

# AND IT'S A LONELY, PERSONAL ART

By FRANK O'CONNOR

**D**EFINITIONS are a nuisance but they prevent misunderstandings. When E. M. Forster wrote a book on the novel, he accepted a French definition of it as "a prose fiction of a certain length" which was incontrovertible, like saying it was written on paper, but not very helpful, as it implied that practically everything "of a certain length" was a novel and consequently that there was nothing useful to be said about it. Anthologies of short stories also suggest that everything "of a certain length" is a short story—squibs by Dorothy Parker or Saki, articles, essays and plain shockers, and that nothing useful can be said about that, either. I don't share either view. I admit I am not at all clear what I mean by a short story, or else I should have much less trouble in writing it, but I am passionately clear about what I do *not* mean, and for me, anthologies are full of negative definitions.

A yarn, for instance, is not a short story, as—begging Mr. Forster's pardon—a medieval saga or romance is not a novel. Every literary form is, to a certain extent, a convention; it is what people generally mean when they use the word that defines it, exactly as when a man says, "I'll meet you with the car," you expect to be met with an automobile, not a perambulator. A novel is "Tom Jones," "Sense and Sensibility," "Vanity Fair," "War and Peace" and "The Charterhouse of Parma," and *not*—Mr. Forster's pardon again—"The Pilgrim's Progress," "Marius the Epicurean" or "Zuleika Dobson." (When Mr. Forster launches into a discussion of "Zuleika Dobson," I feel exactly as I should if the man who was to meet me with the car, appeared with the perambulator.) By convention, the novel and the short story have both come to mean stories of real people in real situations, rather than what I call "The Cat's Whisker," the sort of yarn, so popular with magazine editors, which ends, usually in italics "*The face was the face of Minkie, the cat, but the whiskers were the whiskers of Colonel Claude Compyne.*" If we must have a word for the thing, let us call it a "tale," and not mix it up with Chekhov's "Lady With the Toy Dog," with which it has nothing whatever in common but the fact that it is "a prose fiction of a certain length."

**F**OR me, what makes the short story what it is, is its attitude to Time. In any novel the principal character is Time—"Ulysses," "The Informer" and "Mrs. Dalloway" notwithstanding. Even in inferior novels and in books which are not strictly creative literature, the

*Irish short story writer and critic, Mr. O'Connor recently published a volume of his collected short stories.*

## The Short Story, Says Frank O'Connor, Is a Lyric Cry in the Face of Destiny



From a painting by Honore Daumier.  
The interest is in the lonely, the gnarled, the obscure.

chronological ordering of events establishes a rhythm, which is the rhythm of life itself, and I have known novelists who sometimes wrote hundreds of pages until the novel proper began. But what to the novelist is the most precious element in his work is a nightmare to the short-story writer. He is all the while trying to get round the necessity for describing events in sequence; the rhythm is too slow, and when novelists like Henry James and Hardy turn story-tellers and use the rhythms of the novel, he finds the result disastrous. Hardy will cheer-

fully waste three pages getting his hero up the hill before he even begins to reveal what his story is about. Time the collaborator has become Time the gasbag.

Every great short story represents a struggle with Time—the novelist's Time—a refusal to allow it to establish its majestic rhythms ("Chapter I, A Walk on the Heath"). It attempts to reach some point of vantage, some glowing center of action from which past and future will be equally visible. The crisis of a short story is the short story, and not, as in the novel, the logical,

inescapable, result of everything preceding it, the mere flowering of events. I should almost say that in the story what precedes the crisis becomes a consequence of the crisis.

It is one of the weaknesses of the story-writer that, because of his awareness of the importance of the crisis, he tends to inflate it, to give it artificial, symbolic significance. In teaching the short story, I have had to warn students that anyone using symbolism would be instantly expelled from the class. Joyce, who was fascinated by the problem, did use symbolism, but being Joyce used it in such a remote form that he manages to conceal it from most readers. In "Ivy-Day in the Committee Room," a satirical comment on Ireland after Parnell, we meet a few political figures consumed with rancor for the want of a drink. Then some bottles of stout appear, and the tone of their sentiment at once becomes nobler, till, in a mock-heroic parody of a Hero's funeral, a sentimental poem takes the place of a Dead March and three bottles of stout, placed before the fire to open, that of the three volleys fired over the Hero's grave.

**T**HE device of the muted symbol is superbly used in "The Dead." The events of the story have already long taken place, and were never very significant. A tubercular young man who sang a song called "The Lass of Aughrin" fell in love with a West of Ireland girl called Gretta. One night, she found him outside her window, wet and shivering, and soon after, he died. The story proper opens years later with the arrival of Gretta and her husband at a musical party given by two old music teachers in Dublin. As Gabriel Conroy, the husband, enters, he scrapes snow from his galoshes and cracks a joke with the maid about getting married. She retorts bitterly that "the men that does be there nowadays are nothing but old palaver and all they can get out of you." These two things—the snow and the maid's retort—form the theme of the story, and they are repeated in varied and more menacing forms until the climax.

"The men that does be there nowadays" cannot be great lovers; it is only the Dead who can be perfect. The young Gaelic League girl with whom Gabriel chats about the West of Ireland—the subject, like the dead themselves, rising—may be charming, but she cannot have the courtesy and grace of the old music teachers who are passing into the shadow; Caruso—a subtle touch, this—may, for all we know, be a good singer, but he cannot be as great as Parkinson, the obscure English tenor, whom one of the old ladies once heard. And in the tremendous cadenza we realize that Gabriel, good husband though he may be, can never mean to his wife what the dead boy (Continued on Page 34)

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who once stood shivering beneath her window means—till he too has been buried under the snow which is Death's symbol.

This, of course, is only a way of saying that the short story is lyrical, not epic; that it springs from the heart of a situation rather than mounts up to and explains it. There is yet another way of expressing the same thing in relation to the novel. The novel, it is generally agreed, is the typical art of the middle classes which reached its highest development in the century of the middle classes, the nineteenth. The nineteenth-century novel in Europe had a peculiar geographical distribution. It is at its greatest in England, France and Russia.

THE distribution of the short story is quite different. Here, the Russians have the field to themselves; the French with Maupassant are barely in sight, while the English are still hovering round the starting post, eagerly searching for the whiskers of Colonel Claude Compyne. It is true that the great period of the short story didn't come until the decline of the novel, about 1880, but long before that Turgenev had done things with the short story which have never been bettered. This hints at a basic difference in approach between novel and story.

It is even more peculiar in our own times. Now, it is America which takes the place of Imperial Russia and produces both novels and short stories of the first rank. But Ireland, which has never produced a novel, has produced short stories of remarkable quality, and, in spite of Coppard and Pritchett, far superior to English short stories which still mainly investigate whiskers in italics.

This suggests that the difference has something to do with the attitude that the two art forms impose on their writers. I have small doubt that the difference is in the attitude to society.

THE thing which makes the Irish novel impossible is that the subject of a novel is almost invariably the relation of the individual to society, and Ireland does not have a society which can absorb the individual; as an American critic has put it, every good Irish novel ends on a ship to England or America. But the emotion of Gabriel Conroy in "The Dead" is not conditioned by society, and the loneliness of the people in Winesburg, Ohio, is not likely to be changed by any change in their social condition. Their troubles "are from eternity and shall not fail."

In fact, the short story, compared with the novel, is a lonely, personal art; the lyric cry in face of human destiny, it does not deal as the novel must do with types or with problems of moment, but with what Synge calls "the profound and common interests of life"; the little servant girl so weary of her nursing that she smothers the baby; the cabman so obsessed by his son's death that when none of his busy customers will listen to his grief, he tells it to his old cab-horse. It is not for nothing that some of the great story-tellers like Gorki have been tramps. The story-writer is not a soldier in the field, but a guerrilla fighter, fighting the obscure duels of a great campaign. He stands always somewhere on the outskirts of society, less interested in its famous and typical figures than in the lonely and gnarled and obscure individuals of Winesburg, Ohio, and Dublin, Ireland.