

Lesson 2

From Tom Walker to Tessie Hutchinson

Objectives

- To review the history of the short story as a literary genre
- To critically discuss the nature and possibilities of short fiction

Notes to the Teacher

From one perspective, the short story is as old as the ancient myths, with roots deep in oral tradition. From another, it is the youngest of the genres, emerging as a unique form only in the nineteenth century.

Most advanced students have previous experience with short stories. This lesson capitalizes on that by focusing on seven frequently anthologized pieces: Washington Irving's "The Devil and Tom Walker," Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown," Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart," Ambrose Bierce's "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour," Endora Welty's "A Worn Path," and Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery." Prior to the lesson, assign titles so that each story has several readers. Point out that all seven are readily available in story collections and literature textbooks. If your students have not encountered these stories before, you may need to allow extra time to locate and digest the selections.

Procedure

1. Use **Handout 2** to describe the history of the short story. Have students discuss examples from previous reading experience. Ask questions to prompt insights.

Roots—Examples include Greek myths such as Pandora's Box and the story of Persephone and Demeter, Aesop's fables, and biblical stories such as Cain and Abel and the Prodigal Son. With widespread literacy, literary writing ceased to be the domain of the upper classes, with profound effects on both writers and readers.

Emergence of the Literary Short Story—The first real short story published in the United States was Francis Hopkinson's "A Pretty Story" (1774), a prorevolution fiction. Pieces resembling short stories were published even earlier by writers such as Benjamin Franklin. Herman Melville (1818–1891) could be included as another early contributor. Additional U.S. writers later in the century include Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811–1896), Mark Twain (1835–1910), and Bret Harte (1836–1902). You may also want to mention Russia's Fyodor Dostoevski (1821–1881).

The Twentieth Century—We usually consider the century in two phases, the "Modern" and the "Contemporary," although the line between the two is far from static. Non-English writers include Italy's Luigi Pirandello, Germany's Thomas Mann, Russia's Isaac Babel, Argentina's Jorge Luis Borges, Colombia's Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Japan's Yukio Mishima, and South Africa's Nadine Gordimer.

2. Distribute **Handout 3** and point out that the seven stories span the development of the American short story.
3. Have students share information and insights with the whole class.

Suggested Responses:

"The Devil and Tom Walker"

In early-eighteenth-century New England, the miserly Tom Walker and his equally miserly wife attempt a deal with the devil. She fails and disappears; he succeeds and becomes a powerful banker. In his old age, he tries to outsmart the devil but is whisked away to hell. The story makes amusing comments about shrewish wives and miserly behavior; it concludes with a clear message to "all griping money-brokers." The narrator acknowledges reliance on legends and rumors; the story includes extensive imagery, snaps of irony, and social commentary.

“Young Goodman Brown”

Young Goodman Brown goes fearfully but curiously into the forest outside Salem to attend a witches’ sabbath. There he sees—or thinks he sees—all the people he has revered, including his young wife, Faith. He returns to Salem a joyless, bitter man. Readers are often intrigued by the story’s deliberate ambiguity: Is Brown’s experience real or imaginary? Hawthorne emphasizes an eerie atmosphere and dark psychological themes.

“The Tell-Tale Heart”

A first-person narrator asserts his sanity as he describes his carefully planned murder of an old man. He dismembered the body and buried it beneath the floorboards; when the police came to investigate, he thought he could hear the old man’s heart still beating; finally, driven to distraction, the murderer shrieked out his guilt. This is a horror story of murder, guilt, and madness; the tension builds inexorably from beginning to end.

“An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge”

During the Civil War, Peyton Farquhar is hanged as a traitor. Miraculously, the rope breaks and he dodges bullets and evades pursuers as he makes his way home. Suddenly, at the surprise ending, the reader realizes that the entire escape has been a hallucination; Farquhar hangs dead. The vivid imagery of the imagined escape contrasts with the stark facts of the hanging. Readers empathize with Farquhar, who seems a decent person, and recognize the magnitude of a loss of life.

“The Story of an Hour”

Mrs. Mallard is informed of her husband’s death in a train accident. She retreats to privacy to grieve, but suddenly discovers the joy of a new freedom to live her own life. Then her husband walks in—not having been on the train after all—and she drops dead of a heart attack. The story works through multiple ironies and suggests feminist themes.

“A Worn Path”

During the Christmas season Phoenix Jackson journeys on foot to get more medicine for her grandson, who once swallowed lye. Plot is a very minor dimension of this story. Welty illuminates character and suggests themes about old and young, haves and have-nots, blacks and whites, giving and receiving.

“The Lottery”

Townspeople gather for the traditional June lottery. Tessie Hutchinson “wins,” which means the other villagers stone her to death. The story begins with hints of uneasiness and builds to its horrifying climax. Thoughtful readers emerge with reflections about society, tradition, superstition, and scapegoating. Rereadings prompt recognition of foreshadowing and irony.

4. Point out that these seven stories differ in many ways, yet they illustrate some of the traits of the short story as a genre. Ask students to suggest general conclusions.

Suggested Responses:

- a. The genre is diverse. Plot, character, theme, and other literary elements vary in importance.
- b. Stories tend to focus on the experience of a single character at an intense moment.
- c. Many stories include elements of surprise and/or irony.
- d. There is room for ambiguity.
- e. Stories often state or imply significant insights about human nature or life.

A Brief History of the Short Story

Roots

Like other literary forms, the short story has deep historical and cultural roots. Oral traditions, both ancient and recent, have produced a vast body of myths, legends, and fairy tales. Fables and parables have a long history. The great national epics and the Judeo-Christian Bible include many short stories. In classical and Elizabethan drama, messengers often tell stories of offstage events. As forms, both the ballad and the essay overlap with the short story. Geoffrey Chaucer's fourteenth century masterpiece *The Canterbury Tales* and Boccaccio's fourteenth century *Decameron* can be seen as early short story landmarks.

Two key factors propelled the development of modern literature. Popular education and increasingly widespread literacy generated a huge reading audience. The publishing industry enabled writers to reach that audience. Of particular importance to the short story—as well as to other short forms such as poetry and the essay—was the magazine.

Emergence of the Literary Short Story

During the first half of the nineteenth century, the short story emerged as a conscious art form. Writers began to develop the unique possibilities of short fiction as a distinct genre.

In the United States three significant influences were Washington Irving, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Edgar Allan Poe.

Irving (1783–1859) was the first American short story writer to gain international esteem. His famous “Rip Van Winkle” appeared in *The Sketch Book* in 1820. Among Irving's other stories are “The Devil and Tom Walker” and “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow.”

Novelist and story writer Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804–1864) published *Twice-Told Tales* in 1837. Among his most famous stories are “The Minister's Black Veil,” “Young Goodman Brown,” and “Dr. Heidegger's Experiment.”

Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849) is often considered the father of the modern short story. With “Murders in the Rue Morgue,” he created the world's first detective story. He is famous for horror stories such as “The Tell-Tale Heart,” “The Cask of Amontillado,” and “The Black Cat.” Poe also wrote literary criticism about the short story genre.

Later in the century, the short story continued to flourish in America. Mark Twain (1835–1919) wrote humorous stories, while Ambrose Bierce (1842–1914) wrote about the Civil War. The influential Henry James (1843–1916) emphasized upperclass social situations. Sarah Orne Jewett (1849–1909) wrote sensitively of life in New England, while Kate Chopin (1851–1904) explored feminist themes. O. Henry (1862–1910) celebrated surprise endings, while Stephen Crane (1871–1900) wrote fatalistic stories such as “The Open Boat.”

Overseas, the Russian Nikolai Gogol (1809–1852) wrote “The Overcoat,” often credited as the seminal European short story. Russian novelists Ivan Turgenev (1818–1883) and Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910) and playwright Anton Chekhov (1860–1904) also wrote enduring short stories. In France, Guy de Maupassant (1850–1893) specialized in the genre. In England, the Polish-born Joseph Conrad (1857–1924) wrote of life on the sea. Rudyard Kipling (1865–1936) presented stories of Anglo-India, while Arthur Conan Doyle (1859–1930) created Sherlock Holmes.

The Twentieth Century

As a result of its flourishing success in the United States, some critics consider the short story an American form. While this oversimplifies the case, it is true that so many United States writers have written so many fine stories that it is futile to try to list them.

F. Scott Fitzgerald, William Faulkner, and Ernest Hemingway wrote enduring stories. So did John Steinbeck, Katherine Anne Porter, and Carson McCullers. Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio* is considered a landmark collection. With “The Lottery,” Shirley Jackson proved the exception to the rule that nothing disappears as quickly as a single good short story. Flannery O’Connor, Langston Hughes, Eudora Welty, J. D. Salinger, Bernard Malamud, and Zora Neale Hurston made outstanding contributions. The list goes on and on, with new voices emerging every day.

Overseas, Katherine Mansfield was a powerful early-century voice. James Joyce’s *The Dubliners* is an indisputable landmark. Other twentieth-century voices include D. H. Lawrence, Liam O’Flaherty, Frank O’Connor, Sean O’Faolain, and Doris Lessing.

Outstanding stories have also emerged from Continental Europe, Asia, Africa, and Latin America—in fact, from everywhere that people engage in literature. To hear these foreign voices, we depend on translators and on the vagaries of publishing.

Seven Famous American Short Stories

For each of the following noteworthy selections, summarize plot, characters, and setting. Then describe the story's effects on you as a reader, and note observations about technique and style.

	Synopsis	Effect	Observations
"The Devil and Tom Walker" Washington Irving			
"Young Goodman Brown" Nathaniel Hawthorne			
"The Tell-Tale Heart" Edgar Allan Poe			

	Synopsis	Effect	Observations
“An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge” Ambrose Bierce			
“The Story of an Hour” Kate Chopin			
“A Worn Path” Eudora Welty			
“The Lottery” Shirley Jackson			