Complete Collected Stories of V. S. Pritchett Short Guide

Complete Collected Stories of V. S. Pritchett by V. S. Pritchett

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Characters

Critics generally hasten to label the majority of Pritchett's characters as Dickensian, principally because of their eccentricity. In an interview with Douglass A. Hughes (1976), Pritchett, himself, did not "object to it [the labeling] because its an enormous compliment. But on the other hand, Dickens was a very great writer who was sort of centrally English in all of his comic characters. . . . sometimes I may be Dickensian but not in the sense of just going in for funny people. For most of the people I've written fantastic things about are not funny people at all."

Thus, the characters in his short stories come forth as complex webs of the comic, the tragic, the pathetic, and the ironic. In the short fiction, Pritchett populates his fictional streets with characters who remind the alert reader of similar types from Dickens, Poe, de Maupassant, Chekhov, Joyce, and Frank O'Connor; they may be resemblances, but they are never clones.

Consider, for example, the adulterous partners, Joyce and William, in "The Accompanyist" (from On the Edge of the Cliff and Other Stories, 1979). The narrator, William, appreciates, graphically but tastefully, watching Joyce dress; he appreciates the humor in her bones: ". . . her legs and arms were thin, and as she put up her arms to fasten her bra and leaned forward to pull on her tights she seemed to be playing a game of turning herself into comic triangles." From a similar anatomical viewpoint, Pritchett relies somewhat on specialists in the field. In "On the Edge of the Cliff" (the titled story of the 1979 collection), Harry, a retired professor and botanist in his seventies, lives with his mistress Rowena, an artist in her middle twenties.

Following an encounter with Daisy Pike, one of his former lovers — a woman in her fifties who currently sports a young lover — Harry decides on a swim au naturel, thus allowing Rowena to see him naked. "He was standing there, his body furred with grey hair, his belly wrinkled, his thighs shrunk. Up went his bony arms."

Again, through such characters, Pritchett delineates the real but thin line between the ugly and the comic.

No matter who or what they represent, and regardless of their social or psychological states, Pritchett's characters tend to react strongly to one another, as though they exist and function as integral parts of a larger entity or idea. Most often, that entity can be identified within the context of a crisis.

The reader might conclude that in a wide range of stories, lonely individuals must eventually and necessarily communicate with others, but they find the task difficult until such time as they establish a common ground between or among them. Rogers, a builder, and Pocock, a sensitive painter seeking peace ("Pocock Passes"), meet in a pub and realize, in their obesity, a spiritual bond of brotherhood. However, both suffer, within their common obese condition, from a sense that they must bear the burdens of the world.

They continue to meet, much like lovers, until Pocock dies, leaving Rogers struggling to determine the reasons behind that death. The spiritual and physical limitations of the blind Armitage and the scarred Mrs. Johnson ("Blind Love") have been discussed above, but they fit into the same mold, as do the divorced Rachel and the widower Gilbert ("Did You Invite Me?"). The latter couple, both of them apparent bores, come to understand, during a fight between their dogs, that inner strength may often be obscured by outward, superficial weaknesses.

However, Pritchett totally alters the circumstances in "Things As They Are." The pathetic and gullible Mrs. Foster gets drunk with a woman whom she believes to be sympathetic to her numerous problems. When the former passes out, the woman and Frederick, the barman, ransack her handbag.

Again, a significant cadre of Pritchett's characters need to communicate with and to confide in others. When they cannot or will not do so, as with the seventy-year-old widow in "The Spree," their suffering rises to even higher degrees of intensity.

The reader might also discover several twists and turns of love-hate relationships among Pritchett's characters, conditions that generally create difficulties for the central figure or "hero" of the story. For instance, Rev. Lewis ("The Voice") considers Morgan, a defrocked priest, to be no less than a direct associate of Satan. Nevertheless, upon discovering that Morgan lies at the bottom of a bomb crater, buried under the rubble, Lewis rushes to save him, led by the voice that binds him to the victim. Charles Peacock ("The Fall"), an accountant, suddenly masters and becomes obsessed with his mastery of the theatrical stage fall, a routine that masks his own insecurity. In this instance, Peacock's love-hate relationship extends to his fellow accountants, his parents (the owners of a fried-fish shop), his brother Shelmardine Peacock (a successful actor for film and stage), and even with himself. In "The Sailor," the loveable eccentricities of Albert Thompson, the titled character (even though he no longer functions in that vocation), become compatible with the self-acknowledged Puritanism of the narrator. That translates into the realization that the sailor, himself, possesses qualities of the Puritan. Then enters the twenty-five-year-old daughter of a colonel who turns out to be the thirty-nine-year-old offspring of a sergeant-major; from there, Pritchett creates a conflict between Puritanism and those who would tempt others to sin. The piece becomes further involved when Pritchett wraps his characters in mantles of comic relief.

Social Concerns

Although Pritchett's stories, much like their creator's early life, contain strong elements of social comedy, they also convey elements of social and class realism, as well as at least one significant instance of social protest.

The realism may best be observed in "Sense of Humour" (from You Make Your Own Life, 1938), in which representatives of the middle-class business community work terribly hard to achieve and maintain prosperity, but do not always succeed. Pritchett introduces his reader to three characters who, eventually, reveal a series of complex and often interrelated personal and social conflicts: Arthur Humphrey, the narrator and a socially conscious snob, shares his religion equally with the Methodists and Presbyterians; socially and economically he exists as a middle-class English commercial traveler (modelled after someone Pritchett actually had met in Ireland during his tenure with the Christian Science Monitor). Muriel MacFarlane, an attractive Irish girl with a sense of humor, functions as a clerk in the hotel where the salesman lodges. Colin Mitchell, Muriel's young boyfriend, and a dull garage mechanic, bristles with jealously when Arthur embarks upon an affair with Muriel. Colin dies violently and horribly in an auto accident, and the love-sex-death motif underscores the reality of the frustrations arising from the ambiguities of class distinction. Arthur's father happens to be an undertaker, which means that he, as an indirect cause of Colin's death, can save Mrs. Mitchell (the young mechanic's mother) money by lending his father's hearse for the funeral. In fact, Arthur, himself, drives the very vehicle in which Muriel rides beside him, with Colin's body behind. In the end, little has changed.

Pritchett's major attempt to confront social protest appears in "Main Road" (also from You Make Your Own Life), where he reveals to the reader the naturalistic effects of poverty on the human spirit. Within the economy of a direct and relatively simple fictional environment, Pritchett depicts two unemployed and seemingly desperate men traversing the English countryside. Hungry and tired, but also frustrated and filled with resentment, they rob a young poacher. However, their crime satisfies or resolves nothing; indeed, knowing the vocation of their victim, the action might not even technically be considered criminal. More important than that, however, the two men have only satisfied temporarily their physical hunger with the food; any Marxist would see and argue that their social spirits remain totally unfulfilled.

The third aspect of Pritchett's social considerations, social comedy, anchors itself firmly and most often to the institution of marriage. The longest of the fourteen stories in You Make Your Own Life, "Handsome Is As Handsome Was," concerns an unattractive and childless English couple, the Corums, in their forties who entangle themselves and others in a complex web of neurotic and humorous (in a sickly sort of way) relationships. Set in a French coastal pension, the story reaches its climax with a near drowning and a love-revulsion relationship that produces little beyond examples and results of human stupidity. Coram, an industrial chemist who has climbed the ladder from working- to middle-class; his wife, who has stepped down a social notch or two, tries to

demonstrate her defiance of middle-class Complete Collected Stories of V.S. Pritchett morality by trying to seduce the twenty-two-year-old Alex, who refuses her.

Techniques

In the most general of terms, Pritchett has received critical acclaim as a writer of short fiction because of his grasp of character, an attentiveness to detail (no doubt brought about by his literary apprenticeship as a journalist), and an interest in and understanding of natural human behavior. Further, even though his themes may appear morally and psychologically intricate, his focus has always been socially sharp. At all levels of meaning, his stories principally describe and develop predominantly middle-class, ordinary characters who find themselves immersed in the mundane and often comic details of common existence. Certainly, the title piece of When My Girl Comes Home has attracted attention for the irony that governs how Hilda Johnson's family and neighbors view her, as well as the spiritual upheavals created by and following her return from Japan and the war. However, the story also remains a classic exercise in portraying realistically the social intricacies and tensions of English working-class life within a clearly defined physical and emotional environment. Pritchett's fictional Hincham Street very much deserves placement — on a much smaller scale, of course — beside the likes of Mark Twain's Mississippi River, James Joyce's Dublin, Edgar Lee Masters' Spoon River, Elmer Rice's New York City street, or Sherwood Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio.

In his autobiographical works and in interviews, Pritchett has repeatedly asserted that his stories almost always begin with obvious, concrete, and active images that anchor themselves firmly to the minds of the readers.

Those images then relate directly to the plot of the story and unify both actors and their actions. For example, in "Tea with Mrs. Bittle," a painting of Psyche (the soul) has always been in the possession of Mrs. Bittle (another of Pritchett's lonely characters) and her family. In church one Sunday, she befriends two young men, who visit her for tea on several occasions. Then, one of them returns to her flat to steal the painting and other objects. Mrs. Bittle enters suddenly and discovers the act.

In the end, she and the painting, although both having been violated somewhat, win the day against the hooligans. However, given the psychological inadequacies of both characters — frustrated homosexual and heterosexual love being the most obvious and the most traumatic — nothing has been resolved, which in itself stands as a typical outcome within Pritchett's short fiction.

Another Pritchett practice, again perhaps the result of his training as a journalist, concerns his ability to be concise. He has refined the technique of compacting considerable material into relatively short numbers of words.

In "The Wedding," he develops the biographies of three complex characters, sketches the essential details relative to several minor persons, constructs the details of two weddings, provides the opportunities for a symbolic rape and a seduction that follows it, outlines a history of the farming community in the principal events of the story occur, and details the interior plans of three houses. He then finds the space to draw forth all of

the social and sexual antagonisms between those inside and those outside of the farm community. Interestingly enough, Christine Jackson, the thirty-year-old divorcee, proves a close relation of Hilda Johnson ("When My Girl Comes Home"); each of the two women returns home after a fairly long absence, and their neighbors and friends tend to see them as persons other than what they really are.

Themes

Love and sex stand as major Pritchett themes, principally because they encourage him to focus upon human involvements that by their very nature arise from and relate to social and psychological conflicts. In "The Diver" (from The Camberwell Beauty and Other Stories, 1974, and first published as in the New Yorker as "The Fall"), a young Englishman undergoes an initiation into love. Mocked by a middle-aged French woman lying naked on her bed, he lies in response to her question, "You have never seen a woman before?" A sexual block has hindered his powers as a man and as a writer. However, as he stands there, naked and frightened, his brain begins to fashion a story; he becomes a writer again. As Eudora Welty pointed out, "The Diver" allows us to understand that "in times of necessity or crisis, a conspiracy may form among the deep desires of our lives to substitute for one another, to masquerade sometimes as one another, to support, to save one another."

For instance, in "Blind Love" (from Blind Love and Other Stories, 1969), two persons suffering from permanent damage and blemish achieve a perverted state of love. The blind Mr. Armitage hires Mrs. Johnson, possessor of an extensive and horrifying birthmark that she views as the worst of all possible human insults. As a newlywed, she had been forced from her husband's house after the latter recoiled in horror from seeing the birthmark, accusing her of deceiving him.

Thus her affair with Armitage represents the unification of blindness and deception. Again, in "The Marvelous Girl" (from The Camberwell Beauty and Other Stories), blindness in the form of "love in the dark" appears to underscore the theme of failed love. Francis, the husband sits in the back of the audience, in the dark, but can see his wife seated on a stage, basking in the light of public view. He represents a spectator of his failed marriage. Suddenly, the auditorium lights fail; one can only feel and hear. In the darkness, the man accidentally bumps into his wife, the few seconds of their recognizable touch being the brief period of their marriage. The lights come on again and Francis leaves the auditorium with a young secretary, his wife's coworker and "the marvelous girl" whom he has been pursuing. From the lighted building, they enter the darkness of the city. No matter what the object or point of view, love, for Francis, wallows in total darkness.

Finally, in "When My Girl Comes Home," the exceptionally long short story that forms the title of Pritchett's 1961 collection, the writer skillfully but subtly weaves his theme of love into an exceedingly tense explication of working-class life and manners in south London. Through the eyes and thoughts of a young borough librarian, Harry Fraser, we observe the dismay and bewilderment in the Johnson family when, after thirteen years in a Japanese prison camp, Hilda Johnson returns from the war. Instead of having suffered from that imprisonment, she managed rather well for herself, principally because of her marriage to a Japanese soldier. The late war remains a powerful influence upon these inhabitants of Hincham Street; it imprisoned them, made them insensitive to everything else, changed them. Thus, they have difficulty understanding Hilda Johnson, just as she cannot focus clearly her vision of them. "Hilda had been our

dream," laments Harry Fraser, "but now she was home she changed as fast as dreams change. She was now, as we looked at her, far more remote to us than she had been all the years when she was away." From an obvious point of view, this lengthy story exists as an exercise in contrasting reality to illusion.

Key Questions

Because The Complete Collected Stories numbers eighty-two pieces of short fiction, detailed discussion of each one may exceed the time and energy that any group wishes to devote to such an exercise. However, with short fiction, certain general areas can be traversed that will allow for discussion of larger issues: character, plot, setting, theme, language, style, character interaction, or even of the genre itself as Pritchett practiced it. One might begin, simply, with Valentine Cunningham's declaration ([London] Times Literary Supplement 23 November 1990: 1255) that Pritchett "is without exaggeration the best modern British short-story writer, as the eighty-two stories of his massive [ninetieth] birthday-celebrating Complete Stories may reveal." Exactly why those stories have endured both time and critical assault becomes the first essential question.

1. Why is the short story the ideal medium for Pritchett? In other words, how can he, and why does he, confine what he wants to convey to his reader to a form that may (as opposed to the novel) limit the writer in terms of length, breadth, or depth?

2. How does Pritchett's language — the actual words spoken by characters, for instance — assist in the delineation and development of a particular character? How can the reader best understand a Pritchett character — from the writer's description? From the character's own words? From what other characters may say about him or her?

from combinations of all of those?

3. In focusing primarily upon lowerclass Britons, does Pritchett restrict his readers' view of society as a whole?

Does he ever hold forth any hope, either through his characters or his themes, that social classes can, on occasion, bridge their distinctions and differences for the betterment of the entire nation?

4. There are those among Pritchett's critical observers who believe that the key to his art as a writer lies in his appreciation of the erotic. Does the erotic, or sex, have unusual (or even abnormal) roles or functions in his short fiction? Is the erotic, or sex, so important to his art that it subordinates social or psychological themes?

5. Pritchett claims to hold no malice toward any of his fictional characters.

However, does he demonstrate favoritism toward some as opposed to others?

If so, how would one interpret such favoritism and its effects upon theme and plot? In characters' conflicts and interrelationships, are there clearly Complete Collected Stones of V. S. Pritchett defined winners and losers?

6. What are the relationships, in Pritchett's short stories, among irony, eccentricity, and hypocrisy? Does any one (or, perhaps, all three?) of them ever disrupt the neatness of characters' lives?

7. The term "Puritanism" often finds its way into the critical commentary relative to Pritchett's fiction. In the short stories, does he offer a definition of Puritanism, either through his characters or his themes? When, in the fiction, does Puritanism create conflict?

When does it achieve harmony or resolution?

8. In explicating his appreciation for Irish short fiction, Pritchett warned of a danger "that I should think of the Irish, as one often does, as just being funny because they say funny things.

One had to grow out of that sort of thing and get at the real essence of what they [the Irish writers] were trying to say" (interview with Douglass A. Hughes, 1976). How, in his own work, does Pritchett attempt to transcend his comic characters — or rise above the comedy associated with "serious" characters and "get at the real essence" of what he wants to say?

Does he succeed? Where and how?

9. American readers generally agree that Pritchett's short fiction has a predominantly British quality? Does it?

Does that quality restrict the appeal of his stories? Why or why not?

10. "Many Are Disappointed," as but one example, arose from Pritchett's own experience. "Blind Love," as another example, came from totally outside of his own experience. Can the reader easily identify the distinctions?

In other words, does Pritchett write better or differently inside of his experience as opposed to outside of it? Insofar as concerns his short stories generally, is there an issue here?

11. Does Pritchett ever emphasize character at the expense of events or situations? In other words, what appears more important to Pritchett — his characters, or what they do and the situations in which they act? Do Pritchett's characters ever obscure other elements of the story (theme, plot, action, setting)?

12. Are there elements of the drama (including melodrama) in Pritchett's short stories? Do those elements manifest themselves in the characters or in their situations? Do those elements manipulate either the reader or a character?

Literary Precedents

Any discussion of literary precedents in Pritchett's short fiction must begin with those writers who he had read and with the literary impressions that their works stamped upon his imagination. In 1986, Pritchett told critics Ben Forkner and Philippe Sejourne that, as a journalist in Ireland during the civil uprisings of the early 1920s, he "read a great deal of the Irish writers then such as Yeats, George Russell [A.E.], Loam O'Flaherty, Frank O'Connor, Sean O'Faolain, in fact all those remarkable writers. They all read the Russians."

Insofar as concerned Dickens and critics' attempts to label his characters as Dickensian, Pritchett had, sixteen years earlier, told another interviewer, William Peden, that he denied any direct influence from Dickens and saw nothing Dickensian in his characters, even the most eccentric among them. "There are a lot of people in England," he maintained. Two years after that statement, in 1972, Martha Duffy would look across the Channel for a literary precedent, telling her readers of Time magazine that "Pritchett's knowledge of Balzac's body of writing is so well assimilated that he [Pritchett] can call on it at will."

If the reader looks closely at the short fiction of D. H. Lawrence, however, he or she might find an identifiable link between certain aspects of his work and that of Pritchett. Both writer suggest that spiritual death results from a character's failure or unwillingness to accept or even to consider change. Should that character remain tied to a place, situation, or condition, any change then becomes at best difficult. The character "dies." In spite of that, both Lawrence and Pritchett manipulate certain of their characters to the extent that, by responding to purely emotional stimuli, they can change — even if they do not want to do so.

Thus, Christine Jackson, the pseudoprim and pseudo-intellectual school mistress who always wanted to be a duchess, raises her ire when Tom Fletcher, a farmer from the local village to which she has returned, literally "lassos" her at a village wedding. Despite the sexual and social antagonism that whirls about and between the two, Tom wins Christine's heart. After all, she who would spurn a mate will die a maid. In other words, Pritchett may be accused of dramatically diverting Christine from obvious spiritual death, but in her case, the need for love serves as a natural deterrent to loneliness and delusion.

In a consideration of the influence of the Irish writers upon Pritchett's work, one may, for example, draw a parallel between Pritchett's "A Careless Widow" and "A Change in Policy" and the complexities of Joyce's "A Painful Case." Lionel Frazier ("A Careless Widow"), a bachelor and a successful London hairdresser, reminds one of Joyce's James Duffy. Both are afraid of any romantic involvement because it will only complicate their lives; Frazier recoils from the careless widow who lives in the flat beneath his. Paula, in "A Change of Policy," becomes romantically involved with a printer, George, whose wife has been in a coma for more than two years. To entangle matters further, Paula feels a responsibility toward George's young son. Then, suddenly, George falls

from his horse and dies, his widow emerges from her coma, and Paula rushes forward as the nurse for both mother and son. The three then take up harmonious residence in one house. Interestingly, the piece represents one of Pritchett's relatively few plunges into the waters of melodrama.

However, one must dig deeply into Pritchett's short fiction to find consistent tracks leading to specific influences and literary precedents. Yes, one uncovers bits and pieces from the Irish writers, the Russians, the French, and, on certain stylistic occasions, even Ernest Hemingway. But, with the obvious exceptions of Dickens and the European Continental writers of the nineteenth century, Pritchett was a contemporary of Lawrence, Joyce, Yeats, O'Flaherty, O'Connor, O'Faolain, H. G. Wells, and Hemingway. He wrote when they wrote and saw essentially the same events as they; indeed, he has surpassed all of them in literary and mortal longevity. "In its essence," wrote Eudora Welty, "Pritchett's work, so close to fantasy, is deeply true to life." Thus, the real precedent for Pritchett's short fiction lies not in the works of others, but in the notion that, since its very beginnings, literature has mirrored and echoed the sounds, the persons, and the senses of life.

Related Titles

Pritchett's two volumes of autobiography, A Cab at the Door (1968) and Midnight Oil (1971), as well as certain of his collected critical essays (particularly Lasting Impressions, 1990), contain both glimpses and extended views of characters, places, events, and behavioral circumstances that weave themselves throughout his short stories.

Indeed, those books become almost required reading before one turns the attentive or analytical mind to the fiction. Thus, to understand the art, one ought to understand the artist.

Copyright Information

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

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Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults
Includes bibliographical references.
Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.
Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.
1. Young adults□Books and reading. 2.Young adult literature□History and criticism. 3. Young adult literature□Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography□Bio-bibliography.
[1. Literature□History and criticism. 2. Literature□Bio-bibliography]
I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952
Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048ISBN 0-933833-32-6

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994