

# How to Write a Short Story that Works

*Michael Allen*

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*The Goals of Universities*  
*The Truth about Writing*  
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## INTRODUCTION

THIS BOOK WILL show you how to write a short story that works.

A short story that works is a story which, at the end, makes a reader chuckle, or brings a tear to the reader's eye, or makes the reader's jaw drop open in amazement. In other words, it's a story that generates *emotion*. The story works in the sense that it makes the reader *feel* something. The more powerful that feeling or emotion is, the more likely it is that a story might win a prize, or persuade someone to publish it, or cause them to recommend it to someone else – the so-called word-of-mouth effect.

Unlike most books on writing, this one is not going to make any silly promises. It won't guarantee to make you rich and famous in seven days.

What this book will do is show you how to write an effective short story. It will do this by providing you with a proven technique for developing your ideas into perfectly workmanlike pieces of short fiction.

### **Ten good reasons for writing short stories**

Here, just to encourage you to get started, are ten good reasons for writing short stories.

- 1 It's fun.
- 2 It doesn't take long.
- 3 Through the internet you can now find readers far more easily than a writer ever could before.
- 4 Modern printing technology means that you can, if you wish, publish your own work in printed form at dramatically less expense than you could even five years ago.

5 If you have ambitions to be a novelist or a screenwriter, learning to master the short-story form will be excellent training.

6 If you do manage to get published in one of the small magazines, you may be approached by a literary agent. This is, believe me, a far more effective method of making contact with them than writing to them direct.

7 There are numerous competitions for short-story writers, some of which offer substantial prizes and have some standing in the literary world.

8 A short story can be about absolutely *anything*. It can be set in this world or the next, or on a planet ten light-years away; the chief character can be a contemporary Englishman or a prehistoric dinosaur; the ending can be tragic, comic, or anything in between. In other words, the author of a short story enjoys total freedom in the choice of subject matter, setting, timescale, final effect, and any other factor that you care to mention. You don't have to take orders from an editor, producer, or director.

9 If you have a yearning to perform on a public stage, you can give readings of your work.

10 To make a start, you really don't need anything more than a pad of paper and few pens. Although, these days, access to a computer and some technical skill with same is going to be a great asset.

Finally, if you find that you really don't enjoy this form of writing, or that you don't seem to be much good at it, you have lost very little. Even if you buy a word processor, you can still use it for other purposes, after you have abandoned your literary ambitions.

## **Several good reasons for not writing anything *other* than short stories**

In my experience, those who have ambitions to be an author often think that they could make a pretty good fist of writing more or less anything: a novel, a film script, radio play, television sitcom; you name it. However, the best advice that I can give you is not to try writing any of those. Not at first, anyway. Here's why.

You may, perhaps, be toying with the idea of writing a novel. Do you have any idea how much time and effort that will take? I have written about twenty novels, and on average I find that it takes me three hours to produce each 1,000 words of polished, ready-to-print text. These days, most publishers are looking for novels of about 100,000 words or more – which means that a 100,000 word novel will take me about 300 hours to complete. If you are writing in your spare time, as most would-be novelists are, you will have to find six hours a week, every week, for a solid year.

With luck, and much hard work, you may then have a finished novel which you are able to offer to publishers. You will probably have heard that it is much easier to sell a novel through an agent than it is if you send it in on your own. But do you have any idea how difficult it is to get an agent to take you on? One of the agents at Curtis Brown recently revealed that in one year he personally was sent 1,200 manuscripts by unpublished authors. He agreed to take on just two of those authors as clients.

But let's suppose, with a giant leap of imagination, that you somehow persuade an agent to represent you, and the agent manages to get you a contract with a respectable publisher. Let us even suppose that you achieve some sort

of a success with your first novel. Do you know what you will have to do then? You will have to go on writing clones of that book, year in and year out, until you finally go mad or die. That's the way the modern publishing industry works.

I won't bother to describe in any detail how difficult it is to get established as a writer for radio, television, film, or the stage. But exactly the same situation exists as in publishing. It's a brutally competitive business.

Consider, by contrast, the happy lot of the short-story writer. She does not have to commit a whole year of concentrated effort to produce a finished piece of work. A short story can be written within a few hours – perhaps fifteen hours at the most, and often a lot less. Furthermore, a short-story writer is not under any commercial pressure to write the same type of work, over and over again; on the contrary, she can write a tragedy this week and a comedy next.

True, you are most unlikely to become rich and famous through writing short stories. But then, believe me, your chances of becoming rich and famous as a novelist or a screenwriter are pretty close to zero anyway. You may have heard that some Hollywood screenwriters pick up a million dollars just for one script – and that's true. But some years ago the Hollywood branch of the Writers Guild did a survey. And guess what – they found that 393 of their members had indeed earned a million dollars from writing a script, but 1,333 members of the public had picked up the same amount through winning the California state lottery! And the lottery winners did not have to work their socks off for it.

If you want to know more about how thankless a task it is to be a novelist, playwright or screenwriter, you will just

have to read my earlier book, *The Truth about Writing* – you can [read it free on obooko](#). To begin with, however, I suggest that anyone who has a vague, unfocused desire to be a writer would be well advised to start with short stories; and it might well be sensible to stick with that form of writing for ever more.

### **The overall purpose of this book**

The overall purpose of this book is to provide you with a technique for writing short stories.

If you follow the simple procedures which are recommended in this text, you will learn how to find ideas for stories; how to develop the original germ of an idea into the outline of an effective story; how to revise and polish your first draft; and how to go about getting your work published.

To be fair, I should point out that you could decide to write short stories without using any conscious technique at all.

In his book *On Writing*, Stephen King tells us that, in his opinion, a short story is a sort of pre-existing entity, or a found object. The process of writing, he argues, is a bit like digging up a fossil which has lain buried in the ground for some time.

What happens, according to Stephen King, is that one day you catch a glimpse of some small portion of the story, sticking out of the earth, so to speak. (This is your original idea, which comes to you while you are in the shower, or out shopping.) When you are free to work on the story, you sit down at the word processor and begin to write – i.e. you dig up the story, metaphorically speaking – and you see what emerges. When you start to write, you don't know

what the end of the story will look like.

In the old days, this process was known as depending on inspiration.

I can't say that I favour the inspiration technique myself. It seems to me to be unlikely to produce anything which will impress your readers, and quite likely to produce turgid rubbish. What is more, it is a theory which readily finds favour with those deluded 'geniuses' who imagine that anything which flows from their brilliant brain *must* be absolutely wonderful, simply because they sat down and tapped it out. They don't need to plan things out, you see. To a genius it all comes naturally.

Sorry, but I really can't recommend the no-technique-at-all method as the basis for writing short stories. By all means try it, and you may even have one or two successes, in the sense that someone reads a story that you have written in this way and tells you that they like it. But the main trouble with depending on inspiration is that you have nothing to fall back on when inspiration fails. As it assuredly will.

Suppose you get halfway through the story and then you just can't decide where to take it after that. Or perhaps you have an idea – the original glimmer of inspiration – but you just can't see how to develop that idea. You can't even get started. If the magic doesn't work, you are left up a gum tree.

It is far better, I suggest, to use the technique which I shall describe to you in this book. If you do, you will always have available to you a procedure which will bring out and develop such possibilities as are inherent in your original idea. You may not end up with a short story which will win major prizes, or even be published, but you will at least be able to finish what you have begun.

For five decades I have read any book which seemed likely to help me to do the job of writing fiction more effectively. In fact, looking through my files, I find that I have read well over 300 books on writing.

Not all these books were of any major practical value, but many of them did contain useful advice. In particular, I acknowledge a debt of gratitude to Thomas H. Uzzell, the author of *Narrative Technique*. First published in 1923, that book is a classic in its field, and much of what I have to say is based in Uzzell's teachings.

This present book is a distillation of the thinking of all those 300 writers on writing, plus the benefit of my fifty-plus years of experience. In other words, I provide you with a technique which draws on the very best of theory and practice from the past, as amended and adapted by myself in the course of writing something like two million words of fiction.

### **Some working definitions**

Before we go any further, it may be useful to define what we are talking about. Some of the definitions which follow will be expanded upon, and perhaps refined, later in the text, but for the moment let us agree on one or two terms.

First, what is a short story?

Well, to begin with it is fiction. That is to say, a short story is an account of events which never actually happened – at least, not quite in the way that you describe.

My own belief is that all fiction should be regarded as taking place in a parallel universe, where things do not happen in quite the same way as they do in the 'real' world. And some universes, of course, are much more 'parallel' than others. Fantasy stories, in particular, take place in a



world in which magic is possible and hobbits live under the hill. And the stories are none the less effective for that; more so, probably.

For reasons which will be explained later, I don't think a short story should run much beyond 5,000 words. A story of that length can comfortably be read in one sitting.

A piece of fiction which is over 8,000 words certainly becomes something other than a short story. It is a long short story, perhaps.

Go up to 15,000 words and you have a novella, or a novelette. (I suggest that there is not much to be gained by discussing the difference between those two terms.)

Anything around 30,000 words in length is a short novel. (Full-length novels used to average 60,000 or 70,000 words when I was a lad, but, as noted above, they now seem to run to 100,000 words or more. And they are *not* noticeably better as a consequence of being longer.)

I would like to emphasise, right at the outset, that 5,000 words is the *maximum* length that I would recommend for a short story. A story of 2,000 or 3,000 words can be just as effective as a longer one. Furthermore, you can write two stories of 2,500 words in the same amount of time as one of 5,000, and have double the chances of achieving publication, fame, and money. (Not, I repeat, that fame and money are at all likely to come your way; but you may, like most writers, have some dreams and ambitions.)

As for technique: well, a technique is simply a way of carrying out a particular task, especially in the arts or sciences. This book sets out to provide you with *a* technique for writing short stories. As stated above, there are others. But they aren't as good.

## **Three basic requirements**

In order to write short stories you need a minimum of three things:

- 1 Materials. This means that you need some story ideas – something to write about.
- 2 Technique – a method of converting the original idea, or inspiration, into a story.
- 3 A facility with words. In short, you need to be able to write effective English prose.

This book can certainly do something to help you with requirement 1. In chapter 4 I will be suggesting ways and means through which you can consciously find and develop ideas to write about. This is important, because I suspect that the success of your stories will depend more on the nature of your ideas and subject matter than on any other factor. All the technique in the world won't help much if your material is hackneyed, dull, or irritating.

Requirement 2, narrative technique, is what this book is all about. In my opinion you would be wise to use the method outlined in this book, at least in the early stages of your writing career. In time, you may work out a way of proceeding which suits you better.

Whatever technique adopt, it will be of relatively little use to you until you have absorbed it into your bloodstream, so to speak, and turned it into something that comes naturally. It's like learning to drive a car. At first you have to do everything slowly, remembering the correct order; in a few months' time, however, you just walk out to the car, get in, and drive away. As the years pass, you become even more confident and skilled. Practice, in short,

is the key.

Requirement 3, the ability to write effective prose, is the one which I can do relatively little to help you with, though in chapter 7 I shall try.

In any case, even if you can write good English prose, becoming fluent in the art of writing fiction is a separate skill which takes a long time to master fully. How long? Well, the short-story theorist Thomas H. Uzzell used to say that you had to write a million words of fiction before you could consider yourself a qualified writer. Malcolm Gladwell, in his book *Outliers*, argues that to become proficient at any major skill, such as playing the piano, or computer programming, you need to put in 10,000 hours of practice.

If that sounds discouraging, please don't let me put you off. Return to the list of ten good reasons for writing short stories and think of the first one: doing it because it's fun. If you discover, after some trial and effort, that you really don't find it fun, then for goodness' sake do something else. Take up bowls, or grow fuchsias.

## **The structure of the book**

Because I am an Englishman, living in England, much of what I have to say is set in an English context. But the principles expounded are, I assure you, applicable absolutely everywhere.

Chapter 1 provides you with a brief history of the short story. If you are going to work in this medium, you really need to know something about the great masters of the past, and the nature of what they produced.

Mind you, you will soon discover that literary historians are very selective in what they write about. Most books on the history of the short story deal exclusively with the

*literary* short story; they ignore, almost entirely, the history of the commercial short story. Chapter 1 attempts to remedy this deficiency.

Chapter 2 examines the possible benefits which might, perhaps, come your way as a result of writing short stories. Theoretically, it may be possible to earn some money, to achieve a degree of fame (or popular acclaim), or to enjoy the (dubious) advantages of a literary reputation. This chapter makes it plain, however, that your chances of actually acquiring any of these benefits are exceedingly slim. Your best plan is to write short stories because you enjoy doing so, and not because you think it will make your fortune or build a career. If you adopt that attitude, you will save yourself a lot of heartache and frustration.

The third chapter explains the fundamental function of the short story. Readers may not consciously understand why they begin to read a story, but anyone who seeks to write effective fiction certainly needs to understand the mechanisms which are at work. After reading this chapter you will have a firm grasp of this important point.

But what will you write about? Some writers have no difficulty at all in thinking up ideas which can be turned into stories, but others find it almost impossible. Chapter 4 therefore does two things: it provides a method for generating ideas, if they are in short supply; and, more important still, it provides a method for classifying those ideas, so that you know how to develop them into fully fledged narratives.

Chapter 5 deals with the point of view from which the story is told. This is one of the more technical aspects of the book. With practice, however, you will soon understand the advantages and disadvantages of using the various possible viewpoints, and you will identify the best one for

any particular story without much difficulty.

The story idea which pops into your head may come to you in a complete form, all ready to write. It is much more likely, however, that your original idea will prove to be just a fragment of a complete story. Chapter 6 therefore offers a variety of techniques for completing the planning, and for intensifying the emotional effect of the basic idea – developing it so that it generates the maximum impact on the reader.

Chapter 7 has advice on the actual writing of the narrative. It considers the question of an author's style, and it also faces up to the writer's need for a good working knowledge of English grammar, spelling and punctuation. Some suggestions are made as to what to do if you find yourself with problems in those areas.

Chapter 8 provides a useful summary of the key points of procedure which have been fully described in the text.

Once the story is finished, you will naturally wish to offer it to readers. This involves sending it to editors, entering competitions, or publishing it yourself in one form or another. All of which are covered in chapter 9.

And, finally, there are four appendices which give further details of some of the topics which have been touched upon earlier in the text.

In short, this book provides you with a practical guide to narrative technique as applied to short stories. There is, however, just one disadvantage: once you have read the book, you will no longer have any excuses for not getting down to work.

Michael Allen

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **How to learn from past masters**

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DON'T BE TEMPTED to skip this chapter; it contains some important information.

Anyone who wants to write short stories can learn a great deal from the past masters of that art. So you need to know something about the history of the short story; and this chapter will meet that need.

First, I shall provide you with an orthodox history of the short story – the kind of brief summary that you might find in a literary encyclopaedia or a reference book. Second, and more importantly, I shall tell you some of the things that the purely academic accounts of events and personalities often leave out.

The combination of these two pieces of information will show you how to learn from the past masters of the short-story form.

#### **An orthodox history**

I am going to keep this section as short as possible, because it is boring to write about, which means that it is almost certainly going to be boring to read, and you naturally don't want that. But you do need to have some information

about what we might call the *official* history of the short story, if only to appreciate the contrast with the unofficial history, which I shall also give you.

The short story was invented as soon as human beings could talk. One day, one of the first hunter-gatherers went out and had a close encounter with a sabre-toothed tiger. When he came back he gave his family a lurid account of what had happened, no doubt with a little exaggeration thrown in. Later, his wife told the story to some of the other wives while they were doing the cooking. And so on. In other words, the short story began as a tale told orally, often around the campfire.

As soon as civilisation invented writing, stories began to be recorded on paper. The Bible, of course, contains numerous parables and stories which contain moral lessons and judgements. The Greeks had the fables of the slave Aesop, dating from about the sixth century BC. The *Arabian Nights* is a collection of stories from Persia, Arabia, India, and Egypt, which was compiled over hundreds of years.

In the fourteenth century, Chaucer gave us his *Canterbury Tales*, which are effectively short stories in verse. Boccaccio's *Decameron* (1353) is definitely a collection of short stories, by any reasonable definition; one hundred of them. The book relates how a group of young people fled from Florence to avoid the plague. While they waited for the disease to burn itself out, they entertained each other with racy stories about wicked priests and randy nuns.

In the eighteenth century, *The Spectator* published many semi-fictional sketches of characters.

Generally speaking, however, the accepted view among literary historians is that the short story, as we know it today, began in the early nineteenth century; that is to say,

it appeared as a literary form slightly later than the novel, which is usually held to have emerged in the eighteenth century.

According to some authorities, the first short story of any significance, by a writer of any standing, was *The Two Drovers*, by Sir Walter Scott. This was published in 1827.

Grimm's *Fairy Tales*, in the 1820s, was a famous and influential collection of folk tales, and before long the Americans got into the act with Hawthorne's *Twice Told Tales* (1837) and Edgar Allan Poe's *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* (1840).

In England, Thomas Hardy's *Wessex Tales* (1888) was the first volume of short stories to enjoy a major success.

Other masters of the short-story art who worked during the nineteenth century include Anton Chekhov in Russia and Guy de Maupassant in France.

The term 'short story', incidentally, is said to have first been coined by Professor Brander Matthews, of Columbia University, in 1901.

Once we enter the twentieth century, any orthodox history of the short story soon presents us with a long list of 'respectable' authors; and I am not going to bother listing them here.

Neither am I going to list all the so-called 'styles' or 'movements' which the professors of English literature claim to have identified: alleged movements such as realism, modernism, and minimalism. It is all too wearisome to think about. If you really want to know more, visit any well-stocked academic library and you will soon find some learned (and extremely dull) treatises on the subject.

Let us turn, hastily, to something a bit more interesting and useful.



## **An unorthodox history**

Over the years, I have come to the view that the ‘official’ histories of the arts often tell us only half the story. Or less.

Suppose you were to go to the library and find a book called *British Theatre since 1950*, or something similar. This book would almost certainly be written by an academic or a professional critic; and in terms of the year 1955, to take one at random, our official history would faithfully record that this was the year in which an ‘important’ and ‘influential’ play called *Waiting for Godot* was premiered.

Which is true. But what this scholarly book is unlikely to mention is that 1955 also saw the first nights of such popular plays as *The Reluctant Debutante* and *Sailor Beware*. Also open for business in 1955 were *The Mousetrap* (which is still running), *Separate Tables*, and *Dry Rot*. These were all long-running successes, attracting big audiences.

And why are these popular productions not mentioned in an official history of British theatre? Because they are not ‘important’, that’s why. To respectable historians they were ‘mere entertainment’ – just mindless pap for gormless morons. But that is not, as you may have gathered, my own view.

I readily accept that plays such as *Waiting for Godot* and *Look Back in Anger*, which appeared in 1956, were written about at length, both at the time, and since, by people who might reasonably be called intellectuals. But what reason is there for supposing that plays which are appreciated by intellectuals are more ‘important’ and ‘better theatre’ than those which entertain a more middle-brow audience?

That is a question which I have answered at some length in chapter 5 of my earlier book, [\*The Truth about Writing\*](#). If you want to consider the matter in any detail, I suggest that you read what I have said there.

For the present, I will content myself with saying that I know of no rational argument which convinces me that plays which are enjoyed and discussed by intellectuals are any better than plays which entertain a middlebrow audience. As far as I am concerned, they are not 'better' either morally, technically, emotionally, or in terms of any other criterion. They are not *better* at all – they are just different. They are different kinds of plays, which appeal to different kinds of audiences; these audiences approach the plays with different frames of reference and different sets of expectations.

What is true of the theatre is also true of the short story. In the first section of this chapter, I gave you a brief rundown of the 'official' history of this form of fiction. But, as in the theatre, there is another history, which runs in parallel. It is a history of the short story as it has been read and enjoyed by the average person in the street.

Such a reader is not highly educated and has not travelled the world, and is not, thank you very much, at all interested in symbolism, stream-of-consciousness techniques, or having to work out what the hell is going on from a minimalist description. Such a person wants a story told in plain English, with a beginning, a middle, and an end. And in my opinion it is no sort of crime for a reader to want to have things explained clearly.

I shall now provide a history of such short stories, though like the earlier outline it will be a much condensed version of the facts.

What we have to remember, and what is so easy to

forget, is that, in the nineteenth century, magazines and books did not have much competition. There was live theatre, of course, but that was only available in towns. And there were certainly no radio programmes, no television sitcoms, or films.

Compulsory schooling in England was introduced in 1870. This meant that more people were learning to read, and, as printing technology also improved, the short story and the novel were widely read and highly prized.

It should never be forgotten that the most famous fictional character of the entire nineteenth century, Sherlock Holmes, has his existence mainly in the form of short stories; to be precise, there are four Holmes novels, and five major collections of short stories. When the stories first appeared, in magazines such as *The Strand*, sales markedly increased.

Conan Doyle, however, is not often mentioned with much enthusiasm in the official literary histories. Anthony Burgess, for example, in his 1984 essay on the short story in English, refers to Doyle's 'triumphant success'. But then he goes on to tell us that he (Burgess) has 'never been satisfied that... the stories of Conan Doyle are literature, in the sense that Shakespeare is literature.' So there.

We can be quite sure that in the nineteenth century, and ever since, there has been a constant flow of fiction aimed at middlebrow or lowbrow readers. In the twentieth century, it became known as pulp fiction – so called because the magazines which published it were printed on the cheapest possible paper.

In the 1930s, popular fiction magazines often appeared weekly, and they were endlessly demanding of product, particularly in the United States. I see from my file of notes that I once read a book called *Pulpwood Editor*, by Harold

Brainerd Hersey. It was published in 1937 so is probably unobtainable now, but it was a marvellous autobiography by a man who edited pulp magazines. He had a number of extraordinary stories about writers who, in some cases, apparently churned out a million words a year.

Some British writers were also amazingly productive. Consider, for example, the career of Charles Hamilton, who is perhaps best known for writing the Billy Bunter stories under the pen-name Frank Richards. Hamilton used around thirty pseudonyms, and is listed in the *Guinness Book of Records* as the world's most prolific writer; he is credited with a lifetime total of 70 million words.

When I was a lad, in the 1940s and 1950s, there were still many boys' comics, as they were known, which appeared weekly and regularly featured the same characters. The *Rover*, *Champion*, *Wizard*, and others, were famous for the exploits of such heroes as Wilson, the wonder athlete, Rockfist Rogan, the ace pilot who was also a boxer, Alf Tupper, the athlete known as the Tough of the Track, and dozens more.

A similar situation could be found in the magazines which were read by women – titles such as *Woman's Weekly*, *Woman*, *Woman's Own*, and so forth. Throughout my lifetime, all these magazines for women (and more like them) have been printing several stories a week, and achieving circulations which are currently above half a million copies in each case.

Do the people who write stories for these women's magazines ever get a mention in the official histories? Do they heck. Why not? Because they are writing for an audience which is mainly working class or middle class, of average intelligence or less, average education, largely unsophisticated, and of course, female. Such an audience

simply does not count – indeed it barely exists – in the eyes of our official literary historians. The intelligentsia assume that anything which is enjoyed by readers of such modest abilities must, by definition, be absolute rubbish.

I do not accept this view myself, and I suspect that anyone who tries to write for the lowbrow market will soon discover that the job is by no means as easy as it seems.

Exactly the same state of affairs exists if we go up a notch on the intellectual scale. In the first half of the twentieth century, by far the most famous and financially successful short-story writer was Somerset Maugham. He wrote hundreds of stories, and some of them were made into films, such as *Quartet* in 1948 and *Trio* in 1959. Another of his stories, *Rain*, was filmed several times, most famously as *Miss Sadie Thompson*, with Rita Hayworth in the lead.

Maugham was a middlebrow writer to his core; almost anyone could read and enjoy what he wrote. And how is Maugham treated by our official historians? He barely rates a mention, naturally, and when he is mentioned he is sneered at. Here is Anthony Burgess once again, from the essay referred to above: ‘The first thing I wrote... was one of those cheating kind of short stories which Somerset Maugham indulged in: not a word of invention at all, but the mere recounting of an anecdote.’

Later in the same text, Burgess has another go: ‘With some shame, I have to mention the name of William Somerset Maugham, the most successful practitioner of the short story we’ve ever had in England.’ Maugham, according to Burgess, was just repeating stories he had heard on his travels in the Far East.

Maugham himself seems to have got the message about what the literary elite thought of him. In his autobiography

he says: 'It is a misfortune for me that the telling of a story just for the sake of the story is not an activity that is in favour with the intelligentsia.'

Burgess, and the other commentators who grudgingly mention Maugham's name solely in order to denigrate his achievements, seem to me to be offering a less than fair assessment. Whatever else may be said, Maugham was a man who communicated successfully with a wide audience.

Not only do academic writers tend to overlook whole areas of fiction writing, but they are also likely to ignore the economic facts of life.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, magazines were a popular form of entertainment, and the stories printed within those magazines were often the feature which readers enjoyed most. As the twentieth century advanced, however, other forms of entertainment rapidly took over, and the readership of magazines declined.

Cinema, radio, television; gramophones, tape recorders, video recorders; 78s, 45s, LPs, CDs, DVDs – in the twentieth century, new sources of entertainment appeared year by year. As a result, the markets for short stories disappeared almost entirely. H.E. Bates, in his book *The Modern Short Story*, first published in 1941, noted that even in the 1920s and '30s it was said that the short story was unwanted, unprinted, and unread.

From about 1960 on, there was, for all practical purposes, almost no commercial demand for short stories of any kind. True, there were a handful of small literary magazines, which published obscure stuff in return for small fees or no fees at all. There were some crime and science-fiction magazines, such as *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* and *Analog*. And there were a few glossy magazines, such as *The New Yorker* and *Playboy*, which used

occasional pieces of short fiction. And there were the women's magazines. But these were all exceptions, and the likelihood that they would publish anything by a previously unknown writer was close to zero.

A few writers, mostly those who also wrote commercially successful novels, still managed to persuade their publishers to put out collections of short stories: Stephen King, Jeffrey Archer, and Maeve Binchy among them. These, of course, are again names which are ignored by the official historians of literature, because they are popular, easy to read, and therefore (it is said) valueless.

Some writers did manage to swim upstream, and make an impact primarily through their short stories, rather than by means of full-length fiction. Stanley Ellin made his mark in crime fiction; Harlan Ellison in science fiction and fantasy; Roald Dahl in mainstream fiction.

Not that any of these names was ever given any credit for his achievement by the intelligentsia. Here is Anthony Burgess on Dahl: he is 'not a very good short-story writer, not a writer that you would study in a university course, but well known... His stories... have a point; they have a twist in the tale; something happens in them.'

Perhaps Roald Dahl's stories were not in the top rank when judged by some obscure academic standard. Nevertheless, they were good enough to form the foundation of an enormously successful writing career. Twenty-five of the stories were used as the basis of a long-running television series called *Tales of the Unexpected*. One of Dahl's books for children, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, was chosen by readers of *The Times* as the most popular children's book of all time, and was adapted into a hit movie. Dahl also wrote the script for the James Bond film *You Only Live Twice*. Most of us would regard that output

as the record of quite a good writer.

Today (I am writing this in 2009), the situation as regards the market for short stories is changing rapidly. I shall say more about the increasing opportunities for writers in chapter 9; for the moment, however, let us just note that the advent of the internet has led to the creation of new ways to reach new audiences. Dramatic changes in printing technology have also made it possible to produce books at a small fraction of the cost which would have been incurred in previous years.

These changes mean that there is now some point in writing short stories, where previously there was little or none. I myself, for example, wrote a few short stories in my youth, but then never bothered to write any more for forty years, because there was nowhere to send them! In 2003, however, I published a book full of them ([\*King Albert's Words of Advice\*](#), which is free online; see also Appendix III).

## **Writers worth reading**

If you are going to be serious about the business of writing short stories, you certainly ought to acquaint yourself with at least some of the work of the great masters of the form. But don't make the mistake of assuming that you must believe what the professors of English literature tell you. If you only read the work of the 'respectable' writers you will be (a) bored and (b) seriously misled in trying to understand what makes a short story successful.

Some of the writers that I shall recommend in the next few paragraphs are indeed respectable in literary terms. But that's not why I'm recommending them. I'm suggesting that you read them because their stories still carry an



emotional punch, even if they're a hundred years old, and you can learn something useful from taking a look at them.

You could begin, perhaps, by reading the work of Guy de Maupassant. Anthologies of his short stories are readily available in almost every public library, and can be bought cheaply in paperback.

It would also be sensible to read the first theorist of the short-story form, Edgar Allan Poe. Again, see the catalogue of almost any library, or the Amazon online database for a cheap edition.

As for classic English writers, I certainly recommend Saki (the pen-name of H.H. Munro), and some Kipling would do no harm. Despite the reservations of the Eng. Lit. brigade, Maugham definitely is worth reading, as is Roald Dahl.

A useful anthology of some well known stories from the past is *The Oxford Book of Short Stories*, edited by V.S. Pritchett, ISBN 0192801910 – though you must remember that this is a survey of *literary* fiction rather than popular fiction, as explained above.

An interesting critical analysis, subject to the same caveat, is *The Short Story in English*, by Walter Allen; at the time of writing it seems to be out of print, but many libraries will still have a copy.

If you already have an interest in one or more of the established genres, or types of fiction, such as romance or science fiction, you should investigate the classic short stories which have been written in those genres.

In crime, for instance, read the work of Ed Hoch (either his own stories or the anthologies which he edited). In science fiction, Isaac Asimov and Brian Aldiss. In fantasy, Roger Zelazny and Gene Wolfe. And so on.

What you will discover, if you haven't done so already, is

that finding stories which really satisfy you is not as easy as buying a loaf of bread. It requires work. The newspapers tend to review and publicise only one kind of fiction – literary – and unless you take the trouble to do some research you will hear precious little about work in other fields. You will need to read the specialist magazines, either in printed form or on the internet, to hear about new and classic work in other genres. But do make the effort. You will find some amazing stuff. And if you take my advice, you will ignore the fact that the professors of English literature tell you that popular fiction is worthless.

## Conclusions

What can we learn from the two condensed histories of the short story which have been presented in this chapter?

First, I suggest that any standard ‘history of the short story in English’ is likely to be seriously distorted, in that it will concentrate only on *literary* short stories, as appreciated by the so-called intelligentsia, and will ignore the vastly greater number and variety of popular short stories which are read and enjoyed by the great mass of people.

My second conclusion is that literary short stories are just a genre like any other. You should not, under any circumstances, allow yourself to feel defensive, or guilty, if you happen to prefer, say, fantasy fiction to literary fiction. Certainly you should never apologise for such a preference.

You will come to have a better understanding of my reasons for saying this as you read the remaining chapters. For the present, please take my word for it that there is no rational reason for you to struggle to ‘appreciate’ literary fiction if, in fact, it bores you to death.

You should ignore the teachings of the literary estab-

lishment and make up your own mind about what you like and dislike – if only because when you write short stories of your own, you will be well advised to concentrate, at least to begin with, on writing the kind of stuff which you enjoy reading the most.

## CHAPTER 2

### How to decide your aims

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BEFORE WE GO any further, it might be as well to give just a little thought as to why we are going to bother to write short stories at all.

In the Introduction, I did mention ten good reasons for writing short stories, and you may think that ten is enough. On the other hand, I know from experience that many writers – or would-be writers – have an entirely different agenda. The truth is, you see, they wanna be rich, famous, and win the Nobel Prize for Literature. Preferably by next Thursday.

Well... How can I put this tactfully? Let's just say that it's not going to be easy.

What follows is an abbreviated version of a much fuller discussion of the same issue which can be found in my book [\*The Truth about Writing\*](#). In the remainder of this chapter I shall describe four potential benefits which can arise from writing short stories (or any other form of fiction for that matter), and I shall invite you to consider whether any or all of those benefits are sufficiently valuable to you, as an individual, to persuade you to get involved in doing the actual work.

## Money

Theoretically – and I emphasise *theoretically* – being a short-story writer can earn you some money. Perhaps a lot of money: we have already mentioned the commercial success which was enjoyed by such writers as Roald Dahl and Somerset Maugham. (In their day.)

So, just to get you interested, let us begin by seeing how much money you might make if you sold a story to a major magazine.

### *Big payers in the USA*

We will begin by considering some of the most famous American magazines, because they have access to the largest English-speaking market and hence can pay the highest rates in order to secure top-class material.

Among general magazines, *Harper's* reportedly pays 50 cents to \$1 a word, and *The Atlantic* offers up to \$3,000 for a story. Incidentally, both these magazines used to be listed on the website of the American magazine *Writer's Digest* under the heading 'Pie in the Sky'. In other words, it is most unlikely that an unknown writer will actually be able to sell a story to either of these magazines.

In the crime-fiction field, perhaps the most prestigious outlet is *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*. According to the magazine's website, the editors pay 5 to 8 cents a word. (This rate has been constant for several years now.) So for a 5,000-word short story you would receive approximately \$250 to \$400.

A leading science-fiction magazine, *Analog*, pays about the same rate as *Ellery Queen*.

Some major magazines such as *Playboy* will still, oddly

enough, consider stories from anyone who cares to send one in. And if, by some conceivable chance, you managed to sell them a story, you could count on receiving several thousand dollars.

Unfortunately, many other American journals, such as *The New Yorker*, state that they are closed to unsolicited submissions, which means that they will only consider work which is sent to them via a literary agent.

### *The British market*

So much for theoretical earnings in the large and relatively wealthy US market. If we examine the UK market, then the sums of money involved are naturally smaller.

British magazines tend to be coy about what they offer to contributors. In the reference books they are likely to say no more than that payment is 'by negotiation'. But here are a few guideline figures.

For many decades, the leading women's magazines have constituted perhaps the major market for short stories in the UK. Most of the magazines with really big circulations, such as *Woman's Own*, refuse to consider unsolicited fiction. However, at the time of writing, a firm of literary agents which specialises in this field reports that the best payers for fiction among women's magazines are *Take a Break* (up to £1,000) and *That's Life* (reportedly £300). *My Weekly* and *People's Friend*, on the other hand, are said to pay less than £100.

### *Smaller markets*

As I shall demonstrate shortly, the level of competition that you face when submitting work to the top-paying maga-

zines is enormous. You may therefore be tempted to try your luck with some of the less well known journals. Unfortunately, most of these pay their contributors next to nothing.

Various writers' sites on the internet list US short-fiction markets (print magazines) which invite submissions. You will find that the majority of these offer to pay their contributors in nothing more generous than free copies of the magazine: usually one or two copies, at that.

Closer to home, the smaller British magazines are similarly unrewarding. *Peninsular* offers £5 per 1000 words; *Chapman* (a Scottish literary magazine) goes to £15 per thousand.

### *Benefits of publication*

Whether you get paid for your story or not, having it appear in print might in principle lead to other useful consequences. Your story might be noticed and picked up for reprinting in an anthology, such as *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*. It might even be bought for adaptation as a film: *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*, one of Danny Kaye's early successes in the 1950s, was adapted from a short story by James Thurber. And should you be published in the US magazine *Zoetrope*, the reported fee of \$1500 will cover both the North American rights and a two-year film option. The option might even be taken up, and your story might be filmed. Who knows? Pigs have occasionally been known to sprout wings.

A less remote possibility is that the published story might impress a literary agent, and she might ask you to consider writing a novel. That is what happened, in the US, to Amy Tan, who is now a successful novelist; she was first

discovered in 1985 when she published a story in *Seventeen*, a magazine for teenagers.

Back in the UK, *The 3rd Alternative* once claimed that virtually every unagented writer who had been published in the magazine had received at least one approach from a leading agent.

### *But... don't forget the competition*

In spite of the occasionally hopeful words printed above, the fact is that your chances of earning any money at all from writing short stories are almost nil. Why? Well, even if you can write a good story, you need to be aware of the enormous amount of competition.

Some years ago, there was an American literary magazine called *Story*. This was a prestigious journal, which published early work by such famous names as Mailer, Capote, and Salinger. Whit Burnet was the editor, and he once revealed that, at the height of the magazine's fame, it was receiving more submissions *in a week* than there were subscribers to the magazine.

The editors of *Playboy* have stated that, in an average week, they are sent 20 short stories which they have asked to see, and 600 stories which they have not asked to see. In reality, *Playboy* publishes only the most prestigious and successful writers in the world, so there really isn't much point in sending them anything of yours. By all means try, but in my opinion it's a waste of postage.

The three biggest science-fiction and fantasy magazines (*Asimov's*, *Analog*, and *Fantasy and Science Fiction*) each receive, on average, a thousand submissions a month. They publish about six stories a month. Of these six, at least four are by established authors. The unknown writer is most



unlikely to succeed.

The position is little better in the UK-based small magazines. The editor of *Peninsular* is sent about 200 short stories in an average month. The *Edinburgh Review* receives 1600 submissions every year. Unfortunately it sells only 750 copies. The editor suggests that, if you do send something in, you should allow six months for a reply. And don't hold your breath while you're waiting.

The *Edinburgh Review* situation is typical of many small magazines: in other words, the number of stories and articles offered for publication often exceeds the number of subscribers.

One British editor was heard to remark that if everyone who sent in a submission actually bought a copy of the magazine – just bought one copy, not a year's subscription – then the circulation of his magazine would increase by fifty per cent. So, if he has a circulation of 1,000 copies (which would be high for a small magazine), he presumably gets 500 submissions per issue.

By now, I hope, you have got the message. The top-paying magazines have an enormous amount of material to choose from, much of it written by full-time professional writers with years of experience and a long list of publications to their name. What is more, their work is submitted by prestigious literary agents who carry a great deal of weight; the editors know for certain that if a story is sent in by, say, Curtis Brown, it will be of professional standard.

### *The truth about money and short stories*

Magazines come and magazines go, and the rates they pay do vary a little from year to year. Nevertheless, the obvious conclusion to be drawn from the facts set out above is that,

if it's money you're after, writing short stories is no way to go about earning it. You will be much better off working behind the counter in your local garage or pub.

An American writer, Dorothy Rothschild, revealed on her website that over a period of thirteen years she had made 500 submissions of short stories. She had earned, on average, less than \$20 a year; this would probably not have covered her postage bill.

## **Fame**

Many writers not only want to be rich, but they also want to be famous. Poor bewildered fools that they are, they actually want to be interviewed by the big names on TV. They really quite fancy having their picture in *Hello!* magazine, and they want to be photographed sitting next to Posh and Becks at a film premiere.

Well, sorry, but writing short stories just isn't going to do that for you. On its own, short fiction does not get you into the newspapers on a regular basis. So if it's fame you want – real, pop-star-standard fame – then you're just going to have to try some other field of endeavour, and leave the short-story writing to those who are happy to remain unrecognised in the street.

## **Literary reputation**

The third benefit which some writers yearn for is literary reputation. There are now quite a number of bookish types about: people, for instance, who have studied English literature at university and have believed every word that they heard and read there. As a result, these otherwise sensible people become afflicted with a strange desire to

have said about them the same kind of thing as is said about writers who already have a high literary reputation.

If you ever read the literary pages of *The Guardian* or *The Sunday Times* you will know the sort of thing I mean. A typically gushing review might say of an author: 'She writes with enormous sensitivity, with an ineluctable flow of glorious prose which sparkles and coruscates with wit and imagination.' And a whole lot more crap of much the same order.

There are, I'm afraid, quite a few people around who are naïve and misguided enough to think that sentences of that sort actually mean something. If you are among their number, just ask yourself one question: does any normal, well balanced person actually pay any serious attention to this kind of literary twaddle? Does your milkman care what *The Guardian* says about the great literary find of the year? Does your dentist care? Does that fabulous girl/boy who works behind the bar in your local pub give a tuppenny damn about any of it? Of course not. So why should you?

By now you will have realised that I am not over-impressed by literary praise. As it happens, my own books have from time to time had some excellent reviews in some most prestigious journals; and it's always more comfortable to have nice things said about you than harsh ones. But what I realised, after these reviews had appeared, was that no one, in the entire world, seemed to notice what was written in, say, the book section of *The New York Times* or *The Washington Post*. And if I myself drew the fine words that were said about me to anyone else's attention, their reaction was: 'Oh really? How interesting!' And then it was back to discussing last night's telly.

Yes, if you are determined to earn yourself a literary reputation you certainly can do it through the medium of

the short story. But it will be a specialised reputation, known only to a select and eccentric few, and it is not likely to make you rich or famous. So think hard before you decide whether a glorious reputation as a deeply sensitive writer will justify the effort of acquiring it.

And by the way – be warned. Literary reputation can disappear like smoke. This year's avant-garde can easily become last year's old hat.

## **Satisfaction**

Mr Jagger, you will recall, claimed that he couldn't get no satisfaction (a double negative which was, I think, unintentional); but it has to be said that the fourth and final benefit which might come your way, as a result of writing short stories, is that you might find the whole business rather satisfying. In other words, you might find that the act of writing and completing a short story, even if it is never published, or read by anyone else, is enjoyable in and of itself.

You may find this a difficult idea to come to grips with, so let's try to think of some other examples. My wife, for instance, is interested in flower arranging. Now, you may not realise it, but flower arranging is a popular activity. Almost every town has its own flower-arranging club, and all the local clubs are linked to a national body. Every so often there are local competitions, to see who can do the most impressive arrangement of flowers on a given theme, such as 'Time' or 'Absent Friends'. There are regional competitions; national competitions; and every few years there is even, believe it or not, a world conference with associated competitions.

Many of the ladies (and gentlemen) who take part in

these local, regional, and national flower-arranging competitions are intensely ambitious. They are really keen to win first, second, or third place. In other words, they are a bit like writers who are passionately anxious to become rich, famous, and to have a high literary reputation.

But it is possible to approach flower arranging in a different way: a lady might, for instance, pick a few flowers from her own garden, take the trouble to arrange them in a highly artistic and pleasing manner, and simply enjoy them in the privacy of her own home.

Writing short stories is an activity which can be approached in exactly the same way. You can, if you wish, simply choose to write stories for your own interest and enjoyment, taking pleasure in arranging the words on the page.

Think about that. Because, in reality, this kind of personal satisfaction may well be the only reward that does come your way.

## **Conclusions**

I hope this chapter has made it clear to you that writing short stories is not an activity which is likely to make you rich or famous. It might, perhaps, lead to your acquiring a literary reputation among experienced judges. And it can certainly be as satisfying, in creative terms, as photography, flower arranging, or painting.

Personally I think it is important to have at least some idea of what you are trying to achieve when you write, if only to prevent you wasting your time. If you were under the impression, for instance, that writing stories was likely to be a valuable source of spare-time income, then I hope this chapter has cured you of that.

For those who do wish to continue, the rest of the book is devoted to providing you with a basic technique which will at least enable you to write some kind of short story – even if that story does not, in the end, enable you to fulfil all your highest ambitions.

## CHAPTER 3

### How to understand emotion

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AT THE TIME when he was in charge of the British education system, Sir Keith Joseph is alleged to have asked, 'What is education for?'

It was a fair question, though it's doubtful whether he was ever given a clear answer.

In the same way, you and I might usefully ask: What is the short story for?

Now – listen well. I am not often going to lay down the law in this book. I will usually admit that there is more than one way of looking at things, and that people whose opinion differs from mine may have a point. However, on one particular issue I am going to insist that I am right, and that no other opinion is valid.

In other words, what I am going to tell you in this chapter, about the purpose of the short story, is in the nature of an absolute truth. Sorry to be so dogmatic about it, but that's the way it is.

By way of justification, let me give you an example of what I mean by a statement of absolute truth.

Consider the following statement: If you go over to the nearest wall, and bang your head against it hard, you will feel pain.

I don't think you will have much difficulty in agreeing that that particular statement is true. And that's because your experience of life, which includes banging your head against things by accident, confirms what I have said.

Let's consider another statement. This time I am going to say: The sole purpose of the short story is to generate emotion in the reader. That is what is for. That is what it does (if it works at all).

This second statement is just as true as the first. Believe me. Trust me on this.

Of course, the truth of this second statement may not be immediately obvious to you, because you may not have had enough experience of writing short stories, and thinking about their technique, to give you a sound basis for judgement.

You are perfectly at liberty to doubt me, if you wish, and you are free to conclude that my statement about the purpose of the short story is total nonsense. But you will waste an awful lot of time and effort if you do. So for the moment I suggest that you go along with what I say, and act as if you believe it to be true. If you do that, you might even succeed in writing a halfway decent short story.

If you work on the principle that the purpose of a short story is to generate emotion in the reader, then everything that you do when planning and writing a story – all your thinking and the actual writing – will be directed to that end. And by focusing your efforts in that way you will certainly increase your chances of success – no matter what definition of success you choose to adopt.

Conversely, if you choose to ignore the intended and actual emotional effect which is generated by your story, and if you write the piece without any conscious thought about those matters, then you are likely to produce some-



thing which may seem wonderful to you, but which is likely to be uninteresting and unimpressive to editors and readers alike.

Commercially minded writers are most unlikely to make any serious money unless they understand what sort of emotions are sought by readers of large-circulation magazines; furthermore, commercial writers must learn how to *generate* those emotions in the mass-market readers, because such effects do not occur by magic.

Exactly the same is true of literary writers. They will not achieve any kind of a reputation unless they are sensitive to the emotions which stir the blood of highbrow critics.

## **Identifying emotions**

In my earlier book, [\*The Truth about Writing\*](#), I included a long chapter about emotion. In it, I described what modern science can tell us about the nature of emotion, how it is caused, and what happens in the human body when emotions are experienced.

I am not going to attempt even to summarise that chapter here. I will simply say that if you are serious about writing short stories – or novels, or stage plays, or screenplays – you should study that earlier chapter of mine at some length. (A free copy of *The Truth about Writing* is [available online](#).)

All I am going to say here is that, from a writer's point of view, it is convenient to divide emotions into those which are positive, and those which are negative. Positive emotions are those which, broadly speaking, are pleasant to experience, and negative emotions are those which are not so nice. Both types of emotion can feature in, or be the outcome of, a short story.

You will find lists of both positive and negative emotions set out in Appendix I.

The lists in that Appendix are not intended to be exhaustive. I don't pretend to have listed every possible shade of emotion. The two lists are simply a tool which I developed for my own use, and which I am now making available to you. (Thus saving you, as it happens, a great deal of time and effort in research.) When you start to write your own stories, feel free to add to, or delete from, these lists of emotions, in whatever way you wish. They are nothing more than an aid, and not a set of commandments handed down by Moses.

I am now going to suggest that you sit down and read, or re-read, two or three short stories. Preferably famous ones, by established masters in the field.

(Incidentally, without wishing to be flippant or rude, I have to say that, if you are going to make a serious attempt to write short stories, it would be a good idea to read more than two or three. I mention that because, as any editor or television producer or theatre manager will tell you, it is all too common for people to send in scripts or stories which reveal that the person concerned has never studied the relevant medium at all. People *still* send in scripts to BBC radio with the suggestion that they would be 'just right for Children's Hour', despite the fact that Children's Hour has not been broadcast since 1961. Just a thought.)

So, pick out two or three famous short stories, read or re-read them, and then write down, in relation to each, an answer to the following question:

What is the overall emotional effect of this story?

All I want you to do is to report your own feelings. Do you feel amused? Do you feel horrified? Disgusted? Or puzzled? Do you feel pity for the heroine whose husband

died; or a sense of deep satisfaction that the villain got his comeuppance; or a sense of sympathy for the decent man who tried to do the right thing and got no thanks for it? Just write down, in a word or two, whatever your *principal* emotional reaction is. I want you to name just one emotion, the one that you feel when you have completed your reading of the story.

At first, you will find this a peculiarly difficult thing to do. Well, I used to find it difficult, anyway. With years of practice I now find it somewhat easier. If you find yourself stuck, try referring to the lists of emotions in Appendix I, and pick out the one which most closely applies.

When you have completed this task, you will have begun to understand two things. First, that a successful short story does produce one major effect in the majority of readers. And second, that a writer who focuses her mind on producing that one effect will give an invaluable sense of unity to her story. Concentrating on achieving that one effect will prevent the writer from wandering off into all kinds of interesting but unhelpful highways and byways.

## **Theorists of the short story**

The first great theorist of the short story was Edgar Allan Poe, and he was followed by Professor Walter B. Pitkin, whose theories were built on in turn by Thomas H. Uzzell. And what those experimenters and theorists concluded from their research may be taken, for all practical purposes, to be one of the 'laws' of literature.

The most important literary law governing the short story is (as I have already explained) that the function of the short story is to generate emotion in the reader. The second law is that the short story can produce only one

dominant emotion.

Why only one? Because it's a *short* story, that's why. If it was a long story it could produce more than one emotion, usually one major emotion per chapter. But then it would be a novel – or a novella, if it was a very short novel.

There is nothing new or revolutionary in the principles that I am expounding to you here. Edgar Allan Poe understood it all, perfectly well, in the 1840s. In 1842, Poe used his review of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales* to set out his views on the most effective way to write a short story. Here is an extract from that review:

'A skilful literary artist has constructed a tale. If he is wise, he has not fashioned his thoughts to accommodate his incidents; but having conceived, with deliberate care, a certain unique or single effect to be wrought out, he then invents such incidents – he then combines such events as may best aid him in establishing this preconceived effect. If his very initial sentence tends not to the outbringing of this effect, then he has failed in his first step. In the whole composition there should be no word written of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one pre-established design. As by such means, with such care and skill, a picture is at length painted which leaves in the mind of him who contemplates it with a kindred art a sense of the fullest satisfaction.'

You will discover, as we proceed, that in this one paragraph Poe has condensed almost every important truth about the writer's task and the role of emotion in art generally. It will be helpful, however, if I expand and explain a few of his remarks, since I have lifted them out of

context.

Poe says that, if the literary artist (writer) is wise, he will not ‘fashion his thoughts to accommodate his incidents’. What this means is that you should *not* simply write a story based on whatever ‘incidents’ happen to come into your head. What you *should* do is decide upon ‘a certain unique or single effect’ – in other words, decide what precise emotion it is that you wish to generate in the reader. You then *invent* such events, or incidents, which will best bring about ‘this preconceived effect.’

To paraphrase Poe in more modern English: The short-story writer’s job is to decide what emotion to create in the reader, and then to invent a series of incidents (a story) which will generate that emotion.

Once again: the principal purpose of fiction is to make the reader feel; the principal purpose of non-fiction is to convey information.

Emotion is what fiction readers long for and what editors will buy. Readers may not understand, consciously, what it is that they are seeking when they begin to read a short story; and even editors may not consciously understand what they are looking for. But in both cases emotion is the driving force.

## **Emotion in theory**

What follows is an ultra-brief summary of what science can tell us about emotion, and how that knowledge may be applied in writing effective fiction. For more detail, as mentioned above, you should consult my earlier book [\*The Truth about Writing\*](#).

An emotion starts with a stimulus. Something happens to somebody.

As a result of this stimulus, there may or may not be conscious thought on the part of the individual concerned. If there is no *conscious* thought, there will certainly be *unconscious* thought.

There is then a physical response to the thought, such as laughter, tears, trembling, or blushing.

And there may subsequently be conscious thought which leads to further action.

This process will be easier to understand if we consider an example.

Let us consider what happens to a young girl, working in a bank, when a man comes through the door with a gun in his hand.

The stimulus is the entry of the criminal. What is the girl's response to that stimulus? In real life, a bank clerk faced with this problem might react without conscious thought. She might freeze, and stand there paralysed, like a rabbit caught in the headlights of a car. This reaction is very human, but it is not particularly interesting for fictional purposes.

Another uninteresting reaction to danger is the panic response. The gunman comes in and the bank clerk starts to scream; she falls on the floor, and has a hysterical fit. Sorry, but your reader isn't going to be terribly interested. In real life we would all, I hope, be sympathetic, but in fiction, forget it.

The only response which will seriously interest the reader is the conscious, considered response. The gunman appears, and our heroine the bank clerk is horrified and frightened. But we don't just say that she is horrified and frightened.

What we do is describe her shortness of breath, the sudden lack of blood supply to her cheeks, the trembling of

her knees.

And then we describe how she starts to think. Can she reach that alarm button? If the gunman sees her, will he shoot? She feels fear, which we describe through her physical reactions, and she wonders what she should do – ring the alarm or not? Finally, although it's dangerous, she does press the alarm button and the criminal is caught as he tries to escape. Or whatever.

Write that scene in the right way, and your reader will be held, will feel sympathetic emotion, and will be impressed by your heroine's character.

## **Emotion in practice**

We can now state what a writer has to do in order to generate emotion in the reader.

1 Describe the stimulus which kicks off the whole emotion. In the case outlined above, describe the man coming through the door with a gun in his hand. (This, incidentally, is always a good dodge. Raymond Chandler, a highly successful crime novelist, used to say that, when in doubt as to what should happen next, a writer should always have a man come through the door with a gun in his hand.)

2 Describe the clash of desires going on in the head of the sympathetic character, who in this case is the bank clerk. She wants to save her own skin, but she also wants to protect the bank's assets, because she's a really good employee. The period of time during which the character reviews the options and decides (naturally) to be a heroine may be quite short, but it involves *conscious* thought.

3 Describe the physical responses which result from the thought processes, and the action which follows. If there is time, for instance, our heroine may imagine the gunman's bullet tearing through her, and she may start to tremble violently. Then she decides to take the gun off him; or duck for cover; or whatever.

The most powerful emotions are created by the most basic human interests and events: birth, death, courtship, marriage; food and drink; the desire for freedom; and other matters of the same elemental kind. These desires and occasions provide the raw materials for fiction. If your characters' desires are strongly opposed, the characters will experience emotion; and if you describe the events, and the feelings, in the correct way, then your reader will also be emotionally moved.

One has to say, however, that there are plenty of people around – particularly well brought up English people – who are nervous about emotion. (They feel emotion about emotion, in other words.) Many of us don't like 'causing a scene', and we hesitate to raise our voice. And perhaps you are one of those people who consider that expressing strong feelings in public is more than a little vulgar, or unseemly. If this reticence and dislike of emotion is carried over into the writing of fiction, it can create problems. It may mean that your stories won't carry much of a punch. So you are either going to have to overcome your well-bred reluctance to let rip, or do something else instead. Growing fuchsias might be more your thing.



## Irony

I want to say a special word here about irony.

Irony is not an emotion; but it is a herb, so to speak, which gives flavour to other emotions.

What is irony? Well, quite frankly it's easier to recognise it than to define it. There are many different definitions of irony, none of them all-embracing, and many of them relate to the theatre.

One definition of dramatic irony, for example, is a situation in which the audience knows more about the immediate circumstances or the future events of a story than does the character within the play. Thus the audience may feel deeply saddened that a character is looking forward to meeting an old friend, when the audience already knows that the friend is dead. Or, in comic terms, we may wriggle with glee when Buttons tells us that he is going to open a door, and we know that a bucket of white-wash is going to fall on his head.

Another kind of irony occurs when a writer says one thing and means something else. When a *Private Eye* columnist reveals that someone has been doing something illegal or unethical, and then adds, 'We must hope that this does not come to the attention of the authorities', what the columnist means is that he hopes the bastard in question will get a long term of imprisonment.

Yet another type of irony is sometimes called 'the irony of situation'. This occurs when there is a discrepancy between the result which a character expects from his actions, and the result which actually occurs. It is this type of irony which is most useful in writing short stories.

Examples are always useful, so here are brief summaries of two stories in which the final emotion is flavoured by

irony. In the first, *Mrs Bixby and the Colonel's Coat* by Roald Dahl, we find ironic amusement.

The story is as follows: Mrs Bixby is married to a boring dentist. Once a month she says that she is going to visit her elderly aunt, but she actually spends most of her time with her lover, the Colonel.

One day the Colonel buys Mrs Bixby a magnificent, full-length, black mink coat. But now she has a problem – how can she explain this coat to her husband?

On the way home she thinks of a cunning plan. She takes the coat to a pawnbroker, accepts a small amount of money for it, and goes home with the pawnbroker's ticket in her purse. She tells her husband that she found the ticket in a taxi.

Her husband, who can never resist a bargain, tells her that the ticket might be for something valuable, and he insists that they should redeem the item themselves; they will only have to pay a small sum and the pawned item might be worth a lot of money. (Mrs Bixby, knowing her husband, was well aware that he would not be able to resist getting something cheap.) Mrs Bixby gladly accepts her husband's suggestion, but she insists that if the pawned item turns out to be something feminine, he will give it to her. The husband agrees.

The next day, husband goes to the pawnbroker's shop. He then phones his wife and tells her that the ticket was for something really exciting. It is a *very* feminine item, and he tells her to come and collect it when he closes his dentist's surgery that afternoon.

Full of glee, Mrs Bixby arrives at the surgery. Her husband tells her she is a very lucky girl. The ticket was for something in real mink. And then he reveals what he claims to have redeemed... a little fur neckpiece. Mink,

certainly, but a scrawny, scraggy, cheap-looking neckpiece. It isn't the Colonel's wonderful coat. Mrs Bixby can do nothing but choke back her disappointment and pretend to be pleased. But what, she wonders, has that bastard of a husband done with the fabulous full-length coat?

Worse is to come. As she leaves the office Mrs Bixby is passed by her husband's secretary. And, yes, the ultra-glamorous secretary is wearing the beautiful, full-length, black mink coat that the Colonel had given to Mrs Bixby.

Now – this story is amusing (at least it is when told by Roald Dahl); and it is also ironic, because in trying to arrange to keep the mink coat, which Mrs Bixby earned by cheating on her husband, Mrs Bixby has in fact achieved the opposite result. She has succeeded only in awarding the magnificent fur coat to her husband's mistress (about whom she previously knew nothing).

We now know about ironic amusement, or ironic comedy.

By contrast, it is equally possible to have a story which conveys a sense of sadness, or pity, tinged with irony. [\*The Procurator of Judea\*](#), by Anatole France, provides a useful example.

In that story, two elderly politicians, both of them retired after long years of serving the Roman Empire, meet in the baths in ancient Rome. One of the two men is Pontius Pilate.

Pilate and his friend talk at length about old times, and gradually the discussion turns towards the period when Pontius Pilate was administrator of the fairly obscure province of Judea.

Pilate's friend mentions the name of Jesus Christ, and he waits while Pilate thinks about it.

'Jesus?' says Pilate eventually. 'Jesus of Nazareth?'

And it turns out that he cannot even remember the man.

Stories with an ironic flavour to them carry double the punch of stories which convey a similar emotion without irony. And ironic stories do not come to you in a flash of inspiration; they have to be worked on, pretty much from the ground up. The work, however, is worth the effort, because the resulting stories are, in my opinion, among the most impressive examples of the short-story art.

## Summary

The short story, by its very nature, can generate only ONE major emotion, or effect. (A novel can produce many more than one emotion, because it has more space in which to do so.)

During the course of reading a short story, a reader may feel, of course, several minor effects, such as dismay at the heroine's setbacks, and disgust for the villain's lies, but there can be only one major emotion at the end: perhaps a glow of satisfaction at the sound of wedding bells.

If you want to write a successful short story – successful by any definition – you must make up your mind, in advance, to produce a single overall emotional effect.

Identify that single effect. Name it. (Name it in your own mind, that is; not within the body of the story.)

The writer has to think about what she is doing, and has to plan the story in advance. It is not necessary, however, and it may well be unhelpful, for the writer herself to feel emotion, while she is writing.

The reader, by contrast, *feels* a great deal more than she *thinks*. Allowing the reader to think may prove to be unhelpful, because a reader who thinks can probably pick a hole in the credibility of every story ever written.

## **A word about length**

A couple of hundred years of human experience have demonstrated that somewhere around 8,000 words is the upper limit in length for the short story. (Yes, of course there are exceptions. But 8,000 words is about the top limit in most cases.)

Why is this so? Because of human psychology, that's why.

Even the most dedicated readers are not prepared to stick with the same characters and situations for longer than a certain amount of time. In the theatre, people won't stay in their seats for much more than an hour, because their bums get sore and some of them need the loo; so you have to have an interval. Similarly, in fiction, people will only read for a limited time before they want the story to change gear. And if you do change gear, then what you are writing is a novella, or a novel, and not a short story.

While 8,000 words is around the absolute upper limit, you would be well advised to make your own personal limit about 5,000 words. If, in the course of 5,000 words, you haven't hit the reader over the head with a sock made heavy with a powerful emotion, then you are not going to do it in 8,000 words.

I am not a fan of Stephen King, but I agree with him on one point. When introducing a book of his own short stories, he wrote this: 'For me, that emotional payoff is what it is all about. I want to make you laugh or cry when you read a story... or do both at the same time. I want your heart, in other words.'

Exactly. You must move the reader's heart.

Next: how to find ideas for stories.

## CHAPTER 4

### How to find and develop ideas

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I SAID IN the Introduction to this book that, in order to write short stories, you need three things: materials (something to write about); technique; and a facility with words.

This chapter is about finding the raw materials to work with – ideas for stories, in other words.

#### Just like that

Sometimes an idea for a story will come to you just like that. Stephen King tells us, in relation to one of his stories, that all he had to begin with was a mental image of a man pouring gold coins down a drain.

Now where did that come? King says he has no idea. But does it matter? There it was – an idea, or a vision, which just popped into his head. And King, being a writer, said to himself, Hmm. Could make a story out of that. And he did.

In my own case, I am sometimes conscious of where the idea for a story came from, and sometimes not.

Take, for example, *Gunner Balfour Treated Fairly*, which is to be found in my collection of short stories entitled [\*King Albert's Words of Advice\*](#). The *Gunner Balfour* story arose because I happened to find myself in a churchyard where a number of young soldiers lay buried,

and I began to wonder how the dead men felt about dying so young.

If you are in the habit of writing short stories, then you will probably find that ideas occur to you fairly frequently. In which case you should write them down immediately. I have a file labelled 'One-pagers', which means that it contains ideas which have been scribbled down on a single sheet of paper and have not, so far, been developed any further.

On other hand, if you are new to the writing game, you may perhaps find yourself scratching your head and wondering what on earth you could write about. In which case, do not despair. There are plenty of ways to generate ideas – more than enough, in fact, to keep you going for decades.

### **A few words on ideas in general**

The great beauty of the art and science of writing short stories is that you can, quite literally, write a story about anything. You could write a story about a rabbit who falls in love with a (human) Duchess; a carrot who is about to be eaten for dinner; a vase being put up for auction.

I don't say that any of the above ideas would be great ones; I simply say that by using your imagination, and some of the tools which I shall provide you with in this book, you could quite easily develop a workable short story from any of those one-sentence ideas.

What you *choose* to write about will, of course, depend on your personal taste and preferences, and upon your objectives. If your main objective is to make money by writing for women's magazines, then you are going to have to reject, ruthlessly, any idea which is not suitable for that

purpose. On the other hand, if your main objective is just to amuse yourself, you will choose the idea which most appeals to you, regardless of its suitability for publication in any particular market.

Perhaps this is a good time to remark that, whatever kind of story you choose to write, the result will inevitably tell the reader something about yourself. The cold commercial choice reveals that you are a person who is interested in money. The odd, quirky and obviously uncommercial tale tells us that popular success is not important to you. And so on. Every story you write will demonstrate, at least to some extent, what kind of a person you are; and if that makes you uncomfortable, then it would be wise not to start writing fiction in the first place.

Some writers, of course, positively enjoy self-revelation, and use their own life as the basis of some or all of their fiction: James Joyce is the prime example. My own view is that, if you wish to write your memoirs, you should write your memoirs and label them as such. Fiction, on the other hand, requires imagination, and you should use it to the full.

I recommend that, in writing fiction, you avoid the use of characters who are easily identifiable by anyone who knows you. For one thing you run the risk of being sued for libel, and for another thing it's unfair. Even if you ask the permission of individuals to mention them in your story, and they agree, they still won't like the result. When the story comes out they will say, 'Ah yes, but I didn't know you were going to say *that*.'

So don't write up your own life with just a few names changed. It's not a responsible thing to do, and anyway it's not remotely necessary. Yes of course you will be well advised to write, in a general way, about the kinds of



people you know. And you will be well advised to write stories which that kind of person will enjoy, too, because you are likely to have an excellent feel for what will amuse and entertain them. Conversely, you are not, on the whole, likely to know what would delight an audience made up of Patagonian coal-miners. Just strike a sensible balance between personal experience and invented stories, and you won't come to much harm.

Now it's high time to be specific about some methods of generating ideas.

### **How to generate ideas**

I have already touched on one method of generating ideas, which is to consider incidents in your own life. That's perfectly possible, but, as indicated above, you should proceed with care.

Another, and perhaps better, method is to consider your own tastes in fiction. Suppose you are a regular reader of crime fiction, and you fancy writing in that genre. In that case, draw up a list of various types of crime fiction and see which type appeals to you as an author. Here are a few subdivisions of crime fiction as examples: police procedural; private eye (male, female); locked room; caper. Choose one and go on from there.

Suppose you decide to write about a female private eye. First you give her an age, a background, a location. Then, someone comes into her office and commissions her to... well, let's say locate a missing husband; or find a missing will; or keep watch on a dirty old man. Already you have material to work on.

Alternatively, and still in the crime-fiction field, you could begin with a crime: take your pick from mugging,

murder, rape, car theft, burglary. Who commits the crime? Why? Do they get away with it?

You could follow the same procedure in the field of romantic fiction. I am not an expert in this field, but even I am familiar with a few of the sub-genres which readers enjoy: historical, paranormal, Regency, romantic suspense, hospital stories; and so forth.

If none of the above procedures appeal, you could start with a character, such as a taxi driver, or a shopkeeper, and speculate about what might happen to him (or her) in the course of a day.

Or you could start with an incident, such as a boy being knocked off his bike; a chimney pot being dislodged in a storm; or a car breaking down.

Yet another method of finding materials (and the last that I shall suggest to you, although I am sure that there are many more) is to start with an emotion. Such as pity. What arouses pity? An old lady who is devastated because her cat is run over; a child who is dying of leukaemia. Go to the lists of emotions in Appendix I, choose one which looks promising to you, and work on that.

If you really, truly, genuinely, have tried all these methods, and still can't come up with an idea for a story, then I would suggest, politely, that writing is not the game for you. You are a bit like a footballer who goes on to the pitch for five minutes and then has to lie down for a couple of hours because he's exhausted. Such a player isn't a natural-born footballer at all – he's a spectator.

Similarly there are lots of people (nearly all men) who claim to be interested in photography but who are actually only interested in cameras; which is quite different.

But that's OK. None of these things is a sin. And until you have a go at the job, and give it your best efforts over a

period of time, you won't know whether you are any good at it or not.

As soon as you have *something*, some glimmer of the beginnings of an idea for a story, my advice is that you should just develop it a little bit. Simply scribble on a sheet of paper, or tap away on the keyboard, and see where it takes you. Proceed until you have no more than a single page.

At that point it would, I suggest, be a good idea to pause and to think about the nature of the material that you now have in front of you. If you go ploughing on for too long, you may perhaps be using your time inefficiently. It will be better at this stage to do a little thinking before you go much further.

## **Identifying the emotional effect**

You will remember that I asked you earlier to read a few well known stories and to identify the emotional effect of each of them. It will now be a smart move to take a look at the raw material for your own short story, and to identify what possibilities it has for arousing emotion in the reader.

What does the material look like at this stage? Does it have the makings of a comedy? Would it amuse anyone? On the other hand, if the material is rather dark and gloomy, will it make a horror story? Use the lists of emotions, in Appendix I, as an aid to clarifying your ideas at this point. What is the overall emotional effect of the material as it stands?

The next thing to do is to decide whether the likely emotional effect of the material is one that you want to continue with.

If you are writing for a particular market, ask yourself

whether the emotional effect of the material matches the needs of the market. Suppose, for instance, you are hoping to write a short story for *The Lady* magazine. At the time of writing, the chief requirement for such a story, as stated by the editor, is that it should be cheerful. Is your story cheerful? If not, can it be made cheerful? Very often the same material can be used in a variety of ways. Tragedy may be turned into comedy. It all depends how you handle it.

A similar problem might arise if your main aim was to write for a horror magazine. We have no control, by definition, over the type of material that just happens to pop into our head; and if your item of inspiration seems to deal with some happy little girl who goes about spreading sweetness and joy among the sick and the lonely, then for a horror magazine something has clearly got to change; you are going to have to find some way of giving this little girl a grisly death.

I jest. Or try to. Frankly I don't know why anyone would ever wish to read a really gruesome horror story, much less write one, but people do.

In any event, the point is this. Is the most obvious emotional effect of your material one that you can use for whatever purpose you have in mind? If it would require a huge effort, and massive manipulation, to alter the natural thrust of the material, then it will usually be easier to discard the idea, or at any rate put it on one side for another day, and develop a different idea instead.

## **Classifying ideas**

Having thought up an idea for a story, and having identified the emotional effect of it, the next thing to do is to

classify the story: which means that you need to decide how its effect is achieved.

Why would you bother to do that? Because classifying the story will help you to work out how to strengthen it, that's why. And if that statement seems a difficult to understand, then have patience. All will be revealed as we proceed.

Here is the explanation. Briefly, a short story will be found to derive its impact from an emphasis on one of four principal factors, or a combination of some of those four factors. The four factors are: character; complication; theme; and atmosphere.

In the four sections which follow I will give you a much fuller discussion of each of these factors, so that you will soon be able to identify, without too much trouble, which category your story falls into. Once you know that, you will then be in a better position to work out how to develop the story's full potential.

## **Character stories**

A character story is much more than just a story with characters in it. It is a story which interests the reader more by its revelation of what kind of a person the chief character is than in any other way. The reader is paying more attention to the conduct of the main character than to any other element. Above all, the character story is one in which the emotional effect is generated by some aspect of character.

As usual, it will be easier for you to understand what I mean if I give you a few examples.

In discussing each of the four story types, I shall give you a couple of examples of 'classic' stories, by well known

authors. In most cases I shall also give you an example drawn from my own collection of short stories, [\*King Albert's Words of Advice\*](#), which was mentioned above.

The classic stories will be ones which are widely available in libraries or cheap paperback editions, and in some cases they will be available free of charge on the internet. If you find that the hyperlink given fails to connect, just google and you will probably find an alternative.

The first example of a character story is [\*The Piece of String\*](#) by the nineteenth-century French writer Guy de Maupassant. Like much of Maupassant's work, this tale is literally a short story, running to just over eight pages in most editions.

The main character is an old peasant called Hauchecorne. He is accused of stealing a wallet – which he did not do. Naturally, Hauchecorne insists that he is innocent. The wallet is later found. But Hauchecorne is then accused of having had the wallet returned by an accomplice, to get himself out of trouble. Hauchecorne again declares his innocence. And he goes on declaring it, telling the story of what happened, over and over again, to anyone who will listen. Eventually his mind fails, his health fails, and he dies.

The emotional effect of this story is pity for the hypersensitive and innocent old man, wrongly accused of a crime.

And, most important of all in determining what type of story this is, the emotional impact of *The Piece of String* is determined by an aspect of character – a character trait, in other words. In Hauchecorne's case, the trait in question is excessive sensitivity to the opinions of other people. He is not as emotionally robust as he should be; he is unable to shrug off the false accusations made against him; and they

obsess him to the point where he loses first his mind and then his life.

Another well known character story – though in my view a rather silly one – is [\*The Romance of the Busy Broker\*](#), by the American writer O. Henry. Mr Henry (1862-1910) seems to have gone out of fashion nowadays, but in years past he had a high reputation as a master of the surprise ending.

The busy broker in question is a man called Harvey. He arrives at work one morning in company with his secretary. His work involves buying and selling shares on the stock exchange, and before long he is operating at a frantic pace, using two phones at once, shouting orders across the room. Then, towards lunchtime, a brief lull develops. Harvey uses this pause in activity to rush across to his secretary's desk. He declares his undying love for her – apologises that he really hasn't had time to woo her as a gentleman should – and begs her to marry him.

The secretary at first seems overcome with amazement; then she cries; then she laughs. 'Don't you remember, Harvey?' she says. 'We were married yesterday evening at eight o'clock.'

This, as I said at the beginning, is a very silly story, and, when told as briefly as I have told it, it loses whatever credibility it may have in the full version. But take my word for it – in its day, this was a story which was widely read and much enjoyed.

Emotional effect: amusement.

Effect derived from: the actions of the busy broker.

Character trait: obsession with business.

Finally, a more modern example from my own work: [\*Budgie Bill\*](#). This is a story about a young man who breeds budgerigars. In fact breeding the little birds is Billy's sole

interest; he cares not for football, girls, or going out with the lads.

His mother decides that this is all most unhealthy, and she arranges for a young lady, Samantha, to introduce Billy to the pleasures of the flesh. Samantha spends the evening with Billy, and nature takes its course, and when Billy's mum comes home she expresses the hope that Billy might like to take Samantha out again.

'Oh, no,' says Billy. It turns out that his best breeding budgie, Petronella, didn't take to Samantha at all. And therefore Billy couldn't possibly have any further dealings with Samantha, because if Petronella is upset, Petronella won't lay eggs – and then where would we be?

Again, this is a slight and silly story, another one which comes across much more effectively, I hope, in its full-length version. But my purpose here is to give you a third example of how a character story works.

In the case of Budgie Bill the emotional effect is amusement; this is derived from the character of young Billy; and the character trait is his obsession with budgies.

In this section of the chapter, I have given you a definition of what a character-based story is, and I have provided three examples of how such a story generates its effect.

Let us turn now to stories which derive their effect from another factor: complication.

## **Complication stories**

What on earth is a complication story?

Well, it's a story which derives its main interest, and its emotional effect, from a complication in the circumstances which are described in the story.

Obviously, a complication story must contain some



characters too, but the reader's attention is held mainly by the entanglements in which the characters are involved.

Once again, some examples will be in order.

Perhaps the purest complication stories of all are the crime stories which fall within the definition of a locked-room mystery. What happens in one of these stories is that a crime is committed in apparently impossible circumstances. A man is found dead, evidently murdered by a gunshot wound; but the door of his room is locked from the inside; the key is still in the lock; no one could have got in, or out, because the windows, doors, chimneys et cetera are all hermetically sealed.

How was it done? Well (to give but one example) the sun shone through the window of the room; the sun's rays fell on a bottle of alcohol, which focused them into a burning hot ray; which set off the percussion cap of a gun hanging on the wall; and thus our victim's brains were blown out.

Such, I say, is a story of pure complication. The locked-room mystery requires a special sort of mind to write, and a special kind of reader to read one with enjoyment; I have never much cared for them myself, because the explanations are usually far-fetched and sometimes ridiculous. But at least you now know the sort of thing that I have in mind when I speak of a complication story.

Here are two examples of complication stories by famous authors, coupled with a reference to one of my own.

[\*The Cask of Amontillado\*](#), by Edgar Allan Poe, is a horror story. It tells of a man who is determined to obtain revenge on an enemy. The leading character lures his enemy into a wine cellar, and manages to seal him up, alive, behind a brick wall. 'For half a century no mortal has disturbed the masonry,' the author tells us. Charming.

Yes, you are quite right, and well spotted. This story does feature a character whose actions are dominated by one powerful trait: the desire for revenge. So it is tempting to describe it as a character-based story. Nevertheless, I argue that the emotional effect is derived principally from the central complication: which is, the plotting and scheming by the narrator to bring about his enemy's death by a peculiarly unpleasant method.

Effect: horror.

Complication: walling-up of the victim.

Another, mercifully less distasteful, complication story is *The Colonel and Mrs Bixby*, the events of which have already been summarised in my discussion of irony.

Effect: ironic amusement.

Complication: Mrs Bixby's devious scheme with the pawnbroker's ticket.

And a third example by my modest self: [\*Unblotting the Copybook\*](#). In this story, the chaplain of a famous school for boys relates how he struggles to avoid a scandal when the headmaster collapses and dies in an embarrassing location: the bedroom of a well upholstered widow. The chaplain is aided and abetted in covering up this inconvenient death by the school bursar and a bribed policeman.

Effect: a kind of black humour; amusement at the hypocrisy of the 'respectable' main characters.

Complication: death of the headmaster in the wrong bed.

Perhaps you have already sensed, from the examples given above, that complication stories (in any medium) generally have a more down-to-earth appeal than character stories. Stories about individual characters tend to be highbrow, not to say highfalutin, and they appeal to older, more sophisticated, readers. Your average teenager, on the

other hand, is more likely to enjoy a bit of blood and thunder, as found in a complication story.

I cannot claim to have done a detailed statistical analysis, but I suspect that, in practice, eight or nine short stories out of ten will derive their effects from character, complication, or a combination of the two. The double-barrelled or combination story, in which emphasis is laid more or less equally on character and complication, is certainly quite common.

### **Thematic stories**

The third type of story is the thematic one. For the purposes of our discussion, a thematic story is one which sets out to illustrate some basic truth about life; or at any rate, it illustrates some statement which the writer *believes* to be a basic truth about life.

Here are a few examples of 'themes' in the context of the short story; the examples that I have chosen are deliberately hackneyed (although they may still remain true):

Honesty is the best policy.

War is hell.

Diamonds are a girl's best friend.

Thomas H. Uzzell, whom I have mentioned before, took the view that thematic stories were the Rolls-Royces of the short-story world – he called them 'an exalted form of narrative'.

I don't believe a word of that myself. Thematic stories tend to be literary and earnest in tone: they are often written by people who have a mission to improve the world, and the resulting story may well be pompous, preachy, and obvious. Most of us already know that war is hell, thank you very much, and we don't need any smart-

alec short-story writer to tell us about it.

So my first comment is that you should think hard before going to the trouble of writing a thematic tale. You could, I believe, have a nicely successful career in short fiction without ever bothering your head about 'themes' in any way, shape, or form.

Nevertheless, such stories have been written over the years, and some people prize them highly; so for the sake of completeness we must briefly consider them here.

An example of a thematic story from the nineteenth century is [\*Old Age\*](#), by Chekhov. Like many of Chekhov's stories, this is a brief and deceptively slight narrative. An old man returns to the village where he grew up, and discovers that he is pretty much forgotten. What is more, he finds that he is no longer interested in the townsfolk. He visits the grave of his wife, who died many years earlier, expecting to be moved to tears. But what he discovers is that no lump comes to his throat, and, no matter how hard he blinks, no tears come to his eyes.

The emotional effect: a sense of melancholy (or perhaps relief!) at the realisation that, if you become very old, death may not seem so unattractive.

The theme may be summarised as: Old age destroys and carries away everything, perhaps even the capacity for grief.

From the classic era of the short story our familiar friend Maupassant provides another example of a thematic narrative: [\*The Beggar\*](#).

The beggar is a cripple who is unable to work for a living. He limps about the countryside, sleeping rough and begging for odd scraps. Unfortunately, the local populace have long since lost their sympathy for him, and they treat him badly; he begins to starve. Desperate for food, he

finally gives in to temptation and kills a chicken, but is caught red-handed before he can eat it. He is immediately thrown into jail, and the next morning he is found dead.

Emotional effect: horrified sympathy for the wretched beggar.

The theme is biblical: 'Whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken away even that he hath.' (Matthew 13:12)

Our third example of a thematic story is drawn from my own work, because oddly enough I have written such a story myself. I say oddly enough because I never expected to write one in the first place, and I don't expect to write another. Its title is *A Motto to Die by*..

The story was inspired by the fact that I had recently come across yet another example of villainous behaviour by a firm of publishers. You may be under the impression, dear Reader, that publishing is a profession which is populated exclusively by gentlemen. Well, up to a point it is. But there are also some ruthless and unscrupulous fellows in the business.

Anyway, there I was, feeling particularly cross about an appalling piece of publishing skulduggery, so I decided that I would write a story about a less than honest publisher. I also decided that, in writing this tale, I would build into it the idea, or theme, that honesty is the best policy. Indeed I would go further: I would try to demonstrate that the telling of deliberate lies, and the distortion of facts for personal gain, is not only immoral but is also likely to be self-defeating.

The sequence of events described in my story is a great deal more complicated and convoluted than either of the two examples of thematic stories quoted immediately above. Suffice it to say that the villain of the piece is a publisher who is trying to sell his firm, for a high price,

while disguising the fact that it is on the verge of going bust. To assist him in his plans, he tries to bribe an honest man, and the whole scheme backfires, leaving him with no hope whatever of selling his company to anyone. (You can read the whole of this delightful and entertaining narrative – if I do say myself – in my aforementioned collection of stories, [\*King Albert's Words of Advice\*](#).)

Emotional effect: wry (or ironic) amusement that the villain's scheming results in the directly opposite result from the one that he desires.

Theme of my story: as stated above, honesty is the best policy.

## **Atmosphere stories**

We don't need to spend long in consideration of this fourth category, atmosphere stories, because they are rare, difficult to write, and have limited reader appeal, particularly in the twenty-first century. I have never written such a story myself, and I don't intend to try. But here, for the record, is what they are all about.

All stories are bound to have a setting: that is to say, there must be a place, or a series of places, in which the story takes place. But a pure atmosphere story is not just a story with atmosphere. An atmosphere short story is a story in which the setting rises to its feet and begins to play an active part in the plot. Indeed the atmosphere must do more than just play *a* part; it must be *the* most important character of all, performing a vital role in the outcome of the events which are related.

An 'atmosphere' in this sense is not just tropical heat, or freezing cold; those things, if they play any part in the story at all, are just simple complications. An atmosphere for our

purposes is some aspect of the setting which has a powerful impact, often an overwhelming impact, on the minds, as well as the bodies, of the human characters involved.

Here are brief references to a couple of classic atmosphere stories. In both of them the atmosphere is cast as the villain.

In Edgar Allan Poe's [\*The Fall of the House of Usher\*](#), the ancient mansion which is home to the Usher family is a crumbling, sinister ruin, with an air of 'stern, deep and irredeemable gloom'. The story (which is not a bundle of laughs) relates how Roderick Usher inadvertently buries his twin sister alive. Eventually, in the midst of a violent storm, she reappears in front of Mr Usher (and his friend, who relates the story), and Usher drops dead. The entire house then disintegrates.

You have to read the complete text to get the full flavour of the thing.

Another famous atmosphere story, and a more credible one to my way of thinking, is Robert Louis Stevenson's [\*The Merry Men\*](#), first published in 1887. Stevenson referred to this as his favourite work. He called it 'a fantastic sonata about the sea and wrecks.' The principal character is the sea, or a particularly dangerous and malevolent stretch of it where underwater currents collide, and the sea boils with fury. No sailor can take a boat within half a mile of this death trap, and the sound of its roaring can be heard six miles away.

To summarise crudely, the narrator's uncle is driven insane by the sight of a ship which is wrecked in this maelstrom. He also suffers an overwhelming sense of guilt, generated by the fact that he murdered a seaman who was cast ashore from a previous wreck. The mad uncle plunges into the sea himself, never to be seen again.

In both of the examples of atmosphere stories given above, the effect, so far as most readers are concerned, is pure horror. The respective atmospheres are, pretty obviously, the creepy old house and the dangerous stretch of sea.

Both stories referred to in this section were written well over a hundred years ago, and I think that's significant. In those days, readers were much more prepared to read lengthy descriptions of scenes, localities, and atmosphere, than they are today.

Why? Because in the nineteenth century there were no cinemas, no television sets, no digital cameras, and most people didn't travel much. Today we've all been there, seen it, and bored our friends with the home movies. So we are no longer prepared, I suspect, to wade through several pages which attempt to convey to us the full flavour of an atmosphere which can be conveyed to our senses so much more effectively on film or videotape.

We have concentrated, in this chapter, on analysing short stories to find out how they achieve their effects. But it is possible to use our four categories of fiction to analyse works in other media, such as films. If you apply the analysis to the George Clooney film *The Perfect Storm*, you will realise that it is an atmosphere film with knobs on. And the film also illustrates quite nicely why it is that atmosphere short stories are seldom written today: no short story can hope to compete with special effects which have cost millions of dollars.

## **Multi-phase stories**

As already mentioned, it is quite common for a story to derive its main interest and its emotional effect from more



than one of the four main factors: the character-complication story is frequently found. Such a story is simply one which derives its impact from more or less equal emphasis on both the characters and the entanglements in which those characters are involved.

Another point which is worth emphasising at this stage is that analysing material, and determining which of the four categories, or combinations of categories, it falls into, is by no means an exact science.

Two different readers, even if they are experienced analysts, might easily study a given story and find that they differ on its categorisation. One analyst might feel that the story is purely thematic; another might conclude that it is a character-complication story with some thematic content.

Does this matter? Not a lot, at least as far as writing your own stories is concerned. What I am suggesting in this chapter is that you should analyse your *own* raw material; and it is *your* material, when all is said and done.

The whole point of analysing and categorising your basic idea is that doing so may help you to decide how to develop and strengthen the material, so that it has the maximum possible emotional impact on the reader. Much more will be said about that in the next chapter but one.

What you may well find, from analysing and categorising your story ideas over a period of months, or by looking back at your existing body of work, is that you tend to favour certain types of material over others.

Literary writers, who are often deeply sensitive chaps (and ladies) with the souls of poets, may find that they favour stories which emphasise character, perhaps to the exclusion of all else. A typical story of this kind may amount to no more than a simple description of a person, with virtually no conflict or drama in it at all. *The New*

*Yorker* was at one time famous for short stories of this rather vague and feather-light nature. Such stories are much admired in some quarters. I don't much admire them myself, but that's because I'm a vulgar fellow with coarse tastes in almost all the arts.

More robust writers, often young men with a scientific bent, may prefer complication stories, using violent crime, or space travel, as their basis.

And those who are determined to save the world will no doubt go in for stories with a theme.

It is all a matter of personal preference, and I make no recommendations. I simply argue that it is usually a pretty good idea to work out what you are trying to do before you start. Decide that, and you are then in a better position to work out, logically and rationally, how best to achieve your aims.

## **Conclusions**

In this chapter I have suggested ways in which you may develop some basic ideas for short stories, if you happen to be one of those people for whom ideas do not appear out of the blue.

The first step is to write down your basic idea; develop it to some extent; and then step back and take a look at it.

Identify the emotional effect of the material, as it stands. Is that emotional effect one that you are happy with? Does it match the needs of the magazine you are trying to write for? Is it the kind of story your mother would like? And if not, do you care?

Assuming that you wish to persevere with this story idea, the next step is to determine where its principal interest lies, as far as the reader is concerned.

Is the reader going to be mainly interested in one main character? Or will the reader be persuaded to keep reading by a fascination with the twists and turns of the complication? Is there any significant thematic element – in other words, does the story illustrate what seems to you to be an important truth about life? And, finally, does the setting/location/weather play such a major part in the events that the story may sensibly be placed in the atmosphere category? (This is rather unlikely, but it is possible.)

In chapter 6 I shall describe how you go about developing and strengthening your raw material. But first we have to consider another technical question – namely, the point of view from which the story may best be told.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **How to choose a point of view**

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THIS CHAPTER CONSIDERS the problem of how to choose the best point of view for telling your story. And if you don't really understand what I'm talking about in that first sentence, then don't worry because all will be made clear to you by the time you have read this chapter.

Frankly, it was a bit of a puzzle trying to decide whereabouts in the book to put this particular discussion. In the end, however, I decided that this present point is the most logical position to insert a discussion of viewpoint. Why? Well, because in most cases the choice of viewpoint for a story is best made after you have a pretty clear idea of what the story is about, but before you put the final touches to it: somewhere about here, in other words.

#### **Sources of wisdom**

Over the past fifty years or so, I have read more or less every book that I could lay hands on which appeared to shed some light on how to write fiction (about 300 of them, all told). These analyses have varied from abstruse academic works at one end to crude 'how to get rich quick by writing a novel' manuals at the other. The books at either

end of this spectrum tend to be useless. The valuable ones are somewhere in the middle.

As a result of this research I am in a position to give you the benefit of all that accumulated wisdom. What follows, in other words, is not so much the fruit of my own genius, but an amalgam of the thinking of all the great fictional theorists, expressed (I hope) in simple and clear language.

It may be useful if I mention here the names of some of the most valuable thinkers on this particular aspect of story-telling, so that you can read their discussions yourself, if you so wish.

First, I need to remind you of Thomas H. Uzzell, author of *Narrative Technique* (first published in 1923 and long since out of print). In that book, Uzzell writes extensively about the various possible points of view for relating a story. Uzzell's early ideas were refined some thirty years later when he considered full-length fiction, in his book *The Technique of the Novel*. In the remainder of this chapter I shall make extensive use of the principles which Uzzell sets out in both his major works.

A more recent viewpoint theorist is Albert Zuckerman, whose book *Writing the Blockbuster Novel* is essential reading for anyone who intends to tackle the longer form of fiction. Al Zuckerman is one of the most successful literary agents in New York, and as it happens he was my own agent for about fifteen years. In 1980/81 I worked very closely with Al when I was writing a thriller called *No Holds Barred*, so I have personal experience of the insights which he can bring to a writer's work.

Not surprisingly, the best books on fictional technique are those written by literary agents. I say not surprisingly because agents are the people who earn their living by actually selling books to publishers, and it is therefore very

much in their interests to think hard about what makes a book tick. Agents who have written useful books on writing fiction include Paul R. Reynolds, Malcolm MacCampbell, Scott Meredith, and Carole Blake.

For completeness I suppose I must mention that I have also sought help from the academic writers on the subject of viewpoint – though the academics are, as usual, much less helpful than the more down-to-earth practitioners.

Academics, by and large, consider that they are letting themselves down if they write anything which can be understood by the ordinary reader. They don't feel they're doing things right unless their prose is well nigh incomprehensible.

You might read, for example, a work by Gerard Genette, entitled *Narrative Discourse*. In that book, Genette identifies three types of prose, which he refers to as non-focalised, internally focalised, and externally focalised. The terminology is not what you might call instantly clear, is it? So, what is Genette actually talking about?

Well, when you dig down through the layers of obfuscation, you discover that what Genette calls non-focalised fiction is simply a story told from the point of view of the classic omniscient narrator (of whom more below). Internally focalised prose is a story told from the point of view of a particular character. And an externally focalised story is one which is told in the Hemingway manner, with an account of the events being given from the viewpoint of one of the characters, but without any comment or thoughts from that character.

The analysis which Genette gives us is interesting, up to a point, and useful, up to a point. But, for the record, it is an incomplete and faulty analysis. What is more, Genette offers us a discussion which is couched, like most academic

discourse, in obscure language; reading the thing is damned hard work, and in the end you discover that it's scarcely worth the trouble, because other writers have set out the same ideas with greater clarity.

Other academic writers who have dealt with the question of viewpoint include Wayne C. Booth (*The Rhetoric of Fiction*), and Tzvetan Todorov (*The Poetics of Prose*). Wade through these stodgy tomes if you wish, but you won't find anything there which tells you more than is contained in the rest of this chapter. And you will find that my description – even if I do say so myself – is a great deal easier to follow than the output of the academic elite.

It is high time we got down to business.

In the good (?) old days, writers on the art of fiction would limit themselves to advising you that there were two ways – and only two ways – in which you could tell a story. You could either write it in the first person, or in the third person. Either you wrote: I opened the door and walked into the room, where I fell over a dead body. Or you wrote: *He* opened the door and walked into the room, where *he* fell over a dead body.

It must have been nice to live in such simple, untroubled times. Today, of course, we know that things are not that simple. Dear me, no. So let me end this brief introduction to the subject of viewpoint in fiction by saying that there are three principal points of view from which a story may be told. The first of these three viewpoints is the omniscient.

### **The omniscient viewpoint**

A writer who adopts the omniscient viewpoint writes as if she is one of the gods. In other words, she looks down from

above and sees everything with perfect clarity.

An omniscient author knows everything about everybody in the story. She knows what each and every character is thinking and feeling, at any given point in time, and she is free to tell her readers about those thoughts and feelings to whatever extent she wishes.

The omniscient viewpoint is sometimes called the novelist's angle, and certainly it was much used by novelists in the nineteenth century. Such novelists, as often as not, commanded great armies of characters, and they told their readers, in enormous detail, about the characters' upbringing, tastes, likes and dislikes, moral character, and family history. They also related the innermost thoughts and feelings of those characters.

The writer who adopts the omniscient viewpoint stands well outside the story, looking on. She is not a participant in the tale; she stands aloof.

Inevitably, and inescapably, the omniscient writer must write in the third person. She must say 'He climbed the stairs', and not 'I climbed the stairs', because if you write in the first person you are, of necessity, using one of the other two available viewpoints.

While it is possible, in theory, for the omniscient writer to enter the minds of *all* her characters, it is common for novelists to limit this practice to the half-dozen or so major characters. In a short story, it may be wiser to describe the thoughts and feelings of only one or two major characters. Other, minor, characters may best be dealt with by describing their actions only, ignoring their internal reactions.

And by the way, if you are going to enter the heads of your leading characters, and convey their thoughts to the reader, you should preferably be consistent about it. In a murder story, for instance, it is no good telling us what



everyone is thinking except the murderer. Not only is that aesthetically unbalanced, and a form of cheating, but it also tends to send a signal to the alert reader. It is the equivalent of putting a neon sign above the guilty party's head, saying *This Is The One Who Did It!*

The omniscient viewpoint has a long and honourable history; and for that reason it is, perhaps, just the tiniest bit old-fashioned. Don't let me put you off – you can certainly breathe new life into the old girl. But, in adopting a technique which was widely used 150 years ago, you can easily slip into the habit of writing in the style which the old-timers used. And that may not go down too well with modern editors and readers.

#### *Author comment*

Before moving on to describe the second of the three possible viewpoints, I want to say something about the extent to which an author may, or should, comment on the action.

There are numerous variations which can be worked upon the three basic viewpoints; and one of those variations is the extent to which the author chooses to comment, or nudge the reader's elbow.

The omniscient viewpoint provides ample opportunity for the writer to say what she thinks about any of the characters, or about the unfolding events; and, if you are using this viewpoint, you really ought to decide, as consciously as possible, whether you are going to use this opportunity to comment, or not.

Not commenting means that you just tell the story. You simply relate what happens to the characters. You may, perhaps, take advantage of your godlike position and tell

the reader what the major characters are thinking and feeling. And that would probably be a good idea; it helps to get the reader involved in the story.

However, the writer who chooses to comment can go considerably further than that. The writer may, if she wishes, give hints and tips about the unfolding action: she may choose to remind us readers of things we might have forgotten, and forewarn us of events yet to come. She may well tell us, for instance, that Mr Brown is a nasty piece of work, and that Mrs Green will one day be declared a saint. She may point out that Miss Jones is making a big mistake by agreeing to have dinner with that man from the sales department, and she may assure us that Mr Brown will one day be married and have four kids.

In the nineteenth century, particularly, writers took full advantage of their godlike status to bombard us with their own beliefs and moral judgements. Which is all very well. You can do that if you choose. But just remember that the modern reader is likely, on the whole, to be more interested in the unfolding events of the story than in hearing what you, the author, think about couples living together without being married, or the state of the modern Labour party. A writer can make herself the star of the show if she wishes, and inflict her opinions on the long-suffering reader. But be warned – even the star can be booed off-stage.

My advice (to be ignored if you wish) is that you should confine yourself to telling the story, entering the minds of the leading characters from time to time, and telling us what they are thinking and feeling. Apart from that, keep your mouth firmly shut. No one wants to know.

Even if you refrain from telling us directly that Miss Jones is making a big mistake, you may still colour the

reader's thinking by the way in which you present raw information. And here again, this may be done either consciously or unconsciously.

For example, you could write: He was a seedy, unpleasant-looking man. By writing such a sentence, you are conveying to the reader, deliberately or otherwise, what you think of this character. If you refer to him as seedy and unpleasant he doesn't sound like much of a catch for a well brought up young lady, now does he?

On the other hand, you could write, of the same individual: His shoes were down-at-heel and his raincoat was streaked with dirt. Which is more objective, and doesn't ram home a moral judgement. It also leaves open the possibility that this character might turn out to be a perfect gentleman – one who, for entirely understandable reasons, is temporarily down on his luck. And the reader might well be more interested in continuing to read your story if she is left to wonder about that possibility, than she would be if you put up another neon sign above the character's head, saying This One Is Up To No Good.

Some literary thinkers have referred to these two different ways of presenting the facts as writing subjectively and writing objectively. Nudging the reader's elbow, by describing a character as seedy, may be thought of as writing subjectively. Writing objectively, by contrast, simply means telling the reader that the man's clothes are shabby.

All too often a writer will fall into a subjective style of writing without being conscious of it. And that may be a perfectly satisfactory way of proceeding. But just try to be aware of what you are doing, and ask yourself whether that is really the best way to achieve the effect you are seeking.

At the revision stage, try to recognise when you are

falling into the commenting mode, and, if that is not what you really want to do, strike out the offending passage.

### **The major-character viewpoint**

Now we come to the second of the three possible viewpoints for writing fiction.

A story which uses the major-character viewpoint is, rather obviously, one in which the events are related as seen by one of the most important participants in the events. A story told from this point of view is an account of the action as seen (or heard), by a character who is heavily involved in the story.

When using this viewpoint, you relate the events as the major character sees them, and you describe that one character's thoughts and feelings. But you do not enter the heads of any of the other characters, or tell the reader what those characters are thinking and feeling.

Why not? Well, because your major character can't be *sure* what the other characters are thinking. Unlike the omniscient author, he or she is not a god. The main character may guess what is running through the minds of the others, from the way they look and act – but he can't know for sure.

Consider, for example, Maupassant's story [\*The Beggar\*](#) (already mentioned). The story tells us what happened to the only important character in it. Writing in the third person, the author describes the events precisely as they were experienced by the main character, the beggar himself.

In addition to recounting events, Maupassant describes the beggar's thoughts and his feelings. He also tells us what other characters do in relation to the beggar, but he never

tells us what those characters are thinking and feeling. We can definitely *deduce* that those characters are angry, and resentful, and that they dislike the beggar, but we are never told exactly what they are thinking or feeling internally.

Chekhov's [\*Old Age\*](#) is another story told from the major-character viewpoint, in the third person.

Edgar Allan Poe's [\*The Cask of Amontillado\*](#) uses the major-character, first-person viewpoint.

So far so good. But hold on a minute, you say. There may be four or five major characters in a story, so how do you decide which of them to use as your pair of eyes?

Al Zuckerman's opinion (with which I do not intend to argue) is that you should choose the character who is experiencing the biggest emotional load – the one who has the most to gain, or to lose, depending on how the events of the story turn out. Maupassant's choice of the beggar himself as the viewpoint character was a fairly obvious one!

The major-character viewpoint is ideal for stories in which the viewpoint character experiences strong inner conflicts, which you can describe in some detail. Your character may well sit and think for some time, rather than act as prompted by pure reflex.

As remarked above, a story told from the omniscient viewpoint has to be written in the third person. The major-character viewpoint story, however, can be written in either the third or the first person.

Uzzell maintained that it doesn't make a scrap of difference which grammatical form you use, because both forms convey exactly the same information. 'I climbed the stairs' tells us no more than 'He climbed the stairs'. This is true, up to a point. But... it is worth making a few comments.

To begin with, a first-person narrator must obviously be a reasonably articulate individual, if he is to be convincing.

Having said that, you may, of course, want to convey an impression of an individual who is *not* particularly articulate, in which case the first-person mode conveys perfectly what a limited vocabulary the fellow has.

The first person is far better than the third if you want to write a story which is told with a regional accent. See, for instance, my story *Decent White Folk*, in [\*King Albert's Words of Advice\*](#).

I sometimes feel, instinctively, when reading a story told in the first person, that such a story is probably more involving to the reader than it would be if it were told in the third person. That, however, is not a contention which I can prove. And I do have to accept the validity of a point made by Gerard Genette, namely that it is implicit in a first-person story that the narrator has survived the events which he is describing. When reading a first-person story we thus have some assurance (perhaps absorbed unconsciously) that our first-person character will come out on top in the end. So, if you want to maintain total suspense about the ultimate fate of the narrator, then the third person is the one to use. Maupassant, for instance, could not use the first person in *The Beggar*, because the beggar ends up dead!

I believe it is also true, at least in most cases, that stories which call for a great deal of psychological analysis and self-questioning are better handled in the third person. An individual who, on his own admission, spends a lot of time worrying about his own motives and reviewing his own past history can soon begin to seem rather self-centred.

When using the major-character viewpoint, it is still possible to 'colour' your descriptions, or alternatively make them objective, in just the same way as was described in relation to the omniscient viewpoint. In other words, even

when you are writing in the first person, our main character can either say 'He was a seedy and unpleasant-looking man', or, 'His shoes were down-at-heel and his raincoat was streaked with dirt'. It is worth noticing, however, that in the major-character story, the writer's choice of words will not only colour the reader's attitude towards the other character who is being described, but the words will also colour the reader's view of the major character himself.

For example, if a first-person narrator says of another character 'He was a total shit-bag', then you know that the narrator is not a man who pulls his punches. On the other hand, if the narrator says (of the same character), 'He was far from a perfect gentleman', then the narrator is revealing that he is probably an elderly gentleman who was brought up in the age of understatement.

Finally, before we leave this discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of the major-character narrative in the first person, I should not neglect to acquaint you with the concept of 'the unreliable narrator'.

The term is pretty much self-explanatory, and at the risk of stating the blindingly obvious I will just say that it is at least possible that a character who gives you a first-person account of a series of events may, in fact, be lying through his teeth. The whole story may be a complete fabrication, intended either to entertain or to deceive. This possibility presents a number of interesting opportunities, but I will leave it to you to explore them.

The concept of the unreliable narrator is much discussed in literary circles. Indeed in the Eng. Lit. common rooms of the great universities they speak of little else. But don't let that put you off.

Another possibility presented by first-person narration is not so much that the narrator is lying, as that he misun-

derstands completely the meaning of the events that he is witnessing. And, if you can somehow contrive to reveal to the reader that the narrator is drawing entirely the wrong conclusions from the events in which he is involved, then the result can be either comic or tragic, depending on how you handle the material.

This writing business, you will now realise, does tend to get a bit complicated at times. But therein lies the skill, and the interest; and by mastering these skills through practice you will gradually learn how to ensure that your stories have a bigger impact on the reader – an impact more in line with the one that you have intended.

### **The minor-character viewpoint**

The third and final angle from which a story may be told is the minor-character viewpoint. It is sometimes referred to as the mystery angle – for reasons which will now be explained.

In a story told from the viewpoint of a minor character, the narrator is a participant in the action, but is more of an observer than a person who makes the key decisions in the story. And a story told from the minor-character viewpoint can be written in either the first or the third person.

Fortunately, we don't have to go far to find an example of a whole series of stories which are told from the point of view of a minor character. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle provides us with the archetype in the Sherlock Holmes canon.

The Holmes stories, you will recall, are written in the first person by the great detective's faithful assistant, Dr Watson. And, as Conan Doyle obviously realised at an early stage, the minor-character viewpoint is ideal when the author wishes to maintain a sense of mystery. We, the



readers, know no more than Watson is able to tell us, and as often as not that is not very much. Holmes sits and puffs his pipe, and comes to amazing conclusions, but we, like Watson, stumble along in Holmes's wake, wondering what on earth he is up to now.

Countless other crime novelists have adopted the same technique. S.S. Van Dine wrote a series of mystery novels which are related by the detective's secretary. Rex Stout's books about the eccentric detective Nero Wolfe are recounted by Wolfe's faithful sidekick, Archie Goodwin. And so on.

The minor-character angle has other uses, however. Suppose you were to write a story in which the main character is going to be driven insane, or commit suicide, as a result of the impact of certain tragic events. Such a story could either be told from an omniscient viewpoint, as described above, or the story could be told by a minor character. Through the eyes of such a minor character, the reader shares the impact of the events on the narrator, and is told of the much greater effect that they have on the major character.

As with the other two viewpoints, the writer of a story told from the minor-character viewpoint can influence the reader's attitudes towards all the other characters in the story by the extent to which the narrator gives the reader nudges, winks, and nods. When using the first person, you can also colour the reader's view of the minor character cum narrator by what you make the narrator say about himself, about the other participants in the action, and about the nature of the unfolding events.

If you ever read my own collection of short stories ([King Albert's Words of Advice](#)), you may need to know that I regard *Decent White Folk* as a story with a minor-character

viewpoint, told in the first person. The principal character in that story is the Inspector, not the narrator.

### **Choice and consistency**

I appreciate that by now you may have the impression that choosing the best viewpoint to use for a short story is a decidedly tricky business. But it isn't really.

If you are planning to write a story at all, then you will presumably have some sort of an outline in mind. Have a look at that material, and as often as not you will find that the 'best' viewpoint pretty much suggests itself. The choice is frequently instinctive, and may well be dictated, or at least suggested, by the nature of the material.

However, if you get really stuck, then here is a handy summary of the decisions that you need to make.

- 1 Are you going to use the omniscient viewpoint, which enables you to enter the heads of any and all characters if you so wish – or are you going to write from the point of view of one major character, or one minor character?
- 2 If you are using the major-character viewpoint, or the minor-character viewpoint, are you going to write in the first person or the third person?
- 3 Whichever viewpoint you choose, are you going to describe external and visible events only, or are you going to describe the internal thoughts and feelings of any of the characters?
- 4 If you are writing in the third person, are you going to provide 'author comment'? Are you going to give the reader

strong indications of how she should react to the characters and events, or are you going to let the events speak for themselves, with the reader coming to her own conclusions about who is good or bad, right or wrong?

5 If you are writing in the first person, is that narrator going to try to influence the reader about who is good or bad, right or wrong? Or, again, is the reader going to be given a neutral, objective account of events, and be left to form her own conclusions?

6 If you are writing a first-person account, is that going to be a truthful account of what happened, or not?

7 Does the narrator come to correct and sensible conclusions about what he observes? Or does he come to false (and perhaps comic) conclusions?

To repeat, you will not often find yourself needing to work through this checklist in any conscious way, because the answers to the questions listed above will often be implicit in the material that you have already developed. Nevertheless, it can sometimes help you to strengthen what material you have by thinking about some of these possibilities.

As for consistency in the use of one viewpoint – well, that is a matter of personal choice and taste. I myself make it something of a point of honour to stick rigorously to the selected viewpoint. Genette, on the other hand, argues that strict observance of this rule is unnecessary.

Will anyone complain if you do vary the viewpoint? Suppose, for example, you are writing a story from the major-character viewpoint, in the third person. If, for a

paragraph or two, you forget to be consistent and suddenly tell the reader what a minor character is thinking – are your readers going to feel upset?

Probably not, is the honest answer. Most readers won't even notice. At least, not consciously. I am inclined to think, however, that readers will notice such a shift of viewpoint *unconsciously*, and that is why I avoid it.

My advice is that you should choose, consciously and deliberately, to write each story from one particular viewpoint and then stick to it.

## CHAPTER 6

### How to complete the planning

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LET US JUST pause for a moment and see where we have got to in the process of writing a short story.

First, we learnt how to identify the emotional effect which an idea for a story is likely to have on the reader (chapter 3). Next, we gave some thought to analysing our basic story material and classifying it into one of four categories: character, complication, theme, or atmosphere (chapter 4). And, in the previous chapter, we considered how to select the best point of view for use in writing the story.

Before we actually begin writing, however, we need to take a few more steps: which is why this chapter is entitled 'how to complete the planning'.

Please note that I refer to *planning* the story, and not *plotting* the story.

Plotting is a word which has always made me a bit nervous. When I was a lad, many moons ago, most books on writing gave the impression that plotting was something of a black art. Furthermore, said books also gave the impression that plotting was something that only a moron would have trouble with, and as I had trouble with plotting all the time I was made to feel inferior.

So, as I say, we can do without the word plot. What we are doing in this chapter is completing the *planning* of the story. We are getting ourselves organised to the point where we can actually begin to write without wasting our time on futile first drafts which later have to be abandoned.

### **General remarks on planning a story**

I think it is important at this juncture, particularly in view of what I have said in the section above, to make it clear to you that planning a story is *not* a mysterious black art. It is simply a matter of keeping a clear head and asking yourself a series of perfectly logical questions.

It is also worth pointing out that planning need not take a long time. I have discovered, during several decades of writing, that the process of producing a finished story or a novel can conveniently be regarded as having three stages: planning, writing, and revision.

Furthermore, I have found that, on average, it takes me about one hour to complete each of the three stages for every 1,000 words of finished prose. In other words, a 100,000-word novel usually takes me about 300 hours: 100 hours to plan, 100 hours to write, and 100 hours to revise and polish.

Sometimes, if I'm lucky, the job will be done in a bit less than 3 hours per 1,000 words; and occasionally, if a large amount of research is needed, or when a publisher demands an extensive rewrite, it may take longer.

If we take it as a good rule of thumb that a short story should not exceed 5,000 words (a principle which I have already recommended to you), then it follows that planning your story should take no more than five hours *at the very most*. I would hope that, in many cases, an hour or two

would suffice.

In any event, however long the process takes, don't let it become hard work. Just remember that we're doing this largely for fun. No matter how thorough and conscientious you are, the finished story is unlikely to make you rich and famous. So hang loose. Even if you choose to follow my suggested procedure step by step (which would not be at all a bad idea for a beginner), then this planning business still need not take very long. A short story should be cunningly planned and thoughtfully written – but it remains, essentially, a pretty simple device.

## **Reviewing your material**

The first step in completing the planning of your story is to gather together such material and ideas as you have so far produced and take a close look at them.

Our old friend Thomas Uzzell defined the short story by borrowing a definition from Professor Pitkin, and that is a definition which I will offer to you here:

A short story is a dramatic narrative told with a single effect.

Let us consider the terms used in that definition in more detail.

First, what is a narrative?

A narrative is an account of certain events. It is the story; it is what happens. And in a short story it is certainly a good idea to have *something* happen, even if it's not very much.

What does dramatic mean?

For our purposes, drama is the same thing as conflict.

And what is conflict?

Well, all too often, especially in soap operas, conflict involves two people standing in a room and shouting at each other. Which is very tedious in my opinion, and constitutes the main reason why I don't watch soap operas. But, for our purposes, conflict can also be equated with opposition – it is the various obstacles which are encountered in the course of trying to achieve something. A lot more will be said about this conflict business below.

What is the single effect?

As I hope you know by now, the single effect is the principal, and final, emotion which the reader is intended to experience.

And the term 'told'?

Told means related – told in a particular way, and perhaps by a particular character (viewpoint).

Bearing all that in mind, let us now take a look at the material which you have assembled for your intended short story.

You have an audience in view: perhaps you are writing for the women's-magazine market; or for your local writers circle; or for a literary magazine. Whatever. And if you haven't yet chosen an audience, do so now. Write it down. Even if your definition of the intended audience is only something like 'people who enjoy reading Maeve Binchy'. Which, come to think of it, is a pretty good way of describing a certain type of reader.

Next, remind yourself of your chosen emotional effect. You will have consulted, no doubt, the list of emotions provided in Appendix I, and will have selected one of the emotions named there – or, alternatively, you will have dreamed up a fresh flavour of emotion instead.

Don't be tempted to try to generate more than one



emotion. You will have enough trouble producing one emotion effectively, without complicating your life by trying to do more. Yes, I *know* that Shakespeare introduced comic relief into his tragedies; but you aren't writing a play, you aren't Shakespeare, and you haven't got five acts and four hours to play with.

And last, but not least, you have at least the crude outline of a story – something to write about.

What you have to do now is finish the planning of that story.

Finishing the planning means manipulating your raw material, and polishing it so that it generates the strongest effect possible. Because the emotional *effect* is the whole point of the thing.

Of course, you will not always want to produce an emotional atom bomb, so to speak. Sometimes you will be perfectly content to set off a single firecracker. Nevertheless, it will always pay dividends to consider how you might tinker with your raw material in order to intensify the effect which it is producing – and the process of tinkering and enhancing is what the rest of this chapter is about.

## **General remarks about drama**

We know by now (and you were reminded just a moment ago) that the whole point of a short story is that it generates emotion. And the lesson to be learnt here is that emotions are intensified (which is normally a good thing in a short story) by heightening the drama.

A page or two ago, we decided that drama, in this context, is a form of conflict (or opposition). It follows, therefore, that in order to increase the emotional impact of our story, we need to generate some conflict cum opposi-

tion; and, having generated some conflict, we usually need to crank it up, or make it more intense, in order to produce the maximum potential emotional effect.

How do we crank up the conflict?

Well, the answer depends on what type of story you're dealing with. But more often than not, and particularly in a character story, you generate conflict by identifying the desires which are being felt by the main characters in the story, and then creating some opposition to those desires.

A desire, by the way, could also be defined as a goal, or an objective, if you prefer to think in those terms. At any rate it is something that the character wishes to achieve, or do.

And if you're wondering at this point whether the characters in the short story that you're planning actually have any desires, then that is why this chapter is called 'completing the planning'. It is at this stage that you take a hard look at the material that you have assembled, decide what's missing, and then supply the deficiencies.

Suppose for the moment that your story has a main character, and that said character does have a desire. Let us also suppose that I am correct in arguing that it will often be advantageous to provide some opposition to that desire.

How do you go about that? Fortunately it is possible to distinguish three types of opposition which can be faced by any character who actually wants to do something. These three types of opposition are those which might be provided by nature, by other characters, and by the character's own internal doubts and conflicting desires. It will be much easier to understand this when you have seen a few examples, so let's consider each of these three types of conflict in more detail.

### *The elemental clash*

One of the most basic ways in which desires can be opposed is through the force of nature. A doctor wants to get to a remote farmhouse, late at night, to help a pregnant woman, but a blizzard is blowing. This first type of conflict, therefore, can conveniently be thought of as man versus nature, or the 'elemental' clash.

You will already have noticed that this first form of conflict is a bit basic, so to speak. And it is definitely a down-market device. You don't find many literary stories which feature characters who are struggling to cross a flooded river, or who find themselves marooned in the middle of the desert, without water. Yet all those situations involve a man versus nature conflict.

Stories which feature this kind of conflict are much more likely to turn up in what used to be called pulp-fiction magazines than in the pages of serious highbrow journals. Nevertheless, the possibility that your character's desires may be thwarted by some aspect of nature is something that is well worth bearing in mind.

### *The social clash*

The second way in which a character's desire may be opposed is by another character in the story; or possibly by several other characters.

For example, a young man may passionately desire to marry his girlfriend. The young lady's father, a grumpy old so-and-so, may fiercely object to this proposal; the old man considers our hero to be a useless layabout, a junkie, and a gambler, absolutely the last person he wants to have as a

son-in-law.

Another example: a teenager wants to go to an all-night rave, and her mum is determined that she will do no such thing.

This second type of conflict, man versus man (or person versus person) can be described as the 'social' clash, and it may or may not involve physical violence. For the most part it will be more interesting and involving for the reader, I suggest, if the conflict is expressed in non-violent terms. Bashing people about is all very well, but it's a trifle crude.

### *The internal clash*

The third type of conflict occurs when one internal desire of a character conflicts with another internal desire within the mind of the same person.

Our young man may passionately want to run away to Australia with the girl he so much admires, but he also wants to finish his university degree. The teenager who wants to go to the rave has a mother who wants to let her daughter grow up, but mum also wants to protect her little girl from drug-dealers and wicked seducers. Both of these characters, the young man and the teenager's mum, are going to have an internal struggle while they decide which of their two conflicting desires is the stronger.

This internalised form of conflict appeals to the more intelligent and literate reader. With this type of conflict there are no tropical downpours, and no face-to-face shouting matches; the action all takes place in the mind of the character.

Shakespeare, of course, used the soliloquy to allow his characters to describe their internal doubts and difficulties: and perhaps the most famous soliloquy of all is Hamlet's

‘To be or not to be’ speech.

An actor, however, need not depend solely on the playwright’s dialogue. If he is really clever, he can use his face and his body to portray his internal struggle. Colley Cibber, writing in the seventeenth century, described seeing a masterly actor called Nokes, who could use his body language alone to illustrate his internal debate about what action to take; he could do this for minutes at a time, reducing the audience to tears of laughter in the process.

You, on the other hand, functioning as a short-story writer, you must use words alone; they are the only tool you have; and, as you will quickly discover, describing an inner conflict in prose is something which requires skill and practice.

### *Multiple conflicts*

Sometimes it is quite enough for a short story to feature one type of conflict only; you either have one character coping with the disasters of nature, or one character in an argument with another, or one person wrestling with her own conscience. But it is certainly possible to write about a character who experiences all three types of conflict, or drama, in the course of the same story.

Let me give you an example drawn from real life. I was recently watching a TV documentary about D-Day. One of the persons interviewed was an officer who had led a night-time attack on German gun positions in France, just a few hours before the first Allied troop landings in Normandy, in June of 1944.

This officer’s job was to disable the German guns so that they could not fire down on the Allied troops as they came ashore. Disabling the guns therefore constituted this man’s

‘desire’ or objective – that was what he wanted to do. This desire was opposed by the following:

1 Nature (the elemental clash): it was dark. (In a short story you could intensify the drama by adding a thick fog. You could also arrange for the officer to lose his compass and his map.)

2 Man (the social clash): obviously, the German troops would shoot to kill as soon as they heard or saw the officer and his men creeping up on them. (In a short story you could have a traitor among the attacking force who had already radioed ahead with details of where and when the German guns would be attacked.)

3 Internal (the internal clash): the interviewed officer admitted that during this night’s action he was, not surprisingly, scared stiff. He had at least half a mind to abandon the attack. (In a short story you could pile on the agony by giving him an even stronger desire to avoid getting killed: perhaps his wife has just given birth to a new baby son.)

In real life, the officer involved in this D-Day incident acknowledged that pretty well the only thing that made him go through with the attack was his understanding that, if he behaved in a cowardly fashion, he would never be able to look his friends in the eye again. In other words, in this real-life instance, the desire not to be thought a coward was sufficiently strong to overcome his very natural desire not to be shot at and killed.

This documentary example demonstrates an interesting point, which is that, even when all three kinds of drama are

present, the conflict which is likely to be of most interest to the short-story reader is the internal one.

Why is that? I suggest it is because the internal conflict is the one which is best illustrated through this particular medium. A short story is not particularly effective at illustrating the difficulties of finding an enemy gun position in pitch darkness; neither does it give a good impression of hand-to hand fighting with Sten guns, pistols, grenades and knives. Film would be a much more effective medium for giving a realistic impression of those forms of conflict. But a short story, skilfully written, *can* be remarkably effective in describing the inner conflicts and the clashing desires which are experienced, internally, by your leading character.

In the next four sections of this chapter we will consider how conflict can best be generated in each of the four different types of story that we identified in chapter 4: that is to say, the character, complication, theme, and atmosphere variants of the short story.

### **Drama in the character story**

In chapter 4 we spent some time learning how to classify stories. One of the reasons why we did that was because it is much easier to decide how to intensify a story, and thus create more emotion, if you are quite clear what sort of story you are dealing with. And in this section of the present chapter we are going to learn how to create drama (or conflict, or opposition) in the first of our four types, namely a character story.

A character story, you will remember, is a story that paints a portrait.

How is character portrayed?

Character is portrayed in action. People may or may not be what they eat, as the dietitians tell us, but people sure as hell are what they do.

A coward turns and runs. A hero stands his ground. And in both cases they *think* before they act. Or at least they do for our purposes. It is only the person who thinks, and then decides what to do, and in the process demonstrates her true character, who is of any interest to you and me when we write a short story. A person who reacts without thinking does not reveal character; such a person is merely being blown about by the wind.

A short story, as I may have remarked before, is precisely that: short. There is not the time and space, as there is in a novel, to reveal the many facets of a real-life, rounded human being. In a short story you can only deal with one aspect of the individual at a time. And the aspect of character which you choose to describe can usefully be referred to as a trait.

A character trait is a distinguishing characteristic, and, again for our purposes, it is in practice the same thing as a desire, or an objective.

If you have decided that the raw material for your story suggests that the main emphasis is on character (rather than complication, theme, or atmosphere), then you will probably be able to state, without too much thought, what the character's main trait, or desire, or ambition, is.

Let us take a man whose principal character trait is an obsession with football. This man's specific desire, for the purposes of our hypothetical story, is to see his favourite team, Little Kickabout Wanderers, play the great Manchester United in the FA cup.

Now – we have decided that the emotion generated by our story will be more powerful, and hence the story will be



more interesting to readers, if we provide this desire of our character's with some fierce opposition. By opposing the character's desire we will test the strength of the trait, and we will amuse, or shock, the reader, according to our intent and according to the way in which we present the material.

Notice, please, that the same raw material can often be used for either a tragedy or a comedy. In this instance I will settle for comedy, because in my opinion life is already quite serious and gloomy enough, without writing short stories which make the world any gloomier.

We also know, from careful perusal of the earlier sections of this chapter, that we can oppose our character's desire by presenting it with opposition drawn from one or more of three sources: nature, other people, and competing internal desires.

Quite often, in a short and simple story, it will be sufficient to test the strength of the character's trait by submitting it to one conflict only, and leave it at that. On the other hand, if we are determined to write a story which carries a massive knockout punch, we can test the strength of the trait with repeated conflicts, from all three sources, culminating in a life-and-death choice in which the overwhelming strength of the one trait is, inevitably, demonstrated.

So, let us begin.

Joe (our football fanatic) announces his intention to attend the cup semi-final in Manchester, despite the fact that he lives in Devon, has no money, and has no ticket for the game either.

Purely by way of illustration, we will test the strength of this desire in three ways. First, Joe is opposed by his employer. He asks for time off, and his boss says no; in the boss's view, Joe has already had far too many days off for

football matches. The boss says that, if Joe goes to this match, he will lose his job.

Internally, or perhaps in discussion with a friend, Joe debates what to do. After some thought, he decides to go to the match. The fact that he will lose his job weighs less with him than his desire to see his team play against Manchester United.

Please note that Joe does not react by instinct alone. Joe reviews the options, *thinks*, and *decides*. The period of time during which he thinks is known technically as the reflective delay. It is essential to provide a reflective delay in a short story in which you wish to show character in action. Pure reflex, or gut reaction, is less interesting than considered action.

Next, Joe's girlfriend tries to persuade him not to travel all that way to Manchester. She offers to take him for a naughty weekend in Brighton instead, and even shows him the flimsy underwear which she will wear in the bedroom. Joe is mighty tempted, and again considers (internally) the various options open to him. Another reflective delay. But, in the end, the lure of the leather ball proves stronger than the sexy underwear.

Finally, Joe sets off for Manchester, and has to fight his way through a sudden snowstorm. The police warn him that the road ahead is hopelessly blocked. But Joe, thinking it over, decides to plough on anyway, putting his very life at risk.

Eventually Joe arrives at the ground and... Well, you finish it off.

I hope that by now you have got the point. A character-orientated story can be made stronger by identifying the one character trait which you want to demonstrate, and then providing that desire with some opposition.

In the example above, you will note, opposition comes from other people (the boss and the girlfriend), and from nature. In each of the three instances of opposition there is also an internal clash, during which Joe explores the strength of his two competing desires. He wants to keep his job, but he wants to go to the match. The match wins. He wants to go to bed with his beautiful girlfriend, but he wants to go to the match. The match wins. He wants to remain alive, and not get frozen to death, but he wants to go to the match. The match wins.

You could go on inventing situations in which Joe's trait is tested, over and over again. But remember that the reader does not have unlimited patience, and the magazine editor does not have unlimited space. The suggested limit of 5,000 words is one which, in practice, you would be wise not to exceed. Your reader will be amused and held by Joe's antics for about that length of story but not, I suggest, for much more.

The example above uses a character with a love of football, but there are thousands of alternative character traits which you could use instead. You could write a story about an extreme feminist, or a woman who is afraid to leave the house, or a man who passionately wants to own a Ferrari. And so on. Eccentrics are usually easier to portray than are 'normal' people.

We are now in a position to formulate a working method for giving added punch to a character story. The rule is as follows: look for the desire present in the material, give it maximum strength, and then provide it with maximum opposition.

If you really want to *prove*, as opposed to merely demonstrate, the strength of a trait, then you have to submit it to a life-and-death situation, and show that the trait is

stronger than any opposition, even if it costs the character his life.

If you do choose to write a story of life-and-death intensity, make sure that the character has sufficient time to consider internally all the available options. In fact you should put him, or her, in a situation where he cannot *avoid* thinking things through; and, having thought, he must be obliged to make a choice.

If the character responds, yet again, in accordance with the principal trait that you have given him, then the strength of that trait is not just demonstrated but is proved to be stronger than the desire for life itself. Whether the character emerges from this test alive or dead depends, of course, upon the emotional effect that you are seeking to produce.

For the record, let me say here that much of the above analysis was set out nearly ninety years ago by Thomas H. Uzzell. But he too was building on the thoughts of fiction analysts who had preceded him: Professor Pitkin, Poe, and others.

So much for character stories. Next we will turn to creating drama in complication stories.

## **Drama in the complication story**

A complication story can be defined as one which features a predicament – often an unusual and intriguing predicament.

And by the way: just as you should confine your character story to a description of one trait, so you should arrange matters so that your complication story features only one complication. (In a novel, successive chapters may well feature successive complications.)

In reading a complication story, the reader is chiefly interested in some event or twist of fate. And the single effect of the complication story derives from the author's description of that predicament, twist of fate, or event.

In the character story the rule for creating drama, or conflict, is simple: just identify the main trait, give it plenty of opposition, and you're done. But in the complication story there is no such universal solution; you are more reliant on your own powers of invention.

Speaking of invention, the position in a complication story is that you usually have to invent the characters to go with the predicament, whereas in the character story, as we have seen, you normally have to invent situations which test the trait.

Some writers are drawn to character stories, and some are natural complication creators. I am more of a character man myself, but I have noticed, as the years have gone by, that I now find it infinitely easier to invent complications than I once did.

If you find it difficult to think up intriguing predicaments, you should remember that there are numerous well established complications which have been featured in thousands of short stories and which can be recycled, with small variations, if you have the ingenuity. For example, all crime stories are essentially complication stories.

Ghost stories are not as popular now as they were in the Victorian era, but they can be revived if you wish.

In science fiction there are no doubt some good old good ones, such as the space travellers who come across a space ship with no crew.

And in westerns (I imagine) the problem of how to get the cattle back from the rustlers has no doubt been used more than once.

As for romantic fiction – well, it's not my field.

In any genre of fiction, the way in which you intensify a complication is surely to make it more complicated than ever. The three sources of conflict which we identified in the previous section are again your best resource. They are, you will recall, nature, other people, and internal clashes of desires.

Let us look at these three sources of conflict in terms of intensifying a complication.

Can we make our complication worse, and therefore more interesting, by having it occur in darkness, or during a flood, a thunderstorm, a drought? All of these added complications are forces of nature, of course.

Then there will be characters in your story; that will be true no matter what sort of a complication is featured. You can perhaps add to the intensity of the complication by arranging for a character to make the situation worse – either deliberately or accidentally.

For example, you have a child trapped down a narrow well. A helper decides that it will make rescue easier if the top of the well is made wider, so he begins to remove some of the bricks around the rim. One of the bricks falls into the well and knocks the child unconscious...

Or... In the middle of a bank robbery, our heroine is edging her way towards the alarm bell, when a colleague, who is in the pay of the crooks, accidentally but deliberately trips over the electric cable and pulls the plug out of the wall, thus disabling the alarm.

The clash of internal desires can also be utilised to intensify a complication. A man is offered £10,000 if he can remain overnight in a haunted house. But he is terrified of the dark....

All of these are, of course, hackneyed and trite examples,

invented in the space of thirty seconds. You can do so much better, I'm sure. And you will, you will.

A word of caution about complications. Avoid coincidences and accidents.

Yes, you will occasionally read in the newspapers a story about a husband and wife, travelling in separate cars in opposite directions, who collide with each other and are both killed. Such things happen. And in the case just quoted we would have both a coincidence and an accident. But the point is, I'm afraid, that you cannot use such events in fiction. People find them incredible.

And it's no good saying, 'Oh but it really happened.' Events which really happened are not always believable when they are reproduced in a short story, and events which could not possibly happen in real life can be made perfectly credible in the right fictional context. Fairy stories, ghost stories, stories about talking dogs and cats, all of these will work perfectly well if the author is talented enough.

But you simply cannot use that convenient coincidence which will nicely round off your story – not even if it did happen to your real-life Auntie Jane.

Next, drama in the thematic story.

## **Drama in the thematic story**

We need not spend too long worrying about how to create drama in the thematic story because thematic stories are relatively rare, difficult to write, and often not very interesting to read. Though there are, of course, exceptions.

The thematic story, as you doubtless recall, is intended to make the reader think. It is a story in which the reader's interest centres more upon an underlying truth about life

than upon character or complication or atmosphere.

As such, the thematic story is dangerous. By and large, readers don't want to think. If they wanted to think, they wouldn't be reading a short story, because they have plenty to think about already. What readers of fiction want is to *feel*.

However, if you do feel morally obliged to give readers the benefit of your views on life, the universe, and the meaning of everything, don't let me put you off. Just make sure that you present your theme in an entertaining package; otherwise your readers aren't going to be with you for long.

The word 'theme' is capable of many definitions, but in the context of short-story writing it may be defined as a statement about some aspect of life. For instance, it makes no sense to say that you are going to take 'advertising' or 'loneliness' as your theme. Single words are just topics, not themes.

On the other hand, the statement that 'Advertising misleads the young' *could* be used as a theme (if you happened to believe it). And the same is true of 'Loneliness is worth than death'. Or, in a lighter vein, 'TV advertisements are more fun than the programmes they interrupt'; or 'It's better to be lonely than married to a man'.

Once you have decided to write a thematic story, you can proceed in one of two ways. You can either decide simply to provide an illustration of the theme, which means no more than writing a story which shows that your theme holds true at least in the circumstances that you describe; or you can attempt to 'prove' your theme, which means that you must demonstrate that the theme is true in all possible sets of circumstances, in all societies, in all eras.

Personally I take the view that few 'absolute truths'



about human life remain true whatever the circumstances, and therefore I would be cautious about trying to ‘prove’ my chosen theme, whether by writing a short story or through any other form of argument. But you may be more certain of the tenets of your faith than I, in which case you will plough ahead regardless.

I have already mentioned, in chapter 4, that I have written one thematic story myself, and the basic theme of that story is ‘Honesty is the best policy’. A banal enough idea, goodness knows.

When writing that story (*A Motto to Die by*, which is included in my collection [\*King Albert's Words of Advice\*](#)), I confined myself to giving a description, which I hope is modestly amusing, of a set of circumstances in which honesty would indeed have been the best policy. I did not attempt to prove that this thematic statement is always true, no matter how the circumstances might vary.

Why not? Um, well, because it is quite often the case that honesty is *not* the best policy.

If you read the newspapers, not to mention the history books, you will find lots of examples of rogues who have prospered and honest men who have gone bankrupt. The statement that ‘Dishonesty leads to riches, more often than not’ is more likely to be true than my own modest contention of the opposite.

If you must write a story with a theme to it, try not to make your choice of idea too obvious. As already stated, ‘Honesty is the best policy’ is a pretty familiar cry, and, in and of itself, it is not likely to be wildly exciting for readers.

Secondly, if you hope to get your story published, it will probably be a good idea not to make your theme too controversial or shocking.

‘Black people are plotting the downfall of the white race’

might not go down too well with the Race Relations Board, and 'Feminists should be sterilised at puberty' might get you beaten up by two butch-looking ladies round the back of the bus stop. So it will do no harm to pay some attention to simple self-preservation.

As for finishing the planning of such a story.... Well, as with the complication story, you are going to have to invent your characters and events to illustrate your theme. Which should not be impossibly difficult.

Suppose we were going to write a story with the theme 'Loneliness is better than being married to a man'. Without too much effort, one could tap out a story to illustrate that idea as follows: Miss Smith is a lonely middle-aged lady. She has a job which involves little contact with the public, and her boss is less than interested in her. At Christmas she has only her cat for company. In the new year, her cat dies, and she decides that enough is enough. She will advertise in a lonely-hearts column. Which she does, and soon meets a man who proposes to her. Thinking that this is going to be her last chance, Miss Smith accepts the offer of marriage. But she soon realises that her new husband has simply been looking for someone to do his housekeeping and darn his socks. He is absent most of the time, playing bowls with his friends, leaving her as lonely as ever. Her conclusion, that loneliness is better than being married to a man, is your theme.

Such a story could be written, as has been remarked before, as either comedy or tragedy. Once again, I prefer comedy myself.

Once you have settled on a story framework, such as the one above, you would then consider whether the drama could be intensified. Miss Smith's desire is for company: so, give that desire some opposition. She has a close and

long-standing friend, someone she was at school with. The friend marries, or dies, depriving Miss Smith of her last confidante. She tries to get a job which involves meeting people: she is rejected because she is too old.

And so on.

Given the slightly depressing nature of the material sketched out so far, I would be inclined to give this story something of a black-comedy flavour.

I have suggested that Miss Smith soon realises that her new married state is worse than her former lonely spinsterhood. She has made a mistake. Now suppose that her husband demands that she make him an apple pie every Thursday, despite the fact that she dislikes apple pie herself – it brings her out in spots. So she makes him an extra-special apple pie, with an unusual flavour that her hubby remarks upon. Although he does not know it, the strong flavour is there to disguise the taste of arsenic; and, since hubby is so enthusiastic about it, our heroine promises to make him an apple pie at least twice a week from now on.

I rather like that.

## **Drama in the atmosphere story**

The atmosphere story, you will recall, is the story that makes places come alive. It is a type of story which is seldom attempted, hard to write, and, I suspect, mostly not worth the trouble of writing it. We noted in chapter 4 that other media, notably film and television, can evoke the power and majesty of nature and 'atmosphere' much more effectively than can prose.

Having said that, we should not underestimate the effectiveness of the written word. Mountains never look all

that impressive (to me) in a black-and-white photograph, despite all those rave reviews that are given to Ansel Adams. Words seem to me to be able to describe a mountain at least as well as a photograph. So don't despair. If you are tempted to write about the awesome power of nature, the cause is not completely lost. You may yet be able to make your mark with a story of this kind.

Imagine the following scene: a beautiful young woman is sunbathing nude in a field.

Now – it would not be difficult to find a human being who would respond to this scene in some way. A young man might well be sexually stimulated. An older woman might be concerned at the risk which the young woman was running by lying there naked. An old-fashioned prude, of either gender, might be shocked and disgusted by the display of flesh.

You notice that so far I haven't mentioned the field.

Few observers, I suspect, would notice the field. An elderly and short-sighted naturalist might, just possibly, have concentrated on the lesser-spotted multi-crested blue-bellied dragonfly which was hovering just above the young lady's left nipple; but even he, I venture to suggest, would have found little to get excited about in the field itself.

And the problem, you see, is this: when writing an atmosphere story, what you have to do is to find, or invent, a character who would be just as strongly affected by the field as the young man or the old-fashioned prude were by the naked young lady. Which is not, I further suggest, an easy task.

The main character in the atmosphere story is the atmosphere itself. It is the field or the storm or the ruined castle. And, just as you should ideally dramatise the main

character in a character story (rather than simply describe that character), so, in this instance, you have to dramatise the atmosphere.

Many, perhaps most, atmosphere stories cast the atmosphere in the role of villain. It is relatively easy to give the reader a powerful jolt by relating how the heat of the desert drives a man mad and then kills him; it is harder to give the reader a powerful emotion by describing how a sunny day at the seaside cures a man of his depression. But the atmosphere can, of course, be cast as hero if you are seeking the lighter and more cheerful emotional effect.

There are five key steps to take when planning an atmosphere story:

- 1 Choose an atmosphere.
- 2 Select the character (or characters) who will be profoundly affected by the atmosphere.
- 3 Show how the events generated by the atmosphere affect the character.
- 4 Invent a crucial situation in which the fate of the character is sealed. Preferably this situation should be unusual or unexpected in some way.
- 5 Tell the story from the point of view of an onlooker or a minor character, usually someone who is not affected by the atmosphere to the same extent as the major character.

To repeat: the human characters in an atmosphere story are there to show the impact of the atmosphere, whether that impact be good or bad. In practice, in most published

stories of this type, it is usually bad.

On the whole, I feel that an atmosphere story is one which should be attempted, if at all, only after you have written perhaps a hundred other stories in the more orthodox character and complication modes.

### **Fleshing out your characters**

You are now close to completing the business of planning the events of your story – though you can, of course, come back and alter them at any time you wish. What you need to do now is to flesh out your characters; get to know them; understand why they do what they do.

It is not possible to write a successful short story without having a good working knowledge of human nature. That knowledge should ideally be derived from personal experience, but the study of other people's experience may suffice at a pinch.

To obtain personal experience, all you need to do is live a life and at the same time keep your eyes and ears open. Do that for forty or fifty years and you may have learnt a little about how human beings behave, and why they do the things they do.

That's all very well, you say, for those of advanced years. But if you're young you may need to fall back on the experience of others; fortunately this is widely available in summarised form, in books and newspapers.

In my youth I read a good deal of academic material about human psychology, and for what it is worth I found that the most convincing explanations of human action were those given by Alfred Adler.

Like Jung, Adler was an early disciple of Sigmund Freud, and, also like Jung, he soon found himself in

disagreement with Freud's theories and went his own way. If you poke around in second-hand bookshops, or search the internet, you may still find some information about Adler, and you could do a lot worse than study what he had to say.

In any event, besides having a working knowledge of human psychology, you will also need to know some mundane things about your characters, such as where they were born, whether they are married, whether they have any physical or mental defects, what their ambitions are, and so forth.

Some years ago I can across a useful way to summarise this kind of information. It was a list of topics which had been drawn up by the drama theorist Lajos Egri, and it was set out in his book *The Art of Dramatic Writing* (first published well over fifty years ago and still in print).

Egri considered it valuable for a writer to draw up a summary of each fictional character's background, setting out the information under three headings: physiology, sociology, and psychology. (For a complete list of Egri's headings, see Appendix II.)

I agree with Egri in thinking that it is extremely helpful to get to know your character by filling in a form of this kind. Now that we live in the age of computers, I have set up a template for the Egri character-analysis data on my word processor, and for each character I simply open a new copy of that template and proceed to fill it in.

Over the years I have found this to be a thoroughly practical discipline. In the case of a major character in a novel, I may well take half an hour or more to complete the questionnaire in some detail. For a short story I usually sketch in a few key points.

Once you have gone through this Egri form-filling

exercise, writing down as much or as little as you think you need to know, the next step is to print out a copy of the data and review it.

I myself then take a red pen and underline those parts of the character's background which, in my judgement, need to be passed on to the reader. The rest is just there to help the character to 'live' in my mind.

For example, I may have decided, when thinking about a particular character, that he is an only child, or that he is left-handed. But does the reader really need to know that? If I think she does, I put a red line under that piece of information, to remind me to include it in the text.

And in case all this form-filling is beginning to sound like a lot of work, let me say that, for most short stories, the Egri character-analysis exercise takes no more than a few minutes. But I always do it, religiously, because I have found over the years that it helps me to write better stories.

### *Choosing a name*

Before you complete each Egri form, you will, of course, need to think of a name for your character. Or at least a name for most of them; some characters can remain nameless, and be referred to simply as the bus driver or the waitress.

A word of caution is necessary here.

We live in an increasingly litigious age, and the UK is the world capital for libel suits. It is easier to sue for libel in the UK than it is in most western nations, and the damages paid for defamation tend to be higher here than elsewhere.

You do not, believe me, wish to become involved in defending a libel suit. Even if your defence is successful, the process will take for ever, the cost will be high, and the



worry enormous. You therefore need to give just a little thought to this possibility, remote though it is.

But surely the risk of libel can't affect anyone who writes fiction, I hear you cry.

Oh yes it can. It was established in the case of *Hulton v. Jones*, in 1910, that an action for libel can be brought if reasonable people might conclude that the defamatory words in a work of fiction refer to a real-life plaintiff.

Let us suppose, for instance, that you write a story about a priest who is a paedophile, and that you call him John Something.

Let us further suppose that you don't bother to check whether or not there is a real vicar called John Something, and it subsequently turns out that there is such a man. In that unhappy case you may be in big trouble. You would have to hope that the Reverend Mr Something was a very forgiving and merciful Christian indeed.

It is best, on the whole, not to expose yourself to that risk in the first place. When writing about professional people, such as doctors, actors, vicars, military personnel, and so forth, you should go to your local reference library. All of these professional bodies – the Church of England, solicitors, the Army, et cetera – publish lists of the names and other details of their members. Seek advice from the librarian on which reference book to use, and choose a name which does not appear on the relevant list.

And it's no good imagining that choosing an unlikely name will help you, even for a non-professional character; it might do quite the opposite.

Tom Sharpe, in *Porterhouse Blue*, satirised the noble souls who work in television, and he chose a name for a character which was truly outlandish. Nevertheless, from a far-flung corner of the BBC there emerged a person of that

same unusual name. Mr Sharpe could produce no notes to show that he had scoured the appropriate directories to avoid libelling the person in question, and he had to pay up.

In the case of villains – and other characters for that matter – who are not professional people and are not on any list anywhere, writers have in the past adopted various strategies to protect themselves from possible libel.

Some writers have bought themselves a gazetteer and picked the names of places for use as surnames. Others, following a method used by Sir Compton Mackenzie, have used a 1940 New Jersey telephone directory.

These are wise moves, and if your work is going to appear in print anywhere you should keep a note of how you have selected the names of your characters. And you definitely shouldn't use the names of people living in your street.

Finally, as I mentioned in the chapter on finding ideas, there is considerable risk in writing any kind of fiction which is nothing more than thinly veiled autobiography.

Writing fiction about real events, and hoping to escape being sued for libel by merely changing the names, is not going to provide any real protection. If you write a story based on your own schooldays, and someone takes exception to being identified as the school bully, you are at risk. Even if the real-life events did happen forty years ago.

For further information on libel, read David Hooper's useful book, *Reputations under Fire*.

## **Filling in the blanks**

There is another form to fill in too – at which news I can positively hear you groaning.

I am sure that at times, when reading this chapter, you must have begun to wonder whether all the steps that I describe are really necessary. Good grief, you may have said to yourself, is all this really necessary? Surely there must be simpler ways to do things. And what about inspiration? What about spontaneity, the heat of the moment, the sudden flash of excitement as an idea unexpectedly comes to you?

Yes indeed, what about all those things?

To avoid doubt, let me say that I am entirely in favour of them. I am an admirer of spontaneity, and I welcome inspiration. But my point is this: if you follow my advice, then the happy surprises of inspiration will come your way more often than would otherwise be the case. What is more, they will be relevant to the story that you are working on.

I recommend that, when planning a short story, you work systematically and methodically, and think clearly about what you are doing. If you do that, then inspiration has some fertile ground in which to grow.

The process of acquiring literary technique is a bit like learning to drive a car. In my youth, learner-drivers were taught the MIGS formula: Mirror – Indicator – Gear – Signal (a hand signal, believe it or not). And at first, as we learners jerked along the road, abusing the clutch, we had to mutter those four words under our breath and concentrate hard on performing each task. But soon the driving process became entirely instinctive.

So it is with the procedures outlined here. With constant practice, technique will become ingrained and automatic.

The second reassurance I can give you is that, once the techniques which are outlined in this chapter become familiar, the necessary steps can be thought through pretty

quickly. So quickly, in fact, that the results which they yield begin to *feel* like inspiration: it's as if the idea came to you just like that. But it didn't really, and it won't in future. In most cases, that happy insight into how to end the story will only come to you if you apply the logical thought processes which I have set out for you.

What then, is this other form to fill in, which I referred to a few paragraphs earlier? Answer, it is a schema which enables you to identify those parts of the plot or the story which are as yet incomplete or which need additional work.

As with the Egri form, you can make a template of this schema on your word processor, and simply fill in a new copy whenever you're ready.

Just *when* you fill in this form is a matter of judgement, but if you haven't done it by this stage in your planning, then now is the time.

The schema is set out below, and you will not be fully ready to start writing until you have completed all parts of it. The blank spaces will tell you which bits of the planning are not yet complete. The completed schema should run to no more than one side of a sheet of paper.

Some words of explanation follow the schema itself.

### *The short-story schema*

A Type of story

B The single emotional effect to be made

C Conflict

1 Initial complication

- 2 Main character(s)
- 3 Main character(s) trait
- 4 Crucial situation
- 5 Outcome

D Editorial value

E The point of view

### *Words of explanation*

You may be little uncertain about what you are expected to write down against some of these headings, so let's go through them one by one.

Type of story. This means that you must decide whether your story can sensibly be classified as character, complication, theme, or atmosphere (or some combination of these). How you develop your material will depend on the classification of the material: we have considered the various different dramatic techniques, for the different types of story, in the earlier sections of this chapter.

The single effect. Consult Appendix I if you are in any doubt about your chosen effect. Write down the intended emotion as precisely as possible.

Conflict. Again, we have dealt with how conflict (or drama) is created, in each type of story, earlier in this chapter. What we need here is a brief summary of the traits, the conflict, et cetera, to prove to yourself that the elements of the story are all there.

The 'initial complication' may well be your original story

idea, and in a pure complication story it will be a more unusual event than in a character story.

The crucial situation will inevitably occur later in the story. It is what is often described as the climax, but it need not necessarily be intensely dramatic, unexpected, or violent.

The meaning of ‘outcome’ is, I hope, obvious. It means what happens at the end of your story. But perhaps it is worth saying that most readers prefer a story which has a clear ending and doesn’t leave you up in the air.

Editorial value. Who will read this story? Will anyone pay money for it? If not, does it matter? Perhaps editorial approval is irrelevant to you.

The point of view was discussed in chapter 5.

## **The scene-by-scene outline**

Once you have filled in an Egri form for each major character, and completed the schema, you are almost ready to begin writing. And about time too, you are no doubt thinking. But there is one further step to take, however keen you are to get started, and that is to draw up a scene-by-scene outline of the story.

Um, just a minute, you may be saying to yourself. This is a short story I’m writing, not a play. So what’s with this business of a list of scenes?

Well, it is perfectly true that you are not writing a play, but you would nevertheless be well advised, in my judgement, to write your story in the form of a series of scenes. Twenty-first-century readers expect it.

That was not true, of course, of readers in the nineteenth century. A hundred or more years ago, writers could get away with a different form of narrative. They could be

wildly discursive, if they wished. They could tell their readers all about the weather, the scenery, the characters' religious beliefs, their clothes, their education – and a lot more besides. If they felt like it, writers could comment on the state of national politics. Writers could get away with all that, in those days, because the nineteenth-century readers, bless their little cotton socks, were not bombarded daily, as we all are, by stories told in scenes.

In the late nineteenth century, theatres became common in all the major cities, though not in the countryside. In the early part of the twentieth century, cinemas began to appear. Then radio; then television; and now most of us have access to several hundred different digital channels to entertain us.

The average person watches television for between three and four hours a day. Let's say that half of that visual experience is drama. What this means, in practice, is that a person aged thirty will have watched television or film drama for about 10 hours a week for 25 years. Which is a total of 13,000 hours *of stories told in scenes*.

Now do you begin to understand why I say that you should *write* in scenes? It's because your readership is used to stories told in that way. Modern readers expect it, and they will resist any other approach.

OK, so we will write in scenes. But what is a scene?

*Scene* is a term derived from the theatre, and it originally meant a change of setting. Scene 1 of a play might be set in a drawing room, and when the curtain went up there would be a representation of a drawing room up there on the stage. There would be chairs, tables, windows, and so forth. Scene 2 might be set in a garden. To move from scene 1 to scene 2, the curtain would have to come down, and the stagehands would set to work removing the chairs

and tables and substituting greenery of various types to represent the garden. The curtain would also come down to indicate a passage of time, even if two successive scenes took place in the same setting.

I think you get the idea.

In film, of course, we can cut instantly from indoors to outdoors, from a scene set on an aeroplane to a scene set in the desert below. And in film a scene might reasonably be described as an interaction between two or more people, even if the people concerned move rapidly from setting to setting.

For the purposes of your short story, a scene can be thought of as ending when one of the following happens:

You begin to write about a different group of people (and particularly if you change the viewpoint).

There is a significant lapse of time.

Or the characters move to a new location.

It will help you, believe me, if you draw up a one-page summary of the various scenes in your story. And if you haven't yet thought of the story as a succession of scenes, then kindly do so now.

Resist the temptation to skip this process of drawing up a scene summary. It will only take a few minutes. And, as we shall see in the next chapter, the process of writing a first draft of your story will create quite enough problems of its own, even if you are absolutely certain of what story it is that you wish to tell, and how it is structured.



## **CHAPTER 7**

### **How to write your story**

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AT LAST! YOU'RE ready to go.

You have completed your schema, filled in your Egri character analyses, and have your scene outline in front of you. You also, perhaps, have some scraps of scenes written on odd bits of paper. In any event, you have more than enough material to make a start on writing your story. So begin.

#### **The basic procedure**

You write the story simply by working through the outline, scene by scene. And as you go, remember the following points.

Maintain consistency in the use of your chosen viewpoint.

Don't name the emotions which your characters are experiencing; describe instead the physical effects which the events have on the characters concerned.

To be more precise, remember the procedure for creating emotion which was outlined in the discussion of emotion in theory (chapter 3). Make sure that you describe the stimulus which kicks off the emotion. (In our original

example, you may remember, a man comes through the door of a bank with a gun in his hand.)

Next, describe the clashes going on in the head of your selected character (originally a bank clerk): should she press the alarm button, and thus risk getting shot, or should she be a coward and do nothing?

Make sure that your character has sufficient time to review the options open to her – i.e. make sure that there is a reflective delay.

Then describe the physical responses in the character which result from the thought processes. And, finally, describe the action which follows: tell us what she does.

When each scene is complete, in the full-length version of your story, mark it off from the next scene with a one-line gap. I usually put an asterisk in the centre of the gap, so that if the break occurs at the bottom of a page it will still be apparent that there is a change of scene.

Once you have completed a first draft, you will need to revise it, probably several times. But with modern word processors this is not the tedious business that it once was.

As you revise, make sure that all the information listed on your scene outline, your schema, and your scraps of paper, is either included in the draft or is deliberately discarded. Check your Egri sheets and make sure that you have passed on to the reader all those facts about your character which you decided were worth passing on.

And incidentally, please note that as much information as possible should be conveyed to the reader indirectly rather than indirectly. For instance, you could quite reasonably say of a character: He had a mop of unruly red hair.

But it would be far better to include this description of the character's anatomy as part of the action: 'No!' said

John loudly, shaking his mop of unruly red hair. (Yes I know that looks silly, but you get the general idea.)

The start and finish of a story are the most vital parts of all, the beginning being even more important than the end. Work hard on these at the revision stage.

Then set the story aside for a while – perhaps a week or a month. After which, do a final check. You will be surprised at how much you spot that needs changing.

A word about proofreading your manuscript. It is all too easy to read what should be there, rather than what actually is there. I was recently given a leaflet advertising a local theatre. It was a glossy, four-colour leaflet, and I imagine that several thousand copies had been printed at a cost of several hundred pounds. The main features offered by the theatre were listed in large letters on the front of the leaflet: Music! Comedy! Drama! Except that the leaflet didn't say 'Comedy'. What it said was 'Comdedy'.

About fourteen people had probably looked at the proof of that leaflet, before approving it for printing, and they had all read what they thought was there rather than what actually was there.

And you, if you set your story aside for a week or a month, will find all sorts of similar mistakes in your own work. This is the time to eliminate them. With this final polish, your story is finished. And then, for heaven's sake, leave it alone. Don't tinker with it any more. True, it may not be perfect. Nothing ever is. But just get on with another story instead of fussing over this one.

## **Problems in writing**

There is no polite or tactful way to phrase the content of this section on problems, so I'm afraid I'm just going to

have to warn you at the outset that some readers may find it offensive, and hope for the best.

In writing the first draft of your story, you may encounter a number of problems. And if you are under 60 years of age, and you were educated in England, the chief of these problems is likely to be that you don't know how to write decent English. By 'decent' English I mean prose which is clear in its meaning, grammatically correct, and correctly spelt.

If you can contrive to make your prose not only correctly spelt and punctuated, but also elegant and stylish, so much the better; but most editors and readers will gladly settle for prose which just meets a few basic criteria.

Why are you unlikely to know how to write decent English? Because no one ever taught you, that's why.

Let us begin at the beginning. I will try to justify my claim that many would-be writers lack the skill to write well.

### *Evidence of literacy problems*

I could quote many examples to illustrate the problem, but I will confine myself to three quotations from *The Times*. On 17 November 2002, Minette Marrin wrote an article about British universities. 'Over the past 15 years,' she said, 'I've listened to despairing accounts – from friends who teach even at good universities – of how bad things have become. Many students arrive unable to write essays, or even to construct a paragraph.'

The following day, in the same newspaper, the forthright Ann Widdecombe remarked that she lived in a world 'in which linguistic anarchy prevails, where children are no longer taught the function of a verb, much less its precise

formation, and where bright, enthusiastic graduates produce a jumble of words, randomly punctuated, and call it a letter.'

A few months later, on 18 March 2003, *The Times* carried an report on a study which showed that nine out of ten graduates were turned down for a job with one particular firm because their CVs were full of errors in spelling and grammar.

The firm analysed 1,000 applications from people who had been educated at university level, and found that 90 per cent of the applicants had disqualified themselves before the end of the first page of their CV.

A spokesman for the firm commented that 'The falling standard of literacy is a most alarming development.'

The problem is not, of course, confined to students, or even to those under thirty. In the five years or so before I retired, I had a job which involved extensive correspondence with solicitors. And you might imagine, being a trusting sort, that the members of that profession would invariably be capable of writing a sensible letter.

Not so. It was common for me to receive letters from solicitors which were sloppy, careless, and semi-literate at best. I had one correspondent who regularly misspelt the name of his own client. Sometimes I couldn't even understand what the writer meant to say. More than once I have picked up a letter by its corner, held it out at arm's length, and said to myself, What in the world is this man talking about? (Or words to that effect.)

If you, dear Reader, are of retirement age, and if you went to an old-fashioned grammar school, or an independent school, and if you were in the so-called 'arts' stream, then there is a fighting chance that you might be able to write a short story in prose which will not make an experi-

enced editor wince because of its elementary errors.

But if you are 20 years old, and attended your local comprehensive, it is more than likely that you will have been taught English by someone who was, frankly, incapable of writing a respectable sentence himself. The result will show. Believe me, it will show.

None of this is your fault, of course, and your position is not altogether hopeless. But neither is it promising. For the moment, at least, you are a person who wants to be a champion high-jumper but is only four feet six inches tall and weighs twelve stone. You are like a trumpeter with one lung; a golfer with one arm; a pianist whose fingers got caught in the mangle.

Unlike any of the poor souls named immediately above, you may be able to do something to overcome your deficiencies. But it is going to be damned hard work. Fortunate are they who were blessed with good English teachers in their youth.

### *Does this matter?*

But hold hard, you cry – after you have roundly abused me, under your breath, for insulting both you and all those hard-working teachers of English. What does it matter, you enquire, if there are one or two trivial errors in my punctuation and spelling? What matters is surely the underlying story – the quality of the tale I have to tell.

Well – deep sigh – yes. And then again, no.

It is true that you can write the most polished and perfect prose that the world has ever known and still produce a mighty dull story. It is also true that a cracking good story can survive a few typos.

But – and this is a sizeable *but* indeed – put yourself in

the chair of a hard-working editor of a small literary magazine. She gets 200 stories a month. Fifty a week. Ten a day. At least. Not only does she have to read these stories, but she also has to edit and produce the magazine; probably in her spare time.

Suppose our lovely editor begins to read the morning's post and she comes across something like this:

Their were five men on the batlments, and for of them were enmy soljers, the fith was Genrul Carstairs.

Now – how does our editor react?

The story is potentially interesting – it jumps straight into some action, which is seldom a bad idea. But we have two sentences separated by a comma, and 7 of the 19 words are incorrectly spelt.

What will our long-suffering editor do?

The evidence from those who have done the job suggests that she will read half a page or so, just to make sure that the apparent illiteracy is not a sophisticated pose, and then she will drop the story into the circular file which stands gaping at her feet.

Even if the story is essentially a good one, our editor simply doesn't have time to do a re-write job. That is not her function.

Exactly the same attitude is going to be taken by most of those who judge short-story competitions. For the most part these will be volunteers; they are not even being paid to read what people send in. Many of these judges will be individuals with enormous tolerance and goodwill. But in the end they are going to say to themselves, Can I really award a prize to this story – which will after all be published in the club anthology – when it is written in such an appallingly careless manner? Regretfully, they too will set aside your wonderfully moving epic.

All of which may be grossly unfair and unreasonable. *But that's the way it is.* And if you want to operate in the real world, you are going to have to face up to this fact.

## **Testing your skills**

By now it is just conceivable that you may be wondering whether you yourself have any shortcomings in the spelling and grammar departments. And how is your vocabulary? Fully familiar, are we, with some of the more notorious pitfalls for the unwary?

It is not for me to label your knowledge of English as good, bad, or indifferent. But if this book is to be of any practical value I have to make it plain to you that you are unlikely to make progress as a writer without having at least a rudimentary awareness of some of the more obvious potential errors. You need, above all, a feeling for the nuances of the English language. It is not for nothing that English possesses so many words of almost, but not exactly, the same meaning: it is to enable writers to communicate facts and feelings more precisely.

Here are a few test questions to enable you to discover whether you are 100 per cent on the ball in this department – or whether you might, perhaps, still have a few things to learn.

### *Vocabulary*

Do you know the difference between the following pairs of words? Can you explain the difference, in each case, in a couple of brief sentences? If you can't, check the meanings in a dictionary.



aural and oral  
appraise and apprise  
canvas and canvass  
complement and compliment  
discreet and discrete  
loath and loathe  
interment and internment  
prescribe and proscribe  
principal and principle  
stationary and stationery

Why am I banging on about these similar but different words? Because the spell checker on your word processor won't help you if you write complimentary when you mean complementary. For that matter, your spell checker won't help you if you write see when you mean sea, or no when you mean know.

### *Spelling*

Spelling is difficult to test in a printed book, but set out below are twenty commonly misspelt words. Half of them are correctly spelt, and half are not. Can you identify the wrong 'uns? (Answers at the end of the chapter.)

accommodate  
agressive  
appalling  
aquire  
benefitted  
besiege  
concensus  
desparate

detatched  
gauge  
harassed  
millennium  
minuscule  
momento  
neccessary  
niece  
seperate  
supercede  
surprise  
threshold  
wilful

### *Grammar and punctuation*

Finally, if you're already not fed up with this game, here are a few sentences which contain some elementary errors of grammar or punctuation, or both. Can you see what is wrong? (Answers again at the end of the chapter.)

- 1 After inspecting a guard of honour, President Reagan's motorcade moved into the centre of Moscow.
- 2 Its a long way from London to Wiltshire, the train toots it's whistle with relief when it finally arrives.
- 3 She was the oldest of the two sisters.
- 4 Between you and I, he is quite wrong, and I would of told him so if he hadn't been so big.

5 Through hard work the coach affected a considerable improvement in the teams performance.

### *Some old favourites*

The English language does not stand still (though many of the older generation wish it would). It changes and develops: new words are added, old ones drop out of use, and even spellings can vary over the years, particularly where hyphens are concerned. In my youth, dining-room was a term which had a hyphen, as here; now it is more 'correct' to print it as two separate words.

Despite all this flux, there are a number of traditionally controversial subjects on which you need to take a position.

Where do you stand, for instance, on the question of split infinitives?

How do you decide whether to use *that* or *which* when a relative pronoun is called for?

When you need to use the past tense of *learn*, are you going to write *learned* or *learnt*? And *spelled* or *spelt*?

In the case of verbs ending in a syllable which sounds like *eyes*, do you spell the suffix *-ize* or *-ise*? In other words, is *organize* correct, or is *organise* better?

In order to form a view on these matters, you will need to establish a good working relationship with a number of standard reference books: these are listed in the section on solutions, below. But if you're remotely interested in my own views, they are as follows:

Split infinitives. As far as I'm concerned, you can split infinitives with impunity if it makes your meaning clearer. In other words, if you want to boldly go where no one has ever gone before, that's OK by me. But beware; some readers may think you're doing it out of ignorance.

The use of *that* or *which* is a tougher problem. Suppose we write: *The government approved a law that will give free sweets to all children under ten.* Is the word *that* correct in that sentence, or would *which* be better? My view is that the choice is not so much between *that* and *which* as between *that* and *comma-which*. In other words, if you don't need a comma before the word, then *that* is OK. If you do need a comma, *which* is the right choice. Consider the following example: *The consumption of chocolate, which some people consider unhealthy for children, rose again last year.*

I prefer *learnt* and *spelt* because that's the way I think the words should sound.

The *-ize* and *-ise* question is essentially an etymological one. Historians of the English language argue that all words ending in this sound derive ultimately from a Greek root, in which the words are spelt with a *z*. This leads the Oxford dictionaries, for example, to insist on *organize*, *theorize*, and so forth. Unfortunately, this is the English language we're talking about, so there are quite a few verbs – advertise, despise, exercise, and others – which have never (well, not recently) been spelt by anyone with anything other than an *-ise* ending.

My personal choice is to end all *eyes* words in *-ise* and have done with it. This decision has nothing to do with etymology. My choice is aesthetic: I prefer the rounded shape of the *s* to the angular shape of the *z*. So there.

### *Nobody is perfect*

Let me make it plain at this point that there are definite limits to my own knowledge of grammar.

I will readily admit, if you put a gun to my head, that I

would have to think hard before explaining the difference between a transitive and an intransitive verb; and there are also some things called ditransitive verbs, which have both a direct object and an indirect object; they are really tricky.

I believe I understand what is meant by the active voice; and I could have a stab at explaining what a gerund is. But for all these explanations I would much prefer to consult one of the standard reference books (of which more below) before claiming even tentative authority on the subject.

As for spelling – well, some of the words listed in the spelling section above are those which had me fooled for years.

And it's never too late to learn. When I was in my forties, a professor of mathematics pointed out to me that there is a difference between *verbal* and *oral*, and a professor of chemistry reminded me that *data* is a plural noun. So is *media*.

## **Solutions to problems**

### *Be your own prodnose*

As you write your story, you should make a note, on a separate piece of paper, of all the points of grammar, spelling, and fact which need to be checked. For example, as I was writing this present chapter, I jotted down the following queries, among many others:

Christian – does it require a capital?  
proofreading – one word or two?  
high jumper – hyphen? Two words?

And so on. Sometimes there is a long list of words and facts

to check – more in a non-fiction book like this than in a short story. But the dreary truth is that I have to check them all if I am to be reasonably sure of not making a fool of myself. And to be perfectly honest this task is sheer drudgery.

When it comes to checking such things, those writers who are working for a major newspaper have the advantage over us ordinary mortals. The full-time journalists know that they have some back-up available to them in the form of sub-editors. On major newspapers there is even someone whose job it is to tidy up the careless errors of grammar and punctuation, and nothing else. Nowadays this person is known as the revise editor, or something similar, but years ago he was called the prodnose – presumably because his job was to prod his nose into all the copy going into the paper, and to check for mistakes in style and usage.

An article in *The Times* illustrated how useful such a revise editor can be. One of that paper's most distinguished correspondents admitted that in drafting a recent column he had misspelt Mother Teresa (by including an *h*), Margaret Atwood (with an unnecessary second *t* in the surname), J.M. Coetzee (with an *s*), and Gutenberg (with two *u*'s). All of these errors, if left in, would have attracted criticism from readers who care about accuracy.

The article made the point that, even on *The Times*, correct usage is definitely a problem. For one thing, journalists work at speed; more importantly, 'there are now two generations of journalists who were not taught any formal grammar at school.' In other words even our leading newspaper is feeling the effects of our pathetic education system.

So, you have to be your own prodnose. But how do you

do that?

Answer, by buying yourself a decent set of reference books.

### *A basic library of reference books*

‘Grammar,’ said Alice Thomas Ellis in 1989, ‘is like walking. You have to think about it when you start but if you have to go on thinking about it you fall over. It should come as second nature.’

Yes indeed. Most of us, however, need a little help from time to time, and I recommend that you buy copies of the latest edition of each of the following:

1 *Concise Oxford Dictionary*. I suspect that many readers never notice, but at the back of this dictionary there are a number of useful appendices. The most relevant of these, for present purposes, is a *Guide to Good English*. If you didn’t do very well on the self-assessment test that I provided a few pages ago, this basic guide to grammar and punctuation is essential reading.

2 *The Oxford Dictionary for Writers and Editors*. Why do you need this as well as the *Concise*? Because it is what it says – a dictionary specifically for writers. It is sometimes much easier to find things here than in the *Concise*, especially when you’re checking terms like proofreading (which, it appears, is *sometimes* hyphenated).

3 *The Oxford Guide to Style*. This used to be known as *Hart’s Rules*, because the book was originally prepared by a Mr Hart as a guide for the typesetters of Oxford University Press. This is the book to go to when you want to know,

for instance, whether to describe a character as a girl of 15 or a girl of fifteen. The answer is 15, strictly speaking; but as the book says, on page 166, ‘clarity for the reader is always more important than blind adherence to rule.’ And as I have already mentioned, I for one ignore the suggested ending for verbs such as *organise*.

4 *Fowler’s Modern English Usage*. Well, Fowler wrote the first edition, back in 1926. This is the classic text to turn to for advice on correct grammar and construction. The discussion of the word *that* alone occupies more than three pages.

Another book which is well worth owning is Sir Ernest Gowers’s *The Complete Plain Words*. First published over fifty years ago, this is still as good a guide to writing prose as I have ever come across. It remains in print. The chapter on punctuation constitutes, in my opinion, the best guide of all to that subject.

Earlier in this section I wrote, in reference to the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, that ‘there are a number of useful appendices’; and it may have occurred to you to wonder whether I should have written ‘there is a number’. If so, read Gowers’s discussion of the subject in his chapter on the handling of words.

There are many more books on the use of English that you could read, and possess, with advantage, but the ones listed above will do for the time being.

## **Personal style**

Once upon a time, any text which dealt with writing would place considerable emphasis upon a man’s style – and in



those days it was mostly men they were talking about.

I'm not quite sure why there was so much emphasis on the importance of style, but in any case no one seems to worry about style any longer. Perhaps that is because, as stated above, mere everyday proficiency in the use of the English language is now so rare that it seems absurd to expect such refinements as an elegant personal style as well.

We, however, do need to touch upon the subject of style, if only briefly. Is it worth trying to cultivate your own style of writing? And if so, how?

Looking back over the history of literature, we can see that the nature of prose writing has changed dramatically over the centuries.

Sir Thomas Browne is widely regarded as one of the great stylists of the seventeenth century (his essay 'Urn Burial' in particular), but his line of thought is sometimes remarkably difficult to follow at this distance of time. The same can be said of many great writers. Opening *Wuthering Heights* at random, for instance, I find Emily Bronte writing 'I seized the handle to essay another trial.' Today we would never say any such thing. 'I grabbed the handle to have another go', perhaps.

Coming to the twentieth century, we can see that there were certain 'stylists', for want of a better word, who were highly influential. Hemingway for one. James Joyce for another. Virginia Woolf, in certain circles. Some of these writers tended to attract attention by virtue of their style alone, almost regardless of the content of their stories or novels, and for that reason they were often much imitated. Though I have heard it said that the reason why Hemingway was so influential was because he was so easy to copy. But is what the famous and successful writers of the past

did of any relevance to you and me as we strive to finish our modest short story?

I suggest not. Any conscious striving after a particular style would be likely, in my view, to be less than helpful. Most of us have enough trouble just telling the story in plain English.

‘People think that I can teach them style,’ Matthew Arnold once declared. ‘What stuff it all is! Have something to say, and say it as clearly as you can. That is the only secret of style.’

I agree.

We should be continually aware, of course, that the reader needs help. We should not make things over-complicated. Many years ago (long before you were born), there was a famous American journalist called Ed Murrow. He made his name as a reporter in England, during the Blitz. Towards the end of his life, Murrow was told by an academic that, after extensive study of Murrow’s published work, the academic had discovered the secret of his success. It was short sentences. Murrow replied that he didn’t think short sentences were much of a secret. Nor are they.

It is also worth mentioning that, when writing in the first person, you must, of course, write in the ‘style’ or the ‘voice’ in which that person would naturally speak. A cockney labourer is not likely to speak in the same accent, or use the same sentences, as an Oxford don.

Beyond that, I suggest that you should just write in your own natural voice, and leave it that.

## Answers to the tests

### *Spelling*

Earlier in the chapter I set you a modest spelling test. The correct versions of ten of the words are set out below; the other ten are correct as printed.

acquire, not aquire  
aggressive, not aggressive  
benefited, not benefitted  
consensus, not concensus  
desperate, not desparate  
detached, not detatched  
memento, not momento  
necessary, not neccessary  
separate, not seperate  
supersede, not supercede

### *Grammar and punctuation*

1 The first sentence provides an example of what is technically an unattached, or dangling, participle. The motorcade did not inspect the guard of honour; President Reagan did.

2 Here we have two sentences separated by a comma. Ideally there should be a semi-colon after *Wiltshire*, but a full stop would do. Also, the first *its* should be *it's* and the second *it's* should be *its*.

3 She was the *older* of two sisters. If there had been three sisters, she might have been the oldest. In talking about persons who are closely related, *elder* and *eldest* are often

used rather than older and oldest.

4 Between you and *me*, not I. This is a common error, but often debated; see the discussion in Fowler. Also, I would *have* told him so; not would *of*.

5 The general sense of the sentence implies that the coach *effected* a considerable improvement. He might have *affected* a lack of dismay when the team lost, i.e. he might have pretended not to care. *Teams* requires an apostrophe before the *s*, unless he coached several teams successfully, in which case the apostrophe would go after the *s*.

## **Conclusion**

We have now completed the main body of the book, and it is time to provide a handy summary of the suggested procedure for writing a short story.

## **CHAPTER 8**

### **Summary of the procedure**

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SET OUT BELOW is a summary of the procedure for writing a short story which has been outlined in the previous chapters of this book.

- 1 Think of an idea for story. You need some raw material to begin with. (Chapter 4)
- 2 Identify the emotional effect of that material, as it stands. (Consult Appendix I)
- 3 Decide whether the material derives its effect predominantly from elements of character, complication, theme, or atmosphere. (Chapter 4)
- 4 Determine the best point of view from which to tell the story. (Chapter 5)
- 5 Develop and intensify the material, if necessary, to heighten the emotional effect. (Chapter 6)
- 6 Complete the paperwork by filling in the suggested schema, doing an Egri analysis form for each of the major

characters, and by drawing up a one-page outline of the scenes. (Chapter 6)

7 Write a first draft.

8 Check that all the material in your rough notes, in the schema, the Egri forms, and scene outline, is either included in the final story or is discarded as unnecessary.

9 Set the story aside for a week or two, and then do a final polish.

10 Give some thought to marketing the story. (Chapter 9)

11 Start a new story.

Few further comments are necessary. But it might be salutary, I think, to refer back to the paragraph from the work of Edgar Allan Poe which I quoted way back in chapter 3. I am also going to repeat some of the comments that I made there.

In 1842, Poe wrote the following:

‘A skilful literary artist has constructed a tale. If he is wise, he has not fashioned his thoughts to accommodate his incidents; but having conceived, with deliberate care, a certain unique or single effect to be wrought out, he then invents such incidents – he then combines such events as may best aid him in establishing this preconceived effect. If his very initial sentence tends not to the outbringing of this effect, then he has failed in his first step. In the whole composition there should be no word written of which the

tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one pre-established design. As by such means, with such care and skill, a picture is at length painted which leaves in the mind of him who contemplates it with a kindred art a sense of the fullest satisfaction.'

I hope that you are now in a better position to understand what Poe was talking about; indeed, you can now see, I hope, that in this one paragraph Poe has condensed almost every important truth about the short-story writer's task.

Let us take a closer look at some of the things Poe says.

Poe speaks of 'a single effect to be wrought out'. Time and again I have reminded you that a short story can have only one final and principal emotional effect. That is what you are aiming to achieve from the very first word: you are trying to make the reader feel an emotion.

The wise writer, says Poe, 'has not fashioned his thoughts to accommodate his incidents'. In other words, do not plunge ahead with writing whatever story pops into your head. Instead, work out what the emotional effect of that story is likely to be, and consider whether it is one that you wish to proceed with. If it is, fine. If not, you must do as Poe says, and 'invent such incidents as may best aid... in establishing this preconceived effect.'

But please note that the reader's desire is not just a desire for *any* emotion. It is a desire to be made to feel what Poe calls 'a sense of the fullest satisfaction.' In my own mind, I equate this process of creating a sense of satisfaction with that of entertaining the reader; I appreciate, however, that 'entertain' has a rather superficial ring to it, and the effect that is being sought is often far from trivial or superficial. In any event, the writer's task (as I see

it) is to leave the reader with a strongly *positive* emotion, even if the subject matter is dark and tragic.

It is possible, of course, to set out to leave the reader with strongly negative emotions. In an extreme case, you might wish to leave the reader with the impression that this world is such a horrible place that it's hardly worth continuing the struggle to live. I wouldn't wish to do that myself; I would regard it as immoral. More to the point, perhaps, it is definitely not the way to write a story which one reader will recommend to another, or which is likely to impress a professional reader. (Although, come to think of it, some professional readers, particularly academics, are quite foolish enough.)

Finally, Poe speaks of the story being read by someone who contemplates it 'with a kindred art'. What this means is that not every story is going to work for every reader. It is impossible to write a story which will create the desired emotion in every single individual, no matter what their tastes or background. Obviously, a story which is written in English can only be appreciated by someone who can read and understand English. Less obviously, stories also require a particular 'frame of reference'. A pensioner is going to have a better feel for a story set in the second world war than would a child; a young woman is more likely to enjoy a Bridget Jones-type story than is a man who regularly supports Arsenal. And so on.

In short, there is nothing particularly new or revolutionary about the technique for writing short stories that I have described to you in this book. What I have provided is basically a reminder, for modern readers, of the principles that govern success in a classic art form.



## CHAPTER 9

### How to get your stories published

---

IN CHAPTER 2 I invited you consider why you were bothering to write short stories in the first place. I also made it plain to you that spending your time in this way is unlikely to generate enough income to cover the costs of paper and postage.

However, it may be that you still have hopes. You may hope to earn *some* income, however modest; you may wish to achieve recognition as a literary figure through publication in the more highbrow (non-paying) magazines; you may hope to attract the attention of an agent, or a publisher, with a view to writing a novel; or you may simply want to get your name into print so that you can show the result to your grandchildren.

The rest of this chapter outlines the possible ways in which you might achieve these aims.

In brief, you can submit your story to print magazines; you can offer it to websites which publish short stories; you can enter competitions; and you can publish your work yourself. More about each of these follows.

#### Submitting to print magazines

There is no point whatever in my listing here the names and addresses of potential markets in the world of print. In

practice, the famous magazines, with large circulations, are simply not going to publish your work, and the smaller magazines come and go at an alarming rate; it is a rare one which stays around for years on end.

Start with a reference book that contains a list of magazines that publish fiction. To find one relevant to your own country, go to Amazon and type the two words *writers* and *market* in the keywords search box. It would also be sensible to do an internet search for possible print markets, particularly in some of the smaller genres such as fantasy and science fiction.

These days, most magazines have some sort of web site of their own, and there will usually be a set of guidelines for potential contributors. For goodness' sake follow these guidelines – otherwise you are not merely wasting your own time but you are also insulting the intelligence of the person who opens your envelope. And it goes without saying, I hope, that there is no point in submitting a romantic story set in Tahiti to a magazine which publishes only horror fiction. But people do. Every day.

### **Printed collections of stories**

If you have enough stories to make up a book-length collection, you may think it worth while to try to interest a book publisher. The truth is, however, that publishers are most unlikely to be interested. In an article on the plight of the short story, published in 2003, Erica Wagner concluded that 'few publishers would dare release a book of stories by an unknown writer without first softening up the market with a well-received novel.'

In the same article, it was claimed that, in the twelve-month period from June 2002 to June 2003, British

publishers put out only 21 new short-story collections. Of those, 13 were by authors from abroad.

### **Internet short-story sites**

Online fiction magazines come and go at an even faster rate than printed magazines.

What happens is that some eager enthusiast – for, say, fantasy fiction – thinks what a splendid wheeze it would be to open up a web site which will blow the socks off his fellow fantasy fans. So he sets to work, only to discover a few months later that it is enormously hard work and doesn't bring in a penny. The web site quietly closes.

Correspondence with such people may prove to be rewarding on a personal level. On the other hand, your story may disappear into a cosmic black hole. And few of these sites pay even nominal fees.

### **Competitions**

If you do a web search for 'short story competitions' you will soon discover that there are lots of them. Some of them offer substantial prizes. The BBC Short Story Award brings a cheque for £15,000. First place in the Bridport Prize competition wins you £5,000. Not bad, I think you will agree. Most competitions, however, offer only £100 or £200. Even if you win.

The snag is that in order to enter the competition you almost always have to pay a fee, usually something of the order of £3 - £5. If a thousand people enter, the organisers can bank a few thousand pounds, pay the judge a few hundred perhaps, and emerge with a modest profit.

From time to time the work of the winners of these

competitions is posted on the internet or is offered in print form. Such examples as I have read suggest that the judges tend to pick the kind of stories that they themselves write. Which is hardly surprising. So it pays to find out something about the judge, if he/she is named. If the judge writes sensitive literary stuff, your hard-edged scifi horror story is unlikely to win.

By all means have a go at these competitions if you wish. After all, if you aren't in, you can't win, and £100 is better than a poke in the eye with a sharp stick. But don't hold your breath.

## **Self-publishing**

Here, just for fun, are some extracts from an article that I found on the internet. It was written by Josh Saitz, who (at least when he wrote the article) was running a magazine called *Negative Capability*.

'I know from experience,' says Josh, 'that if you want to get published in a major magazine, you have to have an agent, and most agents won't take you unless you've done something.... If you are a talented writer and are thumbing through the writing market book looking for a place to send your submission, do yourself a favour and save yourself the postage. Publish it yourself. Write it, edit it, get pictures yourself, print it and sell it. You don't need anyone to validate you and you definitely aren't going to make any money or get any fame by having a short story published by the *Pine Cone Journal* in Wisconsin because nobody reads that shit anyway.'

Josh continues: 'I'm sorry if this short spiel has left you feeling disappointed, but I really do have a great deal of empathy for you because I too was a miserable unpub-

lished writer for a long, long time. I also sent out hundreds of short stories, essays, reviews and other wonderfully insightful pieces and I was rejected 99% of the time, usually by being ignored. The 1% of people who responded were either liars or total frauds....

‘I have written for dozens of magazines since then, but only because they had already read my own magazine. So my advice to you is to publish your own work, send it out, trade it, sell it wherever they sell stuff like that, and eventually you will be able to find your audience before you go crazy.’

Thanks Josh. I don’t have much to add, except that I agree with every word of it.

Not, please note, that I am saying that the self-publishing route is easy. It isn’t. It is time-consuming and arduous and possibly expensive. But it can be done.

If you want to go down the self-publishing route, your choices are broadly as follows:

- 1 Publish work on one of the web sites which allow you to do so without charge. (You are currently reading a free copy of this book which was published on obooko.com). If you insist, you can set up your own web site, on which no one else’s work appears, but I don’t recommend it. And by the way, if you aren’t already familiar with the internet and all its wonders, then you certainly should be.

- 2 Publish a single story in print form, as a small booklet. The cost of such an enterprise, in cash terms, would be modest if you use an online printer such as Lulu.com or Blurb.com.

3 Gather together enough stories to make up a small book and publish that. Recent changes in printing technology are such that the cost of publishing a paperback is now tiny compared with what it was even five years ago. Again, check out some online firms such as Lulu or Blurb.

Self-publishing is too large a subject to go into in any detail here. But there are plenty of books to guide you, some of them excellent. If you're interested, do your research.

Of course there are also firms which will perform this service for you. At a fee. Sometimes a large fee. The back pages of any writer's magazine will provide several advertisements.

## ENVOI

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The purpose of this book has been to teach you a technique for writing short stories. But you should always remember that no technique is worth much to its possessor until it has been mastered and forgotten. So by all means read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest all the principles which have been set out in the preceding chapters. But then you must practise until the process becomes well nigh instinctive; after that, you can change and improve upon everything that I have taught you.

Personally, I write short stories because I enjoy doing so. It's a lot less work than writing a novel, and it's a more varied experience.

If you are a beginner, I hope that this book has at least encouraged you to make a start. And if you are an established writer, I hope that it may have given you some further insights into the craft.

Good luck.

## APPENDIX I

### The range of emotions

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IF IT IS true, as I believe, that fiction writers need to understand how emotions are created in the human body, and that writers also need to develop the skills which will enable them to generate emotions in readers, then it follows that they need to be aware of the possible *range* of emotions.

How many emotions are there?

And are they all equally useful to the writer?

Those were the questions that I began to ask myself about fifty years ago; and gradually, over the succeeding period, I have put together some answers.

What I needed, I eventually decided, was a sort of emotional equivalent of Bloom's *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives*. (A taxonomy is simply a classified list or catalogue. However, no self-respecting social scientist will ever use a short and familiar word when a longer one can be used instead.)

About twenty years ago, I picked the brains of my friendly neighbourhood psychologists, searched the databases in a good library, and found that there was only a modest amount of scientific literature to help me.

The best book that I could then find on emotion was *The*



*Language of Emotion* by Joel R. Davitz, and, with the aid of that and one or two other sources, I put together a list of all possible emotions. That list is reproduced below.

I say 'all possible emotions' with some trepidation, because naturally anyone who looks at my list is going to say, But what about so-and-so?

Well, what about so-and-so? You should understand that the list which follows was originally drawn up for my benefit alone. As far as I am concerned the list is complete, but if you wish to add to it, or delete from it, for your own purposes, then feel free to do so.

I appreciate that some people will argue that there are omissions from the list, and will say that some 'emotions' are included which should not be there. For example: cowardice and bravery are not listed.

Personally I don't think that cowardice is an emotion; it's a character trait. Cowardice is what you display, or reveal, when you are placed in a situation which requires your action but creates fear, and then you run away, rather than do what you should.

The same can be said about courage, or bravery. If, in the face of danger, you make a conscious and deliberate decision that you will stand firm and fight the enemy, then you display bravery.

On the other hand, one 'emotion' which is listed is gaiety; and some might argue that it should not be. It could be argued that gaiety is a mood, or a manner of behaviour, rather than an emotion.

There are many more questions and quibbles which we could discuss, and you are welcome to debate these matters in your own mind or with your friends if you wish.

You will also note that I have placed the named emotions in a particular order. I decided, correctly or other-

wise, that emotions can conveniently be divided into two kinds: positive and negative, which broadly means pleasant and unpleasant. Within those two categories, emotions can again be ranged from the merely satisfactory to the ecstatically delightful, and from the mildly unpleasant to the absolutely horrible and intolerable. Whether I am right to think that elation is more 'pleasurable' than enjoyment, for instance, is a nicety which we could debate all night. But it would not, I suggest, be particularly profitable.

Here then is my list of emotions, beginning with the pleasant ones:

*Positive emotions* (ranged from the most powerful and pleasant to the mildest in strength):

Ecstasy  
Rapture  
Happiness  
Hope  
Exultation  
Delight  
Gaiety  
Elation  
Contentment  
Serenity  
Enjoyment  
Amusement  
Confidence  
Relief  
Love  
Lust  
Passion  
Affection

Excitement  
Cheerfulness  
Friendliness  
Gratitude  
Determination  
Admiration  
Inspiration  
Pride  
Amazement  
Astonishment  
Curiosity  
Awe  
Reverence  
Solemnity  
Satisfaction

*Negative emotions* (ranged from the least powerful and unpleasant to the most intolerable and unwelcome:

Apathy  
Boredom  
Reflection  
Puzzlement  
Surprise  
Resignation  
Disappointment  
Indignation  
Concern  
Dejection  
Impatience  
Irritation  
Frustration  
Dislike

Embarrassment  
Resentment  
Discontentment  
Pity  
Exasperation  
Scorn  
Jealousy  
Contempt  
Sadness  
Nervousness  
Dismay  
Disgust  
Shame  
Guilt  
Repentance  
Humiliation  
Alarm  
Distress  
Remorse  
Melancholy  
Sorrow  
Grief  
Anxiety  
Loathing  
Depression  
Anger (rage, fury)  
Dread  
Hate  
Fear  
Panic  
Horror  
Terror  
Despair

## APPENDIX II

### The Egri character-analysis form

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AS STATED IN the text, the form which is reproduced below is adapted from one that was devised by Lajos Egri for his book *The Art of Dramatic Writing* (1950). I have amended it here and there, for my own purposes, and you are, of course, free to make further changes yourself. It is simply a tool, a little aide-memoire, to remind you to think about various aspects of a character's physique, background, and temperament.

#### CHARACTER'S NAME:

#### PHYSIOLOGY

Sex:

Age:

Height:

Weight:

Colour of hair/eyes/skin:

Posture:

Appearance and clothes:

Defects:

Heredity:

State of health  
previous:  
present:

#### SOCIOLOGY

Race:  
Nationality:  
Class:  
Manner of speech:  
Occupation:  
Education:  
Married/single:  
Home life  
previous:  
present:  
Religion:  
Place in community:  
Politics:  
Amusements, hobbies:  
Key possessions:

#### PSYCHOLOGY

Sex life:  
Moral standards:  
Ambition:  
Frustrations:  
Attitude to life:  
Complexes:  
Abilities:  
Extrovert/introvert:  
IQ:  
Main trait to be emphasised:

## APPENDIX III

### ***King Albert's Words of Advice***

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FROM TIME TO time in this book (in a shameless piece of self-advertisement) I have referred to various short stories of my own. These stories may all be found in the collection *King Albert's Words of Advice*, published by Kingsfield Publications at £10.99, ISBN 1 903988 06 3. Fortunately, you don't have to buy a copy of the book – which in any case may be out of print by the time you read this. Instead, you can [download a free version](http://obooko.com), in PDF format, from obooko.com.

Ignoring all the rules of modesty, I would like to point out that my collection of stories does constitute a useful supplement to this present book, in that most of the stories in it were written according to the principles which are explained in the preceding chapters.

Set out below is a brief summary of the three key facts about each story in the collection: the story's classification (character, complication, et cetera); the viewpoint used; and the final effect.

The stories in my collection may, in your opinion, be good, bad, or indifferent; but if you read them after reading this book you will at least gain some benefit from seeing how theory translates into practice.

*King Albert's Words of Advice*

Complication.

Minor character, first person.

Amusement that the slightly simple and credulous narrator has been persuaded to buy drinks.

*Budgie Bill*

Character.

Major character, third person.

Amusement at a worried mother's failed attempt to get her son interested in girls.

*Tears to the Eyes*

Complication.

Omniscient.

Pleasurable sense of satisfaction that Charlie has settled down to married life.

*Unblotting the Copybook*

Complication.

Major character, first person.

Black humour: amusement at the hypocrisy of the Vicar and the supposedly virtuous school staff.

*Tea with Mr Swinburne*

Character.

Major character, first person.

Amusement, tempered by concern for the fate of the troubled poet.

*Verbena Lodge*

Character.

Major character, first person.

Surprise and (amused?) dismay at the realisation that Mrs Addams got away with murder.



*Theodore's Bride*

Character

Major character, first person

Reflective amusement at the prospect of Theodore marrying a much younger woman.

*A Man of Sound Judgement*

Character.

Major character, first person.

Amusement, tinged with disgust, at the realisation that the 'man of sound judgement' had, in fact, no judgement at all.

*Decent White Folk*

Complication.

Minor character, first person.

Dismay, or even shock, at the attitudes revealed.

*The Last King of England*

Complication.

Major character, first person.

Shock/horror at the fate of England.

*Event Prediction 101*

Complication.

Major character, first person.

Uneasy concern about the unpredictable fate of the earth.

*Say What You Mean*

Character/complication.

Omniscient.

Amusement that the pedant's argument about the importance of clear communication has been questioned.

*A Motto to Die by*

Thematic.

Omniscient.

Ironical amusement that the villain's scheming has resulted in the opposite effect from that which he desires.

*Staring Me in the Face*

Character/complication.

Major character, first person.

Sympathy, and some admiration, for the narrator.

*Truth in the Drama*

Character.

Major character, first person.

Sympathy for two rather confused young men.

*The Golden Boy*

Character.

Major character, first person.

Reflective sadness, tinged with horror.

*Gunner Balfour Treated Fairly*

Complication.

Major character, first person.

Sense of sadness at the lives wasted in the first world war.

## APPENDIX IV

### ***The Truth about Writing***

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ANOTHER BOOK OF mine that I have referred to in the text is *The Truth about Writing*. This is a book which contains much useful information for anyone who is involved in what might loosely be called ‘creative writing’; for that matter, it will also be valuable for those who write non-fiction. Here is a brief rundown of the contents. And if you think the book sound as if it’s worth reading in full, you can either buy a copy (ISBN 1 903988 05 5) or you can [download a free copy](#) from obooko.com.

The underlying thesis of the book is that, if you’re not careful, writing can seriously damage your health – not to mention your relationships, your bank account, and your career prospects. My overall aim is therefore to tell writers how to survive and prosper while struggling to make sense of the mad worlds of publishing, theatre, television, and film.

The early chapters help you to clarify your ideas about what you hope to achieve as a writer – money, fame, or literary reputation; they also provide a realistic assessment of your chances of achieving those aims. Subsequent chapters provide a detailed explanation of how the modern publishing industry works, and explain the crucial role of

emotion for writers of both fiction and drama.

The chapter on emotion is essential reading for anyone who intends to write fiction or drama. You may not agree with what I have to say on the subject, but you can hardly fail to benefit from reading the chapter.

The latter part of the book offers practical advice on how to find the time and energy to pursue your writing career, and help is provided on how to market your work in the digital age.

Here, by way of a taster, are just a few of my more controversial conclusions:

As far as income is concerned, most writers would be better off working behind the bar in their local pub.

The desire for fame should be sufficient, in and of itself, to get you sectioned under the Mental Health Act.

Serious literary criticism is written in a language called litbabble, which is a form of postmodern, deconstructed gobbledygook. Its practical value, in terms of helping you to write a better novel, is nil.

Unsolicited submissions, from writers who are not represented by an agent, are accorded the same degree of respect as would be given to something left on the publisher's doorstep by a dog with diarrhoea.

The so-called advance is actually a retrospective.

Most publishers can recognise a bestseller, but only

when it was published two years earlier and they have the sales figures in front of them.

Publishing depends, for its continuance, upon a ceaseless flow of mugs, suckers, and assorted half-wits who are prepared to work for a year or more without any serious prospect of remuneration.

The degree of success experienced by a writer will vary according to circumstance, and the definition of circumstance is everything that the writer cannot control, or even influence.

*The Truth about Writing* has, I am pleased to say, been warmly welcomed by some of those who actually work at the coalface of writing and publishing.

‘This is a thought-provoking book, written in a chatty, informal style, that will be of great interest to any serious writer.’ Brenda Townsend PhD, *Worlds Apart*

‘Michael Allen pulls no punches. He tells it like it is. You should buy this book!’ Michael Wilson, *Link*

*The Truth about Writing* is published by Kingsfield Publications at £12.99. ISBN 1 903988 05 5. As with my collection of short stories, you can [download a free PDF version](#) from obooko.com.

Now that you've finished *How to Write a short Story that Works*, do remember that you can print out a paper copy (if you haven't done so already), you can send the digital file to a friend, or you can just email your friend and offer the link to obooko. If you have the time and energy, you can use the book as the basis for offering an evening course at a local college, or whatever. In short, feel free to use it and the information that it contains in any way which appeals. All you are asked to do is to mention the name of the author, and where to locate the original text on obooko.com.

Why am I offering it free? Because I'm not able to think up a way to make any serious money out of it, that's why. Yes, I could self-publish the book in printed form, and I might one day, because there may be a few eccentric souls you would like a copy in a convenient paperback format. If I ever do that, I'll add a note here.

Michael Allen  
August 2009