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## Chapter 1

# Introduction

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The short story in America has for almost two centuries held a prominent, even pre-eminent place in the American literary tradition. It was the Irish writer Frank O'Connor, himself a noted writer of short stories, who said that for the Americans the short story had become 'a national art form'.<sup>1</sup> It could be argued, indeed, that around the 1820s and 1830s the Americans virtually invented what has come to be called 'the short story', in its modern literary sense (although one should of course note the parallel European tradition in, for instance, the development of the Russian short story from Gogol in the 1830s). Certainly the short story found its first theorist in one of its major early practitioners, Edgar Allan Poe; and the short story was for Poe his most successful and influential literary form. A number of other American writers in both the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries have, arguably, done their best work in that medium. Nathaniel Hawthorne's stories rank with his novel *The Scarlet Letter* as among his most outstanding achievements. Herman Melville's best short stories, such as 'Bartleby', may not outweigh the epic achievement of *Moby Dick*, but for many readers they are equally rewarding and more formed and finished as works of art. Stephen Crane's short fictions (like 'The Open Boat' and 'The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky') are as well known as his great novel *The Red Badge of Courage*. Henry James's short stories (as well as his novellas) are, in the view of almost all his critics, among his finest achievements. Sherwood Anderson's short story sequence, *Winesburg, Ohio*, is his finest work. Ernest Hemingway's short stories are as highly esteemed as his novels and, in the view of some of his critics, constitute the most successful part of his *oeuvre*. In the middle of the twentieth century writers like Flannery O'Connor and Eudora Welty did their most significant work in the short story form, and nearer to our own time writers as different as Donald Barthelme and Raymond Carver – writers who can be said to be

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among the most significant of their era – have made their considerable mark primarily through their short stories.

As well as European and Middle Eastern predecessors such as Boccaccio's *Decameron*, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, and the *Thousand and One Nights* (which originated in tenth-century Persia and was known in an eighteenth-century translation to Poe and Hawthorne), there are more local predecessors for the first flowering of the literary short story from the 1820s. Washington Irving's *The Sketch-Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.* (1819–20), which contains the seminal – virtually the founding – stories of the American tradition, 'Rip Van Winkle' and 'The Legend of Sleepy Hollow', is mainly a collection of essays and sketches about places and characters. As such it grows out of the genteel English tradition of Addison and Steele's *Spectator* magazine (1711–12 and 1714), which mingled essayistic observations on contemporary society with tales and anecdotes. Irving's stories themselves, however, derive from German folklore sources: 'Rip Van Winkle' from a story found most notably in Grimm's tale 'Peter Klaus the Goatherd' and 'The Legend of Sleepy Hollow' from Bürger's 'Der wilde Jäger' ('The Wild Huntsman'), which had been translated by Sir Walter Scott. The influence of German, and British, Romanticism is there too in Poe. Poe had read E. T. A. Hoffmann, and used Hoffmann's term 'fantasy-pieces' (*Fantasiestücke*) to describe his *Tales of the Grotesque and of the Arabesque* (1839).

## American origins

Among the Koasati Native American people of what is today southwestern Louisiana and eastern Texas they tell a story which, it is likely, goes back centuries to the time before the arrival of Europeans.<sup>2</sup> Bear and Rabbit are friends, and Bear invites Rabbit to his house. Racking his brains to think of something to give Rabbit to eat Bear decides, because he is fat, to cut off some of his own stomach and give that to Rabbit ('Thereupon Rabbit really sat and watched'). Rabbit eats the food, and later invites Bear over to his house. To feed Bear, he too cuts a piece out of his own stomach. But he injures himself and cries out for help. Bear goes out to look for a doctor and finds Vulture, who says he will doctor Rabbit. Vulture makes Bear fence in the house with palmetto leaves, and then tells him to leave. Bear goes, but later hears Rabbit cry out. 'Why is he making a sound?' asks Bear. 'Because he does not want the medicine' says Vulture. But Bear goes in later and finds nothing but Rabbit's bones. He becomes very angry and taking a knife he goes out to look for

Vulture. When he finds him he throws the knife at him and it pierces him through the beak. And that is why vultures have pierced beaks.

The story is typical of a host of Native American oral stories about animals, particularly trickster figures like Rabbit (*Cokfi*). They are often 'origin stories' or stories explaining the features of the natural world, as here. They also often 'illustrate and reaffirm, through positive or negative examples, culturally appropriate behaviour'.<sup>3</sup> It is odd, perhaps, that the main trickster figure here is Rabbit, since he seems to be merely the victim in the story: presumably he illustrates here by a 'negative example'. So the story illustrates both how things have come about (the Vulture's pierced beak), and how not to behave. Bear has magical powers (as the audience would know) but Rabbit does not: so the moral of the story is presumably (like the warning at the end of a television magic show), 'Don't try this at home!' The story is a myth of origin and also a moral fable. It is part of a group of stories that anthropologists have called 'Bungling Host' stories, and related to another group, 'Sham Doctor' Stories. The former group has affinities with figures in the literary tradition, like the backwoods host in Twain's 'Story of a Speech'; and the 'sham doctors' in the literary short story range from Hawthorne's Dr Heidegger in 'Dr Heidegger's Experiment' (1837) and Poe's 'Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether' (1845) to O. Henry's Jeff Peters in 'Jeff Peters as a Personal Magnet' (1908).

In its mythical and moral aspects this story has many of the features that we will find in the literary American short story. The moral fable and the figure of the trickster are two of its staple elements, as we shall see in the coming pages, and the trickster reappears in late twentieth-century Native American literary stories like those of Gerald Vizenor.<sup>4</sup> Early settlers often had close contact with Native American peoples, and certain stories certainly found their way into mainstream American Culture (Longfellow's long verse narrative *Hiawatha* is the most famous example). So it is likely that these stories played at least some part in the formation of the mental attitudes that gave rise to the literary short story. The African American slave story is also part of the cultural ambience of the literary short story, and received its first major literary treatment in Joel Chandler Harris's stories of Brer Rabbit and Brer Fox and others in *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings* (1881).

## Genre

Any discussion of the short story has, sooner rather than later, to deal at least briefly with the vexed question of genre or 'kind'. How do we define the short

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story so that we know broadly what kind of work we are dealing with, and how far do we need to? Short story criticism has perhaps, as more than one critic has suggested, been overly concerned with genre definition.<sup>5</sup> Attempts have been made to identify the short story form with particular modes of cognition or attitudes to life, but these usually stumble over counter-instances. For example, the ‘modern’ short story (broadly, that developed in the later nineteenth century and brought to fruition in the early part of the twentieth) has been identified with ‘epiphanic’ perceptions of reality, which focus on lyric evocation and revelatory moments rather than plot or linear narrative and development,<sup>6</sup> or it has been associated with a view of life that transcends the material facts of the world and tries to establish some mythical or even sacred perspective.<sup>7</sup> But it is usually easy to come up with instances that contradict or at least trouble the principles laid down. The plot-driven stories of O. Henry upset any theory which sees the modern short story as simply presenting a fragment of life. Many broadly ‘realist’ stories (for instance many of Hemingway’s, like ‘Cross–Country Snow’ or ‘The Three Day Blow’ or ‘Fathers and Sons’) narrate their chosen incidents and accumulate their varying significances without reaching any great single moment of revelation. Nor would such stories, or those of other writers who often (though by no means always) work in a broadly realist mode, like John Cheever in the 1950s or Raymond Carver in the 1970s and 1980s, easily be corralled under the heading of ‘metaphoric’ or ‘symbolic’: modes where the emphasis is on some figuration of reality which works by substitution rather than literal presentation. To be sure, a critic may want to value or stress the importance of one mode or another, and his or her critical preferences may lie in one direction or the other; but it seems ultimately counter-productive and restrictive to try to establish the validity of these preferences by way of generic definition.

Genres, it has been said, are not essences,<sup>8</sup> and we may give ourselves unnecessary labour if we try to identify *one* element or principle which defines the short story. Firstly, what is ‘short’? Here one can only be pragmatic and relativistic: shortness has come to be defined in relation to the longer form, the novel, and when it comes to fictional prose means in practice anything between five hundred and fifteen thousand words, or between one and forty average printed pages.

But there is also the case of what has come to be known most often as the ‘novella’ or the long story – that form of between about fifty and hundred and fifty pages (or 20,000 and 40,000 words), too long for a ‘short story’ and too short for a novel. The novella often covers more narrative ground, often deals with a large number of characters rather than focusing on one or two,

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and is often divided into parts or chapters. As a brief pointer to usage, Melville's 'Bartleby' (around 20,000 words) is usually described as a short story, *Benito Cereno* and *Billy Budd* (about 35,000 words each) as novellas, and Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* (around 60,000 words) as a short novel. *Novella* is an Italian term, used in that language simply for story or tale; its specific application in English to the long story comes via the German *Novelle*, in use since the early nineteenth century (when it was introduced by Goethe) to classify an important genre of longer stories from Kleist to Thomas Mann. Henry James preferred the French *nouvelle* for the more expansive form in which he himself excelled, speaking of 'the blest *nouvelle*' and praising its 'shapely' dimensions.<sup>9</sup> Recently 'long story' itself, workmanlike and vernacular, has been used and argued for in an outstanding anthology of twentieth-century pieces edited by Richard Ford.<sup>10</sup> There are many fine novellas in the American tradition (Herman Melville's *Billy Budd*, Stephen Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, and Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*, to name only three), but for the sake of focus and economy this study will confine itself to the short story.

One notion (among others) of the short story which I would like to keep in mind during the exploration of the many different kinds of story which follow is that of 'the idea as hero'. The term was coined by the novelist Kingsley Amis in his critical book on Science Fiction, *New Maps of Hell* (1960), where he applied it to novels as much as short stories, and used it to point to works of fiction where a leading idea about a future state of society governed the development of the whole. But the phrase can suggest more broadly a mode of story in which the overall idea, rather than character, plot or 'themes' in the usual sense, dominates the conception of the work and gives it its unity or deliberate disunity. And it seems particularly applicable to the short story, which is often motivated by a single idea or image (whereas the novel can incorporate several and chart the relation between them). Poe wrote of how 'the idea of the tale' can be 'presented unblemished, because undisturbed, and this is an end unattainable by the novel'.<sup>11</sup> The 'idea as hero' should not suggest a 'thesis-driven' or polemical work, or one that works discursively rather than poetically, but rather a work that is dominated by a single guiding idea or mood and achieves a perceptible overall aesthetic coherence. It may well stay in the mind as an 'image' as much as an idea. Henry James insisted on this fusion of idea and image when he wrote of his story 'The Real Thing': 'It must be an idea – it can't be a story in the vulgar sense of the word. It must be a picture; it must illustrate something.'<sup>12</sup> The short story cannot, of course, entirely dispense with 'story' without becoming a sketch or prose poem or some other form,

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but its relation to story is that of the artist rather than the anecdotalist. Structure, diction, imagery and tone will all be conceived with a purpose which is more important than merely ‘communicating the story’. To put it a simpler way, and to use a common phrase which is perhaps more suggestive analytically than its casual use would suggest, what the short story writer’s art tries to convey is the ‘point’ of a story: that moment of understanding or cognition in which we grasp not so much ‘what the writer was getting at’, in the old phrase, as what the *story* may get at in its collaboration with the mind of the reader reading.

### The literary and social context of the early American short story

Ralph Waldo Emerson, in his celebrated and seminal essay ‘The American Scholar’ (1837), wrote: ‘Each age, it is found, must write its own books; or rather, each generation for the next succeeding. The books of an older period will not fit this.’<sup>13</sup> And this desire to ‘make it new’ (in Ezra Pound’s phrase) is no small part of the emphasis on the short story in American literature from the 1820s.

Washington Irving, after the success of *The Sketch-Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.*, wrote in a letter in 1824:

I have preferred adopting a mode of sketches & short tales rather than long work, because I chose to take a line of writing peculiar to myself; rather than fall into the manner or school of any other writer; and there is a constant activity of thought and a nicety of execution required in writings of the kind, more than the world appears to imagine . . .<sup>14</sup>

Conditions of writing and publication in the first half of the century also encouraged the publication of short pieces. International copyright laws allowed publishers to pirate British work and print it cheaply, putting original American novels at a disadvantage. This inequity was not finally removed until 1891.<sup>15</sup> As a result a writer like Edgar Allan Poe with the ambitions to create an independent American tradition turned to magazine publication as the best means of creating both a literature and a reading public. It was particularly during the economic Depression of 1837 that he began to see ‘the magazine, rather than the book, as the appropriate expression of American culture’,<sup>16</sup> and he wrote to a prospective sponsor:

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I perceived that the whole energetic, busy spirit of the age tended wholly to the Magazine literature – to the curt, the terse, the well-timed, and the readily diffused, in preference to the old forms of the verbose, the ponderous and the inaccessible.<sup>17</sup>

For Poe, the medium of the magazine, with its concomitant stress on short pieces of writing, lyric poetry, essays and short stories, was central to his vision of his own career and of the whole future of American literature. Poe's important contribution to the aesthetic argument for the short story will be considered in a later chapter, but its connection with this broad cultural aim should not be underestimated. As Andrew Levy comments: 'For Poe the magazine project was an ideological end, not a means; the magazine's success per se would constitute a revolution, or the culmination of one.'<sup>18</sup>

Another insight into the suitability of the short story for American cultural conditions, though a notably more measured and less exalted one than Poe's, can be found in the remarkably astute and prescient comments of the contemporary French historian and cultural critic Alexis de Tocqueville in his *Democracy in America* (1843). De Tocqueville considers the question of what kind of literature can be expected of a new democracy in conditions where 'Classes are intermingled and confused' and 'knowledge as well as power is infinitely divided up and, if I may so put it, scattered all around'. Most of those who read will go into business or politics or 'adopt some profession which leaves but short, stolen hours for the pleasures of the mind'. He goes on:

With but short time to spend on books they want it all to be profitable. They like books which are easily got and quickly read, requiring no learned research to understand them . . .; above all they like things unexpected and new . . . [W]hat they want is vivid, lively emotions, sudden revelations, brilliant truths, or errors able to rouse them up and plunge them, almost by violence, into the middle of the subject . . . Short works will be commoner than long books, wit than erudition, imagination than depth.<sup>19</sup>

Despite the European condescension in the tone, it is remarkable how penetrating De Tocqueville is here, and how well he predicts the strengths (as well as some of the potential weaknesses) of literature in a new democracy. He predicts with uncanny accuracy the qualities of a popular commercial literature (and seems to look forward to film and television). His accompanying analysis that 'formal qualities will be neglected' in literature does not, of course, do justice to Poe's zealous theorizing about form in his review of Hawthorne (1842) (about which De Tocqueville could scarcely have

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known by 1843) or 'The Philosophy of Composition' (1846), but nevertheless the passage I have quoted seem precisely to predict the short stories of Poe himself.

Looking forward to the development of the American short story across the nineteenth century and beyond, one might consider further this idea of the 'democracy' of the form. Apart from its association with magazine publication (which persists in the present, although often in elite or coterie publications as well as popular ones) and its appeal to busy readers, the form has been held to have characteristics which associate particularly with 'the man in the street'. Partly because of its length and the time taken to read it, it has been seen as the precursor of the one-hour television play or the two-hour film, those staples of culture from the mid-twentieth century onwards. Frank O'Connor, in his fine study of the short story *The Lonely Voice*, has seen the short story as the ideal form for treating the life of the isolated individual, the 'Little Man' and the 'submerged population group';<sup>20</sup> and while this definition may be restrictive, there is a sense in which the form does lend itself to the examination of scenes from the life of the common man or woman, episodes and crises which are typical of those of ordinary life but hardly demand the developed treatment of the novel. The emphasis of democracy was on what Emerson called 'the new importance given to the single person'.<sup>21</sup> And this emphasis, in nineteenth-century America, favoured the cultivation of the short story.

But it is perhaps the 'lightness' and mobility of the short story, above all, that suits it to the preoccupations of a fast developing rural and urban culture, characterized by the diversity of its traditions and the mixed nature of its population. As we shall see, the short story was to be associated in the period immediately following the Civil War with what became known as 'local colour' literature (of which Bret Harte's story 'The Luck of Roaring Camp', 1868, is perhaps the first example), which emphasized the varied customs and local flavour of different regions of the United States, like the newly settled Far West, the South-West or the Deep South. The short story was frequently the form chosen by writers introducing such new areas to a still predominantly East Coast reading public: it could give brief and vivid glimpses of new and 'exotic' places and ways of life in short narratives which wakened the imagination to new scenes and new experiences without subjecting readers to the extended treatment of a novel. Even today, when we are more aware of the variety of population groups within single societies, the short story is notable for the leading part it has played in the fictional treatment of Native American, African, Jewish, Hispanic, Asian and other ethnic groups within American society: disseminating ideas of cultural diversity and



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bringing these groups into various relations to each other and to the often challenged concept of a literary 'mainstream'.

Henry James once wrote that the novel required a society with long-established traditions: 'It takes an old civilization to set a novelist in motion.'<sup>22</sup> It might be said in contrast that a new civilization is likely to turn to the short story, which gives the writer an ability swiftly to change his focus on a variety of topics, places, figures. Elsewhere James implicitly likened his attitude as a short story writer to that of the photographer who can move through society with swiftness and agility capturing representative scenes. To Robert Louis Stevenson (another practitioner and critic of the form), James wrote: 'I want to leave a multitude of pictures of my time, projecting my small circular frame upon as many different spots as possible.'<sup>23</sup>

It is perhaps this sense of both mobility and democratic openness to experience that most characterizes the short story in America. The genre speaks in a host of different voices – as we shall see, the sense of 'voice', the closeness to the scene of an oral narrator is a strong strand in the web of the American short story – and has the freedom to tackle an immense variety of subjects in almost as many different modes. An approach to it cannot be centred on any one mode (romantic 'tale', realist story, 'tall tale', anecdote, sketch, or parable) but must take account of them all. In a fast developing society the genre as a whole, and the individual writer, may gain immeasurably from the short story's ability to move fast, to register the fleeting as well as to work experience more slowly into the careful constructions of a clearly defined art. Raymond Carver's advice to himself during a difficult time in his progress as a writer was advice that stayed with him, and it could be taken as one motto for the American short story writer: 'Get in, get out. Don't linger. Go on.'<sup>24</sup>

  
*Chapter 2*

## The short story as ironic myth: Washington Irving and William Austin

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Two writers at the very beginning of the American short story tradition, Washington Irving (1783–1859) and William Austin (1778–1843), produced stories which not only constitute the foundations of a genre but also deal with the foundations of modern American society itself. Other stories by Irving and Austin approach the genre by way of Romance, parable and sketch, and prepared the ground for the greater achievement of Nathaniel Hawthorne. Irving's 'Rip Van Winkle' (1819) and Austin's 'Peter Rugg, the Missing Man' (1824) also provide paradigmatic examples of the way the short story frequently – one might almost say typically – takes a moment of crisis as its subject matter: the moment which marks a radical change in the life of an individual, a group or, as here, a whole nation. Their small handful of other stories also tend to deal with crisis, usually psychological or moral, by way of 'Romance' (defined by Hawthorne as 'a neutral territory, somewhere between the real world and fairy-land, where the Actual and the imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other')<sup>1</sup> or the semi-supernatural or 'fantastic.'<sup>2</sup> The term 'tale' was commonly used in the nineteenth century for this kind of story.

### Washington Irving

Irving's 'Rip Van Winkle' is one of only three short stories or tales, as he more often called them, in *The Sketch-Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.* (1819–20), a collection mostly made up of essays, sketches and anecdotes, many of which are not on American topics but grew out of Irving's travels in Britain between 1815 and 1817. In 'Rip Van Winkle' on the other hand Irving writes, one might say, the myth of the ordinary unheroic American. Rip lives at home with his nagging wife, avoiding his domestic duties, helping neighbours with