

SEMINAR: Short Fiction in America  
TUTORS: Christopher Benson and Shannon Pepe

Compared to novels, short stories—precisely because they are short—often get slighted. But this is a mistake, as Washington Irving makes clear in a letter from 1824:

I have preferred adopting the mode of sketches and short tales rather than long works. . . there is a constant activity of thought and a nicety of execution required in writings of the kind, more than the world appears to imagine. It is comparatively easy to swell a story to any size when you have once the scheme and the characters in your mind; the mere interest of the story, too, carries the reader on through pages and pages of careless writing, and the author may often be dull for half a volume at a time, if he has some striking scene at the end of it; but in these shorter writings, every page must have its merit. The author must be continually piquant; woe to him if he makes an awkward sentence or writes a stupid page; the critics are sure to pounce upon it. Yet if he succeed, the very variety and piquancy of his writings—nay, their very brevity, make them frequently recurred to, and when the mere interest of the story is exhausted, he begins to get credit for his touches of pathos or humor; his points of wit or turns of language.

Led by English teachers Christopher Benson and Shannon Pepe, this “parents only” seminar will feature short fiction by three American writers who have mastered the genre: Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864), Flannery O’Connor (1925-1964), and John Updike (1932-2009). Each of these writers offers a Christian vision of life colored from their respective time periods and ecclesial traditions. The Puritan inheritance of Hawthorne, the Catholic sacramentality of O’Connor, and the mainline Protestant ethos of Updike influence the style and substance of storytelling. In *Call If You Need Me*, Raymond Carver gives a memorable apologia for *why* we should read short fiction:

If we’re lucky, writer and reader alike, we’ll finish the last line or two of a short story and then just sit for a minute, quietly. Ideally, we’ll ponder what we’ve just written or read; maybe our hearts or intellects will have been moved off the peg just a little from where they were before. Our body temperature will have gone up, or down, by a degree. Then, breathing evenly and steadily once more, we’ll collect ourselves, writers and readers alike, get up, “created of warm blood and nerves” as a Chekhov character puts it, and go on to the next thing: Life. Always life.

There will be a total of six classes that meet on Monday evenings in the fall semester from 7:00-9:00 PM. Maximum enrollment is 16 parents. Once enrolled, you will receive a reader with the content below. To prepare for the first class, read the content under “Introduction” and Updike’s story, “Dentistry and Doubt.” Authors will be read in reverse chronology because newer writing tends to be more accessible than older.

- I. Introduction
  - Jacob Klein, “Discussion as a Means of Teaching and Learning”
  - John Sutherland, *Lives of the Novelists*
  - Flannery O’Connor, “Catholic Novelists and Their Readers”
- II. John Updike
  - Dentistry and Doubt (Monday, September 11)
  - Pigeon Feathers (Monday, September 25)
- III. Flannery O’Connor
  - The River (Monday, October 9)
  - Revelation (Monday, October 23)
- IV. Nathaniel Hawthorne
  - Earth’s Holocaust (Monday, November 6)
  - The Minister’s Black Veil (Monday, November 27)