

## SHORT STORY ANALYSIS: AN EXAMPLE IN ESSAY

Twenty human beings extinguished their victim's life today at the College for Seniors. We mangled the body for nearly two hours. I know; I was there. When we were done there was not even an effort to see if a spark of life remained. Our last act was unanimous agreement to move to the second victim at our next cabal.

We had ripped our victim asunder, shredded it, pulled it apart word-by-word. No life and less dignity remained in the originally pert short story, Kate Chopin's THE STORY OF AN HOUR.

Isn't that what analytical readers are supposed to do? After all, that is why we were in the class – to learn, develop or hone our skills as “analytical readers.” The implication in our situation is that we old dogs learn to refine our palates, develop the paws and claws to dig more effectively into the subtle qualities of a short – indeed *any* – story. We had been lying in wait, metaphorically panting and drooling for the innocent prey. When our new class of seniors introduced ourselves to each other we rendered forth in class at our hunt mistress' direction individual thumb-nail sketches about our propensities to read, to document our readiness for red meat, well, er, for a bowl of printers ink at least.

When the mistress-of-the-hunt loosened the leashes, we first nosed about chaotically as a newly assembled pack of hounds will do. Then, with a verbal kick and horn blast or two from the hunt mistress, our astute instructor, we were off -- baying the moon, blood scent in our inquisitive nostrils.

The real scene was benign enough, a languorous classroom. There was the expected allotment of chairs, tables, and blackboard with chalk. No, they are not *au*

*courant*, not dark slate gray blackboard and chalk. Now, onto the *white* plastic ‘blackboard’ one rubs *in lieu* of chalk a wicked cylinder of acrid fluid that is never fresh. Typically a second cylinder must be uncorked after the first dozen words on the anemic board -- but I’m off the subject. For our session pens were poised, notebooks at hand. A couple of would-be analyst/hounds rested chins and elbows on small piles of books before them. One rested three chins but I’m off the subject again. Two of us old mutts plus 18 of the blue rinse set comprised the pack. There were meaningful barks and yelps and some not so meaningful along the trail. There were mercifully few of the, “Let me show you how much I know” whines.

To help get a good bite on a story we were told to consider the Title and Author; they would tell us something about the story as would the Names, Ages, and Relationships of the Characters. Does the Time Span have meaning? Did the Story run the course of an afternoon, a life time; how much? Where did the Action occur? Consider the Historical Context and certainly the Imagery and Symbolism. Remember to sniff out the Themes, the Issues. How does the story enlarge the reader’s Vision? And the Universal Truths, aaah yes, we must remember the Universal Truths, the UTs. For without the UTs..., oh, rats!

In the exemplar story, a young woman with heart disease is gingerly informed that her kindly husband has just been killed in a train wreck. The devastated widow retreats behind the locked door of her boudoir. As her emotions evolve rapidly over the next few minutes, influenced by a grand view of the beckoning outdoors, she is taken with a subtle sensation she attempts at first to deny and repress. She finally realizes and admits to herself that she now is liberated, “...free, free, free.” She acknowledges she is more

interested in living than before. Our heroine returns to the company of others just as her *husband* enters the front door. He was not on the ill-fated train in question and, indeed, did not even know about the crash. The net effect of ‘the story of the hour’ is presumably too stressful for the young lady’s faulty heart, for she dies upon the spot. Fundamentally a really neat short story, to me.

I developed in class toward the end of the two hour exercise in short story analysis a long repressed sensation parallel to and reminiscent of the heroine’s growing – repressed, denied and then admitted -- sensation. About six decades ago my high school English classes, like yours, took up various short stories, novels and plays. Most were originally and fundamentally interesting, informative, enlightening – in a word, FUN. But by the time we had pounded them for weeks under our teachers’ well-meaning guidance, gnawing the marrow of life from them, they were lackluster – even repellent. Dead, dead, dead! It was years before *As You Like it*, *Hamlet*, and others resurrected.

Maybe it’s that I am such a clod that I don’t sense enlightenment from the niceties of dissecting literature and putting it under my microscope. As with sex, pleasure comes before art form. Heaven knows I have had a life-long love affair with literature, even if purely for my selfish pleasure. Perhaps there is a personal parallel with my enjoying Laphroaig or other single malt. I don’t really care how it was made, whether the distillery uses ‘pot stills’ or not, whether the basic ingredient is barley, corn, or petunia seeds. I’m not going to make any whisky. Have you ever plunged deeply into making sausage from scratch? I have and have made some. You need not go there.

I offer that if you love reading and can scarcely imagine enjoying it more than you do, don’t flagellate yourself if you are not particularly interested in why you like

some stories better than others. Does it really make a difference in the long course of things whether your taste is for Russian short stories, romance novels – or sit-coms? On the other hand, if you enjoy the mental prodding of hearing the opinions of others plus that of trying to express your own, if the *camaraderie* of other seniors turns you on, if you find instructors who facilitate and illuminate class sessions as much as those found at our College for Seniors, I suggest you go for it! Give it a try. Even, or especially, a course in short story analysis! Diversity is good for the circulation, mental and physical.

And old dogs can learn new tricks.

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