

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-65797-6 - The International Story: An Anthology with Guidelines for Reading and Writing about Fiction

Ruth Spack

Excerpt

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# Introduction: Literature and the Short Story

**L**iterature can be divided into four major categories, known as genres: *poetry* (poems), *drama* (plays), *fiction* (novels and short stories), and *nonfiction* (almost all writing that does not fit into the previous categories, for example, essays and autobiographies). Writers of nonfiction work primarily with the facts as they exist in the real world. Writers of poetry, drama, and fiction re-create events or make up “facts” and create an imaginary world. With the exception of two poems, all of the readings in this book are works of fiction: short stories.

The *short story* is called “short” primarily because it has relatively few pages. But *short* doesn’t necessarily mean easy to read. In a short story, what happens usually happens over a brief period of time—often no longer than a day or even an hour. Therefore, the short-story writer must compress the action and description and make the story come alive by implication. One detail must suggest many others. The *short of short story*, then, involves much more than just the number of words. Even if a short story is not long, the suggestive use of language can make the story a challenge to read and understand.

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## **PART ONE**

# *Reading Fiction*

**Chapter One: Developing Effective Reading Strategies:  
Understanding and Responding**

**Chapter Two: Developing Effective Reading Strategies:  
Analyzing and Interpreting**

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**P**art One consists of two chapters that are designed to help you find effective strategies for reading and understanding fiction.

Chapter 1 focuses on your initial reactions to what you read. Through a variety of activities, this chapter encourages you to explore your responses to short stories and to recognize that there are many possible responses to a given text.

Chapter 2 focuses on analysis and interpretation of what you read. Learning how a story is composed through various elements such as plot, setting, character, and point of view can help you understand the story's meanings or significance. Activities within this chapter ask you to create scenes and characters as well as to analyze scenes and characters within a short story. Through these activities, you can develop a deeper understanding of how language can be used both to create and to comprehend a story.

## CHAPTER ONE

# Developing Effective Reading Strategies: Understanding and Responding

Some of the stories in this book may be easy to read; others may be hard. Some will immediately provoke a reaction; others will take more thought and discussion. Some stories may require only one reading before you feel that you understand what is happening and grasp the story's meanings or significance. Others may at first appear easy but in fact involve complex concepts and require careful rereading.

The following guidelines are designed to help you develop effective approaches to reading even the most difficult stories. In time, you will develop your own strategies for productive reading.

### **BEFORE READING**

You may be able to understand what you read better if you have some background knowledge before you begin reading. The following suggestions may be helpful.

1. Read the *title* of the story. The title may give you a clue to the story's focus.
2. Read the *biographical information* ("About the Author") that precedes the story. By reading some background on the author's life and literary history, you may gain some insight into the author's approach. Knowing the date, original language, and country of origin of a work of fiction can help you understand it better.
3. Read any *background information* ("The Context of the Story") that is provided. This information may help you become aware of an unfamiliar concept that is crucial to an understanding of the story.
4. Look at the length of the story. Knowledge of how long a story is can help you plan your reading time.

### **A FIRST READING**

The first time you read, enter the world of the story. Try to feel what the characters feel and to know what they experience. During this first reading, you do not need to understand every word or detail.

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## GUIDELINES

**Guidelines for a First Reading**

1. Preview the story by reading the title, the biographical information about the author, and the discussion of the context of the story.
2. Read the story through once to try to grasp what is happening, without using a dictionary.

**ACTIVITY: Reading a short story**

Following the guidelines for a first reading, read “The Story of an Hour” by Kate Chopin (pp. 6–8). ●

**The Story of an Hour**

Kate Chopin

United States, 1894

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Kate Chopin (1851–1904) was born in the United States, in Missouri, the daughter of an Irish Catholic father and a French Creole mother. Her father died in 1855, and she was raised by her mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother. In 1870, she married Oscar Chopin and lived with him and their six children in Louisiana. Her husband died in 1882.*

*In the early 1890s, Chopin gained national recognition as an outstanding short-story writer. Her major work, the novel *The Awakening*, appeared in 1899. Although this novel won the respect of literary critics, its sympathetic treatment of a woman’s sensuality shocked readers and reviewers throughout the United States. Her next collection of short stories was rejected by her publisher. Deeply hurt by the negative response to her work, Chopin wrote very little more. Her work remained virtually ignored until the 1960s.*

## THE CONTEXT OF THE STORY

*In the nineteenth century in Louisiana, where most of Chopin’s stories are set, women’s rights were limited. Most married women were considered to be the property of their husbands.*

Knowing that Mrs. Mallard was afflicted with a heart trouble, great care was taken to break to her as gently as possible the news of her husband’s death.

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It was her sister Josephine who told her, in broken sentences; veiled hints that revealed in half concealing. Her husband's friend Richards was there, too, near her. It was he who had been in the newspaper office when intelligence of the railroad disaster was received, with Brently Mallard's name leading the list of "killed." He had only taken the time to assure himself of its truth by a second telegram, and had hastened to forestall any less careful, less tender friend in bearing the sad message.

She did not hear the story as many women have heard the same, with a paralyzed inability to accept its significance. She wept at once, with sudden, wild abandonment, in her sister's arms. When the storm of grief had spent itself she went away to her room alone. She would have no one follow her.

There stood, facing the open window, a comfortable, roomy armchair. Into this she sank, pressed down by a physical exhaustion that haunted her body and seemed to reach into her soul.

She could see in the open square before her house the tops of trees that were all aquiver with the new spring life. The delicious breath of rain was in the air. In the street below a peddler was crying his wares. The notes of a distant song which some one was singing reached her faintly, and countless sparrows were twittering in the eaves.

There were patches of blue sky showing here and there through the clouds that had met and piled one above the other in the west facing her window.

She sat with her head thrown back upon the cushion of the chair, quite motionless, except when a sob came up into her throat and shook her, as a child who had cried itself to sleep continues to sob in its dreams.

She was young, with a fair, calm face, whose lines bespoke repression and even a certain strength. But now there was a dull stare in her eyes, whose gaze was fixed away off yonder on one of those patches of blue sky. It was not a glance of reflection, but rather indicated a suspension of intelligent thought.

There was something coming to her and she was waiting for it, fearfully. What was it? She did not know; it was too subtle and elusive to name. But she felt it, creeping out of the sky, reaching toward her through the sounds, the scents, the color that filled the air.

Now her bosom rose and fell tumultuously. She was beginning to recognize this thing that was approaching to possess her, and she was striving to beat it back with her will—as powerless as her two white slender hands would have been.

When she abandoned herself a little whispered word escaped her slightly parted lips. She said it over and over under her breath: "free, free, free!" The vacant stare and the look of terror that had followed it went from her eyes. They stayed keen and bright. Her pulses beat fast, and the coursing blood warmed and relaxed every inch of her body.

She did not stop to ask if it were or were not a monstrous joy that held her. A clear and exalted perception enabled her to dismiss the suggestion as trivial.

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*Reading Fiction*

She knew that she would weep again when she saw the kind, tender hands folded in death; the face that had never looked save with love upon her, fixed and gray and dead. But she saw beyond that bitter moment a long procession of years to come that would belong to her absolutely. And she opened and spread her arms out to them in welcome.

There would be no one to live for her during those coming years: she would live for herself. There would be no powerful will bending hers in that blind persistence with which men and women believe they have a right to impose a private will upon a fellow-creature. A kind intention or a cruel intention made the act seem no less a crime as she looked upon it in that brief moment of illumination.

And yet she had loved him—sometimes. Often she had not. What did it matter! What could love, the unsolved mystery, count for in face of this possession of self-assertion which she suddenly recognized as the strongest impulse of her being!

“Free! Body and soul free!” she kept whispering.

Josephine was kneeling before the closed door with her lips to the keyhole, imploring for admission. “Louise, open the door! I beg; open the door—you will make yourself ill. What are you doing, Louise? For heaven’s sake open the door.”

“Go away. I am not making myself ill.” No; she was drinking in a very elixir of life through that open window.

Her fancy was running riot along those days ahead of her. Spring days, and summer days, and all sorts of days that would be her own. She breathed a quick prayer that life might be long. It was only yesterday she had thought with a shudder that life might be long.

She arose at length and opened the door to her sister’s importunities. There was a feverish triumph in her eyes, and she carried herself unwittingly like a goddess of Victory. She clasped her sister’s waist, and together they descended the stairs. Richards stood waiting for them at the bottom.

Some one was opening the front door with a latchkey. It was Brently Mallard who entered, a little travel-stained, composedly carrying his grip-sack and umbrella. He had been far from the scene of accident, and did not even know there had been one. He stood amazed at Josephine’s piercing cry; at Richards’ quick motion to screen him from the view of his wife.

But Richards was too late.

When the doctors came they said she had died of heart disease—of joy that kills.

**SUBSEQUENT READINGS**

Because you are reading the short stories in this book to fulfill the demands of an academic course, the way you ultimately read a story will be different from the way you read purely for pleasure. For example, in a second reading of a story, you may read not from beginning to end but rather forwards and backwards, as you predict and remember what you have read



before. Details that you hadn't noticed the first time may suddenly appear important. Ideas that seemed to confirm your own beliefs or expectations may now seem to contradict them, and vice versa. Although this reading process can be unsettling, it is a natural process that even the most advanced readers of literature experience.

### **Establishing a Goal for Rereading**

To understand a story fully, you need to read it more than once; and you need to adopt different strategies for different stages of reading. Therefore, when you reread, you should try to establish a goal. The following guidelines can give you an idea of ways to read for different purposes.

- If you are rereading in preparation for a class discussion of the reading, you may want to underline or copy passages that you particularly like or that you find confusing so that you can bring them to the attention of the class.
- If you are rereading for the purpose of answering a question the instructor has posed about the story, you will want to reread the story in an attempt to find an answer.
- If you are rereading in preparation for writing an essay about the story, you will want to look for specific details that will help you develop ideas.

The following guidelines provide some useful suggestions for how to approach a close reading of a story. Activities following the guidelines will help you practice these strategies. However, you may not need to apply every one of the strategies to every story you read or in the order in which they are presented. Your instructor may assign certain tasks for some or all of the stories, or you may discover other strategies that work best for you.

### **Defining Unfamiliar Vocabulary Words**

Even at this stage, you do not need to know the meaning of every word in a story. As you reread, underline or in some other way make note of only the words or expressions that seem to hold a key to comprehension: words whose definitions you need to know in order to achieve a general understanding of the passages in which they occur.

You do not necessarily have to use a dictionary to find the meaning of words. Although a dictionary can be helpful in learning vocabulary, it cannot define all expressions, and the definitions you find may not apply to the reading passage. Furthermore, using a dictionary can be tedious and time-consuming.

Another way to approach unfamiliar vocabulary is to guess at the general meanings of words, using contextual clues. Context will not always give you precise meaning, but it will often give you enough clues about the meaning to understand a passage.

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Use a dictionary, or the Glossary, primarily in two circumstances: (1) when you are not satisfied with the meaning you have guessed from context, even after subsequent readings, or (2) when you are assigned to summarize or analyze part or all of the story.

## GUIDELINES

### **Guidelines for Using Contextual Clues to Guess at Meaning**

1. Look at what precedes and follows the word or expression (for example, grammatical forms within the same sentence, other key words or expressions, important ideas, significant scenes, and so on).
2. Try to determine whether the word has a positive or negative connotation.
3. Consider how the word fits into the whole story.

### **ACTIVITY: Guessing meaning from context**

Working in pairs or a small group, read the first four paragraphs of “The Story of an Hour” (pp. 6–7). Identify two or three words or expressions that you find challenging. Following the guidelines for using contextual clues to guess at meaning, discuss those words to infer their meaning in the passages in which they occur.

Consult a dictionary or the Glossary to compare the meanings you have decided upon with the dictionary definitions. ●

### **Annotating**

A second or third reading can consist simply of reading the story again. But you can achieve a closer reading by making brief notes as you read. Making these notes, either in the margins of the text, within the text itself, or on a separate sheet of paper is known as *annotating*. Annotating is a way to record your reactions to a story. This process not only helps you focus on the reading task but also clarify the action and meanings of the story. Annotating can be practiced in many ways. Each reader has an individual way of making notes. You might write notes about each paragraph or about larger chunks. You might write a brief word or whole sentences. You might underline, highlight, circle, and/or write comments in a notebook.

### **A Student Reader at Work**

Reprinted here is an example of how one student annotated the first four paragraphs of “The Story of an Hour.”