent whose cold constringing body inflicted icy agonies." The repeated "k" and "s" sounds magnify the effect of the serpent wrapping himself around the dreamer and make almost tactile the feeling of overwhelming cold.

The kind of constructions that Coppard used most, especially for comic effect, are parallel sentence patterns employing comparison or antithesis and series. The opening of "Fine Feathers" is a beautifully comic piece of writing that sets a tone of cosmic indifference to the pathetic happenings. Through a series of parallels the narrative distance from the protagonist increases until he is reduced to insignificance in the harmonic disorder of the universe:

Homer Dodd was a clerk in a brewery and when young had been full of ambition. But what is the use of ambition in a brewery, a country brewery at that? Haggar and Chibnall's Entire was a household word within a radius of ten miles of Humpingden, but within fifteen miles it was only casually appraised. In twenty miles it was rarely met and seldom

mentioned. In thirty miles it succumbed to its parochial doom and was unknown. If time or distance or whatnot could do that to an old malty aromatic conservative brewery, what could it not do to the ideals of a Homer Dodd who had none of these peerless qualities! There was no Haggar now, not a Chibnall even, there was only a Company Limited. . . .

The very name "Homer Dodd" begins the comedy. An epic given name is joined fatally to a common surname. His ideals are certain to be demeaned. Coppard next exaggerates the importance of the brewery, then he diminishes its reknown through a series of parallel steps back. He compares the brewery to Homer to dramatize the hopelessness of his aspirations. The final line chops from Homer any vestige of hope. All things must pass, and few of them will be noticed. The primary comic device of "Fishmonger's Fiddle" is a series of contrasts and comparisons managed through parallels. For example, "Arnold was absurd and tempestuous and spoke foolishly of God, he was handsome and careless and tender, and all her thoughts were of him." The gentle mockery of these lines come towards the middle of the story as the tone drifts away from its early broad comedy.

Uncle Vole was a retired cattle dealer, hearty, connubial, and a nonconformist. Aunt Vole was neither hearty (saving as to appetite) nor connubial (except by implication), but she was rather deaf and she was very nonconformist.

The parenthetic comments on the parallelism of the second sentence provide a comic contrast between the two characters.

Figurative language is Coppard's forté. Sometimes so overdone as to appear grotesque, it is yet one of the most distinguishing marks of his fiction. Not only are Coppard's metaphors striking and valuable in their own right, but they often

support the mood or even aid in the development of the gross structure of a work. That he liked to play with language his images demonstrate more than any other quality of his writing. But, that his metaphorical language often informs the structure of a given work reveals the total command of his artistry. His imagery can be brief and comic, as when in "The Cat, the Dog, and the Bad Old Dame" he refers to a purgative as "remedial shrapnel." Sometimes his imagery is vulgar, as when in "The Funnel" the wife attacks the husband's kindness: "'Kind! Yah, I know you! It's to wash your little mushy soul in your own spittle, that's all.'" But, in stories such as, "The Italian Whirligig," "Adam and Eve and Pinch Me," and "The Field of Mustard," meaning is controlled, as structure is developed, by means of a central metaphor--in the first story that metaphor is a tiny amusement park containing a merry-go-round; in the other two the Garden of Eden controls meaning on the figurative level. In other stories ("The Higgler," "The Black Dog," "Arabesque: The Mouse") interlocking metaphor patterns become unifying motifs that contribute to the total fictive experience. Without his careful structuring of metaphors, Coppard could not achieve the lyric quality of "Mordecai and Cocking" or "The Field of Mustard."

Coppard's figurative language has great range. For example, he uses similes in "Craven Arms" to describe two sisters who are pursuing the protagonist:

[Ianthe Forest] had eyes of indiscretion and a mind like a hive of bees, it had such a tiny opening and was so full of cloying content.

[Kate Forest] had a mind that was cultivated as perfunctorily as a kitchen garden, with ideas like roots or beans, hostilities like briars, and a fence of prudery as tough as hoops of galvanized iron.

Coppard uses metaphor to express the absurd. As Lally leaves Phil in "Fifty Pounds," she looks back at him through her new-found "sardonic revelation" and deflates his pomposity with a thought:

Let him keep his gracious, mournful airs to the last, false though they were. It was better to part so, better from such a figure than from an abject scarecrow, even though both were the same inside. And something capriciously reminded her, for a flying moment, of elephants she had seen swaying with the grand movement of tidal water--and groping for monkey nuts.

But, sometimes his metaphors are themselves absurd, such as this one in the same story:

A lanky gas tube swooped from the middle of the ceiling towards the middle of the tablecloth as if burning to discover whether that was pink or saffron or fawn--and it was hard to tell--but on perceiving that the cloth, whatever its tint, was disturbingly spangled with dozens of cup-stains and several large envelopes, the gas tube in the violence of its disappointment contorted itself abruptly, assumed a lateral bend, and put out its tongue of flame at an oleograph of Mona Lisa which hung above the fireplace.

In one way or another Coppard's imagery almost exclusively employs nature as its vehicle. Principally by way of setting, Coppard makes nature a major participant in his fiction. Often, he resorts to the "pathetic fallacy" (here the term is not used in a pejorative sense). In some cases ("The Field of Mustard," for instance) nature is personified so that it becomes almost a party to the action, a kind of character. Coppard uses all of nature in his imagery though he is particularly fond of the moors, the downs, the fields, forests, the sky, light-dark contrasts of natural settings, and water. Coppard uses water,

for example, extensively in "The Black Dog" and "The Watercress Girl." Set in watery locations, both of these stories are expressed in a lovely liquid language heavy with water images. Incidental images of nature figure even in the development of individual scenes. In "That Fellow Tolstoy" as Quass disowns his child, he bites the head off a daisy that he has been toying with. In "The Watercress Girl" Frank Oppidan has stolen up to Mary's window planning to throw acid in her face. He sees her kneeling before the fire drying her long dark hair. Slowly the hatred within him is melted by her beauty, but, as he stands confused between resolution and desire, a small but violent act of nature intrudes, and he intercedes on the side of the weak.

There and then shrill cries burst upon them. The cat leaped from the garden to the window-sill; there was a thrush in its mouth, shrieking. The cat paused on the sill, furtive and hesitant. Without a thought Oppidan plunged forward, seized the cat, and with his free hand clutched what he could of the thrush. In a second the cat released it and dropped into the room, while the crushed bird fluttered away to the darkened shrubs, leaving its tail feathers in the hand of the man.

We know that Frank will not harm Mary.

By way of further example of Coppard's imagistic power, we can develop at some depth two examples of his metaphorical use of nature, as sexual symbol and as animal characterization. With some exceptions Coppard's fiction is shot through with a sexual tension uncommon in his time. And, it is his suggestiveness that makes sexuality such a powerful feature of his fiction. It is also this sexuality that earned him the reputation as a vulgar writer. Pregnancy is the principal literal depiction of sex in Coppard (one comes to feel sometimes that whenever Coppard

needed a conflict he got someone pregnant). There are even a few subtle bedroom scenes. And, in "Craven Arms" we find some overt sexual discourse. David Masterman, passionately in love with Kate Forest (who loves him even more passionately), makes repeated "libidinal suggestions" in his attempt to seduce her closely guarded virtue. But, this sexuality, though often subtle, is also fairly literal. On a few occasions Coppard uses nature metaphors to draw the reader onto a level of more turbulent sexuality. And, when a metaphor becomes charged with layers of meaning that open into both the subconscious of the reader and the deepest possible expression of the literary moment, it becomes symbol. Coppard's most vivid symbol of sex occurs in "Marching to Zion," an allegorical tale. Mary relates a dream to Michael, the narrator.

"I dreamed," said Mary, "That I was in marriage with a carpenter. His name was Joseph and he was older than I by many years. He left me at the marriage and went away to Liverpool. . . . It was at Easter, and when I woke in my bed on the first morning there was bright wind blowing in the curtains, and sun upon the bed linen. . . . My white veil was blown from its hook down on the floor, and it was strewn over with daffodils I had carried to my marriage.

"And at that a figure was in the room--I don't know how--he just came, dressed in strange clothes, a dark handsome young man with black long hair and smiling eyes, full of every grace, and I loved him on the moment. But he took up some of my daffodils only--and vanished. . . . And at night in the darkness, when I could not see him, the dark man came to my bed, but was gone before morning, taking more of my daffodils with him. And this happened night upon night until all my flowers were gone, and then he came no more."

At Christmas, when her husband returned from Liverpool, the dream continues, a child was born. The allegory is forced, but the sexual suggestiveness of the loss of the flowers is striking. (The mustard flowers in "The Field of Mustard" become a much more

complex metaphor carrying, among other meanings, a sexual charge.)

Coppard also uses animals, snakes, to project sexual symbolism. In "That Fellow Tolstoy," a story filled with direct and oblique sexual references, the last scene between Quass and Veronica involves a snake. Quass has disowned the child that he had told his wife not to conceive. She has grown increasingly moody, a fact he attributes to her reading Tolstoy, and their passion has waned. They boat into the country, and, while walking through a field, Veronica is startled by a snake. Quass is repelled by it, but Veronica picks it up by the tail and holds it at arm's length. When she flings it away, her disgusted husband hurries back to the boat. By the end of the scene, their marriage seems to have effectually come to an end. The symbolic implications of this scene have been prepared for by earlier allusions to a "serpent" and to "Eden."

These same allusions are made more intense in "Keeper Cuffley." Cuffley begs Squire Langston to fire the no-good George Winlath, who is after the keeper's daughter: "He's a snake, a snake, and I put my foot on snakes like any father would, like you, sir, if you had a daughter." But, Cuffley is dismissed, Winlath assumes his job as head keeper, Sue gets pregnant, and her father, ever conscious of evil, will not allow her to marry Winlath. The narrative reflects Cuffley's thoughts:

Life so often was so cruel hard and the world difficult to live in. It hadn't used to be, not in the days of old before all this wildness came in. A man was plain and honest then, was contented then, with no power for evil doings and no wish to do them either. Like the Garden of Eden it was,

the Garden of Eden. And yet every bit of that had been lost on account of a snake that got in unknown. He would have stamped on it; would have shot its eyes out and left it blasted for ever; would have shot the head off it and flung its tail into the flaming furnace. When at last he slept it was to dream of the coils of the serpent whose cold constricting body inflicted icy agonies.

More important than his use of sexual symbolism is Coppard's figurative use of animals. If nature plays an important part in the settings and subsequent atmosphere of Coppard's short stories, animals have a major role in characterization and thematic development. Of course, the countryside about which Coppard writes is full of animal life: horses, dogs, rabbits, birds. And, although one would expect such animals to appear as part of the scenery, Coppard is much too organic a writer to merely tack details on to a narrative scheme. The animals that appear in his fiction are carefully worked into the structure of the narrative.

Again and again persons are characterized as animals. In "My Hundredth Tale" Livia says of Johnny in a letter: "His people were just rabbits." The "philosopher" in "The Italian Whirligig" is "a squirrel itself for shyness." David Masterman, the protagonist of "Craven Arms" is pursued by three women: "What a fate for a misogynist! He felt like a mouse being taken for a ride in a bath chair." In "The Gudgeon and the Squirrel" the characters are described almost literally as animals. The professor is a fish and his pregnant maid is squirreling things away. When Mrs. Sadgrove offers the higgler Mary's hand, we are told: "His breast might have been a revolving cage and his heart a demon squirrel."



Primarily, Coppard uses animal imagery to convey the entrapment and brutality of the world. Small, weak animals become analogs of the victimization of man by a harsh world. Coppard had, in his own life, a morbid fascination for the apparent brutality of the animal kingdom. He describes in detail the time he watched a snake devour a frog. The frog was caught head first in the snake's mouth, but the snake could make no progress in swallowing it.

I remained perfectly still. Now and again I heard a faint clicking noise--the frog's bones were cracking under the relentless constriction. On the back of the snake's neck two nodules appeared; they were the outlines of the frog's eyes, now actually bolting out of its head.

And what did I do to terminate this horrible orgy? Nothing. I was interested. . . . If nature has evolved this unalterable law for snake and frog should it not be condoned? . . . Tiger and wolf leap on their prey; the victim is their only means of life, it is the proffered manna, and the victim, too, has likewise been so disporting itself in the ease and freedom of the world.<sup>23</sup>

But, in case we should think that Coppard is passively accepting the law of nature when it applies to people, he concludes with heavy irony that the frog "must have been stupid to wander into the path of that snake, just as the child was stupid to get in the way of the limousine that killed it."<sup>24</sup>

Small, harmless, defenseless animals seem to symbolize for Coppard the state of the human condition. In "The Snare" and "Mordecai and Cocking" he uses the rabbit as a metaphor for the trapped state of man. In "My Hundredth Tale" and "Arabesque: The Mouse" the impotent, melancholy protagonists passively participate, respectively, in the deaths of a family of wrens and

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<sup>23</sup>Coppard, It's Me, 231.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 231-32.

of a mouse. Mice held for Coppard a strange fascination that is reflected in his fiction. He tells about seeing a trapped mouse with its dead offspring:

At odd times I have been much troubled by the troubles of mice. . . . Other mouse troubles, which I tell of later on, have afflicted me. I loathe the creatures with their disproportionate heads and repugnant feet, but they always stir my compassion. Could it be that I have a mouse fixation? I do not know how these complexes are supposed to work.<sup>25</sup>

He says later:

Although normally I am so full of compassion that I hesitate to pluck a flower, I am ruthless with fleas and bugs and slugs. I cannot tread upon a beetle, yet I killed a mouse because it had scraped a nest in a clean shirt of mine and laid its young there. I swear it looked up beseechingly at me, and cowered over its young and would not leave them. Was that cruelty in me? Am I squeamish, fastidious, callous, fearful?<sup>26</sup>

The death of a mouse figures importantly in the metaphorical structure of "The Higgler" and becomes the controlling metaphor of "Arabesque: The Mouse."

If there are victims, there are also predators. The ongoing predatory figure in Coppard's fiction is the tiger. We have discussed the story of that name. In "The Philosopher's Daughter" we find this simile: "A gleam of discord" flashed between two characters, "as though a fawn had met a tiger in a brake." In "Silver Circus" the similarity between man and animal becomes absolute. The protagonist agrees to be sewn into a tiger skin to battle an old, enfeebled lion for a circus show. To his surprise, he discovers during the mock combat that the "lion" is, in fact, a man that he hates for having taken his wife. The brutality that ensues is more terrible than a real

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 58.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 231.

animal fight would be. Becoming an "animal," the "tiger" beats the "lion" to death. Amusingly, the mouse and the tiger metaphors come together in one of Coppard's later works, "Cheese." In this fantasy a cheese salesman who cheated a gypsy of a formula for making cheese is drugged by a gypsy woman, who calls him "mousy," and is taken to a warehouse where he stumbles about all night until he finds a huge piece of cheese on a hook. Taking the bait, he springs a trap that falls around him. Over the following days, he sees an enormous tiger pacing around his cage, and he comes to feel like a trapped mouse being stalked by a cat.

In setting out Coppard's methods of composition earlier in this chapter (and in Chapter I), we have described the manner in which material from his notebooks was transferred to his fiction, yet we have seen in our survey of the first two of Coppard's minor forms that neither his language nor his images are mechanically attached to the gross structures of his short stories. Coppard integrates his smaller forms organically into the whole fiction. In fact, his minor forms are often supportive, that is, they resonate with the meaning and structure of the whole. The final, and unique, minor form that Coppard employs in his short stories is the interlude,<sup>27</sup> which, though irrelevant to the meaning or the structure of some individual short stories, is for many more stories an integral part of the whole. Frank O'Connor describes these interludes (though he

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<sup>27</sup>"Interlude" is the word I have decided to use because these scenes appear as a break in or deviation from the major action, usually serving to entertain the reader and the characters of the story in a comic manner.

does not call them that) as part of Coppard's "quality," that being the packing of the story with details, fascinating but irrelevant.<sup>28</sup> The details with which Coppard packs his stories are not, however, always as irrelevant as they may seem on first reading. According to O'Connor, Coppard preferred "quality" to "design."<sup>29</sup> As we shall see, Coppard's use of design in his major formal structures is often so involved as to suggest contrivance. If the quality that O'Connor deprecates has any formal value, it is, in fact, to draw our attention away from the careful design, creating in the reader the effect of spontaneous story. Whenever a character enters a room or walks through a field, he notices, or the narrator describes, every detail of the setting down to the most trifling object or incident. For example, Coppard frequently notices clocks. In stories like "Olive and Camilla," "The Little Mistress," "Pomona's Babe" and "Purl and Plain" Coppard takes pains to detail the clock or clocks in the room--size, shape, color, working condition, origin. One might say that Coppard's concern with time as a thematic element of his fiction led him to include clocks in so many scenes. Sometimes clocks or watches do have this metaphorical function, but in addition they serve to enforce the realistic detail that Coppard loved and that draws the reader's attention away from the joints and angles of his construction. These details, too, serve to reflect in fiction the aimless attentions of real life. Again, for Coppard, successful fiction creates the "appearance" of reality, and the real world is full of

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<sup>28</sup>O'Connor, 186.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 174.

trifling objects and events. After Harvey Witlow, the higgler, has prepared Elizabeth Sadgrove's body for the coffin, he looks around the bedroom:

It was a very ordinary bedroom, bed, washstand, chest of drawers, chair, and two pictures--one of deeply religious import, and the other a little pink print, in a gilded frame, of a bouncing nude nymph recumbent upon a cloud. It was queer: a lot of people, people whom you wouldn't think it of, had that sort of picture in their bedrooms.

Although this detail does not serve to advance the action, it does help to round out the reader's experience of this fiction, even to help convince him in his illusion of its truth. Often, though, apparently irrelevant details support the materials or the form of the story. In "The Black Dog," for instance, Gerald and Oriande watch a wasp on a rock in a pool attempt to escape the water without flying away. This seeming irrelevancy consumes over half a page of description and commentary, but, as the story progresses, the reader discovers, if he has not already guessed it, that this scene is an analog of Gerald's position in the larger narrative.

We could easily spend time here on additional examples of Coppard's use of "quality," but we will turn our attention to the particular kind of "irrelevancy" at which he is unique--the interlude. Although these interludes do not occur in all, or even most, of Coppard's stories, they are so much a part of his overall "fiction mongering" that they serve as a kind of watermark of his style. The interlude occurs as a break in the action, taking the form of a dialogue overheard. One or more parties to the action proper will at some point, ordinarily during a visit to a tavern, stop to listen in on a background

conversation. If the major characters themselves do not stop to listen in, then the narrative persona merely halts the action and directs the reader's attention away from them to the intruding dialogue. Typically, this dialogue, occurring between two or more rustics, will consist of comic digressions on a common theme--the weather, poaching, farming, places visited. These interludes function in two general ways in Coppard's fiction: they add a touch of realism, the fleshing out of the bare bones of the action; and they enhance the story's "voice," that is, they give the story the sound of a tale being told, with all the irrelevancies and digressions that are proper to the tale. In effect, they cover up some of Coppard's conscious literacy, and, indeed, are a part of his very literate attempt to take the short story back to its "vulgar" roots. Coppard's recordings in his Diary of conversations he overheard in taverns are the originals of the interludes he skillfully worked into his later short stories. The following is excerpted from his Diary entry of October 2, 1902:

At the "Swan" Inn I called for a pint of beer & two pennyworth of bread & cheese. They served the pint & then told me they hadnt got any bread & cheese. I debated whether to be indignant or merely meek. Meanwhile they took my twopence, & I turned into the taproom & sat awhile listening to the farming men. One "Harry" had been threshing all day & was bewailing the decadence of these threshing times. "I 'spose its 'cause I'm an o'wd 'and" he said; "why once a time the farmer'd run roun with a can o' beer evry now & agin & wait on ye with yer drink, now----- devil a drink dye see."

Harry relates how one squire, for his hard work, had given him permission to trap hares, at which task he had been very successful, and, in addition, had told off the squire's keeper.

"Yes" continued "Harry", "I made a tidy bit out of 'um. I found a litter of 3 hares there once." . . . "Ah" broke in a little man, "if ever ye find a litter of 3 one av ums sure to 'ave a little white star in's forehead[.]" a statement which met with general confirmation. . . .

At this point a cross eyed scanty-bearded man, of unfathomable age (he might have been 20 or 60) called for a pint of beer. "Don't put too much old in it, Emly," he begged shrilly. "no, I see as I don't, Jack" said Emly who had a sharp voice. "And not too many flies" he continued[.] at which piece of jocularity Emly remained dumb, perhaps confounded.

Coppard briefly describes the general scene then turns back to the dialogue which digresses to a subject related to hares:

"Talking of 'ares" the little old man commenced[.] "I 'ad a little black & tan once, a terrier[.]" "Ah, tha you 'ad, Alf" interjected someone. "he 'adnt got a white 'air on his little body[.]" He paused for breath & someone said "No?" "He was so small that when he was 6 months old ye could putt 'im in that pint pot. O course he swelled out a bit arterwards but e was a little dawg. Well one day we started up a 'are & it was the first time 'e'd sin one. "After it" I says "after it" & away he goes and follows the owd 'are, but dang me when the owd 'are stopped, 'e stopped too, yes, & looked at her, & when she started off agin off he'd go[.]" "Hadn't got no nose for 'er, Alf?" "No e 'adnt got no nose" said Alfred with a ruminant [sic] air & poised pipe[.] "Laff, I did laff, I couldn't 'elp laffing."

Frank O'Connor, though he maintains (correctly) that Coppard's "quality" eventually got out of hand, replacing substance in the stories, admits the truthfulness of the kind of scenes that we have designated "interludes."

Whenever a character entered a restaurant or a railway carriage there was someone or something there for him to observe, even when this distracted from the character's own preoccupation. He might have just visited the hospital where his sweetheart was dying or the prison where his only son was awaiting execution, but having a bit of Coppard in him, he could never resist a momentary interest in an old gentleman with a passion for Hittite. This is perfectly true and within the experience of everybody. Some nervous weakness drives us to cheerful irrelevancies even when we are anticipating what we know perfectly well will be the end of the world for us.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 174-75.

But, not every divergence from the immediate action of a Coppard short story is irrelevant, as we have already noted. Admittedly, the humorous horse shoeing dialogue that breaks in on the serious discussion of Francesca and Goneril in "The Little Mistress" seems totally irrelevant, as O'Connor, in his example, claims that it is. But, a careful reading of the lengthy scene discovers that the circumlocutory dialogue between Ted and Archie about the horse, Dragon, artfully serves as a comic counterpoint to the principal's discussion of the meaning of life. With the earthy shouting at the smithy in Goneril's back yard, Coppard gently mocks the inflated seriousness of the primary dialogue concerning "universal space," "the way to raise sunken ships," and "dual personality." The two women who pass their time in talk of life are made to appear foolish in contrast to the life around them.

Sometimes the interludes of Coppard fictions serve merely to fill the story with rich detail. "Craven Arms" contains such an interlude. And, "Abel Staple Disapproves" is for most of its length nothing but digressive discussions at a tap-room. Although they have nothing to do with the substance of the meeting between Abel and Ted Billings, they create a setting in which the reader is relaxed and amused.

In other fictions the interludes operate as a part of the action or as a commentary on it. In "Fishmonger's Fiddle" on their one outing, Maxie and Blackburne stop at an inn which is also being visited by "an elegantly dressed man and a lad." The man winks at Maxie as he sings a silly song:

"Oh, the Queen of Poland is my queen  
And I'm her Salamander."



On their way home the timid Maxie refuses Blackburne's request that she come live with him. She is married and abandoned, but she fears the hell-fire that her aunt has promised her is the certain consequence of a divorce. Yet, she holds on to a foolish belief that in seven years she will be free to marry. At the end of the story we find her imagining the magic passage of seven years: "And there was a stupid man with triangular eyebrows who kept winking at her and singing:

'Oh, the Queen of Poland is my queen  
And I'm her Salamander.'"

The silly song perseverates in her conscious mind as a reminder of her one puny attempt to capture her own life.

The comic violence of the interlude in "The Presser" while Johnny Flynn and Hetty are taking tea comments on the brutality of life in the slums of London. Johnny has been punched the day before by an older boy, and the little girl's mother has been beaten by her father. The wedding scene of "The Higgler" seems to be a lengthy departure from the central narrative, but the interlude that ensues supports the metaphorical substructure of the story proper. The old couple, who talk on and on after the wedding, converse about marriage, money, and death, all elements of the relationship between Harvey Witlow and Mary Sadgrove. Death, in fact, occurs continually on both the literal and figurative levels of that story. "Alice Brady" is the story of an eighty year old woman whose family has lived at an inn for a hundred years; she has lived there all her life. Dispossessed when the inn is remodeled, she is taken to the workhouse where,

in spite of the best care, she immediately dies. In the story's interlude a group of men sit around in the inn's tap room swapping yarns about Alice's father, events of the village's past, and, by implication, the nature of time and mutability. While the men are talking, Alice is taken from the inn to the workhouse. As she comes from her room down the stairs that end in the tap room, all the men rise out of respect, and one of them notices that the ancient clock has stopped for the first time.

In each of the above examples the interlude is not merely a bit of extraneous coloring tacked onto the action but is, rather, an integral part of the fictive experience. Regardless of Coppard's intent in writing these interludes--to add "voice," to get a comic effect, to repeat some of his favorite bar room exchanges--the fact is that they serve as part of his very literate artistry.

Coppard's own particular love of language and fascination with the workingman's tale prompted his experimentation with minor forms, but he was only one, though one of the leading, experimenters with gross structural forms in the short story of the twenties and thirties. His old Oxford friend L. A. G. Strong describes in 1934 the changing scheme of short story narrative and of point of view. The focus has been limited to the briefest typical action that will allow the reader to infer all that he needs to in order to participate himself in the revealing of character, to fill the blanks of the author's suggestion and indication.

The modern short story writer is content if, allowing the reader to glance at his characters as through a window, he

shows them making a gesture which enables the reader's imagination to fill in all that is left unsaid. Instead of giving us a finished action to admire, or pricking the bubble of some problem, he may give us only the key-piece of the mosaic, around which, if sufficiently perceptive, we can see in shadowy outline the completed pattern.<sup>31</sup>

The artistic short story writers of the twenties and thirties stripped the events of their fictions of any unnecessary actions or descriptions to reveal the inner life of the story and to intensify for the reader the creative experience. T. O. Beachcroft, tracing the history of the short story, comments on Dickens' "Dr. Marigold's Prescriptions":

This certainly is not a genuinely short story, though it has a central unity of theme. There is a far shorter modern form of story embedded inside it, which A. E. Coppard or H. E. Bates might have written. Coppard at times has the power of combining the incongruities and even terrors of Dickens' stories with a simplicity characteristic of John Clare.<sup>32</sup>

Perhaps Coppard had something like this in mind when he described the short story in that romantic and ambiguous fashion as a "phoenix, a paragon. . . . that I could give . . . a significant setting, gold maybe, and adorn it with gems, a creation to be treasured." In his artistic crucible the short story has been melted down to its most elemental form, and it arises to be forged with care and with much detail into a living organism. As the narrative voice tells us in the first lines of "Olive and Camilla," "they had lived and travelled together for twenty years, and this is a part of their history: not much, but all that matters."

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<sup>31</sup>L. A. G. Strong, "The Short Story: Notes at Random," Lovat Dickson's Magazine, II (March, 1934) 281-82.

<sup>32</sup>Beachcroft, Modest Art, 103.

Frank O'Connor has said that in Coppard's early books the reader gets the feeling that the form of the short story itself is being handled in a new way.

Most storytellers see the short story as a convention that appeals to them: the convention of Chekhov, the convention of Maupassant--in America nowadays, the convention of Joyce--and it is only as their work develops that they create a convention of their own. Coppard knew Chekhov and Maupassant backward, but he never settles for one convention rather than the other, or indeed for any convention other than his own need to grip the reader by the lapel and make him listen.

As a result, his formal range is remarkable--greater I should say than that of any other storyteller.<sup>33</sup>

Coppard's command of developmental forms, the forms that control the inner structure of a work, was far-reaching and sure. "The Little Mistress," for instance, is structured in a literal movement that begins outside of the Harper home, moves the reader inside the home, and, gradually, on the figurative level, moves the reader into a view of the characters' psychology. The view point is initially that of a passerby looking across a wall into the windows. The setting moves to and through the front door into the rooms of the house and into an increasing intimacy with the characters. This gradual revelation is supported by a second level of action in which characters are compared and contrasted (both mirrors of persons and actual mirrors operate on literal and figurative levels), and one of the characters, the maid, snoops into the private correspondence of her little mistress.

Coppard loved to manipulate parallel and antithetical structures in his language, and parallel and antithesis became,

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<sup>33</sup>O'Connor, 173-74.

expectations so that by the end of the story we are not surprised to discover that Camilla (who, fortunately, has not tried to compete with Olive in alcoholic consumption) has actually had an affair with each of the four men with whom Olive believed herself to be in love.

"Arabesque: The Mouse" and "Pomona's Babe" both make good use of repetitive patterns to expose the psychology of their protagonists. In "Arabesque" the mind of the only figure in the story flashes back twice to parallel incidents in his past that are suggested by the setting and events of the primary narrative line. As we watch this mind verging on madness, we learn something of the personality of the impotent romantic turned misanthrope. The total effect of characterization in the Johnny Flynn stories is also to create a person in whom idealization of the world through literature leads first to escape and then to romantic impotence. In "Pomona's Babe" Coppard exposes this projection of his personality in repeated patterns of aborted attempts by the youthful Johnny to leave the world of his books long enough to engage effectively in the world around himself. Although he pretends willingness to act--ironically, he plans an elaborate murder using the library as cover--in fact he twice, with relief, surrenders his feeble attempts to realize his manhood to the more blunt methods of his mother.

The five stories mentioned above (some to be analyzed further in Chapter IV) suggest something of the formal range Coppard employed in developing whole fictional structures, especially the manner in which the author "moves" the reader

through his fiction from incident to incident. His very use of motif, such as the recurring patterns of "Olive and Camilla" or the water imagery of "The Black Dog" or the light-dark, life-death setting that unites action and controls mood in "The Higglers," implies his very literary consciousness of fictional shape.<sup>34</sup> This shaping on all levels from language to gross structure so consumes Coppard's materials that, finally, they can not be distinguished from the form that brings them to life.

A. E. Coppard formulated his life experiences into fiction through two gross structural shapes: the traditional Aristotelian "plot" and the modern poetic or lyric mode of the short story. The first formal method he acquired from the bulk of his reading in fiction, particularly Henry James; the poetic form Coppard devised himself, probably inspired by his own love of lyric poetry and later augmented by his reading of Chekhov. Few of Coppard's best stories fall purely into the more traditional form. Two of his best known plotted stories are "Judith"

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<sup>34</sup>Another "form" that dominates Coppard's writing is that of the fantasy story. I have avoided dealing with that form because, although Coppard garnered quite a reputation for fantasy and included at least one such story in all but one of his volumes, they are on the whole weak, cutesy, cloying, pointless productions that even Coppard seems to have thought little of. He says in his introduction to his collected fantasies, Fearful Pleasures (Sauk City, Wisconsin: Arkham House, 1946), that he likes writing fantasies because "it makes work easy, for with its enchanting aid a writer can ignore problems of time and tide, probability, price, perspicuity, and sheer damn sense, and abandon himself to singular freedoms on the aery winds of the Never-was."

The only fantasies that approach significance are "Adam and Eve and Pinch Me," "Clorinda Walks in Heaven," and "Father Raven," and each of these stories works, as much or as little as it does, because the fantastic form (especially the sloppy writing) is toned down and the subject matter is significant or interesting in itself. The rest of Coppard's fantasies are, at best, merely slightly diverting froth.

and "Fifty Pounds." "Judith," as we noted in Chapter I is "plotty" enough to be made into a feature film. Whenever Coppard strayed from his own dictum that short is best, he got separated from the fullest expression of his own skill.

"Judith" is a long short story concerning the love affair of the village schoolmaster, Jones, and a "great lady," Judith, Lady Leeward. In the course of explications and complications Jones, in an attempt to keep the affair secret (he is poor but a gentleman), is, through a series of accidents, indicted for murder. On one of his trysts in the woods, he is seen about the time an old woman is murdered. Circumstantial evidence piles up against him, and, though Judith could establish his alibi, he prefers hanging to drawing her name into disrepute. She attempts suicide, leaving a note that explains all. The doctor who saves her reads the note, but, true to his class, he destroys it before Judith recovers. By this time Jones is conveniently dead, and life goes on as usual for the idle rich. This is the stuff of slick fiction magazines. Its only saving grace is the high level of its writing. Its substance rests on a very class conscious element of social protest worked out with a kind of Jamesian summary and analysis. Still, its movement relies on accidents, mistaken identity, involved complications, letters--in short, it challenges the limits of Aristotelian probability.

"Fifty Pounds," on the other hand, is deceptively good. The plot is not particularly original, but, as we have seen, Coppard uses it well to expose his characters. When Coppard writes the longer, more traditional short story, he is still

most successful in brief moments when suggestion and implication rather than telling or summarizing dominate the manner of the tale. One of Coppard's most intriguing stories is the long, episodic "Ring the Bells of Heaven." This story is the intense characterization of Blandford Febery--farm boy, great actor, revivalist preacher, apostate, drifter, seeker of the truth, Byronic hero, who loves the world but is repeatedly disgusted and rejected by it. In a series of scenes and summaries "Ring the Bells of Heaven" follows Febery from his childhood to his death examining his self-assurances and his self-doubts. Febery does not appeal to the reader's empathy so much as to his interest in the bizarre, and it is this curiosity that moves the reader through the action. Except for the somewhat uneven development of the character of Febery, the story succeeds primarily in its individual scenes rather than in its whole.

Most of Coppard's best fiction combines the traditional plot gross structure with poetic supportive forms, such as, language and imagery, stressing dramatization and indirection over summary and analysis of events. In stories like "The Higgler," "Fishmonger's Fiddle," "The Black Dog," one does not notice the Aristotelian plot which is disguised in complex supportive and developmental forms.

As an artist of the short story, the most important formal mode that Coppard employs is the poetic. Although Coppard himself never verbalized the lyric capacity of short fiction, we traced in Chapter I the critical recognition of this quality in his work from the very beginning of his volume publication.



Again, the most striking statement of the poetry of Coppard's prose is Ford Madox Ford's assertion in his review of The Field of Mustard, "Half Pixie and Half Bird": "Mr. Coppard is almost the first English writer to get into English prose the peculiar quality of English lyric verse." That understanding of Coppard's finest work by the early reviewer has been echoed by subsequent critics. Kunitz and Haycraft say: "Mr. Coppard is primarily a poet . . . his prose stories have a definite poetic quality."<sup>35</sup> In 1941 H. E. Bates focused on the poetry in Coppard's fiction as tightly as anyone has:

As Coppard began speaking in the early twenties, . . . it was clear that a poet had taken up the short story. . . . A man with ripe powers of description, an uncanny knack of weaving a tale, a keen eye for lyrical colour, a sense of both humor and tragedy, Coppard had both strong and delicate gifts. The results excited attention, . . . for Coppard's way was refreshing and the English short story had never known such pieces as Dusky Ruth, The Poor Man, The Higgler, Fishmonger's Fiddle--stories as sturdy and sound in grain as oak, as delicate and oddly scented as hawthorn.<sup>36</sup>

According to Bates, Coppard was not alone in the creation of the lyric short story--the form itself arose out of a post war necessity. The expected renaissance of poetry after World War I never materialized because so many of the rising poets had been "blown to bits" or embittered by the war.

What they had to say was too much the sour fruit of frustration to find expression in lyricism, and yet was too urgent to be wrapped up in the complacent folds of ordinary prose. That generation . . . needed and sought as a form something between lyric poetry and fictional prose. That form it found, and proceeded to develop as its own, in the short story.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Stanley J. Kunitz and Howard Haycraft, eds., Twentieth Century Authors (New York: The H. W. Wilson Co., 1942), 313.

<sup>36</sup> Bates, 136.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 123.

Bates miscues on Coppard. Coppard had determined to write short stories long before the war when he had read Hardy's Life's Little Ironies, and, after being motivated by Oxford, he was simply waiting for the end of the war to break loose from his clerkship to become an author (his employment in the Ironworks had exempted him from the war<sup>38</sup>). In fact, it is startling to find in Coppard's fiction even the very few references to the war that do occur. His fiction, as his life did, missed much of the turmoil of the twentieth century.

Yet, if Coppard was not a member of the war generation either in age or experience, his artistic endeavors set a direction for a whole generation of young writers. Bates calls it

an interesting coincidence, that immediately the Great War was over two important writers found their natural expression, as prose writers, solely and exclusively in the short story--an event for which there was no English precedent except Kipling.<sup>39</sup>

Coppard and Katherine Mansfield, Bates continues, assisted "the English short story to a state of adult emancipation."<sup>40</sup> They brought to the short story the vision of the poet.

It will remain eternally to the credit of Katherine Mansfield and A. E. Coppard that both attempted to bring to the short story some of the fancy, delicacy, shape, and coloured conceit of the Elizabethan lyric--a comparison especially true in the case of Coppard--and that when they left it the short story had gained new vitality and new design and above all, perhaps, a certain quality of transparency.<sup>41</sup>

It is very nice, of course, to use words like "poetic" and "lyrical" to describe the short story, but they describe nothing at all until we give them a meaning. Just what is the

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<sup>38</sup>Coppard, It's Me, 202.

<sup>39</sup>Bates, 123.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 124.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid.

lyric quality of certain Coppard short stories? Where does it reside? Is it primarily material or formal? Gerald Bullett describes the poetic short story of Mansfield and de la Mare giving us a sound beginning for a definition:

We carry away [from such tales], not a host of memorable friends [such as one finds in the novel], but poetic emotion, a savour, a moment of illumination. If we examine those tales which yield us most potent aesthetic pleasure, we shall find that each of them exists for the sake of this illuminated and illuminating moment, of beauty or of terror, of wonder or of sheer surprise, all that precedes and follows that moment being in the nature of an orchestral prelude and postlude, the first to seduce our minds to the enchantment, the second to release us from it without shock. This moment, which may do its work in us even though itself remain undetected, is what the short story writer gives us; it is this that we retain.<sup>42</sup>

This moment of illumination is characteristic of the poetic short story as is its suggestiveness. The traditional prose narrative states, summarizes, tells, concludes. It may even contain a fairly explicit statement of purpose. But, the poetic short story communicates its meaning--never a "message"--by indirection; it suggests. O'Connor implies something of this suggestive quality in his brief remarks on "Dusky Ruth." We are left at the end of the tale with the lasting impression of Ruth's merry "curious gaze" at the traveler the morning after he has spent an "innocent" night embracing the naked girl. When, at last, the traveler leaves, having had no opportunity to see the girl alone, the narrator closes: "Her shining glances followed him to the door, and from the window as far as they could view him." O'Connor concludes:

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<sup>42</sup>Bullett, 110.

If Somerset Maugham had told that story, the woman's smile would have left us in no doubt of his meaning, the meaning of the old song:

He that will not when he may

He shall not when he wold.

But this, of course, is not Coppard's meaning at all. He was fascinated primarily by women's secretiveness: it is the theme of most of his great stories. . . .<sup>43</sup>

Eileen Baldeshwiler is currently doing the major work towards a definition of the lyric short story. In a sketch of its history she traces the lyric short story from Turgenev and Chekhov through Coppard and Mansfield and Lawrence and Woolf and Anderson to Katherine Anne Porter, Eudora Welty, and John Updike.<sup>44</sup> In two essays for Studies in Short Fiction, Professor Baldeshwiler has outlined a definition of the lyric short story, contrasting it with the more traditional short story mode. In a 1964 essay she distinguishes between the "lyric" and "mimetic" forms. Mimetic stories "achieve their entire effect by presenting in ordinary prose a chronologically straightforward series of events whose significance is contained in and completed by the resolution of the events."<sup>45</sup> Lyric stories, however, introduce an "amalgamation of additional elements into the mimetic base, elements characteristically expected in verse."<sup>46</sup> These "poetic" elements . . . include (1) marked deviation from chronological sequence, (2) exploitation of purely verbal

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<sup>43</sup>O'Connor, 177.

<sup>44</sup>Eileen Baldeshwiler, "The Lyric Short Story: the Sketch of a History," Studies in Short Fiction, VI, 4 (Summer, 1969), 443-53.

<sup>45</sup>Sister M. Joselyn, O. S. B. [Eileen Baldeshwiler], "'The Grave' as Lyrical Short Story," Studies in Short Fiction, I, 3, (Spring, 1964), 217.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid.

resources such as tone and imagery, (3) a concentration upon increased awareness rather than a completed action, and (4) a high degree of suggestiveness, emotional intensity, achieved with a minimum of means.<sup>47</sup>

Elements two, three and four of this definition apply to Coppard's poetic fiction.

A 1969 essay by Professor Baldeshwiler further develops the distinction, though she has replaced the term "mimetic" with "epical." She traces two lines of development in the history of the modern short story--

the large mass of narratives that, for purpose of clarification we could term "epical," and the smaller group which, to accentuate differences, we might call "lyrical." The larger group of narratives is marked by external action developed "syllogistically" through characters fabricated mainly to forward plot, culminating in a decisive ending that sometimes affords a universal insight, and expressed in the serviceably inconspicuous language of prose realism. The other segment of stories concentrates on internal changes, moods, and feelings, utilizing a variety of structural patterns depending on the shape of the emotion itself, relies for the most part on the open ending, and is expressed in the condensed, evocative, often figurative language of the poem.<sup>48</sup>

Somewhat enigmatically she adds that "lyric" refers more to subject and tone than to structure.<sup>49</sup> This implies that there are some topics that are properly lyrical and others that are not, yet most of her definition of "lyric" deals with formal rather than material concepts. Her description of Coppard's lyricism partially solves this dilemma.

In Coppard, outward action is again strictly subordinated to inner feelings, for all is directed to portraying the intense moment (as in "Dusky Ruth") or in tracing its secret

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<sup>47</sup>Ibid.

<sup>48</sup>Baldeshwiler, "Lyric Short Story," 443.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid.

sources ("The Field of Mustard") or showing the growth of personhood through deep emotional involvement ("Fishmonger's Fiddle") or the profound though fitful emergence of individual identity ("The Hurly Burly").<sup>50</sup>

So, lyric subjects are those that deal with the portrayal of the inner man (or, in these examples, inner woman). Yet, she describes this portrayal in a formal manner, distinguishing between modes of "action." Perhaps, the correct solution to the problem is to say that in the lyric short story even more than in the traditional short story the material ingredients of the fiction, including subject, are, finally, inseparable from their structuring except in the most artificial kind of analysis.

This is implied when Professor Baldeshwiler says that in addition to Coppard's poetic use of language "an important source of his poetic effects is his carefully controlled use of setting."<sup>51</sup> Language and setting blend in "The Field of Mustard" "as we see strong infusion of feeling, delicate use of verbal devices including rhythm, continuity of mood among characters, setting and theme, and metaphoric use of natural detail."<sup>52</sup>

Setting may be material, but the blend of setting with the other elements of the fiction is a formal act.

We can add to the above definition of the lyric short story the following ingredients particularly true of that form in Coppard. Although the lyric short story in Coppard may develop by means of a causal chronology, this sequence is never more than a shadow of the Aristotelian plot. Depending on careful selection of highly evocative language, Coppard's poetic

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<sup>50</sup>Ibid., 447.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid.

short stories sustain one continuous mood of significant and serious import, probably occurring as one continuous episode, that is created through suggestion rather than direct statement. Using this definition, we conclude that Coppard actually wrote very few purely lyric works. "The Field of Mustard," "Mordecai and Cocking," "Weep Not, My Wanton," "The Hurly Burly," and "Dusky Ruth" are such short stories. Other Coppard stories, such as, "Fishmonger's Fiddle," "The Watercress Girl," "The Black Dog," and "The Higgler," have many poetic elements woven into the Aristotelian plot.

A final test of Coppard's lyric short story is that of action. In the traditional plotted story the action involves the overcoming of some complication. The reader views the working out of the action to some resolution, and, if the story is forceful enough to gain the reader's empathy, he participates in the quest for the resolution. But, the suspense of the lyric form is never end-directed (of course, any artistic fiction, regardless of its form, satisfies suspense of form more than it satisfies suspense of ending). In fact, the action is almost non-existent because the primary movement is not within the fiction but within the reader. The action within the lyric short story is essentially static, whereas the action within its reader is dynamic. He is moved to a recognition that may escape the participants in the fiction.

One of the most enlightening examples of Coppard's experimentation with the lyric mode comes from his mid-twenties. In the last chapter we outlined Coppard's definition of the

fiction-monger as one who himself engages in life, observes it closely, and shapes it to a believable falsehood. One of the last Diary entries, December 28, 1904, richly portrays a scene that Coppard observed on one of his walks. His description imparts a total feeling for the scene. He notices details, incongruities, grotesques, pathos and blends them into an intense tonal harmony.

Went to Lewes on a dull day. We found our way to Malling Church in suburban Lewes\* It was on some high

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\*Amid a barb of sunshine which gave a pleasant colour to the damp, cold fields & lanes & a noble to the big black trees [.]

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ground overlooking the river, with a farm beside it, and at the bottom of the fields which sloped away we could hear and see the awkward country lads at football. There were a few people standing about the church-yard as if awaiting some event of interest & the verger stood by the wooden gate at the beginning of the little brick walk up to the open door. He was a squat smug man, dressed in black; his hair was fair &, being well oiled and brushed, shining mightily; his face was red with health & his beard was red. He stood with his hands behind him & you could imagine the big common ring around one of his fat ugly fingers [.] We walked into the church, but found nothing of interest beyond the usual Christmas decorations; it was cold and dim, hollow & unfriendly; its blatant restorations left it like the fat little verger who stood so complacently outside. We left the church & as we got into the road a cab drove up to the gate. A man dressed in black, who had sat chatting & grinning with the driver jumped down from the box & opened the door of the vehicle. An old surpliced clergyman came down the church path & stood beside the red featured verger. In a moment or two the man at the cab door pulled out a little white coffin, & tucking it carelessly under one arm he went & stood at the wooden gate. A young couple & an old couple got out of the cab & stood beside the man with the coffin. He then handed a paper to the verger who, after unfolding it passed it on to the clergyman. He read it and turned away growling out the formula "I am the Resurrection and the Life [.] The unhappy people followed him into the church. As we turned away a flock of little children came running down to see the funeral [.] The cabman's horse became restive & plunged about dangerously. The



last thing we saw was the cabman trying to thrash the horse into passivity; the last thing we heard was "You bleeder, you!"

Although the events described here have actually happened shortly before Coppard describes them, this vignette is much more than a neutral description of something taking place (although it is "objective" in the sense that both Chekhov and Coppard define). A particular kind of eye has witnessed the events. The hand of the artist controls the language. What we get is something more than the description of a stop to view the local church architecture (Coppard describes many such stops in his Diary), and it is more than the description of an infant's funeral. Coppard controls the observation and the language to convey to the reader a brief poetic impression drawn from careful selection of details arranged into supportive parallels and contrasts. The overall action moves into and away from the church, but within that simple movement Coppard captures an intense experience. The day is dull, but, he adds as an afterthought, there is a "barb of sunshine." This initial contrast sets the pattern for the life-death motif that emerges from the tone poem. The country lads play football. The "squat smug" verger stands "well oiled and brushed." The narrator does not see but imagines a "big common ring" and "fat ugly fingers." The verger is a grotesque of life, as is the church--"cold & dim, hollow & unfriendly" though it is decorated for Christmas. The men on the cab chat and grin before one of them tucks the "little white coffin . . . carelessly under one arm." The young couple and the old couple follow the ineffectual clergyman into

the empty church as he growls out a "formula." And, curious little children flock to the event. The emptiness and despair of this little collection of ironies is fixed in the last lines as the lively horse is brutally subdued with beatings and curses.

One might call this scene "Chekhovian," though it was written some fourteen years before Coppard knew Chekhov. Of course, it is pure Coppard. It foreshadows his great tonal, lyric works, "Weep Not, My Wanton" and "The Field of Mustard." In all of these pieces statement of purpose gives way to suggestion, insinuation. The deep sadness of a few lives is exposed briefly in a fleeting moment of experience selected from all possible moments of these lives because that single moment shows more than could ever be told. It is the poet's ability to select the exact word that conveys the image. With other words the same scene would be a simple anecdote. The above scene does not create the total experience of Coppard's later work largely because of its brevity. Coppard's finest lyric works, though quite short, are much longer than this vignette.

But, in this brief scene composed long before Coppard set himself to writing short stories, we discover the truth of his major critical belief, expressed in his essays and in his fiction; the life of the tale is in its telling.

## CHAPTER IV

### SOME WELL-TOLD TALES

Although, as we have seen, A. E. Coppard approved of reviews that coincided, in their descriptions of his artistry, with his intentions, he did not like his short stories to be interpreted. Because his primary intention was that of a teller of tales, he insisted that the tale should stand for itself and nothing more. In effect, 'the tale does not mean but be.' He took exception specifically with some reviewers who tried, but failed, to find the meanings of some of his stories. He quotes a review of Fishmonger's Fiddle in The Outlook, and in commenting on it denies any figurative meaning at all:

"As for 'Fishmonger's Fiddle,' I would be prepared to accept the 'cello joke and the lunch in the inn as allegorically significant if I could find a shadow of clue to the allegories. Either the secret of the symbolism is locked in Mr. Coppard's bosom--in which case he is playing a practical joke on his public--or, as seems more likely, he has ill-advisedly attempted to write simultaneously on two planes."

Symbolism? Allegory? Two planes? This is abracadabra to me. I am a writer of fiction about people who live and talk and do, without anything at the back of my mind other than what I conceive to be fitting for their presentation as interesting human beings.<sup>1</sup>

One reason that Coppard may have shrunk from interpretations of his stories is that the interpretations seem to have

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<sup>1</sup>Schwartz, 28.

been so forced, as in the example above. He aimed a sarcastic deflation at an even more forced misunderstanding of "Craven Arms," of which the Sunday Times had said, "The very title . . . is an unfathomable mystery." The reviewer had accused Coppard of being "an obviously clever man who has fallen under bad influences, which have led him to the cultivation of a sort of sham exotericism of manner and style, a parody of profundity."<sup>2</sup> Coppard's reply to this:

It is rather late in the day to interpret the "unfathomable mystery" of the title, "Craven Arms," but I will do my best. I am aware that it is the name of many taverns up and down the land, that a great railway station is called after one of them, that there is an Earl of Craven who probably has a badge of heraldry; but this tale is not about a tavern, or a railway station, or an earl; it is about a man who shrank from marrying a girl he loved. I don't know how my "sham exotericism" managed to immerse the phrase in such profundity, but I do know that "craven" means "cowardly," and that "arms" are those appendages hanging from the shoulders with which we commonly embrace our girls.<sup>3</sup>

Coppard's attacks on these weak attempts at analyzing his fiction are amusing, yet, we have seen him exercise faulty judgment about his own work, demonstrating that in his case (and as a general principle of literary criticism) neither the author's prior intentions nor his judgment on completed work necessarily provide the best understanding of it. But, though Coppard's intention in writing fiction may have always been simplicity itself, and his very literary background makes even this dubious, as T. O. Beachcroft says, "there is an unusual depth in his apparent simplicity."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 16.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 16-17.

<sup>4</sup>Beachcroft, English Short Story, II, 25.

Any analysis of Coppard's fiction meets with a two-fold difficulty. First is the problem of his simplicity. As in Chekhov, the reader knows that there is a great deal there, but the relative inaction of many of his stories makes it difficult to find the words to describe just what they are about. A static scene, unlike a dynamic one, is very hard to get a critical handle on. Where does the interpreter start ordinarily? He answers the question "What happened?" But, very little happens in Coppard's finest story "The Field of Mustard." Or, significantly, little happens to the characters in the story.

A second difficulty in any analysis of Coppard's fiction is the very obvious autobiographical implication in much of it. On the one hand, it is sometimes difficult to refrain from using the fiction to make a psychological analysis of Coppard. On the other hand, some of Coppard's own comments on the autobiographical contents of certain stories tend to deflate any elaborate purely textual analysis. Russell MacDonald, for instance, has written an excellent understanding of "Adam and Eve and Pinch Me" (so good, in fact, that I see no reason to attempt further interpretation), yet his analysis, which develops from a symbolic understanding of the character's names,<sup>5</sup> neglects to mention that a central character, the gardener, with a significant name, Bond, is, Coppard tells us, based on a friend of his, a gardener named Bond, who tended the very garden that Coppard used as the setting of this story.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>MacDonald, 51-57.

<sup>6</sup>Coppard, It's Me, 177-78, 220.

Such knowledge on the part of the reader might, initially at least, cast some doubt on the whole allegorical structure and the metaphysical-psychological extension of the tale. But, a closer look merely convinces one of Coppard's power to turn his life experiences into the imaginative experiences of fiction. In addition, the whimsy inherent in that tale, and implied in its title, gives it an ambiguity that allows the reader to interpret it as tightly or as loosely as he chooses.

Because this final chapter will attempt an interpretation of some of Coppard's best and most representative fiction, we are obviously beginning with an assumption that a deeper understanding of Coppard's fiction can be realized by way of critical literary standards. In fact, regardless of some of Coppard's protestations to the contrary, we have already shown in the last chapter that Coppard is far from a simple story-teller, that, indeed, his fictive materials and forms, available to careful scrutiny, create a depth and complexity of experience that far surpasses the tale told in a tavern. In Chapter III we partitioned some of Coppard's stories to extract the principles of his craft. A true understanding of his art, however, would attempt a monistic view of his fiction, i.e., an understanding of the manner in which his forms structure his materials into a single artistic experience. So, in this chapter we will attempt a close formal analysis of a selection of Coppard's best fiction.

"The Higgler" is Coppard's best known and, perhaps, most representative story. The narrative line is simple

enough. Harvey Witlow, the higgler, in an attempt to expand his failing business travels across the nearby moor to the Sadgrove farm. Mrs. Sadgrove sells him scores of eggs and dozens of chickens, and he soon contracts with her to buy other produce of her farm. Harvey is struck by Mary Sadgrove, a lovely, educated, shy, quiet girl. After repeated visits, partially business and partially personal, Mrs. Sadgrove offers Harvey the girl and the farm worth three thousand pounds. Harvey, weighing his perceived worth against the girl's apparent value, decides that he is being ensnared in some sort of trap or is in some way being made fun of. He vacillates for a time, then he quickly marries Sophy, a girl he has been going with. After some months, with his business once again falling apart, Harvey returns to the Sadgrove farm to ask Mrs. Sadgrove for a loan. He finds Mary by herself, helplessly trying to lay out the body of her dead mother. After he completes that chore, Harvey mentions to Mary that Mrs. Sadgrove had wanted them to marry. To his dismay, Mary informs him that the marriage had been her own idea, that she had loved the higgler and had asked her mother to speak for her. The higgler's foolish suspicions have cost him a beautiful woman and a life of prosperity.

"The Higgler" is as representative as any one story can be of Coppard's most typical materials and formal techniques. It deals with the secret sadness of a woman, the desire for a good living, and the condition of man. It is set in the country and on the moor, providing much opportunity for the animal imagery and the contrasting moods of nature that Coppard makes

a part of so much of his fiction. The settings are packed with realistic detail. Although the story is organized in a very definite plot sequence, it contains some evocative poetic writing. Coppard loved to collect and use outrageous names; occasionally his characters' names fit their personalities. Harvey Witlow is such a name. We are told that Harvey is "shrewd," "crafty," and "cunning." We learn, however, that he is not wise. Mary Sadgrove is the quiet, secretive, sad girl who lives in a house by an orchard at Prattle Corner. As a consequence of his foolish cunning, Harvey marries the coarse Sophy Daws.

A compelling and unified understanding of "The Higgler" can most readily be achieved by an examination of the image patterns that underlie the narrative sequence and support the creation of its mood--dark, aching loss. The mood of desolation and loss that has been realized by the end of the story has been gradually prepared for through a series of deaths and death images that often seem, at the time they occur in the story, to be inappropriate. There are, in fact, so many deaths related in the story, so much violence suggested in the peaceful settings, that dying comes to operate in the fiction as a two-fold motif: as does every motif, it helps unify the fiction; in addition, it holds the mood in a grey that finally becomes dark.

"The Higgler" opens on a series of contrasts between life and death in which death carries the weight of the description. Harvey Witlow is for the first time crossing Shag Moor. The moor is empty and cold, two miles from end to



end; its most prominent feature is a line of telephone poles following the road. There is some life here:

The furze was always green and growing, and, taking no account of seasons, often golden. Here in summer solitude lounged and snoozed; at other times, as now, it shivered and looked sinister.

Not the least sinister element of the setting, as the narrator portrays it, is "a small scarlet notice to stone-throwers" tacked on one of the poles, as "prominent as a wound." In the course of the action the higgler travels back and forth across the moor--"No life there, no life at all." As Harvey crosses the moor in his horse-cart, he talks to himself:

"If things don't change, and change for the better, and change soon, I can't last and I can't endure it; I'll be damned and done, and I'll have to sell. . . . I was better off in the war. I was better off working for farmers; much; but it's no good chattering about it, it's the trick of life; when you get so far, then you can go and order your own funeral."

Like an oasis at the edge of the moor, Harvey discovers the Sadgrove farm, twenty acres of orchard and field. He introduces himself to Elizabeth Sadgrove, who looks "at him as uncomprehendingly as a mouse might look at a gravestone." Harvey also meets Mary: "Beautiful she was: red hair, a complexion like the inside of a nut, blue eyes, and the hands of a lady." As the higgler purchases eggs and pullets, the narrator leads our eye across the beauty of the farm, with one incongruous exception: "In the yard, watching him, was a young gander, and on a stone staddle beside it lay a dead thrush on its back, its legs stiff in the air." Harvey also buys the gander, assuring it, "Come on . . . you needn't be afeared of me, I

never kills anything afore Saturdays." The gander "in some absurd way . . . resembled Mrs. Sadgrove."

Harvey begins to visit the farm twice a week, and his business improves. In July he harvests some cherry trees on the farm, and, as he climbs among the trees, Mary walks through the orchard swinging a clapper to keep the birds away. "Among the bejewelled trees she passed, turning the rattle with a listless air, as if beating time to a sad music that only she could hear." Through the morning, as Mary traverses the orchard, the higgler watches her whenever she is in sight. When she walks to the other end of the orchard, Harvey's gaze descends to a field mouse that spends the morning "climbing to the top of a coventry bush in the hedge below him, nipping off one thick leaf and descending with the leaf in its mouth." All morning Mary walks back and forth, the mouse climbs up and down, and Witlow watches both of them. After his lunch, Harvey returns to the cherry trees. Again, a little death intrudes on the peaceful scene.

A few cherries had spilled from one basket and lay on the ground. The little furry mouse had found them and was industriously nibbling at one. The higgler nonchalantly stamped his foot upon it, and kept it so for a moment or two. Then he looked at the dead mouse. A tangle of entrails had gushed from its whiskered mouth.

Harvey becomes a regular guest at the Sadgrove's for Sunday dinner. His first time there he tells them stories about his service in the war, one of the rare allusions to World War I in Coppard's fiction. In one instance he was almost killed when a bullet just missed his head. On another occasion,

which he describes in more detail, a French farmer had asked Harvey's unit to shoot a pig that had gone mad with the mange.

"Ah, that was a pig! And when it died it jumped a somersault just like a rabbit. . . . Couldn't hit him at all at first, and it kicked up bobs-a-dying. 'Ready, present, fire!' Hubert Luxter says, and bang goes the six of us, and every time we missed him he spotted us and we had to run for our lives."

Before Harvey leaves that day, Mrs. Sadgrove significantly informs the higgler that she wants her daughter married and that she herself is dying: "'I'm not a long liver, I'm afraid. . . . No, I'm not a long-living woman.'" Harvey surveys her death's head:

Hers was a long sallow face, with heavy lips. Sometimes she would stretch her features (as if to keep them from petrifying) in an elastic grin, and display her dazzling teeth; the lips would curl thickly, no longer crimson but blue. He wondered if there was any sign of a doom registered upon her gaunt face. She might die, and die soon.

The grotesque death-mask described in this passage is barely human (we know Mrs. Sadgrove resembles the doomed gander). Coppard exaggerates features that "stretch" in an "elastic grin" to keep from "petrifying." The coarse, thickly curling lips have changed color from "crimson" to "blue" setting off "dazzling teeth" in a "long sallow face." It is with this sort of language use that Coppard creates an atmosphere of loss and desolation that lies only just below the peaceful surface of the action.

Harvey continues his trips to the farm but is not able to speak to Mary; her natural reticence plus his sudden shyness keep them virtual strangers. Afraid that he is somehow being ensnared, he stops going to the Sadgrove farm, and he rushes

into a marriage with Sophy, probably more to escape the threat of indecision than because of his feelings for Sophy. After the wedding ceremony a rain storm keeps the guests in Harvey's house where an interlude occurs. A dialogue about money, marriage, and death ensues between Sophy's grandparents, Amos and Cassandra Fundy. Amos gauges the threatening weather and declares that it will not rain. "'Don't you be a fool,' remarked his wife, enigmatically, 'you'll die soon enough.'" Later, she gives Sophy some advice about bearing children:

"I've had my fourteen touch of children," said Grandmother Fundy. "Yes, they were flung on the mercy of God-- poor little devils. I've followed most of 'em to the churchyard. You go slow, Sophia."

In the months following the wedding Sophy and Harvey's mother quarrel "unendingly," and Harvey's business begins to go bad.

On top of it all his horse died. It stumbled on a hill one day and fell, and it couldn't get up, or it wouldn't--at any rate, it didn't. Harvey thrashed it and coaxed it, then he cursed it and kicked it; after that he sent for a veterinary man, and the veterinary man ordered it to be shot. And it was shot.

Harvey rents a horse and makes one final trip across the moors hoping that he can borrow money from Mrs. Sadgrove. Harvey drives into a harsh, cold, dry wind as the setting sun turns the moor into a tapestry of light and dark.

Low down the sun was quitting the wrack of storm, exposing a jolly orb of magnifying fire that shone flush under eaves and through the casements of cottages, casting a pattern of lattice and tossing boughs upon the interior walls, lovelier than dreamed-of pictures. The heads of mothers and old dames were also imaged there, recognizable in their black shadows; and little children held up their hands between window and wall to make five-fingered shapes upon the golden screen. . . . At Prattle Corner dusk was already abroad;

there was just one shaft of light that broached a sharp-angled stack in the rickyard, an ark of darkness, along whose top the gads and wooden pins and tilted straws were miraculously fringed in the last glare.

This passage provides an ironic preparation for the coming death scene. Although the moor is, as always, a bitter place (and doubly bitter now for Harvey), it is also a place of stark beauty. The gathering dark serves to foil the splendor of the setting sun, "a jolly orb of magnifying fire" that projects on the inside walls of cottages "lovelier than dreamed-of pictures." As the brooding Harvey slumps in his cart behind his hated, borrowed horse, little children stand in the light to cast "shapes upon the golden screen." Even at Prattle Corner where, unknown to Harvey, death has already set in, the dying sun radiates a single "shaft of light" that "miraculously" fringes an "ark of darkness." The images of light and dark, life and death, that have framed the narrative prepare for the final scene, a bizarre mix of the grotesque and the tender. At his knock, Mary opens the door of the dark, gloomy cottage, and tells the higgler that her mother is dead. She has been alone all day with the body, waiting for some help. Harvey draws close to Mary, and for the first time they actually begin talking to each other. The fire in the darkened cottage repeats the pattern of the sky outside.

There was no candle lit; a fire was burning there, richly glowing embers, that laid a gaunt shadow of the table across a corner of the ceiling. Every dish on the dresser gleamed, the stone floor was rosy, and each smooth curve on the dark settle was shining like ice.

Mirroring the "jolly orb" of the sun, the embers of the fire glow "richly." But, the room is, like the moor, cold. Although

the dishes gleam in the smoldering light and the floor is "rosy," the shadows are "gaunt," like the dead face of Mrs. Sadgrove, and the curves of the "dark settle" shine like "ice."

Mary has been attempting to lay out the body of her mother, but rigor mortis has set in and she is stymied by an up-lifted arm. The higgler "put his arm around her and gently urged her to the door." As the wind whips the cottage and the bedroom door repeatedly flies open, the higgler struggles with the dead body to force a dressing gown over the arm that swings up each time he pushes it down.

He went and closed the door, the latch had a loose hasp, and tiptoeing nervously back, he seized the dreadful arm with a sudden brutal energy, and bent it by thrusting his knee violently into the hollow of the elbow. Hurriedly he slipped the gown over the head and inserted the arm in the sleeve. . . . As he lifted the chill body the long outstretched arm moved and tilted like the boom of a sail, but crushing it to its side he bound the limb fast with the strips of linen.

The death has broken down the walls of their mutual silence, and Witlow learns that Mrs. Sadgrove had been against a marriage between Mary and the higgler; Mary had forced her to make the offer. Anagnorisis rushing in on him, Witlow dumbly grieves the loss of a fortune and of a love. "He drove away in deep darkness, the wind howling, his thoughts strange and bitter." The gathering mood of the dark, cold setting draws the reader into the numbing experience of Harvey's wordless, empty sorrow over the enormity of his loss and the bleak prospects for his future. Stupidly, he has exchanged Mary for Sophy, but the thought of Sophy is grim consolation: "Of course, there was Sophy; but still--Sophy!"

One might read through "The Higgler" and attempt to correlate every figure of violence or animal death with some event on the human level of the story. Such a literal reading of the imagery would constitute a simplistic treatment of Coppard's artistry. One can not even say that the higgler's act of crushing the mouse is a literal correspondent to his crushing of his love for Mary. He does not actually crush his love for Mary; he fears what his animal cunning can not understand, so he runs from Mary's love. Throughout the story we see scene after scene that demonstrate the higgler's competence--at bee-keeping, at buying and selling, finally, at laying out a body. But, the scene with the mouse, as other scenes, shows the higgler to be insensitive (though, as we also see, he is not unkind). One mark of his insensitivity is that he looks for things to be more than they seem, and, so, he does not always see what is there. The dark-light contrasts of the story support the differences between Harvey and Mary. The piling up of animal deaths and figures of violence unites the action and mood in preparation for the final scene and suggests further the uncaring universe in which the inability to communicate allows love to falter and die.

In creating this experience of setting Coppard goes beyond mere rural scenery to reestablish an ancient literary tradition. In "The Higgler," as in so many other great Coppard fictions, such as, "Weep Not, My Wanton," "Mordecai and Cocking," and "The Field of Mustard," the rustic setting is such an elemental ingredient of the organic whole that the story becomes

a pastoral, a timeless condition in which man can be understood, finally, only in his relation to nature. For these fictions the setting is not merely a place in which the action occurs, rather, it clarifies and interprets the action for the reader. Because the life depicted in Coppard's rural fiction is ordinarily the life of hard work, brutality, even violence, one might more exactly describe some of this fiction in the tradition of the georgic, but the term "pastoral" suffices. Fictions like "Mordecai and Cocking" and "The Field of Mustard" can even be understood within the form of the eclogue, a dialogue between shepherds in a rustic setting.

The pastoral quality of "The Higgler" fuses life and death, dark and light as complementary though contradictory expressions of a single nature that, while often hostile to man, empathetically reflects his continuing hope and frequent defeats.

Image patterns on the order of those that inform "The Higgler" structure other Coppard short stories. As he does in "The Watercress Girl," Coppard makes extensive use of water imagery in "The Black Dog," but he integrates this imagery much better into the total structure of the latter work. Most of the action of "The Watercress Girl" occurs near the stream where Mary and her father tend the beds of watercress, and this setting is elaborated by imagery, such as this simile describing Mary's experience at her trial: "The trial went droning on beside her remembered grief like a dull stream neighboring a clear one, two parallel streams that would meet in the end, were meeting now, surely, as the judge began to speak." "The Watercress Girl,"



which we have discussed earlier (we developed, for instance, the liquid metaphors used to describe Mary's hair), is the finer, tighter, more poetic work, largely because it is shorter, but Coppard controls the reading experience of the longer work by using scenes of water as the juncture of major events in the action and by supporting these scenes with a flowing metaphorical pattern of water figures.

"The Black Dog" formalizes a number of Coppard themes: the aggressive woman and the priggish man, the relentless passage of time, and the loss of the Garden. The partially omniscient narrator knows the mind of the Honourable Gerald Loughlin, who is trying to discover the mind and win the love of Oriande Crabbe, a strong-willed inn-keeper's daughter. She had left home to follow her mother who had left her father for another man. When her mother died, she became the companion of a Lady Tillington. Loughlin had met her there, just before the story opens, and was immediately entranced by her lady-like qualities. Having wealth and nothing much to do, he stays to woo her: "Time was his own, as much as he could buy of it, and he had an income that enabled him to buy a good deal."

When Honourable, as Oriande later mockingly calls him, learns that she wants to return to her father, he arranges things, and they journey to The Black Dog tavern in the south of England by the sea. To get in and out of the small town they must cross through marshes and over a river that become focal points in the story. Oriande is gladly accepted back by her father, who admits to a little problem. He is living with

Lizzie, a woman with whom he set up housekeeping after his wife and daughter left. He does not want to marry Lizzie, so it is imperative that his wife's death be kept secret. Much to Gerald's amazement, Oriande simply decides to get rid of Lizzie, a task she eventually accomplishes with the simple lie that her mother is coming home. "Her directness almost froze the blood of Hon. Loughlin." Gerald settles into the country atmosphere with a pleasure that gradually turns to distress both at the rusticity of the people and at the vulgarity he is beginning to detect in Oriande's character.

The setting was fair enough and she was fair, but lovely as she was not even she could escape the brush of its vulgarity, its plebian pressure. . . . the Honourable Gerald was accustomed to walk from grossness with an averted mind.

Gerald protests Oriande's lie to Lizzie because it lacks "grandeur." She replies: "'Pooh! You shouldn't waste grandeur on clearing up a mess. This is a very dirty Eden.'" We are reminded of Gerald's thoughts as he visited a "vapid," dull church early in the story and imagined his name with Oriande's in the marriage ceremony portion of the prayer book: "There was no more holiness here than in the tough hassocks and rush-bottomed chairs; not here, surely, the apple of Eden flourished."

Lizzie is forced out, and Gerald drives her across the river to the train station, but, while his attention is diverted, she steals the trap and drives it back into the marshes. "For a day or two longer time resumed its sweet slow delightfulness, though its clarity was diminished and some of its enjoyment dimmed." Then Lizzie is found drowned.

Then it was that Loughlin's soul discovered to him a mass of feelings--fine sympathy, futile sentiment, a passion for righteousness, morbid regrets--from which a tragic bias was born. . . . It laid that drowned figure accusatively at the feet of his beloved girl, and no argument or sophistry could disperse the venal savour that clung to the house of "The Black Dog."

Lizzie's departure and death, although they bring on Loughlin's final disenchantment, are not the real causes of the separation between him and Oriande. Oriande, and the reader, discover long before the Honourable Gerald does that he can never marry the girl. Their personalities are too disparate for any permanent bridge to be erected between the propriety of Gerald and the barbarity of Oriande. The action moves back and forth across rivers, and the central scene of the story involves a particular crossing of the river. From the very beginning of the story, imagery involving water and water-life has played a significant part in the underlying metaphor structure. In the first meeting that we see between Loughlin and Oriande he is too confused to talk, but "her own rivulet of casual chatter carried them on." Gerald talks himself into an awkward situation: "She assented coolly, was silent, while Loughlin ransacked his brains for some delicate reference that would clear him over . . . this . . . cataract." As they cross the river into her village, they pass an old woman whose shift "must have clung to her old body like a shrimping net." Gerald is put up at The Black Dog in a "shrimp of a room" containing a stuffed albatross. During the following days, as they roam the fields, the problem of Lizzie "somehow hung in the air, faintly deflecting the perfect stream of their felicity." And, of course, Oriande's last name is

Crabbe, a sea creature with claws.

The metaphorical structure becomes more clear when, on an outing, Gerald and Oriande come to a pond where they watch a wasp attempt to escape a rock in the middle of the water. Seeming to forget that it has wings, it crawls about the rock, apparently searching for a way out, until a puff of wind blows it into the water. The wasp pulls itself up on the rock and attempts to escape again. Gerald does not understand what the wasp is about, but Oriande suggests that it is trying to find a home. Like Gerald, it is out of its depth but seemingly does not know it and will not fly away. The analogy is clarified in the following central episode. Gerald and Oriande have been picnicking in the marshes, a "vast area of coarse pasture [that] harboured not a single farmhouse," and in the late afternoon they come to the river. With the nearest bridge miles away, Oriande suggests that they undress and swim across, carrying their clothes. Gerald offers to go off down the bank. "'O, don't go far, I don't want you to go far away, Gerald,' and she added softly, 'my dear.'" Gerald undresses behind a bush about a hundred yards away, swims across carrying his clothes, and begins drying in the sunlight, when he notices Oriande swimming below him.

She swam with a graceful overarm stroke that tossed a spray of drops behind her and launched her body as easily as a fish's. . . . She turned away like an eel, and at every two or three strokes she spat into the air a gay little fountain of water.

Swimming gracefully, "tossing a spray of drops," launching her body like that of a fish, and spitting a fountain of water gaily

into the air, Oriande becomes a kind of playful dolphin gambling invitingly under the eyes of the prudish Loughlin. Always practical, he has swum through the water to get to the other side. But, Oriande is an animal in her element. She frolics in the stream just as she revels in life. Gerald slips back into the stream, but she has gone onto the bank. He calls to her, and she replies that she is now dry and dressed. Much to his dismay, when he dresses and goes looking for her, "she still lay upon the grass most scantily clothed." Surprised, he modestly walks away; she, as we expect, is unembarrassed.

But what sensations assailed him. They aroused in his decent gentlemanly mind not exactly a tumult, but a flux of emotions, impressions, and qualms; doubtful emotions, incredible impressions, and torturing qualms.

The narrator re-introduces the mocking tone toward the "Honourable Loughlin" that has been just suppressed throughout the narrative and that Oriande is about to make even heavier. This passage is an excellent example of Coppard's language skill. He parallels two series in which he repeats the same nouns ("emotions," "impressions," "qualms") and builds on their collective meaning by modifying them individually ("doubtful emotions," "incredible impressions," "torturing qualms") to capture the confused state of Loughlin's mind.

When Oriande is dressed they continue their walk, and they begin talking, first of Lizzie's supposed love for Oriande's father, then about love itself. For Loughlin love is "self-sacrifice," but to Oriande it is "anticipation and gratitude" for "the moment of passion." Oriande continues with heavy mock-religious irony:

"Honour thy moments of passion and keep them holy. But O, Gerald Loughlin," she added mockingly, "this you cannot understand, for you are not a lover; you are not, no, you are not even a good swimmer." Her mockery was adorable, but baffling.

Gerald is confused at this analogy: "Now why in the whole world of images should she refer to his swimming? He was a good swimmer." Perhaps propriety has kept his mind too dull for sexual innuendo. Oriande tries to be more clear, but with not much more success. She can never marry him, she tells him:

"So I shall never marry you, how could I marry a kind man, a good man? I am a barbarian, and want a barbarian lover, to crush and scarify me, but you are so tender and I am so crude. When your soft eyes look on me they look on a volcano."

To marry him, she continues, would make her "'feel like a wild bee in a canary cage.'" She recognizes the impossibility of their love:

"You could do anything with me short of making me marry you, anything, Gerald." She repeated it tenderly. "Anything. But short of marrying me I could make you do nothing. . . ."

"And what a timid swimmer my Gerald is."

Later that evening Gerald thinks of Oriande in a metaphor that reflects the swimming episode: "That lovely image in the river spat fountains of scornful fire at him." He tries to read a book: "He learned that when a baby whale is born it weighs at least a ton. How horrible!" Loughlin is so fastidious as to be repelled over and over by the natural life that in this fiction is represented on the metaphoric level by water and water creatures. After the Lizzie episode, he tries to rationalize a defense of Oriande's actions, but he cannot. Recording Gerald's thoughts, Coppard uses an image that implies

the refractive property of water. Water bends light so that one is not sure that what one sees under water is exactly where it seems to be.

"To analyse or assess a person's failings or deficiencies . . . is useless. . . . Different minds perceive utterly variant figures in the same being. . . . Who then is right? You are lucky if you can put your miserable self in relation at an angle where your own deficiencies are submerged or minimized, and wise if you can maintain your vision of that interesting angle." But imbedded in Loughlin's modest intellect there was a stratum of probity that was rock to these sprays of the casuist. [my italics]

So, he leaves.

Oriande and Loughlin separate, appropriately, in the rain. He has been disenchanted but probably not disillusioned. Although he has learned much about Oriande, he has learned little about himself. Consequently, he understands nothing about her at all.

The metaphorical substructures that underly the action of "The Higgler" and "The Black Dog" occur as an aggregate of figures that combine to support the literal narrative. But, Coppard could also manipulate developmental forms that structure a fiction by patterning. Two Coppard short stories that make extensive use of pattern for internal development and unity of the gross structure are "Pomona's Babe" and "Arabesque: The Mouse." The latter work is pure pattern while the former uses a pattern device to support the traditional plot structure. In both stories, however, the patterning draws the portrait of the central character. While the portrayal of Johnny Flynn in "Pomona's Babe" is not as intense or moving as that of Filip in "Arabesque," yet it is insightful of the character of a shy,

sensitive, fastidious young man who is called on to act more aggressively than his timid romantic nature will allow. His subsequent withdrawal into a state of imagined action is such a true picture of the impotent idealist that it might even be depressing were it not for Coppard's tone of almost comic detachment from the action. The story is a loving mockery of the Johnny Flynn in himself, and in every person who experiences life principally through literature.

The story opens on the seventeen year old Johnny Flynn reading Rasselas in his bedroom (also the living room) of the impoverished Flynn family living quarters. His mother and his sister Pomona share the only other room. Johnny, we are told, is of such a retiring and prudish nature that he will not even enter his mother's room and will not suffer to have the women in his room once he is prepared for bed. Mrs. Flynn enters the room anyway to inform Johnny that his sister is pregnant, has been for some time; Johnny, apparently, does not notice such things. Mrs. Flynn has expected Johnny to become enraged because, as she tells him, he is the man of the family. (She has already told Pomona that Johnny would murder her lover and throw the girl out on the street.) But, he, except for some blushes, accepts the news noncommittally, feigning indifference. He realizes, of course, that he is expected to do something, but he shrinks from confrontations with brutal reality. To Mrs. Flynn, "Johnny was a strange son, not very virile." He is short and thin for his age, though, since he has taken up running, he has started to grow. Mrs. Flynn, ever to the point, insists that Johnny write the guilty man, Stringer, a threatening letter,



but Johnny, remembering Stringer as a huge, powerful man, coolly informs his mother that he will simply write and inform Stringer of the circumstances, being assured that a gentleman will do the right thing. As we will see, each time Johnny is called upon to act, he carefully hedges his position so that, on the one hand, he can avoid discomfort and, on the other, he can save face. If Johnny will not write a strong letter, he does take a strong stand on his sister; Pomona will not have her baby in the workhouse. No such shame will come to his family. Mrs. Flynn, the practical counterpart to her idealistic son, points out that they have little money and, since both she and Johnny work all day, no one will be home to care for Pomona. Still, Johnny insists that his sister will not go to the workhouse, and he privately resolves to save his extra money for her care.

Johnny writes three letters to Stringer but receives no reply, so he decides to murder him (he has learned in the meantime that Stringer is actually a small, middle-aged man with glasses and a slight limp). The simpler course would be a direct meeting with the guilty man, but Johnny has not the confidence or the nerve to attempt this. He does not even consider it. Instead, he plans to sneak up behind him on a dark night and beat out his brains with a club. Johnny spends weeks perfecting an alibi, during which time he is, of course, exempted from any direct action. At last he, ironically, works out a plan involving the library. He talks a stupid, lumpish acquaintance, Donald, into going with him to the library to read Rasselas, his plan being to sneak out while Donald is thus

engaged, commit the murder, and sneak back in. But, the evening of the planned murder Donald is too ill to go to the library. Johnny's response, as we would expect, is intense relief that he will not be able to carry out his plan. Still, he decides to test his alibi. So, he goes to the library, tries to get himself noticed by the librarian, then sneaks off. As he waits with a club in the shadows by Stringer's boarding house, Johnny is surprised to see his mother come out. He follows her for a distance, then pretends to meet her by accident. She had got tired of waiting for Stringer's reply to the letters and had gone to confront him herself. She had chased the meek little man around his room and thrown a clock at him. (We know that Mrs. Flynn can be violent. In another scene she hysterically swings a knife at Johnny.) Johnny is marvelously relieved once more; the responsibility for action has been taken from his hands, but he can still pretend that he was going to do something, if only someone had not intervened. We have seen the pattern emerge. Johnny imagines an action but is careful not to take it too far, knowing subconsciously that, if he waits long enough, he will be relieved of the burden. So, we are again not surprised on the evening Johnny comes home from work and finds no one there. Instead of speculating as to where they might be, he retreats into another book. His mother returns late and tells him that Pomona has been taken to the workhouse. He protests feebly; he is shamed by his mother's deceit, but once again he is secretly relieved that he did not have to back up his strong stand with deeds.

He will not visit Pomona at the workhouse, but the little money he has saved for her care at home he gives to his mother to buy something for her. Yet, Johnny is not cold, or distant, toward Pomona. Throughout the story the reader is told of his love for his younger sister. Thus, Johnny is overjoyed, when he arrives home one day, to find Pomona there nursing her baby. He goes into her room and embraces the two of them. Then, he suggests a name for the baby--Rasselas. But, Pomona has already named the boy Johnny Flynn.

"Pomona's Babe" is not a story of initiation, though it might have been, because the protagonist does not grow to self-recognition and adulthood in the course of the action. In fact, the pattern of his actions (or inactions) implies that for him independent personhood will be hard to come by. But, his behavior has been modified somewhat. His emotions have become less hidden; he has lost some of his prudishness. Essentially, the story serves to reveal a certain kind of personality to the reader and to provide some hope for that person's future growth.

If any single demonstration were wanted to prove that A. E. Coppard was not the simple story teller that he so often liked to say that he was, "Arabesque: The Mouse" provides that evidence. Coppard's conscious artistry is clear in the title of this ornate, interwoven pattern of motif on the figure of a mouse. Indeed, so elaborate is the construction of this short story that its most remarkable feature is that it does not appear, when read, to be contrived. The fiction unfolds through two simultaneous narrative actions that mirror each other. The

line of present-time action that controls the story is simple. A man sits in a lonely room watching the antics of a mouse, alternately repelled and delighted by it. The setting and the mouse trigger memories of his mother and of a girl, but the reverie collapses with the snap of a mousetrap. The man throws the mutilated mouse out of a window and resets the trap. If the level of physical action is limited, it resonates into a dark, brooding interior action that becomes a kind of psychological horror story.

The opening is almost farcical in its extremes. The action is set on a "black and freezing" night in a room at the top of "four flights of long dim echoing stairs" in "a high narrow house pressed between a coffee factory and a bootmaker's." A man has "sat reading Russian novels until he thought he was mad." The room, smelling of "dried apples and mice," has a singular feature, a picture on the wall that he stares at until he almost cries, "a colour print by Utamuro of a suckling child caressing its mother's breasts as she sits in front of a black-bound mirror." The noise of the gas jet maddening him, the man darkens the room and sits down before "the glowing but flameless fire" to a conversation with himself. Just then, his attention is attracted by a mouse that creeps out of its hole by the fireplace and scurries into the fender:

The man had the crude dislike for such sly nocturnal things, but this mouse was so small and bright, its antics so pretty, that he drew his feet carefully from the fender and sat watching it almost with amusement. The mouse moved along the shadows of the fender, out upon the hearth, and sat before the glow, rubbing its head, ears, and tiny belly with its paws as if it were bathing itself with the warmth, until,

sharp and sudden, the fire sank, an ember fell, and the mouse flashed into its hole.

Taking a flashlight, the man goes to the cupboard and looks at the baited mousetrap there. "'Mean--so mean,' he mused, 'to appeal to the hunger of any living thing just in order to destroy it.'" He picks up the trap to throw it in the fire, then hesitates again before "quite carefully" replacing the trap with the ineffectual observation: "I hope that little beastie won't go and do anything foolish." (We are reminded here of Coppard's thoughts about the stupidity of the child that got in the way of the limousine.)

The combination of setting and action permits the man's mind to free associate into his own past producing the first flashback. The mouse, the fire, the print, the morbid thoughts inspired by the Russian novels remind him of the day before his mother's death. He had always been squeamish about the killing of small animals. Shortly after his sister was born, a neighbor "had sent him home with a bundle of dead larks tied by the feet 'for supper.'" He had run weeping into his house to discover his mother kneeling before the fireplace squeezing the milk from her breasts into the fire, weaning his sister. "'Let me do it, mother,' he cried, and doing so he discovered the throb of the heart in his mother's breast.'" His mother had explained that if her heart did not beat she would die. She pressed her hand over his own heart: "'Let it always beat truly, Filip, let it always beat truly.'" Intuiting some grief in her voice, "he kissed her bosom in his ecstasy and whispered soothingly:

'Little mother! little mother!'" Already we see in the young Filip a shadow of the darkly brooding man in the high room. Forgetting his horror of the dead larks; he helped his mother prepare them for supper. The following day his mother was run down by a cart, her hands crushed then amputated. She died that night: "For years the child's dreams were filled with the horror of the stumps of arms, bleeding unendingly." With this trauma the duality of his temperament is fixed. He is horrified by brutality of any kind, yet it holds a morbid fascination for him, so that, although he shrinks from it in others, it has a way of emerging in his own personality.

The scene shifts back to the present as the man notices the mouse once more at its antics. "His nerves stretched upon him in repulsion, but he soon relaxed to a tolerant interest, for it was really a most engaging little mouse." The omniscient narrator watches the mouse, not directly through Filip's mind, but as Filip sees it, and the mouse becomes almost human as it moves with "curious staccato scurries," 'spies' a cinder, skips "innocently," 'crouches,' 'blinks,' and 'scampers.' "The melancholy man watched it until it came at last to rest and squatted meditatively upon its haunches, hunched up, looking curiously wise, a pennyworth of philosophy." The reader notices particularly the "pliant paws" with which it rubs its head.

When the mouse again disappears, the man sits before the fire brooding about the past that brought him to his melancholy. The narrator tells us that Filip had grown to be a man with "a burning generosity of spirit and rifts of rebellion"

that made him unwelcome to men of less pure intentions. He became something of a social-moral reformer.

"Justice and Sin," he would cry, "Property and Virtue--incompatibilities! There can be no sin in a world of justice, no property in a world of virtue!"

His "engaging extravagance" and "clear-eyed honesty of mind" eventually made him an outcast. "They could forgive him his sins but they could not forgive him his compassions." Thus, he had sought "melodious-minded men" and "fair unambiguous women" until continued rebuffs made him timid and misanthropic, "susceptible to trivial griefs and despairs, a vessel of emotion that emptied as easily as it filled, until he came at last to know that his griefs were half deliberate, his despairs half unreal." Now, he lives only for beauty, i.e., tranquility, "to put her wooing hand on him." Coppard's summary of the development of Filip's melancholia is perceptive though presented out of keeping with his usual practice of dramatization, especially as seen in the rest of this story. In Chapter II we described Coppard's dictum that the story teller should dramatize, a rule that he generally follows in his better writing. This brief summary exposition of the course of Filip's melancholy stands out as different in character from the rest of the narration, in which Coppard describes action in the time-present narrative line and relies heavily on dialogue in his flashbacks. In the summary Coppard intrudes an interpretation. He tells rather than shows. The "fault" in this fiction (as is so often true of artistic flaws) opens up a better understanding of the work and even suggests something of its formal arrangement. Because

meaning qua meaning is not as important to "Arabesque" as is design, Coppard does not show any scenes of Filip's developing alienation and impotence, although he could have effectively dramatized it almost as quickly and much more distinctively than the interpretive summary. Each of the two flashbacks manipulates a careful integration of the narrative motifs. Perhaps Coppard could not have managed to do that three times. A flashback that neglected the motifs would violate the emerging pattern of the story. On the other hand, an attempt to force the motifs into a third flashback would make the story appear grossly contrived. Thus, the narrator disturbs the movement of the story briefly for an interpretive summary, but it is so tightly written that one reads through it with hardly a break in the dominant narrative movement. He even makes use of it to allude to hands again, the "wooing hand" of tranquility, and to foreshadow the next flashback, an evening with a "fair unambiguous woman."

Having concluded the interpretive summary of the development of Filip's melancholia, the narrative presence returns to the room where Filip sits. With a brief but effective transition from narrator intrusion to narrative time-present, Filip once again flashes back.

Now, while the mouse hunts in the cupboard, one fair recollection stirs in the man's mind--of Cassia and the harmony of their only meeting, Cassia, who had such rich red hair, and eyes, yes, her eyes were full of starry inquiry like the eyes of mice.

At once the reader is reminded of the mouse and the brooding man and the deadly cupboard, as the "curiously wise" look of



the mouse is transformed in the man's remembered imagination to a girl with eyes of "starry inquiry" like those of a mouse.

At "a village festival, all oranges and houp-la," he had danced with the "fair and unambiguous" Cassia. Recognizing his desperate need for friendship, she "caress[es] him with recognitions." They had walked in the garden laughing at two peasants talking about appetite and sickness: "'There's a lot of nature in a parsnip,' said one. . . . 'a lot of nature when it's young, but when it's old it's like anything else.'" "'I tell you,' said one of them, 'there's nothing in the world for [some sickness] but the grease of an owl's liver.'" As many another Coppard interlude, this tiny comedy comments on the primary action. Filip has tried with this "unambiguous" woman to simplify things, to avoid complications, to get back to nature, but the reader knows already that this was their only meeting. Just as Filip's reverie is about to be truncated, so, too, the night with Cassia had been cut short. In a burst of energy and hope Filip had carried Cassia all the way "to her home in a little lawned garden where the smell of ripe apples upon the branches and the heavy lustre of roses stole upon the air." The scent of ripe apples and roses of this remembered time of excited, simplified life contrasts the smell of dried apples and mice in the room where the man sits going mad. And, the reader and the man are reminded, too, in this flashback of the night before the death of Filip's mother. Cassia had opened the buttons of Filip's coat, and, pressing her palm against his breast, said: "'Oh, how your heart does beat! Does it beat

truly--and for whom?' He had seized her wrists in a little fury of love, crying: 'Little mother, little mother!'" The man in the room remembers footsteps behind the door that night, and, as all of his memories come rushing together, he hears in his mind "the clack of a bolt." With a "snap" we are back at time-present. "The man sat up in his room intently listening, with nerves quivering again, waiting for the trap to kill the little philosopher." But, as the man discovers when he finally looks into the cupboard, the mouse is not dead: "The trap had not caught it completely, but it had broken off both its forefeet, and the thing crouched there holding out its two bleeding stumps humanly, too stricken to stir." The man quickly picks the mouse up by the neck but is wracked by squeamish indecision. If he throws it into the fire, he will have to listen to its dying screams. To crush it in his hand disgusts him. Cut off from nature, cut off from man, he can not act. He will not chance any more involvement with life, so he dismisses it. He opens the window and pitches the mouse out. There follows a scene of almost classic allusiveness. After sitting for ten minutes, the man is filled with anxiety and shame, so he seizes his lantern and runs "down the echoing stairs, into the empty street, searching long and vainly for the little philosopher."

At last he returns to his room and warms himself. Then, he takes the trap from the shelf, letting the two feet drop into his hand, and throws the paws into the fire. "Then he once more set the trap and put it back carefully into the cupboard."

Coppard seems to have understood well the manner in

which the self-deluding sufferer of the world's miseries could contrive to involve others in his suffering. P. Stick Repton, the smug, brooding, "graciously mournful" journalist of "Fifty Pounds" is one such character. He obviously delights in inflicting his self-fed misery on Lally. Even more striking is the similarity between Filip and the Johnny Flynn of "My Hundredth Tale." He, too, "accidentally" contrives the death of a small, inoffensive animal. At the end of that story, Johnny, steeped in five years of helpless, self-serving depression, says:

A wren was nesting in a niche outside the door. She used to chirp at me. Carelessly I left a large box standing there, so that at night a weasel climbed upon it and caught the bird and its young. I heard the mother screaming and I could not sleep. This morning a wren fledgling flapped in at the door and fluttered round and round the room; at last it came and settled on my head. But I can do nothing for it, I can do nothing for myself. I am a lost ship waiting for a wind that will never blow again.

For the self-congratulating melancholic, any joy in nature is a bitter reminder that it is he, not the world, that is wrong. The sensitive man who, in his perception, is rejected by the world becomes a kind of psychological paraplegic. He cannot (will not) help himself, and he feeds his own misery on the suffering of others that he might, if he would act, relieve. In the last lines of "Arabesque" the first lines are confirmed--the man is nearly mad.

The design of the arabesque does not unwind for its own sake but to reveal the character of the brooding man, who is identified as Filip only in the flashbacks, scenes of his futile attempts at engaging life. By the time of the narrative proper, he has become nameless. The design of the arabesque is unified

in its many motifs, but they operate beyond this simple function. The darkening effect of the Russian novels on the general gloom is further implied in the phrase "little mother" and in the man's helpless concern with injustice. The image of hands cut off at the wrist emphasizes the man's sense of helplessness in the grip of an uncaring universe. Even more, this image underlies his own unwillingness to act. To extend, as it were, a helping hand is to risk loss; he has experienced rejection already for his fervent beliefs. But, even the purity of his beliefs comes into doubt. He seems not to have believed in justice for its own sake so much as because of his own horror of violence. Did he ever want justice for others for any better reason than to relieve his own tender sensibilities from the knowledge of suffering? He does not mind the suffering of the mouse so much as he minds watching it suffer and hearing its cries.

"Arabesque: The Mouse" is doubly important in our appraisal of Coppard's art and in our understanding of Coppard the artist. The total consumption of materials by form creates an organic whole, a fiction that the reader can experience with his emotions while admiring it intellectually. Just as important to our understanding of Coppard himself, "Arabesque" is a fine example of his artistic detachment and control. Probably this tale is a projection of some fantasy Coppard had of himself. Its concern with mice, with injustice, with socialism comes right out of Coppard's own life. In fact, during the war he

lived in fourth floor rooms that became the setting of "Arabesque"<sup>7</sup> which he wrote while he was secretary of the I.L.P. and was fond of Russian novels.<sup>8</sup> Coppard's description of his own sense of social justice has echoes in the man of "Arabesque":

I must have been born with some revolutionary fermentation in my initial fragment of mind, yet I never ached to assassinate anybody or turn the state upside down, although at the sight of cruelty to bird, beast, or human being I became almost epileptic.<sup>9</sup>

If "Arabesque" projects some facets of Coppard's personality, the artist has also controlled that projection so as to horrify the reader with an experience of decency perverted.

As reviewers and critics have long maintained, "Fishmonger's Fiddle" is one of Coppard's finest works, although it is not, as Professor Baldeshwiler has suggested, a poetic fiction. The definition of Coppard's lyric short stories that we developed in Chapter III included the following: the lyric short story sustains one continuous mood of significant and serious import, probably occurring as one continuous episode, that is created through suggestion rather than direct statement. "Fishmonger's Fiddle" is formalized in an Aristotelian plot composed of a series of episodes that move from exposition through conflict to resolution. More importantly, although the reader recognizes the deep personal conflict of Maxie Morrisarde, Coppard's tone controls both the mood and the reader; the former stays light, though significant, and the latter is kept at a

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 151.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 223-24.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 35.

distance. In addition, Coppard creates a very "thematic" work that obtains meaning more by telling the reader than by indirection.

"Fishmonger's Fiddle" does not yield easily to formal analysis. An initial reading of the story convinces the good reader that it is an excellent, sensitive portrait of a young woman who is too timid to take her own life into her hands, but a closer reading may suggest two flaws in the crafting of the work that indict its value. This, of course, is not an uncommon experience in the appraisal of good literature. Many works that please initially and repeatedly may be found by the "critical" mind to fail in one way or another. The fact that the work succeeds as a whole is the only reason why these faults even come to one's attention. The first of these is the extraordinary (even for Coppard) comic narrative tone in a work of clearly serious intent and effect. This tone eventually shifts to something more neutral that nevertheless keeps the reader at some distance from the potential intensity of the experience. Secondly, "Fishmonger's Fiddle" stands out as one of Coppard's most blatantly thematic pieces. The author makes little attempt to disguise or complicate his purpose by way of suggestion or indirection. In fact, he even resorts to an aphoristic statement of meaning buttressed by frequent reminders of purpose. We will not attempt any explanation as to why Coppard wrote this story the way he did, except to point out that he handled this theme other times, as we have already seen, in a more serious manner. Perhaps, he merely wanted to inform the same theme differently.

In any case, though we shall approach this fiction's revealing of itself through its "faults," we must recognize that this story is an excellent example of the author's power to sweep the reader up into the experience of an illusion so successfully that the reader does not notice, unless he makes the effort to do so, the apparent weaknesses in its construction. In fact, we will conclude that these weaknesses are more apparent than real, that Coppard manipulated these "flaws" in such a manner that they disguise each other, and that the net result of the comedy is to direct and enhance the impact of the story. Furthermore, we must insist that not everything in "Fishmonger's Fiddle" is literal. On the figurative level, the use of geraniums particularly stands out in the creation of Maxie's character.

Early in the story Coppard tells us very definitely what it is about--freedom. The word is repeated throughout the story but used most thematically here: Maxie "did not know that freedom is never to be given, but only to be taken; she was like a child for ever beckoning to the things that did not come."<sup>10</sup>

The author's voice is more evident in "Fishmonger's

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<sup>10</sup>One might easily speculate that it is this story from which Frank O'Connor specifically derives his polar description of Coppard, caught between freedom and necessity. The biographic critic could speculate further, and with considerable force, that Coppard's very real concern with his personal freedom led to his very "thematic" treatment of it in this story, just as his socialism led him to attack capitalism in "Tribute." A significant difference between the two stories, though, is that "Tribute" is a bore and "Fishmonger's Fiddle" is brilliant.

Fiddle" than in most of his other good fiction; as a consequence, the reader is aware of the narrator's opinion of the characters and events. He never introduces himself or becomes self-conscious, but he does stand back and release comic volleys at the participants in this fiction. Especially, the first five pages of the narrative get this treatment. He begins with a light, mocking tone:

Maxie Morrisarde was not of the generation of Morrisardes. . . . Her paternal ancestry was Vole, her father and her father's father were Voles, but neither does that matter, for her mother had been a Crump.

The use of the name "Crump" and the meaning of Vole (a field-mouse) produce the comic effect. Coppard uses parallels and series to contribute even heavier humour to the ongoing exposition. He parodies in an anti-climactic series of periodic sentences the illogical diatribe that Aunt Vole launches against the memory of the husband who has deserted Maxie:

A ruffian, a serpent, he was; he had married her for her little fortune; a swindler he was, pimp, bloodsucker, criminal, and sponge; and he was doomed to the gallows; these things Aunt Vole so constantly avowed, vociferated, and vouched for that in time even Maxie came to believe them. In her heart, too, Mrs. Vole believed him to be a bigamist, but of this she never breathed a hint to the deserted girl.

That "bigamist" could be, for Aunt Vole, more unmentionable than "pimp," "bloodsucker," or "criminal" tells us more about the aunt than the departed husband. Coppard continues in this vein, contrasting parenthetically two parallel series to gain comic effect:

Uncle Vole was a retired cattle dealer, hearty, connubial, and a nonconformist. Aunt Vole was neither hearty (saving as to appetite) nor connubial (except by implication), but



she was rather deaf and she was very nonconformist. Life to her was the world, the flesh, and repentance; packed with tribulation from birth to burial, with snares by the scheming of Satan in every hour of the twenty-four. . . . Aunt Vole sowed and sowed and glowered.

The Voles have "a great rough hufty of a dog, with the name of Toots and the manners of a buffalo" about which Maxie once made the mistake of asking its breed. "Aunt Vole quivered all over as if Maxie had sworn at her. 'Breed!'" Coppard manages some of his best comic moments at the expense of Aunt Vole, particularly in her axiomatic description of the meaning of life. "'A man should settle down, he should settle down and bear his burdens, bear his burdens properly. That's what a burden's for.'"

Against Aunt Vole's confident, determined interpretation of the sinful hopelessness of life, Maxie is ultimately helpless. "Mrs. Morrisarde had been a school-teacher, a slight, fair pretty creature, helpless, charming, delicate, and an orphan, when she had married, quite suddenly, the first man who had made love to her. . . ." Being married had given her identity and position, but now she is abandoned and dependent on her aunt and uncle. Lovely as a flower, she does not flourish so much as she vegetates. In a small garden in the Vole's yard "a plot of grass . . . framed an escarpment of mould whereon a dozen geraniums took seasonal holiday. . . . Maxie Morrisarde was now . . . feeling much like one of those geraniums." Later in the story Maxie contemplates the geraniums as she ponders the entrapment of her marriage. Marriage had given her a certain freedom that she does not possess in her own right, but with her

husband gone she has not the will to maintain that freedom.

That will is soon challenged to act by Blackburne, the cellist of the local symphony, whose innocuous entry into a fish shop provides both the title of the story and the source of a hilarious exchange between the sublimely innocent Maxie and her always suspicious aunt. It is a long time before Maxie is permitted to go on walks without her aunt, and after one of her first solo ventures she reports a curious event: she has seen someone go into a fishmonger's with a fiddle, a cello. Aunt Vole interrogates the girl during tea:

"Fiddle! Oh, I thought--humph." And a silence followed in which the powerful crunching of lettuce became audible as an earthquake. Then Aunt Vole took up her cup and you could hear her gulping her tea--gallons of it. So Maxie took up her cup, and Uncle Vole his, and they all gulped together.

"What shop did you say?" inquired Aunt Vole.

"Fish shop!" shouted her husband.

"A fish shop," said Maxie too. "It looked funny, you know."

.....  
 "What did they want with a fiddle in there?"

"Oh, I don't suppose he was anything to do with the shop," explained the girl.

"They don't go into a fish shop for nothing," Aunt Vole pursued, "fiddle or no fiddle."

"No, he must have gone in to buy some fish," ventured her flurried niece.

"Oh," rejoined aunt, "Roman Catholic, I dare say. I shouldn't go that way again."

In comic scenes, such as this, the reader comes gradually to discover that Maxie's failure to gain her freedom is her own fault. Only a very weak person would sit gulping tea while being assailed by a brand of logic that follows from Major Premise: fiddle to Minor Premise: fishmonger to Conclusion: Roman Catholic and Decision: don't go that way again.

Maxie does go down to the pier with Toots, who kills a pigeon being fed by a young man. The young man and bystanders blame Maxie for the dog's crime, and she hurries ashamedly away. The next day, afraid that she will be recognized, she returns to the pier without the dog, and she "audaciously" pays twopence to sit close to the orchestra, where she recognizes the cellist as the young man of the pigeons and of the fishmonger's. They begin meeting, and, as they do, the narrative tone shifts from broadly comic mockery to a more gentle, almost paternal, humour. Blackburne himself is both the object and the source of this humour.

He was rather queer, but irresistibly friendly, and Aunt Vole had been quite wrong about him: nothing to do with any fishmonger at all, he only bought fish to eat. It was a pity, but all musicians had to, and he vowed that he ate like a horse.

Blackburne introduces a discussion of freedom:

Each day he played on the pier three times, day in and day out; he was like a carthouse, never free, and he would rather be a fishmonger, and he envied Maxie.

"Oh, but that is quite a mistake," said the girl. I haven't any freedom."

"Stuff! . . . You married and so achieved a status. That's an important truth about marriage--for the woman. She links herself with a man and ipso facto becomes an individual. Until then she has only been a nuisance, bullied by her mother, badgered by her sisters, and spanked by her brothers--possibly even by her pa. You were freed of all those affectionate ties, and then your man obligingly left you, so now you are more free than ever."

"He has left me alone, but not free," murmured Mrs. Morrisarde.

Blackburne promises her kisses, which he does not deliver then and there, but Maxie imagines them and is "secretly thrilled to be treated as a woman." Still, the reader knows that Maxie's will is too weak to move her beyond imagination to

action. "She had had a black serge father and a mother full of hymns; they died young, but they had not died soon enough--Maxie was no rebel." She timidly introduces a discussion of divorce with Aunt Vole, who first imputes her modesty, then, after several twists and turns, supposes that the missing husband, whom she has defamed, might return to the girl. An insect metaphor comically reveals further the illogical duplicity of the aunt:

Aunt Vole could travel upside down as easily as a wasp on a ceiling, and you dared not remind her of this for she could just as easily sting you. . . . "Stay as you are, my girl, you're safer. Break out, and you break down." . . . Maxie, timid and unfortunate, felt like an insect caught in a web that the spider had forsaken.

But, Maxie does exercise her will for one reckless, exhilarating day. She leaves home early on the Sabbath and joins Blackburne for a day on the seashore. Maxie impetuously removes her wedding ring and flings it into a river. She and Blackburne talk of God and of the meaning of life. Maxie, always deadly serious about such things, is limited in her perception of the universe and her place in it. Blackburne alternately mocks God, while chiding Maxie, and gently reproves her for her timidity.

"Oh, chuck, chuck! You've no more brains than a frying-pan. But oh, Mrs. Morrisard," he leaned on his elbow closer to her, "I'm deeply fond of you."

. . . He swore that she had a soul as sweet as any of the white birds, and the body of a queen--which was going rather far, perhaps, but not really absurd, maybe.

They visit an inn where a man sings a silly song about the Queen of Poland, then they go on through the lovely fields: "Maxie felt that she could go on roving thus for ever in so

bright and free a world, to hear and see all the absurd things and all the beautiful things with the man she loved." But, when the night comes, she gently refuses Blackburne's offer to be her husband or her lover. She has accepted her aunt's dread of sin and divorce "because it defamed God's will. Like all timid people she took a reason that had not been hers and made it her own, multiplying its intensity. Never, never, never!" Blackburne tells her that he has heard that in seven years time a woman is free to marry again if she has heard nothing of her husband. At the end of the story Maxie imagines the passage of seven years and remembers the silly song of the absurd man on her one day of freedom:

"Oh, the Queen of Poland is my queen,  
And I'm her Salamander."

On her return from the day with Blackburne, she tells her aunt everything and is forced to swear on the family Bible that she will never do such a thing again.

Maxie laid her hand on the open book. She was the creature of her environment, always. With her lover she had no fears, for he was fearless. With the Voles she laid down her pride. . . .

Maxie's timid spirit has been finally and completely subdued.

Coppard was aware of the shaping power of environment in his own life, and he displays his understanding of this force in "Fishmonger's Fiddle." In addition he makes some very apt comments on the nature of freedom and the social function of marriage for women. Why he did not develop these ideas with more of the subtlety and suggestion at his command, we can not know. But, the function of the humour is clear. The comedy at once relaxes the reader, lifts the weight of some of the more

dense thematic statements, and provides a running commentary on the characters and events. From this remove the reader can share in the narrator's gentle sympathy for the hopelessly weak girl. Instead of experiencing human anguish, as we might if he had taken us closer, we are lookers-on at the sad human comedy. Maxie Morrisarde is captive between two interpretations of life-- Aunt Vole ('burdens are meant to be born') and Blackburne ('come live with me and be my love'), and, having too little personality to choose for herself, she is swayed by her fear of hell-fire, which is really her defense against a larger fear. To attempt freedom is to endanger one's present security. The life Maxie has with the Voles is shallow, but it is dependable. She is too weak to risk the loss she must take in order to gain more, and it is easier to fear God's judgment than to recognize one's own weakness.

The narrator's broad mockery of Aunt Vole becomes, then, a fine narrative device. By making the person who represents Maxie's fear appear foolish, the narrator increases reader sympathy for the girl who lets herself be intimidated. She cannot see what the narrator and, by extension, the reader can see. Aunt Vole is an empty windbag that the narrator pierces with one comic dart after another. That Maxie is not a party to the comedy makes her plight all the more poignant.

The short stories that we have discussed so far in this chapter, except for "Arabesque: The Mouse," all depend on plot to inform their gross structures. The last three fictions that we will analyze are shaped in the lyric mode. Like all of

Coppard's poetic short stories, "Weep Not, My Wanton" occurs as a static action, the movement of which can be recorded by the change within the reader rather than in the characters. The setting is a living member of the action that operates with great subtlety to support and intensify one's response to the little human episode. The story opens with this alliterative description of pastoral tranquility.

Air and light on Sack Downs at summer sunset were soft as ointment and sweet as milk; at least, that is the notion the down might give to a mind that bloomed within its calm horizons, some happy victim of romance it might be, watching the silken barley moving in its lower fields with the slow movement of summer sea, reaching no harbour, having no end.

Most of the toilers on these great fields have gone home at the end of the day, but the tranquility is not complete.

At the crown of the hill a black barn stood by the roadside, and in its yard, amid sounds of anguish, a score of young boar pigs were being gelded by two brown lads and a gipsy fellow. Not half a mile of distance here could enclose you the compass of their cries.

So, within the larger peace exists a circle of a half mile radius filled with cries of anguish. Into this circle walks a labourer and his family proceeded by their own sound, "a sound mingling dully with their steps--the voice of the man. . . upbraiding his little son." The huge labourer towers over his tiny son--"a thin boy, a spare boy, a very shrunken boy of seven or eight years, crying quietly. He let no grief out of his lips, but his face was streaming with dirty tears." The man is scolding his son for having lost sixpence, and, when he runs out of words, he lifts his heavy hand and strikes the boy "a blow behind with shock enough to disturb a heifer." The family passes

the black barn, and the gypsy shouts encouragement to the father, "but the man ignored him, as he ignored the yell of the pig and the voice of the lark rioting above them all. . . ."

The setting is a complex amalgam of life and suffering that casts the boy's plight into relief. Walking a few paces behind the man and his son are his wife and toddling daughter. The woman "seemed to have no desire to shield the boy or to placate the man. She did not seem to notice them. . . ."

Again, the narrator describes the massive size of the man, who is drunk, and who once more strikes the small boy. "The boy, crying quietly, made no effort to avoid or resist him." A renewed verbal assault on the child is concluded with another physical attack: "He seized the boy by the neck and shook him as a child does a bottle of water." At last the mother very carefully intervenes. She sends the toddler up to her father and hurries behind some bushes with "a giggle of laughter." The little girl is now interposed between the father and son, and, as the woman shuffles out of the hedges a few moments later, the little boy joins her. "'O, my Christ, Johnny!' she said, putting her arms around the boy, 'what's 'e bin doin' yeh? Yer face is all blood!'"

Now we discover the source of his brave quiet crying. He has not lost the money but has only pretended to in order to keep it from his father. Whispering to his mother, he gives her the sixpence. The little family group goes on together out of the picture. "The screams from the barn had ceased, and a cart passed them full of young pigs, bloody and subdued. The



hill began to resume its old dominion of soft sounds."

The similarity between the boy and the pigs is suggested yet clear. They have both been bloodied, but the boy has not been subdued. The pigs' cries of anguish have provided in the setting the voice that the boy would not use, an ironic chorus for this miniscule tragedy. But, in this tale, if the pigs are victims, the boy is not. We have been told in one of the descriptions of the massive father: "There were two bright medals on the breast of his waistcoat, presumably for valour; he was perhaps a man who would stand on his rights and his dignities, such as they were. . . ." It is the boy, however, who acts courageously, quietly suffering abuse so that the family's remaining money will not be drunk up. The pigs have been desexed and the father has inebriated his manhood, but the boy has affirmed his own personhood. This series of similarities and contrasts is brought to an end by the end of the day. The circle of sound is absorbed into the quiet of the downs, which are empty save for "one anxious farmer." The day declines "with a greyness that came not from the sky, but crept up from the world." In the final quiet "you could hear dimly men's voices and the rattle of their gear."

As readers, we have been fixed observers of the scene unfolding before us. The narrative persona merely directs our attention to the appropriate area of the downs. Although he provides descriptions of the father and son in a manner calculated to increase our sympathy for the latter, he refrains from intrusions, conclusions, or summaries. He does not tell us of

the similarities and contrasts that formalize this work so much as he draws our attention to them by careful word selection. Thus, it is left for the reader to see deeply into a moment of human anguish and triumph.

"Mordecai and Cocking" is a more tragic but more lovely poetic work than "Weep Not, My Wanton." Like the lesser tale "The Snare," the analogy drawn between the trapping of a rabbit and the entrapment of man grows from a simple image to become the controlling metaphor of the fiction. "The Snare" fails to be more than casually entertaining because its light mood keeps the reader at an amused distance and because the "snare" of the title is never even suggested as the story develops but instead is introduced near the end in a direct, and grotesque, statement of purpose by one of the characters.

The most obvious poetry of "Mordecai and Cocking" is found in the language, some of the loveliest lyrical writing that Coppard has done. For sheer beauty it compares as a whole work only to "The Watercress Girl," in which we find descriptions like the following:

Then Oppidan was startled by a flock of starlings that slid across the evening with the steady movement of a cloud; the noise of their wings was like showers of rain upon trees.

But, "Mordecai and Cocking" gains lyric quality, too, in its highly evocative capturing, in the briefest moment, of the essence of the hopeless human struggle for freedom. Coppard establishes parallel actions involving man and rabbit, then he joins the two in a final brilliantly realized action. The conclusion of the tale becomes not so much a resolution of the

action as it is a confirmation of the entire narrative experience. With Eustace Cocking we experience on the human level and the animal level the truth of his pessimistic observations about life.

Coppard sets the scene on the downs--bleak, empty, lonely, open, yet strangely beautiful.

The downs, huge and bare, stretched in every direction, green and grey, gentle and steep, their vast confusion enlivened by a small hanger of beech or pine, a pond, or more often a derelict barn; for among the downs there are barns and garneries ever empty, gone into disuse and abandoned. . . . Elsewhere in this emptiness even a bush will have a name, and an old stone becomes a track mark.

Though little grows on the downs themselves, the narrator tells us: "The day was radiant, the very air had bloom." The downs have a magic, illusory quality so that "in the valley below the men a thousand sheep were grazing; they looked no more than a handful of white beach randomly scattered." The downs bear another sign of life, too (and in so doing are perceived as being, themselves, alive): "Like veins upon the down's broad breast, you may perceive the run-way of the hare."

Within this elemental setting we discover two characters talking. The older man is Mordecai, a shepherd, the younger is Eustace Cocking, now unemployed. They are discussing the relationship between justice and law, Cocking not nearly so dispassionately as Mordecai. Cocking intends to break the law. He avows that whenever he does something wrong he always feels glad about it next morning. Mordecai responds: "'Tis against law, Eustice, and to be against law is the downfall of mankind.'" Cocking replies that the law is "'made by them as don't care for

my needs, and don't understand my rights. Is it fair to let them control your mind . . . ?" Cocking is bitter because, after working for a man for fourteen years, he has been let go because his wife could not afford more time away from her children to care for the home of his boss's wife.

"'Tain't the job I minds so much as to let him have that power to spite me so at a moment after fourteen years because of his wife's temper. 'Tis not decent. 'Tis undergrading a man."

Cocking concludes that, if such an act is law, he will ignore the law. "'And that you can't do,' retorted the old man. 'God A'mighty can look after the law.'" Cocking answers: "'If He be willing to take the disgrace of it, Mordecai Stavely, let Him.'" The two men begin talking of other things, and the narrator directs the reader's attention around the downs, finally settling on the hare run-ways. The dialogue resumes to give the story a direct and somewhat forced statement of purpose, a momentary lapse from which Coppard recovers by the superb writing of the following scene. In effect he frees himself with the following dialogue to write the last scene:

"Why can't a man live like a hare?" broke out the younger man. "I'd not mind being shot at a time and again. It lives a free life, anyway, not like a working man. . . ."

"Because," said Mordecai, "a hare is a vegetarian. . . . And," he added significantly, "there be dogs."

"It takes a mazin' good dog to catch a hare on its own ground. . . ."

"There be traps and wires!"

"Well, we've no call to rejoice, with the traps set for a man, and the wires a choking him."

Once again the focus of the action moves away from the characters and dialogue to a description of two mating hares:

The doe, a small fawn creature, crouched coyly before the other, a large nut-brown hare with dark ears. Soon she

darted away, sweeping before him in a great circle, or twisting and turning as easily as a snake. She seemed to fly the faster, but when his muscular pride was aroused he swooped up to her shoulder, and, as if in loving derision, leaped over her from side to side as she ran. She stopped as sharply as a shot upon its target and faced him, quizzing him gently with her nose.

Coppard packs this brief passage with metaphor after metaphor, yet his careful selection of diction and smooth control of sentence structure give the description a natural simplicity. His word selection is precise and allusive. The doe becomes almost a human female who crouches "coily" before the male and, later, quizzes "him gently with her nose." A profusion of verbs transmits the action of the scene. The doe crouches, darts, sweeps, twists and turns, flies, runs, stops, faces, and quizzes. When the buck is "aroused," he swoops and leaps. The animal grace of twisting, circling, leaping movement of the doe uses up most of the language of the description, yet her power is overshadowed in the relatively brief description of the "large nut-brown" buck who seems impassive until his "muscular pride" is "aroused." Then he almost casually leaps over her in "loving derision." As nature itself does, the two hares become distinct and individual characters in the story.

The peace of the buck hare is soon attacked by an intruder, another buck who watches from a distance. The nut-brown hare makes repeated attacks upon the interloper, but, each time he defeats the tawny buck and resumes his courtship, the intruder returns to watch at a distance.

Hapless mourning seemed to involve his hunched figure; he had the aspect of a deferential, grovelling man; but the lover saw only his provocative, envious eye--he swept down

upon him. Standing up again, he slammed and basted him with puny velvet blows until he had salved his indignation, satisfied his connubial pride. . . .

. . . But though he could beat him and disgrace him, he could neither daunt nor injure him.

The character of the third hare is drawn as singularly as that of the other two. The reader sees him as a sad, almost despicable figure "hunched" with "hapless mourning," "deferential" and "grovelling." But, to the threatened suitor, the tawny buck appears "provocative" and "envious," a challenge to the nut-brown hare's peace of mind. So, he attacks his challenger with what is, to the amused reader, all the violence of "puny velvet blows." Coppard additionally describes the tawny buck as a "shameless spy" whom the brave defender pounces upon and beats "to the full, like a Turk or like a Russian."

By raising the animals to the human level, Coppard reduces the human story to animal conflicts. The narrator speculates on how this triangle might have ended: "The vanquished miscreant would remain watching their wooing with the eye of envy--or perhaps of scorn--and hoping for a miracle to happen." The miracle happens for the tawny buck. Cocking releases his whippet on the hares. The following passage is one of the most beautiful in Coppard:

The doe shot away over the curve of the hill and was gone. She did not merely gallop, she seemed to pass into ideal flight, the shadow of wind itself. Her fawn body, with half-cocked ears and unperceivable convulsion of the leaping haunches, soared across the land with the steady swiftness of a gull. The interloper hare, in a blast of speed, followed hard upon her traces.

Again, the narration dwells lovingly on the sheer physical power and beauty of the doe. She shoots away and is gone. She wastes

no time or energy in galloping but, instead, passes into "ideal flight" becoming the "shadow of wind itself." Her "leaping haunches" barely seem to move as she soars. And, the sad, miserable intruder suddenly appears in a new light as his weak waiting is transformed into dynamic energy, and he follows her in a "blast of speed."

The brave defender of his territory and his pride has suddenly become the victim of this violent turnabout, and the lush description goes on:

Cocking's hound had found at last the hare of its dreams, a nut-brown, dark-eared, devil-guided, eluding creature, that fled over the turf of the hill as lightly as a cloud. The long leaping dog swept in its track with a stare of passion, following in great curves the flying thing that grew into one great throb of fear all in the grand sunlight on the grand bit of a hill.

The dream-like description of the doe in the preceding passage is transferred in this quotation to the hound's fulfilled wish. It has found "the hare of its dreams." The metrical series of hyphenated modifiers describing the hound's ecstatic vision of the hare beats with the alliteration of the "d" sound that punctuates the hound's flight and the hare's heartbeat:

"a nut-brown, dark-eared, devil-guided, eluding creature."

The "long leaping dog" fixes single-mindedly on the hare "with a stare of passion." He, too, has become an almost human player in this violent little drama. The language of shape--sweeping and curving--that has been used all along in the description of the hares is here continued and completed in the metaphor of the hare growing into "one great throb of fear." And, we are reminded, too, of the irony of setting in this eclogue. The

magic, illusory nature of the downs has been transformed to the dog's violent realization of his dream of the hare, as each one acts out his part "all in the grand sunlight on the grand bit of hill."

All of nature stops for the agony of the flight--a "little heart of wax" pursued by a "mouth of flame." But, in the final turnabout the pursuer once again becomes, violently, victim; and the conflict returns to the human level. The dog suddenly falls dead, shot by the gamekeeper, who "rapidly and menacingly" approaches Cocking. The voice of the "God A'mighty" who looks after the law demands a reckoning: "'I shall want you, Eustace Cocking,' cried the gamekeeper, 'to come and give an account o' yourself.'"

The poor man does not get justice because he does not control the law, but he can experience a kind of freedom if he can wait passively for his opportunity. If he strikes out to defend his pride, he succeeds only in drawing attention to himself. That is Mordecai's message to Cocking, supported by the secondary narrative of the hares. But, for Cocking some freedom is not enough; he will not accommodate himself; he will struggle and be destroyed. Coppard uses irony of setting to achieve much of the experience of "Mordecai and Cocking." The bright, lonely, broad panorama of the downs suggests a sweep and a scope beyond the immediate action. The narration captures a brief tableau contrasting vivid life and violent death, a completed action in which the fictive experience is its own end. The conflict exposed in "Mordecai and Cocking" has no resolution



for it is a human conflict as wide as the world. But, for a moment the reader is enabled to enter the arena and engage in the struggle.

"The Field of Mustard" is not only Coppard's master work; it is one of the finest lyric short stories ever written. The story evokes for the reader a deep melancholy of irreparable loss blended from a subtle weave of interlocking metaphorical patterns and careful selection of language. The story is pure Coppard. The essence of his thematic materials is here formalized in a manner so deftly suggestive as to make critical analysis seem to be a criminal act. Indeed, a formal analysis of "The Field of Mustard" is difficult. This is the epitome of the story in which nothing happens. The two principal characters are afforded a small discovery that they have shared the love of the same man. Beyond this, nothing happens to them. The action of the story, as in every poetic work, is the revealing of interior life to the reader with intensity and richness of design. The movement by the reader from ignorance to knowledge is achieved largely through imagery and metaphorical suggestion. And, the knowledge that the reader obtains is, unlike the certitude that issues from the more prosaic "Fishmonger's Fiddle," as ambiguous as the nature of life itself, which is the focus of "The Field of Mustard."

As in every lyric short story, the setting of "The Field of Mustard" is so much a part of the total effect that it almost becomes a character in its own right; the very title announces its importance. The story opens on "three sere

disvirgined women" collecting firewood in the Black Wood on a windy November afternoon. Color and odor and texture are important ingredients of the metaphorical life of the story, a pastoral in the form of an eclogue.

The forest ahead of them swept high over a hill and was gloomy; behind them the slim trunks of beech, set in a sweet ruin of hoar and scattered leaf, and green briar nimbly fluttering made a sort of palisade against the light of the open, which was grey, and a wide field of mustard, which was yellow.

The interweave of light and dark casts a bleak spell on the action. The little light merely supports the dark. "Hoar" is the white of age, while the yellow of the mustard suggests withering and death. The only "green" is a "briar," a contradictory figure that echoes the preceding oxymoron "sweet ruin." The women are pulling "dead branches" from trees and stacking them into bundles.

Age has overtaken the three women and death is not far behind. They wear clothing of "dull blue" and "grey;" the wind tousles their "gaunt locks." Dinah Lock, the dominant character, has gone to huge fat, while Rose Olliver and Amy Hardwick show on their bodies, too, the unmistakable signs of aging. That the time is lost to them is further suggested by their meeting with "an old hedger with a round belly belted low" who tells them the time "by his ancient watch." The watch is a relic of an old war. The hedger's uncle was awarded it for "'doing of his duty.'" "'That all?' cried Dinah Lock. 'Well, I never got no watch for that a-much.'" Dinah covets a watch that she has seen in London, ticking along though reposed in a bowl of

water. After an exchange of insults the women end their conversation with the old man and begin preparing their bundles of kindling. Dinah and Rose start off carrying their loads, but the listless Amy calls to them to "'wait a minute.'" "'Oh God, that's death,'" replies Dinah as she trudges off. She and Rose journey along a diagonal path crossing the field of mustard until, coming to the far corner, they fling down their bundles and wait for Amy. The scene is set; now the eclogue begins.

The descriptions and dialogue that follow convey the women's sense of despairing loss, a loss that the reader shares because he is party to the human condition. Man is a prisoner of rotting time sentenced to a brief journey that begins at the cradle and ends at the grave. Time is bankrupt because the Garden is forever lost, the Golden Age has gone sour. Youth and its promise of love and fruition have gone to ruin, indeed, are never anything more than vain desires. Coppard says none of this directly but suggests it through dialogue and metaphorical development. Like "Adam and Eve and Pinch Me," "The Field of Mustard" is formalized by a controlling metaphor, the Garden of Eden. Unlike "Adam and Eve," the lost Garden of "The Field of Mustard" is neither a hopeful nor an obvious metaphor; it is hidden within the figurative capacity of the field of mustard itself.

From the far side of the field of mustard, looking from where Dinah and Rose rest, the narrator sets the field into a context of forest and hills and roads that has a kind of "gloomy" "grandeur," but Dinah's eyes see only its melancholy.

The reader's eyes are directed to see

the field they had crossed, a sour scent rising faintly from its yellow blooms, which quivered in the wind. Day was dull, the air chill, and the place most solitary. . . . the Black Wood heaved itself effortlessly upon them and lay like a dark pall over the outline of a corpse.

After this extraordinary sexual-death image the narrative persona turns to Dinah, who sinks her elbows into her fat thighs and puffs out: "'Oh God, cradle and grave is all there is for we.'"

Dinah and Rose begin to discuss friends and friendship. According to Rose, Amy is not a good companion because "'she's too sour and slow.'" But, Dinah avows her closeness to Rose: "'I like you, Rose; I wish you was a man.'" This is just one of the many seemingly homosexual references in the story that, in fact, bespeak a certain sexual ambiguity that has come with age. Dinah continues: "'Ah, your time's too long or it's too short, or it's just right but you're too old. Cradle and grave's my portion. Fat old thing! he called me,'" this in reference to the exchange of insults with the old hedger. Dinah and Rose share thoughts about their lost hopes: "'My heart's young, Rose.'" And later, "'I'm growing old, but my heart's young.'" Dinah's "corpulence dispossessed her of tragedy." Rose, who is childless, envies Dinah her four children, but Dinah maintains that her "family's a torment." Even her husband is a loss to her; he has been "'no man at all since he was ill.'"

"Rose had snapped off a sprig of the mustard flower and was pressing and pulling the bloom in and out of her mouth." This striking sexual image compounds the barrenness of this

"sere disvirgined" woman who longs for fruition but garners only the harshness of empty age. The flower of her maiden youth has become ironically soured like the yellow bloom of the mustard which whets the appetite, adds flavour and zest, but is nothing in itself. Seasoning alone is insubstantial. Even the long ago loss of her virginity has gained her nothing. She reads to Dinah from a clipping that she has been carrying with her:

"I came upon a little old-fashioned engraving at the bottom of a page. It imaged a procession of some angelic children in a garden, little placidly-naked substantial babes, with tiny bird-wings. One carried a bow, others a horn of plenty, or a hamper of fruit, or a set of reedpipes. They were garlanded and full of grave joys. And at the sight of them a strange bliss flowed into me such as I had never known, and I thought this world was all a garden, though its light was hidden and its children not yet born."

This passage reminds us of the narrator's vision of his unborn child in "Adam and Eve." But, to Rose, whose children remain unborn, the angelic vision is bitter-sweet. She crushes the paper. An understanding of the peculiar entrapment that is the experience of this fiction begins to clarify. The human condition may be bad for all. Everyone ages. But, for woman especially, who flowers for a time and then fades, the loss of her time is a particularly cruel joke. Her womb may reach out to the future, but that future promises her children nothing more than she has received--cradle to grave. If she has no children, she does not partake of the promise of the Garden, but, if she has children, she only lives to see them replace her youth with their own. Dinah never wanted her own children:

"But I know, I know, I know I never wanted 'em, they were not for me, I was just an excuse for their blundering into the world. Somehow I've been duped, and every woman born

is duped so, one ways or another in the end. I had my sport with my man, but I ought never to have married."

Life is fleeting; all joys are evanescent, soon to be replaced by regrets.

The wind blew strongly athwart the yellow field, and the odour of mustard rushed upon the brooding women. Protestingly the breeze flung itself upon the forest; there was a gliding cry among the rocking pinions as of some lost wave seeking a forgotten shore.

Dinah lies down on the ground next to Rose and begins to talk about Rufus Blackthorn, the former gamekeeper, whom, they are about to discover, is their shared memory of youth and pleasure, fulfillment of their womanhood that becomes in a moment of shared recognition another cruel loss. As Dinah begins to make general comments on the person and character of Blackthorn, Rose agrees with everything positive but denies his failings.

"He was a devil." Dinah Lock began to whisper. "A perfect devil; I can't say no fairer than that. I wish I could, but I can't."

"Oh come," protested Rose, "he was a kind man. He'd never see anybody want for a thing."

"No," there was a playful scorn in Dinah's voice; "he'd shut his eyes first!"

"Not to a woman he wouldn't, Dinah."

"Ah! Well--perhaps--he was good to women."

"I could tell you things as would surprise you," murmured Rose.

"You! But--well--no, no. I could tell you things as you wouldn't believe. Me and Rufus. We was--oh my--yes!"

In this exchange we see another excellent example of Coppard's ability to capture personality in dialogue. Each of the women is standing on the brink of revelation, yet each is so caught up in her own memory that neither understands the implication of the other's words. The full awareness is yet to come. Dinah

boldly describes her love affair with Blackthorn:

"Oh, a pretty man! . . . Black as coal and bold as a fox. I'd been married nigh on ten years when he first set foot in these parts. I'd got three children then. He used to give me a saucy word whenever he saw me, for I liked him and he knew it. . . . I was putting some plants in our garden--I loved a good flower in those days--I wish the world was all a garden, but now my Tom he digs 'em up, digs everything up proper and never puts 'em back. . . . And as I was doing that planting someone walked by the garden in such a hurry. I looked up and there was Rufus, all dressed up to the nines, and something made me call out to him.

Here, once again, the figure of the lost garden creeps back into the action, this time as an analog of Dinah's love-life that had flourished with Blackthorn but has now withered and died in a sick husband.

The affair, once begun with Blackthorn, reached such passion that Dinah would lie awake at nights thinking of him.

I woke up in bed that night, and the moon shone on me dreadful--I thought the place was afire. But there was Tom snoring, and I lay and thought of me and Rufus in the wood, till I could have jumped out into the moonlight, stark, and flown over the chimney. I didn't sleep any more. And I saw Rufus the next night, and the night after that, often, often.

During this time she could not love her husband, who was more satisfied with drink anyway, so she made a bottle available for him, pretended sickness, and met Blackthorn night after night until she had found out that he was faithless: "'And then-- what do you think? Bless me if Rufus weren't up to . . . tricks! Deep as the sea, that man. Faithless, you know, but such a bold one.'"

With a wry smile Rose begins to tell Dinah a story that Blackthorn had told about himself. He had recovered the body of a drowned gentleman and hidden it until he could claim a ten

pound reward for it. According to Blackthorn, he had taken the body to bed with him for safekeeping. Now the reader recalls Dinah's sarcastic rejoinder to the old hedger, who early in the story describes his uncle as "'a noble Christian man'": "'Ah! I suppose he slept wid Jesus?' yawped Dinah." The pervading sexual ambiguity has become even more pronounced.

Taking no notice of the intimate implication of Rose's story, Dinah continues to talk about Blackthorn:

"He used to make fine little slippers out of reeds."

"Yes," Rose concurred, "he made me a pair."

"You!" Dinah cried. "What--were you--?"

As astonished recognition overtakes Dinah, Rose's defense of Blackthorn crumples and turns to bitter denunciation. "Rose turned her head away. 'We was all cheap to him,' she said softly, 'cheap as old rags; we was like chaff before him.'"

The two women have now lost even their passionate memories. Having shared Blackthorn's love, neither has had it. They have been helplessly "disvirgined" and "dispossessed of tragedy." The whole time has been lost. With their sexuality turning to fat or withering to harshness, all that they might have had are the reveries of their flowering youth when they could arouse and hold the passion of a dark, bold man. Now even that is denied them. Memory has turned as sour as the field of mustard. The Golden Age that cannot be recaptured was never anything more than a myth. In lyrical unity personified nature reflects their sorrow.

Dinah Lock lay still, very still, ruminating; but whether in old grief or new rancour Rose was not aware, and she probed no further. Both were quiet, voiceless, recalling



the past delirium. They shivered, but did not rise. The wind increased in the forest, its hoarse breath sorrowed in the yellow field, and swift masses of cloud flowed and twirled in a sky without end and full of gloom.

At last Amy catches up to them. She has found a shilling and invites them to her house after tea for some stout. She trudges on as Dinah and Rose struggle to their feet to resume their burdens. Rose still envies Dinah's children, and the supposed warmth of her fire, but Dinah harshly replies: "'Ain't you got a fire of your own indoors? . . . Well, why don't you set by it then!'" To grieve for loss in this world is foolishness; even to remember it is unwise. The world is a place of aimless tragedies and certain snares. To try too hard to find joy in it is merely to discover one's loss more profoundly. The final exchange between Dinah and Rose is punctuated by another reminder of the death that awaits on the other side of the cradle. "A covey of partridges feeding beyond scurried away with ruckling cries. One foolish bird dashed into the telegraph wires and dropped dead." The use of the word "foolish" implies that the bird did not fly into the wires completely by accident. "Foolishness" is not an animal quality but a human quality. In context the word implies that one should not attempt too much. Perhaps with their new recognition, Dinah and Rose will attempt less and less. Yet, something remains. Having unwittingly shared a lover, they might now share their sorrows.

The wind hustled the two women close together, and as they stumbled under their burdens Dinah Lock stretched out a hand and touched the other woman's arm. "I like you, Rose, I wish you was a man."

Each of the "sere disvirgined women" has become sexless, but,

with the passions only a sour memory, friendship and understanding yet remain. Dinah expresses this need for empathy in an almost pathetic attempt to find the right words: "I wish you was a man." She is, we have been told, too fat for tragedy. Yet, the ending of the story is a bleak and powerful allusion to nature that lifts the story out of its very real depiction of two women to a comment on the universal tragedy of humanity, particularly the tragedy of women.

Again they were quiet, voiceless, and thus in fading light they came to their homes. But how windy, dispossessed, and ravaged roved the darkening world! Clouds were borne frantically across the heavens, as if in a rout of some battle, and the lovely earth seemed to sigh in grief at some calamity all unknown to men.

The earth itself has become a homeless wanderer sighing at the loss of its hoped for perfection. Having lost the Garden, all the loveliness of the earth is but a soured imitation dully reflected in a yellowed mirror.

If the exterior simplicity of Coppard's fiction puts off literary analysis, its complex and subtle interior richness rewards the effort. There is no question that Coppard wrote, as he said the writer must do, with an idea to be developed. But, in his best fiction meaning accrues not by direct statement but through organic use of language, setting, characters, and point of view so that they reenforce and build on each other to create a complete fictive experience. Coppard handles all of the elements of his best fiction so well that the reader can only artificially separate them. In this chapter we have examined the elements of some of his well-told tales. Fictions like "The Higgler" and "The Black Dog" develop meaning through complex

motif arrangements. "Pomona's Babe" and "Arabesque: The Mouse" unfold as pattern, or repetitive form. "Fishmonger's Fiddle" uses a comic tone to reveal by indirection the character of the protagonist. Though setting and language aid in structuring meaning in all of these short stories, they are inseparable from meaning in the lyric stories, "Weep Not, My Wanton," "Mordecai and Cocking," and "The Field of Mustard," which live in the pastoral tradition.

## CONCLUSION

The foregoing dissertation has been an attempt to reconcile the life of Alfred Edgar Coppard with the life of his short fiction, to expand the understanding of both, and to depict the uniqueness of each. Traditionally, Coppard has been thought to be a kind of literary primitive writing almost naturally about natural man. This simplistic version of Coppard's person and work has given way to another simplified understanding, that Coppard was a rather ordinary man who became a very studied artist. Coppard was, in fact, an interestingly complex person whose greatest work of fictive recreation may well have been his own life. At middle age he had acquired the inventive power and the opportunity to break away from the life that necessity had forced upon him to fashion his life after what surely must have been his own adolescent picture of the artist. The poor, uneducated boy who fastened on "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" at seventeen and read voraciously in the greats of English literature until he had read more in bulk than most students (so much, in fact, as to be convinced that his opinion was the final word on all matters concerning English poetry), who so revered anything to do with art, probably never dreamed that someday he too would be a published author. Yet, when he himself became the kind of person whom he had so long admired, an artist, opportunity did not find him wanting. His native sensitivity and

imagination, heightened by his own reading, had made him a perceptive observer of the life around him. The sense of formal artistry that had incipiently developed through his extensive reading exerted itself in selecting and ordering the materials of his fictions into artistic wholes. But, if on the one hand Coppard's life experiences prepared him to be an artist, they also prepared him to think of himself as one. From Alf Coppard, shy child (later, all-around good fellow), he became A. E. Coppard, the author, then "Flynn," the living embodiment of his imaginative recreation of his own life, for a time even "The Warden of Walberswick," revered author aging gracefully.

We have seen, first, Coppard's denial, then, his recognition of the biographical elements of his fiction. We have traced, too, the gathering fictive invention of his own life. Coppard's growth to adulthood had occurred in a tension between life experienced and life read about. He was alternately vexed with shame about his common ignorance and smug with pride about his secret reading. His understanding of this tension provided him with much of the substance of his fiction, particularly evident in the "Johnny Flynn" stories and in other obviously autobiographical works. Yet, most important to our recognition of Coppard the artist in the short story is not that he used the materials of his life in his fiction but that he understood, on some creative level, the distinction between his life and his art. Thus, his art is never a mere rehash of his childhood experiences. Some of the Johnny Flynn stories, especially, show evidence of Coppard's ability to exert ironic distance on the

facts of his life to create the experience of fiction.

However interesting Coppard's life may have been, his value to literary history must be proved by his writing. The most sympathetic treatment of Coppard's work can not place the body of his writing into the first rank of English authors. Yet, if we define his work in terms of the short story, his real value becomes more apparent. Coppard's almost exclusive use of the short story and his self-conscious, literate treatment of that genre, contributed significantly to the artistic growth of the form. He eschewed the traditionally popular forms of short fiction (the gimmick story, the idea story, the abbreviated novel) for the organic short story of the twenties in which positive shortness was understood to grow out of the formulation of life experiences. If Coppard was not the most articulate theoretical spokesman for the new form, he was certainly one of the recognized leaders in its development. And, the romantic associations made with his life might well have helped popularize the short story form in a portion of the public mind.

The duality observed in Coppard's personality finds expression in his fiction. Because of his origins and self-education, Coppard saw himself as the literate common man. The subjects of his fiction are almost always an expression of his reverence for the common. The world of his fiction is peopled by poor men and women who are not trying so hard to understand their lives as they are simply attempting to cope with the confusions and frustrations of cradle to grave necessity. The nature of this world may be slyly comic, or dull and brooding,

or lovingly gentle, or charged with sexual tension, but over it all hangs an air of almost casual violence and brutality, often metaphorically expressed in animal images, in which the hopes of the poor to escape simple necessity are continually still-born. Even though Coppard was an ardent socialist-communist sympathizer, his artistic remove enabled him to create a world in which the poor man suffers but the upper classes are not to blame. The upper classes are merely another condition of the poor man's existence. Man is like an animal caught in a trap; to struggle only reminds one of the fact of one's entrapment; it may even increase the pain. Even to attempt love is to be reminded that mankind is irrevocably divided into man and woman, and in the world of Coppard's fiction the sexual splice will not hold.

Though the subjects of Coppard's fiction derive from his experiences of common men, his fiction is informed through a combination of his literacy and his belief in the common. Thus, he could praise the artistry of Chekhov, Maupassant, and James (and we can recognize their influence in his fiction), while extolling the ancient form of the tale as the most important method for the short story writer because it speaks in a voice that the average man hears. Yet, when Coppard attempts to write the short story as the tale told in a tavern, he relies on strikingly literate devices, such as, pattern, motif, and skillful use of point of view. Even his attempts to capture the fragmentary nature of life as it might be expressed in the tale result in a minor literary form, the interlude. In his

literary theory Coppard praises Henry James and plot, but we see that in his best fiction obvious plot is ordinarily submerged beneath other formal and material elements, such as, voice, or setting, or characterization. In fact some of Coppard's finest fiction, certainly his most important single contribution to the history of the short story, is written in the lyric, or poetic, mode, conveying experience not by causal chronology but by the subtle evocation of moods through controlled use of setting and language. These short stories in particular, if not all of Coppard's work, are among the finest fictions in English.

I have entitled this dissertation Flynn: A Study of A. E. Coppard and His Short Fiction because it seems to me that, although Coppard's fiction can and should be evaluated apart from his life, our understanding of it can be enriched by an awareness of the manner in which the mind of this artist converted his life experiences into the illusion of literature. Coppard's life, of course, is interesting in itself, and there is a sense in which it might well be understood as its author's greatest invention. And, in this sense, Coppard's fiction might well be understood, finally, as a legitimate analog of his life. The primitive man of the woods, the "uneducated larrikin" holding the pen, the dark gypsy who so infatuated Ford--each of these portraits goes no further than surface simplicity. Yet, if one can break through the surface, he will find the real life of the man to be complex and infinitely more engaging than the simple romanticisms. So, too, the apparent



simplicity of so much of Coppard's fiction disguises the rich experience of human life that Flynn has discovered and shared with the reader who will engage and delight in the revelation.

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Each copy contains a page of the original manuscript. Copy 1 contains both the first and the last pages of the manuscript. This story was, according to Coppard, "pirated." The copies were sold at \$65 each. Coppard recalls in Schwartz' bibliography that he had given the original manuscript to an American, whom he does not identify. The page of manuscript in the British Museum Copy is handwritten on the back of a typed page of "Adam and Eve and Pinch Me." (The Newberry copy, number 27, contains a page of the manuscript written on the back of a typed page of "Piffingcap.")

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Although this "tale" has the physical proportions of a novel, Coppard insists that he never writes anything of so much scope.

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APPROVAL SHEET

The dissertation submitted by Frank Edmund Smith has been read and approved by members of the Department of English.

The final copies have been examined by the director of the dissertation and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated and that the dissertation is now given final approval with reference to content and form.

The dissertation is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Jan. 1, 1973

Date

Agnes McNeill Donohue

Signature of Advisor