

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

American Short Fiction is a new title in Salem Press's *Introduction to Literary Context* series. This series is designed to introduce students to the world's greatest works of literature—including novels, short fictions, novellas, and poems – not only placing them in the historical, societal, scientific and religious context of their time, but illuminating key concepts and vocabulary that students are likely to encounter. A great starting point from which to embark on further research, *Introduction to Literary Context* is a perfect foundation for *Critical Insights*, Salem's acclaimed series of critical analysis written to deepen the basic understanding of literature via close reading and original criticism. Both series – *Introduction to Literary Context* and *Critical Insights* – cover authors, works and themes that are addressed in core reading lists at the undergraduate level.

Introduction to Literary Context: American Short Fiction is the second title in the series. The first covered post-modernist American novels, and future volumes will cover poetry, British fiction and world fiction.

Scope and Coverage

American Short Fiction covers 40 works written by American and Canadian authors and published in the 19th and 20th centuries. The list of authors is diverse, including Edgar Allen Poe, considered one of the first short story writers, Antiguan–American author Jamaica Kincaid, and Pulitzer Prize winner Alice Munro, considered the master of the contemporary short story. Other than being described as a concentrated form of narrative prose fiction, short fiction has no clear, distinctive characteristics. Even its length, traditionally defined as being readable in one sitting, might prove problematic in today's speedy culture.

Organization and Format

The essays in *American Short Fiction* appear alphabetical by title of the work. Each is 6–8 pages in length and includes the following sections:

- Content Synopsis – summarizes the plot, describing the main points and prominent characters in concise language.
- Historical Context – describes the relevance to the story of the moods, attitudes and conditions that existed during the time period that the work took place.
- Societal Context – describes the role that society played within the piece, from the acceptance of traditional gender roles to cell phone etiquette.
- Religious Context – explains how religion—of the author specifically, or a group generally, influenced the short story.
- Scientific & Technological Context – analyzes to what extent scientific and/or technological progress has affected the story.
- Biographical Context – offers biographical details of the author's life, which often helps students to make sense of the story.
- Discussion Questions – a list of 8–10 thoughtful questions that are designed to develop stimulating and productive classroom discussions.
- Essay Ideas – a valuable list of ideas that will encourage students to explore themes, writing techniques, and character traits.
- Works Cited
- For Further Study

Introduction to Literary Context: American Short Fiction ends with a general Bibliography and subject Index.

ABOUT THIS VOLUME

The literary history of all nations and cultures is founded on the short story. Although the novel ultimately may be lauded as the pinnacle of an individual author's literary achievement, the short story is the writers' stepping stone to mastering their craft, and all renowned novelists have honed their skills and developed their singular styles through producing short fiction. The once flourishing literary journals presented the short works of writers who would find permanence or fade to obscurity, so it has been the short story that proved the gauntlet that defined the literary artists of each generation. Many of the writers presented in this volume gained initial fame in such publications. While many were bound for glory in both the long and short form, many 19th-century masters represented in this collection continued to create short fiction after launching successful careers as novelists.

For students running the gamut from grammar-school fledglings through doctoral candidates, the short story retains its relevance as a learning tool throughout the course of education. The same holds true for the writer. The short story is the classroom of both the author producing the work and the student studying the finished product. Children learn reading through what essentially amounts to illustrated short stories: even the most rudimentary volumes with a single word adorning each page qualify. Thus, the short form is as ingrained in our literary DNA as eye color in the human genome.

Noted American literary scholar Malcolm Cowley, outlined what he asserted were the stages of short story creation from the germination of the original idea to the finished product in an interview with *The Paris Review*. Cowley's take is interesting because it's more concerned with the emotion and psychological preparation involved rather than the physical act:

For short-story writers the four stages of composition are usually distinct.... Before seizing upon the germ of a story, the writer may find himself in a state of 'generally intensified emotional sensitivity...when events that usually pass unnoticed suddenly move you deeply, when a sunset lifts you to exaltation, when a squeaking door throws you into a fit of exasperation, when a clear look of trust in a child's eyes moves you to tears.' I am quoting again from Dorothy Canfield Fisher, who 'cannot conceive,' she says, 'of any creative fiction written from any other beginning.' There is not much doubt, in any case, that the germ is precious largely because it serves to crystallize a prior state of feeling. Then comes the brooding or meditation, then the rapidly written first draft, then the slow revision; for the story writer everything is likely to happen in more or less its proper order. For the novelist, however, the stages are often confused. The meditation may have to be repeated for each new episode. The revision of one chapter may precede or follow the first draft or the next.

The stories covered in this volume are an amalgam of 19th- and 20th-century examples from the top authors producing short fiction in their respective times. The 19th century is of particular interest as the period in which American fiction began to take form. Despite its hard-won independence, Americans continued to look to England and the continent for its artistic leads in the post-Revolutionary period and into the early 1800s. Britain remained the center of English-language publishing, and while America had a thriving market for newspapers, pamphlets, and journals, those outlets

were almost exclusively the kingdom of nonfiction with a smidge of poetry as the only form of creative writing. Fiction publishing was almost a nonentity as American authors had yet to find a voice.

Most scholars accept Washington Irving's *The Sketch Book*, published in installments throughout 1819 and 1820, as the first popular short story collection by an American author, although, ironically, the stories and essays in the volume were written in England and are dominated by English themes. However, the collection also contained the distinctly American tales *Rip Van Winkle* and *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*, two classics still widely read today. Their vast popularity proved that an American market for short fiction was possible although it would be several more years before it fully flourished.

In 1837 Nathaniel Hawthorne assembled the short stories he'd previously published individually to little avail for a collection dubbed *Twice Told Tales*. Born and raised in New England, Hawthorne wore the yoke of Puritanism that prevailed throughout the Northeast. The majority of his well-known stories concern sin and guilt, recurring themes which crescendo in his most famous work *The Scarlet Letter* (1850). Hawthorne's sea captain father died when he was young, leaving the family with the ample financial resources to allow Nathaniel to pursue a writing career after graduating college without ever laboring in a profession. He toiled for years in near monkish seclusion writing and honing his fiction while developing his themes and perfecting his style. Scholars believe that he published stories under pseudonyms while continuing to refine the texts until he could improve them no further and burning the earlier, imperfect drafts. *The Minister's Black Veil*, covered in this volume, is among his initial successes. Steeped in Puritanism, the story, which Hawthorne labels "A Parable," follows the Reverend Mr. Hooper's donning of a black veil covering all but his mouth

and chin and the exaggerated turmoil it creates in the community. The veil seems symbolic of the sin we all possess, and while Hooper wears his openly (acknowledging his sin), those around him are oblivious to the invisible veils they wear themselves.

Although a contemporary of Hawthorne, Poe—alcoholic, addicted to gambling, and worldly—was the austere New Englander's antithesis. As Hawthorne's stories are sermons in morality, Poe wrote to entertain his audience. His tales of the macabre riveted readers, and he is accepted as the father of the mystery; the most prestigious award bestowed to works in that genre by the Mystery Writers of America bears his name and likeness—the Edgar. Like Hawthorne, Poe also lost his father at a young age but was adopted by a wealthy family. Raised as a gentleman, he initially pursued a military career including several years attending West Point. Poe's stepfather, however, later remarried, dashing Edgar's chances of inheriting the family fortune and forcing him to struggle through a string of odd jobs that proved as unsuccessful as his military endeavors. Poe also spent much time in seclusion perfecting his craft.

Hawthorne's *The Minister's Black Veil* and Poe's *The Tell-Tale Heart*, one of the many Poe creations covered here, are as opposite as their creators, yet close analysis reveals similarities. Hawthorne's Reverend Hooper's decision to hide his eyes from humanity propels the story, while the nameless old man in Poe's murder story loses his life solely because he "had the eye of a vulture—a pale blue eye, with a film over it." Both characters seemingly are innocents who have done nothing to warrant their fates and have been harshly judged by others for their physical appearance. Scholars assert that Hooper's veil is a symbol of his sin-deformed soul, while the old man's deformity is physical. But if the eyes are the window of the soul, as popular adage suggests, perhaps the old man's spirit is as corrupt as his orb.

Zora Neale Hurston is one of ten women writers included in this volume. Her short story *Sweat* was published in 1926 in the only issue ever produced of *Fire*, a planned quarterly magazine for young African-American writers. *Sweat* was never collected in an anthology or republished during the author's lifetime (1891–1960). Hurston brings authenticity to the story about the decaying marriage of a woman and her abusive, philandering husband through dialogue written in vernacular and the use of real locations like Joe Clarke's store where Hurston herself shopped. Protagonist Delia Jones initially seems the typical weak, cowering woman afraid of her brutal husband, Sykes. Readers, however, quickly discern that Sykes has lost his power to dominate his wife. In the story's opening scene, Delia is separating the washing she takes in to earn her living when Syke's drops his coiled up bullwhip on her shoulders. Thinking it is a snake, which she deathly fears, "a great terror [takes] hold of her" and it is "a full minute" before she realizes her husband's vicious joke. Although it appears that Sykes dominates his wife, Hurston describes the whip, long the instrument of black suppression, as "long, round, limp and black," giving it phallic overtones: Sykes has been Delia's oppressor for years, but she has found a new strength and self-worth rendering Sykes impotent and powerless.

Although not a sermon in the manner of Hawthorne, *Sweat* has distinct religious symbolism. Syke's attempt to drive away Delia by bringing a real snake into her house is replete with Biblical overtones that Hurston makes obvious by having the woman refer to the serpent as "ol' satan" and "ol' scratch." And like the narrator of Poe's tale who seals his own fate by confessing his crime to the police, Sykes also is the author of his own demise as the viper ultimately kills him instead of Delia. Also remarkably reminiscent of *The Tell-Tale Heart*, Delia's final vision of the dying Sykes is his "open eye shining." The themes presented by Poe and Hawthorne in the 1800s still flourished in

20th-century short stories. However, *Sweat* is an excellent illustration of how 20th-century fiction became distinctly American. Both Hawthorne's *The Minister's Black Veil* and Poe's *The Tell-Tale Heart* could as easily be set in England or Europe, while Hurston's use of ethnic dialogue roots her story firmly in the soil of the American South.

Hurston introduces another facet into the story as does Jack London in *To Build a Fire*, included in this volume: place and its physical elements as an integral factor of the short form. Not just the purview of novels, location can play a paramount role in setting the mood and tone in short fiction as well. Several authors are so connected to a single location that the geometry becomes a character. This perhaps is best personified by James Joyce's use of Dublin, Ireland, as the setting for all his writings—his sole short story collection isn't called *Dubliners* because he failed to conjure another title! Setting often gives a story or a novel its personality. While this is more prevalent in the alternate worlds of science fiction and fantasy, readers of all genres need to be immediately aware of a story's setting in order to fully comprehend the author's intent.

As stated above, Poe and Hawthorne are prime examples of stories with universal settings which can broaden their appeal to a wider array of readers as the location doesn't set the story's tone. *Sweat* is rich with Biblical symbolism, which the author amplifies through setting it in a stifling hot South Florida. Hurston gives readers the triple whammy of a serpent, Satanic references, and Hellish heat. London uses the Yukon's frozen landscape to set his story's mood. London, however, goes further by employing the –70F temperature as the story's antagonist and third character along with the man and the dog. The unnamed protagonist is locked in a to-the-death struggle against the murderous cold in a duel as lethal as any fought with a sword or pistol. London also utilizes an element so far not seen in the previous shorts: presenting a story completely through narration sans dialogue.

Another interesting feature of London's story is the dog. The animal is described as a "wolf-dog," a combination of the wild and the domesticated. The "dog" easily can be seen as representing nature as London instills it with intelligence, as well as instinct: the dog understands that it's too cold to travel, a fact the man repeatedly acknowledges yet foolishly ignores. The dog is the rational, the man the irrational. At the story's conclusion, the dog survives while the man succumbs to the killing cold.

Spring-boarding into the mid 20th century, John Updike's *A & P*, included here, brings a new ingredient to the study of short fiction: humor. While many stories have been written solely to deliver laughs, Updike, as well as J.D. Salinger, also included in this collection, follows in the footsteps of Mark Twain and others by lacing otherwise dramatic outings with humor. It is interesting to note that Updike's story is set in a small

area a few miles outside of Boston, the exact local where Hawthorne lived and arguably set his fiction. The Puritan spirit that pervaded that area clearly has departed. While Hawthorne's characters were aghast at anything in the realm of sex or immodestly, *A & P* delivers the sexual desire of a young man toward three equally young women who enter the supermarket where he works wearing only bathing suits that display much flesh. Although the young man never directly expresses any sexual desire, he, like London's protagonist, surrenders to the illogic although he realizes it clearly is folly that may destroy his future.

As depicted in these highlighted stories, as well as numerous others in this collection, short fiction holds all the wonders of novels. Short fiction has it all.

Michael Rogers



Hop-Frog

by Edgar Allan Poe

Content Synopsis

Poe begins this story by introducing the king who, it is made clear, loves jokes. While some have retired their jesters, this king not only has seven ministers “all noted for their accomplishments as jokers,” but also Hop-Frog, a professional jester that by virtue of his wit, physique, and dwarf stature is “a triplicate treasure in one person.” Hop-Frog, so named due to his leaping, bent-over posture and inability to walk properly, was given as a gift to the king after being forcibly taken from his “barbarous region” of a home. On account of his inability to walk properly, Hop-Frog’s upper body had adapted itself with enormous strength and dexterity; allowing him to perform amazing feats of entertainment and utility. Along with Hop-Frog, the king was given Trippetta, also a dwarf (graced with “exquisite beauty”) forced to leave her home.

Both Trippetta and Hop-Frog are depended upon for their contributions to the king and his court. Hop-Frog’s joking and entertainment abilities and Trippetta’s grace and dancing abilities make them integral parts of the king’s planning process when he decides to throw a masquerade ball. Upon Trippetta’s careful direction, the party and hall are bedecked for the ball. When the day of the fete arrives, however, the king and his ministers all remain without an idea for their costumes. Even more boisterous and dominating than usual due to great amounts of wine, they decide to enlist

the help of Hop-Frog in designing their costumes. Upon Hop-Frog’s arrival, the king implores him to drink despite the knowledge that he has little tolerance for alcohol as it excites “the poor cripple almost to madness.”

The scene quickly turns bad when, after Hop-Frog refuses to drink, the king becomes “purple with rage.” In an attempt to save her companion, for whom she has utilized her charm and looks to protect before, Trippetta implores the king to leave Hop-Frog alone. In a sweeping movement, the enraged king throws the contents of his goblet in Trippetta’s face. The room becomes impeccably silent until a “low, but harsh and protracted grating sound” begins to come from without the space. A bit alarmed, the king at first believes that the sound came from Hop-Frog but is not certain and as such, is easily swayed to the contrary by Hop-Frog himself.

Hop-Frog’s countenance immediately changes as he tells the king that he will drink whatever amount of wine the king so desires and begins imparting his idea for the king’s costume. The idea, termed “the Eight Chained Ourang-Outangs,” requires the king and his ministers to appear as ourang-outangs who have escaped their masters. Hop-Frog ensures them that he will make them appear so life like that the guests will assume they are real and that “the beauty of the game... lies in the fright it occasions among the women.” The

king and his ministers are enthralled by the idea and leave themselves to the hands of Hop-Frog.

To fashion the costumes, the king and ministers are first dressed in “tight-fitting stockinet shirts and drawers.” They are then coated with tar and covered with flu, a plant fiber. Finally, chains are attached to each of the men and then tied together to create a circle among them. Though their excitement is difficult to endure, the men wait until midnight to enter the ballroom; a room so carefully prepared by Trippetta as to be void of the chandelier that normally lights the room but would also have dripped wax on the attendees.

Upon their entrance, the crowd is alarmed to see these beasts and their jangling chains and the king could not have been happier at their frightened reactions. To keep the attendees captive and ensure a good show, the king made sure the doors were locked behind him and gave Hop-Frog governance over the keys. Within the tumult of the crowd, the man-beasts are thrust to the center of the room where they do not notice the creeping down of the chandelier hook upon them. With a deft movement, Hop-Frog attaches the chandelier hook to the chain connecting the king and his men. By some unseen force, the chandelier hook begins to rise and begins to pull the men closer and closer until they are face-to-face and no longer a fright to the laughing crowd.

In maneuvers of deft and careful skill, Hop-Frog makes his way over the heads of the crowd to where the ape men stand in their predicament. Upon reaching them, the dwarf leaps upon the king’s head and scurries up the chain where he holds a torch and shouts, “Leave them to me! I fancy I know them. If I can only get a good look at them, I can soon tell who they are.” With the whole room erupted in laughter a barely audible whistle is sounded and the chandelier chain rises quickly up about 30 feet; leaving the struggling ourang-outangs dangling.

The crowd is immediately silenced by the frightening display of the eight men and dwarf suspended above them. The silence is broken, however, by “a low, harsh, grating sound, as had before attracted the attention of the king and his counselors when the former threw the wine in the face of Trippetta.” Unlike the first time, though, there was no question that the sound came from the dwarf who foamed and grated at the mouth with the countenance of a maniac towards the eight entrapped men. Hop-Frog began to yell, “Ah ha! I begin to see who these people are now!” and held the flame closer and closer to the king until the tar and flax sparked into a flame and all eight men were enveloped in fire.

With the horror-stricken crowd unable to help or speak below, Hop-Frog continues to yell:

They are the great king and his seven privy-concillors,—a king who does not scruple to strike a defenceless girl and his seven councilors who abet him in the outrage. As for myself, I am simply Hop-Frog, the jester—and this is my last jest.

With the soon blackened corpses hanging from their post, Hop-Frog finishes his speech and climbs to the ceiling where he vanishes through the skylight. Neither Trippetta nor Hop-Frog is seen again after that night.

Symbols & Motifs

There are two instances within the story during which Hop-Frog is apparently grinding his teeth—when he decides to take revenge upon the king and again when he executes that revenge. In several of Poe’s other short stories, such as “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar” and “Berenice,” teeth are a prominent story element. Poe uses teeth as symbols of mortality (Kennedy 79).

The method by which Hop-Frog suggests that the king and his minstrels dress to look like ourang-outangs involves them being covered in tar, an

element through which Poe not so discretely reminds us was a popular form of punishment. Poe even writes, “At this stage of the [dressing] process, some one of the party suggested feathers; but the suggestion was at once overruled by the dwarf.” While this is clearly a foreshadowing of the terrible demise that the king and his ministers will meet, the reader and Hop-Frog are the only people privy to such an inkling; the victims are none the wiser.

Another element of this story that is repeated within other Poe stories, namely “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” is the orangutan. In both stories, the orangutan (ourang-outang as Poe writes it) entails a confusion between animal and man. In “Hop-Frog,” the men are dressed as ourang-outangs in what begins as a ruse and ends with gruesome murders. In “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” the ourang-outang is responsible for gruesome murders that were originally thought to be perpetrated by man. The ourang-outang would appeal to Poe in their exotic nature; during his lifetime, sailors and world travelers began coming back to the Americas with exotic animals like apes and birds. The ourang-outang, with its clear similarities to man, made it an easy way for Poe to draw comparisons and make statements while adding further mystery to his stories.

The most obvious motif of this story is revenge. It is the king’s abuse of Trippetta that drives Hop-Frog to exact revenge, a moment (as discussed above) defined by the grinding of his teeth. Hop-Frog not only gets brutal revenge on the king and his ministers, he also gets away without punishment or repercussion. Termed one of Poe’s revenge tales, “Hop-Frog” is similar to “The Cask of Amontillado,” in that both killers succeed in their revenge and are able to avoid any consequences of their deeds.

Historical Context

While certainly fictional and sensational, “Hop-Frog” does exhibit some elements of history

within. The presence of jesters and ministers within a king’s inner circle was a common occurrence during the Middle Ages. While the role of the jester is largely assumed to be that of a clown and entertainer, the jester was more of a cunning and quick trickster who, unlike the rest of a society’s citizens, was able to speak openly and honestly about taboo or forbidden subjects due to the pre-assumption that it was merely “jest.” As recorded through text, the jester was integral to the monarch and also responsible for providing logical advice and insight. Hop-Frog is illuminated as just such a being—cunning and intelligent enough to gain the king’s trust (in this case, much to the monarch’s detriment).

Societal Context

“Hop-Frog” clearly brings issues of class and society into light. Hop-Frog is taken from his home (a terrible abduction no matter how “barbarous” his homeland) and given to the king as a gift. The triviality of the location and name of Hop-Frog’s exact homeland is highlighted to further evidence his lack of human importance to the king. While Hop-Frog is a dwarf and disabled, he is no less a human and the fact that he is treated so obviously as a commodity is an injustice impossible for the reader to ignore. Further, the king’s treatment of Hop-Frog and Trippetta despite their abundance of intelligence and service to him is harsh, disrespectful and tyrannical. In fact, the king, while presumably powerful and rich, is clearly not as intelligent as the marginalized Hop-Frog.

Interestingly, the king and his ministers are not the only people punished. By locking the ballroom doors and stringing the murder victims up out of reach, the ball attendees are punished as well. This leads one to believe that Poe was making wider implications of guilt upon the society who harbored such a king. The fact that Hop-Frog exerts his revenge and escapes to live his

own life further illustrates Poe's feelings towards class stratification and the down-trodden or dis-respected classes.

Religious Context

There is a lack of religious context within "Hop-Frog" which is most likely due to the fact that Poe chose to enumerate stories involving the methods and questions of psychology and science as opposed to the mysticism of religion.

Scientific & Technological Context

While there isn't a specific scientific or technological context, there is a pronounced psychological aspect to "Hop-Frog" as there is to many of Poe's stories. Poe was very interested in psychology and specifically phrenology (a pseudoscience purporting that different parts of the brain are responsible for different functions). In "Hop-Frog," there are several moments when Poe takes us on a "journey into the mind" (Canada 1997).

The first instance is when Hop-Frog makes the eerily swift switch from being extremely angry and obstinate to calm and obedient after the king forces him to drink and throws wine in Trippetta's face. Poe is clearly illustrating that within Hop-Frog, something has switched his countenance. The reader soon finds that this is the moment when Hop-Frog determines his plan for revenge. The murder of the king and his minstrels itself is another psychological element within the story. Hop-Frog not only seeks revenge, he seeks the very public and horrible eroding of the king. By stringing the king and his cronies up on the chandelier chain, Hop-Frog is forcing the entire captive audience to watch as he burns them. This is not only psychologically (and clearly physically) damaging to the king, but to the crowd as well who watch helplessly as the men burn above them.

Biographical Context

Edgar Allan Poe was born to actor David Poe and actress Elizabeth Poe in 1809 in Boston, Massachusetts. The author's father left the family in 1810 and in 1811, his mother died of tuberculosis. Around that time, Poe was sent to live with tobacco merchant John Allan and his wife Frances Allan who were his foster parents but never officially adopted him. Due to gambling debts and arguments with his foster father over financial support, Poe dropped out of both the University of Virginia and West Point Academy. Poe moved to Baltimore where he lived with his aunt and cousin Virginia in 1831. After finding success as an editor of the "Southern Literary Messenger," Poe moved his cousin (then wife) and aunt to Philadelphia where he published some of his most famous works such as "The Fall of the House of Usher," "Ligeia," and "William Wilson." After Virginia's death in 1847, Poe continued to travel and write. In 1849, the year during which many of his most famous poems were published ("Annabel Lee," "The Bells"), Poe disappeared after a Richmond lecture tour and was found later in an unconscious condition in Baltimore.

Throughout his life, Poe battled problems with alcohol and gambling. With the loss of his parents and the troubles he had with his foster father, Poe was something of an outsider. While he posthumously attained far-reaching fame and is credited with the creation of the literary genres pure-poetry, short story and detective fiction, he struggled during his lifetime to find lasting success, both critically and monetarily.

Comparison between Poe and his character Hop-Frog have been made based upon their common struggles with alcohol, acceptance and success. Like Hop-Frog, Poe quickly became out of control with the smallest amount of alcohol. Both Poe and his character try to avoid drinking but are not able to. The king himself, a