

## YOUR RESPONSE TO SHORT FICTION And My Response to Your Response

As I read your responses to the questions I gave you on Wed., I was struck, but not really surprised, by how many of your comments agreed in spirit (if not exact wording) with many of the points I'll want to stress and reinforce throughout the semester. I think this speaks of your experience working with literature as an object of study, and indicated, about many of you, your sophistication as readers. I think everyone has a strong base on which to build an even deeper appreciation for the art of the short story, and for literature in general.

Here are some of the points you made, which struck a chord with me, as I read through your responses, paraphrased and partially quoted below. My comments are in italics:

Short stories by definition are supposed to be brief, and "Young Man on Sixth Avenue" "really defines the 'short' in short story." *We'll see in a few weeks which famous short story writer vehemently agrees with this comment.*

I appreciated "Love in L.A." because of its "realism." I could relate to Jake, the main character, and his wanting to better his life. *A major expectation of most readers is that literature create worlds which "seem real" or have "verisimilitude." Even the wildest fantasies and science fiction scenarios, if they don't seem at least plausible on some level, usually lose their power and appeal (at least for most people).*

I appreciated "Girl" because it was "much different from any other short story I've ever read." *A lot of readers realize that the best stories are those that are unpredictable in some way. They have a novelty, a sense of freshness. They take your imagination where it hasn't been before; and, like any trip to a newly discovered place, that untried territory can be exciting than the same old worn path.*

"The Story of an Hour" lets readers "draw their own conclusions" from the story. It gets readers to think. *A lot of readers enjoy encountering works that are challenging and provocative, rather than easy and predictable. Great literature always has that ability to provoke us to deeper, more profound levels of thought, providing us with a deeper experience of human nature than we might have otherwise had. That "no pain, no gain" cliché works here, because if it's too easy, if it doesn't make you "think," it's probably something you already know, and you don't really need to read it.*

"Killings" seemed like a worthwhile story, when I understood parts of it. I like mysteries; but a lot of this story was a mystery to me because I did not understand what was going on. *Sometimes this is the fault of the story. It's a "bad" or poorly written, poorly constructed story and the author is incompetent. Sometimes, though, not "getting it" has to do with the reader not reading attentively enough, or not reading between the lines (interpreting ambiguities or connotative meanings), or not knowing how to read something that's written in a new or different way. It also might have to do with the reader's expectations. If I'm expecting a murder mystery with lots of intense plot and action and I get a kind of quiet, psychological, subtle interior mystery instead, I might be disappointed and kind of resistant to figuring out what's going on. I just don't want to bother because it's not what I normally like or what I expected. The solution to that problem probably seems obvious. Give the work a second or third reading, adjusting your expectations. If you still don't understand it, the writing may be pretty weak, or you may need a little help.*

"The Lady with a Pet Dog" was worthwhile because it "showed how people change." *Change is so often at the heart of the short story, its raison d'être (whole reason for being). A character (usually the main character, or "protagonist") begins the story with one consciousness and ends with another. There's been change, growth, and that's what the story dramatically renders.*

Any story that is enjoyed by its reader is worthwhile. *Two students wrote this in practically the same exact words, and many others wrote to the effect that a short story should be “entertaining.” I’ll never disagree with that. It’s a simple point but true. Literature is meant to be entertaining. That enjoyment, in some cases, is an end in itself. I don’t read George Carlin, for instance, to think more deeply about U.S. foreign policy, or whatever; I read him to laugh. But I do think a bonus—and I think what makes him a great writer—is that he makes me think deeply, too.*

*Compare these two comments:*

(1) “When I read a short story, I expect that it won’t be in a lot of detail. Short stories leave you wondering, leave you asking questions about why things happened the way they did. You must always use your imagination to give you the answer to the questions you have, and there’s never just one answer.”

(2) “When I read a short story I expect good details [and descriptions]. Details keep my interest in the story.”

*Is one of these statements more “right” than the other? How can we reconcile them?*

I didn’t appreciate “Love in L.A.” because the story was very open-ended. I felt as if I did not understand the theme the author was trying to convey, or the main character’s motives. *This happens a lot when we’re reading something challenging, and if it happens to you, you shouldn’t immediately think there’s anything wrong with the story or wrong with you. It probably indicates that the story is subtle rather than obvious, and you might have to read it two or three times before you “get it.” Good short stories deserve that second and even third read-through. They can make all the difference—knowing “what happens” allows you to pay attention to the finer details that will reveal more meaning to you on a second and even third reading. The reward is that click you’ll hear as the light turns on in your mind, as you suddenly make meaning in a deeper, more satisfying way than if it had been obvious all along.*

“Girl” was worthwhile because I could relate to it. Although the author is writing about growing up in [Antigua], it seemed so similar to all the rules my mom, aunts, and grandmother used to tell me. Like the line, “but I don’t sing benna on Sundays at all and never in Sunday school” which sounds like my mom telling me to “turn off that rap mess; it’s Sunday.” That was weird and funny—that he was writing about another culture and it seemed so similar to the United States. *This person is really experiencing the pleasure of being able to jump cultures and find that common human thread. Isn’t it great when you find you can relate to someone who you initially thought was so different from you? Imagine being able to travel, not only across physical distances to make that connection, but through time as well. To be able to go back in history as far as the written word goes back, and discover that common human thread. That long ago inside insight into human nature that’s still expresses your own nature. That’s what literature offers.*

I didn’t appreciate “Girl” because all the speaker did was give orders. The speaker went on and on about how to do chores, went on and on bossing the girl around. There wasn’t any substance or story behind the reading. What’s the point? *One person’s treasure is another’s junk, it seems! Is there a right and wrong here? I don’t think so. Anytime a writer goes out on a limb with an experimental style, as Jamaica Kincaid does in “Girl,” she’s going to encounter a range of opinion about the work. And I think it’s true in general that experimental forms of fiction—those attempts to create new forms—often end up requiring more from the reader, who has no precedent for understanding it. That’s a tough position for the reader to be in. But some readers enjoy being in that position, having to open up to the story in new ways to get meaning out of it.*

*This student expresses the opposite of what many students maintain—namely, that there has to be a “point” (message, moral, lesson) to a short story. Note the frustration in the response just above. But this student says:*

“I appreciated the fact that there seemed to be no ‘point’ to the story [“Soldier’s Home”]. I don’t think it had a plot that we could diagram. It was up to the reader to deduce his or her own reaction to or thoughts about the story.” *Most readers want meaning, but some are really uncomfortable with stories that don’t loudly announce their meaning, that leave it to readers*

*to figure out their own meanings, if they want to. I think this student isn't saying that the story has no point, just that the point isn't forced on her, or obvious in any way. She gets to decide what it means, when she's ready.*

**“A short story should be entertaining. The characters should have depth. I want to be able to picture them. I want to be able to picture the scenery. When I read a short story, I expect to forget that I'm sitting and reading, and instead picture the story in my head.”**

*My first impression here is that this is someone who likes to read, someone invites an author to stretch her imagination, likes to get absorbed in the world of the story. Of course, I might be wrong, and just projecting my own thinking! But my impression is that this comment is a fairly accurate representation of people who like reading generally feel.*