

Some Anomalies of the Short Story (from Literature and Life) eBook

Some Anomalies of the Short Story (from Literature and Life) by William Dean Howells

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by William Dean Howells

SOME ANOMALIES OF THE SHORT STORY

The interesting experiment of one of our great publishing houses in putting out serially several volumes of short stories, with the hope that a courageous persistence may overcome the popular indifference to such collections when severally administered, suggests some questions as to this eldest form of fiction which I should like to ask the reader's patience with. I do not know that I shall be able to answer them, or that I shall try to do so; the vitality of a question that is answered seems to exhale in the event; it palpitates no longer; curiosity flutters away from the faded flower, which is fit then only to be folded away in the 'hortus siccus' of accomplished facts. In view of this I may wish merely to state the problems and leave them for the reader's solution, or, more amusingly, for his mystification.

I.

One of the most amusing questions concerning the short story is why a form which is singly so attractive that every one likes to read a short story when he finds it alone is collectively so repellent as it is said to be. Before now I have imagined the case to be somewhat the same as that of a number of pleasant people who are most acceptable as separate householders, but who lose caste and cease to be desirable acquaintances when gathered into a boarding-house.

Yet the case is not the same quite, for we see that the short story where it is ranged with others of its species within the covers of a magazine is so welcome that the editor thinks his number the more brilliant the more short story writers he can call about his board, or under the roof of his pension. Here the boardinghouse analogy breaks, breaks so signally that I was lately moved to ask a distinguished editor why a book of short stories usually failed and a magazine usually succeeded because of them. He answered, gayly, that the short stories in most books of them were bad; that where they were good, they went; and he alleged several well-known instances in which books of prime short stories had a great vogue. He was so handsomely interested in my inquiry that I could not well say I thought some of the short stories which he had boasted in his last number were indifferent good, and yet, as he allowed, had mainly helped sell it. I had in mind many books of short stories of the first excellence which had failed as decidedly as those others had succeeded, for no reason that I could see; possibly there is really no reason in any literary success or failure that can be predicted, or applied in another Base.

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I could name these books, if it would serve any purpose, but, in my doubt, I will leave the reader to think of them, for I believe that his indolence or intellectual reluctance is largely to blame for the failure of good books of short stories. He is commonly so averse to any imaginative exertion that he finds it a hardship to respond to that peculiar demand which a book of good short stories makes upon him. He can read one good short story in a magazine with refreshment, and a pleasant sense of excitement, in the sort of spur it gives to his own constructive faculty. But, if this is repeated in ten or twenty stories, he becomes fluttered and exhausted by the draft upon his energies; whereas a continuous fiction of the same quantity acts as an agreeable sedative. A condition that the short story tacitly makes with the reader, through its limitations, is that he shall subjectively fill in the details and carry out the scheme which in its small dimensions the story can only suggest; and the greater number of readers find this too much for their feeble powers, while they cannot resist the incitement to attempt it.

My theory does not wholly account for the fact (no theory wholly accounts for any fact), and I own that the same objections would lie from the reader against a number of short stories in a magazine. But it may be that the effect is not the same in the magazine because of the variety in the authorship, and because it would be impossibly jolting to read all the short stories in a magazine 'seriatim'. On the other hand, the identity of authorship gives a continuity of attraction to the short stories in a book which forms that exhausting strain upon the imagination of the involuntary co-partner.

II.

Then, what is the solution as to the form of publication for short stories, since people do not object to them singly but collectively, and not in variety, but in identity of authorship? Are they to be printed only in the magazines, or are they to be collected in volumes combining a variety of authorship? Rather, I could wish, it might be found feasible to purvey them in some pretty shape where each would appeal singly to the reader and would not exhaust him in the subjective after-work required of him. In this event many short stories now cramped into undue limits by the editorial exigencies of the magazines might expand to greater length and breadth, and without ceasing to be each a short story might not make so heavy a demand upon the subliminal forces of the reader.

If any one were to say that all this was a little fantastic, I should not contradict him; but I hope there is some reason in it, if reason can help the short story to greater favor, for it is a form which I have great pleasure in as a reader, and pride in as an American. If we have not excelled all other moderns in it, we have certainly excelled in it; possibly because we are in the period of our literary development

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which corresponds to that of other peoples when the short story pre-eminently flourished among them. But when one has said a thing like this, it immediately accuses one of loose and inaccurate statement, and requires one to refine upon it, either for one's own peace of conscience or for one's safety from the thoughtful reader. I am not much afraid of that sort of reader, for he is very rare, but I do like to know myself what I mean, if I mean anything in particular.

In this instance I am obliged to ask myself whether our literary development can be recognized separately from that of the whole English-speaking world. I think it can, though, as I am always saying American literature is merely a condition of English literature. In some sense every European literature is a condition of some other European literature, yet the impulse in each eventuates, if it does not originate indigenously. A younger literature will choose, by a sort of natural selection, some things for assimilation from an elder literature, for no more apparent reason than it will reject other things, and it will transform them in the process so that it will give them the effect of indigeneity. The short story among the Italians, who called it the novella, and supplied us with the name devoted solely among us to fiction of epical magnitude, refined indefinitely upon the Greek romance, if it derived from that; it retrenched itself in scope, and enlarged itself in the variety of its types. But still these remained types, and they remained types with the French imitators of the Italian novella. It was not till the Spaniards borrowed the form of the novella and transplanted it to their racier soil that it began to bear character, and to fruit in the richness of their picaresque fiction. When the English borrowed it they adapted it, in the metrical tales of Chaucer, to the genius of their nation, which was then both poetical and humorous. Here it was full of character, too, and more and more personality began to enlarge the bounds of the conventional types and to imbue fresh ones. But in so far as the novella was studied in the Italian sources, the French, Spanish, and English literatures were conditions of Italian literature as distinctly, though, of course, not so thoroughly, as American literature is a condition of English literature. Each borrower gave a national cast to the thing borrowed, and that is what has happened with us, in the full measure that our nationality has differenced itself from the English.

Whatever truth there is in all this, and I will confess that a good deal of it seems to me hardy conjecture, rather favors my position that we are in some such period of our literary development as those other peoples when the short story flourished among them. Or, if I restrict our claim, I may safely claim that they abundantly had the novella when they had not the novel at all, and we now abundantly have the novella, while we have the novel only subordinately and of at least

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no such quantitative importance as the English, French, Spanish, Norwegians, Russians, and some others of our esteemed contemporaries, not to name the Italians. We surpass the Germans, who, like ourselves, have as distinctly excelled in the modern novella as they have fallen short in the novel. Or, if I may not quite say this, I will make bold to say that I can think of many German novelle that I should like to read again, but scarcely one German novel; and I could honestly say the same of American novelle, though not of American novels.

III.

The abeyance, not to say the desuetude, that the novella fell into for several centuries is very curious, and fully as remarkable as the modern rise of the short story. It began to prevail in the dramatic form, for a play is a short story put on the stage; it may have satisfied in that form the early love of it, and it has continued to please in that form; but in its original shape it quite vanished, unless we consider the little studies and sketches and allegories of the Spectator and Tatler and Idler and Rambler and their imitations on the Continent as guises of the novella. The germ of the modern short story may have survived in these, or in the metrical form of the novella which appeared in Chaucer and never wholly disappeared. With Crabbe the novella became as distinctly the short story as it has become in the hands of Miss Wilkins. But it was not till our time that its great merit as a form was felt, for until our time so great work was never done with it. I remind myself of Boccaccio, and of the Arabian Nights, without the wish to hedge from my bold stand. They are all elemental; compared with some finer modern work which deepens inward immeasurably, they are all of their superficial limits. They amuse, but they do not hold, the mind and stamp it with large and profound impressions.

An Occidental cannot judge the literary quality of the Eastern tales; but I will own my suspicion that the perfection of the Italian work is philological rather than artistic, while the web woven by Mr. James or Miss Jewett, by Kielland or Bjornson, by Maupassant, by Palacio Valdes, by Giovanni Verga, by Tourguenief, in one of those little frames seems to me of an exquisite color and texture and of an entire literary preciousness, not only as regards the diction, but as regards those more intangible graces of form, those virtues of truth and reality, and those lasting significances which distinguish the masterpiece.

The novella has in fact been carried so far in the short story that it might be asked whether it had not left the novel behind, as to perfection of form; though one might not like to affirm this. Yet there have been but few modern fictions of the novel's dimensions which have the beauty of form many a novella embodies. Is this because it is easier to give form in the small than in the large, or only because it is easier to hide formlessness? It is easier

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to give form in the novella than in the novel, because the design of less scope can be more definite, and because the persons and facts are fewer, and each can be more carefully treated. But, on the other hand, the slightest error in execution shows more in the small than in the large, and a fault of conception is more evident. The novella must be clearly imagined, above all things, for there is no room in it for those felicities of characterization or comment by which the artist of faltering design saves himself in the novel.

IV.

The question as to where the short story distinguishes itself from the anecdote is of the same nature as that which concerns the bound set between it and the novel. In both cases the difference of the novella is in the motive, or the origination. The anecdote is too palpably simple and single to be regarded as a novella, though there is now and then a novella like *The Father*, by Bjornson, which is of the actual brevity of the anecdote, but which, when released in the reader's consciousness, expands to dramatic dimensions impossible to the anecdote. Many anecdotes have come down from antiquity, but not, I believe, one short story, at least in prose; and the Italians, if they did not invent the story, gave us something most sensibly distinguishable from the classic anecdote in the novella. The anecdote offers an illustration of character, or records a moment of action; the novella embodies a drama and develops a type.

It is not quite so clear as to when and where a piece of fiction ceases to be a novella and becomes a novel. The frontiers are so vague that one is obliged to recognize a middle species, or rather a middle magnitude, which paradoxically, but necessarily enough, we call the novelette. First we have the short story, or novella, then we have the long story, or novel, and between these we have the novelette, which is in name a smaller than the short story, though it is in point of fact two or three times longer than a short story. We may realize them physically if we will adopt the magazine parlance and speak of the novella as a one-number story, of the novel as a serial, and of the novelette as a two-number or a three-number story; if it passes the three-number limit it seems to become a novel. As a two-number or three-number story it is the despair of editors and publishers. The interest of so brief a serial will not mount sufficiently to carry strongly over from month to month; when the tale is completed it will not make a book which the Trade (inexorable force!) cares to handle. It is therefore still awaiting its authoritative avatar, which it will be some one's prosperity and glory to imagine; for in the novelette are possibilities for fiction as yet scarcely divined.

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The novelette can have almost as perfect form as the novella. In fact, the novel has form in the measure that it approaches the novelette; and some of the most symmetrical modern novels are scarcely more than novelettes, like Tourguenief's *Dmitri Rudine*, or his *Smoke*, or *Spring Floods*. The *Vicar of Wakefield*, the father of the modern novel, is scarcely more than a novelette, and I have sometimes fancied, but no doubt vainly, that the ultimated novel might be of the dimensions of *Hamlet*. If any one should say there was not room in *Hamlet* for the character and incident requisite in a novel, I should be ready to answer that there seemed a good deal of both in *Hamlet*.

But no doubt there are other reasons why the novel should not finally be of the length of *Hamlet*, and I must not let my enthusiasm for the novelette carry me too far, or, rather, bring me up too short. I am disposed to dwell upon it, I suppose, because it has not yet shared the favor which the novella and the novel have enjoyed, and because until somebody invents a way for it to the public it cannot prosper like the one-number story or the serial. I should like to say as my last word for it here that I believe there are many novels which, if stripped of their padding, would turn out to have been all along merely novelettes in disguise.

It does not follow, however, that there are many novelle which, if they were duly padded, would be found novelettes. In that dim, subjective region where the aesthetic origins present themselves almost with the authority of inspirations there is nothing clearer than the difference between the short-story motive and the long-story motive. One, if one is in that line of work, feels instinctively just the size and carrying power of the given motive. Or, if the reader prefers a different figure, the mind which the seed has been dropped into from Somewhere is mystically aware whether the seed is going to grow up a bush or is going to grow up a tree, if left to itself. Of course, the mind to which the seed is intrusted may play it false, and wilfully dwarf the growth, or force it to unnatural dimensions; but the critical observer will easily detect the fact of such treasons. Almost in the first germinal impulse the inventive mind forefeels the ultimate difference and recognizes the essential simplicity or complexity of the motive. There will be a prophetic subdivision into a variety of motives and a multiplication of characters and incidents and situations; or the original motive will be divined indivisible, and there will be a small group of people immediately interested and controlled by a single, or predominant, fact. The uninspired may contend that this is bosh, and I own that something might be said for their contention, but upon the whole I think it is gospel.

The right novel is never a congeries of novelle, as might appear to the uninspired. If it indulges even in episodes, it loses in reality and vitality. It is one stock from which its various branches put out, and form it a living growth identical throughout. The right novella is never a novel cropped back from the size of a tree to a bush, or the branch of a tree stuck into the ground and made to serve for a bush. It is another species, destined by the agencies at work in the realm of unconsciousness to be brought into being of its own kind, and not of another.

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V.

This was always its case, but in the process of time the short story, while keeping the natural limits of the primal novella (if ever there was one), has shown almost limitless possibilities within them. It has shown itself capable of imparting the effect of every sort of intention, whether of humor or pathos, of tragedy or comedy or broad farce or delicate irony, of character or action. The thing that first made itself known as a little tale, usually salacious, dealing with conventionalized types and conventionalized incidents, has proved itself possibly the most flexible of all the literary forms in its adaptation to the needs of the mind that wishes to utter itself, inventively or constructively, upon some fresh occasion, or wishes briefly to criticise or represent some phase or fact of life.

The riches in this shape of fiction are effectively inestimable, if we consider what has been done in the short story, and is still doing everywhere. The good novels may be easily counted, but the good novelle, since Boccaccio began (if it was he that first began) to make them, cannot be computed. In quantity they are inexhaustible, and in quality they are wonderfully satisfying. Then, why is it that so very, very few of the most satisfactory of that innumerable multitude stay by you, as the country people say, in characterization or action? How hard it is to recall a person or a fact out of any of them, out of the most signally good! We seem to be delightfully nourished as we read, but is it, after all, a full meal? We become of a perfect intimacy and a devoted friendship with the men and women in the short stories, but not apparently of a lasting acquaintance. It is a single meeting we have with them, and though we instantly love or hate them dearly, recurrence and repetition seem necessary to that familiar knowledge in which we hold the personages in a novel.

It is here that the novella, so much more perfect in form, shows its irremediable inferiority to the novel, and somehow to the play, to the very farce, which it may quantitatively excel. We can all recall by name many characters out of comedies and farces; but how many characters out of short stories can we recall? Most persons of the drama give themselves away by name for types, mere figments of allegory, and perhaps oblivion is the penalty that the novella pays for the fineness of its characterizations; but perhaps, also, the dramatic form has greater facilities for repetition, and so can stamp its persons more indelibly on the imagination than the narrative form in the same small space. The narrative must give to description what the drama trusts to representation; but this cannot account for the superior permanency of the dramatic types in so great measure as we might at first imagine, for they remain as much in mind from reading as from seeing the plays. It is possible that as the novella becomes more conscious, its persons will become more memorable; but as it is, though we now vividly and with lasting delight remember certain short stories, we scarcely remember by name any of the people in them. I may be risking too much in offering an instance, but who, in even

such signal instances as *The Revolt of Mother*, by Miss Wilkins, or *The Dulham Ladies*, by Miss Jewett, can recall by name the characters that made them delightful?

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VI.

The defect of the novella which we have been acknowledging seems an essential limitation; but perhaps it is not insuperable; and we may yet have short stories which shall supply the delighted imagination with creations of as much immortality as we can reasonably demand. The structural change would not be greater than the moral or material change which has been wrought in it since it began as a yarn, gross and palpable, which the narrator spun out of the coarsest and often the filthiest stuff, to snare the thick fancy or amuse the lewd leisure of listeners willing as children to have the same persons and the same things over and over again. Now it has not only varied the persons and things, but it has refined and verified them in the direction of the natural and the supernatural, until it is above all other literary forms the vehicle of reality and spirituality. When one thinks of a bit of Mr. James's psychology in this form, or a bit of Verga's or Kielland's sociology, or a bit of Miss Jewett's exquisite veracity, one perceives the immense distance which the short story has come on the way to the height it has reached. It serves equally the ideal and the real; that which it is loath to serve is the unreal, so that among the short stories which have recently made reputations for their authors very few are of that peculiar cast which we have no name for but romanticistic. The only distinguished modern writer of romanticistic novelle whom I can think of is Mr. Bret Harte, and he is of a period when romanticism was so imperative as to be almost a condition of fiction. I am never so enamoured of a cause that I will not admit facts that seem to tell against it, and I will allow that this writer of romanticistic short stories has more than any other supplied us with memorable types and characters. We remember Mr. John Oakhurst by name; we remember Kentuck and Tennessee's Partner, at least by nickname; and we remember their several qualities. These figures, if we cannot quite consent that they are persons, exist in our memories by force of their creator's imagination, and at the moment I cannot think of any others that do, out of the myriad of American short stories, except Rip Van Winkle out of Irving's Legend of Sleepy Hollow, and Marjorie Daw out of Mr. Aldrich's famous little caprice of that title, and Mr. James's Daisy Miller.

It appears to be the fact that those writers who have first distinguished themselves in the novella have seldom written novels of prime order. Mr. Kipling is an eminent example, but Mr. Kipling has yet a long life before him in which to upset any theory about him, and one can only instance him provisionally. On the other hand, one can be much more confident that the best novelle have been written by the greatest novelists, conspicuously Maupassant, Verga, Bjornson, Mr. Thomas Hardy, Mr. James, Mr. Cable, Tourguenief, Tolstoy, Valdes, not to name others. These have,

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in fact, all done work so good in this form that one is tempted to call it their best work. It is really not their best, but it is work so good that it ought to have equal acceptance with their novels, if that distinguished editor was right who said that short stories sold well when they were good short stories. That they ought to do so is so evident that a devoted reader of them, to whom I was submitting the anomaly the other day, insisted that they did. I could only allege the testimony of publishers and authors to the contrary, and this did not satisfy him.

It does not satisfy me, and I wish that the general reader, with whom the fault lies, could be made to say why, if he likes one short story by itself and four short stories in a magazine, he does not like, or will not have, a dozen short stories in a book. This was the baffling question which I began with and which I find myself forced to end with, after all the light I have thrown upon the subject. I leave it where I found it, but perhaps that is a good deal for a critic to do. If I had left it anywhere else the reader might not feel bound to deal with it practically by reading all the books of short stories he could lay hands on, and either divining why he did not enjoy them, or else forever foregoing his prejudice against them because of his pleasure in them.