

Words Aptly Spoken
SHORT STORIES



*Classical
Conversations*
MULTIMEDIA

Jen Greenholt, *Words Aptly Spoken Series*
An Introduction to Classical Literature, Short Stories
First printing 2007. Second printing 2011.

©2011 Classical Conversations® MultiMedia. All rights reserved.

Published by Classical Conversations, Inc.
P.O. Box 909
West End, NC 27376
www.ClassicalConversations.com | www.ClassicalConversationsBooks.com

Cover design by Classical Conversations.

Printed in the United States of America.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise, without prior permission of the author, except as provided by USA copyright law.

ISBN:

*Classical
Conversations*
MULTIMEDIA

Acknowledgments

Many thanks to the editors at Classical Conversations:

The opportunity to read and ponder the great stories in this collection has been a privilege. Your input and advice have been gifts throughout the process.

SAMPLE

Foreword

When you read a good story, what does it make you feel? What sets a classic tale apart from the rest? Is it a vague, happy feeling that you get when you reach, “The End”? Or is it, perhaps, a more concrete reaction—the story had an important message that made you think? Whatever the reason, there is something special about a story that can both provide enjoyment and entertainment for its readers and help them to see or understand a deeper message.

Many authors have the priceless gift of being able to combine these two aspects in their work. In the pages that follow, you will have a chance to enjoy the works of writers like Nathaniel Hawthorne, Hans Christian Andersen, O. Henry, and more. This short story collection provides an introduction to classic literature in a slightly less threatening form—the short story.

Being able to read works of classic literature and understand what makes them classics is an invaluable skill that can carry you from the classroom to educated society and beyond. However, in order to develop that skill, you need to begin at the beginning. Sometimes the best way to do that is to think like a writer as well as a reader. For this reason, *Words Aptly Spoken: Short Stories* focuses on the basic elements that make up a story. Through reading and writing exercises, this guide will help you understand what features make up a polished short story.

As with other collections in the *Words Aptly Spoken* series, *Short Stories* contains a series of questions about each work being studied. Review questions help you identify the basic plot, characters, setting, and message of the book. Thought questions take the themes and ideas raised by each author and help you apply them to other, more familiar situations.

Sometimes it is easier to learn by doing, and *Short Stories* gives you tools to practice your own creativity. Writing Practices at the end of each section will give you the opportunity to imitate good writing skills. Thinking about a story from a writer’s perspective will help you recognize strong and weak elements in other authors’ works, but it also makes reading and writing about classic literature a more fulfilling experience.

All this being said, take a deep breath, and get ready to plunge into some great short stories.

SAMPLE

Table of Contents

A Note for Parents: Tools for the Journey	9
Story Comprehension Questions	
 STUDY GUIDES	
<i>Where Did That Come From?</i> Plot Twists and Surprise Endings	13
“A Man and the Snake,” Ambrose Bierce	15
“The Notorious Jumping Frog of Calaveras County,” Mark Twain	21
“The Cop and the Anthem,” O. Henry	27
 <i>Can You Please Focus?</i> Story Focus.....	33
“Little Girls Wiser than Men,” Leo Tolstoy.....	35
 <i>What Happened To Kansas?</i> Settings.....	39
“The Mansion,” Henry Van Dyke.....	41
 <i>Have We Met?</i> Character Development	59
“The Hiltons’ Holiday,” Sarah Orne Jewett	61
“The Schoolboy’s Story,” Charles Dickens.....	73
 <i>What’s Cooking?</i> Plot	83
“The Celestial Railroad,” Nathaniel Hawthorne.....	85
“The Necklace,” Henri Guy de Maupassant.....	97
 <i>Do I Sense a Connection?</i> Theme	105
“God Lives,” Hans Christian Andersen	107
“The Teapot,” Andersen.....	109
“Father Zossima’s Brother,” Fyodor Dostoevsky	111
“The Startling Painting,” Dostoevsky	115
 <i>Was it a Dark and Stormy Night?</i> Mood	119
“The Casket Scenes” from <i>The Merchant of Venice</i> , William Shakespeare	121
“Iago’s intentions” from <i>Othello</i> , Shakespeare.....	133
“The Pardoner’s Tale,” Geoffrey Chaucer	141
Paradise Lost, Book 1, John Milton	155
“Christmas Bells,” Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.....	175
 <i>May I Ask Who Is Speaking?</i> Point of View.....	179
“The Hammer of God,” G.K. Chesterton.....	181
“The Tell-Tale Heart,” Edgar Allan Poe	193

What Does It Have To Do With Me? Moral Application..... 199
 “Stolen Fruit,” Saint Augustine 201
 “Alypius and the Gladiators,” Saint Augustine 203

Looking Back, Looking Forward 207

Bibliography 209

Photo Credits..... 211

SAMPLE

A Note For Parents: Tools for the Journey

If you have ever heard Shakespeare performed before a live audience and marveled at the ease with which the words flowed from the actors' lips; if you have ever envied people who can call on Milton, Dickens, Joyce, and Lewis to lend eloquence to their argument; if you have skimmed a list of the 100 greatest novels of all time and winced as you remembered struggling to finish *The Grapes of Wrath* in high school—you may think that the great conversations of literature are forever closed to you.

The good news is, they're not! Whether you are a student, an adult, a parent, a child, or all of the above, you have the capability to train yourself not only to read great literature, but also to share its beauty, truth, and joy with others.

Although most people learn to read as children, the art of deliberately engaging with the content and ideas of a novel or short story requires ongoing practice.

The *Words Aptly Spoken* series is based on the classical model of education,¹ which breaks learning into three natural stages: grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric. In the grammar stage, you learn the vocabulary of a subject. In the dialectic stage, you learn to develop logical arguments and analyze others' ideas. In the rhetoric stage, you explore the consequences of ideas as you form and express your own. This guide will help you as you begin to apply the classical model to the study of literature.

Why Short Stories?

As a parent or adult, you might be asking, "But why short stories? Aren't they inferior to novels? How hard can it be to read a short story, or write one? How much can you really say in a thousand words?" The short answer? A lot.

As a developing reader and writer, however, short stories have a very specific advantage over longer books: they are short. It sounds obvious, but it's actually important. Because the stories in this collection are short in length, you can easily read them multiple times. Whereas you might need a week to complete a four hundred-page novel, you might be able to read a four-page story twice in a single hour. As a result, you can pick out different pieces of the story each time and focus on the details.

For short stories as well as long novels, one of the characteristics of a classic is that you can read it over and over again. The first time, you read to find out what happens. The second time, you might notice what events move the plot forward. The third time, you might see how the characters grow and change. The fourth time, you might pick out individual descriptive words that create a specific mood in a scene. The fifth time might reveal similarities between this story and others you have read.

How to Use This Book

Despite popular belief, reading is not wholly instinctive. Because comprehension, analysis, and critical thinking require practice, each story in this collection comes with a set of questions designed to give structure and guidance to your reading. Treat these questions

¹ See Dorothy Sayers' essay, "The Lost Tools of Learning."

as tools not only for reading, but also for writing, leading discussion, and sharing your ideas with others.

Review Questions pull out the **grammar** for each selection: Who is it about? (Characters) What happens? (Plot) Where does it take place? (Setting) What is the message? (Theme) What is the scope or time frame? (Focus), and so on. For readers of all ages, repeatedly asking these questions will generate good reading habits; eventually, as you read, your brain will automatically take note of this information and store it for future use.

Thought Questions are an exercise in **dialectic**, taking the basic elements from the review questions and encouraging you to analyze that information in light of other knowledge. As you become more familiar with the building blocks of a story, you should begin to ask questions of your own. What does this mean for me? How should I respond to this argument? You can use the thought questions as a jump-start for your own thinking process, as training tools for leading discussion, or as topics for essays and book reports.

You may not be able to answer the questions after just one reading, and because these stories are short, you should take time to read each story at least twice. The first time should be for general enjoyment and to get a feel for the author's writing style. The next reading should look a little deeper at the underlying issues the author confronts.

A word of caution: don't merely "look up" the answers to the questions and skim the rest of the story. Once established, this habit will make it harder for you to read and understand more difficult books. After all, self-respecting Olympic runners know that they would be at a severe disadvantage in the actual games if they secretly completed only half of their daily training regimen. In the same way, the results you achieve as a reader will reflect the quality and consistency of your training.

Another important part of your training as a reader is learning to think about literature from the perspective of a writer. For this reason, *Short Stories* is divided into sections dealing with different elements of a good story: plot, characters, point of view, and so on. Each section begins with a short overview of the topic and suggested questions to keep in mind as you read one or more stories that demonstrate different approaches to that topic.

Each section ends with a writing practice that will help you to develop your creativity and begin to think like a short story writer. Although a particular exercise is suggested for each story studied, if you would rather practice a different skill or work on several at once, feel free to do so.

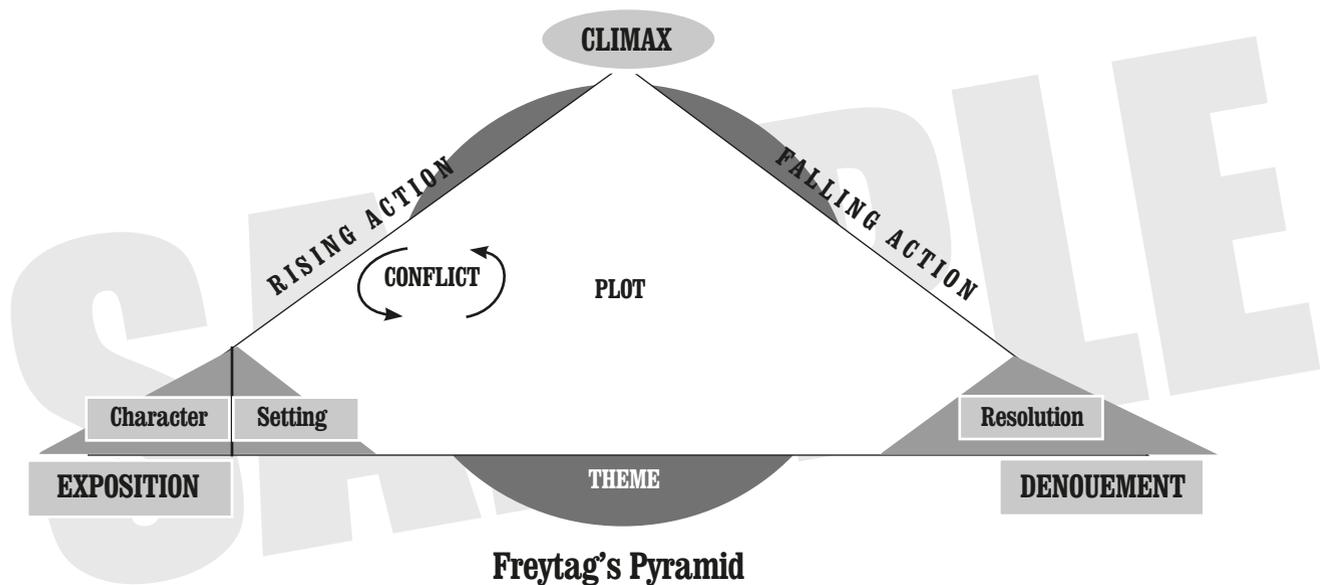
The Journey in Perspective

One of the most important things to remember as you start—or resume—this journey is that it doesn't happen overnight. The art of leading and sharing in conversations about classical literature takes a lifetime to refine. You must begin with the fundamentals: learning to read closely, taking notes, and developing the vocabulary to structure your ideas and explain them to others (**grammar**). You must practice: adding new techniques, revising old ones, and comparing the results (**dialectic**). And then you will be ready to start all over again as you share the joy of the journey with others around you (**rhetoric**). Let's get started!

Story Comprehension Questions

Although every story is different, all authors must consider certain common elements. A good reader thinks like a writer and vice versa, so whether reading or writing, you will benefit from thinking about the parts of a story (**grammar**).

In the nineteenth century, a German writer named Gustav Freytag developed a model he used to analyze plays. Here is a modified version that may help you visualize the relationship between the different elements of a story:



Freytag's Pyramid

As you read, you should keep certain questions in the back of your mind to ensure that you understand what's going on and can pick out the different features of a story. Each section in this book will focus on one set of questions, but to develop good reading habits, refer back to this page frequently to make sure you can answer all the questions for each story you read.

Focus

- What is the time span of the story?
- Does the author give background information on the characters? The setting? The plot?
- How is background information given (flashbacks, references by characters or narrator)?
- Is the author able to wrap up all loose ends satisfactorily by the conclusion of the story?

Setting

- Where does the story take place? How do you know?

- How does the author describe the setting? What does the setting look like?
- What kind of emotions does the setting evoke? Spooky? Normal? Funny? Why?
- Is the setting important to the story? Why?
- Does the author assume you are familiar with the place, or does he or she provide that information?

Characters

- How many characters are in the story?
- What are their names?
- What does each character look like?
- Does the author make you like or dislike any of the characters? How? Why?
- What is the major character trait of each person? How does the author reveal that to you?
- Are the characters believable? Do they act the way you expect or are they complicated?
- Do any of the characters change in the course of the story? How and why?

Plot

- Outline the specific chain of events.
- How is the story introduced?
- Is there a rising action?
- Is there a climax or turning point?
- Is there a falling action?
- How does the story conclude?
- How is the plot revealed (through action, conversation, or the author's descriptions)?
- Does everything happen in sequence, or are there flashbacks?
- Does the author lay out the plot clearly, or are there events you must guess at?

Theme/Moral

- What is the theme of the story? Love? Greed? Sacrifice?
- What is the moral of the story?
- What is the author trying to reveal about human nature?
- What is the worldview of each of the characters?
- What do you think might be the author's worldview? What makes you think so?

Your Perspective

- Did you like the story?
- What would have made it more interesting?
- How would you have changed any of the characters? Why?
- Which character did you like best? Least?
- Could you relate to any aspect of the story? How?

Where Did That Come From?

PLOT TWISTS and SURPRISE ENDINGS

Have you ever heard someone say, “That movie (or book) was way too predictable”? If you have, then you have heard a very common complaint. Think about it: people have been writing books for centuries. Writing a story with a completely original plot is highly unlikely. So what keeps an author’s work from becoming “just another Cinderella story”?

For some authors, the answer lies in plot twists and surprise endings, which lead you to expect one type of ending and then at the last moment go a different direction. These devices keep the reader off balance and interested in what happens next. The following three stories are written by authors who excelled at using plot twists. As you read each story, remind yourself of the following questions about plots:

- How is the story introduced?
- Is there a rising action?
- Is there a climax or turning point?
- Is there a falling action?
- How does the story conclude?
- How is the plot revealed (through action, conversation, or the author’s descriptions)?
- Does everything happen in sequence, or are there flashbacks?
- Does the author lay out the plot clearly, or are there events you must guess at?

Some stories with unexpected endings—like the ones in this section—invite you to be a detective, especially as you read them a second time and look for the hints you might have missed the first time. Sometimes, though, the author deliberately avoids giving clues to his or her ending. As you read, also consider the relationship between an author and a reader. As a reader, is it more satisfying to be able to predict the ending of a story or to be surprised? Put yourself in the author’s position, and think through what your own approach to the element of surprise would be.

SAMPLE

"The Cop and the Anthem"

O. Henry



William S. Porter (1862-1910), an American writer, was imprisoned in 1898 for alleged embezzlement and spent three years in a federal prison. When he was freed in 1901, he turned over a new leaf and took a new name as well. He is remembered by this name: O. Henry. He had a gift for finding extraordinary occurrences in the lives of ordinary people. Most of his subjects lived in the poorer sections of New York City. "The Cop and the Anthem," first published in 1904, presents the life of a man who finds prison preferable to another winter out in the cold.

On his bench in Madison Square Soapy moved uneasily. When wild geese honk high of nights, and when women without sealskin coats grow kind to their husbands, and when Soapy moves uneasily on his bench in the park, you may know that winter is near at hand.

A dead leaf fell in Soapy's lap. That was Jack Frost's card. Jack is kind to the regular denizens of Madison Square, and gives fair warning of his annual call. At the corners of four streets he hands his pasteboard to the North Wind, footman of the mansion of All Outdoors, so that the inhabitants thereof may make ready.

Soapy's mind became cognisant of the fact that the time had come for him to resolve himself into a singular Committee of Ways and Means to provide against the coming rigour. And therefore he moved uneasily on his bench.

The hibernatorial ambitions of Soapy were not of the highest. In them there were no considerations of Mediterranean cruises, of soporific Southern skies drifting in the Vesuvian Bay. Three months on the Island was what his soul craved. Three months of assured board and bed and congenial company, safe from Boreas and bluecoats, seemed to Soapy the essence of things desirable.

For years the hospitable Blackwell's had been his winter quarters. Just as his more fortunate fellow New Yorkers had bought their tickets to Palm Beach and the Riviera each winter, so Soapy had made his humble arrangements for his annual hegira to the Island. And now the time was come. On the previous night three Sabbath newspapers, distributed beneath his coat, about his ankles and over his lap, had failed to repulse the cold as he slept on his bench near the spurting fountain in the ancient square. So the Island loomed big and timely in Soapy's mind. He scorned the provisions made in the name of charity for the city's



dependents. In Soapy's opinion the Law was more benign than Philanthropy. There was an endless round of institutions, municipal and eleemosynary, on which he might set out and receive lodging and food accordant with the simple life. But to one of Soapy's proud spirit the gifts of charity are encumbered. If not in coin you must pay in humiliation of spirit for every benefit received at the hands of philanthropy. As Caesar had his Brutus, every bed of charity must have its toll of a bath, every loaf of bread its compensation of a private and personal inquisition. Wherefore it is better to be a guest of the law, which though conducted by rules, does not meddle unduly with a gentleman's private affairs.

Soapy, having decided to go to the Island, at once set about accomplishing his desire. There were many easy ways of doing this. The pleasantest was to dine luxuriously at some expensive restaurant; and then, after declaring insolvency, be handed over quietly and without uproar to a policeman. An accommodating magistrate would do the rest.

Soapy left his bench and strolled out of the square and across the level sea of asphalt, where Broadway and Fifth Avenue flow together. Up Broadway he turned, and halted at a glittering cafe, where are gathered together nightly the choicest products of the grape, the silkworm and the protoplasm.

Soapy had confidence in himself from the lowest button of his vest upward. He was shaven, and his coat was decent and his neat black, ready-tied four-in-hand had been presented to him by a lady missionary on Thanksgiving Day. If he could reach a table in the restaurant unsuspected success would be his. The portion of him that would show above the table would raise no doubt in the waiter's mind. A roasted mallard duck, thought Soapy, would be about the thing—with a bottle of Chablis, and then Camembert, a demi-tasse and a cigar. One dollar for the cigar would be enough. The total would not be so high as to call forth any supreme manifestation of revenge from the cafe management; and yet the meat would leave him filled and happy for the journey to his winter refuge.

But as Soapy set foot inside the restaurant door the head waiter's eye fell upon his frayed trousers and decadent shoes. Strong and ready hands turned him about and conveyed him in silence and haste to the sidewalk and averted the ignoble fate of the menaced mallard.

Soapy turned off Broadway. It seemed that his route to the coveted island was not to be an epicurean one. Some other way of entering limbo must be thought of.

At a corner of Sixth Avenue electric lights and cunningly displayed wares behind plate-glass made a shop window conspicuous. Soapy took a cobblestone and dashed it through the glass. People came running around the corner, a policeman in the lead. Soapy stood still, with his hands in his pockets, and smiled at the sight of brass buttons.

"Where's the man that done that?" inquired the officer excitedly.

"Don't you figure out that I might have had something to do with it?" said Soapy, not without sarcasm, but friendly, as one greets good fortune.

The policeman's mind refused to accept Soapy even as a clue. Men who smash windows do not remain to parley with the law's minions. They take to their heels. The policeman saw a man half way down the block running to catch a car. With drawn club he joined in the pursuit. Soapy, with disgust in his heart, loafed along, twice unsuccessful.

On the opposite side of the street was a restaurant of no great pretensions. It catered to large appetites and modest purses. Its crockery and atmosphere were thick; its soup and napery thin. Into this place Soapy took his accusive shoes and telltale trousers without challenge. At a table he sat and consumed beefsteak, flapjacks, doughnuts and pie. And then to the waiter he betrayed the fact that the minutest coin and himself were strangers.

"Now, get busy and call a cop," said Soapy. "And don't keep a gentleman waiting."

"No cop for youse," said the waiter, with a voice like butter cakes and an eye like the cherry in a Manhattan cocktail. "Hey, Con!"

Neatly upon his left ear on the callous pavement two waiters pitched Soapy. He arose, joint by joint, as a carpenter's rule opens, and beat the dust from his clothes. Arrest seemed but a rosy dream. The Island seemed very far away. A policeman who stood before a drug store two doors away laughed and walked down the street.

Five blocks Soapy travelled before his courage permitted him to woo capture again. This time the opportunity presented what he fatuously termed to himself a "cinch." A young woman of a modest and pleasing guise was standing before a show window gazing with sprightly interest at its display of shaving mugs and inkstands, and two yards from the window a large policeman of severe demeanour leaned against a water plug.



It was Soapy's design to assume the role of the despicable and execrated "masher." The refined and elegant appearance of his victim and the contiguity of the conscientious cop encouraged him to believe that he would soon feel the pleasant official clutch upon his arm that would insure his winter quarters on the right little, tight little isle.

Soapy straightened the lady missionary's readymade tie, dragged his shrinking cuffs into the open, set his hat at a killing cant and sidled toward the young woman. He made eyes at her, was taken with sudden coughs and "hems," smiled, smirked and went brazenly through the impudent and contemptible litany of the "masher." With half an eye Soapy saw that the policeman was watching him fixedly. The young woman moved away a few steps, and again bestowed her absorbed attention upon the shaving mugs. Soapy followed, boldly stepping to her side, raised his hat and said:

"Ah there, Bedelia! Don't you want to come and play in my yard?"

The policeman was still looking. The persecuted young woman had but to beckon a finger and Soapy would be practically en route for his insular haven. Already he imagined he could feel the cozy warmth of the station-house. The young woman faced him and, stretching out a hand, caught Soapy's coat sleeve.

"Sure, Mike," she said joyfully, "if you'll blow me to a pail of suds. I'd have spoke to you sooner, but the cop was watching."

With the young woman playing the clinging ivy to his oak Soapy walked past the policeman overcome with gloom. He seemed doomed to liberty.

At the next corner he shook off his companion and ran. He halted in the district where by night are found the lightest streets, hearts, vows and librettos. Women in furs and men

in greatcoats moved gaily in the wintry air. A sudden fear seized Soapy that some dreadful enchantment had rendered him immune to arrest. The thought brought a little of panic upon it, and when he came upon another policeman lounging grandly in front of a transplendent theatre he caught at the immediate straw of "disorderly conduct."

On the sidewalk Soapy began to yell drunken gibberish at the top of his harsh voice. He danced, howled, raved and otherwise disturbed the welkin.

The policeman twirled his club, turned his back to Soapy and remarked to a citizen. "'Tis one of them Yale lads celebratin' the goose egg they give to the Hartford College. Noisy; but no harm. We've instructions to lave them be."

Disconsolate, Soapy ceased his unavailing racket. Would never a policeman lay hands on him? In his fancy the Island seemed an unattainable Arcadia. He buttoned his thin coat against the chilling wind.

In a cigar store he saw a well-dressed man lighting a cigar at a swinging light. His silk umbrella he had set by the door on entering. Soapy stepped inside, secured the umbrella and sauntered off with it slowly. The man at the cigar light followed hastily. "My umbrella," he said, sternly.

"Oh, is it?" sneered Soapy, adding insult to petit larceny. "Well, why don't you call a policeman? I took it. Your umbrella! Why don't you call a cop? There stands one on the corner."

The umbrella owner slowed his steps. Soapy did likewise, with a presentiment that luck would again run against him. The policeman looked at the two curiously.

"Of course," said the umbrella man—"that is—well, you know how these mistakes occur—I—if it's your umbrella I hope you'll excuse me—I picked it up this morning in a restaurant—If you recognise it as yours, why—I hope you'll—"

"Of course it's mine," said Soapy, viciously.

The ex-umbrella man retreated. The policeman hurried to assist a tall blonde in an opera cloak across the street in front of a street car that was approaching two blocks away.

Soapy walked eastward through a street damaged by improvements. He hurled the umbrella wrathfully into an excavation. He muttered against the men who wear helmets and carry clubs. Because he wanted to fall into their clutches, they seemed to regard him as a king who could do no wrong.

At length Soapy reached one of the avenues to the east where the glitter and turmoil was but faint. He set his face down this toward Madison Square, for the homing instinct survives even when the home is a park bench.

But on an unusually quiet corner Soapy came to a standstill. Here was an old church, quaint and rambling and gabled. Through one violet-stained window a soft light glowed, where, no doubt, the organist loitered over the keys, making sure of his mastery of the coming Sabbath anthem. For there drifted out to Soapy's ears sweet music that caught and held him transfixed against the convolutions of the iron fence.

The moon was above, lustrous and serene; vehicles and pedestrians were few; sparrows twittered sleepily in the eaves—for a little while the scene might have been a country churchyard. And the anthem that the organist played cemented Soapy to the iron fence, for he

had known it well in the days when his life contained such things as mothers and roses and ambitions and friends and immaculate thoughts and collars.

The conjunction of Soapy’s receptive state of mind and the influences about the old church wrought a sudden and wonderful change in his soul. He viewed with swift horror the pit into which he had tumbled, the degraded days, unworthy desires, dead hopes, wrecked faculties and base motives that made up his existence.

And also in a moment his heart responded thrillingly to this novel mood. An instantaneous and strong impulse moved him to battle with his desperate fate. He would pull himself out of the mire; he would make a man of himself again; he would conquer the evil that had taken possession of him. There was time; he was comparatively young yet; he would resurrect his old eager ambitions and pursue them without faltering. Those solemn but sweet organ notes had set up a revolution in him. To-morrow he would go into the roaring downtown district and find work. A fur importer had once offered him a place as driver. He would find him to-morrow and ask for the position. He would be somebody in the world. He would—

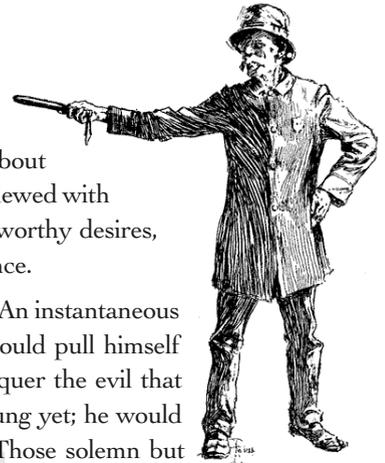
Soapy felt a hand laid on his arm. He looked quickly around into the broad face of a policeman.

“What are you doin’ here?” asked the officer.

“Nothin’,” said Soapy.

“Then come along,” said the policeman.

“Three months on the Island,” said the Magistrate in the Police Court the next morning.



Review Questions

1. Where did Soapy usually go for the winter months? How did he get there?
2. How did Soapy first attempt to get arrested? Why did his strategy fail?
3. Why did the man with the umbrella choose not to have Soapy arrested?
4. What brought about Soapy’s change of heart?
5. For what crime was Soapy finally arrested?

Thought Questions

1. Imagine what it would be like to have no home or even shelter during the winter. Do you think a prison cell would be preferable to taking charity? Why or why not?
2. Should prison be harsh and unpleasant, or is the loss of freedom punishment enough? What is the purpose of imprisoning criminals? Discuss.
3. Do you think Soapy would still want to change when he got off the Island again? Is it harder to make promises to reform in tough times or when things are going well? Why?
4. Do you think O. Henry’s portrayal of the law and its relation to society still applies today?
5. Is it “fair” for an author to surprise readers without giving them clues to how a story will end? Why or why not? Does an author owe his or her readers anything?

PLOT TWISTS and SURPRISE ENDINGS

Writing Practice

Ambrose Bierce, Mark Twain, and O. Henry were all masters of the surprise endings and unexpected plot twists that keep readers' attention. The introduction, stage-setting, and climax of the story lead toward a seemingly straightforward conclusion. At the last minute, the story does a 180-degree turn and ends up in a completely different location than you might have guessed.

Now that you have seen examples of these authors' writing, ask yourself what characteristics of the stories made you think the stories were going to end in a predictable way. Think about the structure of the stories, who narrates them, how they begin, in what order the events occur, the way the characters are introduced, and how the plot twists are revealed. After reading each story a second time, do you notice any clues that point toward the surprise ending?

Now it's your turn. Think about each of the following familiar stories:

Cinderella

Beauty and the Beast

The Three Little Pigs

Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer

The Frog Prince

Hansel and Gretel

Your goal is to re-imagine the stories to produce the "shock effect" that Bierce, Twain, and O. Henry produced. Using some of the techniques you have seen, come up with a way to end each classic story with a twist. Be as specific as you can, and don't forget to decide if you will give your reader "clues" to the new ending, and if so, how you will do it.

Can You Please Focus?

STORY FOCUS

Short stories have one characteristic that immediately sets them apart from novels. They are short. While this observation may seem obvious, it is an important one to remember. Novels can have three plots, five subplots, and fifteen characters and deal with all of them thoroughly by the end. Short stories do not generally have this ability. Within the scope of most short stories, it is very difficult to deal with multiple plots or numerous characters. The author has to choose a focus for their story.

In a short story, often the entire plot will be focused on one small event. This event may be the last straw on an already loaded-down camel, but the author does not have to include all the other straws. While some background information may be needed, it is usually kept as brief as possible. Pay particular attention to these questions as you read the following short story:

- What is the time span of the story?
- Does the author give background information on the characters? The setting? The plot?
- How is background information given (flashbacks, references by the characters or narrator)?
- Is the author able to wrap up all of the loose ends by the conclusion of the story?

A short story author is a little bit like the writer of a history book. All of human history would never fit into a single book, so historians have to choose which events and people to include. When you write a short story, you have to do the same thing. The good news is that even if you're telling a story that has been told a million times before, it is possible to make it fresh by changing the focus.

SAMPLE