Units 11 – 14: Short Story Writing

"Legend of Sleepy Hollow"

by Washington Irving
Literature for Unit 11
https://www.gutenberg.org/files/41/41-h/41-h.htm

"Rip Van Winkle"

by Washington Irving
Literature for Unit 12
https://www.gutenberg.org/files/19721/19721-h/19721-h.htm#RIP_VAN_WINKLE

Unit 11 – Assignments

- Read the Assignment Background below, then read the entire story: "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," by Washington Irving.

Before reading the story:

Does the title suggest the importance of the setting? Titles are given for various reasons, but the astute reader of a well-written story ought to be able to discern why the author selected its title. As you read this story, ask yourself why Washington Irving chose the title he did. Find evidence within the story to support your claim.

It will be well for the student to familiarize himself thoroughly with the story. The following questions will help in this:

1. Where did Ichabod come from?
2. Why did the place become drowsy?
3. Was there any motive for driving Ichabod out of town?

After reading the story through carefully:

Note which of the plot elements is most important, judging from:

1. The relative amount of space in the story devoted to that element.
2. The general impression that the story seems to have made upon the public or what is best remembered about it.
3. The lasting impression which the story has made upon you as an individual reader.

Unit 11 – Assignment Background

Adapted for High School from:
Short Story Writing: A Practical Treatise on the Art of the Short Story
by Charles Raymond Barrett

Writing a Short Story

The short story was first recognized as a distinct class of literature in 1842, when Poe's criticism of Hawthorne called attention to the new form of fiction. But the short story as we know it today is a product of the 19th century; and it owes its position in literature, if not its very existence, to the work of

Irving, Hawthorne, and Poe. They first recognized its possibilities and employed it seriously; and the art and genius which they put into their tales assured the short story a permanent place in literature. They differed in subject matter and style, but they recognized the same requirements and limitations; and the guidelines which they established then still apply today.

The term *short story* is applied to every piece of prose writing of 30,000 words or less, without regard to its matter, aim, or handling. A short story may be:

- An episode
- A fairy tale
- The presentation of a single character with the stage to himself
- A tale of the uncanny
- A dialogue comedy
- A panorama of selected landscape: a vision of the sordid street, a record of heroism, a remote tradition, an analysis of an obscure calling, a glimpse at a forgotten quarter…but one thing it can never be—it can never be 'a novel in a nutshell'." ("The Short Story," by Frederick Wedmore. *The Nineteenth Century*, March 1898.)

The term *short story* is properly used only when it means a short prose narrative, which presents artistically a bit of real life; the primary object of which is to amuse, though it may also depict a character, plead a cause, or point to a moral; this amusement is neither of that aesthetic order which we derive from poetry, nor of that cheap sort which we gain from a broad burlesque: it is the simple yet intellectual pleasure derived from listening to a well-told narrative.

The first requisite of a short story is that the writer has a story to tell—that is, a plot. He may present pretty scenes and word pictures if he will, but he must vivify and humanize them by the introduction of certain characters, patterned after the people of real life; and these characters must move and act and live.

The question of length is but relative; in general a short story should not exceed 10,000 words, and it could hardly contain less than 1,000; while from 3,000 to 5,000 is the most usual length.

The short story is artificial, and to a considerable degree unnatural. It could hardly be otherwise, for it takes out of our complex lives a single person or a single incident and treats that as if it were complete in itself. Such isolation is not known to nature: There all things work together, and every man influences all those around him and is influenced by them. Yet this separation and exclusion are required by the conventions of the short story; and after all, there is always the feeling, if the characters are well handled, that they have been living and will continue to live, though we have chanced to come in contact with them for only a short time. This highlights the difference between a short story and a novel: the short story magnifies one singular incident in a character's life.

In the novel we have a reproduction of a certain period of real life: all the characters are there, with their complex lives and their varying emotions; there are varied scenes, each one the stage of some particular incident or semi-climax which carries the action on to the final chapter; and there are persons and scenes and conversations which have no reason for being there, except that just such trivial things are parts of life. With the short story it is very different: it permits of but one scene and incident, one or two real characters, with one predominant emotion; all else is a detriment to the interest and success of the story. A book may be called a novel even if it is composed of a series of incidents, each complete in itself, which are bound together by a slender thread of common characters; but a story cannot properly be called a short one unless it has simplicity of plot, singleness of character and climax, and freedom from extraneous matter.

Unit 12 – Assignments

- Read the Assignment Background below, then read all of "Rip Van Winkle."
- Write the plot (in a single sentence) of "Rip Van Winkle," then write a "skeleton" or "working plot" of the story.
- Think of a plot for your own short story (this should be one sentence) and begin developing your "working plot." You do not need to finish your "working plot;" however, you should begin to form the direction in which you want your story to go.

Unit 12 – Assignment Background

Adapted for High School from:

Short Story Writing: A Practical Treatise on the Art of the Short Story

by Charles Raymond Barrett

Short Stories Classified

The tale is the relation, in an interesting and literary form, of some simple incident or stirring fact. It has no plot in the sense that there is any problem to unravel, or any change in the relation of the characters; it usually contains action, but chiefly accidents or odd happenings which depend on their intrinsic interest, without regard to their influence on the lives of the actors. It is usually a true story but may also be a figment of the author's imagination.

The moral story, in spite of the beautiful examples left us by Hawthorne, is usually too baldly didactic to attain or hold a high place in literature. Its plot is usually just sufficient to introduce the moral. It is capable of a high literary polish in the hands of a master; but when attempted by a novice it is often reduced to a series of moral platitudes which fail to transmit the intended values. Fables and allegories are types of moral stories.

The weird story owes its interest to the innate love of the supernatural or unexplainable which is a part of our complex human nature—the same feeling which prompts a group of children to beg for "just one more" ghost story, while they are still shaken with terror from the last one. It may have a definite plot in which supernatural beings are actors; but more often it is slight in plot but contains a careful psychological study of some of the less pleasant emotions. Poe presents wonderful examples of the weird story.

The character study is a short story in which the chief interest rests in the development and exposition of human character. It may treat of either a type or an individual. Good character delineation is one of the surest proofs of a writer's literary ability. If the character is inactive, we have nothing more than a sketch. A proper character study tells the story of an active character.

The dialect story might be considered as a subdivision of the preceding class since it is in effect a Character Study; but its recent popularity seems to warrant its being treated separately. Its chief distinction is that it is written in the broken English used by the uneducated classes of America, and by foreigners. Its plot is often either very slight or hopelessly hackneyed, and it is redeemed from the sheer commonplace only by its picturesque language. It is usually told in the first person. It is simple, and sometimes has a homely pathos. It may present character as either active or inactive, though usually the former. Its reason for existence is that it gives truthful expression, in their own language, to the thoughts of certain classes of society.

The parable of the times is a short story which aims to present a vivid picture of our own times, either to criticize some existing evil, or to entertain by telling us something of how "the other half" of the world lives. It is in a sense a further development of The Tale (Class I), though it has a more definite plot. It is the most favored form of the short story today. Since its matter is gathered from our everyday lives, it requires some degree of skill to make such narratives individual and interesting.

The story of ingenuity is one of the most modern forms of the short story, and one of the most ingenious. It might be called the "fairy tale of the grown-up," for its interest depends entirely upon its appeal to the love for the marvelous which no human being ever outgrows. It requires fertility of invention, vividness of imagination, and a plausible and

convincing style. Yet it is an easy sort of story to do successfully, since ingenuity will atone for many technical faults; but it often lacks serious interest and is short lived. Poe was the originator and great exemplar of the Story of Ingenuity, and all of his tales possess this cleverness.

The humorous story almost belongs in the category of Stories of Ingenuity, so largely does it depend upon the element of the unusual; but it often has little care for plot. Indeed, these stories are the freest of all in their disregard for conventions; with them it is "anything to raise a laugh," and the end is supposed to justify the means. In general they are of transient interest and crude workmanship, little fitted to be called classics; but Mark Twain, at least, has shown us that humor and art are not incompatible.

The dramatic story is the highest type of the short story. It requires a definite but simple plot which enables the characters to act out their parts. In its perfect form it is the "bit of real life" which it is the aim of the short story to present. It is the story shorn of all needless verbiage, told as nearly as possible in the words and actions of the characters themselves, and possesses a strong climax. Therefore it demands the most careful and skillful workmanship, from its conception to its final polishing. It is the most modern type of the short story.

The plot is the nucleus of the story, the bare thought or incident upon which the narrative is to be built. When a child says, "Grandma, tell me the story of how the whale swallowed Jonah," he gives the plot of the story that he desires. In like manner, before you put pen to paper, you must have in mind some interesting idea which you wish to express in narrative form; the absence of such an idea means that you have no plot, no story to tell, and therefore have no business to be writing.

In general the plot of a short story involves an incident or a minor crisis in a human life, rather than the supreme crisis which makes or mars a man for good. The short story plot must be simple and complete, and the best ones contain an unexpected twist at the end. As nearly as possible it must deal with a single person, in a single action, at a single place, in a single time. Think about Aristotle's elements of a tragedy (plot, character, thought, diction, melody, and spectacle). Yet the plot is only relatively important. It must always be present or there is no story; but once there it takes second place. The short story is not written to exploit the plot, however clever that may be, but to give a glimpse of real life; and the plot is only a means to that end.

The surest test of a usable plot is, "Is it natural?" Every plot is founded upon fact, which may be utilized in its original form, or so skillfully disguised or ingeniously distorted that it will seem like a product of the imagination. The best plot is derived from the action of an artistic imagination on a commonplace fact. But if we can neither find nor invent a new story we can at least ring the changes on the old ones, and in this lies our hope today. Each one of these old plots is capable of an infinite variety of portrayals, and what we are often hailing as an original story is merely one of our old friends looked at from a different point of view. How many good, fresh stories have you read that were based on the ancient elemental plot of two men in love with one woman, or on that equally cliché one of fond lovers severed by disapproving parents?

An Example of Developing Plot:

In "The Ambitious Guest" by Nathaniel Hawthorne, the theme is "The futility of abstracted ambition;" or, in its most general terms, "The irony of fate." The true plot is: *An unknown but ambitious youth stops at a mountain tavern and perishes with its inmates*. In the development of a plot from this germ into the completed story, it is often of advantage to make what may be called a "skeleton" or "working plot."

The story can be read at the link found on your **ArtiosHCS** curriculum website at **www.ArtiosHCS.com**.

Working Plot of "The Ambitious Guest"

(the numbers correspond to the paragraphs of the story)

1 The scene is a tavern located at the Notch in the White Hills.
The time: a September night.
The place is susceptible to danger from landslides and falling stones.
The family who resides there—father, mother, grandmother, daughter, and children—are gathered happily about the hearth.

2 & 3 The tavern is on a well-frequented road.

4-7	A young stranger enters, looking rather travel-worn, but quickly brightens up at his warm reception.
8 & 9	A stone begins to roll down the mountain side.
10	The guest, though naturally reticent, soon becomes familiar with the family.
11	The young man's character is marked by high and abstracted ambition.
12	He is as yet unknown.
13& 14	He is sensible of the ludicrous aspects of his ambition.
15	The daughter is not ambitious.
16-19	The father's ambition is to own a good farm, to be sent to General Court, and to die peacefully.
20-23	The children wish for the most ridiculous things.
24-27	A wagon stops before the inn but drives on when the landlord does not immediately appear.
28-31	The daughter is not really content.
32	The family picture develops.
33-37	The grandmother tells of having prepared her grave clothes. Fears if they are not put on smoothly, she will not rest easily.
38 & 39	She wishes to see herself in her coffin.
40 & 41	They hear the landslide coming.
42	All rush from the house and are instantly destroyed. The house is unharmed. The bodies are never found.
43 & 44	People who view the scene later are uncertain as to whether the tavern had a visitor that night. The ambitious young man has died without leaving any trace of his life.

You will notice that this working plot omits many little details which are too trivial to set down. This method of creating a skeleton enables you to crystalize into ideas what were mere phantasms of the brain, to arrange your thoughts in their proper order, and to condense or expand details as you see fit.

Unit 13 & 14: Writing Your Story

Unit 13 – Assignments

- Read the Assignment Background below.
- Finish your "working plot," using the example in Unit 12 as a model.
- Decide if your story will focus on one or two main characters and complete a characterization questionnaire about your character(s). A link to a questionnaire can be found on your **ArtiosHCS** curriculum website.

Unit 13 – Assignment Background

Adapted for High School from:

Short Story Writing: A Practical Treatise on the Art of the Short Story

by Charles Raymond Barrett

The Characters and Narration

The Characters

Stories are stories only insofar as they reflect life, and life is impossible without human actors. It is the hopes and fears, the joys and sorrows, the sins and moral victories of men that interest us. The character which seems most real is usually a composite of the most striking characteristics of several real persons.

A mistake which seems hard for the novice to avoid is that of telling everything possible about a character and leaving nothing to the imagination of

the reader. This exhaustive method leads to a multiplicity of detail which is very apt to contain considerable irrelevant matter; the details are usually arranged with little regard for their true value; and the intended description becomes a mere catalogue of personal charms. For example, in these three descriptions, detailed though they are, there is nothing to distinguish the particular person described from scores of other people possessing the same general traits:

He was a tall, deep-chested, broad-shouldered man, having a light complexion, dark moustache, hair, and eyes.

We will take a look at our heroine, as she sits lazily rocking, the sunshine touching her hair. She is of medium height, with black hair and eyes and a winning smile that makes friends for her everywhere.

Lura was yet but a slight schoolgirl; she was now fifteen and equally as large as Grace. She looked very beautiful as she came out to meet Grace and Mrs. Morton, on their return from the village. Her dark brown hair had been carefully combed back, but the short locks had fallen and formed in ringlets about the snowy neck and face. Her large gray eyes were bright. Her full curved lips were red, and in laughing and talking revealed two rows of small, even, pearly white teeth. Her cheeks were round and well formed; although at the present time they bore no marks of roses, they were generally rosy. The gray eyes, by the changing of the expression, often became almost black and greatly completed her beauty.

Clever character depiction consists in selecting and presenting only those salient details which will serve to present rather a vague image, which shall yet possess a definite personality, to which the reader may give such distinctness as his imagination may impart to the hints offered. It is an attempt at building a complete character upon a single characteristic.

In "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," Irving describes the hero, Ichabod Crane, and the heroine, Katrina Van Tassel this way:

The cognomen of Crane was not inapplicable to his person. He was tall, but exceedingly lank, with narrow shoulders, long arms and legs, hands that dangled a mile out of his sleeves, feet that might have served for shovels, and his whole frame most loosely hung together. His head was small, and flat at the top, with huge ears, large green glassy eyes, and a long snipe nose, so that it looked like a weather-cock, perched upon his spindle neck, to tell which way the wind blew. 'To see him striding along the profile of a hill on a windy day, with his clothes bagging and fluttering about him, one might have mistaken him for the genius of famine descending upon the earth, or some scarecrow eloped from a cornfield.

She was a blooming lass of fresh eighteen, plump as a partridge, ripe and melting and rosy-cheeked as one of her father's peaches, and universally famed, not merely for her beauty, but her vast expectations. She was withal a little of a coquette, as might be perceived even in her dress, which was a mixture of ancient and foreign fashions, as most suited to set off her charms. She wore the ornaments of pure yellow gold which her great-great-grandmother had brought over from Saardam, the tempting stomacher of the olden time, and withal a provokingly short petticoat to display the prettiest foot and ankle in the country round.

Once introduced, the characters should be allowed to work out their identities with the least possible interference from the author. Their characteristics must not be listed like invoices of goods: they must themselves display the psychological powers with which they were endowed by their creator. Their speeches and actions must seem the results of mental processes, and must appear natural, if not logical.

One good method of presenting the characteristics of a fictitious personage is to indulge in a bit of mind reading and give his thoughts as he thinks them, another and better way is to show the man actuated by his dominant mental qualities. In "The Cask of Amontillado," Poe builds a whole story on an elaboration of the latter method and presents the picture of a man temporarily mastered by the spirit of revenge. It is only by thus allowing the characters to work out their own destinies that you can make them real; otherwise they will appear as mere painted puppets, without life or volition.

On account of the technical limitations of the short story the number of characters which may have

"speaking" parts is very small—in general only two, and frequently but one. There are usually other characters present to help out the action, but they are merely supernumeraries, without form, life, or influence. The few real characters in the story must be made unusually interesting on account of their loneliness. They compose the story, they represent the human race, and if they fail us, we are in sad straits. They must be individual; they must stand out sharply from the page, clear and attractive, and leave no doubt of their personalities. We must see them so vividly that when they speak and act, we shall perceive them as actual personages.

Good short stories have been written and will be written which contain little or no dialogue; they succeed through vividness of plot, skill in character depiction, ingenuity of construction, or some such quality; but they would be more interesting and more natural if they held more conversation. A short story should be full of talk of the proper kind; there are few people who preserve silence at all times, and in the exciting moments which a short story usually presents, most persons would find tongue to voice their teeming thoughts. Speech adds naturalness and vividness to the actors, it lends them a personal interest, it gives insight into character, and it aids the development of the plot.

If these fictitious personages are to talk, however, they must talk naturally and interestingly—and "there's the rub!" The only way to make your characters talk naturally is to imitate the speech of the persons whom they in some degree represent. People in general do not talk by book: they use colloquial language, full of poor grammar, slang, and syncopated words; and their sentences are neither always logical nor complete. In reproducing this, however, you must "edit" it a little, using your own judgment.

Conversation like the following is—let us hope—interesting to the parties concerned, but the reader would be delivered from it as from a plague.

"I am so glad to get one desire of my heart."

"And that is?" said Al.

"Snow!"

"So glad that is all. I thought you had spied my new tie and was planning some crazy design upon it."

"Oh, let me see! Now, really, that is becoming to your style, but I think it would suit mine better. Brown eyes and black hair should never wear blue—that is for grey eyes, the tried and true. See?"
"Neither the eyes nor the tie," said Al, as he turned his back and looked up at the ceiling.

The real difficulty with this dialogue is that the writer attempted to make his characters "smart" and so permitted them to indulge in repartee, but as they were only commonplace people the privilege was too much for them and they merely twaddled. They did succeed in being humorous, but the humor is unconscious.

Narration

It is of little importance who tells the story or how it came to be told; the less the narrator appears the better. It is seldom that more than one narrator is necessary, yet two, three, or more are often introduced, with full descriptions of persons and circumstances. Amateurs usually begin by writing strictly true stories, and they always consider it of prime importance that they had the tale from grandmother, or that it actually occurred to John's wife's second cousin's great aunt; forgetting, in their unconscious egotism, that the reader cares only for the narrative, and nothing for the narrator. Stories told to interested listeners by "grandma," an "old hunter," or some loquacious "stranger" usually need to be so revised that the intrusive relater will disappear, merged into the unobtrusive author.

The best method of narration, the simplest and most natural, is to tell the story in the third person, as if you were a passive observer; to make the characters active and conversational; and to permit nothing, not even your own personality, to get between the reader and the story.

Unit 14 – Assignments

- Read the Assignment Background below.
- Using your "working plot" and your character questionnaires, write a rough draft of your short story.
- Read through your story and make sure that it is interesting and that it has unity of plot. Make necessary adjustments to the content and fix any grammatical or mechanical errors.

Unit 14 – Assignment Background

Adapted for High School from:

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by Charles Raymond Barrett

The Beginning

The crucial test of the short story is the manner in which it begins. Therefore it behooves you to make the beginning as attractive and correct as possible. The beginning of a good short story will seldom comprise more than two or three paragraphs, and often it can be compressed into one. If it cannot get to the story proper in that space, there is something radically wrong—probably in the plot; for the conventional brevity of the short story requires particular conciseness in the introduction.

In every story there are certain foundational facts that must be understood by the reader at the outset if he would follow the narrative easily. These usually include such details as the era and location of the story, the names, descriptions, characteristics, and relationships between the different characters, and the significance of events prior to the story that may influence its development. You must make sure that the details which you select are fundamental and have a definite influence, which requires some knowledge of them. Any or all of these facts, however, may be introduced later in the narrative when their need appears.

In themselves they are commonplaces, tolerated only because they are necessary; and if they cannot be made interesting, they can at least be made unobtrusive. To begin a story thus is to make a false start that may prove fatal:

> *This happy family consisted of six; a father, mother, two sons, and two daughters. Clara, the eldest, had completed a course at college, and during the past few months had been completing one in cooking, guided and instructed by her mother. Bessie, the youngest, was five years old. She sat rocking Amanda, her new doll, and was asking her all manner of questions. John and Henry, aged respectively ten and fourteen years, were helping their father.*
>
> *Grandma and Grandpa were expected to dinner; also Mr. Draco, or "Harry," as everyone called him. He was a friend of the family's, and Clara's special gentleman friend.*

Note how Hawthorne handles a very similar family group in the initial paragraph of "The Ambitious Guest." He inserts his details without apparent effort; and yet he makes the persons individual and distinct. He does not say:

> *This family was happy, and comprised father, mother, grand-mother, daughter of seventeen, and younger children.*

But instead says this:

> *The faces of the father and mother had a sober gladness; the children laughed. The eldest daughter was the image of Happiness at seventeen, and the aged grandmother, who was knitting in the warmest place, was the image of Happiness grown old.*

The conventions of the short story allow little space for the retrospection necessary to such an introduction; and when the writer begins to say, "But first let me explain how all this came about," the reader begins to yawn, and the charm of the opening sentences is forgotten in the dreariness of the ensuing explanations. The safest way to begin a story is to begin at the beginning, state the necessary facts as succinctly as possible, and lead the reader into the quick of the action before he has had time to become weary. For it must be remembered that the object of the short story is always to amuse, and that even in the introductory paragraphs the reader must be interested. If he is not, he will very likely cast the

story aside as dry and dull; if he does read it through, he will be prejudiced at the outset, so that the result will be about the same.

There is a questionable sort of beginning, which might be called dilatory, that consists in carrying the literary aspect of the essential facts to the extreme and making them occupy a good deal more valuable space than is rightly theirs. This is generally the method of a past school of short story writers, or of the writers of today who are not yet well versed in the technique of their art. Of this class Washington Irving is a great example. In "Rip Van Winkle" and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" he devotes to the introduction almost as much space as a writer today would give to the whole tale. He is so skillful in gently urging the narrative along, while he introduces new essentials and interpolates literary but non-essential matter, that in neither story can one exactly fix the bounds of the beginning; but in each a modern storyteller would combine the first ten paragraphs into one introductory paragraph.

To prove further that the beginning of a story does influence its success, I would ask you to consider the following, which is typical of the style of introduction most typically employed by the novice:

It was a bright, crisp, twilight evening, and two young girls sat together in a richly furnished parlor of a splendid country house.

One, tall and slender, with a richly molded figure; handsome brunette features, and raven tresses—Edith Laingsford, the daughter of the house; the other, a girl of medium height, with a figure perfectly rounded, and a fair Grecian face.

Her eyes were of a soft gray, and her hair a waving chestnut. She was Marion Leland, a dependent cousin of Miss Laingsford's.

Now, frankly, do you care to read further? Surely there is nothing in the glimpse of the plot here presented that encourages you to hope that the tale may improve upon further perusal. From these three paragraphs you can construct the whole story: you know that the "dependent cousin" and the girl with the "handsome brunette features" will be rivals for the affections of some "nice young man" of corresponding conventionality, and that the poor relation will finally win him—chiefly because it always happens so in stories and seldom in real life. And you know from these specimen paragraphs that there will be nothing in the handling of this poor old, hackneyed plot that will repay its perusal. Of course there is always a chance that you may be mistaken in your surmises; but the chance is too slight, and you cast the story aside with a yawn, even as the editor would do. See to it, then, that your own stories do not deserve like treatment.

The Story Proper

The ideal short story, from the point of unity, is one which requires the passage of the least time and presents the fewest separate incidents. It is the relation of a single isolated incident, which occupies only the time required to tell it. It is seldom that even a model short story plot will be a perfect unit, for in the story, as in the life which it captures, some slight change of scene and some little passage of time are inevitable.

Thus in "The Ambitious Guest" Hawthorne had need to indicate the passage of some little time, during which the guest had his supper; but the breach is passed in so matter-of-fact a manner that there is no jolt, and yet the sense of time is secured:

Let us now suppose the stranger to have finished his supper of bear's meat, and by his natural felicity of manner to have placed himself on a footing of kindness with the whole family; so that they talked as freely together as if he belonged to their mountain-brood.

Selection of details plays an important part in any literary work, but in the short story extreme care is indispensable, for the short story has too little space to sacrifice any to pretty but useless phrases. Such irrelevant matter is usually called "padding," and its presence is a serious detriment to the success of any story, however clever in conception.

When the outcome of the writer's meanderings is finally revealed, it should be a veritable surprise—i.e., be unexpected. This is a matter that is rather easily managed, for it is a poor plot that does not afford at least two settlements—either the heroine marries the hero, or she marries the villain; and often there is a third possibility, that she marries neither. If he has provided a proper plot, the author has but little to do with making the surprise genuine, and that little is negative. He opens the possibility of the hero doing any one of a number of things, and he may even give rather broad hints, but he should take care never to give a clue to the outcome of the story, unless he purposely gives a misleading clue. The most artistic method is to make these hints progressive and culminative[1], so that though each one adds to the knowledge of the reader, it is only

when they all culminate in the climax that the mystery is completely solved. This preparation for the climax is one of the most delicate tasks required of the short story writer.

The ending must appear inevitable—but its inevitability must not be apparent until the end has come. It is only after the story has been read that the reader should be able to look back through the narrative and pick out the preparatory touches. The novice usually prepares the way for his climax so carefully that he gives it away long before he should. This he does either by means of anticipatory side remarks, or by making the outcome of his story so obvious at the start that he really has no story to tell, and a climax or surprise is impossible.

Climax and Conclusion

The end of a short story comprises the climax and the conclusion. The climax is the chief surprise, the relief of the suspense, or the greatest relief, if there is more than one; it is the apex of interest and emotion; it is the point of the story; it is really the story. The conclusion is the solving of all problems, the termination of the narrative itself, and the artistic severing of all relations between narrator and reader.

The climax, in spite of its importance, is but a small part of the story, so far as mere words are concerned. In a properly constructed narrative its influence is felt throughout the whole story, which, as already stated, is but one long preparation for it. But in itself the climax is usually confined to a single paragraph of ordinary length; and the climax proper, the real point of the story, is usually conveyed in a half dozen words.

It is hardly necessary to say that the climax should be very near the end of the story, for even those stories which attempt to begin in the middle and go both ways at once place the climax properly. But there is a danger that the climax will come too soon. After they have reached what is properly a central point in their story, amateurs often become lazy or in too great a hurry and rush the latter part of the narrative through unceremoniously. In such a case the reader is very apt to come upon the climax unexpectedly, and so find it forced and illogical; whereas if the author had preserved the proportions of his narrative and led up to his climax properly, it would have been accounted strong and inevitable.

If the heroine is hesitating between her two lovers she must decide in the climax or on account of it; if the hero is in a position of great danger, he must be killed or saved. The revelation need not be couched in the bald phrase, “And so John married Kate,” but it may be hinted at or suggested in the most subtle manner; but settled in some way it must be. For the conclusion, as for the beginning, one paragraph is about the average length. In “The Ambitious Guest” Hawthorne employs three paragraphs, exclusive of the climax itself, to conclude the story. Each of these three paragraphs contains matter necessary to the completion of the tale in Hawthorne’s style.

Life size bronze of Rip Van Winkle sculpted by Richard Masloski, copyright 2000. This statue is located in Irvington, New York (a town named for Washington Irving), not far from the Tarrytown location of Sunnyside, Irving's final home.

1. culminative: (of stress or tone accent) serving to indicate the number of independent words or the important points in an utterance by assigning prominence to one syllable in each word or close-knit group of words. (from dictionary.com)