Irwin Shaw's Short Fiction Short Guide

Irwin Shaw's Short Fiction by Irwin Shaw

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The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

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Characters

Irwin Shaw's characters are a gallery of interesting, usually likable characters whose plight is not of their own making. Their diverse personalities, familiar difficulties, and awkward efforts to extract themselves account for the popularity of his stories. To read the collected stories is to read la comedie humaine of America in the middle decades of the century. Shaw possesses a keen eye for the way people look or gesture, and a knack for spotting what makes them tick.

Shaw's stories pulse with the life of the American city. Characters from varied professions crowd his pages: salesman, cab driver, soldier, sailor, prize fighter, football player, writer, farmer, bartender, deputy sheriff, nurse, student. They are any and all ages: adolescent boys, marriageable girls, middle-aged husbands and wives, long term bachelors and career women, aged mothers and ancient fathers. They poise along all life's milestones: making plans for work or love, anxious to leave home, newly employed or married, stuck in dead-end job or relationship, lamenting a dead parent or absent lover.

Although the lives of Shaw's characters are most often shaped by chance, some of them cooperate unwittingly in their fate because they are ignorant of their own best interest. Shaw's most deliciously malicious vision of human self-deception and self-destruction is the aptly titled "A Wicked Story."

Robert and Virginia Harvey are dining at a restaurant after attending the theater. They are talking about one of the actresses when she enters the room.

Immediately and inexplicably Virginia begins to insist that Robert has been eyeing the woman all night and wants to have an affair with her. Virginia uses the occasion to pour out her fears about Robert's infidelity and her jealousy of his physical attractiveness.

Robert vehemently denies Virginia's allegations, but as they leave the restaurant, he eyes the actress. She eyes him back. Robert decides to let ripen the seed which Virginia planted.

Social Concerns

Shaw wrote over eighty short stories, sixty-three of which are included in this collection written between 1937 and 1978. The stories chronicle the career of a generation from struggling adolescence during the Depression to uneasy maturity in the 1970s. They depict a generation that is never able to relax its vigilance or take things for granted. These stories portray the literal and metaphorical battles this generation fought.

The literal battlefield is Europe in the 1940s. Typical of Shaw's wartime tales is the poignant "Walking Wounded" which recounts the plight of Peter, a British soldier, who cannot, after two years at the front, remember what his wife looks like. Although he finds a friendly pilot willing to take him home, he cannot find his commanding officer.

Without orders he cannot leave. Bureaucratic red tape triumphs.

An important pseudo-battlefield for this generation is the football field. It is the setting for the satiric, "March On, March On Down the Field." The story tells of the sorry plight of a professional football team working for a stingy owner. When the crowd is smaller than anticipated, he insists the players take a pay cut; as an economy measure he refuses to provide helmets.

Yet, having played the hardheaded accountant, he pleads with them just before game time to play in a collegelike, enthusiastic spirit.

Hard times force even gentle people into economic conflict. A number of Shaw stories recount the poverty of the Depression era. In "Second Mortgage" a penniless Brooklyn family that cannot pay its bills receives weekly visits from an elderly widow who holds the second mortgage on the property. She sits pathetically for a couple of hours in the living room as if some miracle will put money into the family's pockets before her eyes. At first sympathetic to her, the family comes to hate her hopeless vigil.

The bedroom is no more placid a place for Shaw's generation than the battlefield, stadium, or marketplace.

Representative of the battle between the sexes is the famous "Girls in Their Summer Dresses." Michael and Frances Loomis are trapped in a loveless marriage but manage not to think about it often. One beautiful Sunday they set out for a stroll with unusually light hearts. Soon Frances notices that Michael is eyeing every pretty girl in a summer dress. She complains about his old habit, and soon they are enmeshed in a familiar quarrel. The mood is ruined; they decide to spend time with acquaintances they do not like in order to avoid each other.

Techniques/Literary Precedents

As the outlines of these stories suggest, Shaw's artistry rests upon an ability to place two characters in a deceptively ordinary setting, put them in conflict, allow them to talk at cross purposes, and send them finally in opposite directions. Such scenes work only if the narrator can quickly sketch the crucial characteristics of these colliding personalities and cast their exchange in rapid dialogue. The technique relies upon dramatic irony, with the audience realizing more implications to each speech than either the speaker or the listener. In some stories the interior monologue of the central character replaces dialogue as the main device for exposing the personalities in conflict.

Shaw does not rely on the device which O. Henry, the nineteenth century master of short fiction, popularized: the unexpected plot twist revealed in the final paragraph or sentence. Shaw's method is closer to that of James Joyce who articulated the concept of epiphany. Joyce strove to create in a short story a moment at which the character has a revelation about, an insight into, his own nature. The epiphany is more striking, Joyce argued, if it results from the familiar rather than from the extraordinary. Many of Shaw's best stories — "Girls in Their Summer Dresses," "The Eighty Yard Run," "A Wicked Story" — are clearly tales of epiphany.

Themes

Three themes recur frequently in Shaw's short fiction. The first is the role of chance and accident in shaping human life. In "Small Saturday" Christopher meets and dates the girl who will become his wife only after both miss the chance to go out with others.

Unknown to them, a lusty Swiss flying into New York, a police bust of several con artists, and a middle-aged man's passion for a young actress have helped mold their destiny. In "Noises in the City" a man's affection for his pregnant wife is rekindled after he meets a man whose wife was murdered. The victim died when a stable husband and father went unaccountably berserk. In Shaw's world lives are changed by a thoughtless word, a careless glance, or an unplanned meeting.

Tales about people whose fates are sealed by chance and coincidence strike readers with wonder; unexpected convergence is one of the staple devices of the best-selling storyteller.

The second recurring theme is the longing of the individual to maintain a sense of purpose and self-worth amid the twists of fate. In "God Was Here, But He Left Early," Rosemay Maclain returns to Paris. A department store buyer who visits Europe on occasion, and the divorced mother of a teen-age girl, Rosemary became pregnant as the result of a one-night stand with a young married Frenchman. Seeking legal abortion, she is interviewed by a French psychologist, who refuses her request. Rosemary seeks out her lover, but he offers only a vague hope of a doctor in Zurich. Later, she dines with friends who lead her to Rodney Harrison, an Englishman as young as her French lover. His attentions, her fear of the wine at dinner, and the atmosphere of Paris encourage her to seek consolation in Rodney's arms. Instead of love, however, he has only mild sadism to offer her. Rosemary retreats into a bewildering, self-mocking, but ultimately protective hysteria.

The third recurring theme is the American predilection for building a sense of self-worth on athletic or economic success. The archetypal story elaborating this theme is "The Eighty Yard Run." The story tells of the decline of Christian Darling. Taking the classic path to success, he married the boss's daughter, but the stock market crash of 1929 ruined both the boss and the inherited business. Surprisingly, his wife Louise is successful in the Depression job market as an editor while Christian is forced to sell suits to undergraduates at his alma mata. The job brings him close to a haunting image of the man he might have become. As a collegiate football player, Darling once ran eighty yards for a touchdown. The memory has sustained him — until he goes out, in jacket and tie, onto the field of the deserted stadium to reenact the moment. When undergraduates unexpectedly observe him, Darling flees the stadium in embarrassment, recalling that he ran the play in practice, not in a game.

Adaptations

Four of Shaw's stories were filmed in the 1940s and 1950s. "Educating the Heart" was filmed as Easy Living (RKO, 1949), directed by Jacques Tourneur and starring Victor Mature and Lucille Ball. The film was released as a home video in 1989. "Tip on a Dead Jockey was filmed under the original title (MGM, 1957) by Richard Thorpe and starred Robert Taylor and Dorothy Malone. "The Walking Wounded" and "Act of Faith" were also filmed. None of these last three were commercial or critical successes, and none is available on video now.

In 1981 three stories were adapted by Kenneth Cavender for television: "The Girls in Their Summer Dresses," "The Man Who Married a French Wife," and "The Monument."

"The Eighty Yard Run" is available as part of the anthology The Esquire Collection of Great Fiction on audio cassette (Esquire Audio, 1985). The reader captures beautifully the staccato rhythm of Shaw's style built on the simple, short sentences.

Key Questions

With their focus on the seemingly endless battles in human existence, Shaw's stories make ideal readings for discussion groups. His short fiction, especially those tales about conflicts between men and women, cause readers to take sides with one character or the other. Differing sympathies give rise to lively debate.

The time of Shaw's stories also leads to an area of discussion. The America of Shaw's 1930-1960 stories and the America of the turn-of-the-century is much different. Contrasting aspects of Shaw's America— its business climate, its leisure activities, its military life — with their contemporary state will generate lively conservation about the degree and cause of change. It is a rich topic to explore with readers of different generations who will inevitably view social and economic changes differently. Those who believe that contemporary America is in decline from a more heroic, more stable, more moral post-World War II America will especially find Shaw's writing a challenge to their assumptions.

A discussion group leader could approach the short fiction by grouping stories. Each discussion session might treat a group of four or five stories that center on a theme or topic. Among possible topics are the relations between the sexes, the means to, and meaning of, economic success, and professional football as a reflection of social values.

1. How is the experience of reading a short story different from reading a novel? Edgar Allan Poe attributed the power of short fiction to its ability to create one dominant impression in a reader who could devour a story in one, uninterrupted setting. Does each Shaw story create a dominant impression?

2. How clear is Shaw's opinion of each character in a story? Can readers easily tell whose side the author is on?

3. Whether the subject is career or sexuality, Shaw's attitude seems to be that it is an arena of human conflict.

Which of the following describes Shaw's vision? (a) Gender conflicts are part of a never-ending conflict that is incapable of decisive victory or (b) A battle in which there will be a victor and a vanquished?

4. Shaw's stories are filled with characters expressing their failed dreams, exploded hopes, and disappointed expectations. Is there prospect for human happiness in Shaw's world?

5. Read one of Shaw's stories aloud.

How does hearing the story affect the listener's interpretation of themes and conflicts?

6. Are there certain topics in Shaw's fiction that seem very outdated? Are there topics that seem both contemporary and timeless?

7. Shaw has a knack for catchy, arresting titles. Which titles are especially striking? What aspect of a story does he emphasize with the title? Does he always explain the title?

8. In the Introduction to his collected stories, Shaw writes, "In a collection of stories you can be all the men or fragments of men, worthy or unworthy, who in different seasons abound in you." What are the most noteworthy character traits that abound in Shaw's fiction? Which are worthy/unworthy? What seasons, do you sense, Shaw's life has passed through?

9. Short Stories: Five Decades is arranged in chronological order, which offers an opportunity to trace the development of Shaw's vision of America and the development of his art. Choose two or three early stories and contrast them to two or three late stories. What changes are immediately apparent?

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