

## In Breach of Story: Breaking the Shackles of Traditional Fiction

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I have undergone the trauma of too many undergraduate creative writing teachers, too many books on the craft of short stories. Though I am sure all of them have been well intentioned, I am still distressed. In my own writing, the time-honored rules of the traditional short story have served as shackles confining my creativity. When writing my short stories, I have always felt compelled to stay in one point of view, to include that essential epiphany, to make the story's length substantial, to have a linear, causal plot, and to see the actual events of my story perfunctorily correspond with the points on Gustav Freytag's plot structure pyramid. As an artist, I want to have the entitlement to be liberated and limitless in my work, yet in so many writing courses, anthologies, and fiction craft books, these seemingly indisputable story regulations prevail. After studying numerous authors who defy conventional story standards, I have come to realize that the option to break the traditional rules is always there. And rule breaking or not, experimental stories typically succeed in achieving ends similar to the conventional pieces: concentrated emotional impacts, examinations of universal themes, and fulfillments of implicit contracts between the writer and reader.

Edgar Allen Poe provided a footing for short stories that "paved the way" for future writers of short fiction. His review of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales* (1842) is viewed as his "theory of fiction." In it he states that the special goal of the writer of a piece of short prose is "to create a concentrated emotional impact." This impact, presupposing that the writing is of high quality, results directly from the succinctness of the narrative, which Poe says "can and should be read in a single sitting" of perhaps no more than two hours.<sup>1</sup> If the early aim, then, of a short piece of fiction was to achieve the aforementioned concentrated emotional impact, the manner in which the writer gets there is of no consequence.

In the anthology *Anti-Story*, Philip Stevick states that in the early part of the twentieth century, "short fiction challenge[d] the received notions of time and space, continuity and coherence, artistic illusion and psychological process just as powerfully and successfully as longer fiction [did]. It puzzle[d] and trouble[d]

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<sup>1</sup> Edgar V. Roberts and Henry E. Jacobs, *Literature: An Introduction to Reading and Writing* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1998) 458.

its readers with its artistic audacity. And it include[d] some of the most extraordinary art of our time, as passionate in its craftsmanship, as controlled in its structure, as penetrating in its vision as any art of any kind. But then a kind of fatigue over[took] the form, changing short fiction into perhaps the most conservative art of mid-century, during the nineteen-fifties probably the single mode of artistic expression most self-imitative.”<sup>2</sup> This period can be pinpointed as the source of the rules that stifled me and many other creative writing students before and after me. Stevick goes on to say how “disturbing and ultimately tiresome” it is “to find so many patterned and rather obvious symbols” in these English and American works of the half century. He points out how few distinct voices there are to be found and how “in an age in which every other art continued to extend its own possibilities,” short fiction “became rather predictable and formulaic.”<sup>3</sup> Many writers, however, by the 1960s, felt liberated to try new techniques after the torrent of anti-stories.<sup>4</sup>

John Gardner refers to the “rules of fiction” in this way: “the search for aesthetic absolutes is a misapplication of the writer’s energy. When one begins to be persuaded that certain things must never be done and that certain other things must always be done, one has entered into the first stage of aesthetic arthritis, the disease that ends up in pedantic rigidity and the atrophy of institution. Every true work of art—and thus every attempt at art (since things meant to be similar must submit to one standard)—must be judged primarily, though not exclusively, by its own laws.”<sup>5</sup>

In the renowned textbook anthology of fiction *Understanding Fiction* by Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, the authors palpably state that there exist no rules for a “good short story.”<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, they make it clear that “There are, instead, certain general principles” and that “an understanding of such principles ... is aimed at bringing the reader closer to the true center of successful fiction—to a sense of the relation of the story to life meaningfully lived. Even the type of plot or characterization chosen, though sometimes seeming to be merely technical, has, as we try to indicate, a deep psychological basis.”<sup>7</sup> The aforementioned principles a story ought to possess indoctrinate into would-be writers that very constricting ideology of a presupposed form to follow. *Understanding Fiction* is a well-respected anthology with quality stories, yet it is severely lacking in the realm of inspiring creativity and boundless

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<sup>2</sup> Philip Stevick, in *Anti-Story: An Anthology of Experimental Fiction*, ed. P. S. (New York: Free Press, 1971) xi–xii.

<sup>3</sup> Stevick xii.

<sup>4</sup> Dr. Walter Cummins, E-mails and Conversation from May 2003 to August 2004.

<sup>5</sup> John Gardner, *The Art of Fiction* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983) 3.

<sup>6</sup> Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, *Understanding Fiction* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1979) xv.

<sup>7</sup> Brooks and Warren xv.

writing. It has helped to perpetuate the artistic shackles I mention in my introduction.

A traditional short story reads as conventionally as Eudora Welty's "Why I Live at the P.O." Though this story is rich with Welty's local color and unique characterization, it still serves as an archetype for the regularity of the standard short story. It has only a few characters, the narrator (Sister), Mama, Papa-Daddy, Uncle Rondo, and Stella-Rondo; a standard setting (the family home and, later, the P.O.); and one major event (the younger sister, Stella-Rondo, coming home after a failed marriage, causing Sister's family to turn against her and force Sister to move to the P.O.). It can easily be graphed onto the typical story structure. In the beginning, the conflict is introduced when Stella-Rondo, the spoiled, insufferable younger sister, returns home with a two-year-old child she claims is adopted. The rising action of the story occurs when gradually all the family takes Stella-Rondo's unjustifiable side over Sister's in all their petty arguments. The story reaches its climax when Sister can no longer bear the family's warped loyalty to the malicious Stella-Rondo, and Sister announces she is moving to the P.O., where she works. The family swears off its ties to the United States mail. The dénouement occurs when Sister finds herself contentedly settled in the P.O., estranged from all members of her family. This type of story is effective and enjoyable to many, but it represents the type of tale that too many have emulated. With the exception of the strong characters and the unique conflict, it does little to break new ground or experiment. It does not make its reader think deeply about it after the last page is turned. This type of story could almost be graphed identically with so many other stories. Its ghost has long been present in the traditional short story.

Philip Stevick reminds us that "the last thing we expect of a fiction, if we base our expectations on traditional fiction, is that it will talk to us, mocking our banalities, or shift without preparation between a kind of lunatic fantasy and a precisely calibrated and perfectly credible realism, or stop after fifty words."<sup>8</sup> In *Anti-Story*, Stevick as editor presents short prose works (he is reluctant to call them stories) that have a "contrariness" to traditional stories. The prose works he exhibits, along with the other stories from other collections I will mention, are "more than a reaction against what may now seem a certain blandness in earlier fiction, more than a reaction against formal predictability, more than a reaction against epiphany, with all that it implies of structure and sensibility." The word "story," he claims, "inevitably carries connotations of narrative ease, facility, the arched shape, the climactic form, all of these being qualities generally avoided in new experimental fiction."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Stevick xiii.

<sup>9</sup> Stevick xiv-xv.

What follows will be specific studies of some actual anti-stories, those prose pieces that refuse to kowtow to convention. In analyzing these stories, I will explain how they break the rules and what they substitute as virtues. I will also prove that the anti-stories, even in their quest to be different, still achieve ends similar to traditional stories. The concentrated emotional impact, which Poe referred to, is of highest importance; this is what makes a short story a short story. The examination of universal themes is central because, no matter what form the writer writes in, a reader must still, in some way, be able to identify with the conflict or concern at hand. Lastly, the fulfillment of the implied contract or agreement between the writer and reader is the reason most writers write and why most readers read. An objective of some sort must be met; a reader must feel satisfied once the last word is read. In August 2003, during a discussion panel about fiction at Fairleigh Dickinson University's Master of Fine Arts program's residency, Dr. Walter Cummins, Professor Emeritus of English, generated a list of central elements a work of fiction should possess, and these should also be considered alongside the essential requisite values. Those elements include the following: people, emotions, events, development or movement, and patterns or motifs.

One way to flout the rules of the traditional short story has to do with length. As Philip Stevick puts it, "how *short* can a story be?"<sup>10</sup> Pieces that are less than the usual length, usually referred to as "flash fiction" or "short shorts," were originally viewed as inferior, inadequate. Critics seemed to feel as if length were a prerequisite for quality. In Stevick's words, those stories were "likely to strike discriminating readers as gimmicky, tricky pieces of commercial fluff whose shortness is possible only because of the slickness of their construction. How short can a *serious* fiction be? As short as one likes? That's too easy an answer. A fiction must be long enough to display the art and craft of its writer, his own vision, his voice, his power. The minimal story, in fact, is an experiment no less audacious than the others."<sup>11</sup>

The short but powerful story "Taboo" by Enrique Anderson Imbert is a mere snippet of a story. Only five sentences and four paragraphs long, it must have appeared to critics as a fraction of something real, an evasion of seriousness. The central character, Fabian, is warned by his guardian angel not to say the word *doyen*. Fabian repeats the word as a question, and the last sentence of the story reads: "And he dies,"<sup>12</sup> a poignant climax. The value of this story actually lies in its simplicity, its directness and sharp detail.

Jamaica Kincaid is a groundbreaking writer. Her story "Girl," for example, transfigures traditional fiction by toying with form. This particular story, less

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<sup>10</sup> Stevick xxii.

<sup>11</sup> Stevick xxii.

<sup>12</sup> Enrique Anderson Imbert, in Stevick 314.

than three pages long, is written in only one long sentence. The piece is a series of phrases and exclamations separated by semicolons and linked by dashes: "... this is how you set a table for lunch; this is how you set a table for breakfast; this is how to behave in the presence of men who don't know you very well, and this way they won't recognize immediately the slut I have warned you against becoming; be sure to wash every day, even if it is with your own spit...."<sup>13</sup> Resembling a process-analysis instructional essay, "Girl" pithily conveys the lukewarm, peremptory sentiments of a cynical mother barking orders to her daughter so she will, in some way, succeed in life. Each word seems to be chosen vigilantly for maximum effect; each exclamation is pieced together like an intricate quilt.

Kincaid's story "The Letter from Home," reprinted alongside "Girl" in the collection *At the Bottom of the River*, works in much the same way: "I milked the cows, I churned the butter, I stored the cheese..." (37). Through items in a long series, the three-page story manages to convey a full experience in the most minimal of ways. The reader is offered a virtual lifetime of incidents by story's end. Kincaid also uses powerful, inchoative verbs such as "hissed," "stretched," "banged," "shed," "twisted," "broke," and "spins" (37-39) that are rarely modified by adverbs, and she seldom adorns nouns with adjectives, which produces a tight, compressed effect.

The stories in Kincaid's collection *At the Bottom of the River* are blunt, explicit, and uninhibited. Kincaid manages to say exactly what she wishes to say, but she does not need pages upon pages to do this. The explicit narrative clutches the reader and does not let loose. "I turned and rowed away, as if I didn't know what I was doing" (39); "I stood up, I sat down, I stood up again" (38). The reader may relax in the sincerity of her prose without having to speculate. Some may refer to Kincaid's works as "prose poems" because they contain that simplicity and dexterity characteristic of poems. They seem to focus on the minute aspects of form just as poems do—images, diction, intricate developments. To me, however, they are still very much short stories because they all have the concentrated emotional impact, vivacious people, patterns and motifs, and they fulfill the contract from writer to reader. If I classify them here as "anti-stories," it is because they do not contain those time-honored traits that the traditional stories told us they must contain, length being one of those. Kincaid's form does employ tools of poetry, but that is just a method toward her dispatching of a short story. All the narrator needs to communicate is done by means of explicit narrative, razor-sharp examples, and animated imagery. These pieces stand on their own and blaze new trails for short works of fiction.

In the anthology of American short-short stories *Sudden Fiction*, editors Robert Shapard and James Thomas contend that the primary attribute of short-

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<sup>13</sup>Jamaica Kincaid, "Girl," *At the Bottom of the River* (New York: Plume, 1992) 4.

short stories is life. The pieces are “highly compressed, highly charged, insidious, protean, sudden, alarming, tantalizing.” They “confer form on small corners of chaos, can do in a page what a novel does in two hundred.”<sup>14</sup> Grace Paley states that people are frightened by very short stories—the same as they are by long poems. She asserts that a short story is nearer to a poem than to a novel, and that when a story is extremely short (one, two pages), it should be read the same way one reads a poem—at a snail’s pace. “People who like to skip can’t skip in a three-page story,” Paley says.<sup>15</sup> And Paul Theroux says that very short fiction should not be mistaken for an anecdote. “It is highly calculated—its effects, its timing. In most cases, it contains a novel.”<sup>16</sup>

Nathalie Sarraute wrote a series of relatively short pieces in her collection *Tropisms* of 1964. She called the pieces “tropisms” because she “considered their spontaneous nature and movement similar to that of certain organisms as they respond to various stimuli ... they are, as she says, pieces of precise dramatic action, captured in slow motion and developed by means of cadences, image patterns, and recurring motifs.”<sup>17</sup> “Tropism XVIII,” for example, moves very slowly, and reminds the reader of a movie camera slowly panning across the setting as it captures the cottage, the window, the cat, the spinster lady, and Ada, the cook. This certainly may be seen as a true “anti-story” because there is an entirely uncommon effect. The story is more about witnessing than anything else—witnessing all the characters, animate and inanimate, at a certain moment. The piece is shapeless. No conflict is present; there is no rising or falling action, and the point of view changes with virtually every paragraph. It is barely two hundred words, in direct opposition to the traditional story, yet it still stands on its own as a work of art and contains people and motifs as well as universal themes (e.g., loneliness, sense of home). Some stories can carry themselves with just a few words, but some strive for the opposite. “Tropism XVIII” is certainly one of the latter.

H. E. Francis does wonders with the short-short form in his piece “Sitting.” This work is constructed in a thrifty, spare style, with no paragraph containing more than three sentences. In fact, a majority of the paragraphs are only one sentence long. The piece deals with a strange man and woman sitting on a man’s front steps; they never move. Years pass by in this ultra-short piece, and the man and woman remain on the steps. Finally, the owner of the house dies and the public agrees that the “sitting” man and woman deserve the house. They are permitted to take it over as the story ends, and the next morning strange men and women are found everywhere sitting on steps. Through condensed narration

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<sup>14</sup> Robert Shapard and James Thomas, in *Sudden Fiction: American Short-Short Stories*, ed. R. S. and J. T. (Salt Lake City: Gibbs M. Smith, 1986) xvi.

<sup>15</sup> In Shapard and Thomas 253.

<sup>16</sup> In Shapard and Thomas 228.

<sup>17</sup> Mary Rohrberger, *Story to Anti-Story* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979) 612.

and the elimination of extraneous words and phrases, Francis crafts a parable about persistence and class in his distinct way that leaves an enormous impact with the reader—all in fewer than three pages.

Chet Williamson's very short piece, "The Personal Touch," is under four pages and is constructed by mixing bits of narration with a series of letters between the protagonist, Joe Priddy, and the subscription director of SNOOP, "the Magazine of Electronic and Personal Surveillance."<sup>18</sup> The piece begins with a seemingly ordinary man choosing not to renew his subscription to SNOOP, but Williamson enlivens the piece by throwing an incredible twist into the story: the magazine writes back to his cancellation notice with blackmail material and a much higher renewal rate with no prepaid envelope. Joe Priddy is forced to renew; moreover, SNOOP has severely impaired his life by causing him to be forever paranoid. The letters in the story are a valuable craft element because the writing is pithy, yet the emotion is strong. Infused into the letters are Joe Priddy's reactions—"427.85? What the hell? What happened to \$11.95?"—which are also concise but quite revealing. Williamson chooses just the right methods to carry his story, doing so in fewer than four pages.

The editors of *Sudden Fiction* scoff at the notion that the short-short form is even younger than the short story, which Brander Matthews claimed to be the first to identify as a separate category from the novel in 1901. They state that the "short-short story" name may be fairly recent, but its forms are as old as myths, parables, fables, and exempla. Shapard and Thomas state that "the most often cited example of a classical short-short, Petronius' 'The Widow of Ephesus,' is no rude prototype. Given an updated setting it could easily pass as a contemporary short-short.... [T]he modern short story was an adaptation of many older story techniques, including those of short-short forms, to the overwhelming popularity of realism and its expansive embodiment, the novel."<sup>19</sup>

Every so often a writer catches us by surprise by placing his work in a completely unexpected form. The new (or not recently used) form refreshes the sometimes-tired short story and sends the message to readers and writers alike that it is reasonable and acceptable to try different approaches. Jack Matthews assaults conventional form in his short-short "A Questionnaire for Rudolph Gordon."<sup>20</sup> The piece is exactly what the title decrees: a questionnaire. He constructs the work as a series of questions, numbered one to one hundred, such as "10) Why had you been crying?" and "61) Why do you need so much money to live?" At first, the form seems ludicrous, with no potential for conveying anything about character or emotion. What can be accomplished with one hundred questions? But suddenly (hence, *Sudden Fiction*) it becomes clear that

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<sup>18</sup> Chet Williamson, in Shapard and Thomas 135.

<sup>19</sup> Shapard and Thomas xiv.

<sup>20</sup> Jack Matthews, in Shapard and Thomas 83.

these succinct questions give more insight to the character and what he is up against than the traditional form could.

The questions seem to serve initially as no more than dialogue, parents snapping questions left and right to their son. There appears to be no narrative or action. Yet, upon closer inspection, the reader starts to see a whole story contained within each question. Each question starts to tell so much: “19) Can you remember the woman saying, ‘No, we shouldn’t have done it,’ and the man answering, ‘Anyway, it’s too late now to change?’” and “64) Were you there when her eyes clouded over?” We see Rudolph Gordon’s past and present, his conflicts and desires. When the reader reads questions such as “56) What is a father?” and “57) What is a mother?” and “58) What is a son?” he is compelled to think deeply about the matters at hand and will start to see his own life as its own series of questions that need answering.

By the last round of twenty-five questions, the questionnaire is fully read as a story—with characters to care about, a conflict that needs resolving, and a strong interest from the reader. Questions such as “79) Who is in the red cottage now?” and “89) Who can say where these things all begin?” and “93) Don’t you have the pride and the skill to make your own way in life?” are rhetorical, but the reader starts to know Rudolph Gordon well enough as a person from these questions to answer them. The questionnaire is signed “Love always, Mom and Dad,” thus the characters of the parents are also very much reflected as it is they who have crafted all of these sometimes absurd and sometimes simple questions. The reader ascertains through this piece that Ralph Gordon is an extremely complicated character: a man with fake and real parents, who was possibly kidnapped, who was lied to, who says never instead of no, who sells his father’s paintings, and who lies. One end result of this careful crafting is that the reader is left feeling needy, wanting Ralph Gordon to give answers to all these questions. The concentrated emotional impact is present, and the universal, parent-child theme is there as well.

T. Coraghessan Boyle’s short-short “The Hit Man”<sup>21</sup> uses yet another approach: a scrapbook-type craft that catalogs a hit man’s early years until his death. This is what Theroux speaks of when he claims that very short works contain a novel. The reader sees this four-page story as a coming-of-age, fictional biography, which tells about the hit man’s trouble with teachers as a youngster, his life on the streets, the death of his parents (he “wastes” his father, but his mother dies naturally), first job, moods, first child, retirement, and death. The piece must be read slowly as Paley suggests,<sup>22</sup> and afterward the reader has experienced a character’s life and times in under a half hour. Boyle utilizes this form for all it is worth, and he has achieved an inclusive novel of a story.

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<sup>21</sup> T. Coraghessan Boyle, in Shapard and Thomas 79.

<sup>22</sup> In Shapard and Thomas 253.

Through the above examples, it is apparent that the short-short (or flash fiction) form is definitely in a rule-betraying, anti-story category of its own. The pieces are effectively condensed, and they revolutionize the stale, customary form. The writers take different roads with their narratives, yet they still achieve at least one of the objectives I mention in the introduction. The originality of the anti-story approaches is not limited to short-shorts, however. A number of writers have demonstrated the inventive possibilities that can emerge in works of typical short-story length.

The story "Nadine at 35: A Synopsis" by Jo Sapp<sup>23</sup> also introduces a new form for short fiction: an actual synopsis of a period of a woman's life. The reader does not experience epiphanies or the plot pyramid structure; rather, the reader is given a quick overview filled with concrete examples of the protagonist's struggle to keep her brain cells from slipping away. When Nadine's husband leaves her, "she does what any other right-thinking thirty-five-year-old American girl would do. She gets a job, subscribes to *Ms.*, deletes the word *girl*, along with *housewife* and *mankind* from her vocabulary, further limiting it, and decides to take a lover."<sup>24</sup> This imaginative form, much like Kincaid's, allows the reader to experience a full range of events in a short period of time. Interestingly enough, with the majority of the story possessing an abbreviated, nontraditional story structure, there is still a climax and a dénouement to be found. Sometimes even an anti-story can be traditional.

Donald Barthelme's piece, "Me and Miss Mandible," certainly goes against the traditional grain of short stories. Barthelme has constructed this as a series of journal entries, a nontraditional student's encounters with his teacher, Miss Mandible, and all things elementary-school related. The student is thirty-five years old, and his being easily accepted as eleven years old in the sixth grade is a misunderstanding he tries to clarify. As R. V. Cassill puts it, Barthelme's "characteristic fiction often seems to be constructed as collage—a pasting together of fragments gathered from the chaotic verbiage of our culture, set in comic and unexpected juxtapositions."<sup>25</sup> The reader takes a walk on the absurd side with this piece, and the humor and wit are endless. Through these scant diary entries, Barthelme achieves much: the pace is quick and smooth, and every entry is surprisingly profound and concentrated: "I am being solicited for the volleyball team. I decline, refusing to take unfair profit from my height";<sup>26</sup> "I return again and again to the problem of my future."<sup>27</sup> This fictitious, anomalous character is a narrator who satirizes all that is American education. The diary

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<sup>23</sup> Jo Sapp, in *The Norton Anthology of Short Fiction*, 5th ed., ed. R. V. Cassill (New York: Norton, 1995) 1435–37.

<sup>24</sup> Jo Sapp, in Cassill 1436.

<sup>25</sup> Cassill 58.

<sup>26</sup> In Cassill 59.

<sup>27</sup> In Cassill 62.

entry method strengthens and enriches the story. Barthelme's risky style has certainly paid off, still drawing upon the central elements of fiction in a truly original way.

Another story by Donald Barthelme, "Views of My Father Weeping," incorporated in Mary Rohrberger's anthology *Story to Anti-Story*, is a dreamscape that, as Rohrberger puts it, "owes much to writers like Gogol, Dostoevsky, Kafka, and Borges, whose dreamscapes provide a suprarational way of knowing."<sup>28</sup> By means of mixing time and place, the story's chunks of writing about the narrator's father—such as "An aristocrat was riding down the street in his carriage. He ran over my father"<sup>29</sup> and "My father throws his ball of knitting up in the air. The orange wool hangs there"<sup>30</sup>—intensify the dreamlike outcome. Barthelme's humor and satire are ever-present, and his ludicrous details and inconsistencies make the reader at first feel as if nothing has happened. However, upon closer inspection, the story does come full circle and the narrator achieves a small resolution to his conflict with his father; he understands his father more deeply. This story, though eccentric and rambling, focuses on the universal theme of children trying to better understand their parents. The emotional impact is powerfully concentrated.

Robert Coover, an inventive writer of contemporary fiction, has paved his own unique road in the field of the anti-story. As R. V. Cassill writes, "he has fused stylistic innovations with an exposure of new forms of consciousness emerging from our technological civilization. Some of his shorter work is based on the structure of fairy tales scrambled and recomposed by the television medium. Absurdity as a metaphysical principle combines with absurdity as a device for entertainment."<sup>31</sup> Coover employs the extraordinary to probe beyond sometimes dull exteriors. His short story "The Babysitter" is a variation of theme; an assortment of related incidents and fantasies that become bungled, as though a person "were rapidly switching channels on a television set."<sup>32</sup>

Coover rebels against the linear, causal plot in his patchwork story. The piece begins in the normal babysitter-type mode: The babysitter has arrived, and the parents are rushing about, not quite ready, while the children, Jimmy and Bitsy, are eating their dinner. The reader is initially deceived by this first glimpse because the tone of normalcy is suggested, a "B" movie where something goes comically wrong with the children or the parents miss being away too much while they are at a restaurant. But the reader is blindsided when the piece explodes in each episode; with all the surreal episodes, it is difficult to determine

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<sup>28</sup> Rohrberger 700.

<sup>29</sup> Rohrberger 700.

<sup>30</sup> Rohrberger 702.

<sup>31</sup> Cassill 324.

<sup>32</sup> Rohrberger 718.

what, in fact, is real and what is fantasy or nightmare. With each new passage (normally around eight or so sentences) the story's gears are dramatically shifted, and the reader has no footing. By the time the reader is halfway through the piece, he or she feels trapped and disorientated, as though he or she were thrown into a carnival funhouse. The major conflict is clouded, the plot seems slapdash, and the point of view is all over the place. Any traditionalist in the field of short stories would be dismayed by the liberties this piece takes, yet by the story's end, the reader has felt something so many stories are not capable of making him or her feel: drained. The story takes its reader to hell and back, and that would be a feat nearly impossible to implement if Coover had followed all the traditional rules. The result is significantly different from any traditional story.

Alain Robbe-Grillet constantly shifts focus in the story "The Secret Room." In this story about a murder, time moves backward and forward, and the concentration is shifted back and forth from the woman to the man. It is obvious that the woman is dead from early on, but her actual death is not placed until near the story's ending. Robbe-Grillet's fiction is certainly experimental, and he is a member of the French "new novel" movement. He revolts against conventional fictional devices such as plot and characterization. As Rohrberger puts it, "Plot, for example, supposes a rational, coherent universe, but for Robbe-Grillet the world is a meaningless puzzle and not a subject for mimetic art. 'The Secret Room' is like a motion picture with stop action, forward and reverse movements, and cuts out of sequence, but a sequential plot can be deduced: action does take place, characters are involved, and, one must assume, some kind of personal conflict leads to the appalling crime."<sup>33</sup> This is another example where rule breaking unwittingly begets traditional short-story order, and the concentrated emotional impact is certainly there.

In the story "In the Heart of the Heart of the Country," William H. Gass uses a compartmentalized approach, separating the narrative of the story into classifications such as "Weather," "My House," "Education," and "Vital Data." One example of a separate compartment is as follows: "The Church. The church has a steeple like the hat of a witch, and five birds, all doves, perch in its gutters."<sup>34</sup> The reader reads this story the way a prospective employer reads a resume, and the unspoken contract is that the writer will give the reader a complete story, but he will do so one detail at a time. The story comes together with these various puzzle pieces, and the reader, by the story's end, has that concentrated emotional impact, a satisfied contract, and an examination of various universal themes: small town life, love, loneliness, religion, and education.

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<sup>33</sup> Rohrberger 627.

<sup>34</sup> William H Gass in R. V. Cassill and Joyce Carol Oates, eds., *The Norton Anthology of Contemporary Fiction, second edition* (New York: Norton, 1998) 233.

Philip Stevick has a whole section of *Anti-Story* devoted to pieces that are “against mimesis.” When a piece of art imitates life, Stevick states, “we are persuaded by its force as an illusion ... we say that the [piece] ‘looks just like’ its object.... No one would wish to speak condescendingly of mimetic theory: some of the most admirable thinkers about art have held that the function of art is to imitate nature.... Still, it is possible to break the illusion that we are experiencing an imitation of life with some remarkable effects.... Only in recent years has short fiction contained the same possibilities, the rendering of a reality ‘out there’ in the world of observed experience deliberately broken by a reflexive commentary on the work itself, fiction about fiction,” also known as metafiction, fiction against mimesis.<sup>35</sup>

Joyce Carol Oates’s piece, “How I Contemplated the World from the Detroit House of Correction and Began My Life Over Again,”<sup>36</sup> relates a story by the use of a succession of notes, but, as ordinary in works of this style, the reader must wonder about what, if anything, happened. The occurrences related to the reader by the protagonist must be thought about at a level deeper than circumstantial.<sup>37</sup> In this piece, Oates is very liberated in her style. The notes, which comprise the piece of metafiction, ramble on about seemingly useless information. A poem is thrown into the mix, and two parts of the story are left empty of comments. The fragments of the protagonist’s life given to the reader provide a great sense of who exactly the character is. Oates really allows the reader to get into the main character’s soul by tossing out revealing bits of narrative: “Sugar doughnuts for breakfast. The toaster is very shiny, and my face is distorted in it. Is that my face?” (773); “A girl of fifteen [the protagonist], innocently experienced” (762); “The girl lies sleepless, wondering. Why here, why not there?” (770); “Out of the hospital, bruised and saddened and converted, with Princess’ grunts still tangled in my hair ... and Father in his overcoat looking like a prince himself, come to carry me off” (772). The format, entries, metafiction style, and subject matter are nontraditional. However, it is easy to find a conflict (girl versus herself, society, others), a climax (her struggle with Simon), a dénouement (returning home and reuniting with family), and a linear, causal plot. Using the most untraditional of forms, Oates’s end result is very much the same as a traditional story: the protagonist tries to discover the world; the protagonist is at war with the world; the protagonist returns home and all is (ostensibly) well.

John Barth has written metafiction on more than one occasion. In his stories, Barth “insists on art as artifice in which the real and fictional worlds are inseparable.”<sup>38</sup> His piece “Lost in the Funhouse” is no exception. In the online

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<sup>35</sup> Stevick xv–xvi.

<sup>36</sup> The story appears in Rohrberger’s anthology. Subsequent references of the story are to this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Rohrberger 762.

<sup>38</sup> Rohrberger 683.

article "The ABC's of Reality Construction," R. J. Hembree states that Barth conveys the essential self-consciousness of metafiction in this piece with the conventions of writing out in the open, drawing attention to the fact that the fiction is a made-up reality.<sup>39</sup> "Lost in the Funhouse" reads like a story evaluated with remarks from an editor or teacher. "As the plot moves forward, it is interrupted with comments about the pace of the story, rising action, climax, resolution, the use of italics.... 'They should be used *sparingly*.' Barth, a creative writing teacher himself, gives the reader a step by step guide of how the story was built within the framework of the story. The body of the story becomes transparent and the true skeleton is revealed like an x-ray."<sup>40</sup> Barth's daring approach produces a two-fold effect: the story contained within the story rests on the rather traditional side, but the effect of making the reader see the bold lines between fiction and reality achieves an especially different result.

As exhibited in the above examples, all of these stories contain the concentrated emotional impacts and the examination of universal themes in achieving ends similar to the conventional pieces. The stories each also satisfy a contract of sorts between the reader and writer, a variety of unspoken pacts that state that though the story might establish its own rules, the writer will follow those distinct rules. The reader must readjust, but he or she can be confident that there is a plan behind the method.

The study of these different short works has made me cognizant of another world that exists in writing. We, as writers, are emancipated artists, and no rule is steadfast; there is no set of guidelines one must internalize. Charles McGrath, in an article from the *New York Times*, says, "short stories these days are often less formulaic, less imitative than they used to be. There's no preferred style or mode anymore—even the *New Yorker* no longer publishes 'the *New Yorker* short story'—and there are now dozens of different camps of short-fiction writing, all happily coexisting."<sup>41</sup> The rules that evolved, endured, and are still taught to students today by various writing instructors exist for the sole purpose of guidance and direction. At times, direction is necessary and valuable to a writer. But there are other times when a writer has his own direction he must follow, and in those circumstances, he must realize that writing rules are not cast iron. Each and every "rule" that exists today can be broken and probably has already been broken. So, one might ask, "Does anything go?" And my answer is yes, anything *may* go, provided a story still contains most of those vital elements from Walter Cummins's list including universal themes, and the end result is still a concentrated emotional impact, satisfying that ever essential writer-reader

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<sup>39</sup> R. J. Hembree, "The ABC's of Reality Construction," *Writers' Village*, 1995. [www.writersvillage.com/preview/Metafiction.htm](http://www.writersvillage.com/preview/Metafiction.htm).

<sup>40</sup> Hembree.

<sup>41</sup> Charles McGrath, "The Short Story Shakes Itself Out of Academe," *New York Times*, 25 August 2004: Section E, Page 1, Column 4.

transaction. The shackles are crumbling, and I know whatever circumstances my writing dictates, I can meet them. I am free to do so. Rules are spider webs to us writers. We can heed them or tear through them.