

THE AMERICAN SHORT STORY

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**THE AMERICAN
SHORT STORY**

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BY

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PREFACE

The following pages contain one of the lectures on American literature delivered at the University of Berlin during the author's incumbency of the Roosevelt Professorship from 1910 to 1911. It was published in English in the *Internationale Wochenschrift für Kunst und Technik* (Berlin, December 17, 1910) and forms Chapter XVI in the author's *Amerikanische Literatur* (Berlin, 1912). No changes have been made in the text.

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February 14, 1912

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A few years ago lectures on American literature meant lectures on American authors or on distinctive periods in the literary history of America. The unit was the individual author or the definitely bounded period. To these two methods of approach, however, a third has been added: it is the study of literary types, especially of prose types. An example is seen in Theodore Stanton's "Manual of American Literature" (1909), which is the four thousandth volume of the Tauchnitz Edition. This, I believe, is the only formal history of American literature which not only discusses periods and authors but groups the latter under such headings as The Historians, The Novelists, The Poets, etc. The same method is followed in "The Wampum Library of American Literature,"

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only three volumes of which have appeared.¹ This Library "has been planned," says the editor, Brander Matthews, "to include a series of uniform volumes, each of which shall deal with the development of a single literary species, tracing the evolution of this definite form here in the United States, and presenting in chronological sequence typical examples chosen from the writings of American authors. The editors of the several volumes provide critical introductions, in which they outline the history of the form as it has been evolved in the literature of the world."

(The reason for this growing attention to literary types is to be sought chiefly in the rise and development of the American short story. The study of this type has led to the study of other types. More has been written, however, in the last ten years about the American short story than about all other types combined; for in the short story, if anywhere, American writers have evolved a new *genre*, as distinct from the novel as the ballad is distinct from the longer epic.)

¹ These are "American Short Stories," "American Literary Criticism," and "American Familiar Verse (Vers de Société)."

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As long ago as 1886 Anton E. Schönbach¹ called attention to the American short story in these words :

Eine Spezialität der amerikanischen Erzählliteratur ist die kurze Geschichte, Novellette, die eine der beliebtesten Gaben der Monatschriften geworden ist. Sie unterscheidet sich sehr von dem, was man in England short stories nennt, in Deutschland ist sie fast unbekannt. Denn die Geschichten, welche seinerzeit in der "Illustrierten Welt," in Payne's "Familienblatt," im "Österreichischen Lloyd" und sonst in Stuttgarter, Leipziger (jetzt besonders in der "Illustrierten Zeitung"), Berliner Zeitschriften geboten wurden, gehörten einer niedrigen Gattung an, enthielten Abenteuer, Aufregung und Schrecken, Kriminalistisches. Am nächsten kommen in der Form einige kleine Sachen von Adalbert Stifter, von Lentner, von Theodor Fontane, und besonders von Rosegger. Aber im wesentlichen ist doch diese amerikanische short story etwas ganz Eigenartiges. Unsere Novellen sind viel umfangreicher und häufig nur kondensierte Romane, indem sie das Vorher und Nachher eines entscheidenden Vorganges im Leben ihrer Gestalten mit vorbringen. Die kurze Magazingeschichte der Amerikaner ist gegenwärtig meistens ein kleines realistisches Lebensbild: ein Ausschnitt aus einem wirklichen Stück Leben, ein einzelner, oft an sich unbedeutender, aber

¹ *Deutsche Rundschau*, März bis Mai. See Schönbach's "Gesammelte Aufsätze" (Graz, 1900), S. 417.

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charakteristischer Vorfall wird beschrieben, oft wiederum nur eine mit etlichen Figuren staffierte Landschaft. Was man von dieser Gattung verlangt, ist Stimmung; es kommt daher alles auf den Erzähler selbst an, der aus der Menge kleiner, scharf beobachteter Züge den poetischen Eindruck gewinnt und ungeschädigt darstellt. Am ehesten lässt sich damit die Stimmungslandschaft der modernen Malerei vergleichen, die ja gar nicht mehr komponiert wird, wie man früher pflegte, sondern durchaus den Charakter der Studie besitzt und bei sorgfältiger Ausführung der Einzelheiten doch auch die Essenz einer gewissen Stimmung wiedergibt; der Münchener Neubert versteht sich darauf vortrefflich. Innerhalb des Rahmens der kurzen Geschichte haben natürlich viele besondere Arten Platz. Für alle gibt es ältere Vorgänger.

¹ The expression "short story," it should be said, has been gradually undergoing a change of meaning. To most readers it is still a vague expression, like the German "Novelle"¹ and the French "nouvelle" and "conte." (Indeed it was not till recent years that American critics, following the lead of Poe, began to regard the short story as fundamentally different from

¹ See Edwin Rohde, "Verhandlungen der dreissigsten Versammlung Deutscher Philologen und Schulmänner in Rostock" (Leipzig, 1876), S. 58.