

Two Short Stories—Studies in Change?

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Traditionally the short story has been subject to the same critical treatment as other prose fiction genres such as the tale and the novel. The accepted approach has been to outline the plot, to analyze characters, to discuss the effectiveness of the various points of view, and describe and evaluate such factors as symbols, tone of voice, setting, and theme.

This approach, however, does not allow for what is basically characteristic of the short story, and the nature or the character of the short story is not allowed to any marked extent to have an influence on the interpretation. Now, admittedly, the short story as a genre has developed into a most diverse type of fiction, the specific nature of which there may be any number of theories about, and it may not be possible to reach agreement about very much more than the fact that the short story is short, or perhaps—in order to be on the safe side—relatively short.

However, Hugh Kenner in his book *Studies in Change*¹ has attempted a descriptive analysis of the short story as genre, which seems very attractive and which may be useful in the interpretation of specific short stories. This paper, within natural limits, will attempt to apply some of Kenner's ideas to two stories.

Kenner in his introduction to the book sets out by trying to establish the basic difference between the short story and the tale. The essence of the *tale*, as he sees it, is a story narrated by a tale-teller in which the teller shares his experiences with his listeners.

¹ Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1965.

The tale is an invitation to the listener/reader to share sights, feelings, emotions with the narrator, factual ones or probable non-factual ones. The short story, on the other hand, by relating the word story with the scientific connotation of the word history, Kenner sees as something basically different. Inherent in the short story is the quality of something methodical, systematic, recorded; something written down rather than told, then reread, revised and improved. "In it [the short story], happenings are related—but more than that, something is examined."² Hence, Kenner concludes, the authority of the short story is not the voice of the narrator, but the relevance of the facts of the story. Referring to Samuel Johnson's story "Ned Drugget" Kenner introduces the word "chronicle," thus stressing the factual characteristics of the short story: "every sentence is made up of facts: things said, things done."³ The purpose of stressing this factual aspect is to make one more point about the short story, namely that it requires of the reader to consider how these facts are differently valued. Kenner introduces: what he terms the "minimum formula" of the short story: "that it is concerned with how experiences are valued: not merely what was said and done, but what difference it made to someone."⁴ The result of this invitation or requirement is an opportunity for the reader to understand yet another aspect of life and man. Another facet of the short story, and possibly one which may be said to be an inherent part of its compressed form, is its economy of expression. Kenner points out that no set form or procedure may be established for the genre, but that there is a "contract" between reader and writer: "the writer will import no irrelevancies, the reader will give his undivided attention."⁵ This is an ideal demand which is fulfilled by the competent writer. It is tempting to suggest that if this contract is not fulfilled by the writer, the story becomes not merely a bad short story, but something other than a short story.

The last thing to be connected with the compressed form, and an element to be considered a vital one in the nature of the short story, is the ending. Kenner says that a long narrative may be allowed

² Ibid., p. v.

³ Ibid., pp. vi—vii.

⁴ Ibid., p. vii.

⁵ Ibid., p. vii.

to end by its own weight, but a short narrative must end because something has been achieved, because "something in it has paused, resolved, changed, settled down, or declared its significance."⁶ The change may appear in the characters of the story, in the atmosphere, or in any other possible element of it.

With this theory in mind I will discuss two short stories to see whether the stories fit the pattern of the theory, and whether the theory can be of any help in our understanding of the stories. My choice of Sherwood Anderson's "Hands" is rather deliberate, that of F. Scott Fitzgerald's "The Rich Boy" is random in the way a good short story by a very good writer can be random.

Sherwood Anderson's "Hands" from the collection *Winesburg, Ohio* supposedly is a border case of the genre and therefore should make an interesting case for examination. On the one hand, the story is only about seven and a half pages long and therefore well within limits that might possibly be set up for the genre in terms of length. The story centres on Wing Biddlebaum, and only two other people are brought directly into it, viz. the girl that calls to Wing from across the meadow in front of his house and George Willard, with whom Biddlebaum has formed a sort of friendship, and whose reaction to Biddlebaum and his bewitching hands is related in a flashback. A few more people are referred to in the second of the two flashbacks of which the story mainly consists, but they are mentioned only in the preterite and pluperfect tense, thus distanced from the focus. The scope of the story consequently is very limited. On the other hand, however, it might be argued that the story is so short as to be only a sketch, and that being part of *Winesburg* it does not qualify as a short story. James Mellard, who in his article "Narrative Forms in *Winesburg, Ohio*" is concerned not with the question of genre but with the question of narrative form, refers to the narratives of which *Winesburg* consists interchangeably as episodes, tales, stories, and sections, and designates the work as a whole simply as the book, viewing it as a unity. Malcolm Cowley in his Introduction to *Winesburg, Ohio*⁸ when speaking

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. x.

⁷ *PMLA*, 83, 1968, pp. 1304—12.

⁸ Sherwood Anderson, *Winesburg, Ohio*, ed. Malcolm Cowley, (New York, 1964). Further ref. to this edition.

of the individual tales says "they were moments, each complete in itself."⁹ Furthermore, it is interesting that Sherwood Anderson himself used the term short story in a context such as might include "Hands": "The short story is a result of a sudden passion. It is an idea grasped whole as one would pick an apple in an orchard. All of my own short stories have been written at one sitting."¹⁰ We are therefore justified, I believe, despite its belonging to a unit of stories, in looking upon "Hands" as an independent short story, at least for the purpose of discussing Kenner's theory.

The language in which the story is told seems to a high degree to follow the ideal of economy of expression. On the "contemporary" level of the story we are not so much told as shown the state of Wing Biddlebaum, and even in the two flashbacks that constitute the better part of the story the author relies on the reporting of *facts* to tell us of Wing's singular fate. We are nowhere directly told what the significance of his hands is, but twice our attention is drawn to their share in his misfortune; once when George Willard out of fear refrains from asking him directly, and once when it is reported that he himself is aware—without knowing why—that his hands are to blame. That information is virtually crammed into the language is apparent from any sentence in the story. The very first paragraph contains, in a nutshell, almost as much as we shall ever know about Biddlebaum, and the first sentence is again a compressed variant of the same paragraph. Sherwood Anderson insisted that this story, like the others in *Winesbtlrg*, was written in one sitting, that in a moment of inspiration it came to him complete, "no word of it ever changed." However, William L. Phillips in his article "How Sherwood Anderson Wrote *Winesbtlrg*, *Ohio*"¹¹ has demonstrated not only the inaccuracy of Anderson's memory, but that "Hands" is in fact the carefully streamlined story as evidenced by the text itself; the story thus complies with Kenner's theory on another vital point.

As to the point about the story being "something written down

⁹ *Winesburg*, p. 6.

¹⁰ *Sherwood Anderson's Memoirs* (New York, 1942), p. 341, as quoted by William L. Phillips in his article "How Sherwood Anderson Wrote *Winesburg, Ohio*," *American Literature*, Vol. XXIII, March 1951, pp. 7—30. The quotation occurs on p. 19 in the article.

¹¹ *American Literature*, Vol. XXIII, March 1951, pp. 7—30.

rather than told," there are a couple of lines which constitute a puzzle, and which cause "Hands" to step outside and remain inside of Kenner's theoretical framework at one and the same time: "The story of Wing Biddlebaum's hands is worth a book in itself. Sympathetically set forth it would tap many strange, beautiful qualities in obscure men. It is a job for a poet."¹² And: "Let us look briefly into the story of the hands. Perhaps our talking of them will arouse the poet who will tell the hidden wonder story . . ."¹³ These lines clearly demonstrate the careful writing down of the story and yet the editorial "us" here presses the story *teller*¹⁴ firmly upon the reader and apparently for this reason carries the story into the realm of the tale.¹⁵ Yet at the same time the sentences invite—through an appeal—to that examination of the central character—in order to understand—which Kenner sees as such an important and typical feature of the short story. And here we are at the most crucial point of our interpretation, namely when we are to formulate what that examination results in. It seems that we must account for two different understandings, that of George Willard, and that of our own as readers. In the story we find George Willard left behind after one of his meetings with Wing Biddlebaum, when Wing has fled on realizing that he has been on the verge of touching George with his hands. George is in a state of perplexity and fear, knowing that something is wrong with Biddlebaum, and knowing that he does not want to find out what the problem is, probably because he instinctively understands that it will have a negative effect on himself if he does. I cannot see that it is possible on the basis of this one story alone to maintain that George Willard understands more than this.

When we as readers, however, have come to the end of the story we have achieved a deeper understanding of Wing and George. It is proper here to call attention to Kenner's demand that at the end something should have declared its significance. On the "present time" level this is not the case: we find Biddlebaum at the beginning

¹² *Winesburg*, p. 29.

¹³ *Winesburg*, p. 31.

¹⁴ "He was essentially a story teller as he kept insisting, but his art was of a special type, *belonging* to an *oral* [italics mine] rather than a written tradition." *Winesburg*, p. 5.

¹⁵ For a detailed discussion of the auctorial intrusions, see Phillips' article.

walking the veranda, and we leave him preparing to go to bed not long after. Through the flashbacks, however, his timidity, nervousness, and the significance of the movements of his hands have been explained or revealed, and in a sense this can be seen to be the way in which "I-Iands" complies with Kenner's suggestion that the story should end when a certain effect has been achieved. Considered in isolation the story appears successfully to comply with this demand; the character of Biddlebaum—to the extent one can say that the story is about him—is not one that needs further development.

It was said above that the story is a border case of the genre. Considering it in isolation, but keeping in mind the fact that it is part of a collection, I believe it is possible to see—even without placing too much emphasis on the editorial "us"—how the story transgresses the limits of the theory. Clearly there are thematic elements in "Hands" which reoccur in the other stories in *Winesburg*. James M. Mellard in his PMLA article deals extensively with the question of narrative form in the stories. Glen A. Love in his "*Winesburg, Ohio* and the Rhetoric of Silence,"¹⁶ dealing with the theme of human communication in *Winesburg*, stresses the communication between man of the grotesques and George Willard: "George Willard, in whom Wing Biddlebaum and many of the grotesques find the opportunity of verbal release . . .";¹⁷ Edwing Fussel, who in his article "*Winesburg, Ohio: Art and Isolation*"¹⁸ in my opinion quite correctly points to the most important theme in *Winesburg*, says that "finally what the characters want of George Willard is to have their stories told (they are quite literally characters in search of an author)."¹⁹ Instinctively they feel that he will be able to express to the world what they themselves are unable to express, and he becomes their medium of communication and self-identification; being themselves "artists," they sense the awakening artist.

As a result of this we are forced to regard the stories of *Winesburg* in two different ways, depending whether we examine them as individual stories or as stories related to each other through common setting and thematic resemblance. The question of whether

¹⁶ *American Literature*, Vol. XXXX (1968—69), pp. 38—57.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

¹⁸ *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. VI, No. 2, Summer 1960, pp. 106—114.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 103—110.

there is enough internal evidence to allow us to do the former or to force us to do the latter, and exactly how the work is to be classified, need not be discussed here. It seems possible to argue, however, that "Hands" in important respects complies with Kenner's theory and that the theory helps us to appreciate more the artistic qualities of the story, and that the story transgresses the limits of the theory without losing in effectiveness.

When reading F. Scott Fitzgerald's story "The Rich Boy" with Kenner's theory in mind one is struck by the possibility that this story deviates from the outlined theory on some of the same points as "Hands." We know that Fitzgerald attached less importance to his stories than to his novels, but that he nevertheless spent days and weeks and sometimes years revising them. In the case of "The Rich Boy," his first serious work after *The Great Gatsby*, we certainly have to do with one of the carefully revised ones. John Kuehl in his article "Scott Fitzgerald's Critical Opinions"²⁰ has successfully shown to what extent Scott Fitzgerald was concerned with the need for a careful rewriting and revising.

For the sake of briefness I shall only mention two points on which "The Rich Boy" complies with Kenner's theory, although it does so on several points.

First, with regard to the question of the compressed form the story of Anson Hunter is considerably longer than that of Wing Biddlebaum, but nevertheless surely a short story. Secondly, despite the presence of a narrator—I shall revert to this point below—the first couple of sections or chapters of the story are very much a factual description of the life of Anson Hunter, almost like a series of snap shots: Anson with his governess, Anson with his brothers and sisters in Connecticut, Anson with friends at Yale, etc. This photographic precision is underscored by the fact that Fitzgerald uses it in introducing Anson's childhood and youth to his first girl, Paula Legendre: "The pictures of Anson in a skull cap at his first school, of Anson on horseback . . ."²¹ There is a great deal to tell about Anson Hunter and it calls for strict economy of expression, the kind of economy of expression that Kenner mentions.

The first point on which "The Rich Boy" compares to "Hands"

²⁰ *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. VII, No. 1, Spring 1961, pp. 3—18.

²¹ *The Bodley Head Scott Fitzgerald*, London, 1963, Vol. 5, p. 291.

and deviates from Kenner's theory is with regard to the presence of the narrator. "When I hear a man proclaiming himself an 'average, honest, open fellow,' I feel pretty sure . . ." ²² presses upon us the voice of the story teller, and when we get the famous "let me tell you about the very rich . . ." ²³—knowing about Fitzgerald's preoccupation with the rich and their life—it is almost as if we get *his* presence imposed upon us in the story too.

With a view to considering in some detail the question of change in the short story as argued by Kenner it seems worthwhile to try to establish what Fitzgerald wants with this story and how he goes about achieving his aim. It is a story about the very rich, whom Fitzgerald considers to be inherently different from ordinary people. He makes his point by picturing them as a brotherhood, as a freemasonry, or as the inhabitants of a foreign country whose cultural heritage and emotional peculiarities make them almost unapproachable. However, this is the story of an individual— "this is his and not his brothers' story" ²⁴—and the detailed description of the brotherhood in the first section only serves to give us the atmosphere out of which Anson Hunter has come and to which he belongs. In the account of his life we are given his characteristics, those personal traits that have developed in him as a result of his class belonging. He expects precedence over others to be given to him freely and naturally, and his attitude towards life lacks the elements of idealism and illusion which are natural and common in other young men. In the fact that his life starts out as a compromise—and that he seems to be aware that this is so—he is singularly reminiscent of the more modern European royalty, whose lives are a compromise between their symbolic functions as heads of state and that of ordinary men and women. This is underscored by the quiet understanding between him and Carl, the night-watchman at Port Washington, when Anson takes Dolly Karger home early with the intention of seducing her. Carl is of "the Old World" and responds with neither smile nor wink to this design of a man of a superior Old Order. The two are completely in tune with each other.

In the world of Anson Hunter there are, by and by, a number of

²² Ibid., p. 286.

²³ Ibid., p. 286.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 286.

changes, but the life of Anson Hunter is marked by a singular stability, and this, I believe, is what Fitzgerald wishes to show. Anson's falling in love with Paula Legendre is the obvious beginning, is the actual point of departure of the story. Paula represents something Anson seeks—"he felt that if he could enter into Paula's warm safe life he would be happy"²⁵—and at the same time, because it is a personal, emotional matter, she represents a challenge and a threat: a challenge to his need for having people depend on him, and a threat to his superiority. The threat, of course, is revealed subsequent to his arriving in a state of drunkenness at the hotel to pick up Paula. Needless to say, Mrs. Legendre's attempt at "protecting" her daughter and its fatal effect on their relationship is central to the story. Anson's independence and superiority have been threatened, and the "psychological moment" has passed forever.

From there on the story does nothing if not confirm the struggle against change in Anson's life. It is hardly revealed clearer anywhere than in the scene of their final moment on the beach at Palm Beach: "Why should he [ask her to marry him], when he might hold her so, biding his own time, for another year—forever?"²⁶ The affair with Dolly Karger is further affirmation. Begun as a diversion and a consolation after Paulas engagement and marriage to Lowell Thayer, it quickly gains momentum and threatens to impose changes on Anson's life: "—one evening when Mr. Karger knocked discreetly at the library door to announce that he had left a bottle of old brandy in the dining-room, Anson felt that life was hemming him in."²⁷ The letter from Dolly--.although he knows or suspects it to be a decoy—nevertheless causes him to tear up his own letter of farewell for the simple reason that her letter represents a challenge to his need for having people depend on him. He cannot accept even Dolly's pretended attempt at making herself independent of him. Typically, in the very act of asserting his power over her there is retraction; he arrives fifteen minutes late: he cannot allow any treachery on his part against his own game. The degree to which he values his independence and superiority is seen after the final break with Dolly when he ascribes his having been saved to the interference of a god.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 290.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 299.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 303.

The recurrent theme of non-change is seen, furthermore, in his functioning as a check on his Yale class, in his interfering in the affair of his Aunt Edna, and in his consistent belief in a standard, a norm of society even when—the narrator admits—there may never have been one in New York, Anson's own city. However, "no change could alter the permanence of its [his name's] place here, for change itself was the essential substratum by which he and those of his name identified themselves with the spirit of New York."²⁸ I interpret this to mean that the continuous changes of society serve as a means for the Hunters to solidify their own permanence. Or put another way: they are above those who are affected by changes and they use the changes to affirm that situation. The death of Cary Sloane, the young friend of Anson's Aunt Edna, seems to confirm this. Sloane becomes a symbol of the victims of the I-Hunters' attempts at retaining their superiority and succeeding.

The last significant incident to indicate the permanence of Anson Hunter is the fact that upon learning of Paula Legendre's death he shows no emotion. She no longer represents a challenge to his superiority, she can no longer function as a person dependent on him and hence she is dismissed. The role is soon taken over by the girl in the red tam. Anson Hunter's life of perfect happiness in stability resumes.

The point I want to make by offering this analysis is that it seems that we have here a story which complies mainly in an external respect with the theory of change being the specific mark of the short story. The central idea of this particular story seems to be to convey the peculiar character of Anson Hunter and by implication, incidentally, his psychological shortcomings. Consequently, because his character is one of rigid permanence, it seems possible to term this short story a study in non-change. In terms of Kenner's theory something has certainly declared its significance, however the emphasis is on non-change and one cannot help feeling that we have again a story which, although it can be successfully analysed in the framework of the theory and gain by such an analysis, transgresses the theory on a vital point. Can it be that the short story as genre—like the life of Anson Hunter—starts out as a compromise?

²⁸ Ibid., p. 315.