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Edited by H. J. Chaytor

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SEVEN SHORT STORIES  
BY FRENCH AUTHORS

*Edited by*

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*Master of St Catharine's College  
Cambridge*



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[More information](#)

## CONTENTS

	PAGE
INTRODUCTION . . . . .	vii
1. TRILBY: <i>Charles Nodier</i> . . . . .	I
2. UN ÉPISODE SOUS LA TERREUR: <i>H. de Balzac</i> . . . . .	63
3. LAURETTE: <i>A. de Vigny</i> . . . . .	90
4. LE PIED DE MOMIE: <i>Th. Gautier</i> . . . . .	129
5. L'ENLÈVEMENT DE LA REDOUTE: <i>Prosper Mérimée</i> . . . . .	147
6. UN CŒUR SIMPLE: <i>G. Flaubert</i> . . . . .	156
7. DEUX AMIS: <i>G. de Maupassant</i> . . . . .	201
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## INTRODUCTION

THE short story is a more difficult form of art than the novel. It proposes to interest or amuse a reader for a few moments, as a novel may interest him for a few hours, and to achieve this purpose by methods similar to those of the novel. Hence the writer of short stories is constrained at the outset by limits of space and time. He cannot, as the novelist, develop his characters and his plot leisurely and elaborately; he has no space for digressions; every incident that he selects for description, every conversation that he introduces must contribute, directly and immediately, to the final impression that he wishes to produce.

The short story must therefore deal with a subject susceptible of treatment upon these lines. The stage must not be overcrowded with characters and the characters must not be suffocated with plot nor left idle with nothing to do. It is true that some short stories might be expanded into novels, if a Henry James or a Paul Bourget undertook the task; but the difference between the novel and the short story as separate literary *genres* is clearly shown by the “potted” versions of Dickens or Thackeray which some self-educator publications supply in the hope of imparting a veneer of civilisation to their readers. The short story must have unity of action; it should deal, that is, with a single definite transaction which has a beginning and an end.

The best French exponents of it prefer to maintain also a unity of time; Vigny's *Laurette* shows much ingenuity in preserving this unity. With plot, as we consider plot, the French short story writer is not overmuch concerned; what he seeks is an incident, a scrap of life, which will produce a definite impression, and his art is concentrated on making the reader feel and see what he has himself seen and felt. The stories by Mérimée and Maupassant in this selection are as good of their kind as anything ever written in French; but they do not contain what an English reader would call plot. He expects a story to have a *dénouement*, an unexpected reversal of the action, a surprise or mystification to reward him for his trouble in reading it. Situations of this kind are not unknown to the writers above mentioned and some French writers of *contes et nouvelles* show remarkable cleverness in providing them; but such dramatic action is not a vital necessity to the French short story.

Some clash of temperaments, some moral conflict which derives its poignancy from the contrast of opposing forces will produce the kind of "situation" required. Instances will be found in any of the stories which form this selection. Nodier contrasts the craving of a homeless spirit for love and sympathy with the austerities of the Northern religious temperament. Vigny tells not merely of a young man condemned to death; his youth is intensified by the presence of a yet more youthful bride, and both are contrasted with a hardy old sea-dog, who might seem at first sight as



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[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION

ix

unamenable to the pathetic as his own binnacle. Mérimée gives us the feelings of a soldier in his first battle; but the fact of inexperience is brought home to us by the veterans among whom the young officer is placed. Gautier shows us a relic of ancient Egypt against the background of nineteenth century civilisation. Maupassant cuts short the peaceful occupation of the angler with the harsh brutalities of war.

The art of description, again, cannot be neglected. Environment is an influence producing character. Consider Nodier's careful description of Scotland, or Flaubert's meticulous accumulation of detail to produce a sense of monotony. The reader understands that what is described as existing when the story opens, is also that which has existed since the characters were born and that the result of their lives is conditioned by their *milieu*. Environment again may help to attune the reader to a particular frame of mind. Why else should Balzac begin his story on a dark January night, unless because he wished to suggest discomfort, mystery and terror at the outset? Sunlight and storm enable the writer to cast the limelight on his stage at pleasure.

While such general considerations as these are applicable to any kind of story, it will be found that the writers represented in this selection look on the world with different eyes and hold very divergent views upon the nature of the art which they practise. To use the slang of criticism, a survey of fiction from Nodier to Maupassant will carry us from Romanticism through Realism to Naturalism. Nodier gives us a fantastic

x INTRODUCTION

story of a Scottish brownie, Trilby, who falls in love with a peasant's wife. Trilby, while explaining that his is no mere sensual love, pours forth his ardour with the passion of a Southerner, while Dougal, the husband, although somewhat of a lay figure, is cold and grim as his native hills. The setting for this conflict of passions is a Scotland of no particular epoch, though local colour is carefully observed; there are brilliant descriptions of scenery, a monastery and its monks, and the story is pervaded by a general air of the supernatural. The influence of Walter Scott, apart from Nodier's own knowledge of Scotland, is obvious; we are in the full tide of Romanticism, of which movement Nodier was a patron, with its appeal to emotion and sentiment, its sympathy with nature and its readiness to accept the supranormal and the mysterious as an element in human life.

These latter elements are equally obvious in Gautier's tale. But he possessed what Nodier lacked, a sense of humour; while Nodier is anxiously following the fortunes of his creations, Gautier is content to watch their doings as a spectator and to laugh at them, if he feels inclined. If we deal with supernatural subjects, as Gautier often did, there are two possible methods of treatment; we may attempt to arouse terror and awe in the reader, or we may reduce the tale to a humorous absurdity. Gautier's *Pied de Momie* deals with a theme which attracted the author as providing a glaring contrast between ancient civilisation and modern life; description is more to him than the emotion it should

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[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION

xi

arouse; the story is of a piece with his *Jettatura* or *Avatar*. An extravagant or grotesque idea, suggested in these cases by a certain strain of mysticism in Gautier's character, is worked out with the easy and infectious good humour of the accomplished literary craftsman and is made almost conceivable by sheer skill. Gautier is not concerned primarily to arouse sympathy, pity or terror; he was by instinct an artist who would have preferred to work with paint and canvas, rather than with ink and paper; "je vais mettre du noir sur du blanc" was his phrase when going to work. He therefore regards a short story as a problem in technique; the reader's feelings are of less importance than the satisfaction of the writer's artistic conscience. The effort to secure that satisfaction led Gautier to set undue stress on form; he uses words as a painter uses colours; with these materials he made it his business to produce a version of reality, to interpret what nature had given, to modify it in accordance with the clarity of his vision and to stamp that interpretation as his own. Such is his practice of his theory, "art for art's sake." He was wedded to no school of method; the result, and not the process, was the important point. But his leanings to the extravagant and grotesque, his love of violent contrast and his attention to local colour give him a footing in Nodier's camp.

But Gautier also belongs to the school of Mérimée by reason of his impersonal method of narration. That school, the realist, held that the business of an author was to relate what he saw, to bring the reader face to

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face with the event described, but not to tell the reader what he ought to think and feel. The author must stand outside the story and leave the facts to make their own impression. "Ainsi se passaient les nuits de Jeannie, et son cœur, aigri par un juste repentir ou par un penchant involontaire, toujours repoussé, toujours vainqueur, ne s'entretenait que de mornes soucis qui troublaient le repos de la chaumière" (*Trilby*). A true realist would hardly have written thus; he would say that the heroine tossed about and rose after a sleepless night, and leave the reader to infer the reason; or if he gave a reason, he would not pass judgment upon it by the addition of ethical adjectives. Realism is an attempt to reproduce reality; everyone interprets reality for himself and the reader should be given the chance of performing this exercise in which the author must not anticipate him. The difficulty of interpretation is due to the fact that while causes and results can generally be stated, the connection between them is not always clear; why, for instance, should different characters act differently in the same situation? If the reason is not plain, obscurity is due to the fact that the characters have not been adequately analysed; the treatment of the subject matter has not been scientific, and when a scientific method has been found, we pass from Realism to Naturalism, to the school of Flaubert and Maupassant.