

1937

What Makes a Literary Short Story

John Rood

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq>

Recommended Citation

Rood, John. "What Makes a Literary Short Story." *New Mexico Quarterly* 7, 3 (1937). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq/vol7/iss3/12>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by the University of New Mexico Press at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in New Mexico Quarterly by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact disc@unm.edu.

What Makes a Literary Short Story?

By JOHN ROOD

THE ANSWER, obviously, is the author. This may sound flippant because it is so obvious, but I assure you that no flippancy is intended. For, even though the author is supposed—by all the rules—to keep out of the story, he is there all the time; in every sentence. We know he is there by what he says and how he says it.

Content and form? What is said and how it is said. But naturally these are here. Something has to be said and it has to be said in a certain way. Both of them are the author at work. So, we always come back to the author: what he is saying and how he is saying it.

Like any artist, the author must be sensitive in special ways. It is not enough to be sensitive merely to things; the artist must also be sensitive to ideas. One might say that "things" are the furniture, and "ideas" the motive force to move that furniture about. Artistry does not end with sensitivity; it begins there. There are many people who are sensitive to things and to ideas but who have no compulsion to do anything about it. They just are sensitive, receptive, and they naturally are the audience of the artist.

We might liken the artist to an electric light bulb! He receives into himself certain stimuli and gives off, because of the stimuli, a radiance. This radiance, or glow, that permeates the work of an artist, be he writer, musician, painter, is the thing that decides whether his work is "good" or whether it is merely mediocre. All of us give off a certain glow but in most of us, it is a very dim glow indeed.

To leave this rather precious atmosphere of "sensitivity," "glow," etc., let us be more specific. In my own experience as an editor, I read hundreds of so-called stories that were not even good reporting, though they were too obviously, in a strict sense, reporting: the author has seen something or heard of something and he describes it as best he

can. Perhaps the majority of stories written by would-be authors are of this sort. And woe to the editor who tells the author that the story lacks reality! The immediate answer would be, "But it actually happened." That always makes the author feel that he is one up on the editor who must be a very stupid person! It is almost impossible to make these "writers" understand that there is a reality beyond what the writer knows to be "true." The editor of a literary magazine is looking for the reality that is the individual creation of the one writer. He is looking for that writer's "glow," which is unlike the glow of any other writer. If the writer hasn't any individual or personal radiance, he just isn't a writer.

It comes down to this: We are not interested in a story because of what it tells, nor are we interested in how it is told. But we are interested in what is told and how it is told if throughout the whole fabric of the story shines a rich personality—the writer.

Let us illustrate this by going into another field—painting. Take the *Bridge at Arles* by Van Gogh. The artist paints a bridge. All right, we have seen bridges before. We are not interested. The paint is put on in small rectangular patches. Sorry, we have already seen that done by others. Then what is it in the picture that holds us, that makes us want to look at it again and again, that fills us with emotion and pleasure and the desire to own the picture? Would that not be the artist himself, and what he put into the saying and doing?

This brings us again to the writer. What can we who wish to be writers, do to make ourselves rich inside ourselves? Obviously the desire is not enough and it is also obvious that we cannot set out in cold blood to make artists of ourselves! There are no rules that we as individuals can follow. If we have the emotional, mental, physical capacities, we are at least equipped for the journey. But even so, it is no easy road. And there is no pot of gold at the end, barring an accident or chance happening. We must forget the dream of vast wealth for the writer if we have any desire

WHAT MAKES A LITERARY SHORT STORY? [199

to accomplish literary distinction. The money *may* come to us, but as I said above, that will be accidental and will have no bearing on the judgment as to whether our work is good or bad.

Our time is one of the richest as well as one of the most difficult times for the writer. There is so much to be known, felt, organized, and written. We are living in a time of violent social changes, and woe be to the writer who is oblivious to these changes. Perhaps you will say, how can a writer be blind to what is going on about him? My answer would be that there are many people who are so busy looking back that they see nothing about them. The young writer especially tries so hard to see "how Hemingway did it" or how Anderson or Cather or Mansfield did it, that he is receiving nothing into himself at all. It would be far better for the literature of our time if all would-be writers forgot the masters of yesterday and listened and looked hard at what is going on about them now. There is no necessity to spend time trying to find "how" to say something if you are not going to have anything to say! And if we are sensitive to our time, we are going to have plenty to say—and the way to say it need not worry us, for that will come easily enough.

Grief

By IRENE FISHER

There is a rhythm in the waves of grief
Spreading in circles wide and wider still
From the stone dropped
Within the depths of anguish.

The waves recede, farther and farther away,
Smaller and smaller as they go
And sorrow, heart close.
Is nothingness. It is not there at all.